

BATTLE FOR BUDAPEST

100 DAYS IN WORLD WAR II

KRISZTIÁN UNGVÁRY

Translated by LADISLAUS LÖB



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I.B. TAURIS

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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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

Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Maps</i>	ix
<i>Map Legend</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction: Hungary and the Second World War</i>	xiv
I Prelude	1
1 The general situation in the Carpathian Basin, autumn 1944	1
2 'They are coming!' – the first Soviet offensive against Budapest	3
3 The second Soviet offensive against Budapest – Ercsi and Hatvan	16
4 The third stage of the operations	25
II The Encirclement	40
1 Hungarian <i>drôle de guerre</i> – Christmas 1944 in the Budapest cauldron	40
2 The encirclement of Buda	49
3 Besiegers and besieged	56
III The Siege, 26 December 1944–11 February 1945	92
1 The hostilities on the Pest side from 24 December 1944	92
2 The siege of Pest, first phase: 30 December 1944–5 January 1945	102
3 The siege of Pest, second phase: 5–18 January 1945 – fighting in the city centre	109
4 The siege of Buda: 24 December 1944–19 January 1945	125
5 Fighting on Margit Island	135
6 The siege of Buda: 20 January–11 February 1945	137
IV Relief Attempts	160
1 Operation Konrad I	162
2 Operation Konrad II	164
3 Operation Konrad III	168
V The Break-out	172
1 The antecedents	172
2 Strategic plans and ideas	174
3 The situation of the garrison at the time of the break-out	178
4 'The First Act of Despair'	179
5 The journey through the Ördög-Árok culvert	187
6 The escapees' further progress	193

7	Arrivals	198
8	Events in the Castle District and the military hospitals	201
9	The German Army Group South's reaction to the break-out	204
10	Soviet views on the break-out	207
11	The outcome	210
VI The Siege and the Population		216
1	The plight of the Hungarian population	216
2	The persecution of the Jews	236
3	The resistance	252
4	Hungarian soldiers on the Soviet side	264
5	Zero hour – it's all over	268
6	The treatment of the prisoners of war	273
7	The Soviet crimes	279
8	The Soviet soldiers' mentality as reflected in contemporary recollections	291
9	Life goes on	295
VII Epilogue		311
	<i>Tables</i>	317
	<i>Bibliography</i>	337
	<i>Photographic Acknowledgements</i>	357
	<i>People Index</i>	358
	<i>Place Index</i>	361

Illustrations


























Colonel-General Hans Friessner with other German officers on Vérmező Meadow.	32
Captain Ferenc X. Kovács, chief of staff, Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.	46
Captain Győző Benyovszky, chief of staff, Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.	46
Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, commander of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps.	67
Lieutenant-Colonel Usdau Lindenau (in captain's uniform), chief of staff, IX SS Mountain Army Corps.	67
Banquet of officers and graduates of Ludovika Military Academy in the 1930s. Second fully visible face from left is Colonel-General Iván Hindy, subsequently commander of the Hungarian I Army Corps.	71
Lieutenant-General Imre Kálándy (in major-general's uniform), commander of the unit responsible for the maintenance of combat morale.	73
Lieutenant-General Ernő Billnitzer (in major's uniform), commander of the Assault Artillery.	73
Marshall Rodion Malinovsky, commander-in-chief of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, with Major-General Ivan Afonin, commander of the 'Budapest Group', on his right.	77
Marshall Feodor Tolbukhin, commander-in-chief of the 3rd Ukrainian Front, surrounded by his officers.	78
'I am fighting, you must work for victory' – contemporary poster.	79
Ervin Galántay, dispatch runner of the Vannay Battalion, as a cadet aged 14 at Kőszeg Military Academy.	81
Member of the 'Levente' youth organisation, with anti-tank gun.	85
Cameraman Jenő Kim, impersonating Miklós Steinmetz.	97
Soviet pioneers and minesweeping dogs in the city centre.	117
Shops burning in the Great Boulevard, January 1945.	122
Lieutenant-General Nicolae Sova, commander of the Romanian 7th Army Corps (far left) with his soldiers in central Budapest.	123
Erzsébet Bridge.	125
Lieutenant-General Ivan Managorov (in major-general's uniform), commander of the Soviet 53rd Army and subsequently of the 'Budapest Group'.	139
The domed tower of the Royal Palace after the siege.	141
Margit Boulevard.	146
Wrecked German gliders on Vérmező Meadow.	148
View of Buda from the Chain Bridge, February 1945.	149
The tunnel used as defenders' headquarters, seen from Krisztina Boulevard on 7 February 1945, with a German dispatch runner mounting his motorcycle.	151

Second-Lieutenant S. I. Yermolaev, posthumously awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal for throwing himself in front of a German tank with his bazooka, although gravely wounded.	166
Victims of the break-out in Széll Kálmán Square (today Moszkva Square).	180
Street in Buda after the break-out.	187
Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and Lindenau on their way to interrogation by the Red Army.	211
Colonel-General Hans Friessner surveying the wreck of Margit Bridge, 4 November 1944.	217
Notices on the ghetto wall. Left: 'Jewish Quarter. Christians forbidden to enter.' Right: 'On the mayor's orders Jews may enter this locality.'	219
Siege food: civilians carving up a dead horse.	220
Bombed-out residents escaping down the Great Boulevard, c. 18 January 1945.	235
Bodies in the garden of the Dohány Street Synagogue.	239
'Jewry and Soviets: the death of Hungary' – contemporary poster.	240
Body on the Danube Embankment.	242
Arrow Cross Militia putting up posters; in the background, Father Kun with a pistol holster on his monk's habit.	250
Air-Force Colonel Sándor András, commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.	253
Central Budapest, January 1945: soldiers' graves with starving horse.	267
Margit Boulevard after the siege.	272
Artist Sándor Ék painting his poster 'The fascist beast cannot escape'.	277
'GPU: it would be the same here' – contemporary poster.	277
Soviet soldier feeding Hungarian children.	299
The 'new' foreign ministry.	300
Procession of the Social-Democratic Party's XII District section.	301

Maps

The beginning of the siege: Struggles on the Hungarian Plain between 29 October and 18 November 1944.	5
The front near Pest between 3 November and 15 November 1944, and the Attila Line.	11
The encirclement of Budapest from the south: Tolbukhin's crossing of the Danube and landing at Ercsi.	18
The third offensive against Budapest: Encirclement of the capital from the west and north.	27
The front near the outskirts of Pest between 3 November and 28 December 1944.	34
Advance of the Soviet troops on the Buda side between 22 December and 26 December 1944.	51
The attacking and defending units in Budapest on 28 December 1944.	60
The front in Pest between 28 December 1944 and 7 January 1945.	107
The front in Pest until 11 January 1945.	114–15
The front in Pest from 10 January to 18 January 1945.	120
The front in Buda between 28 December 1944 and 11 February 1945.	132–3
Relief attempts: Operations Konrad I and II (1–12 January 1945).	163
Relief attempts: Operation Konrad III (18–27 January 1945).	169
Break-out activities in Buda.	181
The paths of the break-outs between Buda and the main combat line.	196
The 'protected houses' (International Ghetto), the Ghetto and the main areas of the persecution of the Jews.	251

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/I
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 Válas, Frigyes Wáczek 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 Brahm 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 Pliev'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 Mehliis, 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.

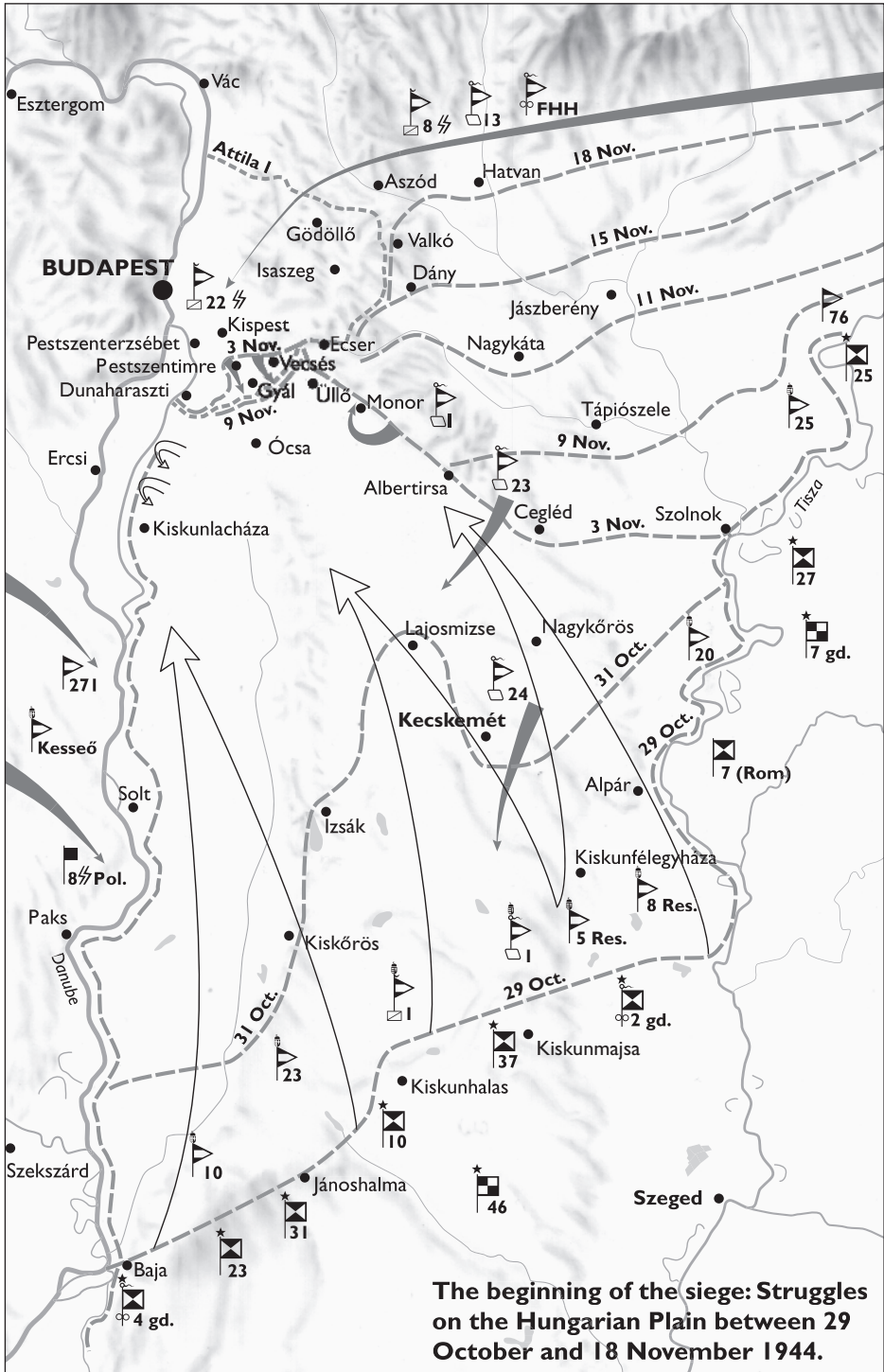
S: There's no point in being so stubborn. You obviously don't understand the political necessity of an immediate strike against Budapest.

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 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, Ecser 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 mine-fields. 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, Ecser 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 Iaszeg 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 salvoes 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

bank of the Danube, had also arrived below Ercsi. The superior strength⁴⁸ of the six rifle divisions and the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps finally overpowered the drained Hungarian forces – the Hungarian 1st Hussar Division, the German 271st Volksgrenadier Division and the 8th Panzer Division – but the front came to a standstill at the Margit Line, between 10 and 20 kilometres from the point of the river crossing, where Malinovsky had to hand over his stalled units to the 3rd Ukrainian Front.

An attack of the Hungarian 10th Assault Artillery Battalion, starting between the villages of Baracska and Martonvásár pushed the Soviet troops back almost as far as the Danube north of Ercsi. A battery of the 1st Assault Artillery Battalion, claiming that it was not adequately employed in its assigned position, joined the attack without orders and destroyed a Soviet group ensconced in Baracska: the battalion's commander, Captain Sándor Hanák, with his self-propelled assault gun, simply flattened a Soviet anti-tank gun that was firing at him. The attack was unexpectedly successful: 15 guns were seized or destroyed and some 250 Soviet soldiers killed.⁴⁹ As a result, no further Soviet attack took place in this area for a long time, and the daring of the Hungarians was mentioned even in German reports.

Malinovsky's attack north of Budapest was more successful. The German military command had been forced by Tolbukhin's progress to move the 1st and 23rd Panzer Divisions of the German Army Group South from the neighbourhood of Hatvan to Transdanubia and the defence found itself significantly outnumbered.

The attack began at 10.15am on 5 December, after a heavy barrage lasting 45 minutes. Eight Soviet divisions broke through the German and Hungarian front between Acsa and Galgamácsa, and in two hours established a salient 12 kilometres in breadth and between 3 and 6 kilometres in depth, pointing towards Vác. At 1.30pm the Soviet 6th Guard Tank Army was also deployed in the sector of the breakthrough. Friessner requested urgent reinforcements from Guderian: it was imperative to block the Ipoly Valley, through which the Soviet tanks could reach the Little Hungarian Plain and threaten Bratislava and Vienna as well as Budapest. However, the only units that could be detailed to the Ipoly Valley immediately were parts of the 24th Panzer Division and an SS brigade of convicts commanded by SS Brigadeführer Oskar Dirlewanger. Friessner notes:

When I reached Dirlewanger's staff I was met by a strange sight. The Brigadeführer, a not very appealing adventurer type, was sitting at his desk with a live monkey perched on his shoulder. The monkey was said to have accompanied him everywhere, including Poland. When I discovered that the staff was packing up I ordered them to stay on the spot... The unit was, as suggested before, a

wild bunch. One company – communists who were expected to ‘prove themselves’ on the front – had just deserted to the enemy.⁵⁰

Between northeastern Budapest and Vác an enormous gap had opened, which the German Army Group South was unable to fill, as it lacked the necessary reserves. In order to protect at least the northern portion of the Pest bridgehead, the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division was transferred from the Csepel front to the Vác region on 6 December, followed over the next eight days by a number of Hungarian units, including the I Special Hussar Battalion, the Army Security Battalion, the IV Pioneer Battalion and the 1/II Parachute Battalion.⁵¹ By this time, however, the Feldherrnhalle Division was so run down that its entire infantry did not even amount to 30 per cent of the combat strength of the Hungarian 1/II Parachute Battalion, whose 1300 troops were the strongest unit involved in the whole regroupment.

On 9 December the left wing of the Soviet 6th Guard Tank Army reached the Danube at Vác. The assault group of the Feldherrnhalle Division and the 13th Panzer Division tried to counter-attack, but without success. A hastily deployed police training battalion was crushed by troops of the 30th Rifle Corps and the 60 tanks accompanying them: 70 per cent of its men were killed or wounded within 24 hours.⁵²

In the northern sector of the Attila Line the only defence was provided by two KISKA⁵³ security companies and the 153rd Pioneer Company, which were pulverised by Soviet troops within a few hours.⁵⁴ Major-General Günther von Pape, commander of the Feldherrnhalle Division, ordered an immediate counter-attack. The task of recapturing the village of Fót was entrusted to the Hungarian II Parachute Battalion, flanked by units of the Feldherrnhalle Division and the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division⁵⁵ (with about 15 armoured vehicles and 200 German and 600 Hungarian troops). Although the occupiers were supported by 26 batteries and numerous mortars, the paratroopers – together with the remnants of two exhausted German battalions and a panzer company – were able to recapture Fót on 13 December. However, by the following evening they had been forced to withdraw once more because of the flanks’ failure to catch up. From a new position south of Fót, despite almost 40 per cent casualties, they carried out a raid and took a number of prisoners, including the Soviet division’s operational chief of staff. Pape awarded them 31 First and Second Class Iron Crosses and personally delivered a transcript of a Soviet communication monitored by the German division: ‘I request immediate reinforcement because I cannot fulfil my task in these circumstances. The enemy is as tough as old boots and is offering fierce resistance.’⁵⁶

As the focus of fighting shifted towards the northern and eastern parts of the city the Soviet troops made deep inroads which could no longer be halted. Lieutenant György Thuróczy recalls one of the offensives:

It was already dark when we took over the defence line. The changing of the guard was not betrayed even by the flame of a match. As we groped our way forward in the trenches connecting the separate dugouts we were suddenly walking on a strange thick material with an uneven surface that felt like textile. When dawn broke we realised that a long stretch of the trench was carpeted with dead German soldiers... The barrage preparing the offensive opened at 8.45 a.m. and for a whole hour, till 9.45, we were bombarded so densely that we couldn't make a move. Then, when the assault of the roaring tanks and the cheering artillery followed, we received no artillery support whatsoever and could only resort to our infantry arms. On our right flank was the defence position of the 1st Battery. To the right of the 1st Battery a platoon of old men of the Territorial Army – horrified by the determined onslaught of the Soviets and lacking a white flag – waved the legs of their underpants at the enemy rushing and clanking towards them... When the attacking Russkis saw the signals of the old soldiers they immediately formed a wedge of infantry protected by tanks and began to pour behind our defence line through the gap that was offered to them. The 2nd and 3rd batteries, afraid of being encircled, began to retreat...

It was already dark night when we arrived in Pécel, worn out in body and soul. The men went to their quarters and lay down to sleep in their clothes. We officers were summoned to the castle by Colonel-General Billnitzer, the commander of the assault artillery units around Budapest. György Kozma, who had been assigned command of the group, reported on the outcome of the fighting at Túzberek. The men were worn out and needed to rest. Billnitzer declared: 'We mustn't allow the Russians to walk into Budapest'...

The men, most of whom were already in a deep sleep, had to be woken, and towards midnight we set out in the damp and cold darkness to form a front line against the Russkis... The enemy's position, fire power and strength could only be guessed at from the machine guns that started barking a few hundred metres from us and fell silent again after their salvoes... Dead beat we threw ourselves down on the ground and immediately fell into a bottomless sleep...

We were suddenly woken. Soon it would be full daylight and we had to dig ourselves in.⁵⁷

Between 15 and 24 November some Soviet troops near Isaszeg and Valkó had been replaced with Romanians. The attacks continued with equal violence, and the Hungarian defence also became more stubborn. In early December, between Maglód and Vecsés in the less endangered southeastern section, the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division and the assault artillery battalion attached to it even launched a counter-attack, which proved

surprisingly successful and for which Captain Frigyes Wácsek of the general staff was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit.

A gap between Valkó and Dány east of Isaszeg was to have been closed and the two villages recaptured through a counter-attack. However, although Hungarian troops recaptured Valkó, the action stalled before reaching its objective because the 13th Panzer Division and the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, lacking infantry, could only provide a few tanks in support. The Soviet counter-offensive, which began on 18 November, broke up a Hungarian battalion of reserve units and convicts, pushing its remnants back to the hills east of Isaszeg. An improvised company laid down its arms and surrendered. The 8/I Battalion, which had only recently been replenished with civilian prisoners and had not received any food for two days, was destroyed, and the surviving units of the 9th Infantry Regiment scattered by continuous Soviet attacks.

On 5 December the Soviet and Romanian forces launched a general offensive in the region surrounding Isaszeg and penetrated the lines of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division and 12th Reserve Division at several points. The 10th Infantry Division alone came under fire for 45 minutes from more than 100 guns. Along the 2.5 kilometre section chosen for that attack, seven Romanian battalions and cavalry battalions charged the positions of two Hungarian battalions.⁵⁸ The 8/II Battalion lost 50 per cent of its men in one day, and the 36/II Battalion, with the exception of five men, joined the attackers.⁵⁹ Although the positions were recaptured in several counter-attacks, the lines had to be pulled back, because a number of Soviet armoured units that had broken through further east were approaching the small town of Gödöllő, north of Isaszeg.

On 9 December the German command promised to withdraw the 10th Infantry Division for a rest, but this was prevented by a Soviet breakthrough between Vác and Veresegyház, and by 11 December fighting was in progress on the perimeter of Gödöllő itself. As a result of heavy losses, the remnants of the 10th Infantry Division's regiments were converted into battalions of less than 50 per cent of normal strength and attached to German battalions. With supplies and administration remaining the only duties of its command, the division in practice ceased to exist.⁶⁰

The 12th Reserve Division, which had arrived in early November in a wretched condition after being almost wiped out in the battle of Debrecen, was in an even worse plight. Because of the incessant Soviet and Romanian attacks, it had to abandon Isaszeg on 12 December and could only retain a foothold in the hills north of Isaszeg.⁶¹ Although Isaszeg was temporarily recaptured through a German counter-attack on 15 December,⁶² the front

of the 12th Reserve Division, whose battalions numbered only between 100 and 200 by that time, remained the most vulnerable point of the bridgehead.

4

The third stage of the operations

Soviet and German strategic plans and the breakthrough

Following Timoshenko's recommendations, the Soviet general staff gave orders for the preparation of a renewed assault on Budapest on 12 December. Concrete plans drawn up by the front-line commanders, Tolbukhin and Malinovsky, now envisaged an offensive of four armies on two fronts.

From the south, in Transdanubia where the Margit Line was defended only by exhausted units of little combat value, two army corps of the 3rd Ukrainian Front were to attack in the direction of Székesfehérvár, the 18th Armoured Corps was to advance north towards the Danube and the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps was to turn east towards Buda. North of the Danube, the 2nd Ukrainian Front was to move towards Esztergom. The capture of the encircled capital was to be shared by both groupings: the left flank of the 3rd Ukrainian Front was to close the outer encirclement ring by the fifth or sixth day, while the right flank was to take Buda and the 2nd Ukrainian Front Pest on the eighth or ninth day. To simplify the command structure, Tolbukhin had earlier been placed in charge of all the units operating in Transdanubia, including Malinovsky's. Details of the units facing the Soviet onslaught on the Margit Line appear in table 10.

The German army command realised in good time what the Soviets had in mind. The Department of Foreign Armies East (Abteilung Fremde Heere Ost) signalled the planned Soviet offensive as early as 12 December. Two days later, Colonel-General Maximilian Fretter-Pico, commander of the German 6th Army, warned that the 36-kilometre section of the Margit Line between Lake Velence and Budapest, which was defended by only 2250 German and Hungarian troops, could be penetrated by any sizeable Soviet thrust.⁶³

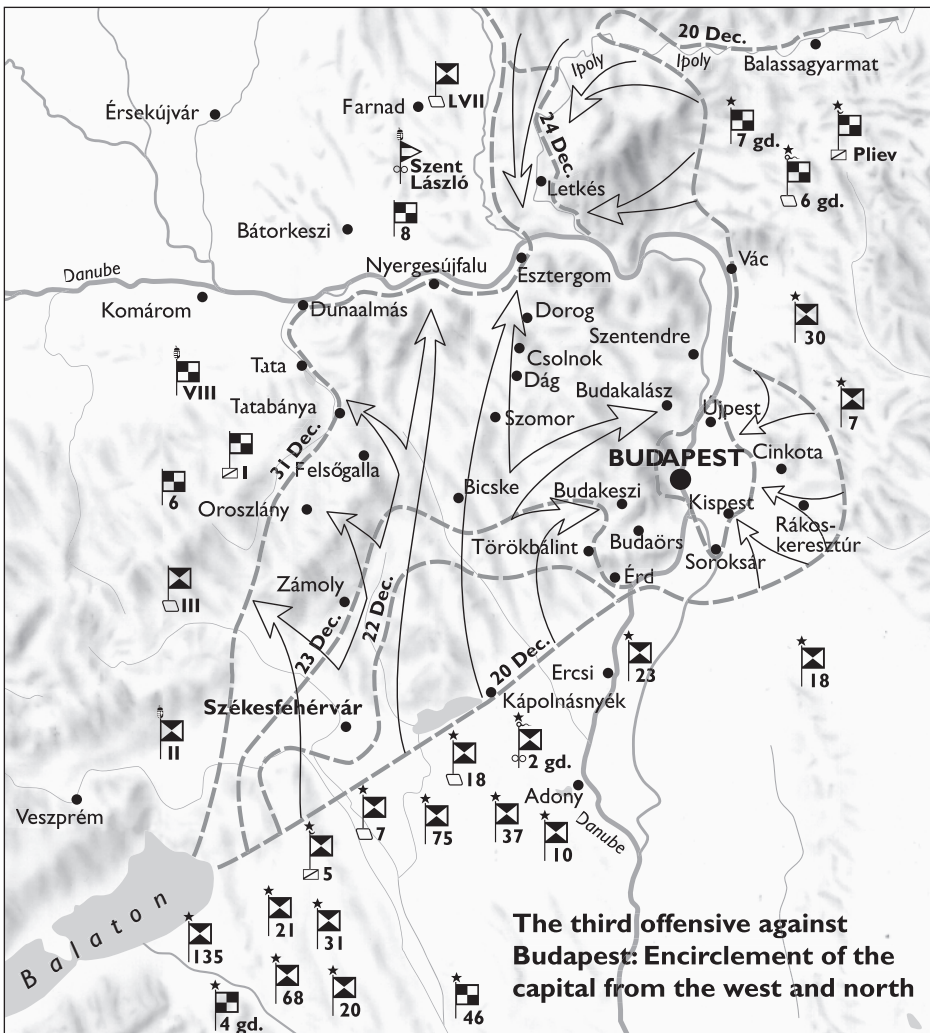
The Germans had already sent substantial reinforcements to Transdanubia, with the intention of regaining the lost territories and creating a solid battle line along the Danube which could be held with a smaller combat strength. Guderian's ultimate reason for so doing was to save troops, for he had always regarded Hungary as a secondary theatre of war. The German units concerned were three panzer battalions, the 4th

Cavalry Brigade and the 3rd, 6th and 8th Panzer Divisions, in total numbering some 400 tanks and 40,000 men. Furthermore the Hungarian Szent László Division was also due to be deployed in this region. In principle they had a fair chance of success, because the advance of the Soviet mechanised units had resulted in a highly vulnerable bulge. Although various options were discussed, the German supreme command, following Adolf Hitler's orders, chose the operation code-named *Spätlese* (Late Harvest), which was to take place between Lake Balaton and Lake Velence; the idea of an attack towards the northeast was dropped because by then the situation of the Pest bridgehead was regarded as uncertain. However, owing to bad weather and lack of fuel and ammunition, the attack had to be put off, first to 20 December and then to 22 December.

The successes of the 2nd Ukrainian Front at the Ipoly river further weakened the prospects of the German attack. This induced Guderian to send north the 8th Panzer Division, those sections of the Szent László Division already present, and the armoured grenadiers attached to them. Surprisingly, these units were split on Guderian's own orders: the armoured grenadiers were detailed to try and prevent a breakthrough at the Ipoly, while the tanks remained in the neighbourhood of Székesfehérvár to intervene in the battle at the appropriate time. The 4th Cavalry Brigade was left to deal with emergencies near the southwest corner of Lake Balaton. Thus by the middle of the month the attacking formation was entirely devoid of infantry, and the troops arriving in the north were used to support those defending the front rather than to mount an attack.

Guderian's measures were subsequently criticised by former combatants as well as military historians. They proved a momentous disadvantage to both the armoured units and the infantry, which were separated from their original environment and forced to fight under unfamiliar commands in unfavourable circumstances. The chief asset of an armoured division is its combination of mobility and fire power, but this can only be maximised in co-operation with the infantry, which alone is able to defend any captured territories. Moreover, the armoured trucks transporting the infantry can only come into their own in a truly offensive strategy. Guderian denied these benefits to his troops; there can be no logical explanation for this unless one assumes that he had been ordered to do so, although the supreme command must have known that his forces were not sufficient to defend Budapest at the Margit Line and at the same time prevent a Soviet breakthrough towards Vienna at the Ipoly. Under the circumstances he could only hope for a miracle that would allow him to gain time and start an offensive of his own later on.

The assault of Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front on the Margit Line began on 20 December at 9.20am after a 40-minute artillery barrage. The 3rd Ukrainian Front – with five times as much infantry and artillery and three-and-a-half times as many tanks and assault guns in the main fighting area



– vastly outnumbered the defenders.⁶⁴ The Fretter-Pico Army Group had not been surprised by the offensive, but a lack of infantry left it with very limited scope for preparation. Major-General László Kesseő, commander of the Hungarian forces between Lake Velence and Baracska, may also have assessed the situation correctly, because on 19 December he lay down his command and departed for an unknown destination.

Each kilometre of the front line came under fire from between 99 and 160 guns and mortars. As the diary of the 2/I Hussar Division reports, during the breakthrough at the village of Kápolnásnyék in the main trajectory of the attack the Soviet generals chased their own infantry into the drumfire, so that ‘hussars who had taken cover in the ditches were dragged out by the Russians’, while ‘it was no longer possible to step out of the houses to ask what was going on, because one house after the other collapsed, burying those inside’.⁶⁵

On 20 December, counter to plans, the breach achieved by Soviet infantry units was only between 5 and 6 kilometres wide, because concerted counter-attacks by German tanks had checked their advance. However, the onslaught of the Soviet rifle corps eroded the defences of the Germans, who lacked infantry to hold the territories they occupied. On 21 December Tolbukhin ordered the deployment of mechanised units, and on 22 December 82 tanks of the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps and 228 tanks of the 18th Tank Corps broke through between Érd and Lake Velence, capturing a territory 60 kilometres in breadth and 30 kilometres in depth.⁶⁶ Also on 22 December, the 20th and 31st Guard Corps and the 7th Mechanised Corps of the 4th Guard Army – the latter comprising 107 tanks and assault guns – attacked Székesfehérvár, where fierce street fighting ensued. For the defence the Germans deployed several commando units using captured Soviet uniforms and T-34 tanks, which had originally been reserved for a German offensive. However, they could stall the Soviets only for brief periods.⁶⁷ The devastating casualties that the Soviet command was prepared to accept in its relentless attacks are illustrated by the following recollection:

In front of the defence line is a well-established double barbed-wire entanglement, and in front of this a pile of Russian soldiers' bodies in the most unimaginable postures. They are victims of who knows which futile attack wave... I have hardly got out of the sidecar when I see two assault artillery men pulling a writhing human wreck from among the dead. They have probably cut through the barbed wire and now they are carrying the twitching body through the gap and laying it down on the outer edge of the trench. The young soldier, with his shaven head and Mongolian cheek bones, is lying on his back. Only his mouth is moving. Both legs and lower arms are missing. The stumps are

covered in a thick layer of soil, mixed with blood and leaf mould. I bend down close to him. 'Budapesst...Budapesst...', he whispers in the throes of death ... In my head one thought revolves: he may be having a vision of 'Budapesst... Budapesst' as a city of rich spoils and beautiful women. Then, surprising even myself, I pull out my pistol, load it, press it against the dying man's temple, and fire.⁶⁸

Although the breakthrough took longer than the Soviets had planned, the Fretter-Pico Army Group was unable to profit from the delay owing to a shortage of reserves, in particular infantry: only in the Székesfehérvár region did it slow down the Soviet advance. Tolbukhin thought it most profitable to press the offensive on the right flank. He ordered the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps to avoid local encounters and to move north as fast as possible in order to take the region of Bicske – the most important railway junction in the direction of Budapest – while the infantry was to reach a line 10–15 kilometres west of the outskirts of Budapest by the evening of 22 December. Despite desperate counter-attacks by the 8th Panzer Division, Bicske fell on 23 December. By 24 December the attacks of Malinovsky's Soviet and Romanian troops on the Pest bridgehead had produced no significant results; on the Buda side Tolbukhin's 23rd Rifle Corps, after taking Érd on the previous day, stalled at the mine barriers near the southwestern edge of the city. Nevertheless, the road to Budapest from the west was now clear (the events leading up to this situation are described more fully in chapter II section 1).

The dilemma of the German and Hungarian leadership

In contrast to the military command, neither the German nor the Hungarian political leadership had been prepared for Budapest becoming a front-line city. Szálasi stated soon after his rise to power that 'I would regard it as necessary to hold Budapest only if any offensive operations were to be undertaken from there. However, if this is not intended, Budapest must definitely be evacuated and we must make a strategic retreat to the Transdanubian hills.'⁶⁹ Although Szálasi is generally considered a fantasist, as a trained officer he was on some occasions able to assess the situation realistically. This is demonstrated by his response at a press conference early in November: 'The Germans want to gain time by defending Budapest.'⁷⁰

On 2 November Szálasi convened a crown council meeting in Buda Castle. Having taken his oath as leader of the nation, he delivered a lecture on relations between Hungary and Japan and then left with his retinue without commenting on the military situation. By that time, the thunder

of guns could already be heard in the Castle District. On 3 November he summoned Friessner and asked him to forward a statement to the highest German authorities. Friessner signalled:

In view of the fact that the battle is now raging in the suburbs of Budapest, he [Szálasi] stresses that these developments are not his fault but a legacy of the previous regime... He regrets that the German leadership intervened so late in Hungarian affairs. At this point his present government can only engage in damage limitation in an attempt to prevent the collapse of the nation; really constructive work is no longer possible.

Szálasi further claimed that he would be able to call up as many as 300,000 men, but the arms would have to be provided by the Germans.⁷¹

If Szálasi did not insist on defending Budapest this was not so much because of the likely devastation, but because he believed that the population (in his words, the 'metropolitan mob') might try to stab the defenders in the back, and there would not be enough forces to suppress it. His views were shared by the leaders of the German Army Group South, who on 26 November sought guidance from the German supreme command as to what should be done if unrest erupted among the population. The answer was that the 'metropolitan mob' should either be evacuated or kept under control by force. Lacking troops for such a task, Friessner asked for an SS general with experience in keeping law and order to be detailed to Budapest, together with 'assault pioneer battalions, as in Warsaw.'⁷² He also requested the supreme command's permission to retreat to the west bank of the Danube in the event of the inner defence ring being broken – a request which was refused. As he was above all else concerned to avoid street fighting, he stressed the untrustworthiness of the population. He could have made a stronger case on military grounds, but then the responsibility for surrendering Budapest would have rested with his own troops, which he presumably did not dare to countenance.

The Hungarian military leadership also rejected the idea of street fighting, believing that Budapest could only be defended through the Attila Line. Early in December, the Hungarian divisions defending the capital were ordered to disarm workers in the public utilities (BESZKÁRT [Budapest Transport] employees, tram drivers, firemen etc) as Budapest was to be declared an open city.⁷³

Hitler alone insisted on defending Budapest. On 30 October this task had been assigned to the III Panzer Corps, headed by Colonel-General Hermann Breith, which had been regrouped from the 6th Army and to which the Hungarian divisions retreating to the city were attached. Likewise, on 30 October the Budapest Corps Group had been constituted from the

staff of the Hungarian VI Army Corps⁷⁴ and the German police and flying squads stationed in Budapest, with Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, who had previously commanded the Waffen SS in the Hungarian hinterland, in charge.⁷⁵ His full title was SS Obergruppenführer and General of the Waffen SS and Police; the rank of Obergruppenführer in the SS was equivalent to Lieutenant-General. As Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was an experienced police officer, his appointment indicates the German leadership's fears of subversion.

