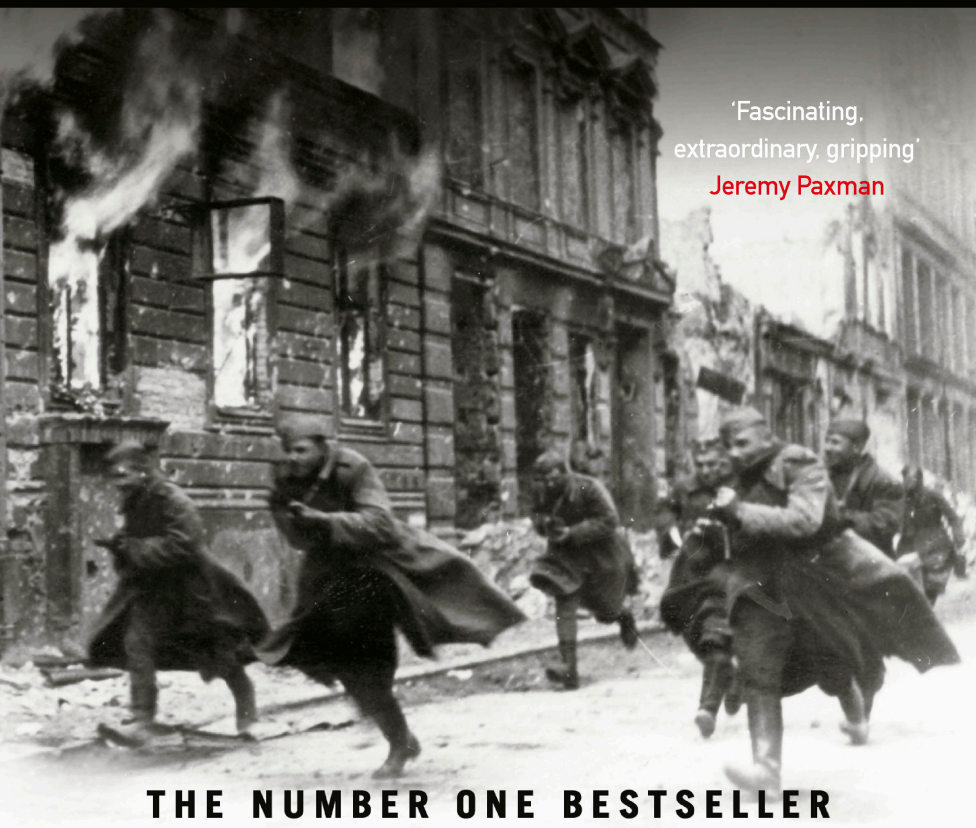
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ANTONY BEEVOR

BERLIN

THE DOWNFALL: 1945

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'This brilliant storyteller. . . makes us feel the chaos and the fear as if every drop of blood was our own: that is his gift. It is much more than just a humane account; it is compellingly readable, deeply researched and beautifully written' Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Spectator*

'As in his *Stalingrad*, Antony Beevor skilfully combines the big picture of the developing strategic situation with a sense of the extraordinary experiences on the ground . . . The strength of *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* is an irresistibly compelling narrative, of events so terrible that they still have the power, more than half a century on, to provoke wonder and awe' Adam Sisman, *Observer*

'In *Stalingrad* Beevor gave us a riveting account of that crucial fearful battle, when Hitler's forces met their match . . . Beevor deploys the same successful techniques in *Berlin*. He combines a soldier's understanding of war's realities with a novelist's eye for symbolic and emotional detail' Orlando Figes, *Sunday Times*

'A compelling narrative, with fascinating detail and a thrilling pace. Beevor's clear writing burns like a torch at night in a landscape of ruins, and convinces by its integrity and power' Max Egremont, *Literary Review*

'The outstanding piece of non-fiction this year. His last book, *Stalingrad* was, I thought, as good as it gets. But *Berlin* is even better. If you ever needed reminding of why war is something we should move heaven and earth to avoid, this will do it' Jeremy Paxman, *Guardian*

'Once you've read it, it'll stay with you forever. What a book!' Barbara Trapido, *Observer*

'Beevor tells the savage, gripping story of the fall of the city with brilliance and a humane attention to the impact of an epic battle on fragile, individual lives. His powerful account lays bare the nightmarish sordidness of German fascism, with its back to the wall, buying a few more days at the expense of thousands of lives' Helen Dunmore, *The Times*

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'Antony Beevor has become justly celebrated for *Stalingrad*, and his new book, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, lives up to all his fans' expectations. Beevor has explored Russian and German sources with his customary industry, to produce a gripping and harrowing narrative of the city's fall to the Red Army in 1945' Max Hastings, *Sunday Telegraph*

'Essential reading' Michael Howard, *The Times Literary Supplement*

'This is a brilliantly researched book, all the more effective because of Beevor's spare and unemotional style' Sue McGregor, *Daily Telegraph*

'The narrative onslaught of Beevor's book is tremendous' Iain Finlayson, *The Times*

'An appalling and gripping story' Margaret Macmillan, *Sunday Telegraph*

'I read it like a novel . . . it does make you feel as if you know what it might have been like to be there' Anne Applebaum, *Evening Standard*

'Riveting, magnificent – masterly but shocking. It simply makes [all previous histories] obsolete at a stroke' Frank McLynn, *Independent*

'Beevor gives an exceptionally clear account of complicated military movements and the reasoning of the commanders responsible for them. But he is also sensitive to the real casualties of war. Boys whose anxious faces disappeared within man-sized helmets; women who managed to feed their babies between multiple gang rapes; and elderly folk who found themselves in the midst of hell because they were loath to leave a family farm or a spouse's grave. The result is a masterpiece of modern historical writing' Michael Burleigh, *Guardian*

'Digging deep into Soviet files, personal diaries and memoirs . . . Beevor brings vividly alive the final days of the doomed metropolis. It's in his eye for the chilling detail about ordinary people and soldiers caught up in the maelstrom of defeat that Beevor so magnificently captures the true pity of war. Compelling, admirably readable and fresh' David Stafford, *Evening Standard*

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'Quite splendid. Combines a calm and scholarly narrative with an unrelenting moral indignation at what he has uncovered. Berlin stands as a superbly lucid examination of one of the most dreadful battles in world history' *Irish Times*

'A compelling piece of historical description and assessment, the more important because some of Beevor's Russian archival sources may not be available in future' Alan Judd, *Daily Telegraph*

'Superlative. The days and events leading to the final collapse of Berlin are recreated vividly and faithfully. It is an education' Cal McCrystal, *Independent on Sunday*

'Magisterial. This is an epic story, epically told: chilling, insightful, analytical, desperately moving. From the past at its worst, Antony Beevor has fashioned history at its best' *Scotsman*

'The style contributes to the account itself, a masterful mixture of narrative finesse and scrupulousness towards the facts. In both categories we are witnessing an author at the height of his art' Thomas Kielinger, *Die Welt*

'The best of five exemplary works of history is Beevor's *Berlin*. The story has been told many times, but Beevor brings a distinctive combination of gifts to it. Not merely is he a lucid chronicler of military tactics, strategy and maneuvers, but he has a sympathetic eye for the ordinary people who became war's innocent victims – in this case the uncountable thousands of women who were raped and brutalized by the Red Army as it raced to the prize that was Berlin' Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Post*

'Beevor, a British historian of great distinction and range, once more demonstrates his mastery of his sources, including newly discovered material from Soviet archives' Gordon Craig, *New York Review of Books*

'A clear window into that dark, awful past for those in Europe – or anywhere else – who have not known war's horrors' *Time*

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'Reading *Berlin* is like viewing some enormous, latter-day Hieronymous Bosch painting of the human race in total meltdown. You can't comprehend its entirety at first glance, because each of the fascinating details compels your attention' *Boston Herald*

'Chilling, authoritative . . . Beevor magnificently captures the true pity of war' *Daily Mail*

'Hugely impressive. Beevor is a superb writer, a diligent researcher and a master of detail' *Chicago Tribune*

'Beevor has created haunting images of the war's final days . . . the best account yet written' Carlo D'Este, *The New York Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antony Beevor was educated at Winchester and Sandhurst. A regular officer in the 11th Hussars, he served in Germany and England. He has published several novels, and his works of non-fiction include *The Spanish Civil War*; *Crete: The Battle and the Resistance*, which won the 1993 Runciman Award; *Stalingrad*; *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945*; *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, which won the 2010 Duke of Westminster Medal for Military Literature; *Ardennes 1944*; and *Arnhem*. With his wife, Artemis Cooper, he wrote *Paris After the Liberation: 1944–1949*. *Stalingrad* was awarded the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, the Wolfson History Prize and the Hawthornden Prize in 1999. *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* was also a number-one bestseller and has been translated into twenty-four languages.

A former chairman of the Society of Authors, he has received four honorary doctorates and a fellowship from King's College London and is a visiting professor at the University of Kent. He has received the Pritzker Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing, the Medlicott Medal for Services to History, was made Commander of the Order of the Crown by the Belgian government, and is a Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France. Beevor was knighted in the 2017 New Year Honours lists for Services in Support of Armed Forces Professional Development.

