

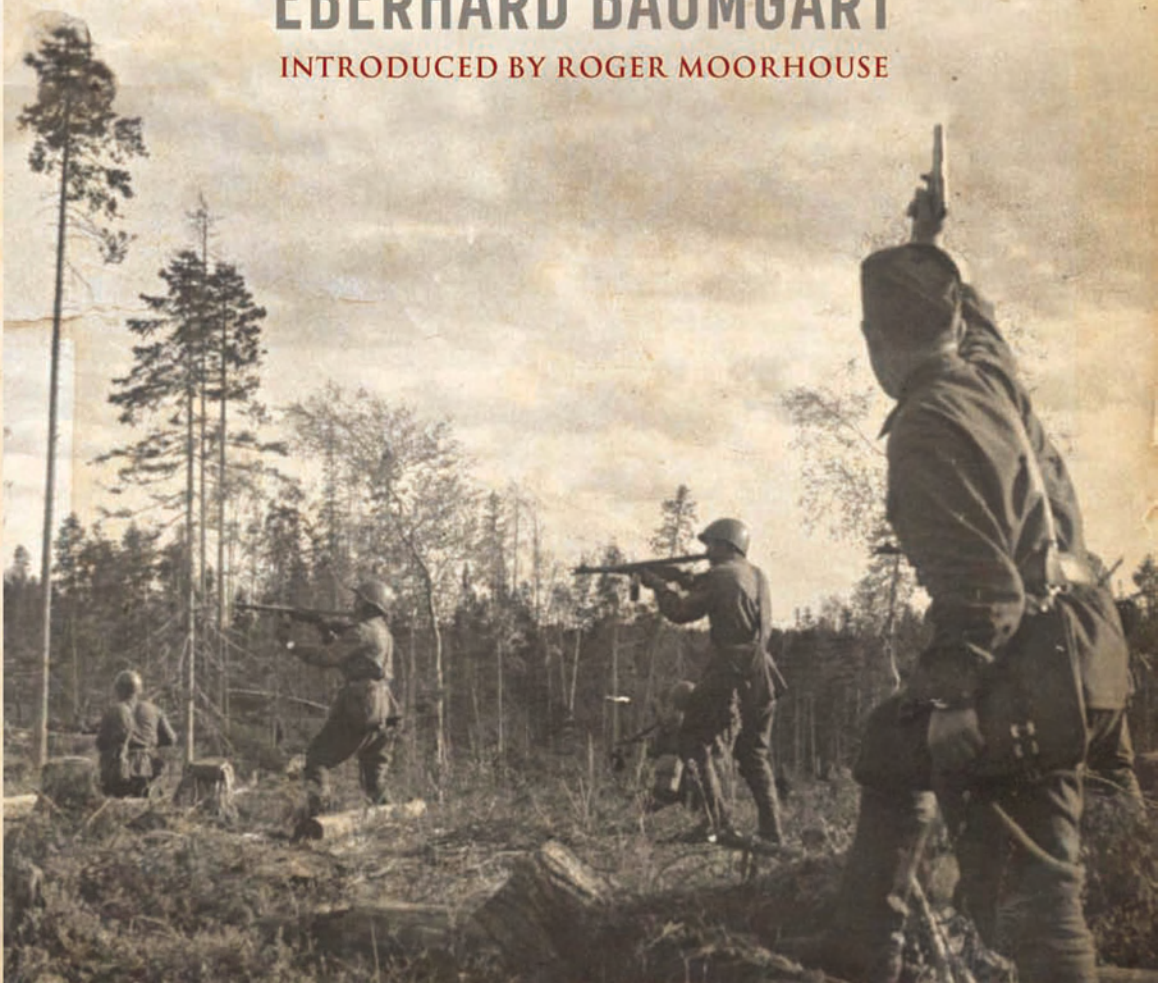
HALBE

1945

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS FROM
HELL'S CAULDRON

EBERHARD BAUMGART

INTRODUCED BY ROGER MOORHOUSE



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TRANSLATED BY EVA BURKE



Greenhill Books



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First English-language edition
published in 2022 by
Greenhill Books,
c/o Pen & Sword Books Ltd,
47 Church Street, Barnsley,
S. Yorkshire, S70 2AS

www.greenhillbooks.com
contact@greenhillbooks.com

ISBN: 978-1-78438-711-2

Originally published in German as
Halbe 1945: Durchbruch in den Untergang
© 1999 Druffel-Verlag,
Berg am Stranberger See

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Roger Moorhouse introduction © Greenhill Books, 2022

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CIP data records for this title are available from the British Library

Designed and typeset by Donald Sommerville

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Books

Typeset in 12.2/16.5 pt Minion Pro

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Introduction

Halbe 1945: Break-out to Defeat

The Battle of Halbe is not one that holds much resonance for non-German audiences. As the last major engagement of World War Two in Europe, it is conventionally merged with the wider Battle for Berlin, or folded into the general German collapse in the final weeks of the war. Yet, it has a significant story to tell, a bloody, brutal story.

