**SITUATION OVERVIEW:** The Battle for Berlin is all but over. The Führer has committed suicide along with his wife, and their bodies have been burnt and unceremoniously buried post haste in the Chancellery Garden. Word has gone out to the new leader of the Third Reich, Grand Admiral Dönitz, that the Führer’s will is “now in effect”, and that he is to take appropriate measures. He is also informed that Martin Bormann will come to him (in Płon) as quickly as possible.

In the streets of Berlin, fighting is still going on but with lesser intensity. The Reichstag has fallen to the Soviets; the Red flag is flying from its top to mark the victory, and the Russian troops are more keen on celebrating than risk their lives at the very last moment.

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In the evening, Hamburg Radio warned the German people that a grave and important announcement was about to be made. Suitable funeral music from Wagner and from Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony was played to prepare listeners for Grand Admiral Dönitz’s address to the nation. He stated that Hitler had fallen; fighting ‘at the head of his troops’, and announced his own succession.

**ANNOUNCER:** It is reported from Der Führer’s headquarters that our Führer Adolf Hitler, fighting to the last breath against Bolshevism, fell for Germany this afternoon in his operational headquarters in the Reich Chancellery.

On April 30 Der Führer appointed Grand Admiral Dönitz his successor. The grand admiral and successor of Der Führer now speaks to the German people.

**DOENITZ:** German men and women, soldiers of the armed forces: Our Führer, Adolf Hitler, has fallen. In the deepest sorrow and respect the German people bow.

At an early date he had recognized the frightful danger of Bolshevism and dedicated his existence to this struggle. At the end of his struggle, of his unswerving straight road of life, stands his hero’s death in the capital of the German Reich. His life has been one single service for Germany. His activity in the fight against the Bolshevik storm flood concerned not only Europe but the entire civilized world.

Der Führer has appointed me to be his successor…

However, due to a lack of electric current in Berlin, very few Berliners heard this…

**The negation attempt**

The Bringer of Death had descended to the netherworld and by his downfall relinquished his worshippers from their oath of allegiance. The spell had lifted and the living soon lost their taste for Wagnerian doomsday initiatives and faithfulness until death. Hitler had appointed Gœbbles as the new Head of State, and although he initially had rejected the honor, and pleaded to follow his Master to the netherworld, he now sought to use his position to strike a last-minute deal with the advancing Soviets. The Russian-speaking General Hans Krebs, former military attaché in Moscow and once embraced in public by Marshal Stalin himself¹, was the obvious emissary to carry the peace offer to the other side.

It wasn’t a long journey either; front line ran a few hundred meters from the Bunker, but it was a fruitless one. Albeit negotiating for hours, the Soviet Lieutenant-General Vasily Chuikov flatly refused to discuss anything but an unconditional surrender. Krebs brought the message to Goebbels and it became clear to everyone in the entourage, that there would be no last minute salvation. Consequently, individual preparations for the nearest future were now a legitimate undertaking.

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¹ This happened on April 3rd, 1941, as the Japanese Foreign Secretary Matsouka was leaving by train from Moscow. Stalin appeared to say goodbye and embraced both the German ambassador and Krebs, who was the military attaché, stating: “We will always remain friends.”
Exit Göbbels

True to their beliefs, Joseph and Magda Göbbels set about orchestrating their private family Götterdammerung. First their six children, aged twelve to four, were killed. This event has never been fully illuminated, but most likely the children were put to sleep by means of some soporific and subsequently killed with vials of Prussic acid\(^2\). Given is it, that the kids were killed; the Russians found their six bodies in the Anti-Bunker.

After the killing, the parents allegedly used some time reminiscing about better times with members of the entourage before ascending the steps to the Chancellery Garden. Here – again the reports are sketchy – Joseph either shot Magda and himself, or perhaps they both resorted to the poison-and-bullet method, favored by Hitler. Finally, a group of SS guards, headed by Göbbels’ adjutant, Schwaegermann, doused the bodies with petrol and burned them.