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BERLIN

THE DOWNFALL 1945

Antony Beevor



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First published by Viking 2002
First published in Penguin Books 2003
Reissued with a new introduction in this edition 2020
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–03239–9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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AKG London: 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 17, 22, 24, 26, 28, 34, 37, 40, 42
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Jürgen Stumpff/Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin: 45
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PK-Benno Wundshammer/Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin: 1
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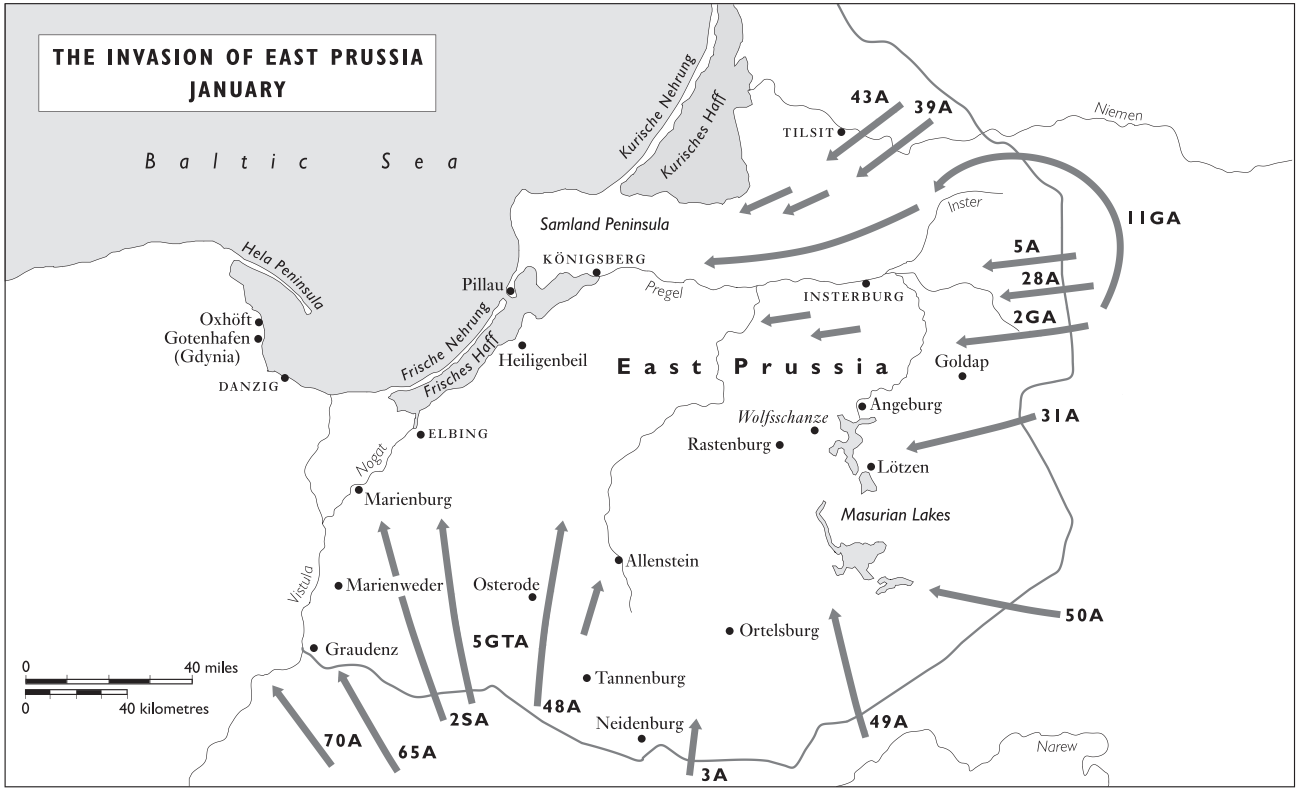
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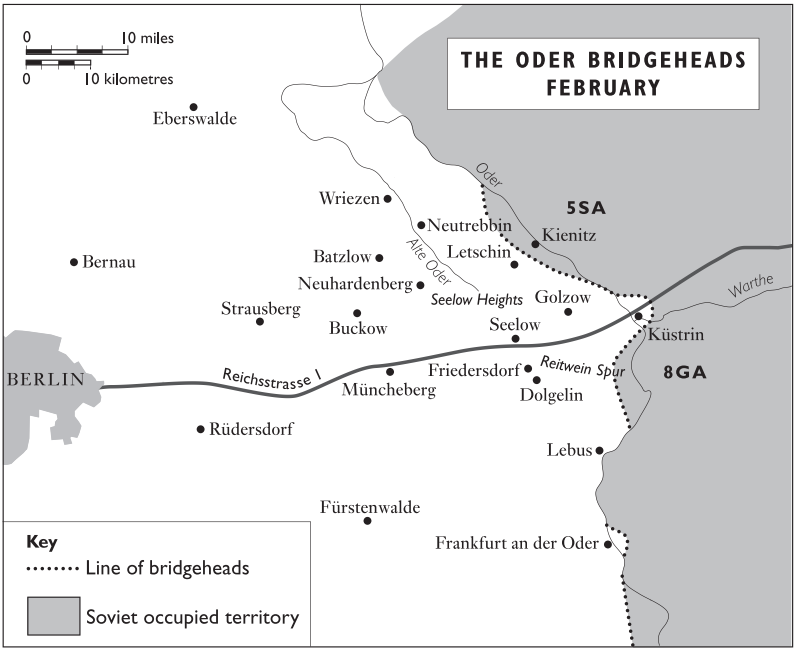
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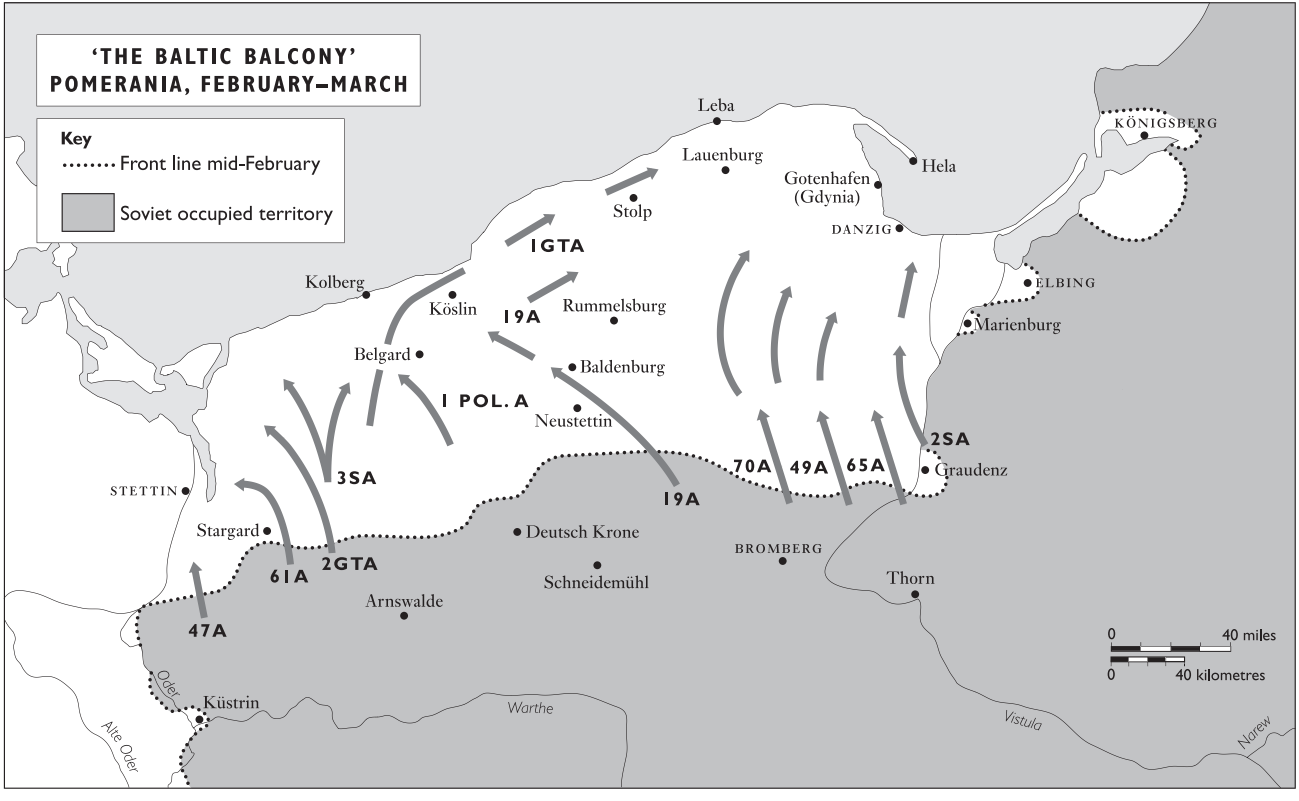
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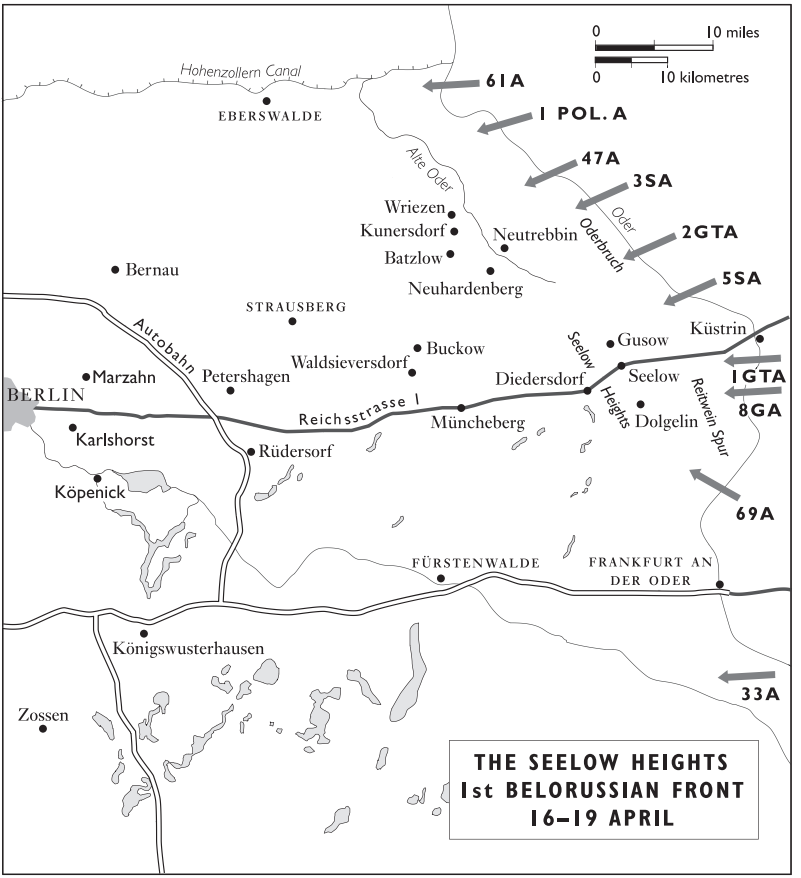
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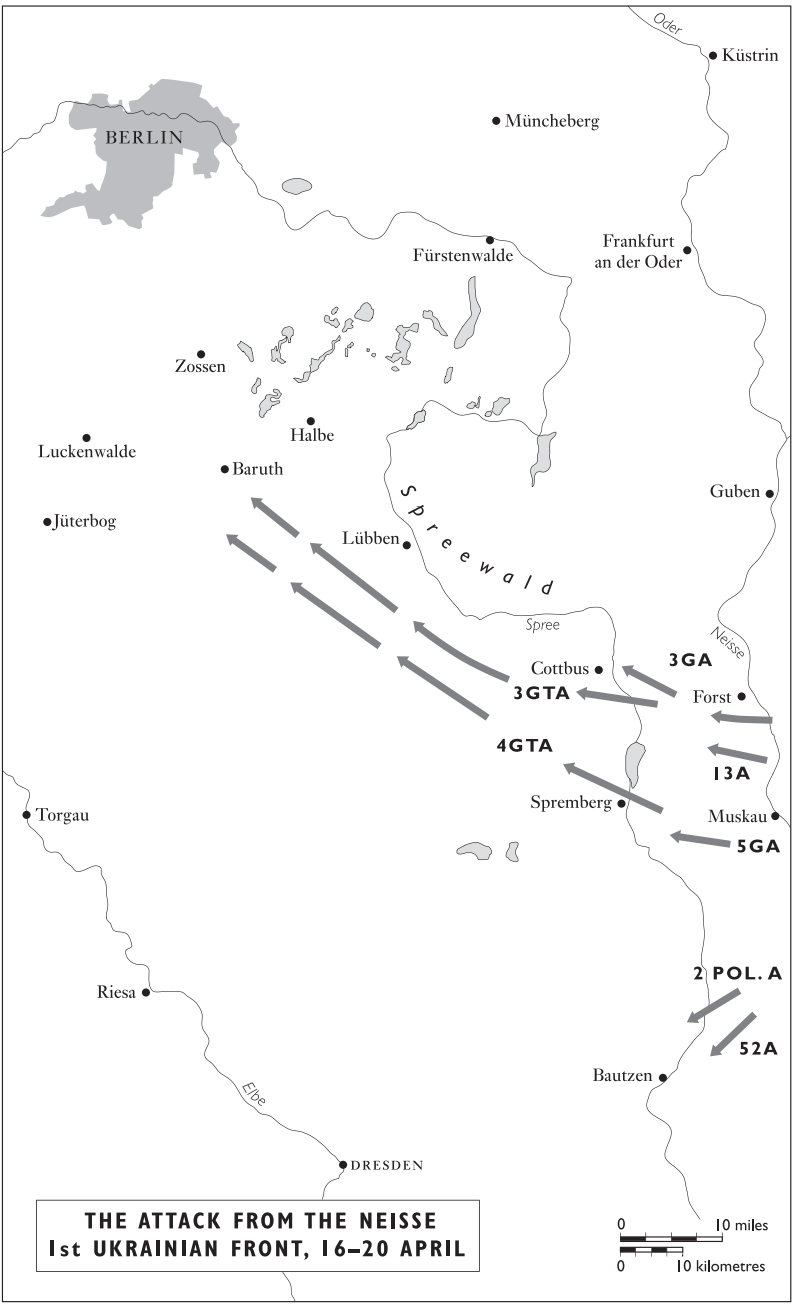
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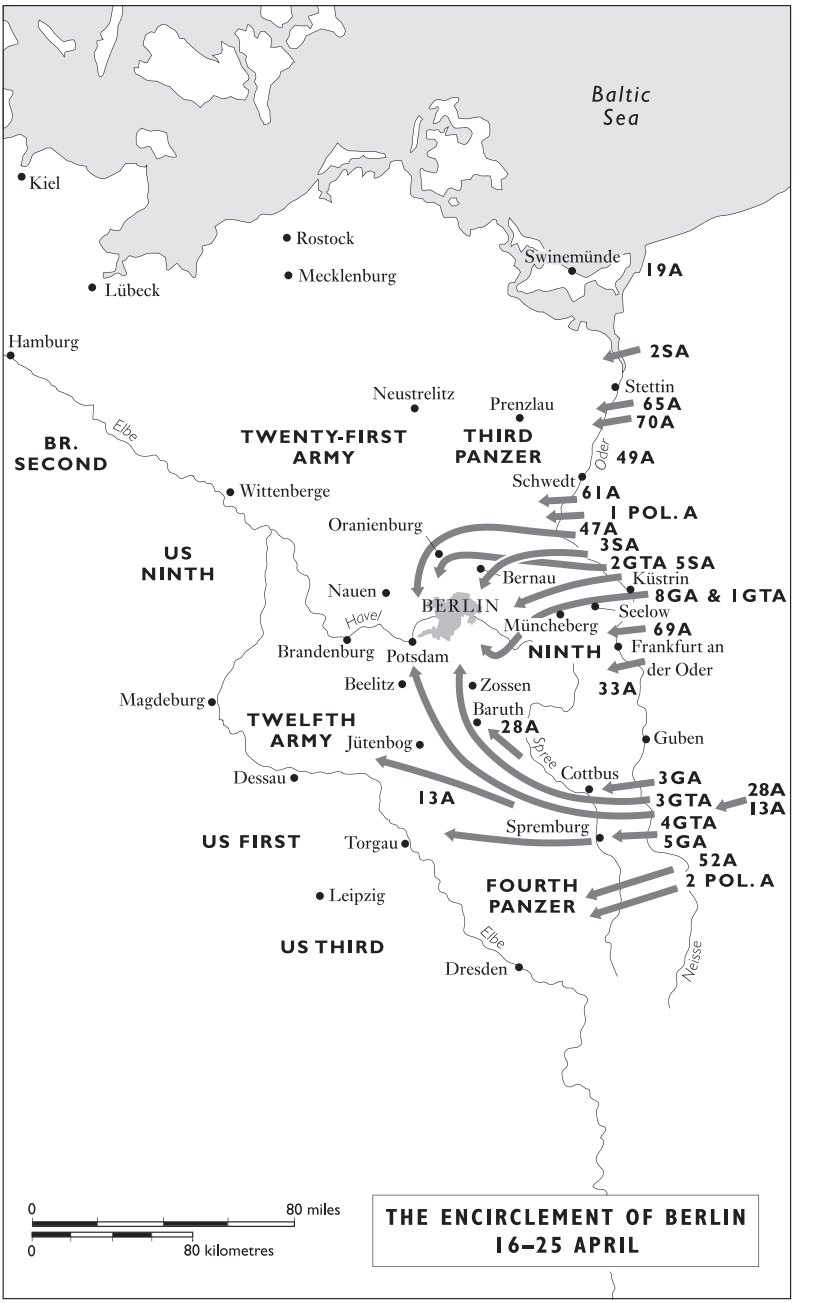