Halbe was the last great encirclement battle of the European war. The encirclement battle was a tactic that resulted when highly mobile forces found an overwhelming advantage in numbers or mobility *vis à vis* their opponents, and consequently it had featured right from the outset of the war, the first being the Battle of Tuchola Heath, in the opening days of September 1939. Such engagements had then seen their hideous apogee in the weeks after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, when entire Soviet armies were destroyed in huge encirclements, such as at Minsk, Bryansk and Kiev, and had duly featured once the tide had turned on the Eastern Front, with Red Army forces now encircling the Germans, the most infamous example, perhaps, being Operation Uranus, during the Battle of Stalingrad in November 1942. By 1945, then, encirclement tactics were routinely being deployed against understrength German

units, and at Halbe it was against those units that were desperately trying to defend the approaches to Berlin. Halbe, therefore, was grimly symbolic of the war's changes of fortune.

Halbe itself is a small town, not far from the picturesque lake-land of the Spree Forest, south-east of Berlin, but in the spring of 1945 it stood at the heart of an area occupied by the German Ninth Army, under the command of General Theodor Busse. Having already been mauled in the Battle of Seelow Heights, to the east of Berlin, earlier that month, Busse's men now found themselves in the eye of a new Soviet storm; caught between the jaws of two approaching Red Army fronts – with Marshal Georgi Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front approaching from the north-east, and Marshal Ivan Koniev's 1st Ukrainian Front circling to their rear, heading north-west towards the German capital. Their orders were to attempt to break out, westward, to join up with the German Twelfth Army, under General Walther Wenck, which was fighting the Americans to the south-west of Berlin.

It was a task that was easier said than done. Busse's forces had already been eviscerated, and though they contained a number of SS detachments – including the IX SS Panzer Corps – there were also some much less fearsome units present, some comprising of dragooned Luftwaffe ground crews, and the old men and boys of the Volkssturm – which, though touted as a fearsome *levée en masse*, was in reality little more than a Hitlerite 'Dad's Army'. Busse could field only around 80,000 men, to face a battle-hardened Red Army force more than three times that size.

The clash that ensued matched any of the European war for brutality. As Busse's forces inched westward, using those armoured SS spearheads as a vanguard, they had to maintain a fighting retreat at their rear, to fend off Zhukov's men in the east. Three break-outs were attempted, all of which were contained by the Soviets, with heavy losses on both sides. For those in

the centre of the 'cauldron', life was little easier as they endured constant air and artillery attack. As one regimental commander later recalled, the shelling was so intense that he could barely raise his head: 'All I could do was lie under a tank with my adjutant and look at the map.'^{*} In this way, German forces would be contained and systematically reduced.

Barely 20,000 men escaped the Halbe cauldron, making their way in dribs and drabs through the Soviet lines to join up with Wenck's Twelfth Army, which would, in time, surrender to the Americans. The remainder were either captured by the Soviets, or killed. Among the former, there were some significant names, including Obergruppenführer Matthias Kleinheisterkamp, commander of the IX SS Panzer Corps, and the thoroughly odious Obergruppenführer Friedrich Jeckeln, who as commander of one of the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* had been responsible for the cold-blooded murder of over 100,000 Jews earlier in the war. Kleinheisterkamp is thought to have committed suicide, Jeckeln would be hanged for his crimes. One who survived the carnage was Colonel Hans von Luck, whose capture brought to an end a remarkable military career, which had spanned Poland in 1939, France in 1940, Operation Barbarossa, North Africa and Normandy.[†] Some 30,000 German soldiers did not survive Halbe – a figure broadly comparable in scale to the entire Allied death toll in the Battle for Normandy of 1944. In addition, an estimated 20,000 Soviet soldiers were killed, as well as around 10,000 civilian dead. Halbe, clearly, was no side-show.

*

^{*} Quoted in Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945* (London, 2002), p. 332.

[†] See Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander* (London, 1989).

This collection of first-hand accounts tells the story of the battle and its aftermath, from the German perspective. It is an eclectic mix, containing the recollections of ordinary soldiers, from enlisted men to senior officers, and civilians, as well as SS men, men of the Panzer divisions, even the former mayor of Halbe himself. It brings to life the grim realities of this most one-sided engagement and contains numerous harrowing vignettes highlighting the ever-present threat of the brutal vengeance of the Soviets, the Red Army's material superiority, and the desperation just to escape the slaughter.

