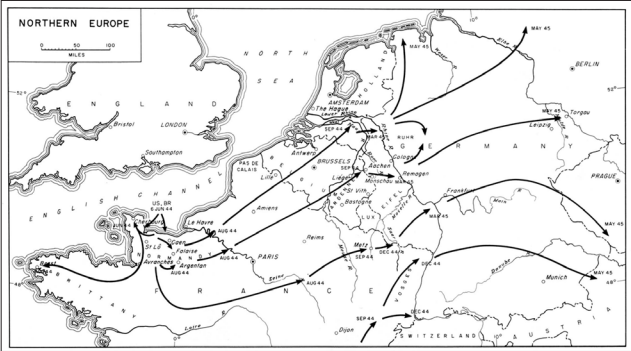


World War II at 80 – April 1945, Part 1



Allied forces advance across Germany in the spring of 1945. (United States Army Center of Military History courtesy map)

Pinching in on Berlin

By Ronald P. May
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RUHR, Germany — During the month of April, Allied forces fanned across western Germany and advanced eastward while Soviet forces closed in on Germany from the east.

British and American forces in the north took control of the Ruhr region in northwest Germany. The heavily industrial area produced much of the war material for German forces.

Over 300,000 German forces, most surrendering peacefully, were taken as prisoners of war during the Ruhr campaign alone.

In the weeks ahead, 1.5 million German soldiers, recognizing their defeat, surrendered to Allied forces.

Halt on the Elbe River

Although Western Allied forces were in position to enter Berlin by the end of the month, they halted their advance 50 miles from Berlin at the Elbe and Mulde rivers.

For strategic and political reasons, the big three national leaders of the Allied countries — Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin — decided at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 that the Soviets alone would fight and occupy Berlin, and not the American forces.

The decision was an attempt to avoid potential conflicts between Stalin and the Western Allied leaders. Tensions between the western and eastern powers’ objectives were already emerging by then.

The Soviets reached Berlin on April 16 and engaged in deadly combat for the next 16 days before defeating the German forces in the city on May 2. Over 80,000 Soviet forces died in the conflict.

On April 21, an historic meeting of Soviet and American forces took place along the Elbe River near the city of Torgau, Germany.

It was the first contact between the two nations’ forces, and it was commemorated with photos, music, and friendly celebration.

Nuremberg

Meanwhile, in the southeastern state of Bavaria, Germany, the battle over the city of Nuremberg commenced on April 16.

Nuremberg was the birthplace of the Nazi party and, following Hitler’s rise to power as head of state, the location of enormous Nazi military rallies from 1933-1938.

The rallies were held at the Zeppelin Field rally grounds, which covered 11 square kilometers and drew nearly one million military and civilians at each rally.

The rallies were designed to reinforce Hitler’s skewed ideology of Aryan (German) supremacy.

The Nazi party created a brainwashing pageantry that incorporated the display of hundreds of Nazi flags, military marches, patriotic music, fireworks, pillars of light from massive spotlights and ceremonies presenting Hitler as the all-wise and

powerful national leader.

The ceremonies were captured on film and later shown as movies throughout Germany.

The U.S. 7th Army fought a fierce urban-combat, five-day battle in the city before finally defeating the defenders.

It was a heavy blow to the German morale.

Morgan County casualties

At least two Morgan County men became casualties in Germany during the campaign in April, only one of them surviving.

Pvt. Richard Lee Teeters from Martinsville was serving with the Army’s 86th Infantry (Blackhawk) Division under Gen. Patton just south of the Ruhr Pocket in western Germany.

On April 9, Teeters and some men from his unit were enjoying a successful day of having taken German forces as prisoners.

As they finished their evening meal in a house they had acquired, a German soldier snuck up and tossed in a grenade through the kitchen window.

“... I was washing my mess kit when — BAM! — and that’s all I remember,” Teeter shared in a May 22, 1945, article in the Daily Reporter.

Teeter, who was married to Nancy Finney and the father of a son, was inducted into the Army in April 1944 and had been in Europe for only a few months before he was injured.

He was hospitalized in Cologne and Paris before being flown to the United States for further treatment.

The injury resulted in the loss of his leg.

His disability didn’t stop him from later raising his five sons and two daughters and serving as the Martinsville postmaster for 22 years.

Teeters died at the age of 75 on Sept. 15, 1994.

Warren Cohen of Martinsville wasn’t as fortunate as Teeters.

Serving on a medium tank in the 70th Tank Battalion and assigned to the 7th U.S. Army, Cohen was killed on April 20, 1945, in the German town of Kuhardt in the Rhineland-Palatinate state of southwestern Germany.

An enemy sniper shot him while Cohen was in his tank turret.

Cohen had arrived in France just two months earlier in February 1945.

He was buried in the Lorraine American Military Cemetery in Saint Avoird, France, and left behind a wife, the former Helen Schoolcraft, and an 18-months-old son, Mark.

A week prior to his death, his wife had received in the mail a photo of him with his tank and his buddies.

Despite these and other U.S. soldier deaths, many more Germans, both



TEETERS



COHEN



MCDANIEL



U.S. Infantry march into Nuremberg in April 1945. (Public Domain photo)



A U.S. and Russian soldier meet after the historic meeting of their respective armies near Torgau, Germany, April 25, 1945. (Army courtesy photo)



Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton and Eddy, inspect corpses in the Ohrdruf Concentration Camp. (Courtesy of Harold Royall, U.S. Holocaust Museum)

military and civilian, lost their lives in April.

Aerial bombing raids over German cities claimed the lives of 400,000 civilians and left millions homeless.

Liberation of concentration camps

During their eastward advance, American and British forces discovered and liberated many German concentration camps in western and central Germany.

Soviet forces heading westward toward Germany liberated camps in Poland and eastern Germany.

Warren McDaniel, who graduated from Martinsville High School in 1937, experienced the shocking site at one of those camps he

helped liberate in central Germany.

McDaniel was serving with the 4th Armored Division, which had crossed the Rhine River in late March.

On April 4, his 355th Regiment stumbled upon the forced labor and concentration camp near Ohrdruf in the central state of Thuringia, Germany.

It was one of the largest camps yet discovered. Created in 1944, the camp was overcrowded with more than 20,000 prisoners.

The ghastly scene confronting the liberators was indescribable.

Thousands of emaciated forced laborers clung to life in abysmal conditions with inadequate food and shelter.

Scores of dead bodies were piled up like stacked wood.

The discovery of the camp prompted generals



Prisoners cling to the fence with smiles on their faces as they’re liberated from the notorious Dachau Concentration Camp. (Public Domain photo)

Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton to visit the site.

They were stunned.

McDaniel was also horrified by what he saw.

He took many photos of the grisly camp and brought them home after the war as a permanent historical record of the atrocity.

Deaths of national leaders

The month of April was also marked by the deaths of three national leaders.

On April 12, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage. He had been president since 1933.

On April 28, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was found by Italian partisans and executed in Giulino in the Italian province of Como at the northern Italian and Swiss border.

With Soviet forces now closing in on Berlin and, knowing that his rule and war were over, Adolf Hit-

ler decided to end his life instead of facing defeat and prosecution.

On April 30, he and his new wife, Eva Braun, committed suicide from inside his bunker in Berlin.

He instructed that his body be burned so that it could not be identified. Dental records later confirmed his identity.

At the end of April, German forces officially surrendered in Italy.

Germany, now on the brink of defeat and collapse, was next.

Next time: April 1945 – Part 2: Okinawa and the Death of Ernie Pyle

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