On 4 November the German 153rd Field Training Division – which would have been useless against Soviet troops but was particularly well suited to put down an insurrection – had been moved to Budapest, and on 10 November the command of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps had been transferred from Zagreb in order to increase the German domination over the Budapest Corps Group. The powers of Colonel Ernő Csipkés, the Hungarian city commander, had been restricted to military security and administration. The Hungarian VI Army Corps had been precluded from taking independent strategic action and left only in control of supplies to its own troops, before being incorporated into the Hungarian I Army Corps on 21 November, which was serving under Colonel-General Iván Hidy as a purely administrative body. These measures had provoked strong protests from the Hungarian general staff, since they totally excluded the Hungarian command from the decision-making process and ran counter to all previous agreements.⁷⁶

On 23 November Hitler had issued his first directive that no house in Budapest be abandoned without a fight, regardless of any civilian losses or material damage.⁷⁷ On 1 December his order number 11 arrived, declaring Budapest to be a fortress and expressly appointing SS Obergruppenführer Otto Winkelmann – who was already in charge of all the German police and SS units in Hungary – commander of Budapest and thus the superior of Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and the IX SS Mountain Army Corps. The Budapest forces were subordinate to the 6th Army but were entitled to take independent action subject to prior consultation. They were to prepare the city's squares and buildings for the defence, repulse any incursions, keep the German and Hungarian gendarmerie and police on the alert in case of any unrest and develop the communication system. Hitler's order also promised the dispatch of special units.⁷⁸

The demarcational confusion in the German command is sharply illuminated by the fact that three different organisations were allocated the same task of defending Budapest without any precise definition of their remit: the Wehrmacht (III Panzer Corps), the Waffen-SS as represented by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch (Budapest Corps Group) and the diplomatic wing of

the SS as represented by Winkelmann. This can only partly be explained by the almost hysterical fear of a popular uprising on the part of some authorities – for example, the Arrow Cross Party and the German security service. Above all, it was probably due to the polycratic power structures of the Third Reich.

On 4 December Szálasi accepted Hitler's decision, although Guderian was still saying that he wanted to keep the enemy out of the city. On this occasion it was announced that in any districts about to be abandoned the bridges and public utilities would be destroyed. The notion of declaring Budapest an open city was rejected by German diplomats on the grounds that in Germany too every town would be defended to the last brick.⁷⁹ Special envoy Edmund Veessenmayer declared that it did not matter if Budapest was 'destroyed ten times, so long as Vienna could thereby be defended'.⁸⁰ Friessner repeatedly asked for the front line to be pulled back, but his request was turned down.

On 5 December Winkelmann was obliged to resign his post, which he had held for only four days, because his doubts about the chances of defending the city and his recommendation to abandon the Pest bridgehead were not to Hitler's liking.⁸¹ In his place Hitler appointed Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. On 12 December, because of the catastrophic situation in Transdanubia, the command of the III Panzer Corps was withdrawn from Budapest (although its divisions remained behind) and the Budapest Army Corps, led by the IX SS Mountain Army Corps and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, took over the operations



Colonel-General Hans Friessner with other German officers on Vérmező Meadow.

as an integral part of the German Army Group South. Although Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was now in overall charge, Winkelmann continued to interfere; he did so for the last time on 22 December when, against Hitler's orders, he tried to convince Friessner of the necessity of abandoning the Pest bridgehead.

The German Army Group South had no illusions about holding Budapest. As early as 1 December Friessner had ordered the evacuation of all military and civilian agencies, declaring that

The remaining departments must be fully mobile. All German female assistants must leave at once. I...shall hold the battle commander personally responsible for ensuring that in the event of a possible battle for the city there shall be no despicable occurrences of German personnel fleeing in a manner likely to damage the reputation of the German Reich and the Wehrmacht.⁸²

On 6 December Colonel-General Fretter-Pico asked for permission to retreat to the inner defence ring of the Attila Line, because he feared a Soviet breakthrough. However, Hitler refused, arguing that this would deprive the defence of the necessary operational depth. With the breakthrough at Hatvan the situation deteriorated, as the defenders did not have enough troops to man the 20-kilometre battle line that had developed near the northern part of Budapest. On 9 December 1944 Soviet heavy artillery began to bombard the northeastern area of the city. As a first sign that the battle of life and death had begun, the Germans formed flying squads made up of cooks, clerks and mechanics: thus the Feldherrnhalle Division was able to scrape together seven companies, and the 13th Panzer Division four companies. On 12 December the possibility of a German attack from the Pest bridgehead with the promised reinforcements was also raised but rejected, not least because it was doubtful whether the eastern part of Budapest would then still be in German hands.⁸³ In other words, the defence of Budapest was by now regarded as unrealistic.

By the beginning of December the Abwehr section of German intelligence, expecting the city to fall shortly, had begun to organise a network of agents with instructions to install 19 stores of explosives at the main traffic junctions and prepare plans for blowing up the most important buildings. The handling of the charges was to be the task of civilians – men and women – recruited for the purpose, who were to communicate only through intermediaries and who did not know each other. However, there is no record of any successful operation of this kind.⁸⁴

Right from the outset, the defenders had been confronted with a superior force. Between 5 November and 24 December, 7 German and Hungarian

brunt of the Soviet and Romanian onslaught, although the somewhat less-exposed German units had not fared much better. Over a three-month period the 10th Infantry Division (the strongest Hungarian unit defending Budapest) lost 99.9 per cent of its combat strength: at the end of October it had set out with a ration strength of some 15,000, and by the beginning of February its last remaining combat unit numbered 18 men.

The morale of the Hungarian troops also gave cause for concern. According to the war diary of the German Army Group South, 100 members of the 12th Reserve Division had fled or crossed over to the enemy on 19 November, and were followed between 22 November and 4 December by 1200 members of the 10th and 12th Divisions. Most of these were either untrained substitutes or soldiers separated from their units who had been ordered into action once more. Such cases receive particular emphasis in German reports, which give the impression that only Germans were fighting, not that more than 60 per cent of the infantry engaged at the bridgehead were Hungarian. In fact, various Hungarian units – the paratroopers, the 6th, 8th and 38th Infantry Regiments, the 1st Armoured Division and the 10th Reconnaissance Battalion – were sometimes praised even by the Germans for their successful counter-attacks.

The desertions drove the divisional commander, Major-General Kornél Oszlányi, to distraction. On 26 November, in a fit of anger, he declared that he 'would not ruin his military career by accepting such a shower'⁸⁵ and elegantly divested himself of the command by reporting sick. He was succeeded by Major-General József Kisfaludy, and from 15 December by Sándor András, a colonel in the air-force general staff. In the Hungarian I Army Corps, Hindy persuaded Captain Ferenc X. Kovács to become the provisional head of the operational section, because his predecessors had 'moved on west, after looking around for a few days'.⁸⁶ In the 1st Armoured Division nobody was willing to accept the position of chief of staff for more than one day, until Frigyes Wáczek – a captain in charge of the general staff's operational section – alone failed to report sick when he was appointed to that position.⁸⁷

As a result of casualties, the designation of units no longer corresponded to their actual strength in terms of equipment and numbers. Both the German and the Hungarian command sought urgent replacements for the exhausted Hungarian units, but the reinforcements arriving regularly had to be deployed immediately without any possibility of forming reserves, and the lack of arms and training made it difficult to replenish even the 10th Infantry and the 12th Reserve Divisions, which were regarded as priorities. Because the badly trained and older reservists as a rule ran away

from the battle line on the very first day, the Hungarian command intended to make use of 2000 Arrow Cross Hungarist volunteers, who had been assembled in the Danube Bend and Szentendre Island north of the capital and who were expected to have more staying power. The Vannay Battalion of 500 trained and 250 untrained paramilitaries was ordered to join the 10th Infantry Division, and the deployment of two other paramilitary formations, the Prónay Commando Unit and the Morlin Group, was also contemplated.

Notes

- 1 The Soviet losses were calculated from the following sources: Ölvedi, p. 196; HL KTB Hgr. Süd 876/b, daily reports, 6–10 October 1944.
- 2 Kovalovszky, pp. 83, 79.
- 3 Styemenko, 1972, p. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Although the Hungarian 1st Army had suffered significant losses after 15 October 1944, and some 15,000 soldiers had left their units, it not only failed to disintegrate but was even able to delay the advance of Petrov's 4th Ukrainian Front through its counter-attacks. As late as December 1944, Petrov's troops were still marking time in the northeastern part of the Carpathians.
- 6 Major-General Zakharov's misleading comment on this conversation is characteristic: 'At this time the [Hungarian] democratic government was being formed. The liberation of the city from the yoke of the German fascists would have accelerated its formation and would have been advantageous for the few wavering elements in the bourgeois parties and groups.' (Zaharov, p. 216). In reality he knew that Stalin's 'political question' did not mean the propagandistic importance of the capture of the capital, but the later division of east and southeast Europe between the victors.
- 7 Zaharov, p. 217.
- 8 Dombrády and Tóth, pp. 378–80.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 10 Dombrády and Tóth, p. 382.
- 11 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd 19 V/51, document no 7097.
- 12 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, 14 November 1944.
- 13 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd 19 V/51, document no 6660.
- 14 HL VKF 304/a, orders of 12 October 1944.
- 15 The order for the Hussar Division to come to Pest and the prohibition on blowing up the bridges of Budapest were without doubt part of the planned ceasefire.
- 16 Towards the end of the war, owing to the extreme shortage of men, 10 per cent of German units were made up of 'Hiwis' (short for *Hilfswillige* or 'volunteer helpers'). These were either men fleeing from the Red Army for various reasons

(collaboration, nationality) or Soviet prisoners of war who joined the German army. They usually served with the baggage train or the artillery.

- 17 The units of the 10th Infantry Division were transported to the Kiskunhalas area at the end of October.
- 18 According to Billnitzer's manuscript (private collections), the Hungarian supreme command had already given the orders in question on 17 October 1944.
- 19 HL VKF 306/b, 1 November 1944. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's order to the Budapest Corps Group.
- 20 Friessner, pp. 159–60.
- 21 Kovalovszky, p. 82.
- 22 Huszár, p. 125.
- 23 HL TGY, Marosújházi, pp. 9–10.
- 24 Huszár, p. 126.
- 25 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 896/b, attachments 3 November 1944; Kovalovszky, pp. 180–211.
- 26 *Hadtudományi Tájékoztató* 1944/10, p. 43.
- 27 This is confirmed not only by Soviet sources, but also by Soviet radio messages decoded by the German Army Group South. HL KTB Hgr. Süd 896/b, 5 November 1944.
- 28 Tóth, 1975a, p. 41.
- 29 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 896/b, report of 11 November 1944.
- 30 The brutally mutilated bodies of surrendering SS soldiers were found after the successful counter-attack. Records of the event are found among the November attachments of the war diary of the German Army Group South.
- 31 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd RH 19 V/54, pp. 59, 116.
- 32 BA-MA RH 24–72/44, strength report 12th Infantry Division, 25 October 1944.
- 33 HL TGY, Tassonyi, p. 19.
- 34 Martin and Ugron, p. 98.
- 35 Friessner, p. 176.
- 36 Tóth, 1975a, p. 62.
- 37 Thuróczy, p. 69.
- 38 Tibor Gencsy's memoirs, p. 18 (in the collection of the author).
- 39 HL TGY, Aurél Salamon, 3179, p. 54.
- 40 Tóth, 1975a, p. 62.
- 41 In October 1944 Stalin and Churchill had come to an agreement about the division of the Balkans. For details, see Kogelfranz, pp. 12–13.
- 42 Tóth, 1975a, pp. 62–3.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 44 Tóth, 1975b, p. 280.
- 45 Veress, p. 76.
- 46 Tomka, p. 85 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 47 For a list of those who received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, see Tóth, 1975b, pp. 203–310. The total number of awards for fighting on Hungarian soil was 382, which includes 26 generals and 80 air-force officers decorated for locally unspecified actions. The 115 soldiers honoured for the crossing at Ercsi represent 42.7 per cent of the remaining 276.

- 48 Some 8000 Hungarian and German troops were facing about 40,000 Soviet troops. At the breakthrough points, the disproportion between the attackers and the defenders was even greater.
- 49 Hanák's battle report of 9 December (in the collection of the author), and interview with Vározy.
- 50 Friessner, pp. 204–5.
- 51 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, 14 December 1944.
- 52 *Népbirosági Közlöny* 1, 1945; *Hadtudományi Tájékoztató*, p. 191.
- 53 For the KISKA auxiliary units see chapter II section 3.
- 54 Note by Gödry (in the collection of the author).
- 55 Martin and Ugron, p. 102.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 57 Thuróczy, pp. 72–4.
- 58 Csima, pp. 47–8.
- 59 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, telephone diary, 6 December 1944.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 15 December 1944.
- 61 HL TGY, Péchy, pp. 149–51.
- 62 HL TGY, Vajda, 2772, p. 101; Csima, p. 48.
- 63 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, 14 December 1944.
- 64 The figures given by Tóth (1975a, p. 131) are inaccurate, as he could not have known the actual strength of the German and Hungarian divisions. In the period concerned, the maximum numbers were: 3000 in the 1st Hussar Division, 6000 in the 271st Volksgrenadier Division, 2000 in the Kesseő Group, 4000 in the 20th Infantry Division, 12,000 in the armoured groups of the 1st, 3rd, 6th and 23rd German Panzer Divisions and 7000 in the German 153rd Field Training Division and other units. These forces, totalling 34,000, were attacked by some 150,000 soldiers in 16 infantry divisions and 4 mechanised or tank corps.
- 65 Tomka, p. 99.
- 66 Veress, p. 86.
- 67 BA-MA RW 49/145, report of 30 December 1944.
- 68 Thuróczy, p. 103.
- 69 Teleki, p. 173.
- 70 Fiala, p. 88.
- 71 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, 3 November 1944.
- 72 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, 26 November 1944.
- 73 Interview with Wączek, who was chief of staff of the 1st Armoured Division when he carried out this order.
- 74 However, the Hungarian VI Army Corps remained in the Carpathians and, with the exception of the 10th Infantry Division, never reached Budapest.
- 75 BA-MA N 370/1. In many works of reference and historical studies Pfeffer-Wildenbruch is erroneously named Pfeffer von Wildenbruch. In reality he was not a member of the German aristocracy. For his personal details see chapter II section 3.
- 76 HL VKF 306/a and Zákó, p. 101.

- 77 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, 23 November 1944.
- 78 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a attachments, 1 December 1944.
- 79 Teleki, p. 173.
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 See HL microfilm, reel no 1071, Winkelmann's notes.
- 82 Maier, p. 493; HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a attachments, 12 December 1944.
- 83 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, 12 December 1944.
- 84 BA-MA RW 49/145, 12 December 1944.
- 85 HL TGY, Bíró, 3053, p. 17.
- 86 Kovács, Ferenc X., p. 21 (in the collection of the author).
- 87 Interview with Wáczek.

II

The Encirclement

1

Hungarian *drôle de guerre* – Christmas 1944 in the Budapest cauldron

Soon Edó comes back with a splendid Christmas tree. He got it for 10 pengős, it wasn't cheaper even in peacetime. 'Just take it', the woman had said to him, 'it doesn't matter any more, the Russians are already in Budakeszi'. Naturally we thought this was an exaggeration and didn't take it seriously ... Radio Budapest had been broadcasting Christmas carols with organ music.¹

Neither the German nor the Hungarian command had made preparations against any attacks from the west, and it was precisely from this direction that the Soviet troops reached the crucial regions of Bicske and Érd, as was briefly indicated in chapter I section 4. A more detailed account of the campaign follows.

In contrast to Pest, where the defence had been planned at least in theory, in Buda there were only a few trenches and bunkers between János-hegy Hill and Hármashatár-hegy Hill, and no defence plans whatsoever. The Soviet breakthrough near Lake Velence on 20 December prompted the command of the German Army Group South to ask Guderian for permission to move the 8th SS Cavalry Division west. Guderian refused, arguing that this operation would weaken the defence in the east. On 21 December the command of the German Army Group South requested permission to relocate the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, but the general staff again refused.

Meanwhile the army corps of the 3rd Ukrainian Front had begun their advance north through a gap that had opened between Lake Velence and Martonvásár. After taking Martonvásár, they occupied the villages of Vál, Alcsút and Pusztazámor, and by the evening of 22 December were threatening Bicske and Bia. When Colonel-General Friessner, renewing his plea

for the relocation of the 8th SS Cavalry Division, pointed out that Budapest would be encircled within a few days, Guderian refused yet again and exclaimed angrily: 'I can't understand why such a large panzer army, unequalled anywhere on the eastern front, is unable to stop the enemy'.² He was forgetting that the panzer forces were not accompanied by the necessary infantry.

On 23 December a performance of *Aida* took place in the Budapest Opera. A member of the audience recalls:

Before the second act an actor dressed as a soldier appeared in front of the curtain. Conveying greetings from the battle front to the half-empty house, he expressed his pleasure at seeing that the spectators were now considerably calmer and more hopeful than a few weeks earlier, and he confidently promised that Budapest would remain Hungarian and our wonderful capital had nothing to fear.³

Performances in the other theatres and in the cinemas also continued.⁴

On the morning of 23 December the Soviet troops took Székesfehérvár. A few hours later they reached Bicske, Herceghalom and Bia, severing the principal rail link between Vienna and Budapest and leaving the Esztergom–Budapest line, which could carry considerably less traffic, as the only supply route to the capital. In the afternoon German resistance in Herceghalom and Bia ceased. In the evening the Soviet 18th Tank Corps bypassed Bicske and overran the defenders from behind: the speed of this advance is demonstrated by the fact that the Soviet infantry did not arrive in Bicske until the morning of 25 December. Late on 23 December units of the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps were also threatening the commune of Páty, north of Bia. The Soviet armoured spearheads were advancing at a rate of 20–40 kilometres a day, letting a second wave capture the bases they had missed. By the morning of 24 December this method had brought them from Páty to Budakeszi through the forests of the Buda Hills, while the German and Hungarian troops were still resisting in some pockets around Érd, Törökbálint and Budaörs, east of Bia.

The German Army Group South and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch only managed to take hesitant and inadequate counter-measures. They decided to 'prevent an enemy advance north and east by fast-moving actions of the armoured group of the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division in the Bia sector'.⁵ The combat force removed from the Pest front in this manner comprised at most 12 self-propelled 15cm Hummel (Bumble-bee) guns, 12 self-propelled 10.5cm Wespe (Wasp) guns, 10–15 tanks and 100 armoured personnel carriers. Although they temporarily recaptured Törökbánya and broke through the Soviet front somewhat further north, in the long run they

were no match for three Soviet rapid deployment corps pressing ahead towards Budapest from a distance of 20 kilometres. The prospects of the depleted Hungarian Budapest Guard Battalion, ordered from Csömör on the Pest side to Húvösvölgy Valley, north of Budakeszi, were no better. The request of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps's command for the 8th SS Cavalry Division to be relocated from Pest was, as always, refused by Hitler through Guderian. Instead some small Hungarian units, such as the 4th and 21st Artillery Battalions, were ordered to Bicske, as if these could have repulsed a tank attack.

In a fit of rage, Hitler relieved Fretter-Pico and Friessner of their posts, appointing Panzer General Hermann Balck (Army Group G) and Infantry General Otto Wöhler (8th Army) in their place. This made no difference, however, as Fretter-Pico and Friessner had already done all that was humanly possible: they had even tried to predict the course of events, hoping that Hitler would send further reinforcements. But Hitler was only seeking scapegoats for the continuous defeats.

On 24 December at 1.10pm Colonel-General Helmuth von Grolman, Friessner's chief of staff, phoned Guderian, urging him to reconsider:

The capital has never been defended from the west. The commander of the SS police forces, Obergruppenführer Winkelmann, believes that the Reichsführer [Himmler] would certainly approve such a decision. A decision must be made with the utmost urgency to extract at least one division and direct it to the Buda side.⁶

After 45 minutes Guderian took it upon himself to approve the relocation of the 8th SS Cavalry Division. At that time he had other great worries. The new German attack in the Ardennes showed signs of faltering, and the Soviet units at the bridgeheads on the Vistula were believed to be preparing an attack on Berlin. Guderian therefore desperately wanted to break off the offensive in the west and transfer the combat forces in question to the east, albeit not to the Carpathian Basin. He expected a Soviet attack on 12 January 1945 and was soon proved right. Hitler, however, was convinced that the defence of Budapest was more important. 'This is the biggest bluff since Gengis Khan. Who invented this nonsense?' he shouted and, ignoring Guderian's protest, ordered the last reserve on the eastern front, the IV SS Panzer Corps (which incidentally was stationed at the location of the subsequent Soviet attack), to depart for Hungary.

On the same day at 4.50pm, when Soviet tanks had already reached the Szépilem tram depot and were only 5 kilometres from Buda Castle, Hitler finally approved the relocation of the 8th SS Cavalry Division, but did not give permission to abandon the Pest bridgehead, although both Guderian

and Balck considered this to be the most appropriate step.⁸ Instead he ordered two infantry divisions to be dispatched to Hungary, and promised to liberate Budapest. For him, as for Stalin, Budapest was a political issue way beyond central Europe.

The German and Hungarian commands knew how far the Soviet troops had advanced.⁹ Nevertheless, they did nothing to avert the impending catastrophe. Hindy's failure to act is understandable, as he had no authority to do so. As orders could be given by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch alone, only a personal initiative by him could have resolved the situation, but he lacked the necessary qualities.

The repeated assertion that the appearance of Soviet troops in Buda had struck the German and Hungarian commands like a bolt out of the blue is patently wrong.¹⁰ On 23 December Hindy and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch knew that the Soviet troops were only 20–40 kilometres from Budapest, and they may also have been informed that the exhausted remnants of the German 271st Volksgrenadier Division southwest of Buda no longer had any serious combat value. Captain Zoltán Mikó, head of the sabotage section of the Hungarian general staff, was aware of the imminent encirclement, and so were the German divisional staffs.¹¹ Reports were being sent constantly, not only by railway employees and gendarmes in the area but also by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's personnel, as an inquiry carried out by Balck demonstrates:

The fuel depot fell into enemy hands on 25 December, although, on 24 December and twice on 25 December, the depot commander had alerted the SS corps officer in charge of fuel to the threat to the depot, requesting either removal of the fuel or cancellation of the ban on blowing up the depot. The food store, with substantial stockpiles, also fell into enemy hands on 25 December. At the same time a significant part of the horse-drawn columns sent to clear the store was also lost.¹²

On 22 December, even before Budapest was encircled, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch requested aerial delivery of supplies.¹³ On 23 December German anti-tank guns were stationed in two places at Budagyöngye on the road to Budakeszi.¹⁴ On the same day the supply units of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division received orders from the Hungarian I Army Corps to send reconnaissance units to the Piliscsaba–Perbál–Zsámbék and Perbál–Budajenő routes north of Páty,¹⁵ and at about midday Lieutenant József Bíró, adjutant to the command of the 10th Infantry Division, was ordered by the corps command to commence reconnaissance activities.¹⁶ At 10pm the chief of staff, Captain Győző Benyovszky, personally visited the baggage train in Pilisszentiván to alert all units.¹⁷

On the morning of 24 December the patrols reported the appearance of Soviet forces from the villages of the Zsámbék Basin between Bicske and Budaörs.¹⁸ Even closer to Budapest, in the suburb of Pasarét, the chief quartermaster of the 1st Panzer Division saw 'German anti-tank guns and assault guns racing towards Hűvösvölgy Valley, and German and Hungarian cars, lorries and mechanised dispatch runners rushing from Hűvösvölgy towards Széna Square'.¹⁹ The reason was that orders to leave the city immediately had been given to the German supply units and the non-combat units of the 13th Panzer Division by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and to the Hungarian army's supply units by the Hungarian command.²⁰ The German supreme command, on its own initiative, had dispatched a navy commando unit specialising in underwater blasting from Lübeck to Hungary to prepare the destruction of the bridges in Budapest and Esztergom, and on Christmas Day the unit, led by First Lieutenant Tegethoff, was already in Vienna.²¹ All this is further proof that the higher echelons were well aware of the impending encirclement.

Typically, no discussions about the possible prevention of the encirclement had taken place between the general staff departments of Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and Hindy. This was mainly due to mutual distrust²² and, on Hindy's part, to an indifference which had been growing since the end of October. Right at the beginning Hindy's control over the Hungarian troops had been taken away from him and his role restricted to administration. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch told his Hungarian partner nothing and treated him in a markedly condescending manner. This was probably one of the reasons why the Hungarian general just watched events passively.²³

On the morning of 24 December, the Budakeszi gendarmerie advised the staff of the Hungarian army corps billeted in the Notre Dame de Sion convent that the first Soviet tanks had been sighted nearby.²⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel Ferenc Szögyény, commander of the South Buda anti-aircraft unit, was unaware of this and ordered his adjutant, Lieutenant Géza Pintér, to drive to Budakeszi in order to inspect potential positions for anti-aircraft guns. Pintér, travelling through the western residential quarters, got as far as the Szépjúházné-nyereg saddle:

There I was unexpectedly stopped by a first lieutenant. I got out, and he asked me where I was going. I said, to Budakeszi to inspect positions. It could have been about half past ten. 'You won't be going there', he said, 'because, in case you didn't know, you are already at the front line.' I said: 'How come?' 'Look back', he said, 'the German SS are behind you'... The lieutenant asked me for my two hand grenades, because he said he didn't even have a pistol.²⁵

Shortly after 10.30am the first Soviet soldiers appeared in front of the Szépjuhászné-nyereg saddle. By midday all resistance had ceased, and by 1pm the first Soviet tanks, slowly rumbling down Budakeszi Road, had reached the junction with Hidegkúti (now Hűvösvölgyi) Road. At the filling station beneath the tram depot a Hungarian tanker had just begun to syphon off petrol. A heavy gun battle developed between the German soldiers, who took cover behind the tanker, and the Soviet tanks, which had pushed ahead without infantry support. Meanwhile petrol was running from the pump and the tanker onto the road.

The Soviet infantry also began to advance from Budakeszi. Some tried to follow the tanks along the Budakeszi road but were left behind, while others set out towards Svábhegy Hill via Makkosmária and the Budakeszi Forest. Late in the morning, eight anti-aircraft guns positioned in Csillebérc were also attacked by infantry. As the position of the guns did not allow firing at a low angle, the crew destroyed the breech mechanisms and retreated. In the early afternoon, according to eye-witnesses, the civilians waiting for their train at the Széchenyi-hegy terminus of the Cogwheel Railway were dumbfounded when they discovered Soviet advance guards with sub-machine guns in their midst. The military command, although aware of the imminent Soviet onslaught, had been unable to warn the dispersed units – with fatal consequences for many.

Lieutenant Pintér got back to Hidegkúti Road by making a long detour. An 88mm anti-aircraft gun in front of the pharmacy in the Szépilona quarter had just set a Soviet tank on fire. Higher up, alongside Budakeszi Road, three or four more Soviet tanks were lurking. A few blocks further, in Tárogató Road, Soviet shells were suddenly landing near the German first-aid station. A telephone call to the command of the Feldherrnhalle Division was answered to the effect that the situation remained unchanged and there was no cause for concern. When an ambulance driver reported that he had come under fire a few kilometres west, nobody believed him. The German chief medical officer again phoned the divisional command, where ‘the affair was declared to be a pathological fantasy. At the very same moment a shell detonated in front of the building, shattering all the windows and severing the phone link.’²⁶

At about the same time a BESZKÁRT employee rang the Hungarian corps command in the Notre Dame de Sion convent from the terminus of the number 81 tram line in the Zugliget quarter: ‘Do you know that the Russians are here? They are here at the tram terminus, they have stacked their rifles and are distributing food. What am I to do?’ Captain Ferenc X. Kovács, who took his call, merely said: ‘Nothing. Try to be as inconspicuous



Captain Ferenc X. Kovács, chief of staff, Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.



Captain Győző Benyovszky, chief of staff, Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.

as possible, so that nothing happens to you. There's nothing else I can do.'²⁷ Subsequently Kovács also started phoning to find out what was happening. Several times he was answered in Russian: 'After my phone calls I went to Sándor Horváth [the army corps's chief of staff] to report. He was also surprised but could do nothing. He may have spoken to Lindenau, but he didn't order me to communicate anything to the Germans.'²⁸ The German corps command heard about the arrival of the Soviets in similar fashion, through a telephone call from a policeman posted at the Szépileta tram depot, who had had a bad fright when the first T-34 tank had aimed its gun at him.²⁹

On the same afternoon the German corps command began to relocate the 8th SS Cavalry Division to Buda, although Hitler's approval arrived only a day later. A reconnaissance detachment drafted from reserves took up firing positions in the Hűvösvölgy Valley and Rózsadomb Hill areas, as did an anti-aircraft detachment in Horthy Miklós (today Móric Zsigmond) Square soon after. However, the relocation was slowed down by heavy traffic and crowds of civilians hurrying to do their Christmas shopping.³⁰

In Széna Square there were tumultuous scenes. Artillery Lieutenant Béla Czeczidlowszky remembers:

The people were very nervous. In Ostrom Street Arrow Cross Party members were getting into their cars and disappearing, and a police officer was carrying a sack

of flour on his back. That was when I realised what, in God's name, was going on here ... Tasziló Tarnay, head of a mortar battery, was in position and bombarding Hűvösvölgy. The Zöld Hordó Inn was still open, and I was able to eat a goulash.³¹

Between 3pm and 4pm a gun battle erupted near the Szépilona tram depot between the approaching Soviet infantry and the German units moving into position. At the same time, the Arrow Cross's Hungarist combat group on Svábhegy Hill received an alarm signal. Led by its commander Antal Ostián – the Arrow Cross Party's chief of propaganda – the group was probably trying to escape from the capital when it became involved in a gun battle with Soviet troops near the Széchenyi-hegy terminus of the Cogwheel Railway, and several of its members, including Ostián himself, were killed. The remainder took up firing positions in the gardens along Mártonhegyi Road.³²

At 5pm, on the orders of Emil Kovarcz, the Minister for Total Mobilisation, the members of the I University Assault Battalion, who were spending the holiday at home, were alerted through the 'snowball' method: each student receiving the message passed it on to two others, so that within the hour all three companies were assembled. Although István Zsakó, the Arrow Cross Party's youth leader, offered the students the opportunity to leave the capital together with the Arrow Cross units, Lieutenant Gyula Elischer, the battalion commander, decided that they should stay behind. Transported by lorry, the students reached the Budagyöngye suburb from Hűvösvölgy Valley at 8pm. Private Gyula Kamocsay recalls:

When we looked further down, where Budakeszi Road and Hidegkúti Road meet, we saw a kind of river beginning to flow, and that river was – on fire. Something down there was burning, actually burning, with blue flames... Never mind, lads, our lorries are big enough, the time is 5 past 8, the direction is towards the fire – with this he [Elischer] got into the first lorry and drove off straight at the fire... We had just got into the thick of the confusion, bang into the middle of the fire, when a German suddenly jumped up in front of us – Stop! – The drivers put on the brakes, around us everything was gushing and swirling. One of the Germans said that there were many wounded, and they immediately started grabbing and throwing the unfortunate half-dead onto the open trailer behind us, where we had a few barrels of diesel oil.

While we were standing there – the loading took two or three minutes – I looked towards Budakeszi Road on the right and noticed three burnt-out tanks on the bend... As soon as these tanks had been hit the oil in them must have run down the road and been set alight by a grenade.³³

The students sealed off Hűvösvölgy Valley and sent patrols to the Szépilona–Budagyöngye area. One patrol captured two men in civilian clothes

speaking Russian³⁴ and another blew up a Soviet tank near Budagyöngye with a hand-grenade. A gendarmerie battalion, which had assembled on Vérmező Meadow the same evening, took up positions near the Bolyai Academy, János Hospital³⁵ and the Cogwheel Railway, and began to mount reconnaissance actions. According to instructions from the Germans, the 600 men making up this unit were to hold a front line stretching between 4 and 5 kilometres to the northern edge of Budaörs, and also take part in a counter-attack next day. Student László Zolnay set out at 8pm to visit his relatives in the Pasarét quarter, and met total chaos on the way:

I tried to walk along Olasz Avenue [today Szilágyi Erzsébet Avenue]. Across the entire width of the street a mass of military formations and vehicles was rolling along, together with hordes of ethnic Swabian peasants from Budakeszi escaping, mainly on foot, with their bundles piled high on their backs. It was almost impossible to find a gap and make headway against this ubiquitous torrent. The terrified screams of the fleeing mass were accompanied by the increasing rattle of guns and occasional explosions from Szépilem. I tried to make more progress by turning off towards Városmajor Grange, but here too legions of refugees were rolling towards the city centre.

I pushed my way through along one of the side streets – Ezredes Street – and carried on with my pistol in my hand... When I reached Marcibányi Square I was blinded by a searchlight and had to stop. Then I saw that the square was full of waiting military formations.

Luckily I was questioned by a Hungarian officer. I told him that I was trying to go to Pasarét for Christmas but couldn't find a way.

He didn't make me show my identity papers but said that he doubted whether I would be able to get through... because the Russians were already in Pasaréti Square and I would be shot dead in the dark by either one or the other side.³⁶

On the same day, the Soviet command launched heavy attacks against the Pest bridgehead in order to prevent the Germans regrouping. At the same time, the systematic bombardment of the whole capital began. The commander on the Buda side, however, decided to stop at Szépilem. He had good reason for so doing, because by that time only about 20 of his tanks, with minimal infantry support, had reached Buda.³⁷ A street battle fought solely with tanks – which are vulnerable in the narrow passages between the houses – is always risky. On this occasion the Soviets had already lost several T-34s although they had not advanced very far into the city, and without more infantry it was doubtful that they could control even those parts of Buda that they had captured. Some sources give a different reason:³⁸ according to these the Soviet troops, suddenly faced with civilians carrying valuables, stopped their advance in order to rob them. In fact they did

not stop to pillage but pillaged because they had had to stop to await the main force.

For the Jews in particular the arrival of the Red Army meant liberation. Unlike the military command, the Arrow Cross militia were surprised by the appearance of Soviet troops in Buda, and many potential victims owed their lives to the ensuing confusion. The first were probably the inmates of a Jewish children's home in Budakeszi Road, where their parents had left them before they themselves were deported or imprisoned in a ghetto. In the early morning of 24 December Arrow Cross men burst into the home and lined the children up, but departed when they heard the rapidly increasing thunder of guns; the children in their turn saw the first Soviet tanks rattling along the village street in the late morning.³⁹ On the same morning Arrow Cross men appeared in the Jewish children's homes in Munkácsy Mihály Street in Buda and marched the children and their carers – a group of more than 100 – to the courtyard of the Radetzky Barracks (later Bem Barracks), where a machine gun ready to fire was awaiting them. However, when news of the Soviet approach arrived in the early afternoon, the mass murder was called off and the group herded to the ghetto in the VII District.⁴⁰ (The fate of Budapest's Jews is discussed in detail in chapter VI section 2.)

