

BATTLE FOR BUDAPEST

100 DAYS IN WORLD WAR II

KRISZTIÁN UNGVÁRY

Translated by LADISLAUS LÖB



I.B. TAURIS

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LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2003 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
Website: <http://www.ibtauris.com>

First published in German as *Die Schlacht um Budapest 1944/45* © 1999
by F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, Munich
Original Hungarian edition: *Budapest Ostroma* (Corvina, Budapest, 1998)

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Translated by Ladislaus Löb
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ISBN 1 86064 727 8

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in Stone by Dexter Haven Associates, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

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Map Legend

Unit	Infantry	Panzer	Cavalry	Motorised, mechanised or Panzer grenadier	Mountain Army Corps	Assault Artillery	Paratroopers
Army	 3	 6	 Pliev				
Army Corps	 7 (Rom)	 III	 5	 2 gd.			
Division	 10	 13	 8 ⚡	 Szent László	 FHH	 1	
Brigade		 39	 4				
Regiment	 38	 30	 16 ⚡	 66 ⚡		 1831 gd.	
Battalion	 E		 AA8 ⚡			 10	 II/1
Company	 P						

This table has been constructed on the basis of the units that took part in the siege. Soviet units are marked with a star, Hungarian units with a small coat-of-arms above the flag, and Romanian units are indicated in brackets after the unit number.

BBS	Budapest Security Battalion	FHH	Feldherrnhalle
BGB	Budapest Guard Battalion	gd.	Guard unit
Gend.	Gendarmerie	Pol.	Police
EFS	Europa Flying Squad Battalion	(Rom)	Romanian
Univ.	University Assault Battalion	⚡	SS
Res.	Reserve		

Preface

The battle for Budapest was one of the longest and bloodiest city battles of the Second World War. From the appearance of the first Soviet tanks on the outskirts of the capital until the capture of Buda Castle, 102 days passed. In contrast, Berlin fell within two weeks and Vienna within six days, while Paris and the rest of the European capitals – apart from Warsaw – saw no fighting at all. Other German ‘fortresses’, for example Königsberg and Breslau, resisted for shorter periods of 77 and 82 days.

Owing to its strategic importance, Budapest has been one of the most frequently attacked capitals of Europe. In the course of its history it has experienced 15 sieges of varying intensity, but the devastation caused in the Second World War was far worse than anything previously experienced: the battle for Budapest which lasted from December 1944 to February 1945 was equalled in ferocity only by those for Leningrad, Stalingrad and Warsaw.

The blockade of Leningrad lasted almost three years, but there was no street fighting. Stalingrad remained a battlefield for four months, but the majority of the population had been evacuated. The three-month siege of Budapest engulfed 800,000 non-combatants and was so vicious that comparisons with Stalingrad began to appear even in contemporary soldiers’ writings.

The inhabitants of Budapest were never evacuated and 38,000 died alongside a similar number of Hungarian and German military personnel: thus every other person killed on the defending side was a civilian. The casualties of the attacking Red Army, with some 80,000 dead, bring the grand total close to 160,000.

Archival material in German or Hungarian is scarce. Many notes made by soldiers at the time have been lost or destroyed. One of the few documents now available – the war diary of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division – was buried in a Buda courtyard on the orders of chief of staff Győző Benyovszky and remained hidden for more than four decades before finding its way to the Budapest Archive of Military History in 1986. From the mid-1980s memoirs started to arrive at the archive in increasing numbers, but were initially banished to the deepest recesses for political reasons.

For a long time all publications on the battle were designed for propaganda purposes. The first account with any claim to scholarship was Sándor Tóth’s *Budapest felszabadítása*, published in 1975. However, Tóth had only been able to inspect Soviet sources selectively, and had not had

any access to German archives. Nor is his work primarily concerned with what happened in Budapest. Of its 279 pages only 62 refer to the fighting in the city, with the rest being devoted to political issues and the relief attempts. This is no coincidence, as Tóth was obliged to keep silent about various details and many eye-witnesses could not speak out at the time when he was writing. Only Péter Gosztonyi, living in Bern, was free to undertake research and publish valuable source material and studies from the 1960s. Political pressure on historians ceased in 1989, but, despite a growing interest in military history of the recent past, no comprehensive examination of the battle was carried out in subsequent years. The only exception was a volume resulting from a conference held at the Institute of Military History in Budapest in 1994.

This study was first written as a doctoral dissertation at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the Hungarian edition has so far been reprinted three times. My research in the Military Archive of the Federal Archives in Freiburg was supported by two scholarships from the German Academic Exchange Service whose staff, in particular Mr Brün Meyer, gave me untiring support. I also wish to thank the other institutions and private individuals who supplied me with documents or details of their experiences. Their names appear in the list of sources.

My aim was to reconstruct the events of one of the bloodiest city battles of the Second World War, making use of all available sources. Owing to the incompleteness of existing official documentation I often had to rely on recollections of participants: in any case, communiqués written in offices or at battle posts cannot convey a true impression of the sheer hell of a siege. Personal accounts therefore play a significant part in my study.

I tried to obtain information from both German and Hungarian survivors. However, although a heavier burden of fighting was borne by the Germans, accounts by German soldiers proved relatively rare and often inaccurate owing to lack of local knowledge, and recollections of Soviet soldiers were even less readily available. Consequently, I have reconstructed the concrete engagements mainly from Hungarian narratives.

The history of the battle for Budapest has aroused considerable interest in both Hungary and Germany, which is indicated not least by the fact that this study has now appeared in four Hungarian and three German editions, and I am still being approached by survivors with further valuable information. In addition to the book I have organised successful exhibitions in Budapest and Berlin based on its subject matter.

The battle for Budapest is part of Hungarian, German and Russian history. The tragic and sometimes shameful events still evoke painful

memories, which made it particularly difficult, even from today's historical distance, to discuss them objectively and fairly. With this in mind I would like to thank the following for their technical advice and thought-provoking comments on my manuscript: András Ceglédi, Klaus Ewald, Ervin Galántay, Ferenc X. Kovács, Péter Nádas, György Pongrácz, István Ravasz, Endre Sasvári, Péter Szabó, Sándor Tóth, Rudolf Ungváry, Sándor Vadász, György Válás, Frigyes Wácsek and Philip Wetzel. My special thanks are due to Professor Ladislaus Löb, the English translator, whose help with the preparation of this volume has far exceeded the requirements of a mere translation and who has assisted me in correcting various inaccuracies.

Krisztián Ungváry

Introduction: Hungary and the Second World War

When the German Wehrmacht attacked Poland and unleashed the Second World War on 1 September 1939, the Hungarian government assumed a neutral position. The population sympathised with the Poles, and more than 100,000 Polish refugees found temporary asylum in Hungary. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Pál Teleki, who did all he could to avoid arousing the anger of Great Britain and the US, complied only to a limited extent with Germany's demands for his country's support. Less than two years later, the political leaders of Hungary had enthusiastically embraced Nazi Germany's 'Crusade against Bolshevism' and declared war on the Soviet Union, on 27 June 1941, without being required by the Germans to do so. On 12 December 1941, by then under German pressure, they also declared war on the US.

