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Despite the fact that it has been 20 years since the end of the Great Patriotic War, our military-historical literature has not really told the story of the work of the General Staff. Whereas since the General Staff is a working organ of General Headquarters, it fulfilled very great and complex functions associated with the planning and supervision of the armed conflict. On the basis of documents on hand and personal recollections, I should like to discuss in this article how the General Staff planned the operations in the final stage of the war and how General Headquarters resolved these problems.

* * *

The first thing on which we should dwell is the evaluation by the General Staff of the circumstances which had built up by the fall of 1944 and the planning of the first operations of the campaign of 1945.

The work of planning the final stage of the armed conflict on the Soviet-German front was begun as far back as the summer-fall campaign of 1944. The evaluation of the strategic situation and the conclusions to be drawn from it did not arise in the General Staff and General Headquarters all at once -- nor was it a result of one single act, but rather had been building up gradually during the process of the current work as the entire complexity of facts were examined and the development of hostilities on the fronts were watched.

The results of the unparalleled attack of the Soviet Army on all directions, without exception, were more than reassuring. As it is generally known, during the attack in the summer and fall of 1944, the Soviet Army annihilated or took prisoner 96 divisions and 24 brigades, destroying 219 divisions and 22 brigades. In all, the enemy lost 1,600,000 men, 6,700 tanks, 28,000 guns and mortars, and 12,000 aircraft. Fascist Germany was not able to restore these losses. Even the force of the loss of morale, which the enemy lost at that time, was great.

At the end of October 1944, the Soviet troops stood on the border of Finland and successfully attacked in Northern Norway, mopped up the territory of the Baltic states, in addition to the peninsula of Syrve and Courland where 34 enemy divisions were isolated, and invaded East Prussia as far as the border of Goldap and Avgusto. To the south of East Prussia, in a number of sectors, they crossed the Narev and Vistula Rivers in force and siezed important beachheads in the areas of Rozhan, Serotska, Magnusheva, Pulav, and Sandomir. The troops were headed in the strategic direction of Berlin. Great successes had been achieved in East Hungary where the 2nd Ukrainian Front reached to Budapest. Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, was liberated on 2 October in the zone of the 3rd Ukrainian Front.

These successes were achieved by the Soviet Armed Forces under the guidance of the Communist Party. Trained by the Communist Party, the military commanders, relying on their staffs and political agencies, led the troops from victory to victory.

However, victory did not come to us easily. Our divisions were depleted. The rate of advance of the Soviet troops, which had been attacking without operational pauses over the course of many months, slowed noticeably. By removing the troops from certain sectors of the front in Western Europe and by utilizing reserves, the Hitlerites were able to execute a maneuver with part of their forces on the East and create a solid and stable front. For us to break through it would require serious preparation.

In evaluating the situation, the general Staff understood the complexity of subsequent development of the success which had been achieved. The conditions and prospects for attack were not identical everywhere. To break through and completely defeat the troops entrenched there would cost us a great deal.

The situation in East Prussia seemed to be much more favorable. The troops of the 3rd Belorussian Front were known to be superior in forces. As a result of this, the General Staff assumed it was possible during the first 20 days of October 1944 to inflict a great blow, with some reinforcement of the front from the reserves of the Supreme High Command, through the entire East Prussia to the mouth of the Vistula at a depth of 220-250 km. However, an additional analysis of the situation detected the necessity of limiting ourselves, at least the first time, to more modest aims.

(1) On their front the Germans had the following: 11 infantry divisions, 2 tank divisions, 2 tank brigades, 2 cavalry brigades. A total of 17 units. The 3rd Belorussian Front had the following: 40 rifle divisions, 2 tank corps, 5 tank brigades; a total of 47 units. But the strength of the personnel in the infantry divisions of the enemy was much greater than the number of people in our rifle divisions. The combat capabilities of the Soviet tank corps and the German tank divisions were approximately the same.

It was expected that we would meet with great resistance in the direction of Warsaw, Poznan, Loda, Kalisz and even toward Silesia where the fate of Berlin was decided in essence, which as we felt at that time, would hinder us from carrying on the attack operations of the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Front for more than 140-150 km even with all our forces.

On the other hand, the General Staff expected much success in the zones of the 4th, 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts due, for the most part, to political considerations. Prospects were painted of a daring thrust to the edge of Moravska Ostrava, Brno and to the approaches to Vienna, and of capturing Budapest and crossing the Danube in force. A large part of the enemy infantry here consisted of Hungarian divisions whose stability, according to our supposition, could be radically undermined by the growing anti-military mood and by the brutality of the Fascists in connection with their desire to hold Hungary on the side of Hitler's Reich. The fall of Szalasi's regime would cause the country to leave the war and would put the German troops into a serious condition. Unfortunately, these calculations proved erroneous. The Fascist dictatorship, supported by the Germans, chained Hungary for some time to the German military chariot. Severe and bloody battles engaged us from the beginning of October in the Budapest direction. According to our calculations at that time, 39 elements [soyedineniya] were in operation against the 2nd Ukrainian Front. The nucleus of this large grouping was 7 tanks (5 German and 2 Hungarian) divisions. Our troops advanced slowly. Because of bad weather, difficulties arose with administration and supply. The enemy relied on a branched system of well prepared reinforcements and exerted fierce resistance. Even though the capital of Hungary was blocked, its capture dragged on until 13 February 1945. Such was the situation in which the General Staff prepared its concept and plan for the last campaign in Europe in October 1944.

