SITUATION OVERVIEW: On April 20th, Adolf Hitler’s fifty-sixth birthday, the Battle of the Seelow Heights east of Berlin is closing to an end. It has been four days since Marshal Georgi Zhukov, the Soviet supreme commander, crossed the Oder River and unleashed his amassed one million troops against the more modest forces of the defender, General Gotthard Heinrici, who could muster some 110,000 men. The difference between the two forces, not only in manpower but even more in material, could foretell the outcome for any sensible man; artillery 20:1, tanks 10:1 and complete air superiority on the Russian side spelled doom for the defenders.

All that the defending German general, Gotthard Heinrici, had working for him was his intimate knowledge of Russian tactics which he managed to employ in time to render the massive Russian artillery barrage relatively futile, as his troops had left their forward positions only hours before. As a result, the following infantry and armor attack over the river met stiffer German resistance than expected. Incomplete reports speak of more than 225 Russian tanks destroyed on this day.

After an initial setback, caused partly by a somewhat choleric and impatient Zhukov, deploying his amour prematurely and taking further heavy casualties as the tanks and vehicles stuck in the marshy soil of the Oder valley, the Russians are steamrolling forward in panzer spearheads, leaving the following infantry to deal with the remaining defenders. By that time additional break-throughs have been achieved both north and south of Zhukov’s main trust.

The rapid advance of the Russian forces caught Hitler off-balance. Believing that the Oder would be a formidable, natural barrier, he demanded that his forces must be able to hold the line and even throw the advancing enemy back over the river. An impossible task.

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At around 10 am, the American 8th Air Force delivered their birthday greetings in a show of force. Some 300 silver birds crammed the blue skies over the city in a two-hour raid, above range of anti-aircraft guns and virtually unchallenged by German fighters, unleashing hell once again on the defenseless population which knew no other means than to huddle themselves in cellars, U-Bahn stations and air raid shelters [Hamilton, 127].

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BIRTHDAYS ARE TRADITIONALLY occasions where people, perhaps especially in their senior years, reflect on the past and ponder what the future will bring, and the situation in Berlin could certainly submerge even the most phlegmatic Geburtstagskind in deep, worried thoughts. But appearances were to be kept up and as German tradition demanded, the Führer was celebrated by the top Nazi brass at a ceremony in the ruins of the Chancellery. The assembled dignitaries clicked their heels in best Prussian manner and courtly expressed their wishes for the future, although some had difficulty finding the right words as Hitler walked the line, shaking hands in silence with each of them.

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1 The morning raid was followed by sporadic RAF attacks throughout the day with fast Mosquito bombers and a final night raid with heavy bombers.

2 Several historians’ accounts have this event taking place in the Führerbunker. Albert Speer, who was there, states that it took place in the dilapidated Reichs Chancellery [Speer, 632].

3 Hitler Youth Leader Artur Axmann even brought a present; the draft of boys born in 1929, now fifteen and sixteen years old, who all “wished to be accepted into the ranks of the SS, to die for their Führer” [Kuby, 97].
None of the notabilities could see what the German Führer thought of his own future, nor did many of them probably care. Their main concern was to escape the doomed city of Berlin post haste, most of them with vows to “continue the fight” from safer places hither and yon; in the north, south or west. Oddly, none of these highly decorated Nazi heroes seized the otherwise apparent opportunity to fight in the east, where the enemy steamrolled forward.

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MORITURI TE SALUTANT: Artur Axmann, the one-armed leader of the Hitlerjugend, had a special gift for his master; the boys born in the year 1929, and thus fifteen or sixteen years old, “wished to be accepted into the HJ and die in combat, defending their Führer”.

