

FALLEN EAGLE

THE LAST DAYS OF THE THIRD REICH



ROBIN CROSS

Fallen Eagle

The Last Days of the Third Reich

Robin Cross



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

New York • Chichester • Brisbane • Toronto • Singapore • Weinheim

This text is printed on acid-free paper.

Copyright © 1995 by Robin Cross
Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 1995 by Michael O'Mara Books Limited,
9 Lion Yard, Tremadoc Road, London SW4 7NQ.

All rights reserved. Published simultaneously in Canada.

Reproduction or translation of any part of this work beyond that permitted by Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act without the permission of the copyright owner is unlawful. Requests for permission or further information should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional services. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cross, Robin

Fallen eagle: the last days of the Third Reich / Robin Cross.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographic references and index.

ISBN 0-471-16408-9 (alk. paper)

1. World War, 1939-1945—Germany. 2. Germany—History—1933-1945. I. Title.

D755.C76 1996

940.53'43—dc20

96-22232

Maps by Stephen Dew

Designed and typeset by Florencetype Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

'A few friends came round yesterday evening. At 8 o'clock we had the usual raid, which left a lot of broken windows as a New Year's greeting. At midnight all was still. We stood with raised glasses, hardly daring to clink them together. A single bell tinkled in the distance for the passing of the year, and we heard shots, and heavy boots crunching on the splintered glass. It was eerie, as though a shadow were passing over us and touching us with its dark wings.'

Ursula von Kardorff, 1 January 1945

Acknowledgments

The author and publisher have made every effort to contact the copyright holders of material reproduced in this book, and wish to apologize to those they have been unable to trace. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for passages reproduced on the pages given below:

- pp. 3, 18, 78, 173, 198: Hans-Georg von Studnitz, *While Berlin Burns*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963
- pp. 10–11: Roger A. Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth*, Macdonald, 1970
- pp. 17–18, 172, 241: Ursula von Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965
- p. 20: Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 1986
- pp. 38, 49–50, 50–51, 230, 243, 249: V. I. Chuikov, *The End of the Third Reich*, Progress Publishers, 1978
- pp. 55–6: Janina Bauman, *Winter in the Morning*, Virago Press Limited, 1987
- pp. 72–3: Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, Harper & Row, 1971
- p. 73: Christian de la Mazière, *The Captive Dreamer*, Dutton, 1974
- pp. 88–9: Alexander McKee, *Dresden 1945*, Souvenir Press Limited, 1982
- pp. 117, 165–6, 166–7: Max Arthur, *Men of the Red Beret*, Hutchinson, 1990
- p. 124 (top): Charles Whiting, *The Battle of the Hürtgen Forest*, Leo Cooper/Pen & Sword Books Limited, 1989
- pp. 124–5: James M. Gavin, *On to Berlin*, Viking Press, New York, 1978
- pp. 125–6: *The 43rd Wessex Division at War*, Clowes, 1952
- p. 131: Charles Whiting, *Siegfried: The Nazis' Last Stand*, Leo Cooper/Pen & Sword Books Limited, 1983
- p. 134: Charles MacDonald, *Company Commander*, Ballantine, 1958
- p. 136: John Foreman and S. E. Harvey, *The Messerschmitt Me262 Combat Diary*, Air Research Publications
- pp. 147, 148 (top): Peter Allen, *One More River*, J. M. Dent, 1980
- pp. 148 (bottom), 251: H. Essame, *The Battle for Germany*, B. T. Batsford Limited, London, 1969
- pp. 158–9: Pierre Clostermann, *The Big Show*, Chatto & Windus, 1951
- p. 177: Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, Michael Joseph, 1952
- pp. 186–7: John Erickson (ed), *Main Front*, Brassey's (UK) Limited, 1987
- pp. 189–190: Margaret Bourke-White, *Dear Fatherland Rest Quietly*, Simon & Schuster, 1947