(1) This Front consisted of the following: 43 rifle divisions, 3 tank corps, 3 mechanized corps, and 3 cavalry corps.

Very limited success, which we achieved in October, was evidence of the fact that it would be necessary to reinforce the troops

attacking in the south, to rest the divisions which had not had any change for a long time, to regroup, to bring up the rear, and to create the material reserves necessary for a breakthrough and subsequent development of operations. Finally, it was necessary to choose the most expedient direction, on the basis of an evaluation of the situation which was building up, and to work out plans for the swift and final defeat of German Fascism during the oncoming 1945. All this required time and means.

The situation in the attacking zones of the 2nd and 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts was discussed in detail at the very beginning of November in 1944 in General Headquarters. Since these fronts were facing a large part of the forces of Army Groups "Center" and "A" -- the enemy's main strategic grouping -- we did not have a superiority of forces, which at that moment was needed in order to attack. Hence, it followed that it would not be expedient to continue the attack in the direction of Berlin and that we must temporarily turn to the defensive.

In his routine report to the Supreme High Command, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General of the Army A. I. Antonov, dwelled especially on his conclusion relative to the change to a defensive in the western direction, and he asked permission to prepare the necessary directives for this. We received Stalin's permission and, on the night of 5 November 1945, the directive was given to the 3rd and 2nd Belorussian fronts to turn to the defensive. The same order for the troops of the right flank of the 1st Belorussian Front followed within several days.

Along with this, the General Staff continued its work on the concept of the forthcoming operations. From the very beginning it was proposed that the task of defeating Hitler's Germany be effected by two consecutive efforts which would constitute stages of the campaign. In the first stage, active operations would be continued primarily on the old, if it could be so expressed, direction -- on the southern flank of the Soviet-German Front in the region of Budapest. Here it was proposed that an abrupt change be made in the situation by withdrawing the main forces of the 3rd Ukrainian Front to the interfluvium of the Tisza and Danube Rivers in the region to the south of Kecskemet from where they would help the forces of the 2nd Ukrainian Front with thrusts in a northwestern and western direction. It was also thought that the troops of these two Fronts would be able to attack rapidly and reach the edge of Banska Bystrica, Komarno, and Nad'kanizha by the 30th of November and the outskirts of Vienna on 30 December.

The threat of defeat on their southern flank would undoubtedly force the German High Command to shift additional forces here from the west which, in turn, would create favorable conditions for advancing our main forces in the direction of Berlin -- those fronts which had been located to the north of the Carpathian Mountains. The General Staff proposed that at the beginning of 1945 the troops of the Soviet Army approach the lower reaches of the Vistula to Bromber, take Poznan, and capture the border of Breslavl, Pardubice, Gihlava, and Vienna, i.e. advance 120-350 km in all directions from the line of their location on 28 October. The defeat of the main forces of the enemy and the approach of Soviet troops to this border would guarantee conditions for the second attack of the campaign as a result of which Germany would have to capitulate.

Thus, only the general content of the Russian campaign of the war and its division into two stages were mapped out in the primary estimate of the concept pertaining to the end of October 1944. The direction of the main thrust had still not been determined, and the idea of splitting the strategic front of the enemy and dividing its groupings on the east had not as yet been discussed.

In the interests of a more exact concept of the operations in 1945, the General Staff, at the beginning of November, summed up the main results won by our army in this stage of the war and concisely formulated an evaluation of the strategic position of the different sides. It can be briefly described by the following: The Soviet Army had won victories deciding the outcome of the war. The completion of the battle on the Soviet-German Front had now been predetermined in our favor, and the hour of the final defeat of the enemy was approaching. At this moment, we were superior to the enemy not only in troop strength, but also in military skill and combat materiel. The battle on the encircled front was completely guaranteed by the well coordinated work of the rear which offered every continuing help to the front.

We evaluated the strategic position of the forces of the Soviet Army and the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition to be close to completing the encirclement of Germany. The blows from our troops were in good accord with the operations of the Allies in Western Europe. In essence, the Soviet Army and Anglo-American forces occupied initial positions for a decisive attack on the vital centers of Germany. Now we were faced with completing the last daring onslaught and, in a short period of time, completely crushing the enemy. As a whole, we stood on the eve of a complete victory. This evaluation of the strategic position of the sides, which, as subsequent events confirmed, was correct also served as a basis for a detailed working-out of the operational side of our concept of operations of the campaign of 1945 in Europe.