Like many people in the West – then as today – British and US politicians were unfamiliar with conditions in east-central Europe and did not really understand the driving forces behind Hungarian politics. This is demonstrated in a conversation that is said to have taken place between a US State Department official and the Hungarian chargé d'affaires on the occasion of Hungary's declaration of war on the US, as recorded by Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister:

'Is Hungary a republic?'

'No, it is a kingdom.'

'Then you have a king?'

'No, we have an admiral.'

'Then you have a fleet?'

'No, we do not have any sea.'

'Do you have any claims, then?'

'Yes.'

'Against America?'

'No.'

'Against England?'

'No.'

'Against Russia?'

'No.'

'But against whom do you have these claims?'

'Against Romania.'

'Then will you declare war on Romania?'

'No, sir. We're allies.'¹

The admiral in question was Miklós Horthy, regent of Hungary from 1920. He had been the ADC of Emperor Franz Josef, who died in 1916, and the last commander of the Austro-Hungarian Navy. Until 1918, Hungary had had a sea port at Fiume on the Adriatic and a battle fleet. Romania was regarded by Hungarian politicians as the arch-enemy, second in repulsiveness only to the communist Soviet Union. This was due to the 'betrayal' in 1916 – when Romania, having previously proclaimed its neutrality, had declared war on the Austro-Hungarian monarchy without any provocation – and the Romanian occupation of Hungarian territories in 1919. Romania was an ally of Hungary because on 23 November 1940 it had joined the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan, to which Hungary already adhered. Horthy had come to power by overthrowing the 'Commune' that had ruled Hungary for 133 days in 1919. This experience of Bolshevism was decisive not only for Horthy himself, but also for a large part of the Hungarian population. The Horthy regime, a limited parliamentary democracy, had been marked right from the outset by both anti-communism and anti-Semitism.

Hungarian politics, which seemed incomprehensible to the Allies, is in fact perfectly understandable and was based on a few simple facts. Until 1918, Hungary had been in personal union with Austria and was hit particularly hard by what Keynes, Lenin and Thomas Mann alike describe as the foolish and impracticable conditions of the treaties that ended the First World War. Hungary lost two-thirds of its territories and one-third of its Hungarian-speaking population. Counter to US President Woodrow Wilson's advice, the neighbouring states – Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, as they were then, and Romania – went in for the same kind of chauvinistic oppression of the other nationalities among their subjects as their own nationals had suffered previously under Hungarian rule, even though they themselves were almost as multi-ethnic as the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy: in Czechoslovakia, for example, the proportion of ethnic Czechs accounted for barely 50 per cent of the entire population. The defeated countries, including Hungary, in their turn regarded the provisions of the treaties of Versailles and Trianon as only temporary, and took every opportunity to assert their revisionist demands. Thus, the aims of the foreign policy of Germany and Hungary coincided in many respects.

As Germany grew stronger during the years following the Versailles Treaty, the leaders of Great Britain and the US looked on more and more

passively, lacking the political will and economic power to redress the balance. Eventually the Allies were obliged to recognise the inappropriateness of the peace that they had created: in 1938 they surrendered the integrity of Czechoslovakia and in 1939 rescinded the guarantees they had given to Romania. However, the German attack on Poland could no longer be explained by any injustices of the Versailles Treaty, and in view of the German aggression, which in the medium term also represented an obvious threat to Great Britain, the British government declared war on Germany.

The orientation of Hungarian foreign policy was not one-sidedly pro-German. Hungary had tried to gain the sympathy of Great Britain ever since the 1920s. Both the feudal elite of great landowners, who had long determined the political life of the country, and Horthy himself admired the British way of life and found it hard to accept that Britain did not consider east Europe a politically significant region.

However, in the internal politics of Hungary, the position of Horthy and the conservative elite surrounding him had begun to weaken even before the outbreak of the war. From 1938 the government was constantly forced on the defensive by a specifically Hungarian group of extremists, named the Arrow Cross movement after the badge worn by its members, which was constantly gaining ground and which preached the necessity of anti-Semitism and a totalitarian political order. Although Horthy and his entourage were themselves anti-Semitic, they felt unable to adopt the type of modern anti-Semitism practised by the Nazis. In fact, they had consolidated their own system with the help of Jewish big business, and Horthy was even on friendly terms with rich Jewish industrialists and their families. Nevertheless, between 1938 and 1942 the Hungarian parliament voted in favour of various anti-Jewish laws, and Horthy approved them.

Between 1938 and 1940, Hungary, thanks to its alliance with Germany, had regained lost territories in Slovakia, Sub-Carpathian Russia and northern Transylvania. On 2 April 1941 Germany attacked Yugoslavia. Within a few days Croatia declared its independence, and the Yugoslav state disintegrated. When Horthy accepted the German invitation for Hungary to join in the attack – regardless of the fact that only a few months earlier a ‘Pact of Eternal Friendship’ had been ratified between Hungary and Yugoslavia – Prime Minister Teleki committed suicide. Hungarian troops began their offensive on 12 April, occupying Vojvodina, a territory largely inhabited by Hungarians. In so doing, Hungary indirectly became one of the belligerent parties, although for the time being Great Britain contented itself with merely severing diplomatic relations. Nor did the attack in June on the Soviet Union trigger an immediate British declaration of war, because in

Churchill's view no state of war existed as long as Hungarian units did not directly clash in battle with any allies of Great Britain (less than 18 months earlier, after the Soviet attack on Finland, Churchill himself had been preparing plans for a war against the Soviets). Finally, under Soviet pressure, Great Britain declared war on Hungary on 7 December 1941.

For a considerable period the Hungarian (or Honvéd) Army deployed only modest forces against the Soviet Union – in 1942, two corps; between 1942 and 1943, the Hungarian 2nd Army, numbering 200,000 men; and between 1942 and 1944, five occupying divisions. With hardly any mechanised units and hopelessly antiquated aircraft and tanks, their equipment was lamentable.

Since 1942 the Hungarian leadership had been experimenting with reducing its military activities, and Hungarian diplomats were engaged in secret negotiations with representatives of Great Britain and the US. Alerted to these moves by German military intelligence, the Wehrmacht occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944 to ensure that it did not defect. Hungary's new pro-German government, headed by Prime Minister Döme Sztójay, agreed to the total mobilisation and deployment of the Hungarian Army. Horthy, taking offence, retired to his apartment in Buda Castle and announced that he wished neither to be given prior notice of the decrees of a government appointed by the Germans, nor to countersign them. The best equipped divisions of the Honvéd Army were sent to the Pre-Carpathian region, where they joined battle with the Soviets and succeeded in preventing the 4th Ukrainian Front of Colonel-General Ivan Petrov breaking through the passes in the Carpathian mountains for six months.

Soon after the German occupation on 19 March 1944, the deportation began of the Hungarian Jewish community, the largest still surviving in Europe. On the German side only the 60-strong staff of Adolf Eichmann took part in this enterprise, as opposed to some 300,000 civil servants, police officers and gendarmes supplied by the Hungarian administration. By the end of June, of some 700,000 Hungarian Jews, 437,000 had been deported to Auschwitz and their property distributed by the Hungarian authorities among the Hungarian population, which helped to consolidate the policies of the Sztójay government.²

The anti-Jewish measures encountered no resistance of any significance in Hungary. In July 1944, as a result of protests by Hungarian church leaders, the Vatican, the neutral states, the King of England and the President of the US, Horthy gave orders for the deportation to cease, but by that time he was only able to save Jews living in Budapest or drafted for forced labour. On 15 October 1944, when Horthy announced his intention to agree a

separate peace with the Allies, the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szálasi, overthrew him. While Horthy was arrested and taken to Germany, the atrocities committed in Hungary by Arrow Cross militia assumed unprecedented proportions, claiming many more victims.

