

Storming the Castle: The Battle for Hungary and the Siege of Budapest.  
1944-1945

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Budapest is known as one of the most picturesque cities in all of Europe. Its medieval castle, baroque architecture, and imperial landmarks annually attract millions to marvel at its beauty and wander its exciting streets. Despite its aesthetic qualities, Budapest's beauty hides the scars of an extremely tumultuous history as Hungary's capital and most historic city. Over the past one thousand years, Budapest (especially the Buda side of the city) has experienced no less than twelve sieges.<sup>1</sup> One of those sieges, the Soviet siege of 1944-45 remains one of the most brutal sieges in modern history. With regards to sieges of the Second World War, the struggle for Budapest on par with the battles of Leningrad, Stalingrad and Berlin. Lasting from 3 November 1944 until 11 February 1945, the siege of Budapest would last 100 days, ultimately bringing about the total destruction of the city, Soviet occupation, and eventually a communist regime.<sup>2</sup> Despite its acceptance as a major engagement on the eastern front, the reasons behind its occurrence and why the battle escalated so drastically does raise many questions. Why were there so many German forces in Hungary (particularly SS armor units) despite being sorely needed to stem the Soviet tide in Poland? Why was Hitler so committed to holding Budapest and Stalin just as determined to take it? What made the fighting in the city so tenaciously difficult for the Soviet attackers against the German and Hungarian defenders? The German occupation of Hungary, the Soviet desire to draw away precious German reserves from the Berlin-Warsaw axis, and the physical makeup of the city itself would all play key roles in making the Battle for Hungary and the Siege of Budapest one of the most epic struggles of the Second World War.

Hungary had been one of Nazi Germany's strongest allies since participating in the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April of 1941 and Operation *Barbarossa* in June of 1941.<sup>3</sup> Hitler persuaded Hungary's de facto

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<sup>1</sup> Krisztián Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002), xxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv-xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron* (New York, NY: I. B. Fordham University Press, 2011), 144-45.

dictator, Admiral Nicholas (Miklós) Horthy, to join the Axis Powers by promising a strong economic partnership, the eradication of communism from Europe and territory Hungary had lost after World War I.<sup>4</sup> Hungary's importance to the German war effort was not principally manpower or military equipment but mainly grain production and the oil reserves of the Lake Balaton region.<sup>5</sup> Hungary also acted as a critical supply route for oil from the Rumanian oilfields of Ploesti to Nazi Germany.<sup>6</sup>

Although the war initially appeared to be going well, Operations *Uranus* and *Little Saturn* in the winter of 1942-43 would quickly change the situation. These operations not only sealed the fate of the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army in Stalingrad, but they also annihilated the Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army holding the German left flank on the Don River.<sup>7</sup> From this point on, Hungarian forces undertook minor occupation duties until the frontline reached the Hungarian homeland.<sup>8</sup> By August 1944, the Soviet war machine was positioned in Rumania, ready to take the entire Balkans with a brilliant deep exploitation offensive.<sup>9</sup> The *Iassy-Kishinev* Operation brought the Red Army to the gates of Budapest.<sup>10</sup>

As Soviet forces reached the Árpád Line, the Hungarian defensive works along the Carpathian Mountains of their eastern border, political chaos broke out in the Hungarian leadership.<sup>11</sup> Admiral Horthy had been secretly attempting to contact the Allied forces after the disaster on the Don River.<sup>12</sup> Relations with Germany were also rapidly deteriorating over Horthy's insistent protection of Hungarian Jews against Nazi policies.<sup>13</sup> In his memoirs, Horthy reflects the impossibility of remaining allies with Germany stating "Between the realization that, in the reorganization of Europe, no matter what form it took, we should be made a vassal state and our determined will to defend Hungary's right to independence, no compromise was possible".<sup>14</sup> Upon learning of Horthy's desire to pull out of the war, Hitler quickly initiated Operation *Margarethe* in March of 1944, which would lead to the German occupation of the country.<sup>15</sup> In October he would also launch Operation

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 138-44.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 218, 225.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Norbert Számvéber, "The Army of the Horthy Era: 1919-1945," In *Illustrated Military History of Hungary*, eds. Károly Bozsonyi (Budapest, Hungary: Zrínyi Publishing, 2012), 195-198.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>9</sup> Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, 218.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 218-226.