Since the days for elaborate Wehrmacht parades down the East-West Axis and the solemn adornment of victorious Generals with Knights Crosses and Oak Leaves were now long passé, a few Hitler Youth soldiers who had excelled in combat were lined up for the Führer to inspect and decorate. The somewhat befuddled boys watched their great leader in disbelief; a shaky old geezer, worn out and deprived of his former air of authority and self-assuredness. He padded a cheek here and there as Iron Crosses were handed out and spoke of the military situation which was serious, but in no way hopeless; what they had to do was to hold out – ausharren - until new miracle weapons would turn the tide of war and secure the final victory, the Endsieg, for Germany. There was no applause, or even response, to his final “Heil Euch” (Hail to you).4

The SS were determined however to have a parade as described by Oberscharführer [Sergeant] Willi Rogmann: “This morning yet again a Birthday-parade for Hitler was arranged and I had to take part in it. Thus I marched past Brigadeführer Mahnke and his Staff in the first row of the 1. Wachkompanie”. [Berlin 1945, 209 – my translation].

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IN THE BUNKER, the final conference to be attended by all the top military chieftains was held; Grand Admiral Doenitz, commander of the German Navy was there; Heinrich Himmler, the omnipotent Chief of the sinister SS forces and dethroned commander of the Army Group Vistula5; and Hermann Goering too. Also Albert Speer and Ribbentrop, the foreign minister, were there. The tubby Reich Marshal and commander of the once so mighty Luftwaffe secretly checked his watch6. That same morning he had evacuated his lavish country estate Karinhall north-east of the capital and sent his carefully collected loot of art treasures from museums and private collections all over Europe – twenty-four lorries strong – southwards to Bavaria before blowing the mansion up with dynamite. With the Russians virtually on the doorstep, he had no plans of staying in or near Berlin and like the rest of the brass, he had better things to do than listen to his Warlord’s maneuvers with virtually non-existing skeleton divisions.

In the north, forces under General Rokossovsky had established firm bridgeheads, advancing on the town of Prenzlau, a mere 100 kilometers from Berlin. To the east, Zhukov was pushing on Strausberg; just 50 kilometers away and to the south, Koniev’s forces were smashing Busse’s 9th Army on the Oder, threatening to encircle them completely.

The reports were thus gloomy on all fronts; the Reich crumbled by the hour and Berlin itself was already half encircled. In fact, General Karl Koller, Luftwaffe Chief of Staff, warned that the last route out of Berlin to the south could not be held open much longer and consequently now it was time for a last dash towards the Bavarian mountains.

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4 This account is taken from the memoirs of Armin Lehmann, a Hitler Youth courier, but there were in fact TWO such events which have frequently been mistaken for each other, one on March 20th and one on April 20th. Only the March event was filmed and shown in the Wochenschau on March 22nd. The other, much smaller event took place in the Ehrenhof (Honor Courtyard) on April 20th, Hitler’s Birthday.

5 Himmler, who lacked any real military knowledge, proved to be a disastrous figurehead and thus General Gotthard Heinrici replaced him as commander of Army Group Vistula on March 20th, 1945.

6 Eventually, Goering would flee the capital in direction Berchtesgaden, leaving Luftwaffe General Karl Koller to take Hitler’s abuse over the poor efforts of the Luftwaffe. However, before he managed to get out of Berlin, the last Allied air raid forced him to take cover in a public shelter. Although responsible for the situation, his popularity with the Berliners was unscratched. He joked with the people in the bunker and admitted to his self-imposed nickname “Maier” [Koller, 42].
Battle of Berlin

Friday, April 20th, 1945. Fifty-sixth birthday of Adolf Hitler

Several of the Nazi bonzes tried to persuade Hitler to use this opportunity and relocate his HQ to the National Redoubt in Berchtesgaden. They pleaded that the Führer could conduct the war only from there, where he had freedom of action and not as a mere prisoner in besieged Berlin, but Hitler vacillated. As long as he stayed in Berlin, he said, and radiated his will to the defenders, Berlin would hold. If he left, Berlin would fall as East Prussia had done when he left it. He did, however, implement the decision of a split command taken some time earlier; in case that Germany was severed by the enemy, Grand Admiral Dönitz would command the north and Field Marshal Kesselring the south.

