

In March 1945, British Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery stood on the Rhine with visions of a triumphal entry into Berlin dancing in his head. It was Montgomery's expectation that in addition to his own 21st Army Group, he would have command of the US Ninth Army and an absolute priority on fuel and supplies. He would then make a 250-mile dash across the north German plain to capture Berlin.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed with Montgomery's assumptions but the supreme Allied commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, did not.

Ike understood his mission to be destroying the German armed forces and ending the war in Europe as soon as possible. Berlin had political, symbolic, and psychological importance but it was a bombed-out hulk with almost no military

value. Except for a token presence, the Reich ministries had moved out already. The Soviet army was camped on the Oder, 35 miles from Berlin, with more than a million troops in position to attack.

The Battle of the Bulge in December had sapped German strength in the west, but 61 divisions remained, with additional pockets of strength in the Baltic states. Eisenhower's plan was to advance on a broad front, capture the industrial heartland of the Ruhr, split Germany down the middle, and consolidate Allied gains on the flanks. A diversion of resources for a single thrust by Montgomery would have brought operations elsewhere along the line to a stop.

The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union had agreed in 1944 on the boundary lines for postwar occupation of Germany. Berlin lay more than 100 miles inside the Soviet zone, although

the Allied powers would share control of the city. Eisenhower was not willing to expend tens of thousands of lives for the prestige of taking territory that would be turned over to the Soviets as soon as the war ended.

Eisenhower also wanted an orderly linkup with the Soviet forces, whose emotions were running high as they swept through Germany. "What are your ideas on control and coordination to prevent unfortunate incidents and to sort out the two advancing forces?" Gen. George C. Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff, asked Eisenhower. "One possibility is an agreed line of demarcation."

Over the objections of Montgomery and Churchill, Eisenhower decided against an all-out push for Berlin and elected to meet the Soviet forces on the Elbe. Harsh criticism of the decision followed in the years ahead. It dogged Eisenhower in

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his run for the presidency in 1952 and still pops up occasionally in theories that Ike's failure to take Berlin delivered the city into Soviet hands.

Eisenhower and Montgomery

In the first part of the war, Britain had been the dominant partner in the western Alliance, but by 1945 the Americans were providing most of the troops and resources and had taken over the leadership role. The British did not handle the change gracefully.

It rankled that Eisenhower was the supreme commander. "I would never class Ike as a great soldier," Montgomery sniffed.

El Alamein in North Africa "was the only major victory the British had in the first three years of the war," said historian Stephen E. Ambrose. "The British public had desperately needed a hero and after El Alamein the government deliberately

built up Montgomery." He was immensely popular with the British public and the Army rank and file.

The Americans were less impressed by Montgomery and his egotism. The relationship hit bottom in January 1945 when Montgomery held a press conference at which he essentially claimed credit for winning the Battle of the Bulge. Churchill tried to repair the damage with a speech in the House of Commons, acknowledging that the Americans had done most of the fighting and had taken most of the casualties.

Nevertheless, Churchill was also anguished by the decline of British prestige. According to Field Marshal Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff, Churchill "propounded strategies on ensuring that British troops were retained in the limelight, if necessary at the expense of the Americans."

The British pushed constantly for appointment of a "land forces commander" to be inserted between Eisenhower and the Allied army groups. This would have effectively made Ike a figurehead. Their choice for the job was, of course, Montgomery.

Eisenhower had appointed Montgomery coordinator of the ground forces during the initial move inland after the Normandy invasion, but by March 1945, he had resumed operational command of the seven Allied armies—four American, one British, one Canadian, and one French.

Up to then, the leading element of the offensive had been Montgomery's 21st Army Group on the northern flank, supported by the 12th Army Group under US Gen. Omar N. Bradley and the 6th Army Group under US Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers. The Ninth US Army had been attached to

Left: The Brandenburg Gate in June 1945, after the Soviet army took Berlin. Below: Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, flanked by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower (l) and Gen. Omar Bradley (r), in 1946. Montgomery was loved by the British public, but many Allied military leaders were not so enamored.

I.B.E.

By John T. Correll

Eisenhower did not regard Berlin as an important military target. He would not expend tens of thousands of Allied lives to take it.



Carl Weinrother photo via Bundesarchiv, Germany



When Eisenhower established a bridgehead on the Elbe, Montgomery was still 60 miles short of the goal. Eisenhower was concerned that Montgomery's plodding pace might allow the Russians to reach Luebeck first and keep going into Denmark.