<sup>11</sup> Számvéber, "The Army of the Horthy Era: 1919-1945," 203-05.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II: Caught in the Cauldron*, 232-39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 245-47.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Horthy, *Memoirs* (New York, NY: Robert Speller & Sons, 1957), 208.

<sup>15</sup> Horthy, *Memoirs*, 284-288.

*Panzerfaust*, in which German commandos under the famed Otto Skorzeny captured Horthy's son. This caused Horthy to retire and was forcefully exiled to Germany. Horthy would remain a prisoner in Germany for the rest of the war.<sup>16</sup> The German takeover enabled the fanatical fascists of the Arrow Cross Party to take over the country.<sup>17</sup> German involvement in Hungary would lead to the commitment by both sides of large quantities of resources, men and materials. The escalation of force would ultimately culminate in the Siege of Budapest.

In the autumn of 1944, the Soviets began advancing rapidly into Hungary. Under the direction of the Stavka appointed Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, Marshal Rodion Malinovsky's 2<sup>nd</sup> Ukrainian Front made spectacular success by quickly capturing the southern Carpathians, Transylvania, and nearly all of central Hungary east of the Tisza River.<sup>18</sup> Malinovsky was also assisted by Marshal Petrov's 4<sup>th</sup> Ukrainian Front, the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Army, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Army and sizeable units of newly turned Rumanian allies.<sup>19</sup> This Soviet invasion culminated in the capture of Debrecen.<sup>20</sup> Despite Malinovsky's force's need for an operational pause, Stalin insisted that the advance towards Budapest begin immediately for "political considerations".<sup>21</sup> Malinovsky heavily protested that after such heavy fighting, five days were needed to wait for the reinforcements of the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Mechanized Corps to assist the 46<sup>th</sup> Army's drive towards Budapest.<sup>22</sup> Stalin ignored his pleas and the offensive was carried out prematurely. As a result, the Soviet attack was eventually bogged down at the triple belt Attila fortification system around the city.<sup>23</sup> The Soviets were also unable to encircle the city due to the Margareithe Line defenses between Budapest and Lake Balaton to the south, the redistribution of Hungarian and German reserves in the area and bad weather.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Soviets initially failed in their objective of capturing the city, the increasing threat of a Soviet encirclement of Budapest caused the Germans to begin sending substantial reserves to restore the situation. German forces in the area, under the command of General Johannes Friessner, initially consisted of just the German 8<sup>th</sup> Army (Group Wohler) and 6<sup>th</sup> Army (Group Fretter-Pico), with the only operational reserve being the 23<sup>rd</sup> Panzer

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 328-33.

<sup>18</sup> Kamen Nevenkin, *Take Budapest!: The Struggle for Hungary, Autumn 1944* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2012), 24-33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>24</sup> Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, 221-24.

Division.<sup>25</sup> Soon after the Soviets captured Debrecen, the OKH committed the III Panzer Corps and Group Wohler's XVII Army Corps.<sup>26</sup> After Malinovsky's failed attempt at encircling Budapest, the OKH sent not only the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions, but also three 60-tank Tiger battalions.<sup>27</sup> Even after the city had been encircled, the German high command continued to send strong armor reserves to try and relieve the city, namely the elite IV SS Panzer Corps.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately the Germans would commit the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions and the lavishly equipped divisions of the IV SS Panzer Corps to operations in and around Budapest.<sup>29</sup> Although these reinforcements made the continuing Soviet offensive more difficult, it ultimately was a brilliant success for Stavka and Soviet strategic planning. Because the Germans chose to use these precious armor reserves in the Hungarian theatre, the Soviets faced weakened German defensive capabilities in Poland. This would prove absolutely devastating for the Germans facing Zhukov's *Vistula-Oder* Offensive later in 1945. Although it would now take longer to capture Budapest, the Soviets were in a position to more quickly reach their ultimate goal of Berlin.