After the German occupation, the British and US air forces began raiding the industrial centres of Hungary: previously there had been little military activity in Hungarian air space, and the Hungarian air force had been forbidden to open fire on formations of bombers flying towards Germany. Although the Allied forces did not resort to terror bombing over Hungary, more than 20,000 civilians were killed in air raids.

In the autumn of 1944 the Red Army began its offensive against Hungary, with the objective of pushing towards Germany for the final assault. In that offensive – and the last stages of the Second World War as a whole – the siege and capture of Budapest played a decisive role.

Notes

- 1 Gibson, p. 484.
- 2 For Hungarian anti-Semitism and the Hungarian Holocaust, see in particular the studies of Braham and of Götz and Aly.

I

Prelude

1

The general situation in the Carpathian Basin, autumn 1944

The German front in eastern Romania collapsed after the arrest of Prime Minister Ion Antonescu and the severance of diplomatic relations between Romania and the German Reich on 23 August 1944. Following the destruction of large segments of the German Army Group South, units of the 2nd Ukrainian Front encountered practically no resistance to their advance through Romania, and arrived at Hungary's Transylvanian border on 25 August. Early in October they also reached the border in the south of the Great Hungarian Plain. On 6 October they began their general offensive with the aim of encircling – together with the 4th Ukrainian Front from the Carpathians – the German and Hungarian troops (roughly 200,000) in Transylvania. Table 1 indicates the balance of German and Soviet forces in Hungary at the beginning of October 1944 (see 'Tables' section at the end of the book).

Along the 160-kilometre front between Makó and Nagyvárad, two armoured and two mechanised Soviet corps, with 627 tanks and 22 cavalry and infantry divisions, set out north to meet the Hungarian 3rd Army with its 70 tanks and 8 divisions. The Hungarian front, lacking anti-tank defences, was soon torn to shreds, and the Soviet troops were ordered to advance towards Debrecen. In the meantime the Germans had also concentrated forces in the region: Operation *Zigeunerbaron* (Gypsy Baron) was intended to destroy the 2nd Ukrainian Front's units on the Great Hungarian Plain and then, turning south and east, seize the passes in the Carpathians to form an easily defensible battle line. The tank battle of Debrecen took place between 10 and 14 October. Table 2 shows the sizes of the respective forces before the battle.

Although the Soviet units succeeded in occupying Debrecen on 20 October 1944, they were unable to fulfil their aim of encircling the German 8th Army and the Hungarian 1st and 2nd Armies stationed in Transylvania and the Carpathians. In addition, the 4th Ukrainian Front under Major-General Ivan Yefremovich Petrov, which should have closed the circle from the north, had made hardly any headway. Thus the German Army Group South succeeded in extricating its troops. After Regent Miklós Horthy's failed attempt of 15 October to break away from Germany and agree a separate peace with the Soviets, the panzer units that had so far been tied down in the border area added their strength to the German front. By 20 October, the Germans had lost only 133 tanks, while the losses of the Soviets amounted to 500 – more than 70 per cent of their strength.¹ By the end of October, the German panzer divisions had encircled General Issa Aleksandrevich Pliiev's mechanised cavalry units in the Nyíregyháza region, and the Soviet troops were only able to break out with heavy losses.

Between Baja in the south and Szolnok in the east, only seven exhausted divisions of the Hungarian 3rd Army and 20 tanks of the German 24th Panzer Division were holding their positions against the Soviet 46th Army, as the bulk of the German armoured forces had been redeployed to the tank battle of Debrecen. The distance between Budapest and the Soviet lines was only about 100 kilometres. Nevertheless, a Soviet attack was risky, because the German tanks could easily be regrouped to defend the city, while the Soviets no longer had enough armoured vehicles to carry out a successful offensive.

While the Soviet occupation of Hungary was continuing in the region beyond the Tisza river and in the southern part of the Great Hungarian Plain, in Budapest and the western parts of the country the Arrow Cross government was establishing its reign of terror.

The Arrow Cross Party had come into being during the second half of the 1930s, through the merger of several far-right groupings. Its emergence was facilitated by widespread disillusionment with the communist republic of 1919, the surviving feudal structures and the anti-Semitic traditions of Hungarian society. The party was led by Ferenc Szálasi, a suspended general-staff major. In the 1938 elections it had proved extremely popular in working-class districts, obtaining about 20 per cent of votes. Its programme promised land reform, social reforms for workers and peasants, the complete elimination of Jewish influence and the subsequent deportation of all Jews from Hungary, and the creation under Hungarian leadership of a federal state called the Hungarist Carpathian-Danubian Great Fatherland, which was to comprise Hungary, Slovakia, Vojvodina, Burgenland, Croatia, Dalmatia,

Ruthenia, Transylvania and Bosnia. From the National Socialists it had adopted the *Führer* and *Lebensraum* principles.

Although in reality the fate of Budapest was determined by German military policy, according to the Arrow Cross Party the Hungarian people were now obliged to fight against the violence, looting and deportation to Siberia that the approaching Soviet army would bring with it. The persecuted Jews saw the advancing Soviet troops as their saviours. The rest of the population, however, had gloomy forebodings. The relative calm presented by Budapest on the surface was frequently disturbed by Jews being marched to the ghettos or deported to German camps, columns of refugees leaving their homes to trek west, and reports of evacuation orders arriving from the Great Hungarian Plain. 'We must now be prepared to become a city under siege from one day to the next', the linguist Miklós Kovalovszky notes in his diary, after describing a scene observed in the suburb of Kispest:

The old woman is speaking in tears about the evacuation of Kecskemét. They were able to bring a few pieces of clothing and some food with them, but there wasn't enough time to get the three pigs from the farm. The whole town has become a poorhouse; and what if they have to move on from here as well?²

2

'They are coming!' – the first Soviet offensive against Budapest

Plans and preparations

Immediately after the tank battle of Debrecen, Josef Stalin ordered the 2nd Ukrainian Front to take Budapest and continue its advance towards Vienna. With the eventual division of conquered territories between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies in mind, he wanted to secure his supremacy over central Europe as early as possible. During the Moscow negotiations of 8–18 October, Winston Churchill had mentioned his plan to move the British and US forces to the Carpathian Basin. This induced Stalin to act promptly. His decision was influenced through a misleading report presented in late October by Colonel-General Lev Zakharovich Mehlis, the political representative of the 4th Ukrainian Front's commander:

The units of the Hungarian 1st Army facing our front are disintegrating and demoralised. Day by day our troops capture 1,000-2,000 men, sometimes even

more... The enemy soldiers are wandering in small groups in the forests, some armed, others without arms, many in civilian clothes.³

Stalin asked his general staff whether there was any real chance of taking Budapest. The memoirs of Colonel-General Sergei Shtemenko, the first deputy of the Red Army's chief of staff, relate:

Without suspecting anything, we replied that it would be most practical to attack from the well-established bridgehead in the Great Hungarian Plain which had been captured by the left wing of the 2nd Ukrainian Front. This would not involve crossing the river, and the enemy had fewer troops here than elsewhere.⁴

Stalin ordered an immediate attack, ignoring the reservations of General Aleksei Innokentevich Antonov, chief of the Red Army's general staff, who explained that Mehlis's reports applied only to the Hungarian 1st Army and not to the situation as a whole.⁵ On 28 October at 10pm the following telephone conversation took place between Stalin and Rodion Malinovsky, the commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front:

S: Budapest... must be taken as soon as possible, to be more precise, in the next few days. This is absolutely essential. Can you do it?