Montgomery for the drive to the Rhine. Montgomery assumed the arrangement to be permanent.

When Montgomery did not get the orders he wanted, he gave the directions himself. In a message to Eisenhower March 27, he said, "Today I issued orders to army commanders for operations eastward which are about to begin." He would "drive hard" toward the Elbe and "thence by autobahn to Berlin, I hope."

He had miscalculated on several points.

As recently as September 1944, Eisenhower had recognized Berlin as a principal objective, but back then, the Red Army had been outside Warsaw. In a massive effort in February 1945, the Soviets surged almost 300 miles westward to draw within artillery range of Berlin, where they were busily building up their stores of munitions and supplies. It appeared likely that the Soviets would take Berlin, and Eisenhower had turned his attention to other pressing objectives.

Furthermore, primacy in the offensive was about to shift from Montgomery to Bradley. On March 7, elements of Bradley's 12th Army Group seized an intact bridge over the Rhine at Remagen and expanded the bridgehead deeper into Germany. Meanwhile, Montgomery paused at the Rhine and did not get across until March 23.

Bradley, steady and reliable, could be counted on to exploit the bridgehead, whereas Montgomery's reputation for methodical plodding inspired little confidence. "Monty wanted to ride into Berlin on a white charger," said British Maj. Gen. John F. M. Whiteley, deputy operations chief at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, but "the feeling was that if anything had to be done quickly, don't give it to Monty."

British Lt. Gen. Frederick E. Morgan, deputy chief of staff for Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, said, "Monty would have needed at least six months to prepare."

The Cable to Stalin

On March 28—in an initiative that would reverberate for years—Eisenhower sent a cable to Maj. Gen. John R. Deane, the US military liaison officer in Moscow, with a message to be delivered to Stalin. Ike said operations had reached the point where it was essential for him to know Russian intentions so actions of the advancing forces could be coordinated.

His own immediate plan, he told Stalin, was to encircle the Ruhr and isolate it from the rest of Germany, then "divide the enemy's remaining forces by joining hands with your forces. ... For my forces, the best axis on which to effect this junction would be Erfurt-Leipzig-Dresden." Contrary to the legend that Eisenhower's message conceded Berlin to the Russians, the cable did not mention Berlin at all. However, it could be reasonably inferred from the context that Ike did not regard Berlin as a major goal. He was aiming for Dresden, some 100 miles to the south.

Concurrently, Eisenhower sent telegrams to Marshall and Montgomery about the latest developments. The Ninth US Army would revert to Bradley, whose army group would become the spearhead of the advance.

The British complained furiously that Eisenhower had exceeded his authority by contacting a head of state directly. Eisenhower said he wrote to Stalin in his capacity as head of the Soviet armed forces, not as head of state. Besides, Churchill had always felt free to deal with Eisenhower directly.

More to the point was the diminution of the British role. Churchill told the British chiefs of staff that Montgomery had been "deprived of the Ninth United States Army" and that the British "might be condemned to an almost static role" in the final phase of the war. In a message to Eisenhower March 31—sent directly, as usual—Churchill expressed his dismay at "the relegation of His Majesty's forces to an unexpected restricted sphere."

Delivery of the message to Stalin was held up temporarily, but Marshall and the US military chiefs, weary of British complaining, stood staunchly behind Eisenhower. Montgomery's new assignment was to protect Bradley's left flank, seize Luebeck in northern Germany, cut off German troops in the Danish peninsula and Norway, and take the crucial ports on the North Sea.

Bradley pushed into central Germany, encircled the Ruhr, and trapped Field Marshal Walter Model's Army Group B

in the pocket, capturing 325,000 troops and an enormous amount of supplies.

Deane delivered the message to Stalin March 31. Stalin declared his full agreement with Eisenhower and said the Soviet high command planned to “allot secondary forces in the direction of Berlin.” In actuality, Stalin did not believe a word that Eisenhower had said and ordered the Soviet attack on Berlin to begin.

The Issue of Berlin

Eisenhower had not completely ruled out Berlin as an objective. “At any time that we can seize Berlin at little cost, we should, of course, do so,” he said in a wire to Marshall April 7. Ike’s original orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff in February 1944 directed him to “undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.” Nothing was said in the instructions, then or later, about political considerations.