- pp. 210–11, 229: Gerhard Boldt, *Hitler's Last Days*, Arthur Barker, 1973
 pp. 226–7, 248, 260: Vera Bockmann, *Full Circle: An Australian in Berlin*, Wakefield Press, Netley, South Australia, 1986
 pp. 239, 241, 244: Pierre Galante and Eugene Silianoff, *Last Witnesses in the Bunker*, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989
 p. 245: James P. O'Donnell, *The Berlin Bunker*, J. M. Dent, 1979
 pp. 260–2: The Diaries of Lieutenant-Colonel R. L. H. Nunn housed in the Imperial War Museum

The author would also like to thank the following for giving permission to reprint extracts from the documents below, which are housed in the Imperial War Museum:

Pamela Wright for passages from Colonel Peter Earle's diary
 Ian Whittaker for quotations from Major Whittaker's diary (PP/MCR/292)
 D. Evans for passages from his unpublished manuscript (92/371)

Finally, the author would also like to thank James Lucas for permission to quote material from *The Last Days of the Reich* and *Das Reich: The Military Role of the 2nd SS Division*

PICTURE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The publishers are grateful to the following sources for permission to reproduce illustrations in the plate section:

Hulton Deutsch: pp. 1, 2 (below), 5 (above), 6 (below), 7, 8, 9 (below), 10 (above), 11 (below), 12 (above), 13 (above), 16
 Süddeutscher Verlag: pp. 2 (above), 3
 Novosti (London): pp. 4, 5 (below), 6 (above), 9 (above), 11 (above), 12 (below), 13 (below), 14 (above), 15 (below)
 Mirror Syndication International: pp. 10 (below), 14 (below), 15

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	v
1 Lost Victories	1
2 The House of Cards	6
3 Sympathy for the Devil	21
4 Clutching at Straws	52
5 Thunderclap	78
6 One More River	109
7 Over the Rhine	141
8 The Race to Berlin	172
9 The Final Battle	198
10 Aftermath	241
<i>Appendices</i>	
<i>Appendix 1 Key Items of Weaponry</i>	263
<i>Appendix 2 Notes on Personalities</i>	267
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	275
<i>Index</i>	277

CHAPTER 1

Lost Victories

'Never in my life have I accepted the idea of surrender, and I am one of those men who have worked their way up from nothing. Our present situation, therefore, is nothing new to me. Once upon a time my own situation was entirely different, and far worse. I say this only so that you can grasp why I pursue my goal with such fanaticism and why nothing can wear me down. No matter how much I might be tormented by worries, even if my health were shaken by them – that would still have not the slightest effect on my decision to fight on. . . .'

Adolf Hitler, 28 December 1944

IN THE LAST week of August 1914, in East Prussia, General Paul von Hindenburg and Major-General Erich Ludendorff encircled and destroyed the Russian Second Army. At the Battle of Tannenberg they won one of the most complete victories in military history. Russian captives totalled 125,000 and the unknown number of dead included Second Army's commander, General Alexander Samsonov, who wandered into a forest and shot himself. The Battle of Tannenberg cleared German territory of Russian troops for the duration of the First World War. Later a great monument was raised at Tannenberg, and Hindenburg and his wife were buried there.

In January 1945 the Russians were back in East Prussia. This time it was defended by Colonel-General Hans Reinhardt's Army Group Centre, fielding approximately 600,000 men, 700 tanks, 800 artillery pieces and 1,300 aircraft. Facing Reinhardt's command was the combined might of General Ivan Bagramyan's First Baltic Front, General Ivan Chernyakhovsky's Third Belorussian Front and Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky's



An overview of Soviet operations, January–April, 1945.

Second Belorussian Front. Between them the three fronts could put into the field 1.7 million men, 28,000 artillery pieces, 3,300 tanks and 10,000 aircraft, a measure of crushing Soviet material superiority. There would be no repeat of Tannenberg.