A short operational pause came after the initial attempt to encircle Budapest failed. On 20 December, the rejuvenated Soviets launched a massive two pronged assault to finally trap the city. The southern pincer against the heavily defended Margaret Line was led by the Marshal Tolbukhin's 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Army.<sup>30</sup> Using combined arms and concentration of firepower in key sectors, the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Army obliterated the defensive line and allowed a second echelon of the Soviet forces to complete the encirclement of the city.<sup>31</sup> By 27 December, the Soviets had finally closed off the entire perimeter of Budapest, entrapping two Hungarian divisions and four divisions of the IX SS Mountain Corps inside the city.<sup>32</sup>

Although encircling Budapest was a great success, the Soviets still had much to deal with. Not only did the Soviets now have to endure the bloodbath of urban combat, but they also had to deal with the constant threat of a German relief force from the west cutting open an escape route for the surrounded forces or reinforcing the besieged city. As the siege lines were established going into 1945, both Hitler and Stalin began pushing their armies harder for control of the city. Stalin was determined to capture the city quickly to complete the collapse of Hungary and continue his march westward. This

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<sup>25</sup> Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, 122.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>30</sup> (Colonel) S. Alferov, "The Offensive of the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Army in the Budapest Operation," *Soviet Art of Warfare in the Great Patriotic War* 9 (1982): 18-19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, 224.

would allow him to claim as much as possible before the war was over.<sup>33</sup> Hitler was determined to hold his ally's capital, declaring it a *Festung* or Fortress, thus forbidding any surrender and requiring his troops to fight to the last man. He hoped of somehow saving the Reich by stemming the Soviets before they could reach Vienna or Munich.<sup>34</sup>

*Obergruppenführer* (SS General) Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, commander of the IX SS Mountain Corps, assumed command of the besieged forces and began requesting aerial resupplies by the Luftwaffe and establishing defensive strong points throughout the city even before it was completely encircled.<sup>35</sup> Marshals Malinovsky and Tolbukhin, commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ukrainian Fronts respectively, began to prepare their armies to assault the city by utilizing massed artillery, air superiority, armor support and urban assault teams.<sup>36</sup> Both the Soviets and Germans had not seen this level of urban combat since Stalingrad. This lack of experience would contribute greatly to the appalling casualty rates throughout the battle.

Budapest's unique topography and physical structures also contributed greatly to the siege's ferocity. Unlike much of central Hungary, Budapest has many hills both in and around the city. On many of these hills lie actual fortresses (such as Buda Castle and the Citadel of Gellért Hill) or buildings that could easily be made into defensive strong points. These hills gave the Germans and Hungarians prime locations to spot Soviet units and make a final stand if needed. The thick stone buildings of Budapest's old city could also be used by infantry to make every city block a nightmare to clear for the Soviets. The Germans also controlled all the bridges across the Danube River and the city metro, giving them the ability to easily cut off Soviet advances when appropriate. The Germans would make full use of urban warfare's defensive advantages.

The Soviets would answer the challenge of taking Budapest by systematically clearing the city from both east and west. Due to Pest (the city east of the Danube) being much more flat and open, the Soviets would emphasize the majority of their attack from this direction. This would not only be easier for the Soviet infantry and armor to secure but would also deprive the Germans of their primary aerial resupply zones.<sup>37</sup> Malinovsky and Tolbukhin also planned to slowly advance from the west to the walls of the city citadel and Buda Castle, both being utilized as command points by the Axis forces.<sup>38</sup> Tactically, the Soviets emphasized the heavy use of grenades, submachine guns, flamethrowers and even direct armor and artillery fire on buildings.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Krisztián Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-101.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Krisztián Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II*, 129.

As the Soviets systematically advanced block by block through the city in January, the Germans launched three relief attempts from the west, dubbed Operations *Konrad I, II* and *III*. All three of these operations failed at the expense of even more German armor reserves.<sup>40</sup> Every day, the situation became more and more desperate for the doomed garrison of the city. By the end of January the Soviets had captured all of Pest, reached the walls of Buda Castle and forced the Germans to destroy all of the bridges across the Danube River, including the famous *Széchenyi* Chain Bridge.<sup>41</sup> The final phase of the battle saw the final fall of Buda Castle and a desperate breakout attempt by what was left of the garrison, with almost all killed or captured.<sup>42</sup> By 11 February, all resistance had ceased.<sup>43</sup> After 100 days of hell, 493,000 lay dead and Budapest had fallen.<sup>44</sup>

The battle for Hungary and the siege of Budapest not only had extremely important effects on the eastern front and Hitler's eventual destruction, but also affected Hungarian history for the next 45 years. Scars, such as bullet holes along the walls of the city citadel, can still be found hidden amongst the city's current beauty. The invisible scars of the Arrow- Cross Party, Nazi occupation and Communist takeover still haunt the Hungarian people today. This destructive battle not only teaches many military lessons, but also how war can affect a city and its people.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 188-200.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 152-164.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 201-256.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 186-87.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 427-32.