Others who, as a rule, participated in the preliminary discussions of the concept held by General A. I. Antonov were as follows: the Chief of Operations, his deputies, A. A. Gryzlov, and N. A. Lomov, and the chiefs of corresponding directions. Guided by Antonov's map, Operations Division made its preliminary sketches more accurate and computed forces and weapons and all of the other elements of the operations. Finally, a graphic picture of the operations with all computations and considerations was plotted on a special map after which it was even more attentively, one may say even captiously, discussed by General Antonov together with his Operations men. As in preceding years, initial operations were planned in great detail. Subsequent missions of the Front were mapped out only in a general form.

The overall important idea, which concerned the conditions for success of our operations in the main direction, was created at the beginning in the course of a creative search, and then was completely formulated. It consisted of active operations on the flanks of the strategic front in order to draw off the forces of the enemy there from the central sector. It was proposed that this be done not only in Hungary and Austria, somewhat farther from the main direction of our future attacks, but also in Eastern Prussia. A vigorous attack would have to be made against Budapest and offensive operations carried out in the regions of Koenigsberg in order to do this.

We knew that the enemy was particularly sensitive in East Prussia and Hungary. This meant that under strong pressure he would have to shift his reserves and troops from sectors on the front which were not under attack to here. As a result, the western direction where it was important for the Soviet Army to achieve success, would be seriously weakened.

Our expectations justified themselves. As a result of the offensive operations of our troops in East Prussia and near Budapest in November and December, the enemy concentrated, according to our calculations, 26 divisions (including 7 tank) in East Prussia and

55 divisions (including 9 tank) in the area of the capital of Hungary. But, as it then became known, Hitler nevertheless believed that the Soviet Army would inflict its main attack in 1945 not in the direction of Berlin, but through Hungary and Czechoslovakia and, therefore, the main attention of the German High Command and its forces was directed there.¹ This time, as in 1944, the Hitlerites committed a flagrant strategic error and left a total of 49 divisions in the sector of our main Front. This included only 5 tank divisions. Thus, the calculations of the General Staff turned out to be correct.

The fact that the enemy front had achieved a form which was unique and dangerous for it, whereby strong defense troop groups were sitting on the flank with weak and unprotected large reserves in the center, forced us to think about more expedient methods of operations in the main direction. Should we not in this case drop the idea of an equal advance along the entire front which would result in knocking out the enemy or should we break through this weak center with a direct blow, dismember the German strategic front and, without losing any time, strike a blow directly at Berlin? In this case, the uncoordinated enemy troops would be far easier to eliminate completely and, in this way, essentially facilitate achievement of the final aim of the war. The General Staff dwelled on this method of operation which, subsequently proved its value.

Thus, from the very beginning of the planning of the final campaign, the General Staff believed that a blow at Berlin should begin and be carried out as quickly as possible and without delay. Therefore, the opinion of comrades who affirm that the General Staff indefinitely put off the question of capturing Berlin is incorrect. The truth is that circumstances forced the change in plans.

(1) K. Tjppelskirch, Istoriya Vtoroy Mirovoy Voyny (History of the Second World War), Moscow, State Publishing House of Foreign Literature, 1956, p. 542.

In evaluating the operational position, probable missions, and methods of operation, each of the Fronts had its own difficulties, primarily the 3rd Belorussian Front. The German Group in East Prussia was very strong and deep. It relied on powerful, permanent fortifications, natural barriers and population points prepared for defense, and reinforced engineer installations and obstacles, and it could inflict a blow on the flank of our front which was attacking directly in the direction of Berlin. Such flank blows were dangerous because the forces of the German troops were growing steadily here.

Consequently, the East Prussian Group should not only tie up, but also isolate the strategic front from the rest of the sectors and splinter it as much as possible in order to prevent the German High Command from utilizing all its forces in a concentrated form, in one direction.

Such a many-sided operational mission -- to tie up, isolate, and splinter -- meant that to attack in East Prussia we must provide for using at least two fronts: one, to strike at Koenigsberg from the east; and the second, to isolate the East Prussian Group from Army Group A and the rear by bypassing it from the south and southwest. This front would simultaneously protect our troops attacking in the direction of Warsaw, Poznan, and Berlin. According to the position of the fronts in East Prussia which had built up during the course of operations in 1944, the 3rd Belorussian Front could strike from the east and the 2nd Belorussian Front could bypass it.

To solve the principal problem -- to create gaps in the enemy's strategic front -- the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts which were already situated in this direction and which had already captured beachheads on the Vistula could be used to make a daring

attack on the west. Inasmuch as these Fronts would have to break through the defense and achieve success rapidly, they would have to be saturated with tanks everywhere, especially tank armies and tank corps.

During the last three days of October and the beginning of November 1944, General Antonov and the Operations men of the General Staff worked out the operational side of the forthcoming activities. At this time the general concept took on a concrete expression in the form of an exact determination of the direction of strikes of the fronts and armies, the zones of attack, the depth of forthcoming and subsequent missions, and their time schedules. By now, the capabilities of the sides had been analyzed and numerous versions of operations were being weighed.

