Race to the Reichstag:
The Battle of Berlin, 1945

By Joseph Miranda

Note: Soviet units are in plaintext; German units are in italics.

Soviet Perspective

On 1 April 1945 Soviet dictator Josef Stalin ordered Berlin become a primary objective for the Red Army, which was then advancing deep into the heartland of the Third Reich. The ensuing “Berlin Strategic Offensive Operation” was to become a race between two of the Soviet Union’s most powerful military formations: Marshal Georgi Zhukov’s First Byelorussian Front and Marshal Ivan Konev’s First Ukrainian Front.

Berlin itself had considerable military significance. The city and its vicinity contained both the overall German Armed Forces and Army High Command headquarters (OKW and OKH), as well as the administrative centers for the Gestapo and government ministries that were still grimly running Hitler’s war machine. By taking Berlin the Soviets would not only “decapitate” the German government (to use a modern term), but also gain an immense psychological victory that would help collapse the resistance of other German forces still fighting desperately elsewhere in the field.

Stalin also had a much deeper reason to want to take Berlin: the armies of the Western Allies were just then crossing the Rhine and heading east. With Berlin in hand, they would have effective control of the bulk of Germany in the postwar world. That control would help put in place Anglo-American domination of Europe. Consequently the Red Army would have to get to Berlin first.

All that was reflected in the instructions Stalin sent to Zhukov and Konev: the new offensive was to be launched on 16 April, a mere two weeks away. That was a short time for the staffs of the two fronts to use to plan, they were used to having considerably longer periods to set up such major undertakings.

Stalin also directed the offensive be conducted as a double envelopment, with First Byelorussian Front attacking from the north and First Ukrainian Front sweeping up from the south, with a projected linkup near the suburban towns of Potsdam and Brandenburg. That initial advance would surround Berlin, making it difficult for German reinforcements to get to it. Cutting off the city would also prevent the Western Allies from racing in at the last moment and claiming Berlin for themselves.

On that latter point Stalin had, in retrospect, little of substance about which to be concerned. Allied, especially American, leaders had chosen to take a single objective for a good drive in directions other than Berlin.

Stalin also commuted the two fronts to take a single objective for a good operational reason. The Soviets found resistance was growing in intensity as they pushed into Germany. Even with massive superiority in armor, artillery, aircraft and manpower, the Red Army was taking more casualties than it was inflicting on the Wehrmacht.

There was yet another reason for the approach chosen by Stalin. Effectively, he was setting up a personal competition between Zhukov and Konev to see who would be the first to conquer the capital, presumably because that would cause each to spur on his own soldiers. In aid of that, Stalin established the demarcation line between First Byelorussian and First Ukrainian running east-west from the Niesse River to the town of Lubben, 37 miles short of Berlin. From there it was left open. In his memoirs Konev later wrote (rather naïvely): “Could this halting of the boundary at Lubben have been designed to create competition between the two fronts? I admit that this could have been the case… This becomes all the more plausible if we think back to that time and recall what Berlin meant to us.”

Dual Drives

On 16 April, First Byelorussian Front opened its attack along the Oder River at the Seelow Heights east of Berlin. The Soviets there were up against Gen. Gotthard Heinrici’s Army Group Vistula, which was deployed in depth. The initial assault failed to make headway; so Zhukov committed his reserves, which fought their way through several defensive lines. Heinrici’s defense plan had been good, but he lacked the reserves to counterattack breakthroughs. Accordingly, First Byelorussian got through and headed for Berlin – though not quickly enough to satisfy Stalin.

Meanwhile, First Ukrainian Front assaulted across the Niesse River. It soon enveloped much of Ninth Army, then turned northwest toward Berlin. For both Soviet fronts casualties were enormous. Doctrine normally called for combined arms armies to make the main assault against enemy lines, with tank and mechanized corps following to conduct the exploitation; however, Stalin’s demand for speed had necessitated putting the armor up front to participate in making the initial rupture. Moreover, tactical reconnaissance wasn’t properly performed, and command control frequently broke down as spearheads raced ahead of signals units and headquarters. The sheer number of units jammed into the narrow front sectors meant friendly fire incidents increased, especially with the masses of artillery and airpower being employed.

Even so, Zhukov and Konev drove inexorably toward their goal. As the Red Army was running up its own casualty lists, the Wehrmacht was being pulverized. By the 23rd advance guards from both fronts were in the outskirts of Berlin. The next day, Gen. V. I. Chuikov, commander of First Byelorussian’s spearhead Eighth Guards Army (he and that army were victims of the decisive Stalingrad battle of two years prior), reported to Zhukov his men had met elements of First Ukrainian Front inside Berlin, 1945

By Joseph Miranda

Note: Soviet units are in plaintext; German units are in italics.