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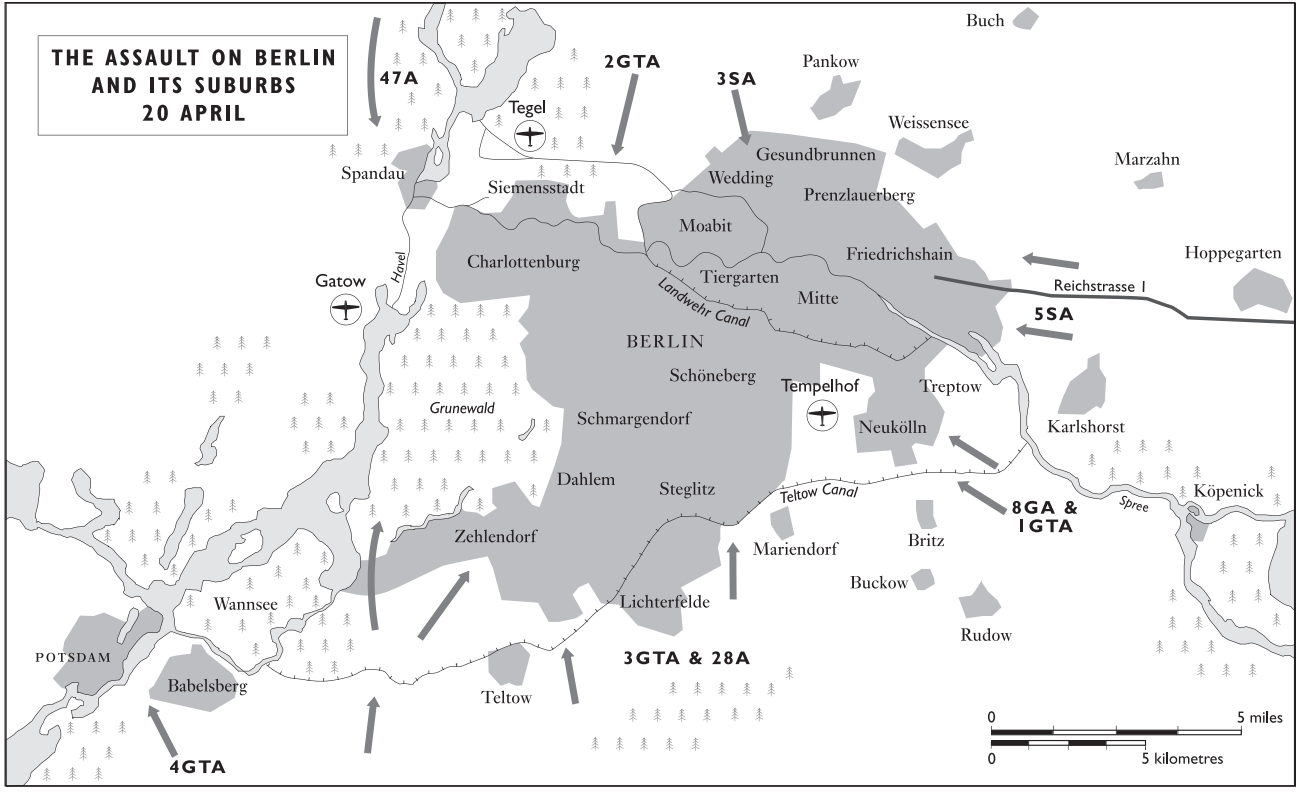
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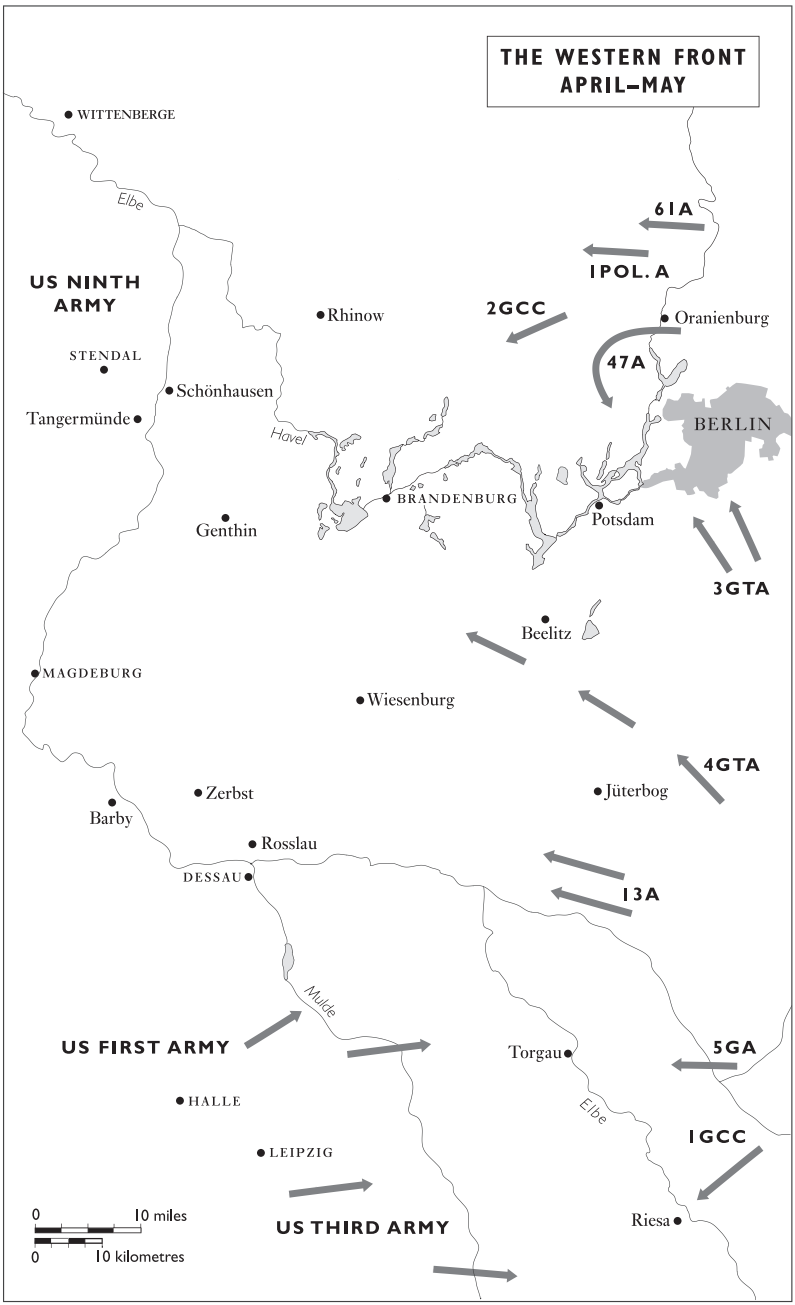
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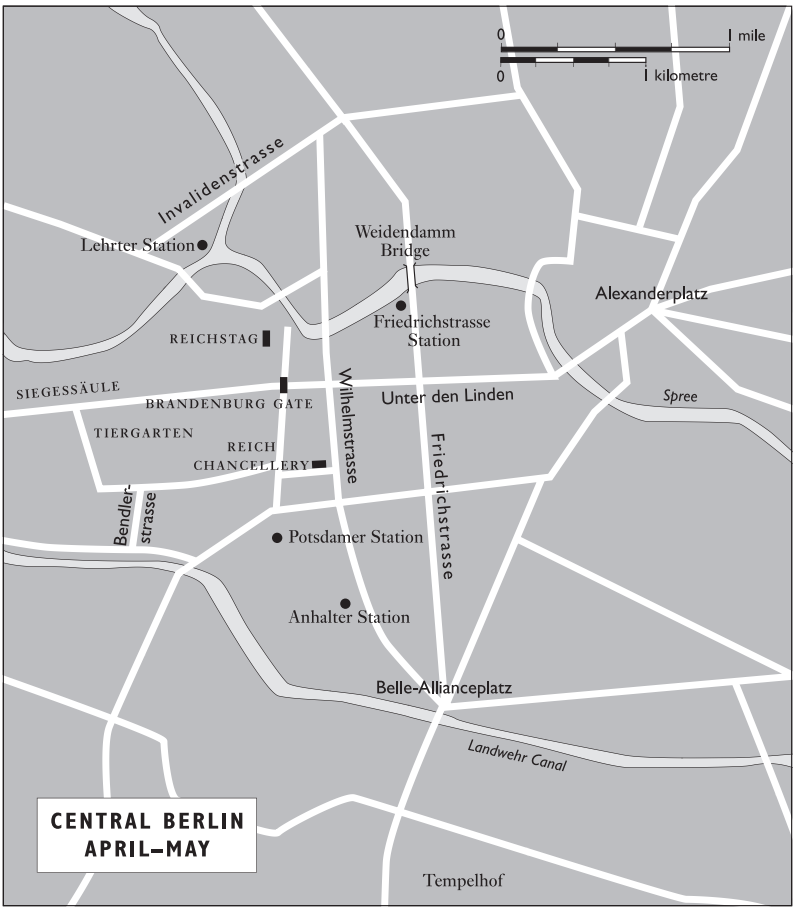
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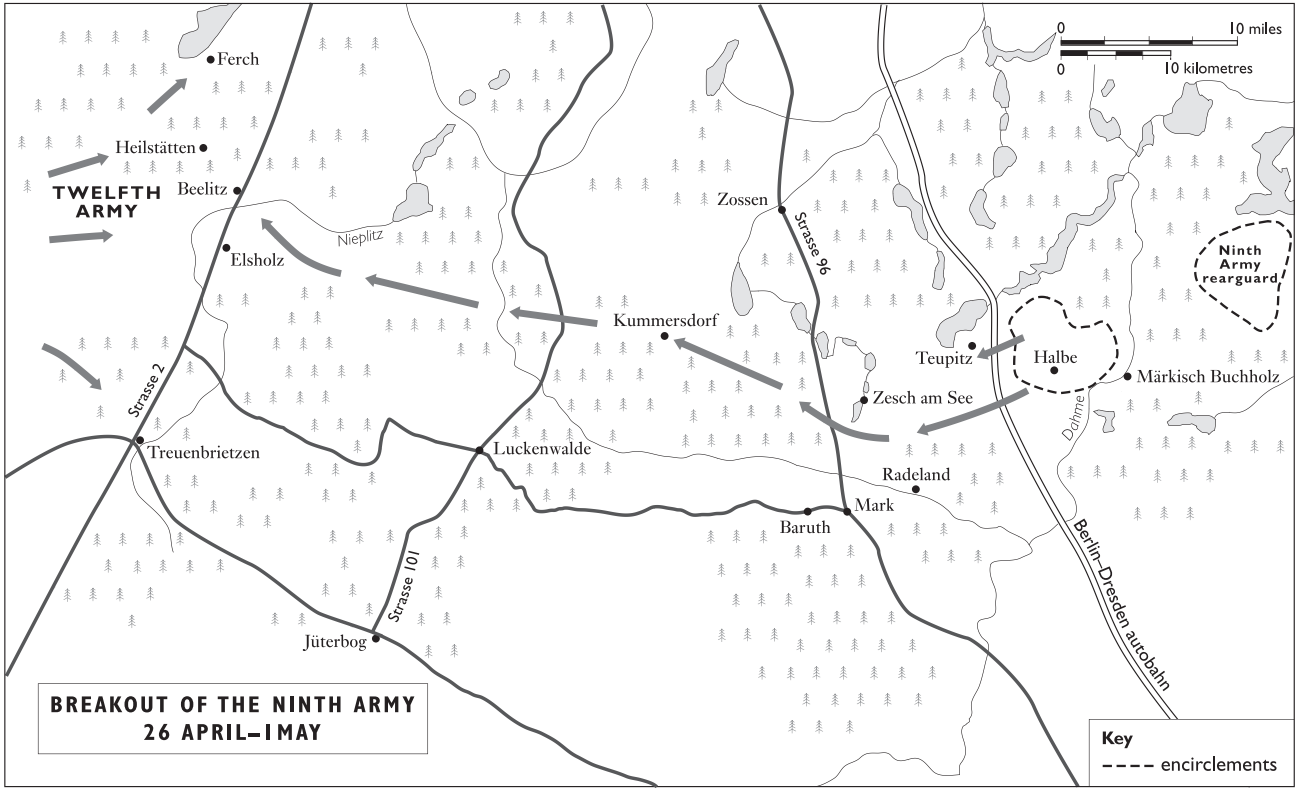
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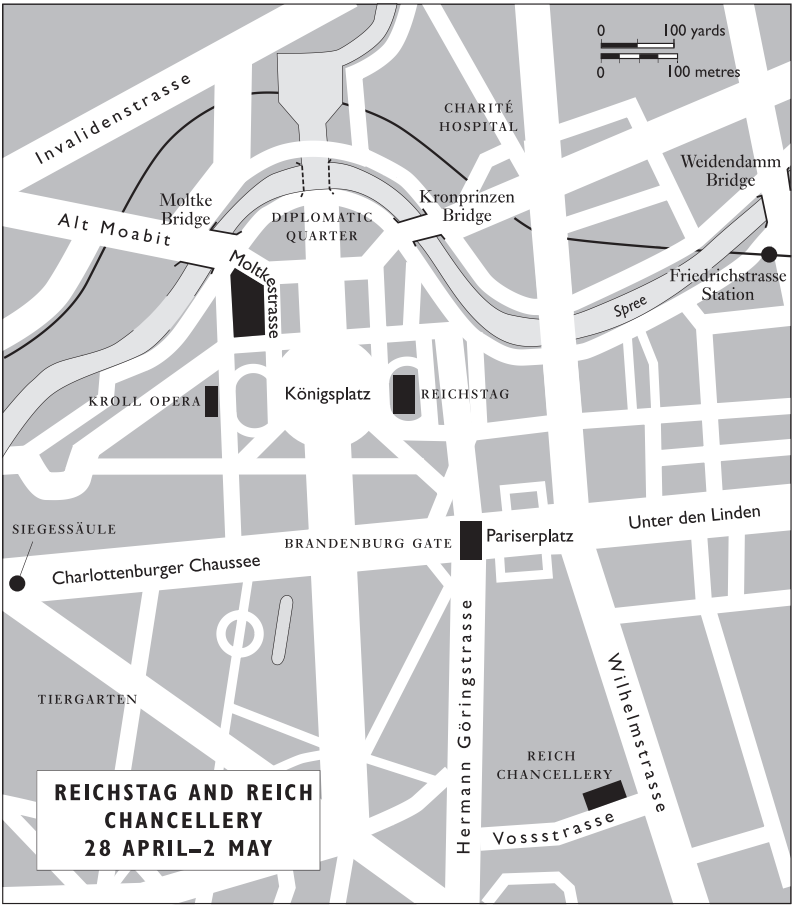
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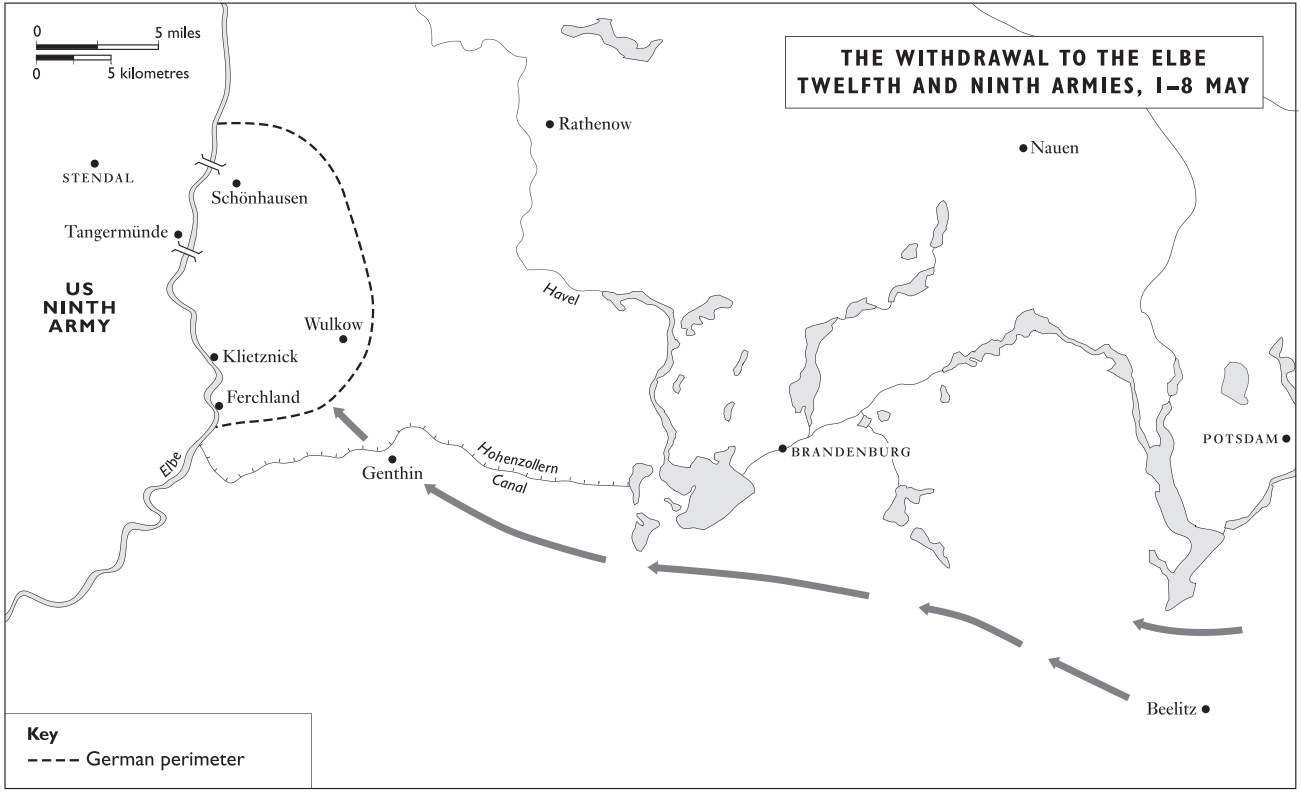
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Glossary