M: The job can be done within five days, when the 4th Mechanised Guard Corps arrives to join the 46th Army...

S: The supreme command can't give you five days. You must understand that for political reasons we have to take Budapest as quickly as possible⁶... You must start the attack on Budapest without delay.

M: If you give me five days I will take Budapest in another five days. If we start the offensive right now, the 46th Army – lacking sufficient forces – won't be able to bring it to a speedy conclusion and will inevitably be bogged down in lengthy battles on the access roads to the Hungarian capital. In other words, it won't be able to take Budapest.

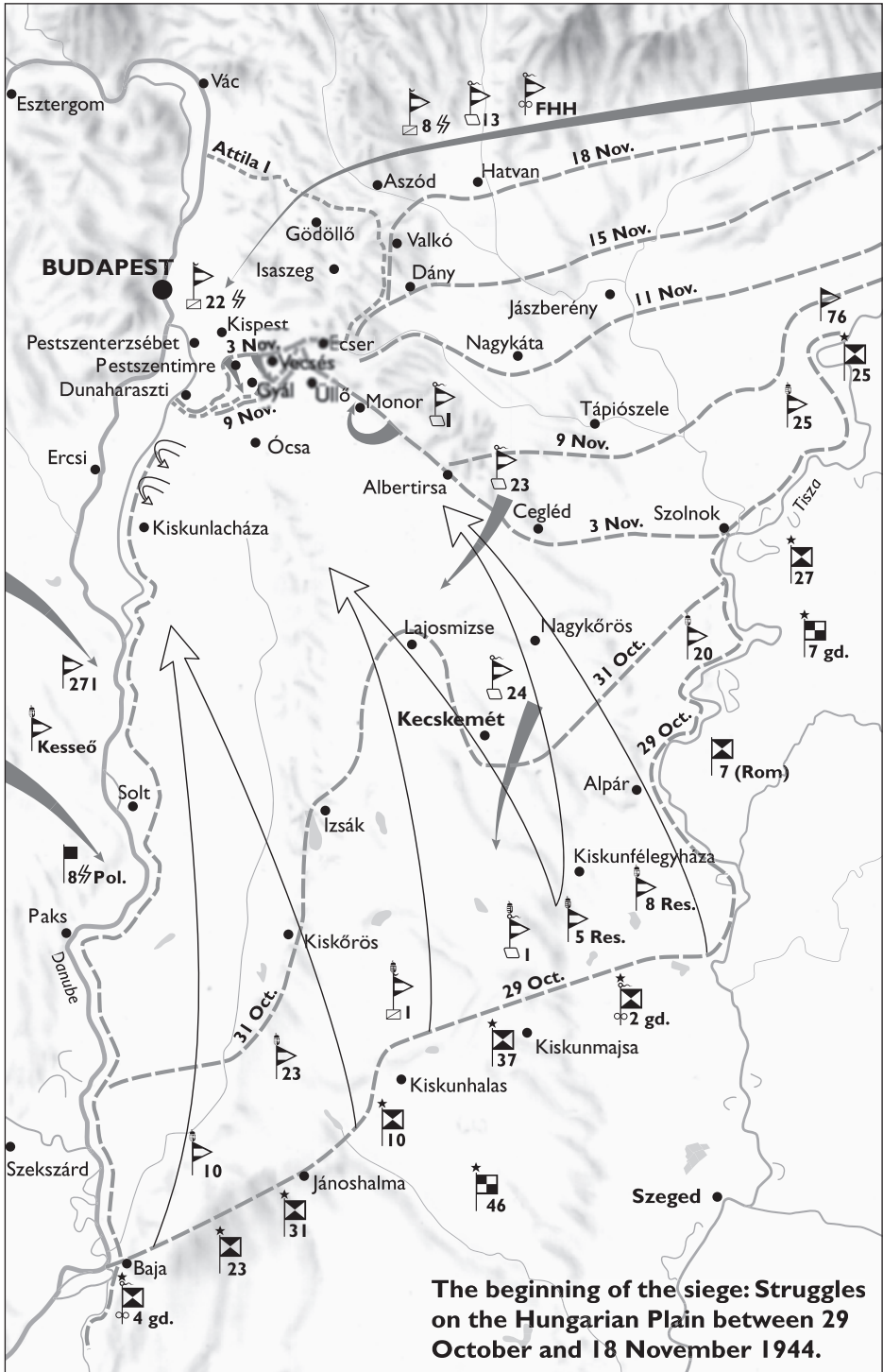
S: There's no point in being so stubborn. You obviously don't understand the political necessity of an immediate strike against Budapest.

M: I am fully aware of the political importance of the capture of Budapest, and that is why I am asking for five days.

S: I expressly order you to begin the offensive against Budapest tomorrow!

Stalin then put down the receiver without saying another word.⁷

Experts disagree about whether Stalin made the right decision. When the order to attack was given, the 23rd Rifle Corps, which had been promised as a reinforcement, was still on its way. The 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps did not join Malinovsky, who had no other armoured units, until the next day, and the 4th Ukrainian Front, which should have taken part in the encirclement of Budapest, was unable to reach the Great Hungarian Plain.



The beginning of the siege: Struggles on the Hungarian Plain between 29 October and 18 November 1944.

The German army command, recognising the Soviet threat, had already begun to redeploy its troops on 26 October.⁸ By 1 November, the 23rd and 24th Armoured Divisions had been moved to the Kecskemét region, and the redeployment of the 13th Panzer Division, the Feldherrnhalle Panzer-grenadier Division and the Florian Geyer 8th SS Cavalry Division had also begun. With these forces, the commander of the German Army Group South, Colonel-General Hans Friessner, was planning to regain the Great Hungarian Plain and establish a solid defensive position along the Tisza.

The offensive, introduced by a brief artillery barrage, began at the appointed time south of Kecskemét with a northbound attack of the Soviet 37th Rifle Corps and the 2nd Mechanised Corps. The Soviet tanks soon broke through the Hungarian defences over a 25-kilometre stretch. The onslaught continued during the night, despite an unsuccessful counter-attack by the 24th Panzer Division, but faltered on 30 October when German and Hungarian troops – particularly anti-aircraft artillery – destroyed 20 tanks in the neighbourhood of Kecskemét alone. On the same day the Soviet 7th Guard Army set out to cross the Tisza, but gained ground slowly. On 31 October the Soviet troops captured Kecskemét, and on 1 November, Malinovsky gave orders for the 4th Mechanised Guard Corps and the 23rd Rifle Corps to take Budapest within three days, before the Germans could regroup.⁹ The armoured vehicles and riflemen transported by trucks and horse carts were to carry out a surprise crossing of the Danube and encircle Budapest from the south. At the same time the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps was to overrun the city from the east. As the majority of Soviet troops was still 40–50 kilometres from Pest and there were no bridgeheads on the Buda side, the plan in practice presupposed that it was possible to ‘walk’ into the capital without further ado.