2

The encirclement of Buda

The outer ring

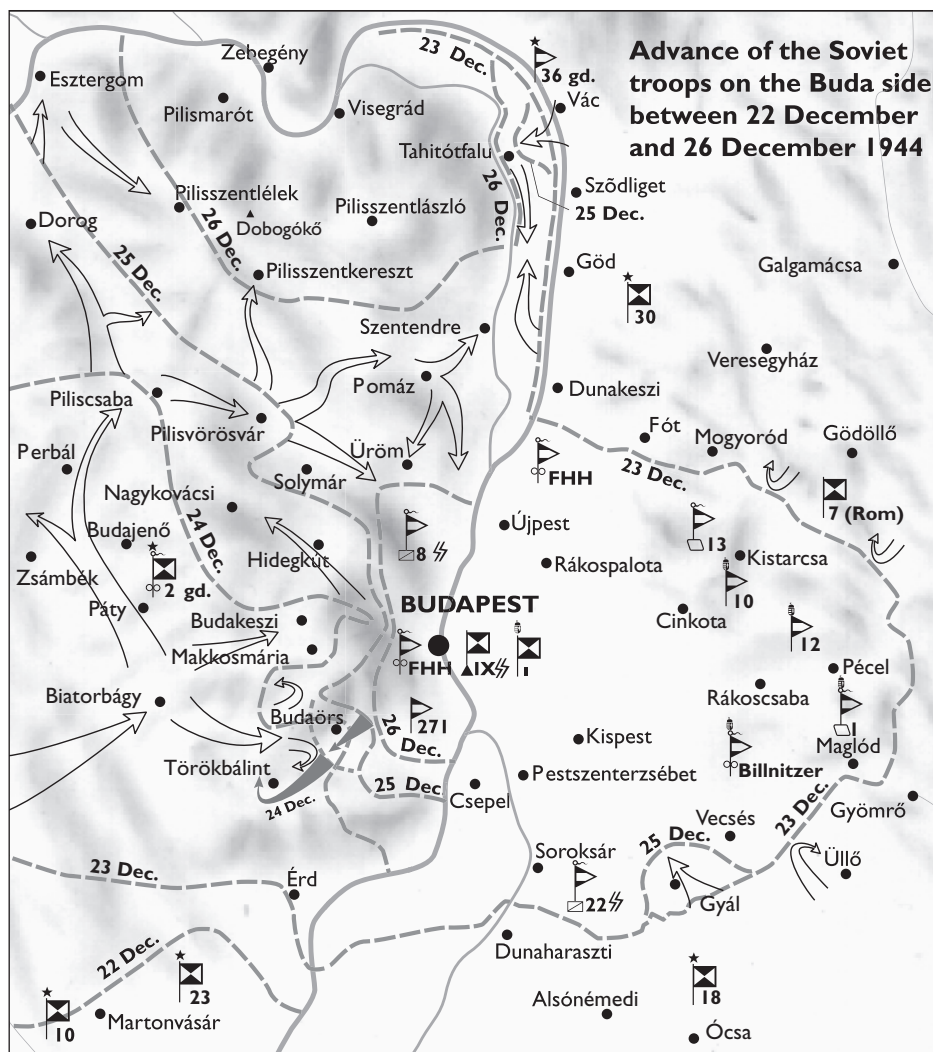
While some units of the Soviet 18th Tank Corps and 31st Rifle Corps were advancing east towards Buda on 24 December without encountering much opposition, others were steadily moving north along the fringe of the Buda Hills. In the afternoon the 32nd Mechanised Brigade, approaching from Páty, reached Perbál and Tök, a vanguard battalion of the 110th Tank Brigade arrived in Tinnye, the 181st Tank Brigade crossed the border of Komárom–Esztergom county near Szomor, and the 170th Tank Brigade was pushing ahead towards Bajna. In the early evening advance guards appeared in Jászfalu and the tanks leading the assault destroyed the locomotive of the last train from Esztergom to Budapest,⁴¹ forcing the passengers to seek shelter in the village. By late evening the road to Vienna was under sporadic fire near Pilisvörösvár, where the chaotic encounter between the columns of vehicles moving outward from the customs point at Üröm and

those forced to turn back from Pilisvörösvár was eerily illuminated by Soviet signal rockets.⁴²

On 25 December, early in the morning, wedges of Soviet tanks advancing west reached Tatabánya, Tarján, Szomor, Dág and Csolnok. Others, moving north, crossed the Budapest–Esztergom railway line at Pilisjászfalu. Most of these continued towards Dorog, while the right wing turned east towards the villages in the Pilis District and the Danube Bend.⁴³ At 7am the latter took Piliscsaba with little resistance, and later in the morning took Piliscsév. From Piliscsaba they continued their advance across the wooded heights towards Pilisvörösvár. They reached Pilisszentiván in the evening and within hours severed the macadamised road leading from Pomáz via Pilisszentkereszt to Esztergom; some reconnaissance platoons infiltrated Pilisvörösvár itself during the night. On the southeastern edge of Dorog the 170th Tank Brigade was held up until evening by a German anti-aircraft gun and a few Hungarian assault guns, and lost four T-34s.⁴⁴ However, Sárísáp and Tokod, west of Dorog, had already been captured at noon, Tát had fallen at 6pm, and by 7.30pm Dorog was also in Soviet hands, with several hundred loaded goods wagons stranded at the railway station. Table 11 lists the strengths of the opposing sides west of Budapest at the beginning of the Soviet offensive.

At 1am on 26 December the Soviets reached Esztergom–Tábor, and by morning the siege of Esztergom had begun. The officers of the Hungarian 23rd Reserve Division stationed in the city decided to surrender, but the commander could not make up his mind to give the order: finally, while fighting was already in progress nearby, he decided not to go through with the plan that he himself had approved just minutes before, as this would have been incompatible with his officer's oath and his loyalty to his German brothers-in-arms.⁴⁵ The division, with hardly any combat troops left, withdrew across the Danube at the last moment.⁴⁶ At 7.30am the Germans, also pulling out, blew up Mária Valéria Bridge between Esztergom and Párkány, and a few hours later the whole of Esztergom was in Soviet hands. A Soviet mechanised unit moving east along the Danube stopped after reaching Pilismarót at noon and Dömös at 2pm, because another retreating German unit had blown up the bridge over the Lepence stream. However, the capture of Esztergom had closed the outer encirclement ring round Budapest.

On the morning of 27 December the Soviet 170th Tank Brigade continued its advance west, seizing three wagonloads of German tanks and armoured vehicles awaiting repairs at Süttő Station.⁴⁷ The German Pape Division Group, which had arrived in the area between 24 and 26 December – consisting of the remnants of three Panther tank divisions, three battalions



that had been moved west from Budapest on 24–5 December, some tanks allocated but not delivered to the 8th SS Cavalry Division and the 13th Panzer Division, and a number of flying squads – had managed with difficulty to close off the passes in the Vértes Hills and secure the Tata–Tatabánya area. Lacking infantry, it could not mount any counter-attacks and was finding it increasingly difficult even to hold the territories it was occupying. This situation was to persist until reinforcements arriving in stages from 28 December stopped the Soviets at the eastern approaches to Komárom.

On the assumption that the Germans would try to relieve Budapest, the Soviet command, rather than advancing any further, decided to concentrate on preparing the defence of the outer encirclement ring. The

battle lines consolidated, and Soviet attacks continued only between Mór and Lake Balaton.

The inner ring

On 24 December, Soviet mechanised units, mainly from Budakeszi, had reached western Buda. Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday and, with the guns thundering in the distance, the streets were almost deserted. Most of the residents hardly realised that in a matter of minutes their world had been turned upside down. Those who noticed Russians hurrying past the garden fences in padded suits and carrying sub-machine guns with unfamiliar round cartridge drums, or who were startled by tanks clattering along the main road, rang up their friends and relations to tell them the news, their voices trembling with bewilderment, fear or – in some cases – joy. In the city centre, during the late afternoon and evening, word spread among the civilians that Budapest had probably been encircled. In his apartment in the Castle District of Buda, the liberal politician Imre Csécsy noted:

The guns were roaring without a break till midnight. Sometimes we also heard the rattle of machine guns. This is the most beautiful Christmas music. Are we really about to be liberated? ...God help us and put an end to the rule of these gangsters. May the drumfire grow stronger by the morning and the city fall.⁴⁸

Others were more cautious: 'We were so afraid of the Russians that we dismantled the Christmas tree'.⁴⁹

At dawn on 25 December Soviet units, pushing north through the forest from the Szépjuhászné-nyereg saddle towards Hűvösvölgy Valley, surrounded a platoon of the Hungarist central combat group commanded by Pál Prónay, which had been stationed for guard duty in a villa at the junction of Hidegkúti Road and Nagykovácsi Road. The Arrow Cross men, first in the garden and then in the villa itself, fought until the morning of 26 December, by which time they had all been killed.⁵⁰

Further south, Soviet artillery catching up from Bia took Budaörs and continued towards Törökbálint. Other Soviet units, in action between Martonvásár and the Danube and reinforced with troops crossing the river from Csepel Island, pushed north, occupying the suburbs of Budatétény and Budafok and beginning to threaten the suburb of Kelenföld. The Hungarian 206th Anti-aircraft Battalion, according to Soviet reports, disobeyed the order to withdraw and, with its 16 guns, defected to the enemy north of Érd.⁵¹

The German corps command, overestimating its chances against supposedly inferior forces, tried to hold up the Soviet troops through a

counter-attack from Törökbálint. However, the remnants of the 271st Volksgrenadier Division retreating from the south and the Galántai Police Battalion had no serious combat strength left. Lieutenant Dénes Horváth, in charge of an anti-aircraft position in the Kamara-erdő Forest, was about to blow up his guns, which had been fixed in concrete, when he received orders for his battery to support the planned counter-attack:

German infantry were due to arrive at the artillery position at about 21 hours to provide infantry protection. On my return from the German battle post I restored the 6 guns of one of our batteries to fire readiness. Platoon commander Sergeant Gerhard...reported that a disorganised group of 150-200 men was coming towards the artillery position on the highway. I ordered Gerhard not to shoot, because they were German troops coming to give infantry support to the battery during the counter-attack in the night. When the tip of the group was about 100 metres from the gun positions we saw in the light of a signal rocket that they were Soviets. At the same moment we came under extremely heavy infantry and mortar fire, which our surprised men immediately returned with the infantry arms at their disposal. As this was going on, a German infantry platoon arrived from Törökbálint, but in such a battle-weary condition that it could only cover the retreat of some of the gun crews. The Soviet units penetrated the firing position and captured part of the crew.⁵²

During the same morning the Soviet 18th Tank Corps continued its drive north, while the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps, with about 80 armoured vehicles, reached the northern and western districts of Buda, capturing the villages of Pesthidegkút and Nagykovácsi. In the early afternoon Soviet soldiers raised the red flag on the lookout tower on János-hegy Hill, and at the foot of the tower the Balázs Restaurant was blazing. By evening a large portion of Budafok and the railway station in the next suburb, Albertfalva, were in Soviet hands. Soviet infantry invaded the area of János Hospital and from the chapel opened fire on Olasz Avenue and Városmajor Grange. Only the armoured group advancing in Budakeszi Road undertook no further attack that day and the next, being satisfied with securing Budakeszi Road and Hidegkúti Road.

The 8th SS Cavalry Division and three Hungarian battalions, hastily relocated to assist the University Assault Battalion, could offer Buda only scanty defence. With these units, reinforced by seven assault guns and a platoon of the city command, Lieutenant-Colonel László Veresváry launched a counter-attack near Soviet-held Zugliget, and succeeded in establishing a thin battle line. Units of the Vannay Battalion closed off Városmajor Grange and drove out the Soviet forces ensconced in János Hospital. Some guns of the 1st Assault Artillery Battalion secured the approach to Hűvösvölgy.

Soviet advance infantry units had taken the convent on Svábhegy Hill on 24 December. When units of the Székelyudvarhelyi Gendarmerie Battalion reached Svábhegy Hill, they were surprised to find Soviet troops awaiting them. In the ensuing gun battle the gendarmes suffered heavy losses and were forced to withdraw at every point.⁵³ In the evening the first troops of the German Europa Flying Squad Battalion arrived at Rózsadomb Hill to take over the defence between Bimbó Road and Olasz Avenue from the students. The local civilians suddenly found themselves on the edge of the front:

On the morning of 25 December three or four gendarmes were running down Bűrök Street, shouting: 'the Russians are coming, save yourselves!' An hour later a tired man of about 40 in a mechanic's suit appeared, asking for food because he had got stuck on Mártonhegyi Road. He told us that his mate was also hiding in the neighbourhood. They could have come from the Turán tank stationed up at the terminus of the Cogwheel Railway.

After lunch we heard trotting noises from Bűrök Street... I looked out, and a big group of German soldiers was stopping in front of the house. An officer stepped forward and inquired: 'Where are the Russians?' He asked for some water and said: 'Budapest is encircled.' Then they set out at the double towards Svábhegy hill. When they got to the house at number 71 shooting suddenly started.⁵⁴

However, the civilians in those districts of Buda that had so far been spared apparently refused to acknowledge what was happening:

The residents of one building complained to Gyula Elischer [the students' commander] because a group, ordered into action, fired a few rounds at a sand-hill by the roadside to test their weapons. When the civilians were told that the Soviet forces were only a few hundred metres away, they were quite surprised.⁵⁵

Until 25 December the university students' patrols had held a line stretching from János Hospital, along the Lipótmező quarter and Gábor Áron Road, to Pusztaszeri Road almost entirely on their own. It was only by chance that Tasziló Tarnay, commander of the 21st Artillery Battalion's mortar battery, realised that Soviet infantry riflemen had begun an attack, and by letting loose a volley from his mortars prevented them retaking János Hospital.

By 25 December no trams were running in the streets. A few lines had tried to start up early in the morning, but had immediately been stopped by the constant shelling. The only public transport still operating were the suburban railway between Budapest and Szentendre and, at least in the morning, the small ships plying on the Danube between Kossuth Square and Batthyányi Square. However, electricity, water and gas supplies and

telephone services were maintained, despite the increasing bombardment. Along the outer sections of Üllői Road and Nagykőrösi Road, people evicted from the suburb of Pestszentimre in the defensive belt of the Attila Line were escaping towards the inner districts of the city.

Although by this time the German high command, billeted in Buda Castle, was less than 3 kilometres from the front line, it was only after these events that reinforcements were detailed to Buda. The Soviet forces, consisting mainly of infantry, retreated from the front line, which was patrolled every four or five hours by sizeable German platoons. Because each party regarded the other as stronger, neither attempted a serious push ahead.

The Gestapo departments and the divisions' assembly, repair and supply units had left Budapest for Esztergom on the evening of 24 December. They had been joined by several thousand members of the Arrow Cross Party with their families, and by members of the Arrow Cross youth organisations.⁵⁶ On the order of Mobilisation Minister Emil Kovarcz, the Hungarian recruits (between 1500 and 2000 men) promised to the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division as reinforcements had also been withdrawn, but units of the Hungarian 8th Infantry Regiment stationed in Buda brought them back, as instructed by the divisional staff.⁵⁷ On the evening of 25 December two German Panther tanks, lent to the Hungarians for a reconnaissance mission, got to Pilisszentkereszt encountering hardly any obstacles, and reached the Hungarian lines at Komárom, on the Danube west of Esztergom, one day later. After dark the last local train left for Szentendre, blacked out and full of refugees.⁵⁸

On the morning of 26 December Soviet units captured Pilisvörösvár and, meeting practically no defence, occupied the villages of Csobánka, Üröm, Pomáz and Budakalász.⁵⁹ Most of the refugee trains only reached Pomáz. Other groups found the roads to Esztergom either cut off by Soviet troops or blocked by stranded German and Hungarian vehicles and only a few, dodging Soviet tanks, got through.

The last group of Arrow Cross men to escape made it to the village of Dobogókő. After taking shelter in a tourist hostel they dispersed; some miraculously reached the German lines at Komárom on 28 December, while others filtered back to the capital and threw away their uniforms.⁶⁰ A Hungarian battalion retreating from Szentendre Island tried to break through to Esztergom, but at the request of the Hungarian authorities in Szentendre, decided to surrender. Towards 12.30pm the first Cossack reconnaissance unit appeared in front of Szentendre presbytery.⁶¹ On 27 December Soviet armoured units also reached the Danube. The encirclement of Budapest was complete.

The German units and four Hungarian pioneer companies attached to them had begun to evacuate Szentendre Island on 25 and 26 December. The Soviet 25th Guard Rifle Division, which had crossed the Danube branch at Vác, had carried out an initial reconnaissance operation on the island on 25 December, followed by larger Soviet forces the next day. In a small skirmish, a unit led by Guard Sergeant Kuzhabai Zhazhikov captured the majority of the company defending the Danube bank, for which he received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal. In Tótfalu 'the parish priest and the notary received the Russians, who didn't hurt anybody but ordered all the mills to grind flour and sent the [Hungarian] national guards on patrol with white armbands'.⁶² The bridge between Szentendre and Tahi, which had been mined, was saved by Izabella Boros, a local resident, who cut the fuses.⁶³ The disarmament of the German and Hungarian troops trapped in the Danube Bend took until 30 December. Between 24 and 30 December, according to Soviet sources, 5390 were taken prisoner.⁶⁴ Finally Kisoroszi, at the tip of the island, was occupied on 3 January 1945. Table 12 lists the major events of the encirclement of Budapest.

3

Besiegers and besieged

The German and Hungarian troops

The debate about the exact number of troops defending Budapest continues to this day. Contemporary Soviet press notices mention some 70,000 prisoners.⁶⁵ According to a report of the Budapest Corps Group, based on reconnaissance figures of 31 December 1944, the number of German and Hungarian fighters at the Pest bridgehead (where 60 per cent of the defenders were stationed) was 37,300. A few weeks later, Malinovsky reported 188,000 defenders and, in mid-February, a total of 138,000 prisoners: these figures were adopted by later Soviet and Hungarian authors, with the exception of Sándor Tóth.⁶⁶ On 31 December the German Army Group South wrote about 50,000 Hungarian and 45,000 German troops trapped in the encirclement, which is also regarded as correct by Tóth.⁶⁷ Gosztonyi cites 33,000 Germans and 37,000 Hungarians, based on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's statements.⁶⁸ The command of the Hungarian I Army Corps tried to take stock of its units on several occasions, but in the confusion achieved meagre results. Even Sándor Horváth, the army corps's chief of staff, had to confess his bafflement:

During the 7 weeks of the siege I was unable to obtain any convincing information about the combat strengths of the units in action within and outside the battle order or about the arms and ammunition situation. The corps's quartermaster, General Staff Captain Dezső Németh, after repeated efforts could only establish that the ration strength was fluctuating around 40,000.⁶⁹

Such disparities cannot be attributed merely to the loss of documents. Nor is it sufficient to argue that originally the Hungarian I Army Corps had been an administrative entity without troops of its own, and that the troops trapped in Budapest were there merely as a consequence of the Soviet attacks. It is true, however, that the army corps only 'owned' the Budapest Guard Battalion and was so short of soldiers that it had to draft, for intelligence duties, some female students of a Transylvanian university who had fled to the capital.

Many of the Hungarian units trapped in Budapest tried to evade the fighting. In reviews of their manpower and arms they concealed their true strength. When drawing their rations through the Hungarian I Army Corps they inflated their numbers, while in communications to the Germans they understated them. On 14 January 1945 the combined combat strength of the 10th Infantry Division and the 12th Reserve Division was reported to the corps as 300,⁷⁰ when the 10th Infantry Division alone had at least 3500 soldiers within the cauldron.⁷¹ Normally, the combat strength – which includes all deployable infantry units, but not artillery men, crews of baggage trains, signallers, pioneers or divisional staff – is between 50 and 60 per cent of the ration strength, which comprises all uniformed soldiers. In this instance, however, nobody in the corps command seems to have noticed that the combat strength did not even amount to 10 per cent of the ration strength.

Generally, combat units suffer greater losses than others. In the absence of regular reinforcements they must be replenished from the divisions' service units. In the German army service, units were regularly combed for this purpose, but among the Hungarians such a procedure was rare. The 10th Infantry Division only managed to scrape together a combat force of 200–300, while the overwhelming majority of its soldiers did not go into battle. This is not surprising, because by that time the Hungarian military command considered it pointless to continue the struggle.

The Hungarian forces defending Budapest on Christmas Day 1944 had a ration strength of 55,100 and a combat strength of 15,050 – somewhat less than the statutory ration strength of two divisions (60,000) and the combat strength of one (15,000). While the 15,050 Hungarian combatants represented 30 per cent of the combined combat forces defending Budapest,

their share of artillery equipment was significantly larger, with 60 per cent of the guns belonging to Hungarian units. However, not all took part in the action: the 4/2 Artillery Battery, for example, did not fire a single shot after 30 December, although it had enough ammunition, four guns and a number of artillery observers.⁷² In addition, the Hungarians lost their men and equipment faster than the Germans. The strengths of the different Hungarian units encircled in Budapest on 25 December are shown in table 13.

The combat value of the Hungarian units in the Budapest cauldron was largely determined by the fact that roughly 50 per cent of the ration strength were not trained for infantry action and 16 per cent were only recruited during the siege. The latter made up 30 per cent of the total Hungarian combat strength, which in turn was only about 30 per cent of the total ration strength. A significant number of units that took no part at all in the action included the KISKA auxiliary security force, numerous police officers and the students of the military institutes, numbering about 17,000. These could have been usefully deployed in action only if they had been equipped with heavy weapons and trained in their use. Even then, however, the majority would probably have stopped fighting at the first opportunity.

KISKA was the successor to the Hungarian National Guard, which had been formed on 25 September 1944 of men who were not eligible for active service and had either volunteered or been conscripted for security and guard duties. They were given food and pay, wore uniforms or civilian clothes with armbands, carried arms requisitioned from civilians and received their orders from the heads of the paramilitary groups or factories and businesses in their districts. On 3 December the Szálasi government had dissolved the organisation because it had been infiltrated by deserters, persecution victims, resistance fighters and other dissidents, and replaced it with KISKA as an integral part of the Honvéd Army, numbering 7000 non-combatants. Generally there was one KISKA battalion in each city district, but universities and other institutions had units of their own. When KISKA also proved unreliable it was dissolved on 6 January 1945.

The police combat groups were similarly made up of original non-combatants. Although at the time of the encirclement their ration strength was 7000 and their official combat strength 1630, their combat value was minimal because of inadequate training and equipment. Their independent operations disintegrated within a few hours with great losses: 50 per cent were killed or badly wounded.⁷³

One exception to the rule was the assault artillery. Although its equipment consisted mainly of small arms, it had considerable combat value

thanks to its high motivation. In January 1945 it was still being joined by volunteers – young paramilitaries, students from military academies and high schools, and soldiers who had lost their own formations – because it offered better food, more humane treatment and proof of identity in case of police raids.⁷⁴ In November 1944, Captain Sándor Hanák recruited an armoured grenadier company of soldiers cut off from other units, and in early December First Lieutenant Tibor Rátz, commander of the I/3 Assault Artillery Battalion, escaped from Pest with his unit to join in the attack of the 10th Assault Artillery Battalion at Baracska because he felt that his assault guns were underemployed.⁷⁵

The regular divisions, on the other hand, comprised many Hungarian soldiers who did not want to fight. A characteristic example is the 1st Armoured Division, which in early December showed a ration strength of 14,000,⁷⁶ but reported only 2038 infantry to the Germans.⁷⁷ By late December there had been 80 desertions, but no investigations followed.⁷⁸ The staff and almost 600 reserves of the 10th Infantry Division's 6th Infantry Regiment (6/I and 6/II Battalions) did not fight at all from 24 December to the end of the siege,⁷⁹ and the 10th Reconnaissance Battalion remained a 'hidden unit' of whose existence the Germans were never informed.⁸⁰ Most units kept two different sets of troop and weaponry accounts.⁸¹ As early as November three colonels and five lieutenant-colonels of the 12th Reserve Division had been discharged or court-martialled, and by the end of December the battalions numbered only 30–40.⁸²

Strangely enough, neither the German nor the Hungarian military leaders made any attempt to change this situation and accepted the reports – although they must have known that they were false. Lieutenant József Bíró, a divisional adjutant, writes in his memoirs: 'The Germans were satisfied with the token actions of our three battalions and even defended the commander of the 18/I Battalion, which had retreated without permission, when Arrow Cross men informed on him'.⁸³ Many members of the higher military echelons were only carrying out routine administrative duties, being mainly interested in minimising their losses or, to put it more simply, surviving the war.

The German military authorities took every opportunity to blame the Hungarians for the defeats. Their reports suggest that the entire responsibility for the defence of Budapest rested on their own shoulders, and they repeatedly refer to desertions on the Hungarian side, forgetting that the same, albeit to a lesser extent, also applied to Germans. Conversely, several Hungarian officers state in their memoirs that the desertions were due, at least in part, to the arrogance of the Germans, the subordinate position of

the Hungarians and the almost complete elimination of the Hungarian command. By the end of December many Hungarian units had been split into companies or even smaller formations and placed under German orders, although in some cases remnants of other units (chiefly the officers) and even civilians had joined German units of their own free will.⁸⁴

Soviet reports about Hungarian desertions also give a false picture, because for political purposes prisoners of war are often presented as if they had voluntarily deserted. Soviet reports about the combat strength of the enemy are equally unreliable. According to documents in Soviet archives, in Pest the defenders lost 35,840 dead, 291 tanks and assault guns, 1419 guns and 222 armoured trucks.⁸⁵ In fact the defenders had no such quantities of military hardware in the entire cauldron, and if we add to the alleged dead the 25,000 prisoners taken by the Red Army in Pest alone, these claims prove even less tenable.

The greatest problem faced by the Germans was lack of infantry. Of the four panzer grenadier battalions of the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, one was not in Budapest and the combined combat strength of the other three was barely more than 500; one panzer grenadier battalion of the 13th Panzergrenadier Division had also remained outside the encirclement. Table 14 lists the German ration strengths in Budapest on Christmas Day 1944.

The combat value of the German units was uneven. It was highest among soldiers from the Reich serving in units with a long tradition. One such unit was the 13th Panzer Division, more than 20 members of which were awarded the Knight's Cross and three the Oak Leaf medal. Others were the 8th SS Cavalry Division and the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, which had originally consisted of SA members, although by 1944 it had been all but destroyed three times (first at Stalingrad) and reinforced with new recruits. The combat value of some 10,000 other troops was impaired by lack of training and equipment, and the unit with the lowest combat value was the 22nd SS Cavalry Division, which consisted of ethnic Germans who could not even speak the language and were the most frequent deserters.

The SS units comprised almost all nationalities – in addition to ethnic Germans, press-ganged French Alsatians, Hungarians, Serbs, Slovaks and Romanians, and Finnish, Flemish, Swedish and Spanish volunteers. The baggage trains of the SS divisions included Russian, Ukrainian, Tartar and other auxiliaries. One artillery battalion of the Galizien-2 SS Division consisted mainly of Ukrainians dressed, for reasons of economy, in Polish uniforms with German insignia.⁸⁶ The 22nd SS Cavalry Division was totally

demoralised by early November, and the 1st, 6th and 8th SS Police Regiments, recruited in Hungary, were extremely unreliable. Behind the 8th SS Police Regiment at the Solt bridgehead, machine-gun positions were set up with orders to fire on any movement that looked like desertion. During the last days of the siege some of these troops even mutinied against their officers.⁸⁷ On the whole, however, the Germans' morale, as well as their training and equipment, was better than that of the Hungarians.

The ideological war waged on the eastern front sometimes had disastrous consequences for the German soldiers, who resisted to the bitter end not only out of a sense of duty and loyalty but also because they feared the worst from the Soviets. That is why even those German units with a low morale chose to fight rather than surrender. A particularly large number of SS soldiers and Russian and Ukrainian auxiliaries chose suicide rather than capture. Many were seen putting their last sub-machine gun cartridge on one side for that purpose.⁸⁸

Supplies for the troops also created serious problems for the German and Hungarian commands. Budapest was a fortress only on paper, and the stockpiling of food to last several months was never even begun. Many of the existing stocks, including both food and military necessities, were kept in the outer districts of Buda and fell into Soviet hands between 24 and 26 December. After Christmas, Captain Dezső Németh, quartermaster of the Hungarian I Army Corps, in an act of deliberate sabotage, moved the Hungarian stocks to locations where they could soon be found by the Red Army. When the encirclement was completed the defenders had 450 tonnes of ammunition, 120 cubic metres of fuel and 300,000 ration units⁸⁹ – enough for about five days.

The German and Hungarian commands could not even think of feeding the civilian population. The minimum of food and ammunition required by the encircled troops was calculated as 80 tonnes per day. Because of limited airfield capacity, 20 tonnes were to be parachuted in and the rest delivered by Ju-52 air freighters and gliders. Emergency landing zones and parachute dropping points were established at the Racecourse, the north Csepel recreational airfield, the site of today's People's Stadium and the Kistrákos drill ground in Pest, and in Tabán Park and Vérmező Meadow in Buda. The capital's larger aerodromes had been taken by the Soviets earlier: Budaörs on 25 December, Ferihegy on 27 December and Mátyásföld on 30 December.

The first air delivery arrived on 29 December 1944. It was flown in by the Budapest supply group of the German 4th Air Fleet, which had been set up on the same day under the command of Lieutenant-General Gerhard

Conrad. The group had some 200 aircraft of various kinds and flew 61 missions a day on average, of which 49 were successful. Until the capture of the Racecourse in early January there were even some days with up to 93 landings. The greatest losses were suffered by the gliders. 32 of the 73 DFS-230s never reached Budapest, and the remainder either disintegrated on crash-landing or ended up in the wrong place. They were piloted by NSFK (National Socialist Flying Corps) members aged 16–18, most of whom had volunteered out of youthful bravado.⁹⁰

Of the required daily supplies only 47 tonnes on average could be delivered. Although 86 per cent of this was ammunition, the German heavy artillery dropped out of the action in the first week of the siege. As no horse fodder was available, the garrison's horses (roughly 25,000) became food for humans. In January the Germans were still carefully guarding a dozen pigs – for the city command and its entourage – at the southern edge of Buda Castle. A company sergeant-major of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division remembers: 'The most dangerous and most successful undertaking of my life was when one night, to feed my hungry soldiers better, I stole a pig from the Germans with a few of my lads.'⁹¹ By the end of January all central stores were exhausted, and the only food available was carrots – originally kept as animal feed – and horse meat. However, even these were so scarce that by the last weeks of the siege most of the soldiers were starving.

The total supplies flown in weighed 1975 tonnes, including 417 tonnes delivered by Hungarian pilots. The parachutes carrying ammunition canisters were red, those carrying food canisters white. During the last week of the siege several thousand canisters were dropped under cover of darkness, but only a few reached the troops. Some were blown by air-currents into Soviet-held areas, and the search for the others could not begin until morning, by which time civilians had pilfered the food, despite the threat of capital punishment. The contents of those that were found intact could not be distributed because of a lack of fuel and constant artillery bombardment. Sometimes the canisters carried surprising objects such as Iron Crosses or yellow flags to mark unexploded shells. A Knight's Cross for Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was dropped three times before it reached him.

The Soviet and Romanian units

The Soviet and Romanian troops also present a mixed picture. The Soviet supreme command always reinforced the divisions in the main line of an attack, but other units could rarely count on this. Tank, cavalry and

mechanised guard corps were reinforced with highly trained and motivated recruits, while the reinforcements of any others included children and old people, drafted indiscriminately. The men in liberated Soviet territories were immediately pressed into service. According to German intelligence, 40–70 per cent of 15 reinforced divisions opposing the German Army Group South came from recaptured territories.⁹² Soldiers freed from German prisoner-of-war camps in Romania were redeployed with hardly a rest. Thus, of 960 prisoners taken by the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division in November–December 1944 only 160 were first-timers, while 400 had already been captured once and 400 twice.⁹³ The Soviet command allocated a large number of Soviet troops and tanks to strengthen the Romanian 7th Army Corps because it mistrusted the equipment and fighting spirit of the Romanians. The majority of Tartar, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Caucasian soldiers also felt unenthusiastic about the war, and the morale of the Moldavians and Ukrainians was particularly low. In some units, before an attack, soldiers were pulled out of the aligned ranks and shot for alleged cowardice. The smallest offences were punished with 10 years' hard labour, converted to three months in a penal company, where the chances of survival were particularly slim. To improve morale before an attack, the Soviet commanders often distributed large quantities of alcohol among the soldiers and set up an armed cordon to prevent any of them trickling back. More than once after a failed attack they ordered their heavy weapons to fire on their own returning infantry.

To escape from such conditions, many Soviet and Romanian soldiers absconded or changed sides, although the Hungarians doing the same in the other direction outnumbered them.⁹⁴ The reason Soviet and Romanian defectors often gave to German interrogating officers was that they 'wanted to live'.⁹⁵ Lieutenant József Bíró remembers: 'During one of our successful counter-attacks 70 Russians crossed over to us. They told us that if they had tried to retreat instead of holding their positions they would have been shot. That is why they were more afraid of going back than forward.'⁹⁶

Table 15 lists the Soviet and Romanian combat forces (with subordinate units in brackets), which were constantly being regrouped for the continuous assaults, from November 1944 to February 1945; table 16 shows the total number of Soviet soldiers engaged in the siege on 1 January 1945. Theoretically the Soviet divisions were much smaller than the German and Hungarian. The German divisions originally formed in 1944 numbered 12,500, the Hungarian 20,000 and the Soviet 9389. However, these figures are deceptive because most Soviet supply units were directly attached to armies or fronts rather than forming integral parts of divisions; moreover,

the total strength of a Hungarian division was so great because the Hungarians tried to compensate for the shortage of heavy weapons by increasing the numbers of infantry armed with rifles. In a Soviet infantry division only 150 men belonged to the supply services and 109 to the medical services, as opposed to 1113 and 628 respectively in a German division. The combat strength of a German division was 7706, and that of a Soviet division 7509.⁹⁷ Table 17 provides an example of the numerical decline of Soviet divisions, despite constant reinforcements, during November 1944.

Due to the discrepancies in the sizes of divisions, a comparison of the strength of the defenders and the attackers must be based on the total numbers on both sides at any given time. Table 18 shows the approximate proportions arrived at in this manner.

It should be noted that the Soviets, unlike the Germans, were often able to repair their damaged equipment. Their 70 light, 32 heavy and 10 self-propelled batteries not only outnumbered the 45 light and 15 heavy batteries of the defenders but also remained in battle-ready condition, while the German and Hungarian units lost 30 per cent of their guns in the early days of the siege. In addition, the Soviets had enough ammunition and were able to take better care of their wounded. Most of the Red Army's supplies could be obtained from the occupied territories. Apart from flour, sugar, tobacco and war matériel, everything was requisitioned locally.⁹⁸ Sometimes the Soviets paid for requisitioned goods, but this had only symbolic value because the banknotes printed by the military were not covered – which was one of the reasons why in 1946 Hungary was to experience one of the worst periods of inflation in history.

As shown above, the Soviet troops vastly outnumbered the Germans and Hungarians. However, their numerical superiority was less decisive than might be expected. In any city battle the defenders have the enormous advantage of being able to form locally superior forces through rapid and concentric regroupments. The presence of roughly double the number of Soviet soldiers therefore proved sufficient solely because the Germans and Hungarians were not only disproportionally short of ammunition and thus unable to make the best use of their heavy weaponry, but also evaded action on many occasions. In different circumstances the attackers would have needed three times as many troops as the defenders to succeed.