Interestingly, some of the accounts presented here make reference to so-called 'Seydlitz Troops' – German POWs who had been 'turned' by the Soviets and were now sent behind German lines to sow disinformation and chaos. In truth, 'Seydlitz Troops', which were named after a German POW of the Soviets, General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurbach, were a figment of the fevered German imagination of 1945. Though Seydlitz was a prominent mouthpiece for Red Army propaganda aimed at German soldiers, such troops were never given the operational go-ahead by Stalin, and there is no evidence beyond the anecdotal that they ever fought. It is, perhaps, testament to the desperation that many German soldiers and civilians felt, in the maelstrom of war that resulted in Halbe, that so many of them appear to have believed in such a chimera.

Aside from the vicarious, visceral thrill of reading such accounts, one must bear in mind that they have a purpose. The Battle of Halbe scarcely registers with most readers, even those rather well-versed in the intricacies of World War Two in Europe. In addition, most of those who write the histories that we read regrettably lack the language skills necessary to access new material and original sources. Consequently, events like the Battle of Halbe struggle to penetrate the established narrative, and so

continue to languish in comparative obscurity, until a volume such as this one presents an opportunity for change; for a shift, however modest, in the story. This is to be welcomed. However difficult the subject matter, however discomfiting the stories portrayed, it is only through bringing such material to a wider public that progress is made towards a more comprehensive understanding of history.

For all that, however, what comes across most strongly is the sense of human tragedy in evidence on these pages; the rapes, the murdered prisoners, the wanton cruelty. The spectacle of the forces of two hideous totalitarian regimes fighting to the death, with no quarter given or expected – just as no quarter had been given or expected when the Germans had been supremely dominant some three years earlier – is one that should give us all pause, and should encourage us to cherish the fact that we live in more peaceful times.

Roger Moorhouse

Translator's Note

The bulk of this book consists of memories or diary notes written by eye-witnesses of the battles in and around Halbe in 1945, during the campaign that saw the downfall of Berlin. As such, these first-hand accounts are written in different registers as the authors vary in age and background. Some are military personnel, from high-ranking SS men to ordinary *Landser*. Some are bystanders, ordinary civilian men and women; others are landowners and farmers. Often, we hear the voice of the town mayor. The text – though replete with army talk that lays bare a lack of leadership and absence of strategic thinking – is overlaid with a vocabulary primarily conveying pain, disappointment and defeat.

Out of touch or vaguely worded orders handed down by the Nazi leadership reflect the total collapse of their war which is echoed by troops being confused, indecisive and ignorant as to what to do, when and where. The lack of maps on the German side is felt in unclear, often conflicting directions given and received. The tone and language used by the Nazi regime to have their people and armed forces believe in victory – yet in the end causing death and destruction in their own midst – reminds one instinctively of that used by the Nazi regime in its propaganda and extermination drives against minorities: purposely devious, intentionally misleading, deliberately hiding behind language intended to keep victims in the dark, and perpetrators firmly

believing in a distorted reality. There was a collapse of language which, with heavy irony, then played itself out to the detriment of the Nazi regime's own people.

I decided not to focus on consistency of tenses nor did I elaborate on geographical references made by the authors, so as to offer to the reader an authentic sense of time suspended and a blurred recollection of space.

Repetitions – various chroniclers recall the same event more than once – have not been edited out. The intention here is to suggest that while recollections of time and space were hazy, the sense of trauma was prevalent and true.

The last part of the book consists of some of the compiler's own thoughts in the aftermath of the Battle of Halbe, specifically with reference to how and when those killed were buried and what happened to the survivors. What was the role the Soviet leadership played with respect to the war cemeteries and the camps they erected for their prisoners of war? These were often referred to as *Schweigelager* (silence camps) because the inmates were not permitted to have contact with the outside world. Here, it wasn't the disintegration or collapse of language that governed communication but rather its total absence. This 'silence' deliberately concealed the Soviet power's inhumane, cruel, torturous and murderous treatment of prisoners and the atrocious conditions they were kept in. The compiler makes reference to that. This silence also obliterated any information about the prisoners. What had been their military career? What had been their involvement on the Eastern Front? Here too, the compiler often fills in the vacuum, albeit rather too selectively, leaving the dark side of the Wehrmacht's activities blank and instead highlighting his intense dislike of Communist ideologies.

I omitted the *ex-* which the compiler and author inserted before a contributor's wartime Wehrmacht or SS title, as these

men were never removed from their position, nor absolved of their actions. Thus, they appear as Hauptsturmführer and not ex-Hauptsturmführer.

Eva Burke

THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

Dear visitor,

When you come to Halbe, consider this:

You are at the site of the largest burial ground in all of modern Germany's history!

Remember the fallen. Consider that they were not only soldiers, but women and children too, who died during their so-called 'liberation' by the Soviets!



Lakes and dense forests dominate the landscape of Mark Brandenburg south-east of Berlin, creating bottlenecks on the German retreat routes in 1945.
