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Blow to the Heart

**Red Marshal Sinks Armored Fist
in Nazi Defenses Before Berlin**

The Russians had been this way before. The armies of Catherine the Great had beaten those of Frederick the Great at Kunersdorf, on the German plain 6 miles east of Frankfurt on the Oder, in 1759. The following year they occupied Berlin. And again in 1813 the Cossacks of Alexander I passed through Frankfurt in their chase of Napoleon's shattered host—a chase that carried them all the way to Paris.

This week one of the greatest battles of history shaped up on the low banks of the Oder River. As if by some kind of historical predestination, it was again the Russians who moved toward the west. The prize was Berlin and the existence of Germany. By virtue of that fact the struggle on the Oder overshadowed all the other Soviet offensives on the great front which now curls from Latvia, past East Prussia, through Poland and Slovakia and around to Budapest on the Danube.

Marshal Gregory K. Zhukoff swung his First White Russian Army like an iron fist straight for the German capital. With tanks and infantrymen—one group led for two or three days, then dropped back to let a fresh outfit take over—he plunged across the German frontier through the so-called "Oder Quadrilateral."

Zhukoff's northern columns won a bitter tank battle before the Warthe River rail and road junction of Landsberg. They crossed the Warthe, swallowed Landsberg, and aimed at a familiar RAF target: Stettin, the birthplace of Catherine the Great and the big Baltic port for Berlin, 60 airline miles southwest. The railway stations and air-raid shelters of Stettin were already crammed with refugees from Danzig and East Prussia; on Jan. 29 the Nazis ordered civilians to evacuate Stettin itself.

At the Fortresses: But Zhukoff's main forces were apparently drawn up along the Oder on a long front before Frankfurt and the other German guardian fortress of Cüstrin, 18 miles to the north (Frederick the Great's father once imprisoned him for fifteen months at Cüstrin). Between the Oder River and Berlin stretches predominantly flat country, with broad highways that weave past long rows of factories and power plants. At the Oder across from Frankfurt, the Reds were about 30 miles from Berlin's outskirts and about 50 miles from the heart of the city.

The Nazis claimed that reserve armies were moving up to the line of the Oder and they gave every indication of being prepared to put up a major fight for the approaches to their capital. The Red Army for its part also moved up reinforcements and tightened the long supply lines reaching back across Poland. For the moment the weather turned against the Russians when an unseasonable thaw softened the hard earth of the plains.

On both flanks of the great central drive, the Russians pushed ahead. In Silesia Berlin announced that the Soviets had launched a new offensive from their bridgehead across the Oder above Breslau. In East Prussia the Russians compressed the German-held pocket to 800 square miles and kept Königsberg under siege. In Budapest the long struggle of the isolated German garrison appeared to be approaching an end.