The German and Hungarian commands

On 25 December the Soviet artillery began to bombard the convent of Notre Dame de Sion on Sashegy Hill, where the Hungarian Army Corps was billeted. Hindy and his general staff transferred to Sándor Palace in the Castle District in Buda, while most sections of the corps command were stationed at various points in the city. The German corps command established itself in Werbőczy Street not far from Hindy. Early in January, both corps commands moved into the air-raid shelter in the tunnel under Castle Hill.⁹⁹ The two-storey shelter had its own ventilation system and electricity generator, which continued to function throughout the siege. The German command occupied the lower level, the Hungarian the upper. Even here Pfeffer-Wildenbruch maintained his bureaucratic habits, with anterooms, secretaries and fixed office hours.¹⁰⁰

As suggested earlier, co-operation between the commands did not run smoothly. The German command issued orders without taking any notice of the Hungarians' wishes and the German troops rode roughshod over the needs of the population and the capital, requisitioning property and blowing up buildings for no good reason. Until the forced joint move to the tunnel, briefings were given only by two German captains, and neither Pfeffer-Wildenbruch nor his chief of staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Usdau Lindenau, thought personal contact with the Hungarian command necessary. Nor did the German and Hungarian commands exchange any information about their reports to the outside world, in which they mutually criticised each other.

There were also tensions within the German command. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, who never left the shelter, distrusted his own officers and kept a constant check on them. He reprimanded Colonel-General Gerhard Schmidhuber for 'carelessly reducing the division's combat strength'¹⁰¹ by airlifting an officer chosen on social grounds out of the encirclement with the 13th Panzer Division's war diary and other documents on 30 December. He repeatedly complained about the discrepancy between the ration strength and the combat strength of the division and refused to accept the result of the ensuing investigation, which contained a detailed account of all its units. After an inquiry which followed the break-out Major Mitzlaff, chief of staff of the 8th SS Cavalry Division, recorded his impressions as follows:

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch is...not a leader of men. In any case it is a novelty for a commanding general not to leave the tunnel for 6 weeks. This also spread to the officers of his staff, who only visited their troops as a formality after the



Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, commander of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps.



Lieutenant-Colonel Usdau Lindenau (in captain's uniform) chief of staff, IX SS Mountain Army Corps.

award of the Knight's Cross. There was particularly harsh criticism of the chief of staff, Major [later Lieutenant-Colonel] Lindenau. It was said that he lacked the necessary seriousness. They had always been calm and confident in total ignorance of the situation.¹⁰²

In terms of background and character, the commanders of the various units differed widely. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was born in 1888, the son of a doctor. In the First World War he served as a lieutenant and subsequently joined the newly established security police. Between 1928 and 1930 he worked in Chile as a gendarmerie instructor. From 1939 to 1940 he commanded the SS Police Division and then became chief of the colonial police department in the corps of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt headed by the SS Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler. On 27 August 1943 he was appointed commander of the Latvian VI SS Army Corps, which he commanded until 11 June 1944 at the comparatively quiet front of the German Army Group North. He came to Budapest in September 1944 to help foil Horthy's attempt to make peace with the Allies and to direct the creation of new armed SS units. Horthy's failure and the ensuing political events which favoured the Germans would not have been enough to make him an important figure in the defence had not the Soviet troops reached the periphery of the capital a fortnight later.

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was not a member of the National Socialist Party and never used the 'Heil Hitler' salute. As an experienced police officer he was appointed commander of the Budapest Corps Group in the hope that he would be able to prevent any unrest and desertions. Like the pedantic official he was, he insisted on strict observation of all the rules. In 1940, for example, he sentenced a soldier to 10 days' detention for taking a pound of coffee from an empty apartment. His subordinates had a very low opinion of him. Lieutenant-Colonel Helmut Wolff remembers with bitterness:

To every helpful suggestion we got dirty and arrogant replies. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch always lied in his reports. For example, Keleti Station fell two days later than he reported. All his reports were so exaggerated that even his adjutant, shaking his head, declared that he would never dare to report such things.¹⁰³

According to Colonel-General Balck, the tune in Budapest was called by a 'civilian' or, at best, 'political' general and his chief of staff, both of whom were 'unable to cope with the situation' but 'could not be replaced'.¹⁰⁴ Although Balck was biased against all SS generals, his criticism was not without foundation. In 1955 Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was one of the last Soviet prisoners of war to be released, and in 1971 he was killed in a traffic accident in West Germany.

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's chief of staff, Usdau Lindenau, aged 30, was one of the youngest staff officers in the German army, and had excellent credentials. He arrived in Budapest from Vienna on 19 December 1944. Although he did not belong to the SS, his promotion to the IX SS Mountain Army Corps was not unusual: as the SS had no general-staff academies its high officers often came from the Wehrmacht.

The commander of the 8th SS Cavalry Division was SS Brigadeführer (equivalent to major-general) Joachim Rumohr. The son of a farmer, he was born in Hamburg in 1910. In 1930 he joined the Nazi Party, and a little later the SS. Since the beginning of the Second World War he had gained considerable experience as commander of various units. During the break-out he was wounded and subsequently committed suicide.

The commander of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division was SS Brigadeführer August Zehender, born in Württemberg in 1903. In 1918, aged 16, he joined the army and served as a sergeant until 1933. After being discharged with distinction he joined the Nazi Party and in 1935 became an SS Hauptsturmführer (equivalent to captain). During the Second World War, he served as a battalion and regiment commander until November 1944; when he saw the failure of the break-out he also committed suicide.

The commander of the 13th Panzer Division, Colonel-General Gerhard Schmidhuber, was born in Prussia in 1894. In 1914 he became a reserve

officer. In 1920 he left the army, but rejoined in 1934. He served as a battalion and regiment commander in France and the Soviet Union and was repeatedly decorated. During the siege, troubled by the memory of having purloined a Persian carpet in Gödöllő, he tried to salve his conscience by giving Captain Benyovszky 100 pengős to help a poor man.¹⁰⁵ He took part in the first wave of the break-out and was killed in Széna Square.

The commander of the 66th Panzergrenadier Regiment of 13th Panzer Division, Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) Wilhelm Schöning, was born in Gumbinnen (East Prussia) in 1908. During the siege he was also put in charge of the other regiment of the division, so that he temporarily performed the duties of Schmidhuber, who in his turn assumed command of all combat groups on the Pest side, which included Schöning's unit. Having been wounded several times, Schöning managed to reach the German lines after the break-out from Buda. He was pursued by memories of the siege until he died in 1987 in Bochum.

The commander of the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, Major-General Günther von Pape, was born in Düsseldorf in 1907. As a regular officer he commanded several companies, battalions and regiments in the Second World War. Because of his outstanding record he was awarded the Knight's Cross and the Oak Leaf medal. On 23 December 1944, when he was detailed to organise the Feldherrnhalle Panzer Corps, his command was taken over by Lieutenant-Colonel Helmut Wolff, the commander of the Panzergrenadier Regiment. Wolff escaped during the break-out and died in 1989 in Germany as a retired Bundeswehr general.

Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Kündiger, acting commander of the 271st Volksgrenadier Division, rose from the lowest ranks to staff officer and also received the Oak Leaf and the Knight's Cross. His division was only partly trapped in Budapest and was reconstituted outside the encirclement under its original commander, Major-General Martin Bieber.

Between the Hungarian and German command structures there were some noteworthy differences. In particular, the highest rank a Hungarian officer could reach by the age of 40 was that of lieutenant-colonel, and Ernő Billnitzer for one was 50 when he became a general. The German army had lieutenant-colonels aged 30 and generals aged 40.

Iván Hindy was born in Budapest in 1890. In 1909 he became a cadet sergeant. In the First World War he received a commission as a First Lieutenant and the class III Iron Crown – a very high honour, considering his rank. After the war he became a counter-intelligence officer, and in 1924 the annual appraisal undergone by every officer described him as

a determined, mature, open character. He is cheerful, with a lively temperament. He has an outstanding intellect, great military talent, and a powerful and quick mind. He is extremely conscientious and hard-working...In combat he has proved a brave, calm and circumspect commander, whose personal courage has made him a model for his subordinates...In the intelligence service he obtained excellent results thanks to his untiring and enthusiastic efforts. His behaviour as a superior is strict, consistent and just. He has a very positive effect on his subordinates, for whom he shows great concern. As a subordinate he is obedient and disciplined.¹⁰⁶

Despite his excellent record he was unable to obtain a higher position in the army, possibly because of his modest results in the staff-officer examination. In 1928 he quit the counter-intelligence service, and for four years taught German in the Ludovika Military Academy. In 1932 he obtained a law degree and was appointed adviser on discipline and questions of honour in the supreme command of the Honvéd Army, before being made head of the same department. In 1936 he was characterised as an 'excellent' staff officer and in 1940 as 'an officer with mature views and understanding, a strong sense of responsibility, a high degree of conscientiousness and initiative, fully conversant with the orders and regulations for dealing with questions of honour and capable of passing objective and fair judgements'.¹⁰⁷ In 1942 he was promoted to Major-General and placed in charge of the Hungarian I Army Corps.

During Horthy's ceasefire bid on 15 October 1944 Hindy played an important part, when on his own initiative he arrested his own commander, Lieutenant-General Aggteleky, who had given orders to eject the German units that were about to occupy Sashegy Hill and the Citadel in Buda before instructions had been issued for the Hungarian breakaway. Hindy was probably talked into the arrest by Lieutenant-Colonel Sándor Horváth, the chief of Aggteleky's general staff and an Arrow Cross sympathiser. When Aggteleky issued his order Horváth protested, and when Aggteleky insisted on it being carried out, Horváth left the room. Half an hour later Hindy and two other officers suddenly opened Aggteleky's door. As Aggteleky recalls, Hindy was their spokesman:

'I invite the Lieutenant-General and the I Army Corps to join the Hungarist party' ... 'No, no and no', I said. Whereupon Hindy: 'Lieutenant-General, hand over the command to me.' At the same time Captain Czech jumped behind my desk and tore the telephone cable out of the wall. He or another took my pistol holster from the hook.¹⁰⁸

Shortly after, Hindy addressed a meeting of the 60 officer members of the staff:



Banquet of officers and graduates of Ludovika Military Academy in the 1930s. Second fully visible face from left is Colonel-General Iván Hindy, subsequently commander of the Hungarian I Army Corps.

A conspiracy against our German comrades is being prepared here. Aggteleky could have opposed the traitors but did not do so. On the contrary, he sided with the traitors. Unfortunately the Regent is being influenced by cliques of Jewish agents and defeatists and is not prepared to dissociate himself from these criminal cliques. The radio proclamation is treason. It is possible that the Regent doesn't even know about it, otherwise it would have been read out by him and not by a common newsreader. To prevent this treason I had to take over the command. I expect the officers of the army corps to support me.¹⁰⁹

Next day Hindy was officially in command of the corps, and 15 days later was promoted to Lieutenant-General.

Hindy's behaviour shocked several of his acquaintances. He had been commonly known as modest, quiet and a perfect gentleman, and nobody could understand why he had sided with the Arrow Cross. Asked why he had accepted the command, he answered:

I spent a lot of time at my desk in the Ministry of Defence, dealing with dull and stupid questions of honour. I was always longing to be on the battle-field, but my application was constantly rejected. However, my wish always remained the same: to become a commander of troops one day and to reach the highest rank I possibly could. 15 October gave me the opportunity. I became

a Lieutenant-General and commander of the defence of Budapest. I accepted this appointment as a soldier, regardless of politics or the system of government. I fulfilled my dream, and am now going to pay for it with my life.¹¹⁰

Hindy was probably unable to admit the real motives for his conduct even to himself. It is unlikely that a soldier who had never been a careerist would have betrayed his regent and his commanders out of ambition. More probably his decision was motivated by his blindness about the Germans and his fundamental rejection of the Soviet system. In this he was by no means alone: many officers who supported neither the Arrow Cross nor the Germans behaved similarly. Even Gyula Földes, captain of the bodyguard, who was known for his absolute loyalty to the Horthy government, found himself in a deep inner conflict when he had received orders to take action against the Germans, and later on committed suicide. The NCOs of the 2nd Árpád Fejedelem Hussar Regiment, who all came from peasant families in the Hungarian Plain and were not interested in politics, on hearing the regent's proclamation sent a delegation to their officers asking for permission to join the Waffen SS if Hungary were to capitulate.¹¹¹

Hindy was not an Arrow Cross fanatic but a typical professional officer of his day. His outlook had been shaped by the Hungarian Commune of 1919 and 25 years of anti-communist education: 'To my mind communism meant nothing but robbery, murder and above all a total lack of religion and a moral slough',¹¹² he confessed when he was being questioned by the People's Court, which sentenced him to death on 15 October 1946 and later had him executed. He did not abandon this conviction, even when he had lost his illusions about the Germans and realised more and more that all the sacrifices had been pointless. His official reports clearly demonstrate his growing insight into the senselessness of the struggle. By mid-January he described the devastation of Budapest as a *fait accompli* and by the beginning of February he dismissed the relief attempts, which Hitler kept promising on the radio, as 'fairy tales'. In the last phase of the war he was even to describe the Soviet troops in more positive terms than the Germans. However, because of his fear of Bolshevism and his sense of impotence he was incapable of taking an independent stance against the ally. From the moment of his arrest he had no illusions about his fate. He said to a friend:

I told the secret police everything as it really happened. I almost dictated my confession to them. They were surprised. I denied nothing, changed nothing of the truth. They were only interested in a brief period: from 15 October 1944 to the end of February 1945. Four months. My interrogators knew very well that my life before 15 October 1944 was immaculate. I was always against



Lieutenant-General Imre Kalándy (in major-general's uniform), commander of the unit responsible for the maintenance of combat morale.



Lieutenant-General Ernő Billnitzer (in major's uniform), commander of the Assault Artillery.

extremes, as you will remember. Even after 15 October I didn't take any part in the atrocities, but tried to prevent them whenever I could.¹¹³ I accepted the command of the defence of Budapest as a soldier. That's all. My case doesn't need any witnesses, either for or against me. What I am going to say is the truth. I shall be sentenced to death and executed.¹¹⁴

As Hindy had been invested with 'full authority for Hungarian affairs in the territory of the capital and royal residence of Budapest' by the Arrow Cross leadership, the orders for the massacres that followed bear his name. He saved a number of Jews, personally calling on the lawyer László Varga to buy the necessary passes. They were obtained for him free of charge by Sándor Keresztes – 50 years later Honorary President of the Hungarian Christian Democratic People's Party – who was working in the Interior Ministry at the time. In return he issued certificates of exemption for László Varga and one of his colleagues, although he must have known that both were deserters.¹¹⁵ But this was not enough.

Hindy embodies the failure of the right-wing Hungarian officer. Although as a private individual he rejected the excesses and bloodbaths, he nevertheless became responsible for them. As commander he lent his name to

the crimes instead of resigning when he saw that he could do nothing to stop them.

The chief of staff responsible for upholding the fighting discipline in the capital was Lieutenant-General Imre Kalándy, president of the Hungarian Boxing Federation, who was already 69 at the time of the siege. Having served as an assault-company and battalion commander in the First World War, he was one of the most decorated Hungarian officers. The moment he heard of the encirclement he asked Hindy to assign him to a fighting unit, declaring that he was still in good health. He was one of the few commanders who regularly visited the front line:

As a soldier he was practically indestructible. His car was hit daily, but if it was hit in front he was sitting in the back, and if it was hit in the back he was sitting in front next to the driver. His face and hands were full of wounds. When he had no car he travelled by bicycle, and when he had no bicycle he walked.¹¹⁶

On 17 January 1945 he was gravely wounded. His command passed to Major-General Andor Szőke, who in his turn was wounded in the fighting near Déli Station. Kalándy was taken prisoner in the break-out and, debilitated by dysentery, died on a forced march. Szőke died in April 1945 in Szolnok.

Lieutenant-General Ernő Billnitzer, commander of the assault artillery, was born in Fiume in 1889. In the winter of 1942–3 he served on the Don as an artillery corps commander. In September 1944 he was commissioned to organise and command the assault artillery, which was the youngest arm of the service.¹¹⁷ He was the only member of the general staff to escape during the break-out, but was caught near Perbál. In 1948, one month after being freed from prison camp, he was arrested and sentenced in a show trial to three and subsequently eight years' imprisonment. As his sentence included forfeiture of all his assets, he became a hospital porter after his release. In the 1960s Major-General András Zákó, one of the leaders of the military emigration to the West, tried to persuade him to spy for western intelligence. Billnitzer, 70 years old and worn out both mentally and physically, refused and informed the authorities. The affair was exploited for propaganda purposes and in exchange he was given an apartment and a modest pension. He died in 1976 in Budapest.

Colonel Sándor András, an infantry lieutenant since 1918, served in the air force after the First World War; it was being organised in secret because of conditions imposed by the treaty of Trianon. He was trained in Italy and took part in the Spanish Civil War as an observer. In November 1942 he became the air-force chief of staff, but was removed from this post

under German pressure and instead made head of the War Academy. When the academy was closed in November 1944 he took over the command of the 10th Infantry Division's infantry units, and on 26 November succeeded Major-General Kornél Oszlányi as commander of the entire division. On 15 January 1945 he crossed over to the Soviets. Later in the same year he was appointed chief of staff of the new Honvéd Army, but resigned when the communist press started a campaign against him following his criticism of the Department of Military Policy's methods of interrogation. On 19 December 1946 he was arrested, and in a show trial given a death sentence, which was converted to life imprisonment. During the 1956 revolution, on 31 October, he was released from Vác prison and after the suppression of the revolution escaped to Canada. In 1978 he returned to Eisenstadt in Austria, where he died in 1985 at the age of 87.

Neither Major-General István Baumann, commander of the 12th Reserve Division, nor Colonel-General János Vértessy, commander of the 1st Armoured Division, played a significant part during the siege, because their units were entirely under German control. Both divisions had arrived at the Pest bridgehead in an exhausted condition, and their commanders were therefore allowed even less say than those of the 10th Division.

Lieutenant-Colonel László Veresváry, commander of the Budapest Security Battalion, was notorious for his harshness. He had served on the front since March 1944 and was put in charge of the security battalion on 17 October. On one occasion he was seen walking up and down the Lágymányos railway embankment, riding crop in hand, issuing commands to his soldiers in a hail of bullets.¹¹⁸ Later on, when his battalion had been pulverised, he became the much-hated commander of the unit responsible for the immediate defence of the Castle District. A gendarmerie officer remembers:

Veresváry, the terror of the Castle ... came twice a day to see us in the cellar, and before he arrived the sentries would shout: 'look out, Veresváry is coming!' He always boasted of having a list of three battalions in his bag, all of them dead. He had a nasty appearance, thick-set, arrogant, and with a scornful face ... always ready to find something to pick on ... We were so fed up with him that one group decided to do him in next time he came.¹¹⁹

This did not happen. Having ordered his soldiers to break out, Veresváry himself joined the enterprise and, according to eye-witnesses, was shot dead by Soviet troops southwest of Piliscsaba between 15 and 17 February 1945.¹²⁰

The Soviet generals

Little is known about the Soviet generals engaged in the siege of Budapest. This is partly owing to the inaccessibility of Russian archives, but more importantly because memoirs published in the Soviet Union lack personal information. We have detailed knowledge only of the marshals of the Ukrainian fronts.

Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky was born in Odessa in 1898. He served in the First World War from the outset and went to France in 1916 as a soldier of the Russian Expedition Corps. On his return in 1919 he immediately joined the Red Army. In 1920, as an NCO, he was sent to commander training college and in 1930 graduated from the Frunze General Staff Academy. In 1936 he had already become chief of staff of an army corps when he was sent to Spain as a military adviser, working there until 1939. He soon became a major-general and in March 1941 became the commander of the 48th Rifle Corps deployed against Romania. The 9th Guard Army, which was attached to his corps, was the strongest of all Soviet armies.¹²¹ After becoming commander of the 6th Armoured Guard Army and holding seven other appointments within a short period, he commanded the 2nd Guard Army at Stalingrad. In 1942 he was promoted to Army General and in May 1944 to Marshal and commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front. The liberation of Odessa and the operations at Iasi-Kishinev, which almost completely destroyed Friessner's South Ukraine Army Group, are linked to him. After the capitulation of Germany, Malinovsky, as supreme commander on the Transbaikal front, led the main strike against the Japanese Kwantung Army. Until 1955 he was commander-in-chief of the Far Eastern Troops, and in the wake of the XX Communist Party Congress, became First Deputy Minister of Defence. As a supporter of Nikita Khrushchev he obtained the post of Defence Minister, which he occupied, unaffected by Khrushchev's fall in 1964, until his death in 1967. He was twice awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal.

Marshal Feodor Ivanovich Tolbukhin was born in Androniki in the Jaroslav region in 1894. In the First World War he served as an ensign and then as a staff captain, and was known to care deeply about his soldiers. After the 1917 revolution he performed organisational duties. In 1919 he was posted as a staff officer to the northern, eastern and Karelian fronts. Because of his personal courage he was awarded the order of the Red Flag. He subsequently graduated with distinction from the Frunze General Staff Academy and held various posts in the general staff. In 1941 he became chief of staff of the Transcaucasian Front and the Caucasian Front, and in



Marshall Rodion Malinovsky, commander-in-chief of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, with Major-General Ivan Afonin, commander of the 'Budapest Group', on his right.

1942 of the Crimean Front. After the evacuation of Crimea he was appointed commander of the 57th Rifle Army. He was engaged with his troops in the battle of Stalingrad from the very beginning, and played a decisive part in repulsing the German relief attacks. Afterwards he commanded several other fronts before taking over the command of the 3rd Ukrainian Front in May 1944.

Because of his level-headedness, his composure and his ability to get on with people, Tolbukhin was regarded as an excellent military leader. He proved his mettle in January 1945 when, despite Stalin's permission, he chose not to withdraw his troops from southern Transdanubia although they found themselves in a critical situation as a result of the third German relief attempt. With this decision he put his own life on the line, because Stalin showed no mercy for failures. From 16 March 1945, jointly with Malinovsky, he took part in the offensive against Vienna. After the war he became commander of the Soviet Army Group South stationed in Hungary, and from 1947 until his death in 1949 headed the Transcaucasian Military District.¹²²



Marshall Feodor Tolbukhin, commander-in-chief of the 3rd Ukrainian Front, surrounded by his officers.

Special units of the defence

When Budapest became a front-line city, several individuals began to organise special volunteer corps outside the battle order. The first of these initiatives came from Lieutenant-Colonel Pál Prónay, who was 70 at the time. Prónay had set up a volunteer corps against the communists in 1919 and another against the Austrians in 1921. After losing his fighting unit in the latter operation, he made many unsuccessful attempts at setting up others. Without the opportunity to assert himself in battle, his life became a series of scandals in public places, murky affairs of honour and court cases lasting decades. He actually came to blows in the street with one of his opponents in litigation.

Following the German occupation of Hungary, Prónay again tried to set up a unit, but in vain. After the Arrow Cross coup of 15 October 1944 he applied for arms to Emil Kovarcz, the new Minister for Total Mobilisation, and personally stood up in Apponyi Square to recruit followers. However, even this attempt almost failed. First Lieutenant Vilmos Bondor describes his impressions as follows: 'The lack of discipline was striking. The comrades gathering round the old man were of advanced age and knew little about modern tactics, although they made up for it by constantly



'I am fighting, you must work for victory' – contemporary poster.

interfering.¹²³ Captain Zoltán Mikó, who was responsible to the general staff for organising commando units, refused to supply arms to Prónay, who was in any case unable to carry out a proper recruiting and training programme and was abandoned by most of the men he had managed to recruit. His company commander, László Vannay, fell out with him within a few weeks and proceeded to organise a detachment of his own, and the students who had originally joined him transferred to the University Assault Battalion. When he began to accuse Vannay of poaching his soldiers and hurl abuse at Gyula Elischer, the students' leader, his officers were obliged to physically restrain him. With a broad-brimmed Boer hat, a studded belt, high boots, an enormous holster and a riding crop,¹²⁴ he made the rounds of various commands, but was refused support by all, including Hindy:

He told me that he had a permit from the government to set up a special detachment, for which he requested weapons. I told Prónay that I knew nothing about any government permit and thought it strange that he was asking me for equipment if he had a permit from the government, because the government

must have known that I had no surplus weapons or clothing. In response to my inquiries Prónay stated that he could muster about 1500 men. I have always had an aversion to any detachments recruited in this manner and I refused Prónay tactfully in view of his age. I asked the corps quartermaster if he knew anything about Prónay's detachment, because somebody would have had to feed them. I was told that Prónay's people were drawing rations for 1500... Soon after, I discovered that they could only account for 100-120 men, who were not even armed.¹²⁵

During the siege Prónay became lethargic, and only rarely visited the corps command. His detachment was officially merged with the National Armed Service on 7 January 1945.¹²⁶ He was last seen in the break-out and, according to some accounts, died in Kút völgy Valley.

Vannay fared better. He had also had a brush with the law, when on 22 July 1932 he was sentenced by a court-martial to degradation and six months' detention for masterminding a right-wing coup. Previously he had caused a stir when he had insulted the liberal-democratic politician Vilmos Vázsonyi in the street and narrowly missed hitting him in the face. In the 1920s he had been busy organising paramilitary units to circumvent the Trianon treaty. In 1938 he was involved in the creation of the Ragged Guard in upper Hungary, and then carried out successful guerilla actions in Sub-Carpathia. In 1943 he began to think of setting up an assault battalion on the instigation of Zoltán Nyisztor, a pioneer lieutenant-colonel who had served as an observer with German pioneer assault troops in the siege of Voronezh. Nyisztor had suggested the creation of similar units in Hungary to the chief of the Hungarian general staff, Colonel-General Ferenc Szombathelyi, on the grounds that in a territory with few natural obstacles most of the battles to come would be defence actions around housing developments. When Szombathelyi did not reply, Nyisztor put the idea to Vannay.

Vannay was among the first to salute Szálasi in Buda Castle after the Arrow Cross coup. On 20 October 1944 he was granted permission by Emil Kovarcz to set up an independent assault battalion, for which he recruited Arrow Cross members from the public services, the association of veterans from the eastern front, young paramilitaries, students from military academies and boys aged 15–18. The local knowledge of volunteers from the post office, the fire brigade, the water works and other utilities was indispensable in city fighting – particularly in tunnels and culverts. Vannay introduced the 'uncle system', under which boys below 18 were attached to men of 35–45, who trained them. Two 'uncle-and-kid' pairs made up the smallest tactical unit, three a squad and nine a detachment.



Ervin Galántay, dispatch runner of the Vannay Battalion, as a cadet aged 14 at Kőszeg Military Academy.

Training began on 1 December at the Újlak brick factory. Vannay had obtained instructors and arms from the 22nd SS Cavalry Division. The methods were so tough that several trainees suffered injuries: some were shot in the bottom while crawling through barbed-wire entanglements, others fell off the roofs they were made to climb in pouring rain.¹²⁷

Vannay solved the problem of food supplies in his own way. First he seized the Szentkirályi Street store of kosher schnapps, goose liver and other provisions confiscated from Jews, which brought immediate protests from the district's Arrow Cross authorities. When this proved insufficient, he took the staff of the Tímár Street bakery into 'protective custody' and forced them to work day and night for his battalion. The same fate befell the cake shop in Bécsi Road and the 23rd Honvéd Army catering section, over which he had a fierce argument with Colonel Csipkés, the city commander. The battalion's identity cards and forged accounts were printed by employees of the Kánitz printing works in Vadász Street, whom he had also taken into 'protective custody'. Although he was a rabid anti-Semite, this did not prevent him from letting a certain Uncle Roth and his wife prepare the stamps for the documents and run the kitchens; in exchange, the

Jewish couple received the same rations as everybody else and were never hurt. There is, however, positive proof that 46 people rounded up in Margit Boulevard were executed in the cellar of the Toldy High School and on the Danube Embankment by some of Vannay's men.¹²⁸

Thanks to the kosher supplies, the battalion acquired a reputation for feeding its soldiers better than the regular army. By the time it was officially named Hungarian Royal Vannay Flying Squad Battalion on 22 December, it numbered 638 members. For a long time Vannay followed the example of Hitler and Szálasi by wearing a tunic without rank insignia. There were several complaints, but Vannay, in protest against his sentence of 1932, refused to appear in a normal military uniform until he was rehabilitated. After Christmas Szálasi formally promoted him to major.

The Vannay Battalion was the only unit with its own security section, comprising about 10 men whose task it was to execute captured deserters and Soviet soldiers caught in civilian clothes. The head of this section, Captain Ferenc Gyulay-Molnár, monitored Soviet radio messages, Captain Szekeres conducted counter-propaganda by loudhailer with the help of two Ruthenian soldiers, and First Lieutenant Endre Kovách took charge of recruitment.

On 24 December the bulk of the battalion was stationed near János Hospital to close off the access to Buda from Hűvösvölgy Valley. However, on 25 December, when the stabilisation of the Buda front would have been of paramount importance, three of the four companies were ordered to join in the counter-attack of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division near Csömör, east of Pest.¹²⁹ On 26 December the counter-attack recovered the original Hungarian positions, but they were abandoned again when Soviet tanks broke through the line of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division. Vannay's units suffered significant losses, and he withdrew the remainder to Buda without informing anybody. The sources contradict each other about what followed. We only know for certain that the Honvéd Army officers accused Vannay, who had been slightly wounded, of running away, while Vannay blamed them for the failure of the counter-attack and the loss of one of his companies.

Subsequently, the Vannay Battalion sustained heavy casualties in the ferocious encounters in Buda, where it was positioned in what was probably the most exposed section of the defence ring. To compensate, Vannay raided the cellars where people had taken refuge and sent whomever he thought fit to the front line with a rifle and no training. To prevent desertions he announced to the Soviets by radio that the Vannay Battalion would take no prisoners,¹³⁰ with the result that the Soviets also showed no

mercy to any captured members of the Vannay Battalion, whether or not they were fighting of their own free will.

Late in December, the students of the Salesian boarding school were drafted into the battalion. Most of the young men, untrained and in civilian clothes, were killed within a few days – a particularly large number died in Széll Kálmán Square in late January. One survivor, Gyula Szuly, writes:

Next day, 14 January, before we could assess our chances of fetching water, block commander Kántor in a resounding voice called all the men to the courtyard. Someone was missing... The policeman standing next to Kántor pretended to be very interested in this: 'What's the matter? Has somebody disappeared? The house commander is responsible. How many men between 18 and 60 are living here?'

'A stranger is missing. I'll get him.'

'The sooner the better', the policeman said with a scowl. 'By the way, the Reverend will be here soon.'

'The Reverend?' The tenants looked at each other.

'Why is the Reverend coming?' I asked.

'Don't ask so many questions.'

The policeman walked away, then came back quite close: 'I don't want any scenes like I had in another house yesterday. Total mobilisation of the country – everybody must understand that.'

'What happened in that house yesterday?'

'Nothing – only the women. Some women made hysterical scenes that were unworthy of Hungarians. This is just an inspection.'

'What kind of inspection?'

'We know that all the men who may be in this building are probably exempt from military service. Otherwise they wouldn't be here, because the call-up orders have been posted everywhere. But up there, in the Vannay Battalion in the Toldy High School, they want to check the papers. There may be someone here who would have to fight' ...

An officer with a grim face was sitting at a desk, wearing a light summer uniform jacket with a first lieutenant's badge. A few others were standing around, some without uniforms.

'First combat company', the officer snapped, writing somebody's posting on a slip of paper.

'Where am I to go?' asked the frightened man in a winter coat, whose papers were apparently not convincing enough to exempt him from military service.

'You'll all go to the First Combat Company's quarters in the high school in Ilona Street, where you'll get your uniforms. Haven't you got a rank?'

'No', the frightened civilian answered. 'I've never been a soldier. My age group was exempt.'

‘Well, now you won’t be exempt. Here is your posting. Enjoy it. In battle you’ll be able to prove that you love your fatherland.’

The walls shook. There was heavy shelling. The officer said:

‘What’s the matter, have we got cold feet? That one was going out, not coming in, as if you didn’t know. It was our Bofors in Hunfalvy Street. The enemy fears it like fire. When this goes off they don’t give much of an answer ... You’ll get used to this music before the final victory.’¹³¹

By the time of the break-out those left alive numbered only 100–120, with a substantial proportion wounded. Vannay himself was killed in Kút völgy Valley.¹³² Many survivors were later tried by the People’s Court for taking part in atrocities.

The student György Deutsch – later the owner of the famous Four Seasons restaurant in New York – was a special case. Having escaped from the forced labour service, he joined the Hungarist Legion and then the Vannay Battalion. Shortly before the fall of Pest he absconded, but was caught and, in a ‘medical examination’, found to be a Jew. Although he claimed to belong to the sect of Transylvanian Sabbathists (who were not regarded as ‘racial Jews’ in spite of being circumcised), he was taken with some others to the Danube to be executed, but managed to escape once more.¹³³

The Hungarist combat groups of the Arrow Cross Party were a mixed bunch. They included several flying squads, some equipped with *panzerfausts*, but these were only deployed as security patrols behind the main defence line. The majority of party members preferred to engage in violence against defenceless people. Of the 2500 activists in the six combat groups, no more than 700 actually came into contact with the Soviets, and that generally when the Soviets attacked them. However, there were a few who not only accepted the Arrow Cross ideology but were also prepared to risk their lives for it. Béla Kollarits was one of them, as Ensign István Szalay, his adjutant, remembers:

In civilian life Kollarits was legal adviser to the German aircraft factory in Csepel. In military terms he was a nobody and had never served in the Hungarian army. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War with a German flying squad. When Szálasi came to power he reported for duty and was immediately made a first lieutenant. He was assigned to propaganda and travelled the battlefield in a car, egging on the soldiers with a loud hailer. On his way home from one of his trips he noticed that the Russians had reached the Lágymányos railway embankment. Determined to defend his house, he went to the Ludovika Military Academy, picked 25 loafing soldiers...and with them joined in the defence of the embankment.¹³⁴



Member of the 'Levente' youth organisation, with anti-tank gun.