A general of Malinovsky’s calibre must have known that these objectives were unrealistic. One can only assume that once Stalin had overruled his objections, he had no choice but to obey. Subsequent events bear witness to the remaining strength of the Hungarian (not to mention the German) army, in what was to be, for Hungary, the last and most devastating phase of the war. While the awareness of approaching defeat and the terror perpetrated by the Arrow Cross government increasingly fuelled the people’s desire for an end to the ordeal, the army still possessed substantial energy reserves. This was one of the reasons why the siege of Budapest was to prove so long and bloody. In the initial stages the Hungarian units on the Danube and their German reinforcements presented a weighty obstacle to the premature Soviet attack. In any case, an early breakthrough by the Soviets would have been almost impossible because they lacked the necessary

resources. Tables 3 and 4 detail the strengths of the two sides at the end of October 1944.

Budapest becomes a front-line city

In military terms, the Hungarian capital was not entirely unprepared for the Soviet offensive. On orders from the German army supreme command (Oberkommando Heer, or OKH), Colonel-General Friessner had begun to build up a rear-defence system in Hungarian territory on 21 September 1944.¹⁰ This consisted of three fortified battle lines: the Margit Line between Budapest and Lake Balaton in the southwest, the Karola Line between the Cserhát, Mátra and Zemplén Hills in the north and the Attila Line on the east side of the capital.

The Hungarian general staff had begun to develop the Pest bridgehead on 11 September, and the Attila Line was to provide defence positions for four divisions of six battalions each. It comprised three semicircular belts: the first ran through the villages of Alsógöd, Veregyház, Maglód, Ecsér and Dunaharaszti, the second through the villages of Dunakeszi, Mogyoród, Isaszeg, Pécel and Pestszentimre to the suburb of Soroksár, and the third along the edge of Pest itself. The fortifications consisted of earth bunkers, anti-tank ditches, occasional barbed-wire entanglements and minefields. After the appearance of the first Soviet troops, work still continued: on 1 November, 28,000 men – soldiers of the Slovak Technical Division,¹¹ specially recruited civilians and units of the forced labour service – were employed on the earthworks.¹²

The Hungarian supreme command had warned as early as September that Budapest could become a front-line city within days, as the Hungarian 3rd Army was not strong enough to resist the first major attack. On 25 September János Vörös, head of the Honvéd (or Hungarian regular) Army's joint chiefs of staff, had cabled to the chief of the German supreme command, Colonel-General Heinz Guderian: 'Unless the Hungarian 3rd Army receives significant reinforcements immediately it is doomed to fall before long. In this event the road towards Budapest, the heart of the country, will be open.'¹³ On 9 October Vörös instructed the commanders of the anti-aircraft artillery and the available technical units to secure the access roads to Budapest. At the same time he ordered the Hungarian I Army Corps, together with the police, gendarmerie and anti-aircraft units attached to it, to take up positions along the Attila Line, and requested reinforcements from the German Army Group South. The Hungarian I Army Corps, located in Budapest, which had only administrative functions

and no troops of its own, was temporarily placed in charge of all the Hungarian units in the capital. Today it is difficult to ascertain whether Vörös's real intention was to defend Budapest against the Soviets or to provide support for the ceasefire planned by Horthy. He may well have been motivated by both considerations.

On 10 October the Hungarian general staff began to prepare for the siege of the capital. On 12 October the staff of the Hungarian VI Army Corps was ordered to move from the Carpathians to Budapest, as was the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division. The Hungarian I Army Corps was to assume security duties, and the Hungarian VI Army Corps defence duties. On the same day the 1st Parachute Group, one of the most reliable elite formations in the Hungarian army, was detailed to Budapest, and three anti-tank gun companies of the 10th Infantry Division were also directed to relocate from their positions in the Carpathians to Budapest with the utmost urgency.¹⁴ Guderian protested against these measures, probably because the German command was aware of Horthy's ceasefire plans and therefore – despite the approach of the Soviets – primarily interested in forestalling a concentration of Hungarian units in the city.

Meanwhile German reinforcements were also on their way to Budapest. To prevent Hungary deserting, the Germans had summoned the 503rd Heavy Panzer (Tiger) Battalion, parts of the 24th Panzer Division and other units to the area. On 13 October the Hungarian general staff gave orders for all mobile Hungarian units to be diverted to the capital.¹⁵ The Maria Theresia 22nd SS Volunteer Cavalry Division, which consisted of forcibly recruited ethnic Swabians living in Hungary, was stationed west of Buda. After the failure of Horthy's ceasefire attempt, the German command threw most of its forces into the tank battle of Debrecen, leaving only a few reserve units in Budapest.

According to the diary of the German Army Group South, on 25 October the following resources were available for the defence of Budapest:

- the 22nd SS Cavalry Division with 13,000 troops and 2000 Hiwis¹⁶ armed with 24 heavy anti-tank guns, 57 field guns, 486 machine guns and 11,386 other arms, and undergoing low-level training due to end on 1 December (the majority having been called up in October);
- the Hungarian VI Army Corps with one Division and six battalions (presumably the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division);¹⁷
- 2,000 other troops;
- 4 flying-squad battalions;
- 1,500 rifles, 150 sub-machine guns, 55 light machine guns and 146 heavy anti-aircraft guns.

These were reinforced on 26 October by the 1/I Parachute Battalion from Buda, which took up positions at Dunaharaszti and Soroksár on the Attila Line to cut off the roads to Kecskemét and Solt. Other reinforcements between the end of October and mid-November were the 1st, 10th, 13th, 16th, 24th and 25th Assault Artillery Battalions, two batteries of the 7th Assault Artillery Battalion¹⁸ with approximately 25 assorted tanks and 2000 troops, and the 1st SS Police Regiment. The artillery battalions were sent to the less threatened regions of Rákoscaba, Ecsér and Pécel, while the SS police troops were stationed in the suburb of Kispest as reserves.¹⁹ The security forces in Budapest were made up of the 9/II Battalion (Szálasi Bodyguard), the Budapest Guard Battalion, the 201st–203rd Specialised Technical Battalions, the students of the Várpalota Officer-cadet Academy, and three gendarmerie battalions. The 12th Reserve Division, which was being replenished and restructured, also drew back to Budapest. The front line, about 70 kilometres south of Budapest, was being held by the 1st Armoured Division, the 23rd Reserve Division, the 8th Reserve Division and the exhausted units of the 1st Hussar Division.