Time was running out for the monument to the victor of Tannenberg. On 21 January Rokossovsky's Second Belorussian Front took Tannenberg. The retreating Germans had dynamited the monument and removed the remains of Hindenburg and his wife and the colours of the regiments he commanded.*

News of the destruction of Hindenburg's tomb filtered back to Berlin, where it was noted in the diary kept by Hans-Georg von Studnitz, a thirty-eight-year-old official in the information and press section of the German Foreign Ministry. His entry for 25 January reads:

The streams of refugees are interfering with military operations, disorganizing the lines of communication from which some counter-stroke might be launched, and are denuding the East of its German population. In the midst of all these terrible tragedies childish actions still abound. For example, German troops were ordered to destroy the Tannenberg memorial, in order to prevent the Russians from demolishing it. Whether they have done so or not, God only knows. But in any case, the Russians can now with justice assert that, by themselves they have destroyed the memorial. The Germans have admitted that they have no hope of returning to East Prussia. The goods wagon in which Hindenburg's body is being brought back would have carried 60 refugees to safety. We would have rendered a greater service to the future of Germany by rescuing that number of refugees than by sending the Field Marshal's corpse round the country.

Germany's future looked increasingly grim on both the Western and Eastern Fronts. In the West the German offensive launched in the Ardennes on 16 December by Sixth SS Panzer and Fifth Panzer Armies and Seventh Army had been contained and then rolled back by the Americans and British. By 16 January 1945 the bulge which had been driven sixty miles into the fifty-mile front held by General Courtney Hodges's US First Army had been eliminated. The fog which had grounded Allied aircraft at the start of the offensive had lifted, enabling fighter-bombers to strafe German traffic routes and supply convoys. The roads on which the Germans withdrew were soon littered with the

* They now hang in the hall of the Officer Cadet School at Hamburg.

blackened hulks of Hitler's armoured reserve. The German losses of 800 tanks were irreplaceable. The Allies made good similar losses in two weeks.

On the Eastern Front, Germany's strategic position had been reduced to ruins by the destruction of Army Group Centre in July-August 1944. At the turn of the year the remnants of Army Group Centre, redesignated Army Group A, held a line along the River Vistula less than 400 miles from Berlin, the flat expanse of the Polish plain at their backs and no obstacle but the River Oder between them and the capital of the Reich. Two Red Army fronts,* Marshal I.S. Konev's First Ukrainian and Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov's First Belorussian, had been ordered to advance across western Poland and into Germany. Both commanders enjoyed an overwhelming material superiority over the enemy and were now displaying a new mastery of mechanized warfare. Konev opened his offensive on 12 January and Zhukov followed two days later. Within forty-eight hours they had broken through the crust of the German tactical defence zone and their armoured formations were moving at speed across open country. To the north the Soviet drive to the Baltic, spearheaded by Third Belorussian and Second Belorussian Fronts, sent millions of refugees fleeing westward to the Reich or northward to the Baltic ports.

On the southern sector of the Eastern Front the situation was equally grave. In August 1944 Romanian guerrillas had staged an armed rebellion in Bucharest, taken control of the city, arrested the puppet dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu and overthrown the government. King Michael had then formed a new government, negotiated an armistice with the Allies and declared war on Germany. By the end of August most of the German occupying forces had left Romania, and on the 30th Soviet troops entered Bucharest without meeting any armed resistance.

Hitler's Balkan strategy was falling apart in his hands. The German occupation of Greece had been fatally undermined by the capitulation of Italy in September 1943. Just over a year later, on 12 October 1944, German Army Group E began a fighting withdrawal from Greece to link up with Army Group F in Yugoslavia.

There were some crumbs of comfort for Adolf Hitler as he surveyed his war maps. North of the Carpathians, Army Group South, which had

* A Red Army front was the equivalent of a German army group. It usually consisted of some five to seven armies with one or two tactical air armies and special armoured and artillery formations in support. An entire front could total up to 1 million men and extend over a battle frontage of up to 150 miles with a depth – if one includes the rear zone of operations – of up to 250 miles.

narrowly escaped destruction in August 1944, was now close to holding its own in Hungary. Budapest, which had been encircled by Russian forces at the end of December 1944, might still be relieved. In Italy Army Group C had halted British Eighth and American Fifth Armies at the Gothic Line, a string of heavily fortified positions stretching from south of La Spezia, on Italy's western coast, to a point on the Adriatic between Pesaro and Cattolica.