All dates given in the book refer to 1945 unless otherwise stated.

BdM Bund deutscher Mädel, League of German Girls, female equivalent of Hitler Youth.

Fritz Russian name for a German soldier. The plural was used for Germans in general.

frontovik Red Army soldier with frontline experience.

Ivan (or Iwan in German), an ordinary Soviet soldier. Term used by Red Army as well as Germans.

Kessel (German for 'a cauldron') a group of forces encircled by the enemy.

Landser an ordinary German soldier with frontline experience. The equivalent of the Red Army *frontovik*.

NKVD Soviet secret police under control of Lavrenty Beria. Military NKVD units – NKVD rifle divisions made up mostly of NKVD frontier guards regiments – were attached to each Soviet Front command. The NKVD chief with each Front was answerable only to Beria and Stalin, not to the military chain of command in the Red Army.

OKH Oberkommando des Heeres, in theory the supreme headquarters of the German Army, but in the later stages of the war its most important role was operational command of the Eastern Front.

OKW Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the supreme headquarters of all the armed forces, Army, Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine, controlled

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by Hitler through Field Marshal Keitel and General Jodl. It directed operations on all fronts except for the Eastern Front.

political department a political officer (*politruk*) was responsible for the political education of all soldiers. The political department of each Soviet army and Front came under the Main Political Administration of the Red Army (GlavPURRKA).

S-Bahn city and suburban railway, mostly on the surface, but some of it underground.

7th Department an organization at each Soviet army headquarters whose main task was to demoralize the enemy. German Communists worked under Soviet officers, and also many German prisoners of war who had undergone 'anti-fascist' training in Soviet camps. They were known by the Germans as 'Seydlitz troops' after General von Seydlitz Kurzbach, who had surrendered at Stalingrad and helped form the so-called National Committee for a Free Germany, which was completely under NKVD control.

SHAEF Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force Europe.

shtraf company or battalion, the Soviet copy of German *Straf* (penal) units. Disgraced officers, deserters and defaulters were condemned to these penal units, where they were in theory offered the chance to redeem 'their guilt with their blood'. This meant that they were used for the almost suicidal tasks, such as advancing first through a minefield. *Straf* units always had an escort ready to shoot any members who disobeyed orders.

SMERSH the acronym for *smert shpionam* (death to spies), a name allegedly chosen by Stalin himself for the counter-intelligence organization attached to Red Army units and formations. Until April 1943, when Viktor Abakumov became its chief, it had been known as the 'special department' of the NKVD.

Stavka the Soviet supreme headquarters of the armed forces, directly under Stalin's control. The chief of staff in 1945 was General Antonov.

U-Bahn underground railway.

Verkhovny commander-in-chief, the term which Zhukov and other senior commanders used to refer to Stalin.

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MILITARY ORGANIZATION

Army Group and **Front** A German 'Army Group' or a Red Army 'Front' represented a collection of armies under a single commander-in-chief. Depending on circumstances, strengths could vary enormously – anything from 250,000 to over a million men.

Army Each German army, usually varying in strength between 40,000 and over 100,000 men, has its name written in full in the text: e.g. Ninth Army or Third Panzer Army. Soviet armies, generally smaller, are written thus: 47th Army or 2nd Guards Tank Army. Most armies usually consisted of two or three corps. A Soviet tank army had in theory 620 tanks and 188 self-propelled assault guns.

Corps A corps consisted of several divisions, usually between two and four. A Soviet tank corps, however, consisted of three tank brigades of sixty-five tanks each and was closer in size to a full-strength German panzer division.

Division Divisions varied greatly in size. A Soviet Rifle Division in theory should have mustered 11,780 men, but most had between 3,000 and 7,000 men. German Infantry Divisions were often even more understrength by 1945.

Brigade This formation, between a regiment and a division, was used more by the US Army and the British than by the Germans and Red Army, both of which had at least two or three regiments to a division. The Red Army, however, had three tank brigades to each tank corps.

Regiment This consisted of at least two or three battalions, with anything up to 700 men each, but often far fewer.

Battalion Each battalion consisted of at least three rifle companies – each one theoretically around eighty men strong – as well as support companies, with machine guns, mortars or anti-tank guns, and then transport and supply companies.

Military rank equivalents between the British Army, the US Army, the German Army and the Waffen SS can be found on antonybeevor.com in the annexe section to this book.

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Introduction

Perhaps I was naive, or just too exhausted to think straight when I was correcting the proofs of this book at the beginning of January 2002. I never imagined the storms ahead. With publication planned for late spring, the editing process had been frantic, checking footnotes, index and all. As requested by Penguin's publicity department, I gave a very brief interview to the *Bookseller* magazine about the book and thought no more about it. But, to my horror, I found that the short piece they printed then prompted the *Daily Telegraph* to speculate on what might be in this book, particularly about the mass rapes by the Red Army. They rang me asking for an interview and more details, but I firmly refused to help. The last thing any writer wants is a controversy five months before their book appears in the shops. And it is, of course, far worse when you find people exploding in moral outrage when they have not had a chance to read the text itself.

The article appeared on 24 January spread over two pages. Grigori Karasin, the Russian ambassador, responded in the *Telegraph* the next day with a letter accusing me of 'lies, slander and blasphemy' against the Red Army. By eleven o'clock the telephone had begun to ring with requests for interviews, and this carried on throughout the day, with interest flaring in the United States and Australia, as well as the rest of Europe. All I could do was to ask the Penguin publicists to erect a barrier, refusing all interviews, while I ducked below the parapet. It was a frustrating and bewildering experience. I forced the *Telegraph* to publish a letter from me correcting some of their worst errors and exaggerations.

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On the Monday, my wife received a call from the Russian embassy to say that the ambassador wished to speak to me. I was on a reconnaissance in Normandy for a future book and so I waited until I returned to London before ringing. The ambassador was in a meeting, but he rang shortly afterwards. I thanked him for calling back. 'Oh, Antony. You must not call me Mr Ambassador. You should call me Grigori. You must come for lunch here at the embassy. A lunch with vodka and the best Russian food.' After his denunciation in the letters' column of the *Telegraph*, I had not expected this opening worthy of a Ferrero Rocher prize for diplomacy. I immediately said that I would send him an early copy of the proofs, and that he must realize that it contained much negative material, because there really was a dark side to the story. This only prompted profuse thanks and a demand that I get my diary to fix a date. I insisted again that he should read the book first. I emphasized that I did not wish to put him in an embarrassing position. 'We are talking about lunch,' he said magnanimously, as if that solved everything.

Norman Davies had kindly invited me to dine at St Antony's College in Oxford, and after dinner, we both talked with Marrack Goulding, the Warden, a former diplomat. I told him about Karasin's attack and then the abrupt about-turn with the invitation to lunch. Goulding's immediate reaction was that no Russian ambassador would have made such an about-turn without a direct instruction from Moscow. I found this observation unsettling. I had not expected the Russians to be happy about the book, but to take it quite so seriously struck me as alarming.

On Friday 15 February – as it happened, at the moment when the Americans and British were preparing to invade Iraq – I made the following entry in my diary:

> Today I went to lunch with Grigori Karasin, the Russian ambassador. Number 13 Kensington Palace Gardens has been the residence since 1932. It is a gloomy, mock-baronial building, with huge halls. Karasin showed me around and talked of its history, including Churchill coming in late 1940 to talk to Maisky in the winter garden, presumably with a warning of Nazi preparations to invade the Soviet Union. Stalin convinced himself that this was just *angliyskaya provokatsiya* to force him into a war with Germany. Karasin also pointed out from the window where a large bunker had been built in 1940.

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He then took me through to Maisky's study, where a table was laid for two. A beautiful young woman in black served us, and the toasts in vodka started, predictably with the victory of the Allies over Nazi Germany. I gave him a copy of *Stalingrad* which he said he would read attentively and tell me what he thought of it.

We prepared to eat and more toasts followed. 'Antony, I think that we understand each other,' he said. It was a phrase which he repeated twice more during the lunch. 'I wanted to thank you for your letter to the newspaper.' He admitted that he had received two signals from Moscow on the subject, which rather confirmed Marrack Goulding's suggestion. 'They thanked me for defending our veterans.' We talked of the veterans and their difficulty in re-examining the Stalinist period objectively. He strongly implied that because the victory over Nazism was still seen as 'sacred', a clear break with Soviet dogma was impossible while they remained alive. But he firmly re-emphasized that I should remember that 'the victory is sacred.'

There was a distinct contradiction in the way that he saw the *Daily Telegraph* article as a politically motivated attack, while at the same time acknowledging that the press was a law unto itself. I tried to emphasize this point. Selling newspapers came before everything, and it was perhaps inevitable that ambassadors tended to suspect a political dimension which never existed. In the case of the *Telegraph* and other newspapers, the problem was that a story like mass rape has always sold newspapers.

I had by then relaxed, reassured that the purpose of the lunch was not after all to quiz me on my sources. We talked of the history of the Second World War, but then he turned to current affairs. I was relieved to find that despite the vodka – we had drunk almost a small bottle each – I was still able to talk coherently and avoid slurring my words. Thank God for the pint of full cream milk which I had consumed just before leaving home.

No doubt lulled at the time by the unexpected charm offensive and the vodka, I was very slow to fill in the sub-text which began to occur to me only the following day. The victory over 'the Fascist beast' was indeed sacred. It was sacred even for those who had been repressed under Stalinism. Almost all Russian families had suffered over three generations

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during the First World War, the Revolution, the Civil War, the famines, the purges, and then the 'Great Patriotic War'. The one thing in which every Russian could take pride was Soviet resistance to the Nazi invasion and the ultimate victory. What I had failed to see was that nothing tarnished that 'sacred' achievement as much as the mass rapes. This was confirmed later when the pro-Kremlin media, both press and television, began to attack me.

In the run-up to publication, there was a very unexpected and slightly comical side-effect. The German ambassador, Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz, contacted me to say that he wanted to show how both Germans and Russians could now be grown up about the Second World War, so he proposed giving a joint launch party for my book with his friend Grigori Karasin. I gulped and said that perhaps he should read the book first. I immediately sent both him and Karasin copies of the proofs. That Sunday I was woken by a very early telephone call. It was Ploetz to say that, having read the text, he now understood what I had tried to say. He could not possibly suggest a joint launch party, and he considered it impossible even to offer me one on his own. This was because his next posting was as German ambassador to Moscow.

I happened to see Karasin just afterwards at the Foreign Office during a conference on the wartime exchange of letters and signals between Churchill and Stalin. He seemed to be avoiding me, so I went up to him and apologized that I had bombarded him with so much to read. A much taller man than me, he looked straight over the top of my head and said: 'You must understand that I cannot possibly agree with what you write.' I replied that of course I understood.