“I am the first to admit that a war is waged in pursuance of political aims, and if the Combined Chiefs of Staff should decide that the Allied effort to take Berlin outweighs purely military considerations in the theater, I would cheerfully readjust my plans and thinking so as to carry out such an operation,” Eisenhower told Marshall.

There was no change in orders. In fact, there is no indication the Combined Chiefs ever considered such a change. Nevertheless, Churchill continued to press the issue. He said the fall of Berlin would “be the supreme signal of defeat to the German people” and that leaving it to the Soviets would strengthen their conviction “that they have been the overwhelming contributor to our common victory.”

For Churchill, the focus of the war had evolved from a pure defeat of the Germans to establishing the postwar balance of power in Europe. This was of far less importance to the Americans, who did not intend to stay in Europe after the war and were anxious to shift their military effort to finishing off the Japanese in the Pacific.

The irony was that the occupation zones were mostly a British creation. The initial plan, called “Rankin C,” was drawn up by the British in 1943 and submitted in 1944 for consideration by the three-power European Advisory Commission. The United States had some doubts, but the Soviets agreed right away. The zones were promulgated in the Occupation Protocol of September 1944 and confirmed at the Big Three meeting at Yalta in February 1945.

Churchill “most definitely wanted Allied troops within the Russian zone when



ITAR-TASS photo

American soldiers (l) and Russian soldiers greet one another on the Elbe in Torgau, Germany, in April 1945. The American advance halted there. The Russians went on to take Berlin, a prize with little military value to offer but a high price in lives.

the Germans surrendered, and he did not want them pulled out until he was certain Stalin would give something in return,” said Ambrose.

Although Eisenhower regarded it as “militarily unsound” to make Berlin a major objective, he kept the issue open. According to Bradley, “the capture of Berlin was still under active consideration by us as late as April 15,” the day before the Russians began their assault on Berlin.

“I never suggested going back on our word over the agreed zones provided other agreements were also respected,” Churchill said in his memoirs. “I became convinced however that before we halted, or still more withdrew, we ought to seek a meeting with Stalin face-to-face and make sure that an agreement was reached about the whole front. It would indeed be a disaster if we kept all our agreements in good faith while the Soviets laid their hands upon all they could get without the slightest regard for the obligations into which they had entered.”

The Russians, who had suffered enormously during the German invasion of their country, were determined to have their vengeance on Berlin. Had the Americans and British challenged them for capture of the city, it is inconceivable that they would have acquiesced passively.

At the Elbe

In the spring of 1945, SHAEF intelligence created a distraction with reports of a “National Redoubt” in the Bavarian Alps where SS divisions and other Nazi

stalwarts might be gathering for a final stand. The redoubt did not in fact exist, but Eisenhower could not ignore the possibility. It did not, however, seriously hamper the advance into central Germany.

By April 11, US forces had closed the 200-mile distance from the Rhine to the Elbe. The next day, elements of Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson’s Ninth Army crossed the river near Magdeburg, 50 miles from Berlin, and established a bridgehead on the other side. Simpson pleaded for permission to keep going to Berlin.

The bridgehead on the Elbe was at the end of a long supply line, with few bridges available. Forward units had to be supplied by air from support bases on the Rhine. A German force of about 50,000 stood between Simpson and Berlin with more in terminal defense lines around the city, ordered by Hitler to hold and fight to the death.

“At that time we could probably have pushed on to Berlin had we been willing to take the casualties Berlin would have cost us,” Bradley said. “[Soviet Marshal Georgi Zhukov] had not yet crossed the Oder and Berlin now lay almost midway between our forces. However, Zhukov’s eastern approaches were infinitely more negotiable than the waterlogged path that confronted us in the south.”

Meanwhile, on the northern flank, Montgomery was making his usual slow progress and was still 60 miles short of the Elbe when Simpson got there. Eisenhower was concerned that the oncoming Russians might beat Montgomery to Luebeck and keep going into Denmark. Ike offered



Bradley (r), US commander of 12th Army Group, and Marshal Ivan Konev (l), commander of the First Ukrainian Front, confer in April 1945.

Montgomery additional forces, but the pace did not improve.

With the bridgehead on the Elbe open, Ike asked Bradley for his judgment about casualties.