The University Assault Battalion came into being in very different circumstances. According to regulations introduced after 15 October 1944, all men were obliged to report for duty in the Armed National Service. In order to satisfy these regulations – but sometimes also in order to evade them – several units, for example KISKA, were formed. This gave a new impulse to the creation of the University Assault Battalion. On 5 October Reserve Lieutenant Gyula Elischer, a former student at the Technical University, obtained a permit from the Ministry of Defence to form a battalion. Towards the end of October the group, which by then numbered 500, was adopted in the battle order as the Royal Hungarian I Honvéd University Assault Battalion, and thus became a unit of the regular army rather than of any particular faction.¹³⁵ Many of the students who joined had previously belonged to the Levente organisation of young paramilitaries or the National Guard. The battalion included 12 men above the rank of private, with an officer corps consisting of two reserve lieutenants and two reserve ensigns. As the promised evacuation to Germany continued to be delayed, other university students offered themselves, and soon the organisation of the II University Assault Battalion began.¹³⁶ Elischer writes:

I and a few others wanted to believe in the possibility of an Anglo-Saxon thrust as in a miracle. Facing the reality was simply too awful...I could not identify with the Arrow Cross, but I could accept a Stalinist communist occupation even less...In 1941 I had been one of the first to cross the Russian border. As a

reconnaissance officer I witnessed some terrible atrocities committed by the retreating troops, or rather by the political units. Everything I saw of Stalinist communism filled me with horror. Professor Ferenc Orsós, a member of the Katyn international commission, was a colleague of my father and I first heard from him what had happened to the Polish officer corps...I hoped that it would be possible to hold our unit together till the end of the war. If it were transferred to Germany for training, I thought, an efficient unit would be able to fight its way through to the Anglo-Saxon lines.¹³⁷

Most of the battalion's organisers were convinced anti-communists, but they were not right-wing extremists. Elischer, for one, had been revolted by the treatment of Jews he had witnessed on a trip to Germany in 1942, and the battalion gave shelter to some Jewish men and a social-democratic youth leader wanted by the Gestapo.

On 5 December Lajos Balás Sipeki, a third-year student of mechanical engineering and an engineering-corps captain, took over the command of the original battalion, while Major Lajos Csiky became commander of the second. The first 200 recruits were kitted out within five days. Each received a sheepskin jacket, pioneer boots and an overcoat with pioneer insignia. Although weapons were in short supply the students found other ways of acquiring fairly adequate equipment. They even obtained rifles with telescopic sights from the Buda shooting range; being familiar with technology, they did not need much training in their use.

Sipeki, with his front-line experience, insisted that his unit should not be sent into battle before completing its training. This landed him in heated arguments with Kovarcz and other Arrow Cross leaders, who demanded immediate deployment, but he resisted these demands and also prevented individual actions by students, which he knew would only have led to pointless slaughter.¹³⁸ Unlike him, the majority of the students had no conception of what war was really like. Most had not been soldiers before and awaited the baptism of fire full of romantic ideas.

On 24 December Kovarcz and the Arrow Cross youth leader István Zsakó alerted the battalion to the Soviet breakthrough and invited the students to leave the capital together with the Arrow Cross youth organisations. The students' commanders faced a difficult choice. According to plans, the battalion should have gone to a training camp in Érsekújvár (today Nove Zamky) after Christmas, but there were various arguments in favour of staying, as Elischer, who made the decision to do so, notes:

Leaving Budapest together with the Arrow Cross youth – with party organisations, perhaps the Gestapo and others like it – would have compromised every member of the battalion once and for all. I did not want that to happen under

any circumstances...I thought that the first battalion must be kept out of the fighting as long and as far as possible. Perhaps there would still be a chance to leave the encirclement and accomplish our original ideas. If it were unavoidable, it would be better to die fighting than to be captured or to allow ourselves to be butchered as a disgraced unit.

I believed that every day we could hold up the communists would help the cause of Hungary and Europe.¹³⁹

Elischer and his companions must have realised that the longer they held out, the longer the sufferings of the population of Budapest – in particular the Jews – would continue, and the closer the city would come to being reduced to a heap of rubble. They believed that in both human and moral terms they were choosing the lesser evil, and were prepared to risk their own lives in the process. Their feelings about communist rule were too strong to let them opt for an alternative that posterity might have regarded as more justifiable.

Finally, the special units also included the Morlin Group, named after Imre Morlin, an artillery captain who later became a priest. This group consisted of some 120 cadets, military-academy students and soldiers who had been separated from their units. It was equipped with *panzerfausts*, two 7.5cm anti-tank guns and a considerable number of light weapons, and attached to the 10th Infantry Division with the task of destroying any Soviet tanks penetrating into the city. Desertions from this group were rare: even boys aged 14–18 fought to the last bullet, and many were killed. After the capture of Morlin on 15 January, however, the group disintegrated. Some members ended up in the Budapest Security Battalion, and several died on the Lágymányos railway embankment.

Notes

- 1 Péchy, Blanka, p.34.
- 2 Száva, 1975b, p.212.
- 3 OSZK, Faragó, p. 1 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 4 *Magyar Játékszín* 18/22, 21–7 December 1944.
- 5 MA KTB Hgr. Süd, 897/b, daily reports, 23 December 1944.
- 6 Száva, 1975b, p.248.
- 7 Guderian, p.347.
- 8 For the procrastination over the relocation, see war diary of the German Army Group South. Extracts from the text are reproduced in Bayer. Balck actually regarded the defence of the capital as superfluous, since the relocated forces alone would have been enough to stabilise the situation in Transdanubia. The

deployment of the IV SS Panzer Corps would then have become unnecessary. For Guderian's comments on Hitler's decisions, see Maier, p. 330.

- 9 Interview with Kovács. The German and Hungarian commands received all the reports of the German Army Group South that concerned them.
- 10 This was claimed primarily by Gosztonyi, but the reports of the German Army Group South dated 22 and 23 December, which were based exactly on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's reports, clearly demonstrate the opposite.
- 11 Schweitzer, BA-MA MSg2/4631, p. 1; Bondor, p. 63. Schweitzer kept the war diary of the 13th Panzer Division and received repeated reports on the encirclement as early as 23 December.
- 12 MA KTB Hgr. Süd 898/b, 8 February 1945. The stores were in the outer districts of Buda, but their precise location is no longer known.
- 13 MA KTB Hgr. Süd 898/b, 8 February 1945.
- 14 Pálfalvi, p. 73.
- 15 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, war diary, p. 74.
- 16 HL TGY, Bíró, 3053, p. 48.
- 17 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, war diary, 23 December 1944.
- 18 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, telephone diary, 23 December 1944.
- 19 HL TGY, Vajda, 2772.
- 20 Interview with Kamocsay, who served with a training unit of the army.
- 21 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b. 24 December 1944.
- 22 For Lieutenant-Colonel Usdau Lindenau's comments on the relations between the two general staffs, see Gosztonyi, 1984.
- 23 Hindy's reports and the reminiscences of his staff members (Paulics, Borbás, Kovács) support this impression. In an interview Kovács said: 'We were also told that the villages in the neighbourhood of Budapest had been overrun. We did nothing, and we couldn't have given the Germans a lot of advice, as they would in any case have simply told us to send Hungarian troops. On the other hand they were too brusque to accept any advice from us. They "didn't need" it.'
- 24 HL TGY, letter from Pál Darnói.
- 25 Interview with Pintér.
- 26 BA-MA MSg, Hübner, p. 2.
- 27 Interview with Kovács.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Gosztonyi, 1992, p. 230.
- 30 Portugall, p. 2 (in the collection of the author).
- 31 Interview with Czezdilowszky.
- 32 Hingyi, p. 2 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 33 Interview with Kamocsay.
- 34 HL TGY, Elischer, p. 13.
- 35 This was called Új [new] Szent János Kórház at the time. The old János Kórház, on the south side of Széna Square, was destroyed during the siege.
- 36 Zolnay, 1986, pp. 411–12.
- 37 BA-MA RH 2/1950.

- 38 For example, interview with Michael Klein: 'At Széplóna on Christmas Day the Soviets were collecting the engagement and wedding rings and watches of the civilians they came across in the streets, instead of attending to their military duties'.
- 39 Interview with Neuburg.
- 40 Letter from György Válas (in the collection of the author).
- 41 Flekács, p. 1 (in the collection of the author).
- 42 Interview with Kamocsay.
- 43 For further details of the capture of the villages in the county of Pest, see Krizsán; the particulars were amended and supplemented, on the basis of interviews with locals, by Pál Dobay.
- 44 Csiffáry, p. 18.
- 45 The commander's behaviour illustrates the mood among the Hungarian regular officers and also explains the attitude of the Hungarian troops during the siege. Although by now the majority of regular officers could see the futility of continuing the war and tried to keep their troops out of the fighting, they were unable to make up their minds either to turn against their allies or to lay down their arms.
- 46 Interview with Safáry.
- 47 Gábor Nagy, 1983, p. 431.
- 48 OSZK, Csécsy, 24 December 1944.
- 49 Varga, p. 1 (in the collection of the author).
- 50 Hingyi, p. 3 (in the collection of the author).
- 51 Csebotarev, 1975, pp. 121–3.
- 52 HL TGY, Horváth, pp. 1–2.
- 53 Pálfalvi, p. 69.
- 54 Interview with Sasvári.
- 55 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 18.
- 56 HL TGY, Elischer, p. 13. István Zsakó, the Arrow Cross youth leader, also offered to evacuate the University Battalion, but Elischer did not wish to share a joint enterprise with the Arrow Cross and therefore remained in Budapest with his unit.
- 57 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, war diary, p. 77.
- 58 Letter to the author from József Varga, 23 January 1944.
- 59 *Okmányok*; interview with Dobay.
- 60 Sólyom and Szabó, p. 54.
- 61 Katona, p. 47.
- 62 Márai, *Diary: 1945–57*, p. 285.
- 63 *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, 24 June 1973.
- 64 Zaharov, p. 229. This number seems to be exaggerated. The forces trapped in the Danube Bend were insignificant, consisting mainly of battalions defending the river bank with only 1000–2000 troops.
- 65 This number is obtained by adding up the figures published in *Szabadság* between 24 December 1944 and 16 February 1945.
- 66 Zaharov, p. 262.
- 67 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, report of 31 December 1944.

- 68 For example, Gosztonyi, 1989b, p. 157.
- 69 Letter from Horváth to Gosztonyi, 8 November 1961; HL TGY 3070, Darnói.
- 70 HL, Documents of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps, report of 14 January.
- 71 HL TGY, Bíró, 3251 and HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division show that between 28 January and 1 February some 1000 men were captured on Rózsadomb Hill. On 11 February several thousand more were captured.
- 72 Interview with Czezdilowszky.
- 73 Ravasz, p. 383.
- 74 Vározy, p. 21 (in the collection of the author); interviews with Lénárt and Csány.
- 75 Interview with Vározy.
- 76 Interview with Wáczek.
- 77 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, report of 16 December 1944.
- 78 Interview with Wáczek.
- 79 Interview with Létay.
- 80 Interview with Benyovszky.
- 81 Interview with Czezdilowszky; recollections of Bíró (HL TGY).
- 82 HL VKE, box 306/b, 2 November 1944.
- 83 HL TGY, Bíró, 3251.
- 84 For example, Lieutenant László Szentendrei of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, who joined the German Feldherrnhalle Division (interview with Szentendrei). Civilian volunteers are mentioned in Kern.
- 85 Soviet archival sources, for example, Zaharov, p. 259.
- 86 Interview with Sasvári. The unit in question was probably the 201st Heavy Artillery Battalion.
- 87 Balck, p. 611; Balck, unpublished papers, BA-MA N 647/v. 13, p. 5.
- 88 HL TGY, Salamon, Aurél, 3116, p. 95. Most reports about soldiers committing suicide come from survivors of the break-out (see chapter IV).
- 89 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/5, 8 February 1945, report from Colonel-General Balck.
- 90 Kovács, pp. 12, 36 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 91 Interview with Gerő Ungváry.
- 92 BA-MA RH 2/2468, report of November 1944.
- 93 Interview with Wáczek.
- 94 For example, Klein, p. 44 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 95 BA-MA RH 2/2458. As a characteristic example of the Soviet command's ruthlessness, the 214th Guard Cavalry Regiment in its entirety was reclassified as a penal unit and its commander degraded merely because the unit had lost its flag in the tank battle of Debrecen. (BA-MA RH 2/1996, report of 18 January 1945). A Russian captain in action on Sashegy Hill told civilians that even those with bone injuries were sent back to the front two days later because their commanders 'wanted to be rid of them' (interview with Benefi).
- 96 HL TGY, Bíró, 3053, p. 28.
- 97 BA-MA RH 2/1330.
- 98 BA-MA RH 2/2458.
- 99 Gosztonyi wrongly describes this as the 'Horthy shelter': the regent's shelter was underneath the Royal Palace.

- 100 Lieutenant-Colonel Wolff's report, BA-MA N 647/13.
- 101 BA-MA, Schweitzer, p. 5.
- 102 BA-MA N 647/13.
- 103 BA-MA N 647/13.
- 104 Balck, pp. 611, 661.
- 105 Interview with Benyovszky.
- 106 MA Hindy's record sheet.
- 107 *Ibid.*
- 108 Bokor, 1982, p. 344.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p. 345.
- 110 *Ibid.*, p. 221ff.
- 111 Tomka, p. 49 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 112 HL, Trial of Hindy.
- 113 In reality he could have done much more if he had taken more positive action to oppose the Germans.
- 114 Varga, p. 221.
- 115 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- 116 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 40.
- 117 Assault guns were first deployed in the field in 1940. As they were produced in limited quantities, assault artillery units were used in Budapest mainly as infantry.
- 118 Interview with Bódy.
- 119 Interview with Lám.
- 120 Interview with Hingyi.
- 121 According to Soviet figures the seven corps had 3341 tanks – almost as many as the total number of tanks on the German side. (Suworow, p. 176.)
- 122 *Sovetskaya Voyennaya Entsiklopediya*: Malinovsky, vol. 5, pp. 100–1; Tolbukhin, vol. 8, p. 63.
- 123 Bondor, p. 38.
- 124 Interview with Galántay.
- 125 HL, Trial of Hindy.
- 126 *Budai Összetartás*, 7 January 1945.
- 127 Letter to the author from Galántay, 21 September 1994.
- 128 Igy élt.
- 129 Letter to the author from Galántay, 17 August 1997.
- 130 Interview with Galántay.
- 131 OSZK, Szuly.
- 132 Interview with Galántay.
- 133 *Népbíróági Közlöny* 5, 2, February 1946. Deutsch was subsequently cleared of collaboration with the Arrow Cross by the People's Court.
- 134 HL TGY, Szalay, pp. 57–8.
- 135 HL TGY, Elischer, p. 3.
- 136 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), pp. 9–11.
- 137 HL TGY, Elischer, pp. 3–4.
- 138 Sipeki, p. 1 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 139 HL TGY, Elischer, p. 13.

III

The Siege, 26 December 1944–11 February 1945

1

The hostilities on the Pest side from 24 December 1944

The penetration of the first and second defence belts of the Attila Line

According to plans, Marshal Malinovsky's three rifle corps were due to take the eastern part of Pest by 23 December 1944. However, by 24 December they had only penetrated the positions of the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division between Ecser and Vecsés, southeast of the city,¹ and begun a significant strike against the Hungarian 10th Division between Csömör and Fót to the northeast. This sector, where built-up areas alternated with deep wedges of vacant land, comprised one of the most important lines of attack. With its fields and pastures, which extended as far as the suburb of Pestújhely, it was extremely favourable to tank offensives, as the Soviet advances in January were to prove.

The Soviet offensive along the entire length of the Pest bridgehead began on 25 December. South of Mogyoród, a short distance from Csömör, the German troops retreated and the attackers advanced over a breadth of 500m. In the evening, Captain Sándor Német, with eight men and two German assault guns, recovered the territory, but two companies of the Hungarian 18/I Battalion were captured.²

Despite some local successes of the defenders, the Soviet and Romanian troops ensconced themselves almost everywhere in the first and second belts of the Attila Line, particularly in the central and northeastern sectors of the bridgehead. The third belt along the edge of the suburbs, however, was still in German and Hungarian hands, as were part of the first belt between Vecsés and Pécel and of the second between Soroksár and Maglód.

When the 8th SS Cavalry Division had been relocated to Buda on 24 December, the defence of the first and second belts – both constructed mainly on vacant ground between villages – had become so thinly spread that only one infantryman was available for every 100m stretch. The defenders therefore retreated to the second and third belts, which were tighter and easier to hold. The retreat took place under constant attack, with considerable casualties. Between the retreating groups large gaps opened, and the connecting wings of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division and the 13th Panzer Division between Kerepesi Road and Üllői Road, two major arteries leading into the city from the east and southeast, were repeatedly separated. The Soviet attack also made the withdrawal of reserves impossible, so that maintaining links between the two divisions remained an acute problem.³

On 26 December, between Fót and Pécel on the northeastern front, Soviet and Romanian attacks carved out a number of salients 300–600m in depth along the lines of the Hungarian 4th Hussar Regiment, 10th Infantry Division and 12th Reserve Division, when T-34 tanks overran the scantily manned trenches and opened fire on the defenders from the rear. In the central sector of the same front, near Csömör, the troops of the 8/III Battalion were surrounded and pulverised, although they had knocked out three of the 12 attacking tanks with their light weapons. Between 10 and 15 Soviet tanks also assaulted the lines of the 4th Hussar Regiment north of Csömör. Two were smashed by the hussars' *panzerfausts*, but the rest broke through. The staff of the 4th Hussar regiment stationed in a nearby winery escaped capture only because Lieutenant Ernő Kammerer, who jumped out of a window and was handed a *panzerfaust*, destroyed a tank that was attacking the building.⁴ A fortified hill northeast of Csömör also fell. The Soviets, for their part, suffered heavy losses, which are ignored in their bland reports:

When several attempts to take the fortified hill had failed, Sergeant Merkviladze asked for permission to try again with a platoon. After receiving permission they approached the enemy positions on the hill under cover of fog to within 20-30m and requested artillery fire... They held out successfully on the captured hill for about 5 hours until the arrival of their own sub-unit, during which time they foiled two enemy assaults.⁵

Merkviladze was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal.

A counter-attack by the Vannay Flying Squad Battalion, launched on the same evening, was initially successful and the positions of the 8/III Battalion at Csömör were recaptured. However, Soviet and Romanian troops, piercing the line of the 12th Reserve Division near Sashalom, threatened

to encircle Vannay's men, who retreated after one of their companies had been crushed and their commander wounded.⁶ The Germans had sent only three armoured artillery trucks to assist them, which were no match for the Soviet tanks.

On the southern front, some parts of the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division were relocated to guard the sector between the village of Lakihegy and the suburb of Királyerdő, which included the emergency airfield on Csepel Island, the first to be put into service after the closure of the encirclement.

On 27 December Soviet and Romanian forces broke through the line of the 12th Reserve Division in the third defence belt and took the eastern suburbs of Rákoskeresztúr and Újmajor. On the same day, troops of the Soviet 18th Rifle Corps took Vecsés and established a deep salient stretching as far as the southeastern suburbs of Pestszentlőrinc and Rákoscsaba. From the southern suburb of Budafok on the west bank, a Soviet raiding party tried to cross the Danube eastward to Csepel Island, but was repulsed in close-quarter fighting by Hungarian anti-aircraft artillery.

On the German side the German Army Group South and the Budapest garrison agreed that it was not possible to maintain the entire Budapest bridgehead. Both believed that a retreat would stabilise the situation, as shorter concentric lines could be held by smaller forces. The most practical solution would have been abandoning the Pest bridgehead altogether in order to develop the defence of Buda and prepare for a break-out. However, the chief of staff of the German Army Group South, Colonel-General Grolman, advocated a fast retreat, while the head of the Budapest garrison, Colonel-General Balck, favoured a slower method.

Although Hitler's order of 24 December had prohibited any reduction in the Pest bridgehead, the IX SS Mountain Army Corps began planning a break-out. As it was impossible to comply with Hitler's demand that both Buda and Pest be held until relief arrived, the corps had no other choice. On 26 December the underground telephone lines between Budapest and the headquarters of the German Army Group South were still working, and at about noon Radio Budapest announced that the defenders were going to break out.⁷ This was probably done on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's instructions, although according to his own memoirs it was on 27 December that he decided to disobey Hitler. On 28 December another order arrived from Hitler, categorically forbidding the break-out.⁸

In view of Hitler's repeated orders to the contrary – issued not only on 24 December but also on 23 November, 1 December and three times on 14 December – one may wonder why the commanders of the IX SS Mountain

Army Corps nevertheless began preparing for a break-out. They may have been hoping that Hitler would see the dramatic deterioration in the situation and authorise the break-out at the last moment, as happened on 24 December when the 8th SS Cavalry Division received his permission for a withdrawal after it had actually begun to move. The predicament of the commands, which were constantly having to revise earlier orders, can be attributed to Hitler's habit of leaving nothing to the military and reserving the right to direct operations at all levels down to individual battalions. As his messages from distant Berlin always arrived late, some of the more self-reliant generals acted on the assumption that the order they wanted would arrive after the event. The command of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps, however, believed in the promised relief and lacked the confidence to disobey the Führer at the crucial time.

The Hungarian command had no say in the matter. The reports of the Hungarian I Army Corps show that Hindy and his general staff advocated a break-out as early as 26 December, but Pfeffer-Wildenbruch only replied that he was not entertaining such an idea 'for the time being'.⁹ Typically, the German general considered it unnecessary to give his Hungarian colleague any reasons for his decision.

The onslaught of the Soviet and Romanian troops at the eastern edge of Budapest continued on 28 December. The Hungarian 1st and 13th Assault Artillery Battalions between Pécel and Ferihegy were unable to close the gap left by the withdrawal of the 8th SS Cavalry Division and were wiped out. In contrast, parts of the 16th and 24th Assault Artillery Battalions managed to hold out and even eject the occupiers of Rákoskeresztúr and Újmajor.

Meanwhile, at the northeastern edge of Pest, Soviet troops had expanded their front line along the Szilas stream and all but destroyed the two Hungarian battalions facing them. At nearby Rákosszentmihály, the Germans attempted five counter-attacks, all of which foundered on strong Soviet resistance. Second Lieutenant Nikolai Hodenko knocked out three armoured vehicles single-handed: it was partly for this that he was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal.¹⁰ The security battalion of the Hungarian I Army Corps was also smashed: 300–400 soldiers sent as replacements crossed over to the Soviets, the commander became ill, and by 30 December there were only seven officers and 40 privates left. The Romanian 2nd and 19th Infantry Divisions captured Pécel and Kistarcsa and reached the edge of the eastern suburb of Cinkota, where extremely heavy fighting ensued. After three assaults Cinkota was finally occupied during the night of 29–30 December, but the Romanian 2nd Infantry Division was so worn

out that it had to be withdrawn from the front at once.¹¹ East and southeast of Pest, Maglód and Gyál fell into Soviet hands on 28 December, and there was fighting in the streets on the periphery of Pestszentimre, immediately northwest of Gyál. The nearby railway bridge across the Danube was blown up by the defenders because Soviet troops had reached its Buda end.

After these events the Soviets announced by loudhailer that parley delegates were to arrive next day. Leaflets appeared urging the German and Hungarian troops to surrender.

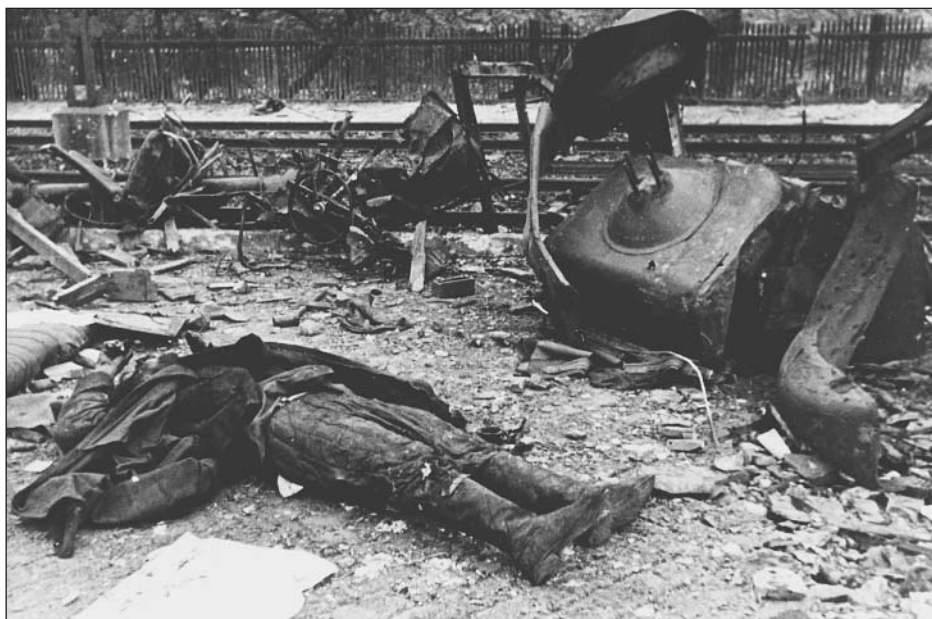
Intermezzo: The parley delegates

Malinovsky wanted to capture Budapest as soon as possible in order to continue his thrust towards Bratislava and Vienna. Both he and Tolbukhin knew, from their experience of Stalingrad, that the siege would be lengthy and fighting in the city costly, but never before had the Red Army besieged a European metropolis with a million inhabitants. In the event, Budapest tied down 15 Soviet and 3 Romanian divisions.

On 29 December the Soviet command, with Stalin's agreement, called upon the garrison to surrender. The terms were generous. The Hungarians would be released forthwith and the Germans repatriated to Germany immediately after the war. All would be allowed to keep their uniforms and medals, and officers even their side-arms. Food would be provided for all, and the wounded and sick would receive medical attention without delay. The ultimatum should have been delivered by two Soviet captains, Miklós Steinmetz in Pest and Ilya Afanasevich Ostapenko in Buda, but their mission failed. The Soviet command accused the Germans of murdering them, an accusation which was to be echoed by historians for decades.¹²

Steinmetz, a Hungarian by origin who had grown up in the Soviet Union, had served in the Spanish Civil War as Malinovsky's interpreter and later as an intelligence officer. His mission failed even before he could reach the German lines. First Lieutenant Gyula Litteráti-Loótz, commander of the anti-tank battalion of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division, writes:

In the morning one of my gun commanders reported that a Russian jeep with a white flag was approaching from Vecsés... 150-200 metres ahead of us in the direction of the Russians, clearly visible to the naked eye, anti-tank mines had been laid out on the cobbles of Üllői Road like a chess board. Because of their rapid retreat on the previous day the Germans had not had time to bury the mines under the road surface, which would in any case have been a complicated and lengthy procedure because of the cobbles. The purpose of the mines was to make the Soviets, if they were attacking with tanks, stop in front of the



Cameraman Jenő Kim, impersonating Miklós Steinmetz.

mine field and offer a firm target, at least for a short while. To our immense surprise the jeep in which I observed two seated men – the driver and another next to him who was waving a white cloth attached to a stick – merely slowed down in front of the mines and then tried to pass between them at walking speed. This did not even seem to be a hopeless attempt. The mines had been laid against tanks, and the tread of a tank is almost twice as wide as that of a jeep. However, the irregular pattern of the mines forced the driver to try crossing the barrier in slalom fashion... There was dead silence, not a shot was fired by either side. It all happened in a fraction of a second. There was a huge bang, whitish-grey smoke, the front of the car reared up, and the white flag presented a grotesque sight as it flew through the air in a high arch. When the smoke had cleared the wrecked car was standing in the middle of the mine barrier. The two Russians were sitting in the jeep, slumped motionless against each other. The mine had exploded on the left-hand side of the car; the driver had probably hit it with his left-hand front wheel.¹³

Litteráti-Loótz's memories prove highly problematic if one tries to reconstruct the events on the spot. From his fighting position, as he specifies it, he could not have seen what he describes because his view would have been obstructed by a rise in the road and a 5-metre difference in level between him and the first Soviet line. In addition, his outlook was restricted by the fact that the road bends north at an angle of about 5 degrees rather than running straight, as on the map published by Gosztonyi. There are further

inaccuracies in his narrative: the distance to the Hofherr-Schrantz machine factory was 2 kilometres rather than 'not far' as he claims; according to the map the death of the delegates would have occurred not 150–200 metres but 400 metres from where he stood; and there were no cobbled streets anywhere in the neighbourhood.¹⁴ Thus he either locates his fighting position wrongly or gives an incorrect account of how the delegates died – or both.

Let us assume that Litteráti-Loótz locates his fighting position wrongly. If, as he says, the mines on the road were visible to the naked eye and he was able to distinguish the two persons in the jeep, he could indeed not have been more than 150–200 metres away. This would have placed him at the level of Vasváry Pál Street, but then a 2.5 metre rise in the street would have hidden the jeep until it was 20–30 metres from the mine barrier, leaving a maximum of 10 seconds before the explosion – not enough time for him to observe the approach of the jeep, identify its occupants and watch the slalom round the mines. All this would have taken at least 20–30 seconds, in which time a jeep will cover 100–200 metres, even if it travels very slowly.

Unlike Litteráti-Loótz's position, the place where the delegates died can be determined precisely. Tóth visited it with Soviet veterans in the 1960s, and the topographical circumstances also suggest beyond doubt that the mine barrier was situated at the crossing of Üllői Road and Gömbös Gyula Road (today Petőfi Road and Haladás Road respectively). This is the highest point in the neighbourhood, from which the road dips east and west. The mines could not have been laid further east because then the slope would have made it possible for the Soviets to remove them unobserved; moreover any Soviet tanks slowing down in front of the mines would have been sheltered by the slope from the defenders' anti-tank weapons. Laying the mines further west would have been pointless because the nearest road junction in that direction was too far away.

Let us now assume that Litteráti-Loótz's account of the delegates' death is wrong. Given the terrain, the time between the delegates' appearance and their death must have been extremely short and, with slight snowfall, fog and a temperature of about –4 degrees Celsius, visibility was very low. A nervous anti-tank gun commander might therefore immediately have opened fire on the approaching vehicle. At a post mortem, two bullets from a light weapon were found in Steinmetz's body that had certainly not been fired by any member of Litteráti-Loótz's group. Anti-tank guns are always positioned behind the first battle line, which in this instance ran alongside the mine barrier in Gömbös Gyula Road. It is possible that

the soldiers in the first line saw the delegates coming and, mistaking the discharge of an anti-tank gun for a signal, also began to shoot, hitting Steinmetz, who may already have been dead. However, it is equally possible that no anti-tank gun was fired, because the shortage of ammunition would have made a gun attack on a jeep unjustifiable.

Exactly what happened will never be known. The most likely explanation is that Litteráti-Loótz's account is incorrect in both respects, although the jeep may really have hit a mine.

Ostapenko and his group were initially more successful. Although they came under fire, none of them was hurt, because the bullets landed in front of their feet. In a second attempt, they reached the German positions without being shot at. Major Shakhvorostov, the 318th Division's head of intelligence, had been informed by telephone of the death of Steinmetz and his companion, but did not stop them.

First Lieutenant Orlov, who survived the mission, has reported the events in detail. The delegates were blindfolded by the Germans and driven to the 8th SS Cavalry Division's command post on Gellért-hegy Hill. After a polite introduction Ostapenko handed the ultimatum to the most senior officer, who immediately contacted Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. Ostapenko then spent almost an hour in informal conversation with German staff officers. After Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's negative reply the delegates started their return journey:

When Ostapenko had put the envelope back into his map case the lieutenant-colonel offered each of us a glass of soda water. We accepted with pleasure and poured the welcome drink down our dry throats. The Germans blindfolded us and, taking us by the arm, led us out of the building. They sat us again in a car and we set off.¹⁵

The delegates soon reached the German front, where they were received by SS Scharführer Josef Bader, an NCO of the 8th SS Cavalry Division:

My commander ordered me to take the delegates back to no-man's-land, where I had first met them. We walked. The closer we got to our first lines the more intense the Soviet shelling became, although a few hours before, when the delegates arrived, it had died down completely. Now they were battering our first lines again. I suggested to the Soviet captain (who spoke flawless German) that we should halt and wait for the shelling to stop before we continued. I also said that I couldn't understand why his people were firing so heavily on our positions although they must have known that their delegates had not yet returned. But the captain said that he had strict orders to return to his people as soon as possible. I ordered the group to stop, took off their blindfolds and told them that I had no intention of committing suicide and was not going any

further. I let them cross the no-man's-land. I must stress that nobody on our side fired. The pause in the firing was complete, and one could only hear the detonations of the enemy shells. The group started to cross a little square. When they had gone about 50 metres a shell struck from the side. I threw myself flat on my stomach. When I looked up I could see only two soldiers walking on. The third was lying motionless in the road.¹⁶

Orlov's recollection is similar:

When they had led us to the first line they took off our blindfolds, and we started walking towards our people. We walked much faster on our way back than on the way there. We may have been about halfway when Captain Ostapenko turned to me and said: 'It looks as if we've made it. We've been lucky once more.' As soon as he had spoken these words there were three enormous explosions. Splinters and bullets were whistling around us. Captain Ostapenko turned towards the Germans and fell on the road.¹⁷

In the intense shelling a German artillery observer and several German soldiers were also wounded.¹⁸ To all appearances the source of the shelling was an uninformed Soviet battery, although it could have been the Hungarian anti-aircraft guns that were also stationed in the area.¹⁹ According to a Soviet post mortem, two splinters and four bullets were lodged in Ostapenko's back. If this is true it strengthens the possibility of Hungarian involvement, as the bullets could not have been fired from the Soviet side.

In any event neither Ostapenko nor Steinmetz and his driver were deliberately killed by the Germans. In all probability their deaths were caused by chance and carelessness.

According to eye-witnesses a third delegate, an officer of the Soviet 30th Rifle Corps, arrived on horseback with a white flag and was led to Colonel-General Schmidhuber, the commander of the German 13th Panzer Division. In the name of his corps the officer, who is described as having been slightly drunk, offered a three-day ceasefire to enable the Germans to prepare their capitulation. Schmidhuber telephoned Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, suggesting that he 'pretend to accept the offer in order to gain at least 3 days of truce in which the problems of manning the front line after the regroupment of troops can be solved. The fortress commander brusquely replied that such a proposition was entirely out of the question. The Russian officer was taken prisoner.'²⁰ Nothing else is known about his fate.

On 31 December 1944 Radio Moscow broadcast a detailed report of the death of the delegates. As a result the supreme command of the Wehrmacht launched an investigation.²¹ This established a number of facts which are published here for the first time. At the request of the supreme command,

the Balck Army Group, based on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's comments, sent the following telegram to Berlin:

They did not send 2 Soviet officers but 4 German prisoners of war as delegates. These were initially ordered by the Budapest command to be shot, but were then handed over by the army high command to the secret field police in Vienna. According to latest reports these 4 prisoners of war are to be delivered immediately through the SS and police high command in Vienna to the Führer's headquarters for interrogation. In accordance with the documents held here the following can be noted with reference to the alleged murder of Soviet parley delegates which was strongly emphasised by Soviet radio on 31 December 1944:

The dispatch to the city of Soviet delegates, as announced by the Soviets, did not take place.