The units stationed in Budapest, with their limited numbers, desultory training and inadequate equipment, did not represent a serious defence force. Friessner, who realised that the capital would be the next target of the Soviet offensive, wrote to Guderian on 27 October 1944 asking for more units. He was to repeat the request several times during the following weeks, without success.²⁰

On 2 November the Soviet mechanised units reached the villages of Dunaharaszti, Alsónémedi, Ócsa, Üllő and Gomba, south and southeast of Budapest, within 15 kilometres of the city. Kovalovszky describes his memories of the first battle sounds heard by the civilian population:

In the short intervals between air raids I can still hear the constant thunder of guns. Are they firing so intensely at enemy planes that have lost their way? Then I realise that these are not anti-aircraft guns. Could the battlefield have got so close to us?... After the brief lunch break the sirens are silent, but the noise of shooting grows ever more threatening. By now there can be no doubt that it is ground artillery that is firing and not anti-aircraft guns, or a big tank battle is going on south-east of us... We are in the battle zone. How long will it last and are we going to survive?²¹

Two paratroopers involved in the action recall the first appearance of Soviet tanks:

On the afternoon of 2 November heavy gun fire could be heard from the direction of the anti-tank defence detachment, and soon the road between

Soroksár and the defence positions was blocked by the horse-drawn columns of the units retreating from Kecskemét in disarray... We cleared the road and a little later the first soldiers from the anti-tank defence position arrived, reporting that the position had been stormed by the Russian tanks.²²

The five T-34s at the head soon reached the bridge over the anti-tank ditch... There was deadly silence, and only the droning of the Soviet tanks and the grinding of the caterpillar tracks could be heard. It was already getting dark, but we could see Soviet infantry bent over in the ditches, following the tanks. Our orders were not to open fire on the infantry till the tanks had been shot up. The tanks came in stages, covering each other, but stopped short before the bridge. At that moment the anti-aircraft guns hidden in the acacia trees alongside the road began to roar, and the defence units near the bridge discharged their anti-tank rocket launchers. There was also heavy infantry fire and the Soviet infantrymen accompanying the tanks threw themselves down on the ground. The unexpected attack immobilised all five tanks.²³

At nightfall each of the two improvised defence positions of the paratroopers was charged by 20 Soviet tanks:

A chaotic battle raged for several hours. Many tanks were damaged by our anti-tank mines or guns and towed away. At Soroksár a few tanks managed to break through the defence line, but the Russian infantry got stuck - within assault distance - on the left flank, and the tanks retreated... At Dunaharaszti the attack also collapsed, within assault distance, after a gun battle lasting several hours: the front held and several Soviet tanks were damaged.²⁴

On 3 November the Soviet 4th Mechanised Guard Corps broke through the defences of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division and reached a point 6 kilometres east of Soroksár, but in the course of the day the paratroopers, led by Major Edömér Tassonyi, regained the lost positions. The Soviet 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps took the villages of Monor, Üllő, Vecsés, Gyál and Pestszentimre, southeast of Budapest,²⁵ which the combat unit of the Budapest police was trying to defend. Three of the police unit's five obsolete Italian Ansaldo tanks were immediately destroyed,²⁶ and the first Soviet tank rolled into Üllői Road, one of the main arteries leading into the city. Other formations penetrated as far as Ferihegy Airport, about 16 kilometres from the centre. Troops of the 8th SS Cavalry Division and the Hungarian 12th Infantry Division recaptured Vecsés and Monor. Parts of Vecsés fell once more into Soviet hands, but were retaken on 4 November.

The Soviet armoured offensive ended on 5 November. Many tanks had been hit, a large proportion of the infantry had fallen behind, the shortage of ammunition and fuel²⁷ was making itself felt and the advancing spearheads risked encirclement by the German 1st and 3rd Panzer Divisions.

On 8 November the 22nd SS Cavalry Division ejected the Soviet advance guards from their positions along the Attila Line. After the withdrawal of the armoured units, Soviet infantry companies and battalions continued to attack and penetrate the defences of the untrained German division, but with the help of the Hungarian paratroopers all such salients were sealed off and destroyed. Table 5 specifies the German units regrouped to the Great Hungarian Plain at the time of the Soviet offensive.

Further attacks of the 2nd Ukrainian Front

Colonel-General Shtemenko's memoirs illustrate the general staff reaction to the 46th Army's stalled offensive.²⁸ As nobody dared to postpone or change Stalin's plan, the only solution was to broaden the attack and try to capture Budapest through an encirclement from two sides rather than a frontal assault. The 6th Guard Tank Army and the 7th Guard Army were to break through in the Hatvan region in the east and reach the Danube north of Budapest at Vác, while the 46th Army was to cross the Soroksár branch of the Danube, take Csepel Island, continue across the Öreg-Duna branch, and attack the capital from nearby Érd in the southwest. It was in order to regroup that the Soviets had stopped their offensive southeast of Budapest on 5 November, which suggests that the strategic command had by now been entirely taken over by military experts.

Meanwhile, early in November, the German supreme army command had positioned three panzer corps to cut off the access routes to Budapest. The III Panzer Corps, led by Colonel-General Hermann Breith, took on the defence of the capital, while further east the IV Panzer Corps prepared a counter-attack in the Jászberény region and the LVII Panzer Corps in the Cegléd-Szolnok region. The Soviet forces – in particular the 7th Guard Army, which formed the left wing of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, the 53rd, 27th and 40th Armies, and the mechanised cavalry group commanded by Colonel-General Pliev – were halted by German and Hungarian units as they tried to advance north. Table 6 lists the numbers of Soviet tanks destroyed between the end of October and mid-November.

From 8 November Malinovsky's 7th Guard Army and the Pliev Corps renewed their attacks towards Isaszeg and Hatvan. In this region, east to northeast of Budapest, a 50-kilometre front line was defended by only a few Hungarian battalions and the German 13th Panzer Division, 4th and 18th SS Panzergrenadier Divisions and 46th Infantry Division. Demoralised by the continuous Soviet attacks, many soldiers of the SS panzergrenadier divisions, who had been recruited by force, surrendered or fled. Their

condition is illustrated by the following report: '18th SS Panzergrenadier Division... consists of ethnic Germans living in Hungary. They cross over to the enemy, their combat value is like a Hungarian division... Strength c. 18,000, 1 rifle per 18 men.'²⁹

It is not surprising that panic broke out among the untrained and badly equipped SS soldiers, who could only watch their comrades being crushed by the Soviet T-34 tanks as they sought refuge in holes in the ground.³⁰ Nevertheless, the command of the German Army Group South blamed them for what happened, as Friessner's note to Guderian suggests: 'In the 4th SS Police Panzer Grenadier Division some commanders have shot themselves because their soldiers had run away. The 18th Panzergrenadier Division has been a total failure.'³¹ The Hungarian 12th Reserve Division, consisting of some 2000 infantry with 20 guns and still in the process of restructuring,³² had been deployed early in November to cut off the approach to Budapest along a line between Pécel, Isaszeg and, slightly further to the south, Dány. As this proved insufficient, the Hungarian 1/I Parachute Battalion, commanded by Major Edömér Tassonyi, was also deployed on 13 November. Until a reinforcement of 600 men arrived on 15 November, the paratroopers, with well-organised artillery support, held a defence sector between 5 and 6 kilometres in length by themselves, rebuffing a series of fierce Soviet attacks. On one occasion the onslaught of the Soviet infantry reached the Hungarian positions. Tassonyi recalls:

I turned to the German artillery observer: 'Shoot to kill at reference point A, at once!' – 'But that's your own position.' – 'Never mind, at once!' I looked at my stop watch. 17 seconds later our position and the area in front of it were under fire from 52 barrels, which gradually slowed down and which after a few minutes decreased in range. This barrage scored a direct hit on the Russian infantry within assault distance. When I went (more accurately, leapt) out after the repulsion of the attack, the paratroopers told me they had known that the second barrage was their own and there was nothing they could do about it. As the firing abated, some had peeped out and seen Russian bodies flying through the air and Russians in panic trying to dig themselves in. Miraculously, our company lost only seven dead and a few wounded in the murderous barrage; although a few soldiers had been buried by earth they escaped unscathed.³³

Tassonyi received the First and Second Class Iron Crosses and a copy of the German Wehrmacht report praising him and his paratroopers. However, the fighting, which continued until 22 November, cost the unit a further 40 per cent casualties.³⁴

Although the Soviet troops had crossed the Tisza at every point, they were unable to prevent the Germans from stabilising the front and establishing

a coherent battle line by constantly regrouping their remaining forces and carrying out successive counter-strikes. The Soviet losses were substantial, but by the end of the month the German panzer divisions had also been decimated. 'The battalions only numbered 100-200 by now. On every 100m of front line there were on average only 3.5 of our men... the best panzer units had eight tanks left, the others four or five,'³⁵ Friessner writes in his memoirs. By the middle of November, the German units stationed northeast of Budapest had retreated to the Karola Line, and in that sector also stabilised the front.