At this stage of their work, the minimum amount of time necessary to defeat Germany was computed approximately. It was assumed that it could be achieved within 45 days of offensive operation 600-700 km in depth with 2 subsequent efforts (stages) without operational pauses between them. The aim of the first stage was to defeat the resisting troops and reach the edge of Bromberg, Poznan, Breslau, and Vienna, 250-300 km in depth, and it was estimated this could be done within 15 days. The second stage was to complete the defeat of Germany and capture Berlin, and 30 days was estimated for this. The planned time was not extensive inasmuch as fierce resistance was expected in the final battles to eliminate the main forces of Fascist Germany. In actuality, the heroic Soviet troops exceeded all plans in this respect.

The depth of the mission of the Fronts, due to specific conditions of the situation, particularly the peculiarities of the locale, was refined more precisely. For example, for the 3rd Belorussian Front, the depth of their next mission amounted to a total of 50-60 km inasmuch as regional hostilities were very difficult and the enemy was strong. In the strip of the 2nd Belorussian Front, the possibilities for the troops to advance were much greater, and this made it possible to plan the front's next mission to reach the boundary of Mlawa, Drobina, i.e. 60-80 km. The immediate objective of the 1st Belorussian, the 1st and, particularly, the 4th Ukrainian Fronts was to achieve 120-160 km in depth.

The depth of subsequent objectives of the 1st Belorussian and the 1st Ukrainian Fronts in the plains of Western Poland in the main direction was determined within the range of 130-180 km.

From the beginning, it was proposed that certain areas of the enemy's territory not be involved in the first strike. This was, for example, Silesia. The relatively weak 4th Ukrainian Front, which we had planned to include in the general attack, would not be able to overcome any firm defense here. Its thirty-eighth and First Guards Army intended to strike at the point at which flanks of adjacent units meet with their northern neighbor, operated from the beginning in a very complex mountainous terrain and then would have to attack in an industrial area.

With regard to the directions of the front's thrusts, the directions of the attack of the 2nd Belorussian Front -- to Marienburg, which would cut off the East Prussian Group from Germany and the other troops and to Allenshtein to dismember this Group -- were now drawn up confidently. The operations of part of the forces of the 1st Belorussian Front encircling Warsaw, and strikes meeting the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front halfway, in order to defeat the Kielce-Radom group of Germans, were determined. Finally, the zone of operations of mixed Groups of the 1st and 4th Ukrainian Fronts -- whose final aim was an attack operation in the first stage

of the campaign held Vienna as before.

In our daily reports to General Headquarters we had raised, to some extent, problems of the operations of the Soviet Armed Forces in the final campaign. Therefore, many of them which had not been widely discussed with the commanding officers of the Fronts were coordinated with the Supreme High Command. During the course of November, our concept was made much more precise. This was in connection with the already firmly established procedure for planning operations in which the primary considerations of the General Staff were only an initial step in the development of a future plan of operations for the Front.

In preparing concepts for the campaign of 1945, General Headquarters did not gather the commanding officers together for any special meeting as had taken place in the past as for example, in the "Bagration" plan for waging the summer attack in Belorussia. At this time we restricted ourselves to calling the commanding officers separately to the General Staff and discussing with them everything which pertained to the operations for their Fronts; their coordinated ideas were then reported to General Headquarters.

Up until 7 November and during the holidays of the October Revolution, the commanding officers of the front troops, Marshals of the Soviet Union, F. I. Tolbukhin, K. K. Rokossovskiy, I. S. Konev, General of the Army I. D. Chernyakhovskiy and representatives of General Headquarters on the Fronts worked on the General Staff. The version of the general concept of hostilities against Germany in 1945 was carefully reviewed in General Staff. After this, the commanding officers of the Front and I went with A. I. Antonov to General Headquarters where a detailed discussion followed Antonov's short report. There were no essential corrections made in the plans. The start of the attack in the main direction was planned for 20 January 1945; however, the plans for operations had still not been confirmed and the directives had not been issued to the fronts.

Within several days after the concept of the initial operation of 1945 had been discussed in General Headquarters, the Supreme High Command determined that the troops which would take the capital of Germany -- Berlin -- would be headed by his first deputy, Marshal of the Soviet Union, G. K. Zhukov who, on 16 November 1944, was appointed to the post of Commander of the 1st Belorussian Front. Marshal of the Soviet Union, K. K. Rokossovskiy, replaced the commander of the 2nd Belorussian Front, General G. F. Zakharov. Stalin personally telephoned these commanders about this.

Stalin took it upon himself to coordinate operations of the four fronts in the Berlin direction in this final campaign in the war against Germany. Because of this, the necessity of the work of the Chief of the General Staff, A. M. Vasilevskiy, on the 3rd Belorussian Front diminished. Direction of operations of the 1st and 2nd Baltic Fronts fell to him as representative of General Headquarters and, on 20 February 1945 after the death of General of the Army I. D. Chernyakhovskiy, he took over command of the 3rd Belorussian Front.

Thus, the campaign of 1945, according to the concept of the General Staff, worked out together with the commanders of the Front troops, was to begin with simultaneous powerful thrusts by the Fronts located in the strategic direction of Berlin. The purpose of the thrusts was to break through and dismember the Front in sections, destroy lines of communications and liaison, disorganize the coordinated action of enemy groups and, even in the first stage of the campaign, destroy the main forces of the opposing German-Fascist troops. The operations of the first stage of the campaign would create, in this way, favorable conditions for completion of the war.