As to the defense of Berlin, the 9th Army offered a glimmer of hope as it still presented a considerable fighting force. Withdrawn to the city boundaries, thus avoiding encirclement and shortening its front while at the same time making resupply and reinforcement a lot easier, it could offer stiff resistance at least for some time. But Hitler, true to his WW1 philosophy of digging in and holding the ground, refused the pleas from an ever more desperate Heinrici, as did he refuse almost anything his military advisors came up with.

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Gloomy military prospects or not, Hitler’s bedfellow through twelve years, Eva Braun, was in no mood for melancholy. She had arrived from Berchtesgaden only weeks before to be with her lover till the end, and now gathering what she could of birthday guests, bunker dwellers and staff she set out to arrange a little spontaneous party in the Führerwohnung upstairs. According to Rochus Misch, the telephone operator, the Bunker was soon all but deserted, with just Hitler and himself in their respective rooms [Misch, 196].

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OUTSIDE THE CITADEL, in Berlin proper, there was little acknowledgment of the Führer’s birthday. Greatest concern for Berliners these days was to fill their stomachs, fetch water at the street pumps, catch some sleep and avoid getting killed during air raids. Most of the working population had at this point been terminated in their jobs, and only left the house to scavenge for food, fetch water from the hand-cranked pumps in the streets or stand in shopping lines when rumor had it that meat, flour, sugar or some other coveted article was available. This morning too, the women queued for provisions, the distant roar of artillery heralding that it may be their last chance.

Accustomed with weeks of night bombing, many Berliners spent the night in their air raid shelters, huddled together in cramped and damp cellars, bringing their few important items with them in bags and valises; identity papers, money, ration-cards, a few items of clothing, some jewelry, maybe, and some food. There they nervously followed the progress of the air raid, listened to the impact of bombs and tried to estimate how close they came.

EYEWITNESS ANONYMA: “Now and then whole hours would pass in eerie silence. Then, all of a sudden, you remember that it’s spring. Clouds of lilac perfume drift over from untended gardens and go wafting through the charred ruins of apartment houses … there’s freshly turned earth around the garden sheds up and down Berliner Strasse. Only the birds seem suspicious of this particular April, there’s not a single sparrow nesting in the gutters of our roof.” [Anonymous, 17]

Some celebration banners had been prepared though. Most commonly the Goebbels-coined phrase “Our walls are broken, but not our hearts” was seen, but on a ruined building in Lützowplatz, a poster displayed the somewhat dubious message; “We thank our Führer for everything”, [Reed/Fischer, 333], another placard read; “We all pull on the same rope: Up the Führer!”, leaving interpretation to the spectator.

EYEWITNESS JACOB KRONIKA: “For years they shouted ‘Heil!’ Now they hate the man, who calls himself their Führer. They hate him, they fear him; because of him they suffer hardship and death. But they have not the power or the courage to liberate themselves from his demonic reign. Despairing and passive they await the last act of the drama.” [Kronika, 127 – my translation]

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7 This National Redoubt was a Nazi phantom that had grown to mythical proportions; an impregnable mountain fortress deep in the Bavarian heartland with unlimited supplies and a defense that crisscrossed the entire area with bunkers, tunnels, gun emplacements and a mighty force of stalwart SS troops, ready to fight to the last drop of blood for their Führer. In reality there was no fortress, just Hitler’s villa with an underground air raid shelter – though quite elaborate – and a small detachment of SS troops.
A new poster went up on the tattered walls of the city this day, courtesy of the Fortress Commandant. It read: “All members of the armed forces at present in Berlin and cut off from their units, all men on leave, all those travelling through Berlin, all convalescents and wounded are ordered to report at once to the von Seeckt Barracks in Potsdam, with enough food to last them for twenty-four hours.” [B12, 99-100]

Although virtually deprived of useful and trustworthy information, newspapers, now down to one sheet printed on both sides, were eagerly awaited by Berliners, hungry for news. Some information could be derived from the Wehrmacht communiqués, describing in vague sentences the cities and villages fallen to the enemy and thus the overall progress of the Red Army. Müncheberg, halfway between Berlin and the Seelow Höhen, was mentioned, indicating a breakthrough of the Oder front was a reality. To the dismay of Berliners, the papers also brought a notice, that starting April 21st, use of public transport was reserved citizens with a red Class III ticket [which virtually no-one had].