It was against this discouraging strategic background that, on 25 January, the German Army's Chief of the General Staff, Colonel-General Heinz Guderian,* paid a visit to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in his official residence on Berlin's Wilhelmstrasse. It was an uneasy encounter. Guderian proposed that Ribbentrop accompany him to see Hitler and urge him to seek an armistice 'on at least one front'. By this Guderian meant an armistice in the West, before the Western Allies could take up their march into the heart of the Reich. Ribbentrop squirmed at the suggestion, protesting, 'I can't do it. I am a loyal follower of the Führer. I know for a fact that he does not wish to open any diplomatic negotiations with the enemy, and I therefore cannot address him in the manner you propose.' To which Guderian replied, 'How would you feel if in three or four weeks' time the Russians were at the gates of Berlin?'

* The German Army's leading expert in armoured warfare, Guderian had been appointed Inspector-General Armoured Troops in March 1943. In July 1944 he replaced Colonel-General Kurt Zeitzler as Chief of the General Staff.

CHAPTER 2

The House of Cards

'The worst is now over. We have succeeded in holding and pinning down the enemy both in the East and the West. We have had to take some heavy blows ourselves in the course of the fighting but I happen to know that the situation is still worse in the enemy camp. It is just a case of staying the distance.'

Heinrich Himmler, December 1944

ON 1 JANUARY 1945, the British writer and politician Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary:

Viti [his wife, Vita Sackville-West] and I hear the new year in crouching over the fire in the dining-room. I turn on Berlin, the *Deutschlandsender*, and then Hamburg – and we get Hitler's horrible but unmistakable voice. The reception is not good and he gabbles off his piece so fast that I may have missed something. But it seemed to consist entirely about reflections upon Germany's fate if she loses her moral staunchness. . . .

The broadcast to which Harold and Vita were listening in mild discomfort was the first the Führer had made since the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate him at his East Prussian headquarters on 20 July 1944. He told the German people:

. . . This nation, this state and its leading men are unshakeable in their will and unswerving in their fanatical determination to fight this war to a successful conclusion in all circumstances – if it means taking in our stride all the reverses which fickle fate may impose on us . . . we are resolved to go the extreme . . . whatever

our enemies smashed was rebuilt with superhuman industry and unparalleled heroism and this will continue until one day our enemies' undertaking comes to an end.

Hitler stubbornly clung to the conviction that Germany would emerge victorious in spite of the terrible pounding the Reich and its armed forces had received at the hands of the Allies. But the conviction was wavering. Three days earlier he had confided in General Thomale, Chief of Staff of the Inspectorate of Panzer Troops, 'The war will not last as long again as it has lasted. That is absolutely certain. Nobody can endure it. We cannot, and the others cannot. The only question is who will endure it longer? It must be he who has everything at stake.'

Time, however, was running out faster than Hitler either imagined or was prepared to admit. On Christmas Eve 1944, Colonel-General Guderian arrived at the *Adlerhorst* (Eagle's Nest), Hitler's headquarters in the Taunus Mountains ten miles north-west of Bad Nauheim. It was from the Adlerhorst that the Führer had presided over the defeat of France in the summer of 1940. Now he had returned to direct the Ardennes offensive.