This is one of those well-known Soviet misrepresentations designed to serve as a propaganda lie hypocritically legitimising the Soviet craze for the destruction and devastation of European cultural shrines and the environment.²²

Thus Pfeffer-Wildenbruch denied the very existence of any official Soviet delegates, although he certainly knew about Ostapenko and probably about the others. He lied to his superiors in order to cover himself because he was aware that the delegates were protected by international law. By suggesting that the Soviets had used German prisoners as delegates – which would have been a contravention of international law on their part – he heightened the total-war psychosis which made it inconceivable for the defenders to capitulate. As a result of his false report, the German supreme command cabled to the commanders on the eastern front that the outcry over the death of the delegates was nothing but Soviet war propaganda,²³ and on 17 January 1945 forbade all 'fortresses' and army groups to receive Soviet delegates, arguing that the Soviet Union, by its use of German prisoners, had repudiated its international obligations.²⁴

The four German prisoners of war are not mentioned anywhere else, and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, when later questioned by Gosztonyi, did not speak of them either. A deliberate German propaganda lie can be ruled out, as a US historian has examined the files of the section concerned and found no propaganda reports whatsoever.²⁵ The Soviet authorities were also silent, either because using these prisoners as delegates would have been illegal or because they did not exist. The Red Army frequently sent prisoners to demoralise the enemy, but in Budapest these were primarily Hungarians. Strangely enough, on 21 January Pfeffer-Wildenbruch ordered the Hungarian I Army Corps's chief of staff to deliver all the documents relating to the delegates to his own command. The purpose of this directive is not known. Nor could Hindy, in his evidence before the People's Court, explain it.²⁶

It is possible that all the parties were lying, but about different aspects of the matter. Litteráti-Loótz may have been trying to cover up his, or his unit's, responsibility for the death of Steinmetz. The Soviet commanders may have known that at the time of Ostapenko's death their units were shelling, and it was also not in their own interest to press the issue of the four German prisoners. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch may have intended to supply propaganda material in his own bureaucratic way. In addition, the Soviets' preparation of the mission had been inadequate: they could have invited Pfeffer-Wildenbruch by radio to receive the delegates, but they did not. Nor can the defenders be held responsible for constructing a mine barrier, or for Steinmetz's imprudence in trying to cross it.

It is striking that the war crimes with which the German military command was later charged did not include the murder of the delegates, and no similar case is documented during the entire war. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, who was tried in Moscow, was not questioned about the matter, and Hindy, who was sentenced to death by the Hungarian People's Court, was not charged with this particular crime. To all intents and purposes Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had unconditional orders to hold Budapest, and therefore had to reject the ultimatum.

The Soviet judiciary nevertheless exploited the affair, as it did in other cases where innocent German officers were executed. In Budapest the scapegoat was Captain Erich Klein, commander of the I Artillery Battalion of the Feldherrnhalle Division. In 1948, as a prisoner of war, he was charged with the death of Ostapenko. Despite physical torture he refused to plead guilty, but nevertheless received a death sentence, which was later converted to 25 years' imprisonment. He was released in 1953.²⁷ His rehabilitation by the Russian military prosecutor in 1993 confirms that the charge against him was pure fiction.

2

The siege of Pest, first phase: 30 December 1944–5 January 1945

The Soviet offensive began promptly the day after the rejection of the ultimatum. On the ground nearly a thousand guns opened fire, and in the sky bombers droned continuously, dropping their deadly loads. The barrage lasted between 7 and 10 hours daily for three days, and the intervals were filled with constant air-raids. Nearly a million people took refuge in overcrowded cellars, many of which received direct hits, killing their occupants. Civilians only ventured into the streets when it was absolutely necessary,

hugging the walls as they hurried to fetch water from a standpipe or bread from one of the bakeries that had been ordered by the Arrow Cross regime to remain open.

In the city centre the streets were covered in a jumble of broken glass, torn overhead tram cables, toppled lamp-posts and other objects that had lost their original purpose. The rubble was interspersed with dead bodies in soiled clothing, frequently with their necks and chests exposed and their pockets turned inside out in the search for their identification discs, personal documents and valuables. Their eyes were wide open, their hands waxen yellow, their ears and noses bloody. They were lying in contorted postures and many had lost an arm or a leg. Houses were aflame. Where shells had exploded, bluish-yellow gunpowder vapour lingered in the air. Mountains of refuse piled up, because it was no longer collected by the municipal services.

The Soviet troops had been reinforced with large quantities of heavy weapons as well as fighter and bomber aircraft. The infantry was supported by a complete air corps, two artillery divisions and various other units, amounting to a total of 15 artillery or mortar brigades and regiments.²⁸ Each artillery division consisted of three artillery brigades equipped with 36 pieces of ordnance – 76mm guns, 122mm howitzers and 152mm heavy howitzers respectively – and complemented by a heavy mortar battalion. The rifle corps were supported by tanks that probably belonged to the 39th Tank Brigade of the Soviet 23rd Tank Corps and some other tank and assault gun regiments.²⁹ In the whole territory of Budapest some 200 Soviet tanks were put out of action, which suggests an attacking force of more than one tank brigade.³⁰

The German and Hungarian defence, in contrast, could not even muster enough ammunition for its remaining heavy weapons, so that the artillery was allowed to fire only a limited number of rounds per day. Heavy-mortar ammunition had run out completely by the end of December.

On the morning of 30 December the Pest front lay east of a semicircular line that bulged out along the edge of the suburbs of Rákospalota, Rákosszentmihály, Mátyásföld, Pestszentlőrinc, Pestszentimre and Soroksár. During that day, the Soviet offensive gained a significant amount of ground in the eastern and southern sectors, where the front of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division was repeatedly overrun and the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, with only three fighting battalions left, found itself in a critical situation. The Hungarian 8/III Battalion, surrounded in Csömör, was obliged to break out, losing a large part of its combat force in street fighting. Soviet infantry supported by tanks stormed across the fields bordering the Szilas

stream west of Mátyásföld, continuing the attack towards Pestújhely that had begun at Christmas between Fót and Csömör. The Hungarian 18/I Battalion took up new positions alongside the detached houses in Rákosszentmihály, but by evening had been practically annihilated near the local church, although the Soviets also suffered significant losses. A group of Soviet soldiers who had advanced as far as the church were encircled as a result of German and Hungarian counter-strikes, and could break out only after asking their own artillery to fire at them and continuously adjusting the direction of the fire as the battle progressed. Captain Nikolaichuk was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal for organising this action.³¹ The 13th German Panzer Division also launched counter-attacks. The first of these stalled. The second, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Ekesparre, chief of the general staff, captured the western section of Rákosszentmihály, but stalled again after the destruction of four or five German tanks and nine armoured trucks.³²

On 31 December a German and Hungarian counter-attack resulted in the recapture for one day of the western section of Mátyásföld and its airfield, but nearby Árpádföld and Cinkota fell into Soviet hands. Further south, the 22nd SS Cavalry Division evacuated Pestszentimre, and in the outer section of Üllői Road the Soviets advanced several hundred metres towards the inner city. Further north, near Rákoskeresztúr, the Hungarian 24th Assault Artillery Battalion, commanded by Major Barnabás Bakó, repulsed an attack, causing the Soviet troops considerable losses. One Russian major committed suicide before he could be taken prisoner.³³

On 1 January 1945 the line of the Hungarian 10th Infantry and 12 reserve divisions between Rákospalota and Pestszentlőrinc became the prime target of the Soviet push towards Pestújhely. The attackers crossed the Circular Railway at several points, and some of their tanks reached the Rákos stream at Gvadányi Road. The first building within the administrative boundaries of Pest was taken by Guard Sergeant Adavkin's assault group, north of Sashalom.³⁴ On the same day, the Soviet 297th Rifle Division, which had so far been kept as a second echelon, launched an attack somewhat further south through the New Communal Cemetery. Captain György Péchy, the commander of the Hungarian 38/III Battalion, remembers:

At dawn the battle line skirted the eastern edge of the New Cemetery facing Ferihegy. The battery took up position in the morgue. I had been allocated 30 extra Hungarian novices.

At 8 o'clock such an artillery and mortar barrage began as I had never experienced on Hungarian soil. The earth in the cemetery was shaking. The men leapt back from their positions, seeking cover in the ditch of Kozma Street.

We also ran there from the morgue and took cover. The Russian infantry attack began. From the ditch we all opened fire on the enemy racing towards us. I directed the fire of the men by my side as if I had been a platoon commander. Majors [Gusztáv] Kajdy and [Ferenc] Joó did the same. Our vigorous and accurate fire worked, and we stopped the attack...

In the early afternoon a Soviet tank appeared and breached the stone wall of the brickworks yard. From a German Tiger tank³⁵ hidden on the other side of the brick kiln an NCO crept to the wall. When he had ascertained the position of the Soviet tank he waved to guide the Tiger's gun towards it. The Soviet tank was destroyed with one shot. At dusk we moved into the round kiln, where the workers from the houses nearby had also taken refuge.

About midnight the enemy unexpectedly attacked. We took up firing positions in the corridor around the kiln. The Russians were driving Hungarian prisoners ahead of them, who were shouting: 'We are Hungarians.' We shouted back that they should throw themselves on their stomachs when they heard 'Lie down!'. Under our continuous sub-machine gun salvos the Russians retreated. Some of the prisoners escaped. We then succeeded in clearing the area of the brickworks through a hand-grenade counter-attack... Next day I and my remaining 15 men withdrew.³⁶

Between 2 and 3 January the Soviet thrust towards Pestújhely made further progress. The attackers broke through at several points on the Rákos stream, although five of their six tanks in the first wave were destroyed by soldiers of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division. Soviet and Romanian infantry penetrated the first defence line and opened fire on it from behind, forcing the Hungarian 6/III Battalion to withdraw in a fierce street battle.

By 3 January heavy engagements had reduced the combat strength of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division to between 10 and 25 men in each battalion, and on that day alone 307 Hungarians were taken prisoner by the Romanians.³⁷ Despite repeated German and Hungarian attempts to drive them back across the Rákos stream, the Soviets continued to widen their salient. To secure their position, they redeployed the exhausted Romanian 2nd Division, which had been withdrawn two days earlier.³⁸ Major-General Lazhko, the commander of the Soviet 30th Rifle Corps, threw into battle the Soviet 36th Guard Rifle Division, which had meanwhile been placed in his charge, and crossed the Rákos stream and the Circular Railway. Further south, his units were steadily advancing on Jászberényi Road towards Örs vezér Square, in the direction of Pestújhely. The 18th Rifle Corps came to within 500m of the emergency airfield on the Racecourse, leaving the emergency airfield on Csepel Island the only possible landing-site. A counter-offensive by the 13th German Panzer Division towards Rákosfalva–Alsórákos failed: the tanks that had penetrated as far as

the railway embankment were destroyed by the Soviets, and a massive mortar barrage prevented the infantry following them.

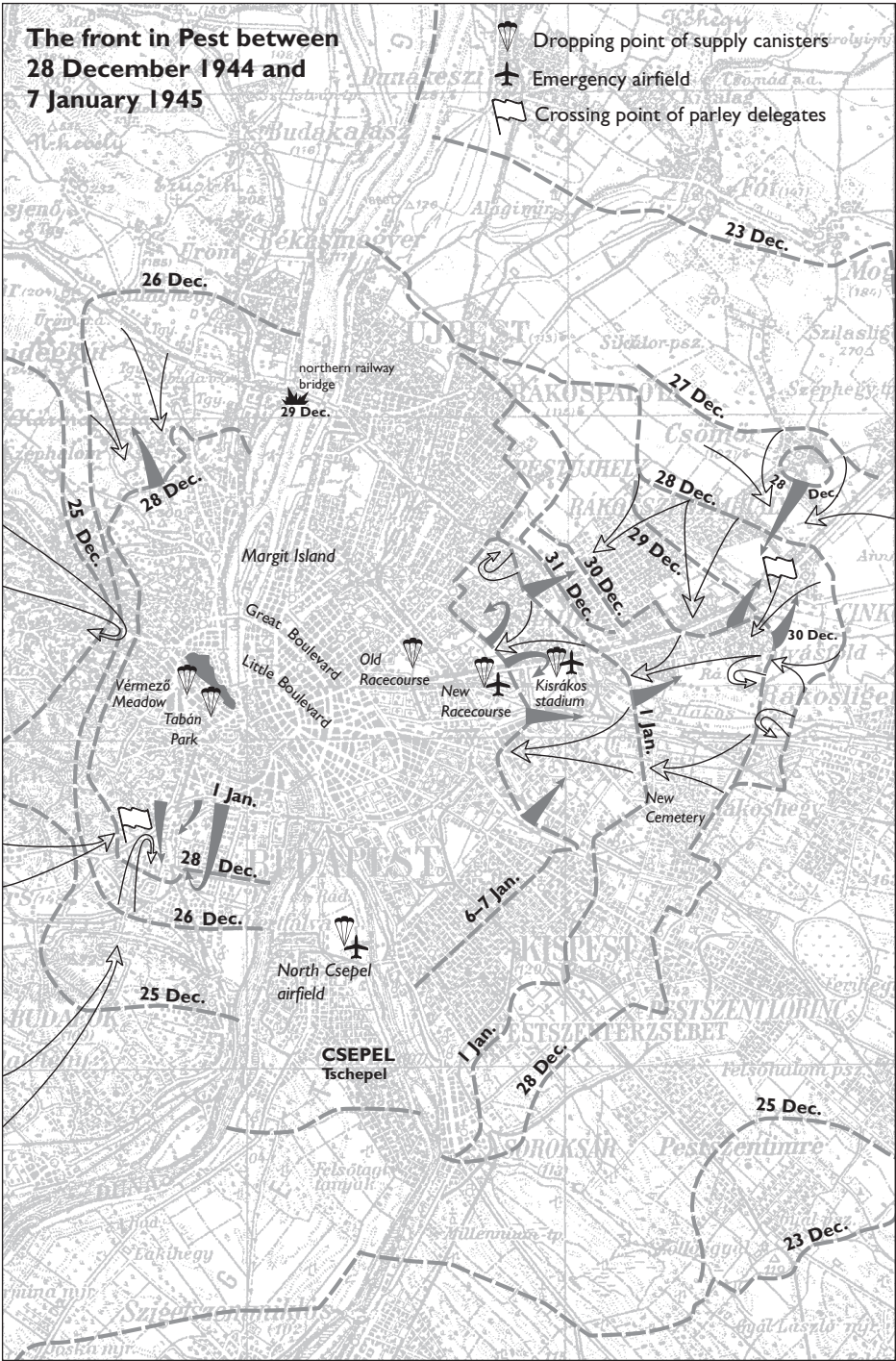
One of the most daring exploits of the siege took place at that time. A 40-tonne motor-barge manned by Russian SS volunteers and carrying ammunition, began a 140-kilometre journey from Győr, slipping through the mine barrier on the Danube and running aground 17 kilometres from Budapest near the village of Leányfalu. It was only thanks to the gaps in the Soviet occupation of the villages along the Danube Bend that the enterprise did not end in disaster. With the help of a Hungarian assault-boat platoon, the crew transported part of its cargo into the city, probably under cover of the trees in the flood plain. Attempts by the SS to organise further transports failed, and a tug was later sent to salvage the stranded barge.³⁹

The Soviet corps commanders had introduced various measures in preparation for street fighting. Their experience, particularly in Stalingrad, had shown that the most practical approach was to split the enemy units into small portions and liquidate these singly. Accordingly, in each Soviet division a special assault group was formed of 15–50 riflemen and a number of technicians, equipped with a sub-machine gun, one or two light machine guns, an anti-tank gun, a flame-thrower and one or two direct-fire guns.⁴⁰

As rifle divisions in the main trajectory of an attack normally proceeded over a strip measuring 400–800m in width and bounded by parallel streets, the strength of the attackers had to be at least three times as great as that of the defenders. The command staff had to be positioned immediately behind their units, because in the volatile situation communications were extremely difficult to maintain. Since sub-units making sudden advances were frequently separated from one another, each regiment was allocated a fast-moving reserve formation – comprising a sub-machine gun company, a reconnaissance detachment and a technical crew – which could urgently intervene to close the gaps in critical situations. The artillery observers had to be posted in the front line because the view was almost completely blocked beyond 100m by buildings and enormous clouds of dust rising after the impact of projectiles.⁴¹

The daily reports of both sides convey a uniformly inaccurate picture of the shifting fronts. In the ocean of houses the constantly changing main combat lines could only vaguely be located. In addition, advance guards and patrols occupied or held positions in front of the main combat lines when the occasion arose. Any maps showing the fronts therefore are no more than rough guides.

For a long time operations were hampered by the lack of co-ordination between the attacking army corps. While the Soviet 30th Rifle Corps and



the Romanian 7th Army Corps received their orders from the Soviet 7th Guard Army, the Soviet 18th Special Rifle Corps was under Malinovsky's direct command. On 11 January, on the recommendation of the Soviet general staff, Malinovsky consolidated the attacking forces into the Budapest Group, with the Soviet 18th Special Rifle Corps's staff in charge. The corps's commander, Lieutenant-General Ivan Mikhailovich Afonyin, was appointed to head the group.

The German corps commands had very little scope for influencing events. In early January it was still possible to make telephone calls, and Hungarian members of the reconnaissance units frequently obtained valuable information by ringing up residents of Soviet-held areas.⁴² By mid-January, however, most telecommunications had been destroyed and contact with the fighters on the front line could only be maintained through messengers. In the opaque mass of buildings, information about Soviet advances was delayed. The command was therefore increasingly transferred to the combat groups which, despite their limited resources, were frequently able to recapture the most important buildings and thoroughfares.

To prevent desertions, the Hungarian soldiers were attached in small groupings to the German units. The German command reinforced the defence with technical barriers and cordons. Key junctions, streets and squares were blocked with electric fences, mine barriers, tank traps and barricades. Behind the fighting units the activities of Soviet infiltrators were to be foiled by a second defence line of police and gendarmerie and other units with inferior combat value such as the II University Assault Battalion.

Within the boundaries of Pest six concentric semicircular defence lines, starting from and returning to the Danube, were developed: the first ran along the perimeter of the southern suburbs to Rákos Station and north-west along the Rákos stream; the second took in Könyves Kálmán Boulevard, Hungária Boulevard and Róbert Károly Boulevard; the third branched off from the second at Józsefváros Station to join the railway line and today's Dózsa György Street and Dráva Street; the fourth followed Haller Street, Orczy Road, Fiumei Road, Rottenbiller Street, Szinyei Merse Street, Ferdinánd Bridge and Csanády Street; the fifth the Great Boulevard (comprising Ferenc Boulevard, József Boulevard, Erzsébet Boulevard, Teréz Boulevard and Szent István Boulevard); and the sixth the Little Boulevard (comprising Károly Boulevard, Múzeum Boulevard and Vámház Boulevard). However, they all contained only makeshift temporary fortifications, occasionally complemented by mine barriers or electric fences.

Early in January the command of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps ordered the remnants of Lieutenant-Colonel Kündiger's 271st Volksgrenadier

Division from Buda to Pest. The commander of the 13th Panzer Division, Colonel-General Schmidhuber, was placed in charge of all the units in Pest. By then the Hungarian infantry regiments were reporting ration strengths of only 150–200, with equipment averaging five light machine guns, one heavy machine gun and four or five mortars – and their numbers were declining. On 7 January the combat strength of the 13th Panzer Division was 887, and that of the Hungarian 10th Infantry and 12th Reserve Divisions was 507; on 14 January the Kündiger Group's combat strength was 225 and that of the Feldherrnhalle Division, including the Hungarian units attached to it, was 865.⁴³ Estimating the combat strength of the 22 SS Cavalry Division at about 800 and that of other front-line units at 400, we obtain a total of 3684. Thus the combat strength of the whole Pest garrison roughly equalled that of one complete Soviet division.

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch did not trust Schmidhuber, and therefore attached SS Oberführer (equivalent of colonel) Helmut Dörner to the divisional staff as 'political officer'. Since Dörner also had military duties he was made commander of a combat group formed from remnants of the 13th Panzer Division. This did not, however, reflect the true power relationships: although Dörner was technically Schmidhuber's subordinate he was able to order Schmidhuber, who had moved his command post away from the battle, to relocate to Pest on around 10 January.⁴⁴

3

The siege of Pest, second phase: 5–18 January 1945 – fighting in the city centre

The noose around the Pest bridgehead tightened and lost its semicircular shape as the attack in the northeastern sector continued. By 5 January Soviet tanks had carved a deep salient through Pestújhely as far as Zugló in the inner city. North of the salient, the Germans and Hungarians were still holding Újpest and the western corner of Pestújhely and Rákospalota, and south of the salient the Racecourse, the area near Örs vezér Square, Kőbánya and a large part of Kispest and Pestszenterzsébet. Further south, on the Danube, Soroksár was about to be encircled at any moment. West of Soroksár, the main defence line ran through Királyerdő and Lakihegy on Csepel Island. A report of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps reads:

The focus of the battle of Budapest has shifted to the eastern bridgehead. Fighting continues with undiminished ferocity, with heavy enemy artillery and

mortar fire. Significant losses on both sides. Apart from a small loss of territory it has been possible, despite the extremely tight ammunition situation, to maintain our position against strong enemy attacks on the entire eastern and northeastern front...Supplies very tight, artillery ammunition available only for one more day. Some types of ammunition used up.⁴⁵

In Zugló, where street fighting went on all day, First Lieutenant István Mányoki's assault artillery group lost 70 per cent of its 120 soldiers in several unsuccessful counter-attacks.⁴⁶

In the early morning of 6 January the 22nd SS Cavalry Division abandoned Soroksár and was pursued by Soviet troops as far as Gubacsi Road. In the densely built-up areas of Pestszenterzsébet and Kispest house-to-house fighting slowed down the Soviet advance, but at the outer edge of Kőbánya the defence line almost disintegrated because the 5-kilometre stretch leading to the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division's sector in Zugló was held by only a few hundred men. Eastern Kőbánya fell to the Soviets before the 22nd SS Cavalry Division could intervene. During the day Soviet troops also captured northern Kőbánya and Rákosfalva, which enabled them to keep the emergency airfield on the Racecourse out of action by bombarding it from both north and south.

On 6 January the defenders were obliged to abandon central Kőbánya and eastern Zugló. From Zugló and Pestújhely Soviet assault units started to advance towards Rákosrendező Station, and it was evening before the German 93rd Grenadier Regiment could halt them. At the northern edge of Zugló the Hungarian 6/III Battalion, with heavy losses, held its position, which was illuminated by the enormous flames of a burning timber yard in Egressy Road. In Pestszenterzsébet Soviet troops, breaching the line of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division, took the Hofherr-Schrantz factory – the last plant still producing spare parts for tanks and functioning as a tank repair workshop.

The emergency airfield in the northern part of Csepel Island had been within range of Soviet artillery since 6 January, and from 7 January could no longer be used. The Germans therefore started fierce counter-attacks to regain the Racecourse with its airfield. The commander of the 66th Panzer-grenadier Regiment, Major Schöning, considered the attack pointless because he saw no possibility of taking the buildings left and right of the Racecourse. A fierce argument broke out between him and Schmidhuber, who insisted on the execution of the order. The infantry needed for this action could be provided only by withdrawing the II/66 Grenadier Battalion from the defence, in the hope that the Soviets would not notice its absence. Ten assault guns of Assault Artillery Captain Sándor Hanák's unit and a German

and Hungarian combat group of some 200 were positioned behind the wooden fence of a stadium. Hanák observed the events through a gap in the fence:

As soon as we had taken position we were told that the Russkis were approaching singing. And really, they were coming across the open track, singing and arm in arm. They were going to attack, presumably in an alcoholic state! I ordered the guns to open fire. Kicking the fence down, we fired fragmentation grenades and machine-gun volleys into the mass. They ran to the stands, where there was a terrible bloodbath when the assault guns fired at one row of seats after another. The Germans reported about 800 of them dead.⁴⁷

However, the German and Hungarian casualties were also great, as Schöning remembers:

The attack collapsed after less than an hour in a hurricane of Russian artillery fire. Reconnaissance Unit 13 made hardly any headway, II/66 together with the very bravely attacking Hungarian assault guns gained the far side of the Racecourse but could not hold it. In the evening we had an incomplete defence line across the Racecourse, stands and stables.⁴⁸

No further advance took place for want of infantry, and the Racecourse could not be recaptured.

On 7 January Soviet and Romanian troops crossed Róna Street in Zugló at several points. In Kőbánya, the 22nd SS Cavalry Division and Lieutenant-General Billnitzer's Hungarian assault artillery troops started nine unsuccessful counter-attacks before finally abandoning the district in the evening. Fighting continued near Kőbánya-alsó Station and the MÁV (Hungarian State Railways) housing estate, as well as along Vaspálya Street and the railway embankment parallel to it. Most of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division was wiped out. In Kispest and Pestszenterzsébet, Soviet rifle-guard divisions reached Vak Bottyán Road, Hunyadi Road and Nagy Sándor Street. The IX SS Mountain Army Corps signalled:

Desperate street-fighting is raging in Kispest. South of Déli Station two incursions have been dealt with through counterstrikes. Despite rigorous combing of staffs and rear services, the bases that make up the front line are daily becoming thinner owing to heavy losses. The supply situation is extremely critical, in particular for want of adequate ammunition supplies by air... Total casualties from 24 December to 6 January 5621.⁴⁹

On 8 January the Soviet troops achieved only small successes, mainly at the line of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division, where they captured Kispest. Near Józsefváros Station, German infantry, supported by three assault guns of the Hungarian 1st Assault Artillery Battalion, recaptured the MÁV housing

estate.⁵⁰ Here a lance-corporal of the 66th Grenadier Regiment had held an important building single-handed by running up and down while firing, in order to suggest that a German soldier was hiding behind every window: he later received the Knight's Cross. Soviet troops, breaking through at the railway embankment, entered Népliget Park south of the housing estate. At Rákosrendező Station, west of Pestújhely, more significant breakthroughs followed. Units of the 7th Romanian Army Corps attacked the post office's vehicle depot in Egressy Road and by the evening, in hand-to-hand fighting, had taken the post-office building.

From the attacks on Zugló it became obvious that Malinovsky intended to split the Pest bridgehead in two. While the territory held by the defence from north to south still measured 15 kilometres, the Soviet spearheads advancing from the east were already within 4 kilometres of the Danube. Counter-attacks against the Zugló salients indicate that the German command was fully aware of the danger. In one of these, on 8 December, the Hungarist combat groups of northern Pest and MÁV, together with units of the Feldherrnhalle Division, reached Czobor Street, where they captured the Soviet battalion staff in the process of settling in.⁵¹ Some spearheads even got as far as Csömöry Road, but were forced to abandon most of the territories gained.

On 9 January the Soviet 30th Army Corps, with overwhelming strength, began a general attack through the side streets from Csömöry Road to capture Rákosrendező Station. They stalled in the morning but, according to a Hungarian report,

[the] pressure grew heavier and heavier during the afternoon, and it became clear that the enemy was trying to cut off the troops in Rákospalota and Újpest in order to split the Pest bridgehead. They therefore constantly increased the pressure towards Rákosrendező Station by deploying more troops, tanks, flame-throwing tanks and flame-throwers, and reached the station. Some enemy patrols also infiltrated Városliget Park during the afternoon.⁵²

In order to prevent an encirclement, General Schmidhuber gave orders for the immediate evacuation of Újpest. He intended to pull the front back to the northern line of the railway ring and succeeded in temporarily recapturing Magdolnaváros Station (today Angyalföld Station) in the process. However, by evening Soviet tanks were again ensconced among the goods wagons in the shunting yard.

Meanwhile in Zugló the Soviets occupied every house, and the front moved to the railway embankment in Mexikói Road. Nearby, the Romanian 7th Army Corps, having captured the Racecourse, crossed Hungária Boulevard at the Kerepesi Road junction. German infantry, assisted by Hungarian

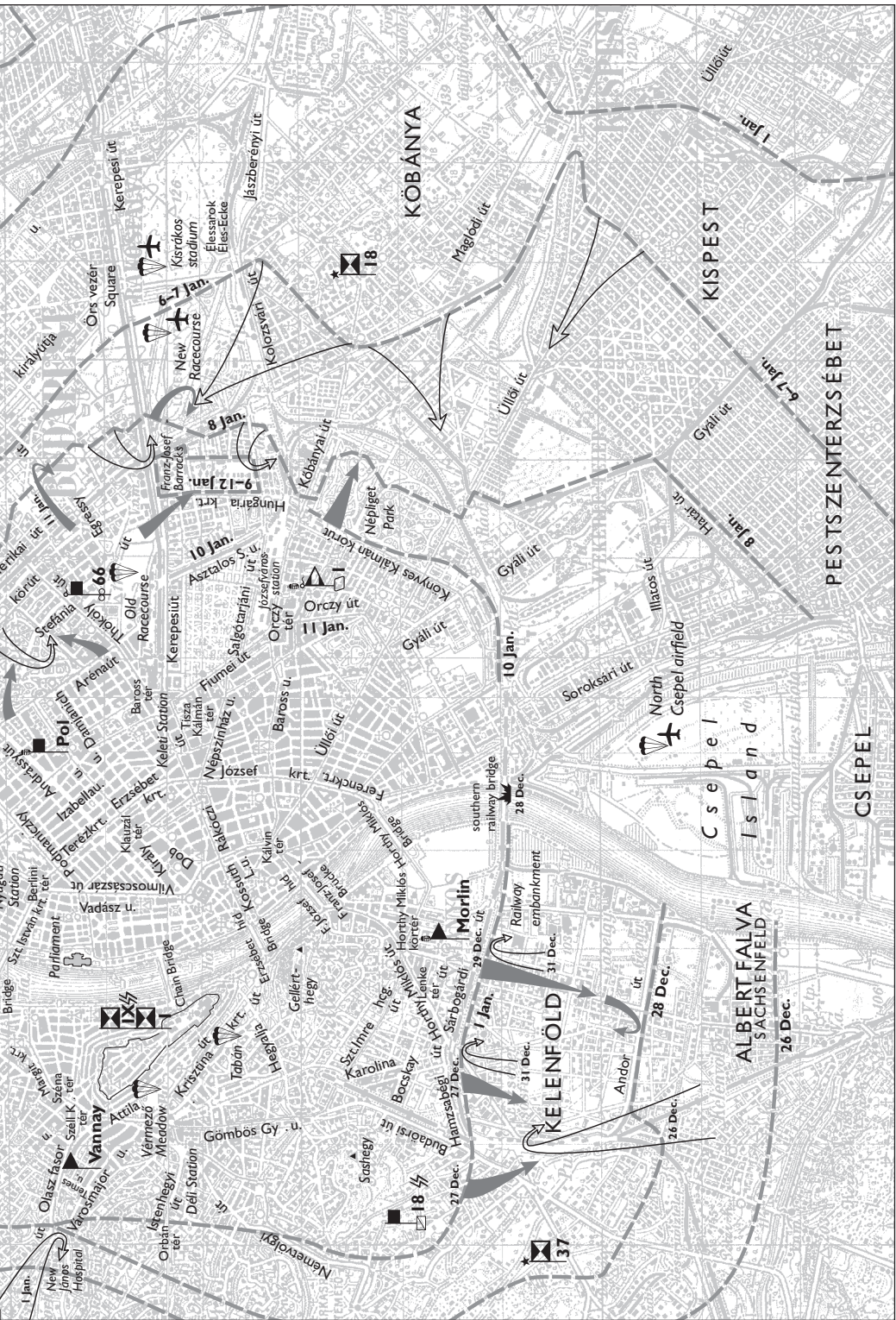
assault guns, retook the northwestern part of Népliget Park. In southern Pest the front stabilised along Határ Road. At the same time the evacuation of Csepel Island began; the island had become untenable as a result of the Soviet advances in both Pest and Buda. The remnants of the decimated German 93rd Grenadier Regiment were incorporated into the 66th Regiment.

The IX SS Mountain Army Corps bombarded the staff of the German Army Group South with desperate messages:

Unless supplies arrive by air, the ammunition for machine guns, mortars and field guns will only last until 9 January, other ammunition until 12 January, horse fodder and fuel until 10 January, food until 11 January. In Budapest there are 3880 wounded, 1400 of them stretcher cases. The situation demands an early solution.⁵³

During the night of 10 January the Feldherrnhalle Division withdrew from Újpest, but was unable to hold its defence positions on the northern railway embankment. Soviet troops moving south in pursuit breached the defences around Angyalföld Station and reached the Rákossziget stream between Lehel Street and Váci Road. They also took Rákossziget Station. Soviet and Romanian troops crossed Hungária Boulevard at the intersection with Mexikói Road and entered Városliget Park. The 2nd Company of the Budapest Police Assault Battalion and a group of gendarmes, some 300 in total, ejected them and took up positions on the northeastern edge of the park. Joining the counter-attack of the 13th Panzer Division, they advanced to Amerikai Road and Korong Street, where one of their small Ansaldo tanks – already obsolete in the Abyssinian war – was destroyed and half of the men killed.⁵⁴ A Soviet counter-thrust in division strength pushed the exhausted group back across the park to Aréna Road (today Dózsa György Road), where it was relieved by Tibor Kubinyi's Budapest Assault Company, which promptly launched a counter-attack and, backed by two German tanks, recaptured about 50 per cent of the park.⁵⁵ There was also heavy fighting for Népliget Park. In southern Pest, Soviet guard rifle divisions advanced along Soroksári Road towards Ferencváros Station. Meanwhile the evacuation of Csepel Island was completed.

On 11 January fighting began in the culverts of the inner districts of Pest. Soviet reconnaissance patrols squeezed through the narrow passages, surfacing under cover of night among the ruins behind the front line. In Angyalföld the Soviet 25th Guard Rifle Division broke through the defences on the Rákossziget stream. In the deserted streets to the southwest the Germans retreated from one factory after another towards Róbert Károly Boulevard. The Soviet troops followed relatively slowly, so that the two sides were separated by a wide stretch of no-man's-land.



An encounter that was to last several days commenced in Városliget Park, Angolpark and near the Széchenyi baths. In the zoo, most of the animals died, and in Vidámpark amusement park the Hungarian 7th Assault Artillery Battalion lost all its assault guns.⁵⁶ Józsefváros Station fell into Soviet hands. At today's Asztalos Sándor Street the Romanian units made slow progress. Kerepesi Cemetery was taken by the Soviets in close-quarter fighting after pioneers had blasted a gap in the surrounding wall, while the 13th Panzer Division withdrew to Fiumei Road. Police units attached to the Hungarian Zrínyi assault guns to compensate for the lack of infantry recaptured the western part of Orczy Square.⁵⁷ The Hungarian 10th Infantry Division carried out a successful counter-strike in the Törökőr area and regained the positions lost on the previous day.⁵⁸ The tug sent to recover the motor-barge stranded in the Danube at Leányfalu was hit on its way, and the crew rejoined the relief armies after swimming to the bank near Visegrád and slipping through the Soviet lines in the Pilis Hills.⁵⁹

On 12 January, on the Angyalföld front, the Feldherrnhalle Division retreated to a line formed by Dagály Street, Frangepán Street, Jász Street, Szabolcs Street and Aréna Road. A large portion of Városliget Park was now in the hands of the Soviets, who had also taken Rottenbiller Street. The Hungarian 10th Infantry Division held its position at the intersection of Hungária Boulevard and Stefánia Road but was left out on a limb, with Soviet troops at its rear at Városliget Park and the Fiumei Street edge of Kerepesi Cemetery. The 13th Panzer Division and members of the Morlin Group launched a counter-attack but stalled after retaking half of the cemetery. A more successful counter-attack of the Kündiger Group and the Hungarian 1st Tank Division from Üllői Road reached Orczy Square and the southwest corner of Népliget Park, and recaptured most of the Tisztviselőtelep estate.⁶⁰

At around midday, German armoured vehicles with flame-throwers set the stalls in Teleki Square alight, and Hungarian soldiers manned the two barricades erected there. Soviet troops from Salgótarjáni Road opened fire on the square, where a building next to the barricades went up in flames and the positions had to be abandoned. A counter-attack failed, leaving a large gap in the southeastern section.⁶¹ Although the front line had moved towards the west three days earlier, it was only now that the Romanian 7th Army Corps managed to capture the Ferenc József Barracks between Kerepesi Road, Hungária Boulevard and Pongrác Road, with each room being fought for so fiercely that in one of the attacking companies all officers and NCOs were killed.⁶²

Three times the defenders sent motor-boats to unload the barge stranded at Leányfalu. Although these returned filled with ammunition it was not



Soviet pioneers and minesweeping dogs in the city centre.

possible to recover everything. Daring civilians with wheelbarrows had constructed makeshift pontoons and helped themselves to part of the cargo, which included, among other things, grated cheese labelled 'Wiener Molkerei' ('Vienna Dairy').