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In fact, the war was coming to Berlin this very day, when long-range guns of the Russian 3rd Army (79th Rifle Corps) fired a “birthday salute” into the city shortly after noon. As the shells landed in the suburbs, only few people noticed. [Le Tissier, 35]

The night before, Goebbels had held a flaming speech on the radio, designed to rally the people to support their Führer and put their trust in him and his lucky star to alleviate them from their present predicament. As electricity was a sparse commodity in the ravished Capital, and as most Berliners at this point were fed up with lies and broken promises, his rhetoric probably fell largely on deaf ears.

Eyewitness Anonymous: “Our radio’s been dead for four days. Once again we see what a dubious blessing technology really is. Machines with no intrinsic value, worthless if you can’t plug them in somewhere. Bread, however, is absolute. Coal is absolute.” [Anonymous, 21]

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Due East of Berlin, Marshal Zhukov’s 1st Belorussian’s had at last managed to break the desperate resistance at Seelow and were racing towards Berlin, pushing the remnants of the German forces ahead of them.

Among them was the 56th Panzer Corps. Functioning as “fire brigade” to the 9th Army, the corps had been involved in harsh fighting, but forced on the retreat again and again to avoid encirclement. They were critically short on fuel and ammunition and in a state of disarray. Cut off from neighboring units and with no communication with higher echelons from 20:00 hours, rumors started to spread that General Helmuth Weidling, a Knights Cross bearer and commander of 56th Panzer, had withdrawn to the west of Berlin to avoid fighting.

This would soon prove to have dire consequences for Weidling.

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8 “From 10.50 a.m. on 20 April, there was no power apart from brief spills of a few minutes at a time. The last factories were forced to close down, and throughout the city, using electricity for cooking became an offence punishable by death” [Byford-Jones, 335].
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**SOUTH OF BERLIN**, in the OKW/OKH headquarter at Zossen⁹, an increasingly nervous General Krebs is calling the Führerbunker, insisting that the facility – equipped with one of Europe’s most modern communications networks – is evacuated before the Russian onslaught.

Air reconnaissance the same morning had revealed the approach of Russian forces, unpleasantly close to Berlin; from the south-east, an armored column 800 vehicles strong was spotted on the road from Cottbus to Lübbenau, and, advancing from the south along the road to Luckau, just some 50 kilometers from Zossen and the cream of the General Staff, as many as 300 T34’s had been observed [groehler, 13].

To counter the latter attack, the Zossen guard company, some 250 strong and supported by a handful of light armor from the nearby Panzertruppenschule II in Wünsdorf under the command of one Oberlieutenant Gustav Kraenkel, was late in the afternoon ordered to block the approach road at Luckau and throw the enemy back. A “Himmelfahrtskommando” [Suicide mission] with no prospect of success.

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**FURTHER SOUTH**, in Bavaria, the icon of the Nazi movement, the “holy” city of Nuremberg, Hauptstadt der Partei as it was anointed in Nazi rhetoric; ominously fell to American forces on this, the Führer’s birthday.

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To be continued …

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⁹ The 60,000-acre area some 70 kilometers south of Berlin had by breakout of WW2 become Europe’s largest military base, dotted with bunkers disguised as handsome country buildings, some of which survive to this day. Bunker complexes called “Maybach” (a command center) and “Zeppelin” (communications) were built beginning in 1934 by the Nazi regime. The initial communications links constructed in 1934–1935 involved considerable redundancy to better withstand air attack. The Zossen bunker complex was well connected with subterranean links to the military commands in central Berlin, and to a trunk cable ring buried around the city. Priority construction of the Zeppelin bunker in 1937–1939 involved installation of dozens of massive telephone and telegraph switchboards. Most were operational by August 1939 in time for the German attack on Poland. Radio facilities were also added. Substantial battery backups guaranteed continued operation even with loss of the electric power grid due to air attack.