Soviet Perspective

On 1 April 1945 Soviet dictator Josef Stalin ordered Berlin become a primary objective for the Red Army, which was then advancing deep into the heartland of the Third Reich. The ensuing “Berlin Strategic Offensive Operation” was to become a race between two of the Soviet Union’s most powerful military formations: Marshal Georgi Zhukov’s First Byelorussian Front and Marshal Ivan Konev’s First Ukrainian Front.

Berlin itself had considerable military significance. The city and its vicinity contained both the overall German Armed Forces and Army High Command headquarters (OKW and OKH), as well as the administrative centers for the Gestapo and govern-

ment ministries that were still grimly running Hitler’s war machine. By taking Berlin the Soviets would not only “decapitate” the German government (to use a modern term), but also gain an immense psychological victory that would help collapse the resistance of other German forces still fighting desperately elsewhere in the field.

Stalin also had a much deeper reason to want to take Berlin: the armies of the Western Allies were just then crossing the Rhine and heading east. With Berlin in hand, they would have effective control of the bulk of Germany in the postwar world. That control would help put in place Anglo-American domination of Europe. Consequently the Red Army would have to get to Berlin first.

All that was reflected in the instructions Stalin sent to Zhukov and Konev: the new offensive was to be launched on 16 April, a mere two weeks away. That was a short time for the staffs of the two fronts to use to plan, they were used to having considerably longer periods to set up such major undertakings.

Stalin also directed the offensive be conducted as a double envelopment, with First Byelorussian Front attacking from the north and First Ukrainian Front sweeping up from the south, with a projected linkup near the suburban towns of Potsdam and Brandenburg. That initial advance would surround Berlin, making it difficult for German reinforcements to get to it. Cutting off the city would also prevent the Western Allies from racing in at the last moment and claiming Berlin for themselves.

On that latter point Stalin had, in retrospect, little of substance about which to be concerned. Allied, especially American, leaders had chosen to take a single objective for a good drive in directions other than Berlin.

Stalin also commuted the two fronts to take a single objective for a good operational reason. The Soviets found resistance was growing in intensity as they pushed into Germany. Even with massive superiority in armor, artillery, aircraft and manpower, the Red Army was taking more casualties than it was inflicting on the Wehrmacht.

There was yet another reason for the approach chosen by Stalin. Effectively, he was setting up a personal competition between Zhukov and Konev to see who would be the first to conquer the capital, presumably because that would cause each to spur on his own soldiers. In aid of that, Stalin established the demarcation line between First Byelorussian and First Ukrainian running east-west from the Niesse River to the town of Lubben, 37 miles short of Berlin. From there it was left open. In his memoirs Konev later wrote (rather naïvely): “Could this halting of the boundary at Lubben have been designed to create competition between the two fronts? I admit that this could have been the case… This becomes all the more plausible if we think back to that time and recall what Berlin meant to us.”

Dual Drives

On 16 April, First Byelorussian Front opened its attack along the Oder River at the Seelow Heights east of Berlin. The Soviets there were up against Gen. Gotthard Heinrici’s Army Group Vistula, which was deployed in depth. The initial assault failed to make headway; so Zhukov committed his reserves, which fought their way through several defensive lines. Heinrici’s defense plan had been good, but he lacked the reserves to counterattack breakthroughs. Accordingly, First Byelorussian got through and headed for Berlin – though not quickly enough to satisfy Stalin.

Meanwhile, First Ukrainian Front assaulted across the Niesse River. It soon enveloped much of Ninth Army, then turned northwest toward Berlin. For both Soviet fronts casualties were enormous. Doctrine normally called for combined arms armies to make the main assault against enemy lines, with tank and mechanized corps following to conduct the exploitation; however, Stalin’s demand for speed had necessitated putting the armor up front to participate in making the initial rupture. Moreover, tactical reconnaissance wasn’t properly performed, and command control frequently broke down as spearheads raced ahead of signals units and headquarters. The sheer number of units jammed into the narrow front sectors meant friendly fire incidents increased, especially with the masses of artillery and airpower being employed.

Even so, Zhukov and Konev drove inexorably toward their goal. As the Red Army was running up its own casualty lists, the Wehrmacht was being pulverized. By the 23rd advance guards from both fronts were in the outskirts of Berlin. The next day, Gen. V. I. Chuikov, commander of First Byelorussian’s spearhead Eighth Guards Army (he and that army were victims of the decisive Stalingrad battle of two years prior), reported to Zhukov his men had met elements of First Ukrainian Front inside Berlin, 1945
The Commanders