Special attention was paid in this period to the best way to protect the daring breakthrough of the enemy's defense and to develop the success achieved in the zone of the 1st Belorussian Front. Its troops were to attack from the Magnusheva and Pulav beachheads which predetermined the direction of the strikes and thus would activate the fight for the enemy. Due somewhat to this, the direction of the attack for the neighboring 1st Ukrainian Front on the left was planned not according to the shortest route to the border of Germany, but to Kalisz which lay somewhat to the north. The General Staff proposed that the shortest route for the 1st Ukrainian Front, in this case, did not justify itself for a number of purely military and economic considerations. In Poland it would pass through the upper Silesian and industrial region and take a stand in German Silesia where the Hitlerites who had organized a firm defense would be able to stop the attack. Protracted battle, loss of speed of operation, and numerous unjustified sacrifices were painted in prospect. Therefore, after repeated discussions and councils with Marshal of the Soviet Union Konev, they dwelled on the attack version bypassing of Silesia from the northeast and north. General Headquarters was in accord with such a concept inasmuch as a strike would create a direct threat to the rear of the enemy who was positioned in front of the 1st Belorussian Front and would eventually facilitate the advance of our troops to Poznan. In addition to this, in this instance all installations in the industrial basin would remain to the side of the main strike and could be preserved, for the most part, unharmed which would make it possible subsequently to utilize them as designed without large expenditures for rebuilding.

On 27 November, during a trip of the commander of the 1st Belorussian Front to Moscow called by General Headquarters, the operational side of the decision for the initial operation of the 1st Belorussian Front underwent somewhat of a change. According to data which had been received by reconnoitering the Front, a strike directly at the west was made difficult because of the presence of the enemy's numerous defense lines occupied by troops. In the opinion of the Commander of the Front, success could be achieved faster if main forces of the Front operated at Lodz, subsequently reaching Poznan. The Supreme High Command agreed with such a refinement.

This circumstance changed the direction of the main strike of the neighbor on the left: the approach of the 1st Ukrainian Front to Kalisz lost its importance. Therefore, Marshal Konev was told that the main direction of attack was to be at Breslau.

Taking into account all these corrections, the troop commanders and their staffs worked out operational plans for each Front which were reviewed by the General Staff and confirmed by General Headquarters.

The Fronts spent about 2½ months on all planning measures in General Headquarters's links. It goes without saying that preparations for operations during this time went at full speed, and details were worked out for concentrating the reserves and materiel necessary for the Fronts. And, after the commanders had agreed upon the fundamentals for future operations, accumulation of necessary supplies was begun on the Fronts.

Thus, the picture of the forthcoming winter campaign of the Soviet Army was completely determined in November 1944 even though the operational plans were not confirmed by General Headquarters until the end of December. Only individual changes were subsequently made in the concepts of the campaign and initial operations.

Let us now discuss how the concept of the final Berlin operation arose and how it was finally formulated.

The attack of the Soviet troops in East Prussia, on the Vistula, and in Silesia, was so decisive and daring that within two weeks the armies of the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts had completed their missions and had reached Poznan and Breslau.

Due to the fact that we had achieved our aim in the first stage of the campaign we had to determine, without losing any time, how to go on inasmuch as the strike at Berlin had become the order of the day and was, so to speak, our immediate aim.

On 26 January 1945, the General Staff received the decision of the commanding officer of the 1st Belorussian Front as to a non-stop continuation, in essence, attack of the front up until the German capital was captured. It was proposed that within 4 days troops be brought up, especially artillery in the rear, supplies be replenished, combat machine materiel be put into working order, that the Third Assault Army and First Army of the Polish troops be put into the first echelon and that from 1-2 February the attack be continued by all forces of the Front. The immediate mission was to cross the Oder River in force; subsequently, the daring strike was to be made at Berlin, directing our main efforts to encompass the German capital from the northeast, north, and northwest. In addition, the Second Guards Tank Army would encompass Berlin in from the northwest and the First Guards Tank Army from the northeast.

Within a day, the General Staff had received the decision of the commanding officer of the 1st Ukrainian Front according to which his front would also operate without any noticeable delay, attacking on 5-6 February and, by 25-28 February, would reach the Elbe River and with his right wing in a coordinated action with the 1st Belorussian Front, would capture Berlin.

Thus, the troops of both Fronts were aimed at capturing Berlin without any pause. But how, in this case, could the decision of Marshal Konev be coordinated with Stalin's decision that only the 1st Belorussian Front would take Berlin? After hot debates with General Antonov, the General Staff proposed two decisions with which General Headquarters agreed. However, the dividing line between these fronts would be the one which Marshal Zhukov had recommended: up to Smirgel' -- first and then Unrushtadt, the Pauleobra River, the Oder River, Ratsdorf, Friedland, Gross Keris, and Mikhendorf. Such a dividing line would actually push the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front to the south of Berlin and not give them any window whatsoever for a direct strike from the south or southwest forcing them to attack Gruben and Brandenburg.