Guderian had travelled overnight in his command train from the OKH* headquarters at the Maybachlager in Zossen, south of Berlin. At Zossen Guderian had 'observed with a heavy heart the progress of our offensive in the West'. By 23 December it was clear that the Ardennes offensive was running out of steam. Once the first shock had passed, the Allied commanders moved swiftly to contain and then defeat the German spearheads. It was only a matter of time before they went on the offensive. Guderian's mission was to persuade Hitler to break off the battle and transfer all the forces which could be spared to the East to counter the massive Soviet build-up north of the Carpathians against Army Groups A and Centre. He had been provided with some heavy ammunition by General Reinhard Gehlen, commander of the Russian section of OKH's Foreign Armies (East) Department, who predicted that the Russians would attack on 12 January with a superiority of 11:1 in infantry, 7:1 in tanks and 20:1 in artillery. An evaluation of the enemy's total strength gave him a superiority of approximately 15:1 on the ground and 20:1 in the air. For Guderian the question was simply one of 'to be or not to be'.

But before Guderian could fight a battle in the East he had to fight a battle with the Führer. The meeting at the Adlerhorst on Christmas Eve

* Oberkommando des Heeres, the German Army high command, whose sphere of operations was confined to the Eastern Front.

was attended by Hitler, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the High Command of the German Armed Forces (OKW), Colonel-General Alfred Jodl, the OKW Chief of Staff, and General Burgdorf, Hitler's adjutant. Guderian ran straight into trouble. Hitler refused to call off the Ardennes offensive and poured scorn on Gehlen's figures, claiming that the Red Army's rifle divisions had a strength of only 7,000 men* each and its tank divisions no tanks. According to Hitler, the Russian build-up was the 'greatest bluff since Genghis Khan'.

At dinner Guderian was seated next to Heinrich Himmler, who had by now gathered to himself the offices of Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army, commander of Army Group Upper Rhine (a formation whose principal tasks were the defence of the river and the rounding up of deserters), Minister of the Interior, National Leader of the SS and Chief of German Police. Himmler leaned over to Guderian and reassured him in the familiar schoolmasterly tones, 'You know, my dear Colonel-General, I don't really believe the Russians will attack at all. It's all an enormous bluff. The figures given by your department Foreign Armies East are grossly exaggerated. They're far too worried. I'm convinced that nothing is going on in the East.'

Guderian was wearily resigned to higher idiocy of this kind, but he had a more formidable opponent in Colonel-General Jodl. OKW had no authority on the Eastern Front, where the war was run by OKH. In consequence Jodl regarded Guderian's travails with studied indifference. He was fully aware that the Ardennes offensive was bogged down, but he believed that a series of subsidiary attacks in this theatre – the first of which, codenamed *Nordwind* (North Wind), was to be launched in Alsace-Lorraine towards Strasbourg – would wear down the Western Allies. Guderian countered by pointing out that the heavy industry and transport systems of the Ruhr had already been paralysed by Allied bombing, rendering all the more important the industrial region of Upper Silesia, which lay directly in the Russians' path. The loss of the region, which was now the centre of the German arms industry, would lead to defeat in a matter of weeks.

The Eastern Front would have to take care of itself. It would have no reinforcements from the West† nor from the units disengaging from

* In fact Hitler was closer to the mark than anyone around the table realized. The establishment for a Red Army rifle division provided for 11,780 men, but the average ranged between 3,000 and 7,000 men.

† With the active help of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West and his Chief of Staff, General Siegfried Westphal, Guderian eventually secured the release of three divisions from the Western Front and one from Italy. But this 'wretched pittance', as Guderian called it, went to Hungary.

Finland, which were passing through Norway. Hitler also refused to countenance the withdrawal of the twenty-six divisions of Colonel-General Ferdinand Schörner's Army Group North which the Soviet Baltic fronts had cut off in Latvia's Kurland peninsula. The Führer was pathologically incapable of yielding ground, but he also wanted to retain access to Baltic waters for the training of crews for the new Type XXI and Type XXIII U-boats. Guderian went away empty-handed.

The next day, when Guderian was on his despondent way back to Zossen, Hitler ordered the transfer of IV SS Panzer Corps, deployed north of Warsaw, and two panzergrenadier divisions to Army Group South for the relief of Budapest. Later Guderian reflected, 'Two of the fourteen and a half panzer or panzer grenadier divisions assembled as a reserve against the impending Russian attack were sent to a secondary front. Only twelve and a half remained for a front of approximately 750 miles.'