Preparations

Thus released from all oaths of allegiance and with the unrelenting foe at the doorstep, it had become time for the remaining entourage and paladins to depart. A bold dash towards freedom in the west before the harbingers of another, oppressive regime descended upon them seemed the only hope left. Quite a lot of people saw it that way, perhaps as many as seven- or eight hundred, all residents of the Citadel and perhaps a bit more enlightened or simply just not quite so worn down as the average Berlin street fighter.

O’Donnell. “The number of unwounded Germans still left in the Reich Chancellery was fewer than 800. About 700 of these were SS soldiers of the LAH guards who had been fighting outside the Chancellery. About eighty were men of the FBK or General Fehrenhuber’s RSQ, the security people. The members of the Hitler court proper had by now dwindled to fewer than twenty. All were scheduled to take part in the breakout except for three who had opted for suicide (Generals Krebs and Burgdorf, Colonel Schaedle). A majority of the people still in the Chancellery was destined to survive” [88, 269-70].

Siegfried Knappe, Weidlings adjutant, had been present in the Bunker since early morning on May 1\(^{st}\) and witnessed the breakout preparations: “It was obvious that the end had finally arrived. Plans were being made now by individuals rather than by commanders. At 7.30 p.m. [19:30], I sat down to a ‘last supper’ with all those from Hitler’s immediate entourage who were still present in the Führerbunker. I was probably the only outsider in the group. Sitting around a large table with me were Martin Bormann, Admiral Voss (a liaison officer representing Admiral Donitz), Ambassador Hewel (a liaison officer representing Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop), and four or five women whose identities I do not recall but who must have been secretaries. There were also two of three other people. We had tea, Army bread, corned beef, and canned liverwurst. The conversation, of course, was about the forthcoming breakout through the Russian lines. Since I was an experienced combat officer and therefore an ‘expert’ in this group, I was probed with all kinds of questions. The appearance of the group was unusual, because all were dressed for the breakout. Fat Bormann could hardly have been comfortable in the regulation enlisted man’s uniform he wore\(^4\). The admiral and the ambassador also wore enlisted men’s uniforms. The attitude of the women was fatalistic.” [A29, 62]

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\(^2\) How this came about in detail remains largely unknown. Magda Göbbels has been portrayed as the sole perpetrator (i.e. in “The Downfall”). Some historians include help from Dr. Stumpfegger, others point to the dentist; Dr. Kanz.

\(^3\) According to Rochus Misch, Schaedle had the consideration to wait for Misch to be released from his duties (by Göbbels) on May 2\(^{nd}\) and then - although suffering from a painful foot injury - guiding Misch to the starting point (the Chancellery cellar window opposite to the Kaiserhof U-Bahn station) and instructing him on the route to take, before he - Schaedle - shot himself sometimes after 04:00 in the morning. [Misch, 235]

\(^4\) In some accounts Borman was dressed as an officer. Kempka, Hitler’s chauffeur: “It was about two on the morning of 2 May when a small troop approached [Admiral’s Palast in Friedrichstrasse]. I recognized Bormann by his SS-Obergruppenführer’s uniform”. [Kempka, 94] Baur, Hitler’s pilot, on the other hand writes: “Bormann was wearing a simple brown uniform with no special distinguishing marks”. [Baur, 192]
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Knappe goes on to relate how the Göbbels approached the group for farewells, and how he was astonished that they had the poise to appear calm and unemotional, considering they had killed their six children just hours before.

Initially, Knappe had wanted to join one of the groups, but was forced to return in the company of Weidling to army headquarters’ in Bendlerstrasse. Here, much to his dismay, his chief forbade him to return to the Reichs Chancellery under the pretext, that he needed him, and thus sealed his fate to become a Russian POW.

Breakout

The route taken by the break-out party led by Brigadeführer Wilhelm Mohnke.

Note correction on map. Mohnke and his party of some twenty individuals (including the secretaries and the vegan cook) made it undetected over the Spree, mainly because they found a small, metal footbridge, named the Schlütersteig, some distance from the Weidendammer Bridge itself.

This bridge is gone today [1943 aerial below].