“When Eisenhower asked me what I thought it might cost us to break through from the Elbe to Berlin, I estimated 100,000 casualties,” Bradley said. “A pretty stiff price to pay for a prestige objective,” I said, ‘especially when we’ve got to fall back and let the other fellow take over.’”

To Simpson’s great and lasting disappointment—and a key part of the Eisenhower and Berlin legend—the US Army advance went no farther. On April 21, the Americans linked up with elements of Marshal Ivan Konev’s First Ukrainian Front at Torgau on the Elbe, 65 miles south of Berlin and well inside the Soviet occupation zone.

Berlin fell to the Russians on May 2. Zhukov later said it cost him 10,000 casualties to take Berlin, but his figure may have been those killed in action, not counting wounded. Konev, attacking alongside Zhukov, probably took an equal or greater number of casualties. Various estimates set the toll for the Red Army at Berlin considerably higher, between 50,000 and 100,000 total casualties.

Germany surrendered May 7, but German forces in Czechoslovakia refused to believe the news and kept fighting. Churchill clamored for the continuation of the offensive deeper into Czechoslovakia, as did Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, commander of the US Third Army.

“From a military point of view, Prague, like Berlin, had no strategic significance,” Bradley said. “Patton wanted desperately to

liberate Prague, both for political reasons and, I am certain, for the headlines.”

“To avoid possible incidents, [Soviet] General Antonov asked General Eisenhower not to move his forces in Czechoslovakia east of the line Budejovice-Pilsen-Karlsbad,” said historian Forrest C. Pogue Jr. “He pointedly reminded the Supreme Commander that the Red Army had stopped east of Wismar on the Baltic at his request [leaving Luebeck to Montgomery] and hoped by the same token that the Allies would stop their advance in Czechoslovakia. General Eisenhower agreed not to move farther. Thus he left Prague to be liberated by the Russians,” who completed the operation May 12.

With the war over, all forces retreated without incident to the agreed-upon demarcation lines for the occupation and the Americans and British proceeded to their assigned sectors in Berlin.

Second Guessers

The recriminations began soon after the war ended. In his memoirs, Montgomery grumbled that the postwar political balance in Europe had “meant getting possession of certain political centers in Europe before the Russians—notably Vienna, Prague, and Berlin. If the higher direction of the war had been handled properly by the political leaders of the West, and suitable instructions had been given to Supreme Commanders, we could have grabbed all three before the Russians.”

At least three times between 1945 and 1965, Drew Pearson’s syndicated

“Washington Merry-Go-Round” column reported breathlessly that American patrols reached the Berlin suburb of Potsdam on April 13, 1945, but were ordered back to the Elbe because of demands by the Russians. In reality, US forces got nowhere near Potsdam.

The issue also arose in 1952 when Eisenhower ran for the Republican nomination for President. Supporters of opposing GOP candidate Sen. Robert A. Taft sent Eisenhower a list of questions, including: “Was it yours or the late FDR’s decision to forbid Gen. George Patton from taking Prague or Gen. W. H. Simpson’s Ninth Army from taking Berlin?”

“Berlin was a destroyed city,” Ike said. “What was the great point in attacking it and capturing it, particularly as our political bosses had already told us that the line we must occupy was 200 miles to the west? ... Marshal Zhukov—a slightly different type of Russian—told me that he used 22 divisions, 2,500 guns, and suffered about 10,000 casualties taking this destroyed city of Berlin. Now, none of these brave men of 1952 have yet offered to go out and pick out the 10,000 American mothers whose sons should have made the sacrifice to capture a worthless city.”

Then there was Henry A. Kissinger, who opined breezily in *Diplomacy* in 1994 that, “General Eisenhower took it upon himself to write directly to Stalin on March 28, 1945, to inform him that he would not advance on Berlin and to propose that American and Soviet troops meet near Dresden. No doubt astonished that a general would address a head of state on any subject, let alone a matter of such political importance, Stalin was also not in the habit of turning down free political gifts.” Kissinger did not say exactly what the “free political gifts” were.

In 2008, author Robert Wilcox claimed that Patton was killed in 1945 by the American OSS and the Soviet NKVD to keep him from revealing that Eisenhower collaborated with the Russians to prevent US capture of Berlin or Prague.

“The major myth in regard to Berlin is that if the Americans had captured the city they would have held it and there would be no Berlin problem today,” Ambrose has pointed out. “This is patently nonsense.” Critics do not explain what difference an American capture of Berlin would have made. ■

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