The General Staff realized this was nonsense: on the one hand, Marshal Konev's decision was confirmed -- to attack Berlin with its right wing -- and on the other hand, a dividing line would be established which would not permit this to happen.

A way out of this situation had to be found. We felt that either the situation would cause necessary changes or we would be forced in the course of operations to correct this nonsense, especially since we still had a long way to go to Berlin. But, as subsequent events proved, the planned attack on Berlin did not succeed in taking place in a short time.

By the end of January it had become known that the enemy was creating a strong grouping in Pomerania. The General Staff considered this to be a threat to the right flank and rear of our troops attacking Berlin. Moreover, a gap of more than 100 km had formed

between the 1st and 2nd Belorussian Fronts secured only by horse cavalry. The troops were in short supply of ammunition and fuel since their supplies had been left on the Vistula. Such a situation forced General Headquarters and General Staff to review their initial decision: ignoring the large forces of the enemy on the flank and not worrying about the rear end supply, it would be impossible to make a run for Berlin. Now, after 20 years, when the maps are all open and responsibility does not have to be borne, certain comrades in their memoirs are drawing profound conclusions about the possibility of capturing Berlin in February of 1945.

In the middle of February, the Pomeranian Group of the enemy turned to attack. Fierce battles ensued. The Soviet High Command had no doubt that the Germans would not be able to overrun our attacking troops. Nevertheless, without defeating this group, it would be impossible to think of any uninterrupted attack on Berlin using all the forces of the 1st Belorussian Front. A large part of them would have to be thrown against this Pomeranian splinter. Subsequently, when the main forces of the 2nd Belorussian Front were swung around to Pomerania, the rear of the 1st Belorussian Front could be considered secured.

Affairs were becoming more favorable in the zone of the 1st Ukrainian Front which was approaching the Neisse River with its right flank (it reached it on 24 February) after which it successfully hammered at the enemy in upper Silesia (the area of Oppeln). But it would require a great deal more time for this front to completely defeat the enemy.

The reassuring situation was telling the zone of the 4th, 2nd, and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts. On 13 February, the Hitlerites' resistance was completely smashed in Budapest. This, in the opinion of the General Staff, opened up favorable prospects for an attack in the direction of Olomouc and Prague; Vienna and Plzen -- near the very belly of Fascist Germany -- and make it possible to draw as many enemy forces as possible here, including those in the central direction which was so very important for us. At that time, we knew that the enemy saw that the main threat for them lay in these directions and had already aimed their picked forces here hoping to change the course in their favor.

The General Staff continued to work out its concept of operations in Austria and Czechoslovakia, proposing that the attack be made at Pardubice, Brno, and Vienna in 15-20 days and that the Vltava be crossed in force and that Prague be liberated. The advance of Soviet troops in these directions would also deprive Fascist Germany of important coal mining regions (Moravska Ostrava), petroleum regions (Western Hungary), and iron regions (Linz) which, together with the loss of the Silesian industrial area and the agricultural regions of East Prussia, would be a considerable detriment to the economic foundations of the military potential of the enemy.

With regard to the future course of the war, our calculations were made by computing the most unfavorable circumstances, namely, that the Allies would not be able to overcome the defense of the German troops. In this case it was considered possible that the enemy would remove a large part of their troops from their western front and transfer them to the east to defend the capital of their Fascist state. The importance of the outcome of the battle for Berlin was too great for the fate of Hitler's clique and, as a whole, for the German Fascist State.

The work of the General Staff in planning the final thrusts was complicated very greatly by the subjective and categorical decision of Stalin as to the special role of the 1st Belorussian Front.

General of the Army, A. I. Antonov, who had assumed the difficult and responsible post of Chief of the General Staff on 19 February, felt this very acutely.

It would be extremely difficult for one Front, even such a strong one as the 1st Belorussian Front, to capture so large a city as Berlin which was well prepared for defense. The situation urgently required that the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts at least be directed toward Berlin, while it was also necessary to somehow avoid an ineffective frontal blow with the main forces. Therefore, the January idea of the General Staff and the commanding officers of the front -- i.e. to take Berlin by the 1st Belorussian Front making a flanking blow from the north and northwest and the 1st Ukrainian Front making a double flanking blow from the southwest and west -- was reflected on General Antonov's map. The first troops were to meet in the area of Brandenburg and Potsdam. Thus, not only would the internal front encircle the enemy in the capital, but the outer Front which would make it possible to parry any possible counteraction on the part of the German troops from the west and southwest. If the Hitlerites, for any reason whatsoever, succeeded in establishing a front to the west of Berlin, then we, of course, would have to continue the attack until they were completely defeated.

Subsequent events removed this question relative to the operations of our Allies. They slowly and carefully advanced. During February and March 1945, the Allied armies repulsed the enemy to the Rhine, seized beachheads in individual places, and began preparations to the east of this river.