Stalin finally realised that the 2nd Ukrainian Front would not suffice to capture Budapest. On 14 November he therefore placed at Malinovsky's disposal 200 tanks and 40,000 troops from the supreme command's reserves as well as the 4th Ukrainian Front, at that time stranded in the Carpathians.³⁶ With the tanks, which vastly outnumbered their German counterparts, Malinovsky reinforced the 6th Guard Tank Army in order to encircle Budapest from the north jointly with the 7th Guard Army, as he had originally planned. However, the Soviet forces were unable to break through the defences from this direction.

The 46th Army's bid to cross the Danube and land on Csepel Island south of the city was more successful. On 6 November a similar attempt by a battalion of the Soviet 23rd Rifle Corps had been foiled by the Hungarian 2/I Hussar Battalion and a rapidly redeployed assault artillery group from Debrecen after the discovery of a Soviet artillery observer hiding in a church tower southeast of the island:

The Soviet Rifle Battalion got stuck in the shallow water near the bank of the Holt-Duna branch, while trying to hide in the thicket of birches, willows and other water plants. Those who hadn't had time to hide were taken prisoner by us. Most of them were probably over 40, with big moustaches and a meek appearance. Our soldiers offered them rum and patted them on the back in a friendly manner... Our welcoming behaviour lured more and more Russkis from their hiding place on the Danube branch. Some were carrying improvised crucifixes made of twigs... there was one Soviet wounded as white as chalk, maybe a sergeant. I still remember his hard, stern gaze and his unyielding face rejecting any amicable gesture, his mouth clenched with pain. He accepted our prompt medical assistance, but when we offered him some rum he shook his head without saying a word. The prisoners asked us not to hand them over to the Germans, but the Hungarian army was not allowed to hold prisoners.³⁷

The Soviet troops trying to cross the river on 14, 15, 16 and 18 November were repulsed, but by 21 November they were landing on Csepel Island in division strength, having gained a foothold at the village of Ráckeve two

days earlier. Tibor Gencsy, commander of the assault half-company of the Hungarian 4th Hussar Regiment, remembers:

The renewed enemy breakthrough from the Kis-Duna branch came at dawn the next day. As a reservist I was billeted in one of the schools in Tököl. The regiment commanders were slumbering sweetly behind me. Those in the front lines, Major Mészáros and the other units, offered no resistance. The enemy troops – probably penal companies, saturated with ‘assault water’ – approached the railway line at the end of the village, where I was positioned with my men, in thick clusters. That is why it was possible for one bullet to go through two or three bodies. We reloaded a few times, and they dispersed to try and attack us from behind by going round the village... Then we were pulled out of the village, and the next day there was a counter-attack supported by German tanks. The enemy troops were splendidly dug in and this time offered clear-headed and serious resistance. As they sat in their splendidly camouflaged trenches we hit them in the neck and head, but with our weak forces were unable to clean up Tököl completely.³⁸

Alarmed by this threat from the south, the German Army Group South detailed the Hungarian 1/II Parachute Battalion, a cadet battalion and the combat group of the Feldherrnhalle Division to Csepel Island, as well as the 1st and 9th Artillery Battalions and two independent battalions. None of these, however, proved a match for the Soviet 23rd Rifle Corps, which completed the crossing to Csepel Island on 25 November and was joined by troops of the Soviet 37th Rifle Corps. With a number of villages changing hands several times, the front finally came to a standstill between Lakihegy and Királyerdő on the southern edge of the conurbation, when the Soviets had advanced far enough for the substantial Hungarian artillery – supported by speedboats of the river service – to open fire on them with 103 guns from the suburbs of Csepel in the north and Soroksár in the east, and the far bank of the Danube in the west. Nevertheless, the fighting still continued, as Aurél Salamon, a reserve hussar lieutenant, recalls:

Towards evening the Russian so-called penal battalion (political prisoners) attacked our positions. A horrible bombardment awaited them, with concerted salvos from machine guns, mortars and dug-in tanks, and even the speedboats on the Danube were showering bullets on them... The attack collapsed after a little while with huge losses. Hundreds of dying and wounded were lying in front of our positions. We could often hear shouts of ‘bozhe moi’ [my God], together with loud, but weakening, calls for help. Our stretcher-bearers tried to bring them in, but each time their efforts were rewarded with machine-gun fire. These people simply had to die. We were unable to help them, and by the next day they were silent.³⁹

The magnitude of the casualties in general may be illustrated by the fact that the 1400 men of the Hungarian 1/II Parachute Battalion, who arrived on 28–9 November as reinforcements, roughly equalled in number the entire strength of the Hussar Division still in action on Csepel Island at the time.

3

The second Soviet offensive against Budapest – Ercsi and Hatvan

Both Stalin and the Soviet general staff were displeased with the slow progress of Malinovsky's 2nd Ukrainian Front, the strongest of all Soviet fronts.⁴⁰ Further north, the 4th Ukrainian Front was even worse off, having covered only 200 kilometres since August 1944, and coming to a standstill at the Carpathians. The Soviet supreme command sent Marshall Semion Konstantinovich Timoshenko to investigate. Marshall Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin, the commander of the 3rd Ukrainian Front operating in Serbia, was also included in the discussions, although he had not so far been involved in the plans concerning Budapest. His role in Hungary was now upgraded because of the 2nd Ukrainian Front's lack of success, and because certain political considerations made a further advance in the Balkans undesirable;⁴¹ in addition, Stalin always liked to incite his subordinates to compete with each other. Timoshenko submitted his report on 24 November:

The 2nd Ukrainian Front is one of the strongest fronts. It has substantial potential for smashing the resistance of the enemy, but nevertheless has not scored any successes lately. The reasons for this lack of success, in my view, are the following:

1. The supreme command – relying on its relatively superior strength – is trying to destroy the enemy formations simultaneously in different areas (Miskolc, Eger, Hatvan).
2. This leads to a dispersal of forces, making it impossible for our troops to bring their superior strength to bear. For example, the principal grouping (27th, 53rd Armies, 7th Guard Army), with 24 rifle divisions, 3 mechanised and 1 tank corps, and 2 cavalry corps, is extended as follows:
 - a) in the Miskolc sector the 27th Army on a 50-km. front line with 8 rifle divisions,
 - b) in the Eger sector the 53rd Army with 7 rifle divisions on a front line of 45 km.,
 - c) in the Hatvan sector the 7th Guard Army with 9 rifle divisions. In the same sector 3 mechanised, 1 tank and 2 cavalry corps are in action.