To my great surprise I heard from him again on 17 June. My heart sank when the telephone rang, and I heard: 'This is the Russian embassy. The ambassador would like to speak to you.' Then Karasin's voice: 'Antony, how are you?' he said as if we were still the best of friends. He told me that he wanted to organize a joint interview, him and me, to be conducted by Yefin Barban of *Moskovskii Novetsii*, 'a good liberal newspaper', he added as if to reassure me that it was not the old *Izvestia*. We agreed a date a few days hence. He suggested teatime. At least, I thought, I would not have to drink a pint of milk beforehand. But when I discussed the prospect with well-informed friends, they urged me to make my excuses and drop out to avoid any possible trap. I took their point, rang the embassy to

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leave a message and wrote a letter to Karasin to apologise for changing my mind.

When the book was published, I looked forward to seeing what the reviewers would make of my great scoop, which had nothing to do with the mass rapes. A friendly archivist in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) had slipped us some unreleased documents which were still classified as secret. They revealed that in April 1945, Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's head of the secret police, was sending in his NKVD Rifle Divisions to seal off Dahlem and the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute where all the German atomic research was carried out. Beria knew from his spies in the Manhattan Project that the Americans were working towards a nuclear device, and Russian scientists were desperately trying to catch up in what was called Operation Borodino, the Soviet attempt to create an atomic bomb overseen by Beria himself. Dahlem was in the south-west corner of Berlin, the point closest to the American bridgehead over the River Elbe and within easy striking distance of the Nazi capital. Suddenly, Stalin's insistence that Marshals Zhukov and Konev should surround Berlin first, before striking inwards, became clear. The Americans must not be allowed to get to Dahlem first. But, as it turned out, not a single reviewer, either here or in the United States or indeed anywhere else, ever mentioned it.

Antony Beevor
London, January 2020

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Preface

'History always emphasizes terminal events,' Albert Speer observed bitterly to his American interrogators just after the end of the war. He hated the idea that the early achievements of Hitler's regime would be obscured by its final collapse. Yet Speer, like other prominent Nazis, refused to recognize that few things reveal more about political leaders and their systems than the manner of their downfall. This is why the subject of National Socialism's final defeat is so fascinating, and also so important at a time when teenagers, especially in Germany, are finding much to admire in the Third Reich.

The Nazis' enemies had first been able to visualize their moment of vengeance just over two years before. On 1 February 1943, an angry Soviet colonel collared a group of emaciated German prisoners in the rubble of Stalingrad. 'That's how Berlin is going to look!' he yelled, pointing to the ruined buildings all around. When I read those words some six years ago, I sensed immediately what my next book had to be. Among the graffiti preserved on the Reichstag's walls in Berlin, one can still see the two cities linked by Russians exulting in their revenge, forcing the invaders from their furthest point of eastward advance right back to the heart of the Reich.

Hitler too remained obsessed with this decisive defeat. In November 1944, as the Red Army was grouping beyond the Reich's eastern frontiers, he pointed back to Stalingrad. Germany's reverses had all begun, he said in a major speech, 'with the breakthrough of Russian armies on the Romanian front on the Don in November 1942'. He blamed his

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hapless allies, under-armed and ignored on the vulnerable flanks either side of Stalingrad, not his own obsessive refusal to heed the warnings of danger. Hitler had learned nothing and had forgotten nothing.

That same speech demonstrated with terrible clarity the distorted logic in which the German people had allowed themselves to become ensnared. When published, it was entitled 'Capitulation Means Annihilation'. He warned that if the Bolshevists won, the fate of the German people was destruction, rape and slavery, with 'immense columns of men treading their way to the Siberian tundra'.

Hitler vehemently refused to acknowledge the consequences of his own actions, and the German people realized far too late that they were trapped by a terrifying confusion of cause and effect. Instead of eliminating Bolshevism, as he had claimed, Hitler had brought it to the very heart of Europe. His abominably cruel invasion of Russia had been carried out by a generation of German youth weaned on a demonically clever combination. Goebbels's propaganda did not simply dehumanize Jews, commissars and the whole Slav people, it made the German people fear and hate them. Hitler, in these gigantic crimes, had managed to manacle the nation to him and the approaching violence of the Red Army was the self-fulfilment of their leader's prophecy.

Stalin, while happy to make use of symbols when it suited him, was far more calculating. The Reich's capital was indeed the 'culmination of all the operations of our army in this war', but he had other vital interests. Not least of these was the plan formulated under Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's minister of state security, to strip atomic research establishments in Berlin of all their equipment and uranium before the Americans and British arrived. The work of the Manhattan Project carried out in Los Alamos was already well known in the Kremlin, thanks to the pro-Communist spy, Dr Klaus Fuchs. Soviet science was far behind, and Stalin and Beria were convinced that if they were to seize the German laboratories and scientists in Berlin before the Western Allies got there, then they too could produce an atom bomb like the Americans.

The scale of the human tragedy by the end of the war is beyond the imagination of everyone who did not live through it, but especially of those who have grown up in the demilitarized society of the post-Cold War age. Yet this moment of fate for millions of people still has much

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to teach us. One important lesson is that one should be extremely wary of any generalization concerning the conduct of individuals. Extremes of human suffering and even degradation can bring out the best as well as the worst in human nature. Human behaviour to a large extent mirrors the utter unpredictability of life or death. Many Soviet troops, especially in frontline formations, unlike those who came behind, often behaved with great kindness to German civilians. In a world of cruelty and horror where any conception of humanity had almost been destroyed by ideology, just a few acts of often unexpected kindness and self-sacrifice lighten what would otherwise be an almost unbearable story.

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Berlin in the New Year

Berliners, gaunt from short rations and stress, had little to celebrate at Christmas in 1944. Much of the capital of the Reich had been reduced to rubble by bombing raids. The Berlin talent for black jokes had turned to gallows humour. The quip of that unfestive season was, 'Be practical: give a coffin.'

The mood in Germany had changed exactly two years before. Rumours had begun to circulate just before Christmas 1942 that General Paulus's Sixth Army had been encircled on the Volga by the Red Army. The Nazi regime found it hard to admit that the largest formation in the whole of the Wehrmacht was doomed to annihilation in the ruins of Stalingrad and in the frozen steppe outside. To prepare the country for bad news, Joseph Goebbels, the Reichsminister for Propaganda and Enlightenment, had announced a 'German Christmas', which in National Socialist terms meant austerity and ideological determination, not candles and pine wreathes and singing '*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*'. By 1944, the traditional roast goose had become a distant memory.

In streets where the façade of a house had collapsed, pictures could still be seen hanging on the walls of what had been a sitting room or bedroom. The actress Hildegard Knef gazed at a piano left exposed on the remnants of a floor. Nobody could get to it, and she wondered how long it would be before it tumbled down to join the rubble below. Messages from families were scrawled on gutted buildings to tell a son returning from the front that they were all right and staying elsewhere. Nazi Party notices warned, 'Looters will be punished with death!'

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Air raids were so frequent, with the British by night and the Americans by day, that Berliners felt that they spent more time in cellars and air-raid shelters than in their own beds. The lack of sleep contributed to the strange mixture of suppressed hysteria and fatalism. Far fewer people seemed to worry about being denounced to the Gestapo for defeatism, as the rash of jokes indicated. The ubiquitous initials LSR for *Luftschutzraum*, or air-raid shelter, were said to stand for '*Lernt schnell Russisch*': 'Learn Russian quickly'. Most Berliners had entirely dropped the '*Heil Hitler!*' greeting. When Lothar Loewe, a Hitler Youth who had been away from the city, used it on entering a shop, everyone turned and stared at him. It was the last time he uttered the words when not on duty. Loewe found that the most common greeting had become '*Bleib übrig!*' – 'Survive!'

The humour also reflected the grotesque, sometimes surreal, images of the time. The largest air-raid construction in Berlin was the Zoo bunker, a vast ferro-concrete fortress of the totalitarian age, with flak batteries on the roof and huge shelters below, into which crowds of Berliners packed when the sirens sounded. The diarist Ursula von Kardorff described it as 'like a stage-set for the prison scene in *Fidelio*'. Meanwhile, loving couples embraced on concrete spiral staircases as if taking part in a 'travesty of a fancy-dress ball'.

There was a pervasive atmosphere of impending downfall in personal lives as much as in the nation's existence. People spent their money recklessly, half-assuming that it would soon be worthless. And there were stories, although hard to confirm, of girls and young women coupling with strangers in dark corners around the Zoo station and in the Tiergarten. The desire to dispense with innocence is said to have become even more desperate later as the Red Army approached Berlin.

The air-raid shelters themselves, lit with blue lights, could indeed provide a foretaste of claustrophobic hell, as people pushed in bundled in their warmest clothes and carrying small cardboard suitcases containing sandwiches and thermos. In theory, all basic needs were catered for in the shelters. There was a *Sanitätsraum* with a nurse, where women could go into labour. Childbirth seemed to be accelerated by the vibrations from bomb explosions, which felt as if they came as much from the centre of the earth as from ground level. The ceilings were painted with luminous paint for the frequent occasions during the air raids when the

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lights failed, first dimming then flickering off. Water supplies ceased when mains were hit, and the *Aborte*, or lavatories, soon became disgusting, a real distress for a nation preoccupied with hygiene. Often the lavatories were sealed off by the authorities because there were so many cases of depressed people who, having locked the door, committed suicide.

For a population of around 3 million, Berlin did not have enough shelters, so they were usually overcrowded. In the main corridors, seating halls and bunk rooms, the air was foul from over-use and condensation dripped from the ceilings. The complex of shelters under the Gesundbrunnen U-Bahn station had been designed to take 1,500 people, yet often more than three times that number packed in. Candles were used to measure the diminishing levels of oxygen. When a candle placed on the floor went out, children were picked up and held at shoulder height. When a candle on a chair went out, then the evacuation of the level began. And if a third candle, positioned at about chin level, began to sputter, then the whole bunker was evacuated, however heavy the attack above.

The foreign workers in Berlin, 300,000 strong and identifiable by a letter painted on their clothes to denote their country of origin, were simply forbidden entry to underground bunkers and cellars. This was partly an extension of the Nazi policy to stop them mingling intimately with the German race, but the overriding concern of the authorities was to save the lives of Germans. A forced labourer, particularly an '*Ostarbeiter*', or eastern worker, most of whom had been rounded up in the Ukraine and Belorussia, was regarded as expendable. Yet many foreign workers, conscripted as well as volunteers, enjoyed a far greater degree of freedom than the unfortunates consigned to camps. Those who worked in armaments factories around the capital, for example, had created their own refuge and Bohemian subculture with newssheets and plays in the depths of the Friedrichstrasse station. Their spirits were rising visibly as the Red Army advanced, while those of their exploiters fell. Most Germans looked on foreign workers with trepidation. They saw them as a Trojan Horse garrison ready to attack and revenge themselves as soon as the enemy armies approached the city.

Berliners suffered from an atavistic and visceral fear of the Slav invader from the east. Fear was easily turned to hate. As the Red Army

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approached, Goebbels's propaganda harked on again and again about the atrocities at Nemmersdorf, when Red Army troops had invaded the south-eastern corner of East Prussia the previous autumn and raped and murdered inhabitants of this village.

