THE BATTLE FOR BERLIN
BY CORNELIUS RYAN

In the spring of 1945 two huge Russian army groups were poised east of Berlin for an all-out assault on the German capital. One, led by Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov, was assembled at Kustrin on the Oder, fifty miles to the east; the other, commanded by Marshal Ivan S. Konev, was seventy-five miles to the southeast, on the eastern bank of the Neisse. Both men were determined to get to Berlin first. The advance of the Allied forces from the west had been ordered by General Eisenhower to halt at the Elbe River.

Cornelius Ryan, aided by a team of Reader's Digest reporters and researchers, worked for more than three years to reconstruct the whole grim story—the military tactics, the human drama and the race to capture Berlin.

At a few minutes before 4 a.m. on Monday, April 16, 1945, there was complete silence in the darkness of the forests along the front occupied by Marshal Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Army Group, composed of 768,100 men. Beneath the pines and camouflage netting the guns were lined up, mile after mile. The mortars were in front. Behind them were tanks, their long rifles elevated. Next came self-propelled guns and, following these, batteries of light and heavy artillery. Along the rear were 400 Katyushas—multi-barreled rocket launchers capable of firing sixteen projectiles simultaneously. And massed in the thirty-mile-long Kustrin bridgehead on the Oder's western bank, now jammed with troops, were searchlights aimed directly at the German lines.

In a bunker built into a hill overlooking the bridgehead, Marshal Zhukov stood gazing impassively into the darkness as he waited for zero hour—4 a.m. He was determined to take Berlin by himself. He had no intention of letting anyone get there before him—especially not Marshal Konev, whose 1st Ukrainian Army Group was scheduled to launch a second major Russian assault at 6 a.m. from the south across the Neisse River. Zhukov looked at his watch. Seconds ticked away. Then Zhukov said quietly to his staff officers, "Now, comrades. Now."

Three red flares soared into the night sky. For one interminable moment the lights hung in midair, bathing the Oder in a garish crimson. The phalanx of searchlights flashed on. With blinding intensity the 140 huge antiaircraft lights, supplemented by the lights of tanks, trucks and other vehicles, focused directly on the German positions.

With an ear-splitting, earthshaking roar the front erupted in flame, as more than 20,000 guns of all calibers poured a storm of fire into the German positions. Pinned in the merciless glare of the searchlights, the German countryside beyond the western Kustrin bridgehead seemed to disappear before a rolling wall of bursting shells. Whole villages disintegrated. Earth, concrete, steel and parts of trees spewed into the air and in the distance forests began to blaze.

The tempest of sound was stupefying. Rocket projectiles whooshed off the launchers in fiery batches and screeched through the night, leaving long white trails behind them. Amid the tumult Zhukov's shock troops began to move out.

In the ranks were men who had stood at Leningrad, Smolensk, Stalingrad and before Moscow; men who had fought their way across half a continent to reach the Oder. There were soldiers who had seen their villages and towns obliterated by German guns, their crops burned and their families slain by German soldiers. They had lived for this moment of revenge.

After thirty-five minutes the bombardment ended abruptly, leaving a stunning silence. In Zhukov's command bunker, staff officers suddenly became aware of the sound of the telephones. How long they had been ringing, no one could say. Officers began taking the calls from field commanders.

At first Zhukov did not believe the reports. The first objectives had been captured, but Nazi artillery fire from the heavily defended Seelow heights lying just beyond the western banks of the Oder was now pinning down the advancing Russians. In the streams
and marshes Soviet tanks were churning helplessly.

At exactly 6 a.m. the forces of Marshal Konev’s 1st Ukrainian Army Group attacked across the Neisse River. Konev’s massed artillery was as merciless as Zhukov’s had been. Konev was leaving nothing to chance. In order to beat Marshal Zhukov to Berlin, he knew he had to overwhelm the enemy within the first few hours. At 7:15 he got good news: a bridgehead had been seized on the western bank of the Neisse.

As time wore on, the Marshal had every reason to be in high spirits. His attack had moved with unforeseen speed, although the fighting had been brutally hard. Since noon of the 17th his tanks had been crossing the Spree River and were by now approaching Lübben, the terminal point of the boundary line laid down by Stalin, separating Zhukov’s front from his own. For Konev the moment had come to ask Stalin for permission to swing his tanks north toward Berlin.

Near Cottbus, in a medieval castle overlooking the Spree, Marshal Konev waited for his telephone call to go through to Moscow. An aide handed him the radiotelephone. It was Stalin. Konev reported his tactical situation, giving his precise position. “I suggest that my armored formations move immediately in a northerly direction, Comrade Stalin.”

“Zhukov is having a difficult time,” Stalin said. “He is still breaking through the defenses on the Seelow heights. Enemy resistance there appears stiff. Why not pass Zhukov’s armor through the gap created on your front and let him go for Berlin from there?”

“Comrade Stalin,” Konev said quickly, “I have adequate forces, and we are in a perfect position to turn our tank armies toward Berlin.”

There was a pause. Finally Stalin said, “Very well. I agree. Turn your tank armies toward Berlin.”

By nightfall of April 22, Konev’s armies had cracked Berlin’s southern defenses and had beaten Zhukov into the capital by more than a full day. (Stalin’s order that was issued the next day—April 23—divided up the city between Zhukov and Konev. Although he could not complain publicly, Konev was crushed. Zhukov had been given the prize. The boundary line, which ran straight through Berlin, placed Konev’s forces roughly 150 yards west of the Reichstag—which the Russians had always considered the city’s prize plum, the place where the Soviet flag was to be planted.)

Now Berlin began to die. In most places, water and gas services had stopped. There were no newspapers. All transportation within the city was grinding to a halt as streets became impassable, and vehicles were crippled. On April 22 the city’s 100-year-old telegraph office closed down for the first time in its history. The last message it received was from Tokyo: “Good luck to you all.”

The Russian forces, after breaking the outer ring of the city’s defenses, gouged their way into the second ring. They crouched behind the tanks and guns and fought up the streets, the roads, the avenues, and through the parklands. Leading the way were the battle-toughened assault troops of Konev’s and Zhukov’s Guards, and with them the soldiers of four great tank armies. Behind were line upon line of infantry.

They were a strange soldiery. They came from every republic of the Soviet Union. There were so many languages and dialects among them that officers often could not communicate with elements of their own troops. In the ranks were Ukrainians and Karelians, Georgians and Kazaks, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Bashkirs, Tatars, Mongols and Cossacks. They came on horseback, on foot, on motorcycles, in horse carts and in captured vehicles of every sort.

Berlin was a holocaust. Its defense forces, supplemented by old men of the Home Guard and boys of the Hitler Youth, had been pushed back into the very heart of the city. There was fighting all through the Tiergarten area and in the zoo. Russian artillery was bombarding the city from the east-west axis, and a fierce battle was taking place within the Reichstag. Finally Gen. Karl Weidling, recently appointed Commandant of the city, could see nothing to do but surrender, and a little before 1 a.m. on May 2 the Red Army’s 79th Guards Rifle Division picked up a radio message.

“Hello, hello,” said the voice. “This is the Fifty-sixth Panzer Corps. We ask for a cease-fire. At twelve-fifty hours Berlin time we are sending truce negotiators to the Potsdam Bridge. Recognition sign: a white flag. Awaiting reply.”

On receipt of the message, Gen. Vasili I. Chuikov ordered a cease-fire. Later that morning powerful loudspeakers all over the city announced the end of the hostilities. Although sporadic firing would continue for days, the Battle for Berlin was officially over, and people who ventured into the Königsplatz that morning saw the Red flag fluttering over the Reichstag.