Marshal Georgi Zhukov

Zhukov started his military career in the czarist army, then joined the Bolsheviks during the October 1917 revolution. He rose through the ranks, winning the prestigious Order of the Red Banner medal during the civil war. Zhukov was a proponent of mobile warfare, and his strong advocacy of it brought him to the attention of Stalin. In 1939 the dictator gave him command of the Soviet forces involved in the Khalkin-Gol operation against the Japanese in Mongolia, where Zhukov displayed skill in handling large mechanized forces. In January 1941 Stalin made him chief of the general staff, a post he held until July, when he was reassigned to command Leningrad Front, where he halted the German advance on that city. That was the first of a series of major successes against the Germans won by Zhukov at Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk. He was appointed marshal in January 1943, becoming commander of First Ukrainian Front in 1944, which he then used to push the Germans out of the southwestern USSR. That was followed by command of First and Second Byelorussian Fronts during 1944’s Operation Bagration. The next year saw him in command of First Byelorussian Front in the Battle of Berlin. Following the end of the war he fell out of favor with Stalin, but was restored to good graces after the dictator’s death. Among other things, Zhukov participated in the 1953 coup against NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria, which brought Khrushchev to power.

 Marshal Ivan Konev

Konev was a rival of Zhukov’s, starting his own career as a political officer during the Russian Civil War. Konev was actually a subordinate of Zhukov’s for much of World War II, commanding fronts at Kursk in 1943 and during Operation Bagration in 1944. Stalin promoted the politically reliable Konev to marshal as a counterbalance to Zhukov’s potential for gathering undue influence within the army. The last year of the war saw Konev in command of First Byelorussian Front. Alongside Zhukov he conquered Berlin. In 1946 Stalin appointed Konev commander of all Soviet ground forces, giving him at least an administrative triumph over his rival.

Gen. Helmuth Weidling

Weidling had a long career in the German Army, joining in 1911 and seeing service in World War I. During the 1939 Polish and 1940 French campaigns, he commanded artillery formations. By 1943 he was a lieutenant general in command of XL Panzer Corps. He commanded the LVI Panzer Corps at the Battle of Seelow Heights in April 1945, where the Red Army broke through the German front along the Oder River and opened the road to Berlin. Summoned to the Führer bunker on 22 April, Weidling fully expected to be stood before a firing squad for having retreated his corps in the face of the overwhelming Soviet breakthrough. Instead, Hitler appointed him commander of the Berlin Defense Area. Weidling quickly pulled his divisions into Berlin and took charge of the city’s defense from the old German Army headquarters at Bendlerblock. After V-E Day, Weidling was charged with war crimes by a Soviet tribunal for refusing to surrender the city sooner than he did.

The city. That encounter was a surprise, as neither front’s commander was aware of how far the other had gotten. What had happened was Stalin, not pleased with Zhukov’s pace of operations, had withheld information, telling Konev that Berlin was still entirely available to become his front’s prize. Stalin had meanwhile extended the final boundary between the two fronts to Anhalter Station in downtown Berlin, allowing both Zhukov and Konev to fight for the city. It then became a question of getting to the Reichstag (parliament), a building with considerable propaganda significance for the Soviets. The fire there on 27 February 1933 had been used by Hitler as the precipitating incident in the final consolidation of Nazi power, which included the crushing of the Communist Party in Germany. Ironically, the Nazis had never reopened the building and, further, the Soviets were at least initially unaware of the existence of the Führerbunker beneath the Reich Chancellery. That was the structure in which Hitler was actually ensconced as the Reich collapsed around him. Within Berlin the fighting turned into yet a further battle of attrition. Soviet direct fire artillery and self-propelled guns blasted German
The Red Army at Berlin

Soviet “fronts” were the equivalent of Western army groups, each composed of several armies (Western corps equivalents). The Red Army mainly employed two types of armies in 1945: combined arms and tank. The former were essentially reinforced infantry armies, while the latter usually consisted of two tank and one mechanized corps (those corps in turn being Western divisional equivalents). For the Berlin operation the Soviet high command reinforced First Byelorussian and First Ukrainian Fronts with large artillery reserves, as well as heavy tank, assault gun, engineer and numerous other support units. There were also three “air armies” in direct support of the operation: Second, Sixteenth and Eighteenth.

Average strengths of late-war tank armies varied from roughly 40,000 to 65,000 troops and 700 to 1,100 armored fighting vehicles and self-propelled artillery pieces.

Average strengths of late-war combined arms armies varied from about 60,000 to 120,000 troops, along with as many as 4,800 motor vehicles of all types. Artillery strength would vary greatly, from a few hundred to a few thousand pieces, depending on an army’s current task assignment.

To fill out the ranks, the Red Army conscripted recently liberated POWs from camps it overran on the drive west. Meanwhile the massive gulag prison system was also called on to release political inmates and criminals for service in the military. Those recruits were given minimal training (or retraining) and then sent to the front. Morale and discipline were low among them, and adding to it was the suspicion the communist system focused on anyone who’d had contact with the Germans. Even with all those measures in place, the average Soviet rifle (infantry) division had only 4,000 men in 1945, half the officially authorized strength.

★