Some people had their own reasons for refusing to take shelter during a bombing raid. A married man who used to visit his mistress regularly in the district of Prenzlauerberg could not go down to the communal cellar because that would have aroused suspicions. One evening, the building received a direct hit, and the luckless adulterer, who had been sitting on a sofa, was buried up to his neck in rubble. After the raid, a boy called Erich Schmidtke and a Czech labourer whose illegal presence in the cellar had been tolerated heard his screams of pain and ran upstairs towards the sound. After he had been dug out and carried off for treatment, the fourteen-year-old Erich then had to go to tell the injured man's wife that her husband had been badly injured in this other woman's flat. She started screaming in anger. The fact that he had been with this woman agitated her far more than his fate. Children in those times received a harsh introduction to the realities of the adult world.

General Günther Blumentritt, like most of those in authority, was convinced that the bombing raids on Germany produced a real '*Volksgenossenschaft*' or 'patriotic comradeship'. This may well have been true in 1942 and 1943, but by late 1944 the effect tended to polarize opinion between the hardliners and the war-weary. Berlin had been the city with the highest proportion of opponents to the Nazi regime, as its voting records before 1933 indicate. But with the exception of a very small and courageous minority, opposition to the Nazis had generally been limited to gibes and grumbles. The majority had been genuinely horrified by the assassination attempt against Hitler on 20 July 1944. And as the Reich's frontiers became threatened both in the east and in the west, they drank in Goebbels's stream of lies that the Führer would unleash new 'wonder weapons' against their enemies, as if he were about to assume the role of a wrathful Jupiter flinging thunderbolts as a symbol of his power.

A letter written by a wife to her husband in a French prison camp reveals the embattled mentality and the readiness to believe the regime's propaganda. 'I have such faith in our destiny,' she wrote, 'that nothing

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can shake a confidence which is born from our long history, from our glorious past, as Dr Goebbels says. It's impossible that things turn out differently. We may have reached a very low point at this moment, but we have men who are decisive. The whole country is ready to march, weapons in hand. We have secret weapons which will be used at the chosen moment, and we have above all a Führer whom we can follow with our eyes closed. Don't allow yourself to be beaten down, you must not at any price.'

The Ardennes offensive, launched on 16 December 1944, intoxicated Hitler loyalists with revived morale. The tables had at last turned. Belief in the Führer and in the *Wunderwaffen*, the miracle weapons such as the V-2, blinded them to reality. Rumours spread that the US First Army had been completely surrounded and taken prisoner due to an anaesthetic gas. They thought that they could hold the world to ransom and take revenge for all that Germany had suffered. Veteran NCOs appear to have been among the most embittered. Paris was about to be recaptured, they told each other with fierce glee. Many regretted that the French capital should have been spared from destruction the year before while Berlin was bombed to ruins. They exulted at the idea that history might now be corrected.

The German Army's high command did not share this enthusiasm for the offensive in the west. General staff officers feared that Hitler's strategic coup against the Americans in the Ardennes would weaken the Eastern Front at a decisive moment. The plan was in any case vastly over-ambitious. The operation was spearheaded by the Sixth SS Panzer Army of Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich and the Fifth Panzer Army of General Hasso von Manteuffel. Yet the lack of fuel made it extremely unlikely that they would ever reach their objective of Antwerp, the Western Allies' main supply base.

Hitler was fixated by dreams of dramatically reversing the fortunes of war and forcing Roosevelt and Churchill to come to terms. He had decisively rejected any suggestion of overtures to the Soviet Union, partly for the sound reason that Stalin was interested only in the destruction of Nazi Germany, but there was also a fundamental impediment. Hitler suffered from an atrocious personal vanity. He could not be seen to sue for peace when Germany was losing. A victory in the Ardennes was therefore vital for every reason. But American doggedness

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in defence, especially at Bastogne, and the massive deployment of Allied air power once the weather cleared, broke the momentum of attack within a week.

On Christmas Eve, General Heinz Guderian, the chief of the army supreme command, OKH, drove in his large Mercedes staff car to Führer headquarters in the west. After abandoning the *Wolfsschanze*, or 'Wolf 's Lair', in East Prussia on 20 November 1944, Hitler had moved to Berlin for a minor operation on his throat. He had then left the capital on the evening of 10 December in his personal armoured train. His destination was another secret and camouflaged complex in woods near Ziegenberg, less than forty kilometres from Frankfurt am Main. Designated the *Adlerhorst*, or 'Eagle's Eyrie', it was the last of his field headquarters to be known by codenames which reeked of puerile fantasy.

Guderian, the great theorist of tank warfare, had known the dangers of such an operation from the start, but he had little say in the matter. Although the OKH was responsible for the Eastern Front it was never allowed a free hand. The OKW, the high command of the Wehrmacht (all the armed forces), was responsible for operations outside the Eastern Front. Both organizations were based just south of Berlin in neighbouring underground complexes at Zossen.

Despite having as quick a temper as Hitler, Guderian was very different in outlook. He had little time for an entirely speculative international strategy when the country was under attack from both sides. Instead, he relied on a soldier's instinct for the point of maximum danger. There was no doubt where that lay. His briefcase contained the intelligence analysis of General Reinhard Gehlen, the head of Fremde Heere Ost, the military intelligence department for the Eastern Front. Gehlen calculated that around 12 January the Red Army would launch a massive attack from the line of the River Vistula. His department estimated that the enemy had a superiority of eleven to one in infantry, seven to one in tanks and twenty to one in artillery and also in aviation.

Guderian entered the conference room at the *Adlerhorst* to find himself facing Hitler and his military staff, and also Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer SS who, after the July plot, had also been made commander of the Replacement Army. Every member of Hitler's military staff had been selected for his unquestioning loyalty. Field Marshal Keitel, the chief of staff of the OKW, was famous for his pompous servility to

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Hitler. Exasperated army officers referred to him either as the 'Reich's garage attendant' or the 'nodding donkey'. Colonel General Jodl, who had a cold, hard face, was far more competent than Keitel, yet he hardly ever opposed the Führer's disastrous attempts to control every battalion. He had very nearly been dismissed in the autumn of 1942 for having dared to contradict his master. General Burgdorf, Hitler's chief military adjutant and chief of the army personnel department controlling all appointments, had replaced the devoted General Schmundt, mortally wounded by Stauffenberg's bomb at the *Wolfsschanze*. Burgdorf was the man who had delivered the poison to Field Marshal Rommel, with the ultimatum to commit suicide.

Using the findings of Gehlen's intelligence department, Guderian outlined the Red Army's build-up for a huge offensive in the east. He warned that the attack would take place within three weeks and requested that, since the Ardennes offensive had now ground to a halt, as many divisions as possible should be withdrawn for redeployment on the Vistula front. Hitler stopped him. He declared that such estimates of enemy strength were preposterous. Soviet rifle divisions never had more than 7,000 men each. Their tank corps had hardly any tanks. 'It's the greatest imposture since Genghis Khan,' he shouted, working himself up. 'Who is responsible for producing all this rubbish?'

Guderian resisted the temptation to reply that it was Hitler himself who talked of German 'armies' when they were the size of a single corps, and of 'infantry divisions' reduced to battalion strength. Instead, he defended Gehlen's figures. To his horror, General Jodl argued that the offensive in the west should continue with further attacks. Since this was exactly what Hitler wanted, Guderian was thwarted. It was even more provoking for him to have to listen at dinner to the verdict of Himmler, who revelled in his new role of military leader. He had recently been made army group commander on the upper Rhine in addition to his other appointments. 'You know, my dear Colonel General,' he said to Guderian, 'I don't really believe that the Russians will attack at all. It's all an enormous bluff.'

Guderian had no alternative but to return to OKH headquarters at Zossen. In the meantime, the losses in the west mounted. The Ardennes offensive and its ancillary operations cost 80,000 German casualties. In addition, it had used up a large proportion of Germany's rapidly

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dwindling fuel reserves. Hitler refused to accept that the Ardennes battle was his equivalent of the *Kaiserschlacht*, the last great German attack of the First World War. He obsessively rejected any parallels with 1918. For him, 1918 symbolized only the revolutionary 'stab in the back' which brought down the Kaiser and reduced Germany to a humiliating defeat. Yet Hitler had moments of clarity during those days. 'I know the war is lost,' he said late one evening to Colonel Nicolaus von Below, his Luftwaffe aide. 'The enemy's superiority is too great.' But he continued to lay all the blame on others for the sequence of disasters. They were all 'traitors', especially army officers. He suspected that many more had sympathized with the failed assassins, yet they had been pleased enough to accept medals and decorations from him. 'We will never surrender,' he said. 'We may go down, but we will take a world with us.'

Horrified by the new disaster looming on the Vistula, Guderian returned to the *Adlerhorst* at Ziegenberg twice more in rapid succession. To make matters worse, he heard that Hitler, without warning him, was transferring SS panzer troops from the Vistula front to Hungary. Hitler, convinced as usual that only he could see the strategic issues, had suddenly decided to launch a counter-attack there on the grounds that the oilfields must be retaken. In fact he wanted to break through to Budapest, which had been surrounded by the Red Army on Christmas Eve.

Guderian's visit on New Year's Day coincided with the annual procession of the regime's grandees and the chiefs of staff, to transmit in person to the Führer their 'wishes for a successful New Year'. That same morning Operation North Wind, the main subsidiary action to prolong the Ardennes offensive, was launched in Alsace. The day turned out to be a catastrophe for the Luftwaffe. Göring, in a grand gesture of characteristic irresponsibility, committed almost 1,000 planes to attack ground targets on the Western Front. This attempt to impress Hitler led to the final destruction of the Luftwaffe as an effective force. It gave the Allies total air supremacy.

The Grossdeutscher Rundfunk broadcast Hitler's New Year speech that day. No mention was made of the fighting in the west, which suggested failure there, and surprisingly little was said of the *Wunderwaffen*. A number of people believed that the speech had been pre-

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recorded or even faked. Hitler had not been seen in public for so long that wild rumours were circulating. Some asserted that he had gone completely mad and that Göring was in a secret prison because he had tried to escape to Sweden.

Some Berliners, fearful of what the year would bring, had not quite dared to clink glasses when it came to the toast '*Prosit Neujahr!*' The Goebbels family entertained Colonel Hans-Ulrich Rudel, the Stuka ace and the most decorated officer in the Luftwaffe. They sat down to a dinner of potato soup as a symbol of austerity.

The New Year holiday ended on the morning of 3 January. The German devotion to work and duty remained unquestioned, however improbable the circumstances. Many had little to do in their offices and factories, owing to shortages of raw materials and parts, but they still set out on foot through the rubble or on public transport. Once again, miracles had been achieved repairing the U-Bahn and the S-Bahn tracks, even though few of the carriages had unbroken windows. Factories and offices were also freezing due to smashed windows and so little fuel for heating. Those with colds or flu had to struggle on. There was no point attempting to see a doctor unless you were seriously ill. Almost all the German doctors had been sent to the army. Local surgeries and hospitals depended almost entirely on foreigners. Even Berlin's main teaching hospital, the Charité, included doctors from over half a dozen countries on its staff, including Dutch, Peruvians, Romanians, Ukrainians and Hungarians.