On 13 January the IX SS Mountain Army Corps signalled to the army group that:

The battle of Budapest has reached its climax. The eastern bridgehead is unceasingly being battered by waves of attacks with maximum artillery, fighter-aircraft and tank support...By day traffic is paralysed by continuous air raids concentrating on the Danube bridges. Some of the bridges are badly damaged. The loss of the eastern bridgehead must be expected as from 15 January.⁶³

In the XIII District the Feldherrnhalle Division halted the Soviet advance along Dagály Street, Lehel Street and Szabolcs Street. In the VI and VII Districts the Soviet commander, Lieutenant-General Afonyin, directed his main forces against Nyugati Station and Erzsébet Boulevard. By evening the front line was running along Bajza Street, Felsőerdő Row, Rottenbiller Street and Damjanich Street, and all but the southern rim of Városliget Park was in Soviet hands.

In the southern section of the bridgehead, Soviet units pushed the Germans and Hungarians back as far as Orczy Square and retook the Ludovika Academy. Further north, they made a deep dent in the defence

towards the city centre and captured Horváth Mihály Square. The Morlin Group failed to mount a counter-attack because the firing pins of its anti-tank guns had been removed by saboteurs.⁶⁴ From Hungária Boulevard the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division withdrew to Keleti Station to avoid encirclement. Repeated counter-attacks by Sándor Hanák's Assault Artillery Unit delayed the Soviet and Romanian advance, but Ferencváros Station fell. Civilians were forced out of cellars to walk ahead of the attackers, urging the defenders to defect.⁶⁵ Some buildings between Podmaniczky Street and Rákóczy Road changed hands up to five times.⁶⁶

On 14 January, at 4.30am, a building at the corner of Klotild Street used as a military hospital received a direct hit. The ammunition store on the mezzanine exploded, burying some 300 patients and staff.⁶⁷ Fighting continued unabated, as reported by the Hungarian and German army corps commands: 'The whole day was marked by enemy terror bombing. Squadrons of enemy aircraft dropped bombs, and fighter planes strafed the streets. This resulted in devastating losses and conflagrations.'⁶⁸ 'All the artillery ammunition is used up, infantry ammunition is running out and can be preserved only through prohibition on firing, the fuel is finished, provisions are extremely critical, the situation of the wounded is disastrous.'⁶⁹

In Angyalföld the Feldherrnhalle Division, threatened with encirclement, hurriedly retreated from Róbert Károly Boulevard towards Csanády Street and Ferdinánd Bridge. In the VI and VIII Districts Soviet and Romanian troops reached Vörösmarty Street, Rózsa Street, Izabella Street, Rottenbiller Street and Bethlen Gábor Street, and captured Keleti Station. The remnants of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division began to relocate to Buda. In the southern section the bulk of the Hungarian 1st Mechanised Rifle Regiment was encircled behind the ruins of Ferencváros Station. As the Soviet troops now posed an immediate threat to the city centre, Lieutenant-General Billnitzer was ordered to close off the Great Boulevard with the remnants of the assault artillery battalions, two pioneer battalions and some assault-boat squads. The boulevard had previously been mined and the streets leading out from it barricaded.⁷⁰

On 15 January the Soviets captured Nyugati Station. In the south they reached the eastern rim of Kálvin Square. Some units entered the National Museum through the drains, but withdrew when seven or eight guns of the Hungarian 10th Assault Company, transferred from their position near the Astoria Hotel, opened fire on them. Remnants of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division resisted along Lónyay Street and Mátyás Street. In Rákóczy Road, as elsewhere, civilians were forced to walk ahead of the Soviets, calling on the defenders to surrender.⁷¹

In Tavaszmező Street the Soviets stormed the command post of the Morlin Group. The Hungarians mistook them for Germans,⁷² and were only able to stop them in hand-to-hand fighting on the barricade at the corner of Rigó Street and József Street. As Soviet troops were already in the Great Boulevard, the residue of the Morlin Group was encircled, but managed to break out thanks to two crates of hand-grenades and a Zrínyi assault gun.⁷³ According to reports of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps, the battle continued 'with undiminished ferocity in the shelled, bombed, burning centre of Pest. In constant attacks the enemy penetrated as far as the buildings east of Kálvin Square.'⁷⁴

In the evening, Colonel Sándor András, the commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, and Major Béla Botond, the chief of staff, called an officers' meeting in the cellar of the General Credit Bank, in which they announced that the Germans had lost the war. They contacted the Soviets and adjourned to András's apartment. József Bíró, the adjutant of the operational staff, remembers András's last words: "Is there anything left in the box?" – "A little alcohol, food, cigarettes and cigars." – "Share it out between the men. Don't see me home. God be with you. Don't say anything to anyone." He shook hands and left the Credit Bank cellar. I was surprised by being trusted with his secret.⁷⁵

General-staff Captain Győző Benyovszky, who could not bring himself to defect, reported the 'disappearance' of the commander and the chief of staff to the army corps command, but no action was taken. One reason why the two officers had not attempted to carry any of their units with them may have been that the close links between the Hungarian and German troops would have made a collective defection impossible. In any case, the gap between them and their soldiers by then was so wide that they were hardly able to give them orders. András himself remembers:

When I had left the cellar of the bank and arrived on the Square in front of the Vigadó Concert Hall I was faced with a Neronian sight. The hotels along the Danube embankment were on fire... The dark Buda side provided an eerie background to the flames... My first interrogation was held in a shelter in Népszínház Street. I was questioned by a Soviet Colonel. My hands were tied behind my back and during the interrogation somebody tried to take my watch from my wrist. Through the interpreter I asked the Colonel if I could give the watch to the person in question as a 'souvenir'. The Colonel shouted at my guard, and the watch remained in my possession. While I was still awaiting my fate a guard thrust his hand in my coat pocket. I grabbed his hand and noticed that he was putting biscuits in my pocket.⁷⁶

During the night, the Germans and Hungarians withdrew from Rákóczy Road to the Great Boulevard in order to avoid encirclement. Horthy Miklós Bridge (today Petőfi Bridge) was blown up by the Germans. The II University Assault Battalion was shattered and its remains incorporated into the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division. At József Boulevard survivors from the Morlin Group, joined by assault-artillery troops, held up a Soviet assault.⁷⁷

On 16 January encounters continued along the Great Boulevard, Rákóczy Road, Bródy Sándor Street, Kálvin Square, the National Museum and Vámház Boulevard. The 13th Panzer Division's report reads: 'Forays in Erzsébet Boulevard have been contained in heavy fighting. Fighting is intensive around breaches east of Berlin Square [today Nyugati Square] and on the Danube (northern section).'⁷⁸ A combat group of the 13th Panzer Division was surrounded near Kálvin Square and various attempts to rescue it failed.

During the night, Ferenc József Bridge (today Szabadság Bridge) collapsed. According to the Germans it was hit by a bomb;⁷⁹ according to the Hungarians it was blown up.⁸⁰ Both versions may be correct: with German and Hungarian troops still left in Pest, the Soviets had as much interest in destroying the bridges as the Germans had in saving them. Soviet troops penetrated deep into the central districts behind Baross Street and Erzsébet Boulevard, threatening to cut the southern section of the bridgehead in two. To forestall this, the defenders launched several counter-attacks aimed at recapturing their original positions, but only succeeded at Erzsébet Boulevard. There was also fierce fighting for the Great Market Hall. By this time the army group had advised the IX Mountain Army Corps that their prime objective on the east bank of the Danube should be to prevent the troops being separated, which in fact amounted to a thinly veiled permission to evacuate. The relocation of the command posts had already begun on the previous day.

The capture of Pest being only days away, Malinovsky ordered the Romanian 7th Army Corps – which had reached the Great Boulevard after losing 23,000 dead, wounded and missing (more than 60 per cent of its strength) since October – to the front in Northern Hungary. Although the real reason was that he did not want to share the victory with the Romanians, he claimed that he was responding to requests from the Romanian general staff. The Romanian commander, General Nicolae Sova, reluctantly obeyed but was nevertheless dismissed on 7 February for 'insubordination' and, after the communist takeover of Romania, sentenced to 10 years' forced labour in Siberia.⁸¹

On 17 January the final onslaught on Pest began, and at 7.25pm. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch received permission to evacuate.⁸² Now the sole objective



Shops burning in the Great Boulevard, January 1945.

of the Germans and Hungarians was to get to Buda across the two bridges – Erzsébet Bridge and the Chain Bridge – that were still standing, albeit badly damaged by bombs. However, many Hungarian soldiers deliberately stayed behind, and in some units the petrol was syphoned out of the remaining vehicles in order to sabotage the relocation.⁸³ The Hungarian Army Corps command sent General-staff Captain Ferenc X. Kovács and Gendarmerie Captain László Kerekes to the blazing city centre to oversee the execution of the evacuation order. Kovács recalls:

During the night I walked as far as Szent István Boulevard, doing the rounds of the various cellars where we suspected Hungarian units to be hiding... Everywhere they were waiting for the Russians and had no desire to go to Buda. In one of the cellars an air-force officer told us with an insolent grin that for him the war was over. There was nothing we could do about him.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, several thousand people had gathered at the two bridges in order to cross to Buda in the drumfire. One was Lieutenant-Colonel Alajos Vajda, quartermaster of the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division:

Coarse swearing in Hungarian and German. Total panic, which increased when we had to walk past a burning palace in a narrow street. We no longer knew where we were. The column swept us along, and there was no point in pulling



Lieutenant-General Nicolae Sova, commander of the Romanian 7th Army Corps (far left) with his soldiers in central Budapest.

out, nor was it advisable because one could not get back in again. Heat was pouring out of the blazing buildings, with window frames and other wooden parts showering the motor vehicles. Between the vehicles several infantry units were on the march. Motorised German field gendarmes were trying to maintain some order, but without much success. Every 10-20 metres we were stopped by another gridlock. Here and there shells and mines began to strike at steep angles. The terrible detonations were accompanied by sub-machine gun salvos. Who knew who was being shot and why? Of course many were hit by bullets or splinters. The wounded were moaning and screaming with pain. As if by a miracle we somehow reached the square in front of the Pest end of the Chain Bridge. There we were met by a veritable firework display. It was almost daylight in the middle of the night... Through huge gaping holes in the bridge we could see the water. The rear of a German military car, which had somehow been caught up in one of the holes, pointed towards the sky. Its nose was deep in the hole, its occupants probably dead. Elsewhere a lorry was on fire after a direct hit and we could hardly get round it. Dead bodies were scattered everywhere, some having been run over many times.⁸⁵

In a letter to his wife, which was never posted, Benyovszky wrote: 'We were at the mercy of the fighter planes like mice in a trap. Imagine the logjam in front of the bridge, vehicles on top of vehicles, and then the circus

started. The huge blocks of flats were burning like torches, the streets full of wrecks, bodies and collapsed walls. We could hardly walk.⁸⁶ In the narrow winding streets, close-quarter fighting with the aim of securing the evacuation was in progress, but the defenders, lacking ammunition, were helpless against the advancing Soviet guns. The hail of shells and bombs on the bridges continued. The exodus lasted all night, claiming numerous victims. A German soldier recalls:

The infantry abandoned Pest by what was left of the two Danube bridges. They were running for their lives, oblivious of the heavy bombardment. The order to evacuate the bridges without delay created a panic. General Hitschler's police battalion, suffering heavy losses even before they reached the bridgeheads in the infernal heat, dwindled to 200-300 within a few hours. The units of the Feldherrnhalle Division, the 13th Panzer Division and the Luftwaffe were decimated by a ferocious artillery barrage. The bridges remained constantly under massive fire, but people were surging ahead regardless. A tangled mass of cars and trucks, peasant carts covered by tarpaulins, frightened horses, civilian refugees, wailing women, mothers with crying children and many, very many, wounded were hurrying towards Buda.⁸⁷

When the bridges were finally blown up at 7am there were still evacuees on them. Another German soldier remembers:

We ran for our lives in the intensive artillery fire. The order for us to withdraw to Buda before the bridges were blown up naturally alarmed the civilian population of Pest and many fled to Buda with us. In the confusion some people (soldiers and civilians) were naturally left on the bridges when they were blown up. But the largest number of victims wasn't due to the blasting but to the heavy-artillery bombardment preceding it.⁸⁸

There were some who tried to oppose the pointless destruction. One member of the Hungarian resistance, Reserve Lieutenant Lajos Gidófalvy, disappeared without trace, probably while trying to save Erzsébet Bridge, which may have exploded as he was climbing the piers with a small group to reach the fuses.

From the Buda side, Pest presented an apocalyptic picture. A member of the University Assault Battalion writes:

At the Pest end of Margit Bridge I saw an ocean of flames. Szent István Boulevard was closed off by the iron structure of Nyugati Station, glowing red. It looked as if all life had perished over there and only the raging fires were left to rule over the ruins. I didn't dare to think of my loved ones who lived there.⁸⁹

After the destruction of the bridges it took the Soviet troops two more days to mop up the last German and Hungarian opposition in Pest, particularly between today's Jászai Mari Square and Nyugati Station.⁹⁰



Erzsébet Bridge.

4

The siege of Buda: 24 December 1944–19 January 1945

In Buda between 24 and 26 December, a front line had gradually developed between Farkasrét Cemetery and Olasz Avenue (today Szilágyi Erzsébet Avenue). On 25–6 December Soviet infantry had captured Kútvölgy Valley and the upper section of the Cogwheel Railway north of the cemetery, almost without a shot. Only at Farkasrét Cemetery, near Orbánhegy and Istenhegy Hills, and in Szépilona had the Germans and Hungarians been able to establish a defence line based on commandeered buildings with varying distances between them. On 25 December the first Soviet troops had arrived in Pasarét. On 25 and 26 December hastily deployed defence formations in the lower section of Hűvösvölgyi Road and Szépilona had retreated towards János Hospital. On 25 December a Soviet rifle unit coming from Virányos Road had entrenched itself in one of the westernmost hospital buildings.

After the breach of the Margit Line on 20 December, fragments of German units had retreated to Buda, while the bulk of what was left of the German 271st Volksgrenadier Division had clung to the suburb of Kelenföld, and the rest to Hármashatár-hegy Hill. The spine of the western defence,

from the northern section of the Danube across Rózsadomb Hill to the southern connecting railway bridge, was formed by the 8th SS Cavalry Division, which had been relocated from Pest and to which a German scratch unit called the Europa Flying Squad Battalion and a number of Hungarian units – the University Assault Battalion, the Vannay Battalion and some small gendarmerie groups – had been attached.

On 26 December Soviet rifle units from Pomáz had occupied the villages of Budakalász and Békásmegyer without meeting much opposition, and on 27 December they had reached Csillaghegy Hill and the Roman baths that had been vacated by the Germans without a struggle. By 28 December, however, on crossing the Óbuda railway embankment at Aquincum, they were faced with growing resistance in the Filatorigát quarter. From here the front line extended to the old cemetery in Óbuda, the corner of Perényi Road and Remetehegyi Road, and Remete-hegy Hill. On the east side of Remete-hegy Hill, between Perényi Road and the cemetery, Soviet troops advancing from Üröm Station were stopped in Bécsi Road.

The positions between the Danube and Fehérvári Road were manned by the Budapest Guard Battalion, and those between Fehérvári Road and Kelenföld by the Kündiger Group (a remnant of the German 271st Volksgrenadier Division) before being replaced by the Hungarian Galántai Gendarmerie Battalion and the city-centre Hungarist Group.⁹¹ Pressure was greatest in southern Buda, where the Soviet rifle corps soon penetrated to the inner-city districts. Their task was made easier by the absence of any significant troop concentrations ahead of the defence line near the Danube, and by 26 December they had captured Kelenföld Station.⁹² Nine German tanks started a counter-attack along the railway line, where German and Hungarian wagons loaded with ammunition were parked in a long row. As they were being forced back by troops of the Soviet 316th Rifle Division they collided with the wagons, setting off enormous explosions that demolished the neighbouring houses and killed many people.⁹³ However, on 27 December the Budapest Guard Battalion, the Morlin Group and a battery of the 1st Assault Artillery Division recaptured the station.

Between 24 and 28 December the University Assault Battalion, patrolling in shifts of four or five hours, sealed off the streets of the suburb of Törökvész between Látó-hegy Hill and the Bolyai Academy in Hűvösvölgy Valley. Their company commands kept in touch with each other by means of the university radio club's equipment. As the area could be overlooked from Svábhegy Hill, every movement in the streets had become potentially fatal, but the Soviets apparently failed to notice the weakness of the untrained forces facing them, because they avoided a gun battle and dodged

the patrols until 28 December. As a result, between 26 and 28 December the students were able to carry out successful counter-attacks towards Vadaspark Park, Kecske-hegy Hill, Oroszlánszikla Rock and Hármashatár-hegy Hill. However, 38 of them had to pay for their baptism of fire with their lives.⁹⁴

On 28 December the Soviets finally captured János Hospital and were within 2 kilometres west of the Danube and the same distance northwest of the German and Hungarian headquarters in the Castle tunnel. A whole Soviet division, in a column measuring 200–300m in width, set out towards Városmajor Grange. The grange was the most sensitive point in Buda, because a vigorous attack from there was likely to cut the cauldron in two and roll straight into the Castle District. The German command had therefore attached particular importance to fortifying it, allocating this task to the Vannay Battalion.

The fortifications were arranged in three echelons, the first at the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway and the second and third within Városmajor Grange, along Temes Street and Szamos Street respectively. The first echelon consisted of four German MG-42 machine guns placed on the embankment with trenches, a mine barrier and a barbed-wire entanglement in front of them, and a lorry blocking the level-crossing. At the foot of the embankment, more machine guns, covered by shutters torn from windows, pointed inward towards the grange. The grange buildings were mined in case any Soviet troops overran the embankment and tried to take shelter in them. A number of smaller defence positions were set up somewhat further back. The school in Városmajor Street was taken over by a company with a *panzerfaust*. At the junction of Trombitás Street and Érmelléki Street, a Hungarian anti-aircraft gun was deployed as an anti-tank weapon and camouflaged with a moveable screen made from the Opera's Persian carpets. Several apartments in Olasz Avenue and Retek Street were turned into machine-gun positions and ammunition dumps. All the positions were secured by pickets, which could communicate with one another and with the command through telephone lines installed in the municipal drains. The heavy-weapon crews waited in nearby cellars, taking up their positions only when instructed to do so by telephone, because the constant shelling made it impossible to stay in the open for long. The machine guns were moved after every few salvos, in order to elude the highly accurate Soviet anti-tank rifles. Each soldier in the advance positions was allocated a dog to keep him warm.

The combat strength of the Vannay Battalion amounted to some 450 men. The soldiers were initially housed in the church within Városmajor

Grange and the command in Csaba Street south of the grange. Their heavy weaponry consisted of two 40mm automatic guns, six 81mm mortars and two heavy anti-tank guns, assisted by three guns of a Hungarian artillery battalion stationed in Széll Kálmán Square (today Moszkva Square) to the east, and two additional Szálasi rocket launchers mounted in front of the church. The local knowledge of municipal employees serving in the battalion enabled them to use the existing cable culverts as a means of providing uninterrupted contact with the Europa Flying Squad Battalion north of the grange.

On 28 December Gyula Elischer, the founder and acting commander of the University Assault Battalion, was ordered to relieve a German unit at the western foot of Látó-hegy Hill. As he recalls, he set out with 20 volunteers, hoping that he would be able, as before, to repulse the Soviets without putting the untrained students at risk:

After a few hours' walk we arrived near the appointed place at lunch time and stepped into one of the houses. Everybody was in the cellar. We were given an excellent lentil soup...

The commander of the German unit that we were to relieve was a young Waffen SS officer. He was wearing a long unbuttoned coat, and round his neck a Knight's Cross and a sub-machine gun. He showed me round the positions and then we entered a nice modern two-storey house in a large garden on the steep slope... The German officer spread out the maps on top of a black grand piano and explained the situation to me. We exchanged a few words in German. He said that he was a secondary-school teacher. He was well-spoken and very likeable.⁹⁵

Outside, between the houses, the body of a German shot through the head indicated the presence of Soviet snipers on the heights opposite. Another of the Hungarians remembers:

Our own snipers with their telescopic-sight rifles had installed themselves in the attic of one of the houses, while the others occupied a section of the makeshift positions measuring 150-200m in length. Before long our left wing was hit by shells and about two dozen Russians were rushing towards the positions, but our machine gun opened fire on them to good effect. Only a few were able to run back. They tried to put our machine gun out of action but it had already been moved somewhere else. The battle quietened down a bit, only a few shots could be heard, and the Russians retreated.⁹⁶

A few minutes later Elischer was wounded. An explosive bullet shattered his shoulder and another hit him near the spine. When he had been dispatched to hospital, the command was taken over by Captain Lajos

Sipeki Balás, who had already been the head of the unit in theory since 5 December 1944.

Even then many of the students did not take the situation seriously. Olaf Szamódi, a student of mechanical engineering and an air-force reserve lieutenant, started a break-out attempt in the direction of Hármashatár-hegy and Kecské-hegy Hills with members of the 2nd Company. The students, marching in closed column, were approaching the Erdei Lak restaurant near Fenőgyöngye at the western foot of Remete-hegy Hill, when Soviet artillery stationed on the ridge above struck them from the side, causing many casualties. Szamódi himself was wounded, and only a few students reached the restaurant, where they were eventually encircled early in January.

On 29 December the Hungarian units that had retaken Kelenföld Station on 27 December advanced 1.5 kilometres further, occupying the industrial estates of southern Buda, and some Hungarian assault guns reached Andor Street.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, they were obliged to retreat to their original positions before evening because the German units due to protect their northwestern flank from a Soviet attack had been unable to keep up with them. The Soviet attack came to a standstill at the Lágymányos railway embankment, Sashegy Hill and Farkasrét Cemetery.

On 31 December Soviet troops crossed the railway embankment, which was, however, retaken by the Budapest Flying Squad Battalion. The battalion suffered considerable losses in the process and was replaced with two companies of the Combat Group led by Major Gyula Viharos, together with the 40-strong Hungarist Combat Group of First Lieutenant Béla Kollarits and the anti-tank group of Major István Déri. These were later joined by the panzer grenadiers of the Feldherrnhalle Division from Pest and some other German units. For a long time the defenders' eight machine-gun clusters, sunk into the embankment and reinforced with barbed-wire entanglements, proved impregnable. The assault battalions of the Soviet 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade launched several attacks, but the men advancing on foot across 50–200m of completely flat terrain were mown down by the machine guns and the tanks were unable to climb the embankment. The strength of several companies was reduced to seven. One Soviet soldier remembers:

Fighting in this section dragged on for a long time. We were unable to advance any further and the term 'dam' became more ominous for us every day. In the grey snow, sooty with gun powder and churned up by missiles, we would haul our wounded back through ravaged streets, and if we were then asked 'Where from?' our only reply amid the ceaseless rattle of guns was: 'From the dam'. To

all of us this word sounded threatening and sinister...The brigade had long since ordered the telegraphists, cart drivers, medical orderlies and cooks to the front line.⁹⁸

The dreaded 'dam' was finally taken by the Soviets on 11 February, when Major Viharos raised the white flag.⁹⁹

On 1 January the Soviet 180th Rifle Division attempted an assault on Városmajor Grange. After a heavy artillery and mortar barrage between 6 and 8 Soviet tanks and infantry from Kút völgyi Road overran the Vannay Battalion's machine-gun clusters. However, the Hungarians destroyed two T-34 tanks and recaptured the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway, where they created near-indestructible machine-gun positions by building the wrecks of the tanks into the earthworks and digging foxholes underneath. The fighting abated, although Soviet snipers posted in János Hospital ensured that the defenders in the front line could only be relieved by night. This embankment was to remain in Hungarian hands until 19 January.

On the morning of 3 January Tolbukhin withdrew the 2nd Mechanised Guard Army Corps, the 86th Guard Rifle Division and the 49th Guard Army Division from the encirclement to ward off the relief attempts. He also ordered the 46th Army to cease its attacks and concentrate on preventing any break-outs, although some of its companies and battalions continued the assault on Buda. (For the relief attempts and break-out see chapters III and IV.)

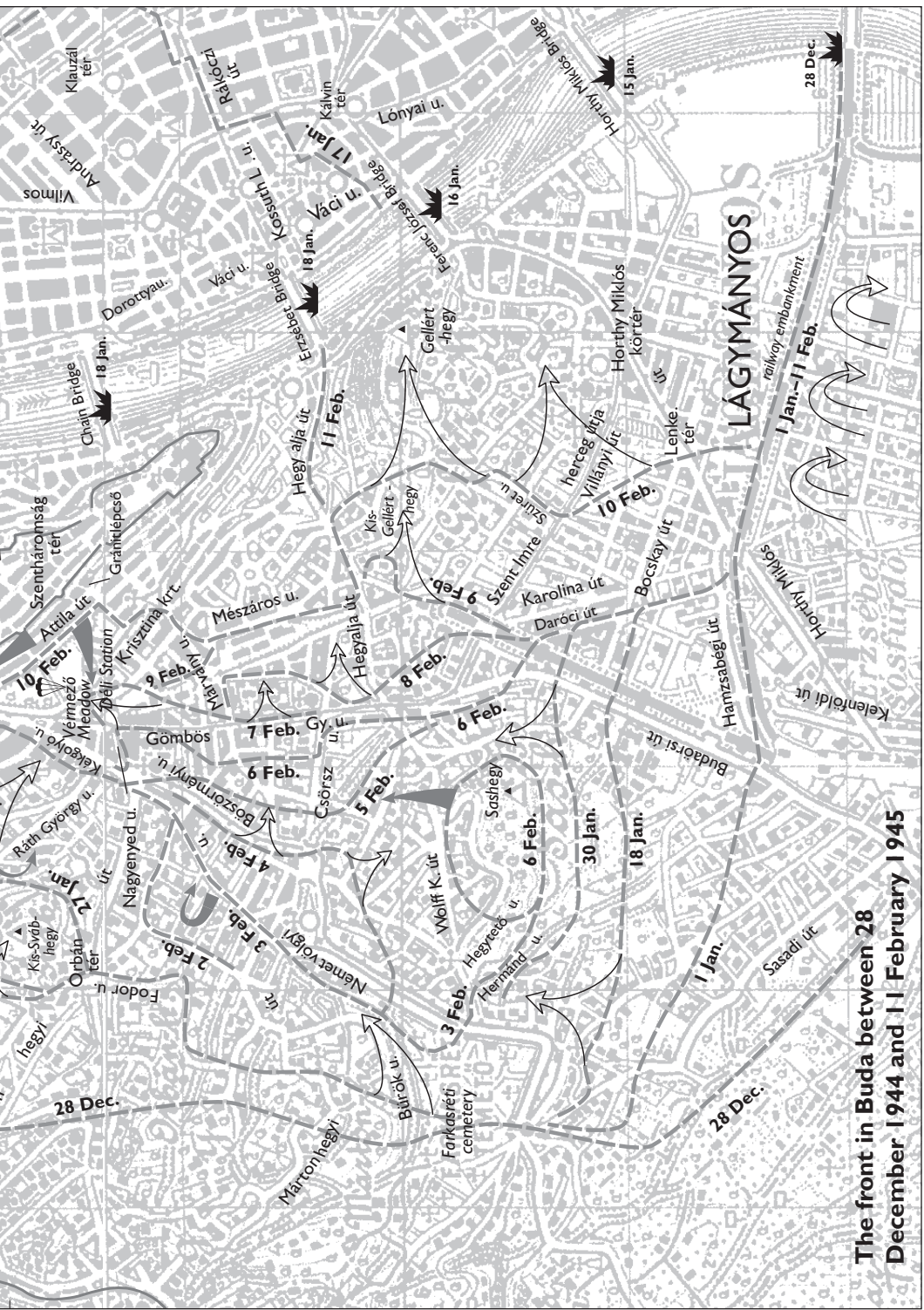
Ferocious battles were fought for the possession of Sashegy and Rózsadomb Hills. Mátyás-hegy Hill, the extreme northwestern base of the defence, changed hands seven times on 3 January alone. This hill, with its steep southern slope, was particularly important to the defence because without it the planned break-out towards the approaching relief troops was certain to cause heavy losses. Here, all Soviet attacks between 3 and 7 January were repulsed.

The loss of Sashegy Hill, which dominated the southern part of the city, would have made Buda untenable, because with the help of observers from that vantage point the Soviets could easily have eliminated the defenders' artillery between the Citadel and Castle Hill and the emergency airfield on Vérmező Meadow. The Germans had therefore developed the defence in depth. Between 300 and 600 Hungarians of the Berend Group, complemented by a gendarmerie unit, occupied the streets in the immediate neighbourhood of the hill, with their command billeted in the Notre Dame de Sion Convent and the bomb-proof premises of the Seismological Institute. The group kept in constant touch with the corps command, and

in due course with the relief armies, through a powerful radio transmitter.¹⁰⁰ South and west of the hill, in front of the Károly király Barracks (today Petőfi Barracks) and in Farkasrét Cemetery, the 8th SS Cavalry Division's companies were posted in the front line, with the battery of their anti-aircraft artillery immediately behind them, and a Hungarian anti-aircraft battery behind the cemetery.¹⁰¹ The defence was further supported by Hungarian assault guns and Hetzer anti-tank guns. On 12 January, southwest of the top of the hill, a Soviet battalion made a deep dent in the defence line, which was retrieved next day. On 15 January, according to a German report, Soviet troops 'with heavy weapons of all calibres succeeded in storming the heights in the morning, but in a dashing counter-strike the height was recaptured and a red regimental flag seized'.¹⁰²

One weak point of the defence was the thinly built-up territory immediately southeast and southwest of Sashegy Hill, and exceptionally heavy Soviet attacks were launched on the most vulnerable section between the hill and the Lágymányos railway embankment to the southeast. To the west, a Soviet assault on Farkasrét Cemetery on 13 January advanced 100–200m between the headstones, but was stopped by police and Hungarist combat groups, which remained in control of the cemetery's northeastern corner. On 20 January a counter-attack by the Waffen SS recovered most of the cemetery.¹⁰³ With positions set up in the burial vaults, about 80 Germans – together with some Hungarian gendarmes and Vannay men – held a defence line of about 1 kilometre against a charge of Soviet rifle divisions, between 2 and 3 kilometres in width. They were able to do so mainly because they had large quantities of heavy hand weapons – in particular fast MG-42 machine guns, of which one was often available to each squad of between five and seven men.

Near the northern edge of Farkasrét Cemetery, between Bürök Street and Mártonhegyi Road, the Soviets had advanced scarcely 100m by the end of the third week of January, because the defenders compensated for their small numbers by resorting to the unconventional 'chessboard' tactic favoured by the nature of the environment.¹⁰⁴ At that time the slopes of Buda were only sparsely developed. The defenders took positions in the villas, which were often up to 50m apart, and formed a thinly manned front line with well-armed storm-troops further back. In the event of a powerful Soviet attack on one of the villas they would withdraw, allowing the attackers to establish a deep but narrow salient. They would then suddenly emerge from other villas and open fire from two sides, cutting off the attackers' supplies and taking many of them prisoner. This method, regarded by traditional strategists as a heresy, proved itself in Budapest



The front in Buda between 28 December 1944 and 11 February 1945

when applied by soldiers who, while badly trained and equipped, could fall back on good local knowledge and high morale, as was the case with the university students, the volunteers of the University Assault Battalion, the Vannay Battalion, the assault-artillery men and some German units.¹⁰⁵

In terms of equipment the University Assault Battalion was worst off. Each of its companies had to defend a section measuring 200–300m with eight Bergmann sub-machine guns, fifty Mauser rifles, five light machine guns, two pistols and one 50mm mortar; the ammunition issued for 7–10 days consisted of 20 sub-machine gun magazines, 100 rounds per rifle, 10 magazines per light machine gun, 10 shells and 775 hand-grenades. None of the companies had further heavy or infantry weapons, and the ammunition was sufficient only for 1–2 days of heavy fighting.¹⁰⁶ This constituted a great handicap in comparison with the Soviet soldiers, most of whom had a sub-machine gun, were supported by numerous heavy weapons and did not need to worry about ammunition, as the label 'Don't economise' on the cases indicated.

Nevertheless, the Soviets advanced slowly and suffered enormous losses, which was to leave them with hardly any infantry by mid-January. Unlike the Hungarians, the Germans were well-provided with arms and ammunition. Moreover, as the front contracted and casualties mounted, the surviving defenders, spread less thinly on the ground, were able to enhance their own equipment with that of the dead. One particular fact that assisted them was that the depleted Soviet units often occupied houses at random rather than in a coherent line. Fighting in the labyrinthine terrain and in the midst of civilians favoured partisan actions, in particular by soldiers in civilian clothes.¹⁰⁷ Thus even when the front line of the Soviet attack had advanced as far east as Alkotás Street, enterprising Hungarian combat groups carried out raids in the west in Ráth György Street and near the school at the far edge of Városmajor Grange. In addition, they were able to make good use of municipal installations: the Vannay Battalion, for example, blew up a Soviet ammunition dump after approaching it through the Ördög-Árok culvert.¹⁰⁸

On 3 January, as a result of the German relief attempts and consequent Soviet regroupments, the pressure on Buda eased and a lull in the fighting ensued for a fortnight. On 10 January the defenders had begun to plan a break-out: they were to cross the Soviet line at the junction of Bécsi Road and Kiscelli Road and reach their own forces at Szentendre. However, the plan was abandoned a few days later because SS Oberführer Otto Gille's IV SS Panzer Corps had failed to reach Szentendre and had come to a halt at Pomáz.

On 16 January Soviet units broke through on Sashegy Hill and south of Orbánhegy Hill. The original positions on Sashegy Hill were recaptured through a counter-attack on the same day, but another counter-attack south of Orbánhegy Hill was checked by heavy Soviet fire. The 13th Panzer Division's report states: 'Throughout the day intense enemy fighter-aircraft activity with bombing and strafing of the front and the city, in particular the Castle District, only occasionally disturbed by our fighters. Whole blocks, especially public buildings, on fire. Traffic in the city by day impossible.'¹⁰⁹

Between 17 and 19 January, west of Sashegy Hill, Soviet battalions launched several attacks on Farkasrét Cemetery, but were rebuffed. Above the terminus of the Cogwheel Railway, after a heavy artillery barrage, five T-34 tanks and an infantry battalion penetrated the first defence line, forcing the 1st Company of the Vannay Battalion back to the western edge of Városmajor Grange, although three T-34 tanks were destroyed. From the gendarmerie barracks in Böszörményi Road the Billnitzer combat group in vain attempted a counter-attack towards Mártonhegyi Road. The Soviets charged the embankment of the south Circular Railway, also without success.