Hitler's preoccupation with Budapest reflected the importance he placed on the Hungarian oilfields at Nagykanizsa, south-west of Lake Balaton, which were still in the hands of Army Group South. They were virtually the last of the Reich's natural oil assets, and oil was the key to survival. Without it Hitler's remaining panzers could not roll nor his Messerschmitt Me262 jets fly against the waves of Allied bombers criss-crossing the Reich by day and night. A dramatic decline in oil production had begun in August 1944 when Colonel-General El. Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front captured the Ploesti oilfields in south-east Romania. Thereafter increasing reliance was placed on the programme to disperse, repair and build synthetic oil plants. However, the plants were extremely vulnerable to air attack, and by the autumn of 1944 the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command and the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) had brought German oil production to a standstill. With the onset of winter weather production crept back up again to 24,500 tons in December, just enough to launch the Ardennes offensive but not enough to sustain it. As Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West, commented after the war:

Taking account of the extra difficulties likely to be met in a winter battle in such difficult country as the Ardennes, I told Hitler personally that five times the standard scale of petrol supply ought to be provided. Actually, when the offensive was launched, only one and a half times the standard scale had been provided. Worse still, much of it was kept too far back, in large truck columns on the east bank of the Rhine. Once the foggy weather cleared and the Allied air forces came into action, its forwarding was badly interrupted.

The Germans fought hard to protect their fuel supplies. There were no fewer than 506 anti-aircraft guns around the much-raided oil plant at Merseburg, which explains why in August 1944 US Eighth Air Force lost 131 aircraft to flak compared with thirty-nine to day fighters. The anti-aircraft guns, grouped in thirty-nine batteries and firing a concentrated pattern of bursts with a shotgun effect, were defending the big IG Farbenindustrie plant at Leuna, three miles south of the town, which produced an estimated 10 per cent of the Reich's oil, half the ammonia and a score of chemical by-products. On 29 August Lieutenant Gordon Courtenay, a bombardier with 398th Bombardment Group, flew one of his first missions over this target. Ahead of him he saw what he assumed to be a pall of black smoke hanging over the target. In fact his B-17 Flying Fortress was approaching the smoke of several thousand shell bursts aimed at the preceding group. As Courtenay observed, 'The sight of those ugly black bursts leaves you with a numb helpless feeling. All you can do is concentrate on your job and pray that in all that steel there isn't a piece with your number on it.'

Running the gauntlet of the Merseburg flak is vividly caught in the diary kept by Second Lieutenant William Duane, a navigator with 388th Group who flew against this target on 28 September:

Up early for an 03.30 briefing. Take off at 07.10. Again I'm navigator and not minding it too much. With this being our 13th mission, I anticipated a hot one but didn't say much to the crew. I guess they were sweating it out enough themselves. . . . After plenty of flying we reached the IP [initial point, from which the bomb run began]. The bomb run was about 13 minutes long. About 2½ minutes before 'bombs away' we got intense and very accurate flak. About a minute later, at 12.00, King [engineer] was hit in both legs. He fell down in the passageway, crawled forward and I plugged in his oxygen mask. . . . I took off my flak suit, grabbed a knife, and cut open five layers of clothes. After noticing the extent of the bleeding I applied a tourniquet. All this took place in some very intense and tracking flak – and me without my helmet. I applied a gauze dressing and tried to get blankets and morphine. Interphone shot out so I started back to the flight deck to inform the pilot. The co-pilot was cranking closed the bomb doors so I got on his interphone. I got down in the hatchway on an oxygen bottle and stayed there relaying messages back and forth between the nose and the pilot. Finally came the blanket and the first-aid kits. King had a piece of flak go right through the meaty part of his upper left leg and puncture his right leg. Bleeding was not arterial so it stopped soon. I was pretty cramped in the