The red area was the Maikäfer Barracks at Chaussee Strasse. They are also gone today and the area is occupied by the BND (Bundes Nachrichten Dienst). The German Intelligence Service.

[Source: James P. O'Donnell; The Bunker]

The breakout-party assembled in the underground garage where the Chancellery motor pool’s shiny limos were parked. General Wilhelm Mohnke tried to organize chaos by splitting this large war party up into smaller groups of irregular sizes, who were to depart at ten minute intervals. He assigned himself as the leader of the first group to break out. It also contained Hitler’s secretaries, the cook, Dr. Schenck and other non-combatant Bunker inhabitants. We don’t know exactly why Mohnke choose to lead the first group, maybe he felt that the dangerous avant-garde reconnaissance befell on him as the Citadel commandant, or maybe the sly soldier knew that the first group would have the element of surprise on its side and thus an advantage. The fact, that he included the women in this group may point to the latter.

The plan was for each group to use the U-Bahn tunnels to go undetected under the Spree and as far north as possible, preferably behind the Soviet frontline. Rally point was the Stettiner Bahnhof (Nordbahnhof) from where they were to march to the Humboldthain Flak tower before splitting up again, leaving each group to find a way to connect with the main German forces.

As it turned out, Mohnke’s group was the only one to escape unnoticed from the Chancellery and reach the relative safety north of the Spree River although they had to surface at the Friederichstrasse S-Bahn station and cut through the barbed wire barricades at the “Schlütersteig”\(^5\), a narrow footbridge to cross the river, just west of the Weidendamm Bridge.

\(^5\) This passage is gone today, but can be seen on 1943 reconnaissance photos.
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Picking up stragglers from other groups, and losing poor Constanze Manzialy on the way, this group eventually, on May 2nd, had made its way to the Schultheiss-Patzenhofer brewery in Schönhauser Allee, a journey of modest seven kilometers in twenty hours and still within the iron ring cast by the Red Army.

**Fate of the break-out groups**

Learning about the general capitulation of Berlin by General Weidling the same morning, diplomat Walter Hewel, who had promised his Führer to commit suicide rather than being caught by the Russians, shot himself in the cellar under the Schultheiss Brewery and was accompanied by one SS stalwart, Obersturmbannführer Gert Stehr, while the majority chose surrender and captivity.

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The group lead by Werner Naumann did not fare much better. Somehow, under dire casualties, single members of the group managed to cross the Weidendamm Bridge, including Bormann, Stumpfegger, Axmann and Weltzin who all made it along the railroad tracks to the Lehrter Station. Also Hans Baur made it across, but lost track of the others and was subsequently severely wounded and captured.

At the station and during an encounter with a Russian patrol, Bormann and Stumpfegger separated from Axmann and Weltzin, and the latter party later found the two bigwigs lifeless, apparently victims to suicide by potassium cyanide. Poor Hans Baur fell victim to Russian machinegun fire, was severely wounded and lost one leg as well as his farewell gift from Hitler, which was ‘liberated’ from him by an unknown Russian soldier. Weltzin was captured the next day, while Axmann as the lone survivor (he was a Berliner and found help and shelter) made it to the West.

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This iconic photo, taken in Friedstrasse (approximately where the Friedrichspalast is today), show an armored vehicle of the Nordland division (recognizable on the rounded Swastika).

It has been alleged that the body to the right of the vehicle is the Swedish Ragnar Johansson.

[Source: Erik Wallin, Twilight of the Gods]

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6 In the morning of May 2nd, Mohnke discovered that his hitherto small group had swollen to some 200 people [O’Donnell, 285-6].

7 Tony Le Tissier state that the brewery was Malzbrauerei Groterjan in Prinzenallee and in an explanatory note denounce both the idea of a surrender at the Schultheiss-Patzenhofer as well as Mohnke’s story about Bärenängler’s brand new army at Humboldthain [Le Tissier, 188-89]

8 The painting of Frederick the Great by Anton Graff, presented to Baur as a reward for long and faithful service. It has been missing since, and today probably adorns the wall of some Russian family, whom are blissfully unaware of its value.
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The SS Nordland along with remnants of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, still in possession of some panzer, conducted a head-on attack at the Russian forces holding the Weidendammer Bridge. Initially they made some headway and got over the bridge, only to grind to a hold on the other side and finally got completely annihilated in Friedrichstrasse.