The bitterness of the battle did not weaken on the Soviet-German Front, but to the contrary, increased. Many important events took place in February and March. In eastern Pomerania, troops of the 2nd and part of the forces of the 1st Belorussian Fronts completely routed the enemy and removed the threat of a flanking operation from the north at the rear of the armies aimed at Berlin. Bloody battles were taking place at the same time in order to expand the beachhead on the Oder to the west of Kostryzyn which ended successfully for us. The Soviet troops stood 60 km from the German capital.

The armies of the right wing of the 1st Ukrainian Front encircled and annihilated more than 5 German divisions in Upper Silesia and, after they had repulsed the rest into Sudetan, they occupied a favorable position for a strike against Dresden and Prague. Troops of the 4th Ukrainian Front in the Carpathian Mountains achieved notable success.

The combat operations in western Hungary in the direction of Vienna had extremely important consequences. Despite the overall situation which was unfavorable to the enemy, he attempted here to create an abrupt change in his position on the front in his favor, and to do this, he concentrated all possible reserves here and made counter attacks against the 3rd Ukrainian Front in the region of Lake Balaton. The extremely brutal Balaton battle lasted ten days. The attempt of the enemy to seize the initiative was repulsed. Our attack on Vienna took place literally the day after the battle in the region of Lake Balaton. Earlier, General Headquarters had warned the commanding officer of the 3rd Ukrainian Front of the necessity of keeping the Ninth Guards Army free from defensive action for an attack on the capital of Austria. This made it possible to immediately move forward not only the troops of the 2nd, but also of the 3rd Ukrainian Front. On 13 April, Vienna was liberated and our troops advanced to the west.

The end of March was used by our Allies to cross the Rhine in force and to attack the interior of the central part of Germany

and Bavaria. By joining the Soviet Army they had in mind cutting off the German forces. The Soviet High Command was informed of this plan, which stemmed from decisions made at the Crimean Conference of the heads of governments of the three Allied powers, on 28 March by letter from the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Anglo-American Forces, General Eisenhower.

Now the Allies advanced faster than before. In the Ruhr, they encircled a large grouping of Germans which was then cut off and which immediately ceased resistance. The main forces of the Anglo-American troops, meeting very weak resistance, advanced to the west to the Elbe and to the shores of the Baltic in the area of Lubeck.

There was no doubt whatsoever that the Allies intended to seize Berlin before us even though, according to the Yalta agreements, the city belonged to the zone of occupation of the Soviet troops. As it has become known from the memoirs of the late Churchill, he urged Roosevelt and Eisenhower in every way to seize the capital of Germany. In a letter to the President of the United States he wrote: "Nothing will have such a psychological effect nor will cause such despair among all German forces of resistance as the fall of Berlin. It will be the supreme signal of defeat for the German people. On the other hand, if we allow the Russians to maintain the siege in the ruins of Berlin then we must realize that as long as the German flag flies there, Berlin will inspire resistance of all Germans under arms."

In addition, there exists still another aspect which you and I ought to consider. The Russian armies will no doubt seize all of Austria and enter Vienna. If they also take Berlin, will it not then create a too exaggerated idea that they have made an overwhelming contribution to our common victory and can this not lead to such a frame of mind that it will cause serious and very great difficulties in the future? Therefore, I feel that from a political standpoint, we should advance into German as far east as possible and that should Berlin be in our grasp, we should certainly take it. This also appears sound on military grounds."

At the end of March, the General Staff worked out all the main considerations on the Berlin operation. In the course of its work, the General Staff had continually consulted with the commanding officers of the 2nd and 1st Belorussian and the 1st Ukrainian Fronts and with the Chiefs of Staff, Generals A. M. Bogolyubov, M. S. Malinin, and V. D. Sokolovskiy and, subsequently, I. Ye. Petrov as to maintaining troop operations in the forthcoming attack. Therefore, as soon as it became clear that the Allies were attempting to be the first to capture Berlin, the commanding officers of the troops of the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts were immediately called to Moscow.

On 31 March, the General Staff reviewed the concept of operations of the Fronts with the commanding officers from these Fronts and coordinated all details. Marshal Konev became very agitated apropos of the dividing line with our neighbor on the right as it did not give him any opportunity to strike at Berlin. No one, however, in the General Staff could remove this obstacle.

The following day, on 1 April 1945, the plan of the Berlin operation was discussed in General Headquarters. Reports were made in detail on the situation on the Fronts, the operations of the Allies, and their concepts. In the course of discussion at General Headquarters, Stalin drew the conclusion that it was necessary to take Berlin as soon as possible and, therefore, the schedule for preparing operations was extremely limited. It would be necessary to begin no later than 16 April, and all must be finished within 12-15 days at the most.

The commanding officers of the fronts agreed with these conclusions, and they assured General Headquarters that the troops would be ready on time. After this, the plan of attack agreed upon by them was discussed. The Chief of the General Staff, in reporting on the plan, noted that the dividing line between the fronts ruled out the direct participation of the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front in the battles for the city which would have a negative effect on schedules for fulfilling the mission. Marshal Konev spoke out against such a dividing line and emphasized the expediency of aiming part of the forces of the 1st Ukrainian Front, especially the tank armies, to the southwest outskirts of Berlin.