Thus the rifle units are distributed proportionally among the respective armies and sectors. A somewhat superior strength exists only in the case of the 7th

Guard Army, in whose sector Pliev's Corps and the 2nd and 4th Mechanised Corps are operating. However, Pliev's Corps and the mechanised corps are worn out as a result of protracted fighting and of having to confront superior forces...

3. To some extent the unit commanders and their staffs have been spoiled by events in Romania and Transylvania, and are not therefore handling the cooperation between the different services with due care.

In view of the above I would consider it practical to require the commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front:

1. to review his earlier decisions and create such formations as will confront the enemy in 2 sectors with absolutely superior strength. The sectors in question are:

- a) Hatvan-Balassagyarmat as the principal section and
- b) Miskolc as the secondary section.⁴²

Table 7 shows details of the strength of the German and Hungarian forces in comparison with the total strength of the Soviet opposition in the Hatvan region; table 8 compares the 2nd Ukrainian Front with the German and Hungarian forces facing it; table 9 indicates the numbers of divisions and soldiers involved in the fighting on both sides between early November and Christmas.

The Soviet supreme command had ordered Tolbukhin already in mid-October to halt the advance of the 3rd Ukrainian Front in Yugoslavia after capturing Belgrade, and to make preparations to take part in the operations in Hungary in order to gain access to the Transdanubian aluminium plants and oil-fields, before pressing ahead towards Vienna or, if necessary, Budapest. It was for this purpose that the 4th Guard Army, stationed in Galicia, had been attached to the 3rd Ukrainian Front on 18 October. On 9 November Tolbukhin's troops had established a bridgehead at Kiskőszeg on the Danube, which they continued to expand. On 12 November Malinovsky had been ordered to hand the 31st Guard Rifle Corps over to Tolbukhin; on 27 November, three days after Timoshenko's report, he had received the same order in respect of the 5th Cavalry Corps. Thus, with the front line gradually shifting west in southern Transdanubia, Soviet forces were in a position to approach Budapest from the southwest.

Soviet headquarters, advised by Tolbukhin, ordered Malinovsky to move the 6th Guard Tank Army, the 7th Guard Army, two mechanised corps, one tank corps, two cavalry corps and two newly constituted artillery divisions to the Hatvan-Kartal region northeast of Budapest. Their attack on the 8-kilometre sector of the front chosen for the breakthrough was to be carried out in two waves, the first by six divisions, the second by two divisions, two artillery divisions and the 6th Guard Tank Army. With a total of 510 tanks and 2074 guns and mortars, every single kilometre of the

front line was to be covered by 64 tanks, 260 guns and mortars, and 4000 infantry. Nearby, over a stretch of 7 kilometres, the 53rd Army was to deploy four divisions with 700 guns and mortars. Now Malinovsky had reason to hope that in three or four days his troops would reach Vác and the Ipoly Valley, from where they would be able both to overrun Budapest and to advance further into the Little Hungarian Plain in north-western Hungary.

By the end of November it was clear that Tolbukhin's troops would capture parts of Transdanubia within weeks or even days, and then advance on Budapest from the southwest. Malinovsky, attacking from the east, was presumably unwilling to share the glory of taking Budapest, which is the only possible explanation for his decision that the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps and the 46th Army should cross the Danube and encircle the city from the west ahead of Tolbukhin. The senselessness of this strategically unnecessary measure, which was to cost a great many lives, becomes obvious in view of the fact that by that time the German and Hungarian defence had collapsed south of the point where Malinovsky intended to cross by force, and that Tolbukhin's troops, advancing at a rate of 10–20 kilometres a day, would soon have reached Budapest from the southwest.

Malinovsky ordered the 46th Army to cross the Danube near Ercsi, a village on the west bank close to the southern edge of Budapest, on 4 December 1944. The defenders had been reinforcing their positions for days in anticipation of the attack, which finally began without any artillery preparation, at 11pm. The Soviet assault squads were received by an extraordinary barrage, which destroyed 75 per cent of their boats in mid-river.⁴³ The following episode exemplifies the scale of the casualties:

Towards midnight on 4 December Sergeant Smirnov's pontoon was transporting an assault squad and two guns to the right bank of the Danube. On the way the pontoon was hit. Smirnov received two bullets in the leg, and four of the oarsmen were also wounded. Nevertheless, they managed to land the assault squad and the guns. On the way back the pontoon was hit and Smirnov wounded again. By that time only two of the fighters remained unscathed. Smirnov, gravely wounded, was giving orders to his comrades lying down, but by the time the craft had reached the left bank of the river they could only lift out his dead body.⁴⁴

Several elite companies were totally lost, and the survivors of others turned back in the middle of the partly frozen river.⁴⁵ By the evening of 5 December the Soviet troops had established four bridgeheads, but three were immediately destroyed by swift German counter-attacks: only one, at

Érd-Ófalu, could be stabilised. On 6 December seven more bridgeheads were established on both sides of Ercsi, although not one member of the first assault company survived the heavy barrage of the defence. Many soldiers were obliged to jump out of their wrecked boats halfway through the journey and continue swimming with their weapons through the icy water. The Soviet losses amazed even their opponents. Hussar Lieutenant-Colonel Emil Tomka writes in his diary:

When I went to the northern sector in the morning I saw a unique sight. Our own artillery was constantly bombarding the Russian crossing point opposite the Szinya farm. German dive bombers were giving assistance, and Terstyánszky's three mortars were firing in the same direction. In spite of all this the Soviet crossing continued. The troops were transported not only by assault boats but also by a steam ferry. The packed loading barge was hit by a German bomb and sank immediately, but a little later they pulled another one out from behind the embankment and the crossing continued. The most horrific thing was that the Germans still holding the embankment on this side were firing with machine guns at the disembarking Russian soldiers, of whom only a small percentage could have been left alive, and these were trying to take cover in the densely overgrown river flats, several metres deep in water or mud. As we were watching this, a hussar next to me said: 'Lieutenant, Sir, if this is how they treat their own men, what would they do to their enemies?'⁴⁶

After the battle, Malinovsky clearly wanted to gloss over the pointless sacrifice of his soldiers by handing out an abundance of decorations. Thus 115 men, nearly half the number of all the soldiers who received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal for actions in specific Hungarian locations, were decorated for participating in the river crossing at Ercsi.⁴⁷ The total of those awarded this highest Soviet military decoration up to 1945 – in many cases posthumously – was 12,000.

According to Malinovsky's plan the troops crossing the Danube were to reach the Budaörs–Bia area by the end of the second day, and the Pilisvörösvár–Szomor–Csákvár area by the end of the third. This would have required an advance of 20–30 kilometres a day, which can be accomplished by infantry units only if they encounter no enemy forces. In the circumstances this was not possible, because after the crossing Malinovsky's troops would still have had to break through the Margit Line. Presumably he had set such spectacular objectives in order to magnify the supposed importance of the crossing.

The misguidedness of Malinovsky's enterprise is further revealed by the fact that the position of the 46th Army did not stabilise until 8 December, when the units of Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front, advancing on the west