The only industry which appeared to be flourishing was armaments production, directed by Hitler's personal architect and *Wunderkind*, Albert Speer. On 13 January, Speer gave a presentation to army corps commanders in the camp at Krampnitz just outside Berlin. He emphasized the importance of contact between front commanders and the war industries. Speer, unlike other Nazi ministers, did not insult his audience's intelligence. He disdained euphemisms about the situation and did not shrink from mentioning the 'catastrophic losses' sustained by the Wehrmacht over the last eight months.

The Allied bombing campaign was not the problem, he argued. German industry had produced 218,000 rifles in December alone. This was nearly double the average monthly output achieved in 1941, the year the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union. The manufacture

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of automatic weapons had risen by nearly four times and tank production nearly fivefold. In December 1944, they had produced 1,840 armoured vehicles in a single month, over half what they had made in the whole of 1941. This also included far heavier tanks. 'The trickiest problem', he warned them, was the shortage of fuel. Surprisingly, he said little of ammunition reserves. There was little point producing all these weapons if munitions production failed to keep pace.

Speer spoke for over forty minutes, reeling off his statistics with quiet professionalism. He did not rub in the fact that it was the massive defeats on the eastern and western fronts over the last eight months which had reduced the Wehrmacht to such shortages in all types of weapons. He voiced the hope that German factories might reach a production level of 100,000 machine pistols a month by the spring of 1946. The fact that these enterprises relied largely on slave labourers dragooned by the SS was not, of course, mentioned. Speer also failed to remark upon their wastage – thousands of deaths a day. And the territories from which they came were about to diminish further. At that very moment, Soviet armies numbering over 4 million men were massed in Poland along the River Vistula and just south of the East Prussian border. They were starting the offensive which Hitler had dismissed as an imposture.

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2

The 'House of Cards' on the Vistula

General Gehlen's estimates of Soviet strength were certainly not exaggerated. If anything, they were well short of the mark on the threatened sectors. The Red Army had 6.7 million men along a front which stretched from the Baltic to the Adriatic. This was over twice the strength of the Wehrmacht and its allies when they invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Hitler's conviction that summer that the Red Army was about to collapse had proved to be one of the most catastrophic miscalculations in history.

'We are lost,' a German sergeant acknowledged in January 1945, 'but we will fight to the last man.' Battle-hardened combatants of the Eastern Front had come to believe that it must all end in death. Any other outcome appeared unthinkable after everything that had gone before. They knew what had been done in the occupied territories and that the Red Army intended to exact revenge. Surrender meant being worked to death in Siberian labour camps as a '*Stalinpferd*', a 'Stalin horse'. 'We no longer fought for Hitler, or for National Socialism, or for the Third Reich,' wrote an Alsatian veteran of the *Grossdeutschland* Division, 'or even for our fiancées or mothers or families trapped in bomb-ravaged towns. We fought from simple fear . . . We fought for ourselves, so that we wouldn't die in holes filled with mud and snow; we fought like rats.'

The disasters of the previous year, above all the encirclement and destruction of Army Group Centre, were hard to forget. National Socialist leadership officers, the Nazi imitation of the Soviet commissar, tried to raise the fighting morale of the ordinary German soldier, the

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Landser, with promises as well as threats of execution for anyone who deserted or retreated without orders. 'You do not need to fear the Russian offensive,' they told them. 'If the enemy start to attack, our tanks will be here in four hours.' But the more experienced soldiers knew what they were up against.

Although Guderian's staff officers at Zossen had formed an accurate idea of the date of attack, the information does not seem to have filtered down to the front line. Corporal Alois K., of the 304th Infantry Division, seized as a 'tongue' by a Soviet raiding party, told intelligence officers of the 1st Ukrainian Front that they had expected an attack before Christmas, then they were told to expect one on 10 January because it was supposed to be Stalin's birthday.

On 9 January, after an urgent tour of the three main eastern fronts – Hungary, the Vistula and East Prussia – General Guderian, accompanied by his aide, Major Baron Freytag von Loringhoven, had again gone to see Hitler at Ziegenberg. He presented the latest estimates of enemy strengths, both Gehlen's compilation and also those of the Luftwaffe commander, General Seidemann. Air reconnaissance indicated that there were 8,000 Soviet planes concentrated on the Vistula and East Prussian fronts. Göring interrupted the army chief of staff. 'Mein Führer, don't believe that,' he said to Hitler. 'Those are not real planes. Those are just decoys.' Keitel, in a sycophantic show of resolution, smashed his fist down on the table. 'The Reichsmarschall is right,' he declared.

The meeting continued as a black farce. Hitler repeated his view that the intelligence figures were 'completely idiotic' and added that the man who compiled them should be locked in a lunatic asylum. Guderian retorted angrily that since he supported them completely, he had better be certified as well. Hitler refused out of hand the requests of General Harpe on the Vistula front and General Reinhardt in East Prussia to withdraw their most exposed troops to more defensible positions. He also insisted that the 200,000 German troops trapped on the Courland peninsula in Latvia should remain there and not be evacuated by sea to defend the Reich's borders. Guderian, disgusted with the 'ostrich strategy' of Führer headquarters, prepared to take his leave.

'The Eastern Front,' said Hitler, suddenly trying to charm him, 'has never before possessed such a strong reserve as now. That is your doing. I thank you for it.'

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'The Eastern Front,' Guderian retorted, 'is like a house of cards. If the front is broken through at one point all the rest will collapse.' Ironically, Goebbels had used exactly the same simile in 1941 about the Red Army.

Guderian returned to Zossen in 'a very grave mood'. He wondered whether Hitler and Jodl's lack of imagination had something to do with the fact that they both came from parts of the Reich – Austria and Bavaria – which were not threatened. Guderian was a Prussian. His homeland was about to be ravaged, and probably lost for ever. Hitler, to reward his great panzer leader for his successes early in the war, had presented him with the expropriated estate of Deipenhof in the Warthegau, the region of western Poland which the Nazis had seized and incorporated into the Reich. But now the imminent offensive across the Vistula threatened that too. His wife was still there. Watched closely by the local Nazi Party chiefs, she would not be able to leave until the very last moment.

Just over twenty-four hours later, Guderian's staff at Zossen received confirmation that the attack was now hours rather than days away. Red Army sappers were clearing minefields at night and tank corps were being brought forward into the bridgeheads. Hitler ordered that the panzer reserves on the Vistula front should be moved forward, despite warnings that this would bring them within range of Soviet artillery. Some senior officers began to wonder whether Hitler subconsciously wanted to lose the war.

The Red Army seemed to make a habit of attacking in atrocious weather conditions. German veterans, accustomed to this pattern, used to call it 'weather for Russians'. Soviet troops were convinced that they had a distinct advantage in winter warfare, whether through frost or mud. Their comparatively low rates of frostbite and trench foot were attributed to the traditional Russian army use of rough linen foot bandages instead of socks. Weather forecasts had foretold a 'strange winter'. After the hard cold of January, 'heavy rain and wet snow' were predicted. An order went out: 'Leather boots must be mended.'

The Red Army had improved in so many ways – its heavy weaponry, the professionalism of its planning, the camouflage and control of operations which had frequently caught the Germans off balance – yet some

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weaknesses remained. The worst was the chaotic lack of discipline, which seems astonishing in a totalitarian state. Part of the problem came from the terrible attrition among young officers.

It was a hard school indeed for seventeen- and eighteen-year-old junior lieutenants in the infantry. 'At that time,' wrote the novelist and war correspondent Konstantin Simonov, 'young people were becoming adult in a year, a month or even in the course of one battle.' Many, of course, never survived that first battle. Determined to prove themselves worthy of commanding veterans, some of whom were old enough to be their fathers, they showed reckless courage and suffered for it.

Indiscipline came also from the dehumanized way in which Red Army soldiers were treated by their own authorities. And, of course, the strengths and weaknesses of the complex national character played its part too. 'The Russian infantryman,' as one writer put it, 'is hardy, undemanding, careless and a convinced fatalist . . . It is these characteristics which make him incomparable.' An ordinary soldier in a rifle division provided a summary in his diary of the changing moods of his comrades. 'First state: soldier with no chiefs around. He is a grumbler. He threatens and shows off. He is keen to pocket something or grab someone in a stupid argument. One can see from this irritability that the soldier's life is hard for him. Second state: soldier in the presence of chiefs: submissive and inarticulate. Readily agrees with what he is told. Easily believes promises. Blossoms when praised and is eager to admire the strictness of officers whom he makes fun of behind their backs. Third state: working together or in battle: here he is a hero. He won't leave his comrade in danger. He dies quietly, as if it is still part of his work.'

Tank troops in the Red Army were in particularly good heart. Having been as demoralized as Soviet aviation in the early part of the war, they were starting to enjoy heroic status. Vasily Grossman, another novelist and war correspondent, now found 'tankists' almost as fascinating as he had found snipers at Stalingrad. He described them admiringly as 'cavalrymen, artillerymen and mechanics all rolled in one'. But the greatest strength of the Red Army was the burning idea that they were finally within striking distance of the Reich. The violators of the Soviet Motherland were about to discover the true meaning of the proverb, 'You will harvest what you have sown.'

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The basic concept of the campaign had been decided in outline by the end of October 1944. The *Stavka*, the Soviet supreme headquarters, was headed by Marshal Stalin, as he had promoted himself after the battle of Stalingrad. Stalin intended to keep full control. He allowed commanders a latitude of action which their German counterparts envied, and, unlike Hitler, he would listen carefully to counter-arguments. Nevertheless, he had no intention of allowing Red Army commanders to get above themselves as the moment of victory approached. He stopped the usual practice of appointing 'representatives of the *Stavka*' to oversee operations. Instead, he took on this role himself, even though he still had no intention of going anywhere near the front.

Stalin also decided to shake up the key commands. If this resulted in jealousies and 'disconcertedness', then he was far from displeased. The main change was to replace Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, the commander-in-chief of the 1st Belorussian Front, the main group of armies on the axis of advance to Berlin. Rokossovsky, a tall, elegant and good-looking cavalryman, presented a striking contrast to most Russian commanders, many of whom were squat, thick-necked and shaven-headed. He was also different in another way. Born Konstanty Rokosowski, he was half-Polish, the grandson and great-grandson of Polish cavalry officers. This made him dangerous in the eyes of Stalin. Stalin's hatred of the country had started during the Soviet-Polish war of 1920, when he had been partly blamed for the disastrous defeat of the Red Army attacking Warsaw.

Rokossovsky was outraged when he heard that he was to be transferred to command the 2nd Belorussian Front army group to attack East Prussia. Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the stocky and immensely tough commander who directed the defence of Moscow in December 1941, was to take his place. 'Why this disgrace?' Rokossovsky demanded. 'Why am I being moved from the main axis to one of secondary importance?' Rokossovsky suspected that Zhukov, whom he had considered a friend, had undermined him, but in fact Stalin did not want a Pole to enjoy the glory of taking Berlin. It was natural that Rokossovsky should be suspicious. He had been arrested during the purge of the Red Army in 1937. The beatings from Beria's henchmen demanding confessions of treason were enough to make even the most balanced person slightly paranoid. And Rokossovsky knew that Lavrenty Beria,

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