Evidently, realizing the invalidity of the existing dividing line between the fronts and desiring to take Berlin faster, Stalin decided the question in his own way: he did not completely relinquish his own idea, but he did not agree with the General Staff and the commanding officer of the 1st Ukrainian Front. On the concept map he silently crossed out that part of the dividing line which cut off the 1st Ukrainian Front from Berlin, put it at Lubben 60 km to the southeast of the city, and stopped abruptly. "He who digs in first -- that one will take Berlin", -- he told us afterwards.

Such was the origin of the specific dividing line in the Berlin operation between the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts which did not continue into the entire depth of the attack, but ended in the southeastern approaches to the city.

The General Staff was satisfied with such a turn of events since this cursed dividing line had not given any peace for more than two months. Even Marshal Konev did not object. This also suited him. Actual events later developed in such a way that two fronts took Berlin.

The beginning of the attack was set for 16 April. Only by this time would the fronts, especially the 1st Ukrainian Front, be able to accumulate the necessary materiel.

That same day, the commanding officer of the troops of the 1st Belorussian Front was given a directive on preparation and conduct of operations with the aim of seizing Berlin and of reaching the Elbe no later than within 12-15 days. The main blow was to be struck against the Kostrzyn bridgehead with the forces of 4 combined arms and 2 tank armies, the latter to be put in after the enemy's defense had been broken in order to encompass Berlin from the north and northeast. The second echelon of the front was utilized in the main direction. At that time this was the Third Army under the command of Col. General A. V. Gorbатов.

On 2 April, a directive was given the commanding officers of the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front. He was to smash the enemy groups in the area of Cottbus and to the south of Berlin and to reach Beelitz, Wittenberg in no later than 10-12 days and then on to the Elbe up to Dresden. The main thrust of the front was set for the direction of Spremberg and Bel'tsig, i.e. 50 km to the south of Berlin. It was planned to put in the tank armies (there were two -- the Third and Fourth Guards Army) after the enemy's defense had been broken in order to achieve success in the main direction.

In addition, General Headquarters considered the possibility of turning the tank armies of the 1st Ukrainian Front directly on Berlin as a supplementary version after which they would mine the abovementioned Lubben. This version undoubtedly reflected the debates which we have mentioned at the conference in General Headquarters.

On 6 April, a directive was also given to the 2nd Belorussian Front which did not participate directly in the capture of Berlin, but had a very responsible mission -- that of attacking on the west to the north of the capital of Germany and, after it had defeated the strong Stettin group of the enemy, securing the entire operation from this direction.

Thus, the concept and plan of the Berlin operation, which was to bring the armed forces of Fascist Germany to capitulation, provided for the dismemberment and encirclement of the enemy to the east of the German capital at the same time as the encircled troops were annihilated unit by unit. Another aim of the daring advance of the Soviet Army to the west was to prevent any possibility of the Hitlerites creating a new organized front.

The decisions of the commanding officers, reached in implementing the directives from General Headquarters, assured the execution of these responsible missions. Powerful army groups with artillery, tanks, and aviation, tremendous even for those times, were concentrated in the direction of our thrusts. The attack began at the appointed time, and the final defeat of the enemy in the most important direction which was that of Berlin was accomplished with the forces of three well-coordinated fronts. On 2 May, Berlin ceased resistance. Within 6 days, Fascist Germany unconditionally surrendered.

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Such briefly is the history of the work of the General Staff under the concept of the principal operations of the final campaign of the war. This was the tense creative activity of a large group of officers, generals, and marshals of the General Staff and the field forces. In the course of this work it was determined how much better, faster, and more completely we could utilize the energy and power of the Soviet Armed Forces and that of all our people in the interests of victory over Fascism. Now, no one doubts that our Armed Forces were superior to the army of Hitler's Germany in their level of military art. Those staff officers, who day and night poured over maps during the difficult and heroic time of the Great Patriotic War, are deserving of great merit for this.

The final campaign of the war in Europe was characterized by achieving the strategic aims which confronted the Soviet Armed Forces at that time. The direction of our main thrust in 1945, caused by well-weighed political and purely military considerations and calculations, led directly to Berlin. Here were concentrated the main forces of the Soviet Army. The use of troops was prepared carefully and in detail. The plans of the attacking operations envisaged the large superiority of our troops over that of the enemy in both forces and weapons throughout the entire attack which increased particularly during the final stage of hostilities.

The very exact knowledge of the possibilities and the foresight as to the nature of the enemy's counteractions made it possible for the Soviet High Command to eliminate any attempts by the enemy to turn the initiative and to change the course of the war.

The Soviet strategic leadership was skillful and relied widely in its activities on experience achieved in the course of preceding campaigns in the war. It had the ability to direct operations of the armed forces and utilize the brilliant military gifts of great and small military leaders such as the commanding officers of the fronts, army commanders, commanding officers of elements, units and subdivisions to the fullest extent. The military staff on all levels which had achieved by that time a high level of leadership of troops were worthy assistants.