**Surrender**

Having forfeited his chance to escape from Berlin, Siegfried Knappe instead had a part to play in the final drama; the capitulation of the forces under Weidling’s command.

In contrast to Göbbels, General Weidling had no illusions that a deal could be struck with the Russians. His sole concern was to end the bitter and pointless fighting swiftly and as orderly as possible given the circumstances.

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**Captured by the Red Army**

A vast majority of the key witnesses ended up in Soviet captivity on May 2nd or shortly thereafter. No big surprise, of course, after all it was the Soviets who took Berlin. The list embraces first-hand witnesses such as Otto Guensche, Heinz Linge, Rochus Misch and Harry Mengershausen along with admiral Voss, pilot Hans Baur, Hans Holbeck, Wilhelm Mohnke, Josef Henschel and Armin Lehmann, all of them captured at one point or another during the breakout attempt.

Doctor Werner Haase, Nurse Erna Flegel, Mechanic Johannes Hentschel and Fritz Tornow (the dog keeper) stayed in the Bunker till the Russians came.

Dead: Martin Bormann, Pilot Betz, and Dr. Stumpfegger (killed or committed suicide during breakout), Guard Ewald Lindloff (KIA), Diplomat Walter Hewel (suicide) and Major Guenther Weltzin (died in captivity [O'Donnell, 303]),

Hansard: Remaining prisoners in 1950

**Captured by the Western Allied**

A few, lucky ones made it to the west and were – sooner or later - taken into custody and interrogated by American or English troops. Amongst those who participated in the breakout
were Gerda Christian, Traudl Junge, Elsa Krueger, Erich Kempka, Guenther Schweagermann, Hermann Karnau, Erich Mansfeld, Hilco Poppen and Artur Axmann.

Axmann was captured in late 1945 during an American action against a Nazi undercover organization that he had been building up. In 1949, he was sentenced to three years in prison for his part in “depraving German youth”. The sentence was mild as he was not proven guilty in war crimes.

Previously, Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven, Gerhardt Boldt, Nicolaus von Below, Wilhelm Zander, Willi Johannmeier and Heinz Lorenz had made it to the west. [81, 129], [87, 55].

The Allied also held General Jodl and Generalfeldmarshal Keitel (both hanged in Nuremberg, 1946), Grossadmiral Doenitz (10 years in prison) and Reichsminister Speer (20 years).

Committed suicide
Apart from the Hitlers’ the list embraces Josef Goebbels, Magda Goebbels (probably assisted), Hans Krebs, Wilhelm Burgdorf (body missing9), Schaedle, Heinrich “Gestapo” Mueller (body missing10), Manziarly (body missing11), and Walter Hewel.

Unaccounted for
Some lesser important witnesses to Hitler’s funeral pyre and burial vanished into Nacht und Nebel in the few hours passing between Hitler’s suicide and the end of hostilities. Whether the managed to find places, where they could lie low for a while and then resurface with different identities, or whether – and more likely – they were killed during the breakout skirmishes and ended up as anonymous corpses among the roughly 100,000 who perished during the Battle of Berlin, we shall probably never know.

It is also possible of course that they were among those who were marched off to the Gulags, never to return.

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9 Although Burgdorf’s body was never found, Misch saw both him and Krebs dead in the Bunker. He did not hear gunshots though, as it is depicted in “Downfall”, and assumed death by poisoning [Misch, 231-2].

10 Müllers suicide has never been confirmed, and it has been speculated, that he survived and went into service with the CIA. A Berlin grave with Müllers name was maintained by unknown persons for many years, but was opened in 1963 as part of an investigation. Müller was not in the grave, which contained remnants of two or three other persons.

11 Constance Manziarly’s suicide is conjecture, based on the fact that she was never heard of again. She may have, as O’Donnell muses [O’Donnell, 287], just have slipped away and made it through to her native country on her own account.