The transfer of German and Hungarian troops from Pest temporarily alleviated the tension in Buda. With no sizeable Soviet attack expected across the frozen Danube, the riverside quarters of Buda were secured only by sentries from the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division. To protect the traffic, the streets were screened off at several points with rush-matting and reed blinds.¹¹⁰

5

Fighting on Margit Island

Early in January the Soviets had tried to occupy Margit Island from the north, but their rubber boats had been sunk by the defenders' machine guns.¹¹¹ At dawn on 19 January Soviet riflemen landed in the north corner of the island and ensconced themselves between the concrete structures of the half-built Árpád Bridge. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch sent a German battalion commanded by SS Sturmbannführer (equivalent of major) Karl Weller, together with about 100 remaining men of the Hungarian II University Assault Battalion and 36 of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division's anti-tank company with four 75mm guns, to flush them out. The Soviets held their positions, but were unable to continue their advance in the unforgiving terrain. During the night of 20 January, 'the German sentry posted in the club houses on the Pest side of the island fell asleep and a Soviet

infantry platoon, reaching the island across the frozen Danube, occupied one of the club houses and the medieval ruins'.¹¹² By the morning of 21 January, the Soviets had established two bridgeheads near the power station on the west bank of the island.¹¹³ German counter-attacks were thwarted by the profusion of trees and shrubs and the deep snow, in which two assault guns got stuck. Before the morning of 22 January an entire Soviet battalion had landed with mortars and anti-tank rifles.

On the morning of 23 December, after a heavy mortar and artillery barrage, the Soviets sliced the island in two near the Palatinus baths. The Germans in the northern half were surrounded but managed to break out after dark. First Lieutenant Litteráti-Loótz undertook an independent mission with an armoured reconnaissance vehicle borrowed from the German battalion's command:

Four of my soldiers volunteered. We got in the armoured vehicle and, sitting on four crates of fragmentation shells (12 in all), coupled a gun to the vehicle. At 12 noon, on the road that runs from one end of the island to the other, we drove at full speed through the line of flabbergasted Russians and, following the big bend behind the water tower, reached the medieval chapel. My four soldiers uncoupled the gun and let rip against the Soviet mortars and their crews on what used to be the open-air stage, while I covered them with my sub-machine gun and Sergeant Hahn turned the vehicle round. The whole thing took no more than 2-3 minutes. We fired our 12 shells and by the time the Russians realised what had hit them we had recoupled the gun and were rushing back to our own lines the way we had come. At the same time we were throwing hand grenades right and left, so that the Soviet anti-tank guns lining the road could not open fire on us. Because everything had gone so smoothly we repeated the exercise at 15 hours. Six of us, without the gun but with sub-machine guns and hand grenades, drove to the square in front of the Nagyszálló Hotel, constantly firing from the open-top truck. Having peppered the Russians posted there, we immediately turned round and withdrew. We had no casualties.¹¹⁴

In the clubhouses on the eastern side of the island, the exhausted German soldiers were unable to beat off the constant Soviet attacks. Concerted artillery and mortar fire made all movement impossible, and those parts of the island still in the defenders' hands were hit by as many as 6000 missiles an hour, including several 15cm artillery grenades manufactured in Csepel, which were also used by the Soviets. Civilian men and women, press-ganged in Pest, were forced to carry ammunition to the front line across the frozen Danube before the German and Hungarian soldiers' eyes.

The university students held the Palatinus baths until 25 January, when they had to retreat. By 28 January fighting was in progress at the

Casino and at the edge of the polo ground, and the last clubhouse fell in the afternoon. The bridgehead had become so narrow that the Soviet troops were frequently hit by their own shells. In view of the hopeless situation, the German command gave permission for the island to be evacuated. First to leave was Litteráti-Loótz:

Because of the full moon we covered the tractors and guns with white sheets and began to withdraw at 20 hours. We could only move at walking speed. As the bridge surface had been wrecked by bombing, the four vehicles and three guns took more than three hours to reach the Buda shore, but they did so without any losses.¹¹⁵

A German attempt to blow up the still intact stump of the bridge failed for technical reasons. A platoon of sappers, led by a lieutenant, tried again, but when they reached the arch the bridge suddenly exploded. The sole survivor was a Ukrainian volunteer, who swam back to the Buda bank through the icy river.¹¹⁶

6

The siege of Buda: 20 January–11 February 1945

On the Buda side, the capture of Pest was followed by a week's lull in the fighting. The front as a whole stretched from Flórián Square in the north, via Mátyás-hegy Hill, Városmajor Grange, Orbánhegy Hill, Farkasrét Cemetery and Sashegy Hill, to the Lágymányos railway embankment in the south.

From 20 January the effects of the German relief attempt began to be felt, but it was only in the southern sector that Soviet shelling almost ceased and the defenders were able to readjust the battle line at some points. On 21 January, when the relief spearheads were within 35 kilometres from Buda, the IX SS Mountain Army Corps relocated the Dörner Combat Group (13th Panzer Division) – the only reserve unit of the defence, which had been withdrawn from Pest – to the southwestern section of the front. According to the corps command's plans, the forces concentrated in south Buda were to recapture the Budaörs airfield as soon as preparations were completed, in order to establish an air bridge for supplies and care of the wounded. The three assault guns of the Hungarian 1st Assault Division were to break through first, followed by mine-clearing patrols and the Dörner Combat Group.¹¹⁷ The entire reserves of the defence amounted to 800 infantry, 20–25 tanks, some 30 armoured personnel carriers and about

12 guns.¹¹⁸ The Soviet command, expecting relief attempts, had deployed the 1st Mechanised Guard Corps southwest of Buda and placed it under the command of the 4th Guard Army.

In north Buda, from 20 December the main defence line ran from the Óbuda end of Árpád Bridge through the Kiscell quarter, Mátyás-hegy Hill and the Csatárka quarter to upper Bimbó Road. From there to today's Vasas Stadium the positions on the northeastern slopes overlooking Pasarét remained unchanged for a long time.

On 21 January the Vannay Battalion, backed up by Tibor Rátz's two Zrínyi assault guns, recaptured Városmajor Grange. However, it paid dearly for this success, with 68 dead or missing and many wounded, including the dispatch runner Ervin Galántay, aged 14, who was shot through the neck. The Europa Flying Squad Battalion, reinforced with university students, suffered similar casualties: although it destroyed a Soviet flame-thrower tank and retook some buildings between Bimbó Road and Olasz Avenue – not least the villa used as headquarters by the Gestapo on the site of today's Körszálló Hotel – 54 German and 13 Hungarian soldiers were killed.¹¹⁹

South of János Hospital, between the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway and Farkasrét Cemetery, the positions of the opposing forces in the detached houses and gardens of Istenhegy, Orbánhegy and Mártonhegy Hills remained static. Resistance developed mainly between Farkasrét Cemetery, Sashegy Hill, Károly király Barracks, Bocskai Road, and the Lágymányos railway embankment as far as the ruins of the southern railway bridge. The bare summit of Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill became a no-man's-land 400m in width. Between Sashegy Hill and Farkasrét Cemetery the German front line lay in Hermánd Street.

On 22 January Soviet troops began to remove the roadblocks erected in the northwestern and central sections of the Buda front, which suggested that they were no longer expecting a break-out in response to the relief attempts. At the same time, reinforced with some units transferred from Pest,¹²⁰ they renewed their attacks along the entire bridgehead. The Soviet supreme command was dissatisfied with the progress of the 46th Army, which in 20 days had occupied only 114 of Buda's 722 blocks.¹²¹

The front in Óbuda and on Ferenc-hegy Hill livened up. Rózsadomb Hill came under unceasing mortar and gun bombardment, and Soviet troops from Látó-hegy Hill achieved a 100m breakthrough in Csatárka Street, where Sergeant Alexei Isaev died after throwing himself in front of a machine gun that was holding up the assault on a multi-storey building.¹²² However, in the more open spaces between the villas the attack stalled, and both sides were able to carry out local strikes and counter-strikes in the fog.



Lieutenant-General Ivan Managorov (in major-general's uniform), commander of the Soviet 53rd Army and subsequently of the 'Budapest Group'.

A report of the German IX Mountain Army Corps reads: 'Enemy incursions crushed or cut off in uncommonly violent encounters. Some encounters still in progress. Own and enemy losses high'.¹²³ In the heavy fighting Lieutenant-General Afonyin, the commander of the Soviet Budapest Group, was hit by 18 pieces of shrapnel and replaced with Lieutenant-General I. M. Managorov, the commander of the 53rd Army.

By this time the Danube was almost completely frozen over. In the night, after hiding for five days, two German soldiers made their way to Buda across the ice near the Chain Bridge. Their example was followed, in the opposite direction, by some members of the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division, mainly Transylvanian Romanians and gipsies detailed from the division's baking company as replacements for the defence of the Buda bank.¹²⁴

At about 8pm, the seven-storey Regent Building at the corner of Margit Boulevard and Mechwart Square, in whose courtyard the Germans stored large quantities of ammunition, blew up. In the supposedly bomb-proof air-raid shelter 300 bodies remained buried for months under the rubble.

On 23 January there was relatively little change, as the IX SS Mountain Army Corps's report indicates:

In 20 desperate raids the enemy, in company-to-battalion strength, supported by extremely intensive artillery, mortar and anti-tank fire and by waves of fighter aircraft, tried to break through the front in the northwest and north today. Apart from 2 enemy salients, which are still the object of fierce fighting, the front line has remained firmly in our hands.¹²⁵

However, this could not disguise the fact that the defenders' strength was rapidly declining and the losses could not be replaced.

On 24 January most of the previous day's breaches were sealed off, but according to the IX SS Mountain Army Corps, fighting continued for 'every inch of ground' at Vérhalom Square, Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill and between Sashegy Hill and the Danube: without reinforcements it would be 'impossible to hold the front.'¹²⁶ Even closer to central Buda, preparations for a Soviet attack near Széna Square were observed by the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division.

During the night of 25 January, the Soviets launched an assault on the Vannay Battalion's positions in Városmajor Grange. They crossed the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway and occupied the western section of the grange, but their advance was stopped by the University Assault Battalion and the 6/III Battalion in Csaba Street, Bíró Street and Szamos Street. The defenders near Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill also came under heavy pressure.

In the southern sector, Soviet troops captured a large part of the uniform factory at the corner of Bocskai Road and Daróczi Road near the Lágymányos railway embankment. The Hungarian 1st Assault Artillery Battalion and German infantry, suffering heavy losses, tried all day to liberate the building and the soldiers trapped on its upper floor.¹²⁷ Meanwhile Soviet soldiers with flame-throwers, forcing their way into the houses on the south side of Hermánd Street, began to encircle Sashegy Hill from the west.¹²⁸

On 26 January the Soviet attack which had started at Látó-hegy Hill some days before increasingly gained ground along Törökvész Road. As the German and Hungarian units were completely exhausted, the defence suddenly collapsed, and the only reason why this did not lead to total disaster was that the Soviets had also sustained heavy losses. At dawn Soviet units reached the Vérhalom quarter, by which time the University Assault Battalion had lost 70 per cent of its strength. In the evening fighting spread to Rókus-hegy Hill, Alsó Törökvész Road and the Rézmál quarter.

At the command post of the University Assault Battalion in a school in Áldás Street an exploding petrol drum gravely wounded Captain Lajos Sipeki Balás. He was replaced by Captain Tibor Mikulich and subsequently



The domed tower of the Royal Palace
after the siege.

by Gendarmerie Captain Zsombor Nagy. By then most of the students were not fit for action: those still alive were laid up in atrocious conditions in various emergency hospitals, and the dead could only be buried in the frozen ground with difficulty. Some of the wounded had been dumped in the corridors of the command post, as Private Dénes Vass remembers:

I stumbled unsteadily through the ruins of Áldás Street towards the commander's room to deliver the evening report. In the partly cleaned corridor only a half-metre wide strip was free for walking. On both sides civilian and military wounded were lying on the bare floor. Somebody caught my coat. It was a girl of about 18-20 with fair hair and a beautiful face. She begged me in a whisper: 'Take your pistol and shoot me'. I looked at her more closely and realised with horror...both her legs were missing.¹²⁹

Soviet assault groups recaptured most of Városmajor Grange, forcing the defenders back as far as Csaba Street. The command of the Hungarian I Army Corps ordered the Szabados Group to relieve the students, but because of the rapidly worsening situation both units were obliged to continue the fight side by side. The Szabados Group, which consisted of some 300 members of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division's supply units,¹³⁰ had really been created to justify the existence of the divisional command and

divert attention from the fact that by late January between 1500 and 2000 members of the division had never seen battle.¹³¹ Soviet rifle units advancing from the Törökvész and Vérhalom areas reached the fork of Fillér Street and Hankóczy Jenő Street northeast of the grange.

In north Buda, the Soviet thrust continued towards Szemlő-hegy Hill, Szépvölgyi Road, and Vérhalom Square. During the night Soviet infantry and 20 tanks also attacked south of Svábhegy Hill.

In Vérmező Meadow, members of the Budapest branch of the Deutsche Jugend (German Youth) organisation aged between 13 and 16, who had been directing the gliders to the landing strip with electric torches, came under fire from the light weapons of Soviet troops in the adjoining streets. This ended the systematic delivery of supplies to the defenders, although some gliders managed to land in the southern and central sections of the meadow, which still remained outside the Soviets' range.

In Daróczi Road the Germans, assisted by the Hungarian 1st and 10th Assault Artillery Battalions, at last ejected the Soviet assault group from the uniform factory. Captain Sándor Hanák recalls:

We rolled up with two automatic flame-thrower guns and 4-5 assault guns. I saw the politruks driving their soldiers forward with sub-machine guns. The Russkis were jumping out near the corner of the fence. Our flame-thrower licked over them three times and then I had a fragmentation shell lobbed into them. When the smoke cleared I saw them still jumping out of that hole. Obviously they were being prodded from behind.¹³²

The trapped German and Hungarian soldiers were liberated, but the factory was soon retaken by the Soviets.

Meanwhile, south of the Buda end of Erzsébet Bridge, an attack by Soviet infantry across the Danube was foiled by the defenders' fire.¹³³

In the evening, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, after receiving news of the failure of the third relief attempt, called a war council. Colonel-General Schmidhuber and some other officers submitted a break-out proposal, which he rejected, arguing that the Führer's orders had to be awaited. The officers' response has been described as follows:

Leaving the room after the meeting, several commanders openly speak about Hitler's pig-headedness. Even some of the SS are beginning to doubt his qualities as a leader. One of them noisily strides out of the room saying in a loud voice, for all to hear: 'Now I know that our men are meant to be sent to the slaughter in Budapest.'¹³⁴

On 27 January, after the failure of SS Obergruppenführer Gille's final relief attempt, Hitler personally cabled that Budapest must be held until relieved.¹³⁵

The German Army Group South, regarding a break-out as hopeless, had written Budapest off by this time.¹³⁶

Soviet units overran the defence positions on Orbánhegy Hill and, in a surprise attack, captured Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill through the underground passages in its northwestern slope. Having thus removed the last obstacle to their advance, they established a salient from Kis-Svábhegy Hill to within 150m east of Vérmező Meadow. A German report reads:

The situation there has become extremely serious. The IX SS Mountain Army Corps with its currently engaged forces will not be able to stop a strong enemy thrust across the meadow towards the Danube. To prevent the defence forces splintering, it will be necessary for the northern front to be pulled back to a substantially reduced battle line during the night of 28/29 January. Opportunities for the deployment of armoured units in house-to-house and street fighting are limited. Drivers and panzer grenadiers are fighting on foot. Our own losses are extremely heavy. The number of wounded exceeds those fighting. If Vérmező Meadow, the last possible landing ground for gliders, is lost the supply prospects are frightening. The plight of the wounded is shocking.¹³⁷

Pushing ahead from Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill, the Soviet units then forced the defenders still holding out in Városmajor Street and Városmajor Grange to retreat to the Déli Station and Kékgolyó Street area.

In north Buda, the German Feldherrnhalle Division and 13th Panzer Division, with the Hungarian combat groups attached to them, withdrew to Újlak church. Soviet troops advancing from the west, encountering no significant resistance, reached the western edge of Marczibányi Square.

On 28 January the Germans continued their rearguard actions near Zsigmond Square and at the foot of Rózsadomb Hill. The Szabados Group and units of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division that had provided cover so far began their withdrawal towards Margit Boulevard. Soviet troops, continuing their push from Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill, reached Kékgolyó Street. At 11pm a counter-attack led by the command of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division failed to repulse them.

On 29 January the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, with the Szabados and Billnitzer Groups, launched a two-pronged counter-attack from Kékgolyó Street and Istenhegyi Road to try and recapture Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill and Városmajor Grange. The Szabados Group was reinforced with 200 high-school pupils, who had been armed only two days earlier, 50 bus and tram conductors from the Vannay Group, and 30–40 members of the Prónay Group who had been caught hiding. The operation, supported by the assault guns of the 13th Panzer Division, stalled in Kis-sváb-hegyi Road (today Goldmark Károly Road), because the untrained Hungarians had

sustained enormous casualties and run out of ammunition.¹³⁸ A patched-up gendarmerie battalion attacked in the same direction, and after some initial successes suffered the same fate.¹³⁹

It became clear that the Soviets intended to cut the bridgehead in two and encircle the German and Hungarian units still resisting on Mátyás-hegy Hill. The command of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps cabled in despair:

In order to prevent the bridgehead being split, in the night of 29/30 January the corps will move to a new battle line in the northwest and north close to Castle Hill. This is the final position...Supply situation terrible. If the IV SS Panzer Corps does not arrive in the shortest possible time it will be too late. We have reached the end.¹⁴⁰

As a last resort, a 200-strong scratch unit of artillery-measuring squads, baggage-train crews, signallers and engineers were drafted into the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division to protect the remnants of some hidden formations which still existed in practice albeit no longer on paper. Late in the evening, the command of the Hungarian I Army Corps, with the Germans' permission, ordered the retreat to Margit Boulevard.

On 30 January, at daybreak, the Germans and Hungarians withdrew from southern Margit Island. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch placed the commander of the 13th Panzer Division, Colonel-General Schmidhuber, in charge of the southern section of Buda and detailed the remaining units to the foot of Gellért-hegy Hill. By that time Schmidhuber had begun to contemplate organising an independent break-out, although he knew that his chances of getting through were minimal. His initiative was foiled by the arrival the next evening of the corps command's instructions to relocate immediately to the north.¹⁴¹

Later on 30 January the Soviet onslaught reached Széll Kálmán Square. In Városmajor Grange the defence collapsed, and only a few dogged groups continued to hold some buildings in nearby Ignóus Street and Fény Street. The first Soviet T-34 tank arrived from Retek Street and, sweeping the damaged anti-tank barrier in Dékán Street out of its way, reached the corner of Széna Square. Artillery men of the Hungarian 12th Reserve Division stationed in the square propped up their howitzers with ammunition crates so that they were able to fire horizontally, and their first shot blew up the T-34. However, a second Soviet tank emerged and crushed them, together with their howitzers. In Retek Street the defenders damaged two more Soviet tanks in close-quarter fighting, but this did little to change the situation. From the northern side of Széna Square the Soviets opened fire on the Post Office Palace, the defenders' last important base before Castle Hill.¹⁴²

In Németsölgyi Road some Hungarian police and gendarmerie units surrendered. The remnants of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division were transferred to Fő Street, although the majority of its baggage and administrative staff, some 900 men, remained on Rózsadomb Hill and were taken prisoner with their food and other supplies. The front line between Margit Bridge and Széll Kálmán Road stabilised in Margit Boulevard, which was sealed off by the Billnitzer Group jointly with the residue of retreating combat units and Hungarian technical personnel. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch cabled:

The battle of Castle Hill has begun... Forming a main battle line in the jumble of houses on Castle Hill is an illusion. The deployment on the front of much greater forces than so far is necessary... All day there have been extremely heavy air attacks on the Castle and the fighting troops. The supply situation of the troops is catastrophic, as already reported in detail. The plight of 300,000 Hungarian inhabitants cooped up in the smallest possible space is terrible. No building is intact. Losses due to enemy action are enormous. There is starvation and risk of diseases.¹⁴³

Soviet troops reached the western edge of Vérmező Meadow at the level of Bors Street (today Hajnóczi József Street) and, storming across the open space, captured the school in Béla király Road (today Attila Road) and a base of the Budapest Flying Squad Battalion, whose members had been kept in reserve for the defence of the Castle District. With some German and Hungarian units keeping up their stubborn defence of the remaining buildings on the northern side of the meadow, the Soviets came under fire from two different directions as they continued their attack towards the Castle District. Nor did their infantry weapons suffice to prevent four supply gliders landing after dark with the help of theatre spotlights in the meadow's northern section.

On 31 January the fighting further north abated and the front line solidified, for the duration of the siege, on Margit Boulevard. The Soviets raided 10–12 student volunteers inside the Átrium cinema and ejected them after a hand-grenade battle in the dark auditorium. German troops converted the corner block near the Buda end of the Chain Bridge into a fortress, distributing sandbags and machine guns in the apartments. In the Sashegy Hill area the Hungarian Berend Group and 201/1 Anti-aircraft Battery repulsed the Soviet troops which had infiltrated Wolff Károly Street (today Hegyalja Street) and Miasszonyunk Street (today Meredek Street).¹⁴⁴ Low-flying Soviet heavy bombers and fighter bombers relentlessly attacked the Castle District, and the buildings collapsed one after another. Soldiers and civilians were ordered out of their houses to erect barricades in the streets leading to Castle Hill. The commander of the Hungarian Anti-aircraft Artillery signalled: 'Castle and Krisztina Boulevard in ruins. Fighter



Margit Boulevard.

aircraft defence nil. Anti-aircraft battalion engaged in infantry action. Enemy pressure heavy and overpowering. Troops tired to exhaustion. Food supplies short. Artillery equipment: 22 guns and 29 automatic guns.⁷¹⁴⁵

On 1 February the main defence line ran from the Buda end of Margit Bridge along Margit Boulevard to Széll Kálmán Square, and from there over a short stretch of Krisztina Boulevard at the northern corner of Vérmező Meadow to the junction of Kékgolyó Street, where the Soviets were directly threatening Déli Station. Between the station and Széll Kálmán Square the situation was confused: the Post Office Palace and the southern blocks of Krisztina Boulevard were in German hands, while two buildings at the northern edge of Vérmező Meadow were held by Soviet troops. Between Kékgolyó Street and Sashegy Hill the situation was even more chaotic. Here the main defence line bulged west, where the Germans were clinging to Farkasrét Cemetery, the streets at the eastern foot of Orbánhegy Hill (particularly Mártonhegyi Road) and Istenhegyi Road as far as Nárcisz Street. Meanwhile, the Soviets were not only threatening Németséggyi Road and, parallel to it, Böszörményi Road but had also reached Hegyalja Road opposite the main entrance to Farkasrét Cemetery. The battle line became more coherent from Sashegy Hill to Daróczi Road, Bocskai Road, Karolina Road and Hamzsabégyi Road.

On the same day, the focus of Soviet attacks shifted to southwest Buda. There was heavy fighting in Budaörsi Road at the level of Bocskai Road,

where Soviet infantry with tank support broke into the German positions and began to threaten Sashegy Hill from the south. Elsewhere, two Soviet reconnaissance patrols advancing across the ice on the Danube were pushed back. Hindy reported to the Hungarian Ministry of Defence: 'Supply situation intolerable. Menu for the next 5 days per head and day: 5 gr. lard, 1 slice of bread, and horse meat... Lice infestation of the troops constantly increasing, in particular among the wounded crammed into the tight caves. Already 6 cases of typhus.'¹⁴⁶

A scratch unit of assorted defenders launched an attack from Orbánhegy Hill towards Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill in order to divert the Soviet threat from Vérmező Meadow, but within half an hour the action came to a bloody end. The defence line could only be stabilised from Istenhegyi Road to Királyhágó Square.

On 2 February the Germans, suffering many casualties in house-to-house fighting in Mártonhegyi Road and the lower section of Istenhegyi Road, retreated about 1 kilometre and were only able to slow the Soviet advance through a number of holding actions along the disjointed battle line. Hungarian troops recaptured the primary school at the corner of Vérmező Meadow and today's Attila Road. In the middle section of Krisztina Boulevard, heavy fighting took place for the German school near Festetics Palace. According to a report of the Hungarian I Army Corps 'the Soviets made a small dent between Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill and Farkasrét Cemetery, and by evening the situation was not yet resolved. The enemy group attacking on Sashegy Hill broke into the German positions, but a Hungarian counter-attack restored the old battle line.'¹⁴⁷ A determined platoon, led by Pioneer Lieutenant László Benkő, slipped through the battle line across Széll Kálmán Square and wiped out the Soviet battalion command billeted in the school in Városmajor Street.¹⁴⁸

On 3 February Papal Nuncio Angelo Rotta, representing the Budapest diplomatic corps, visited Pfeffer-Wildenbruch in his bunker and asked him to urge the German supreme command to end the suffering and prevent the ultimate destruction of the civilian population. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, realising that the end was only days away, informed the Wehrmacht headquarters in Germany of the nuncio's intervention, inquiring whether there were still plans for the relief of Budapest¹⁴⁹ and hoping to receive permission to break out. The reply was that the Führer's orders remained unchanged and Budapest must be held to the bitter end.¹⁵⁰

Fierce engagements were in progress for Sashegy Hill, and house-to-house fighting raged in Hegytető Street. Soviet troops attacking from Orbánhegy Hill reached Németvölgyi Road.

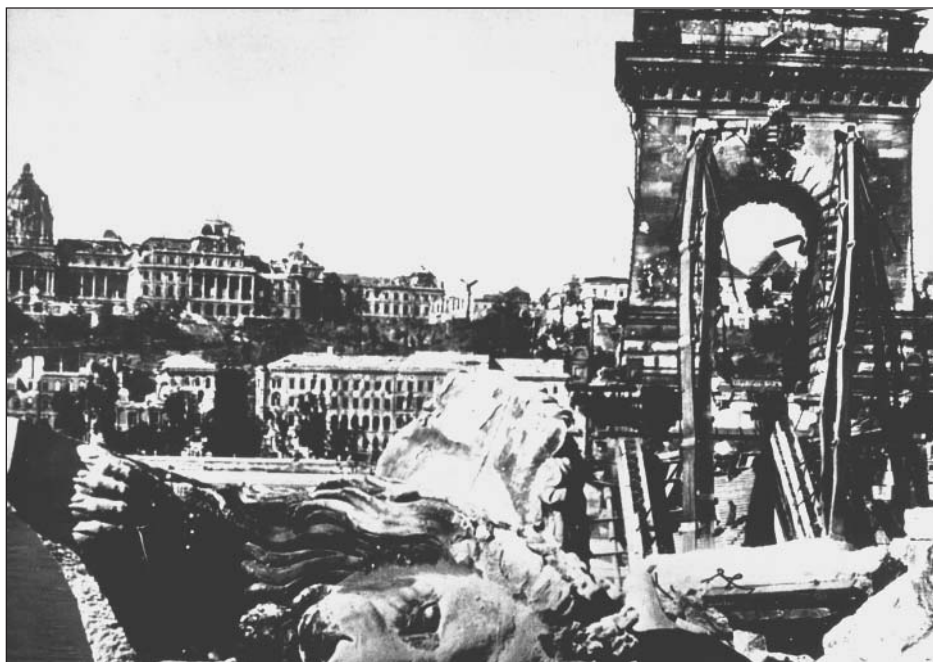


Wrecked German gliders on Vérmező Meadow.

In the evening Hindy held a meeting in his bunker, attended by the few senior commanders who could be reached. All realised that defeat in a matter of hours was likely. Staff Captains Dezső Németh and Frigyes Wáczek, stressing the hopelessness of the military situation and the plight of the civilians, tried to persuade their colleagues to capitulate unilaterally. Hindy helplessly explained that he could do nothing: without the co-operation of the Germans he would not even be able to convey his commands to his units, and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch would ignore a unilateral surrender.¹⁵¹

On 4 February Soviet troops from Orbánhegy Hill reached Németvölgyi Road and continued their attack towards Déli Station. This marked the beginning of the encirclement of Sashegy Hill from the north. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch radioed to his superiors that he was unable to hold out as the defence could collapse at any moment. Deliberately avoiding the word 'break-out' he requested permission to 'take whatever tactical step' was necessary, but permission was refused.

On 5 February the last gliders landed on Vérmező Meadow. Two touched down near Kőműves-lépcső steps, three broke up in the southern part of the meadow, the sixth fell on the ruins of the Szarvas Restaurant, and the seventh crashed into the attic of 31 Attila Road. Paradoxically, this



View of Buda from the Chain Bridge, February 1945.

proved to be the most successful day for the defenders' air forces: 97 tonnes of ammunition, 10 tonnes of fuel, 28 tonnes of food and four engine-oil drums and spare-part crates reached their destinations.¹⁵²

Soviet anti-tank units destroyed two German tanks and anti-tank guns in Királyhágó Square, and occupied the buildings south, north and west. In the evening the 16th SS Cavalry Regiment gave up its base at the corner of Németvölgyi Road and Farkasrét Cemetery, and Soviet troops reached the junction of Gömbös Gyula Road (today Alkotás Street) and Hegyalja Road between Németvölgyi Road and Sashegy Hill. With Sashegy Hill essentially encircled, the annihilation of the German unit trapped in Farkasrét Cemetery and the storm on Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill and Déli Station began. Hungarian volunteers counter-attacking in Karolina Road suffered great losses. The Soviets took the gendarmerie barracks in Böszörményi Road and established a small salient in Budaörsi Road. As Soviet troops had broken through to Krisztina Boulevard near the northern corner of Vérmező Meadow, the defenders were no longer able to hold the Post Office Palace. They evacuated the building through an emergency exit from the air-raid shelter, which resulted in more casualties.¹⁵³

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch once more requested permission to break out, failing which the defenders would be annihilated within days and unable

to tie down the Soviet forces any longer. Even now he only dared to make a feeble blackmail attempt, by declaring that the garrison would be lost unless approval arrived by next day. Hitler again refused, because prolonging the siege by a few days was obviously worth more to him than the possible success of a break-out, which would at best have meant the survival of a few thousand unarmed men who would need immediate hospital treatment.¹⁵⁴ Since the beginning of January, the Führer and the German supreme command, having written off Budapest, were only interested in deriving maximum profit from the doomed defenders.

On 6 February fighting was fiercest near Déli Station and in Hegyalja Road, where the Soviet combat units included groups of officers equipped with flame-throwers. Some 20 members of the Németvölgy Arrow Cross combat group were taken prisoner and executed near Németvölgy Cemetery.¹⁵⁵ A counter-attack launched by the 8th SS Cavalry Division from the southeast and northwest towards Sashegy Hill was checked by strong Soviet opposition. Soviet troops attacking from Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill captured the military hospital in Királyhágó Street, while others, attacking from the west and south, drove the German defenders out of Németvölgy Cemetery. The IX SS Mountain Army Corps signalled in despair:

Given our tremendous losses and their superior equipment it will not be possible to stop the enemy in the confusing urban terrain, where whole battalions are required for the defence of small streets. All our positions have been overrun, with the exception of one artillery defence position in the process of development.¹⁵⁶

On Sashegy Hill, the Berend Group, with no food and ammunition left, abandoned the battle. Fighting was so fierce that in one detachment that had originally numbered 38, only seven were still alive when they surrendered.¹⁵⁷ On the same day Soviet artillery began to bombard the battery positions securing the link between the defences of Gellért-hegy Hill and Castle Hill.

On 7 February Soviet infantry and tanks penetrated the northern and western parts of Déli Station. Further south they reached Gömbös Gyula Road, where some buildings changed hands several times in heavy fighting. Of a volunteer detachment of 32 men engaged in Márvány Street, all but two had not been killed or wounded by evening. At Villányi and Bocskai Roads the defenders succeeded in repulsing most of the Soviet inroads, and from Sashegy Hill a German group of company strength fought its way back to the German defence lines. From the Post Office Palace a group of Soviet soldiers and Hungarian volunteers fighting on the Soviet side



The tunnel used as defenders' headquarters, seen from Krisztina Boulevard on 7 February 1945, with a German dispatch runner mounting his motorcycle.

attempted an attack towards Kékgolyó Street, which foundered under intensive German fire.¹⁵⁸ The last German machine-gun positions in Farkasrét Cemetery were wiped out.¹⁵⁹

During the night the Germans tried to recapture Déli Station, but succeeded only in occupying its western part. A German group managed to hold a building on the corner of Krisztina Boulevard and Városmajor Street and, with its last operational tank, foil a Soviet attack from the Post Office Palace towards the Castle District.¹⁶⁰ On the northern front ferocious fighting had raged all day around a breach made by Soviet tanks with flame-thrower backing, but the attackers were ultimately unable to pierce the defence positions in Margit Boulevard.

On 8 February Soviet units from Németvölgy Cemetery reached Avar Street, parallel to the southern railway line. The Soviet attack from Sashegy Hill advanced to Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill. A Hungarian group reoccupied a large part of the Post Office Palace. In the night a small platoon of the Hungarian 102nd Horse-drawn Chemical Warfare Battalion, led by Ensign Norbert Major, rescued a German detachment trapped on the upper floor of a building at the corner of Krisztina Boulevard and Városmajor Street. The Hungarians sprinted across Vérmező Meadow, burst into the building

and led those Germans still able to run back to Attila Road. Airborne supplies weighing four tonnes landed by parachute for the last time.

The IX SS Mountain Army Corps pulled the battle line back to the eastern edge of Vérmező Meadow and evacuated most of Déli Station. This time it was the commander of the German Army Group South who requested Hitler's permission for a break-out, as the makeshift military hospitals in the cellars of the castle, where the wounded were kept in appalling conditions, had reached their maximum capacity despite the growing number of deaths. When permission was again refused, the IX Mountain Army Corps began to concentrate the remnants of its units in the Castle District.

Colonel Lajos Lehoczky, the last commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, made the final entry in the division's war diary, providing a fine sample of military officialese:

I orally reported to the Corps Commander and the Commander of the 13th Panzer Division (Colonel-General Schmidhuber) the following:

In the name of martial honour I request that measures be taken, in agreement with the commander of the German Army Corps, to terminate the fighting when food or ammunition supplies are exhausted and the soldiers' nourishment becomes so inadequate (horse meat, lack of bread) as to reduce their combat value to such an extent that defection to the enemy, desertion or robberies must be expected, nor is the possibility of the ranks turning against their superiors to be ruled out... The sufferings and deprivations of the civilian population are even greater than those of the garrison and from this moment the historical responsibility will rest with the commander of the Hungarian army corps, Colonel-General Hindy. I also request that the other Hungarian corps commanders be heard.

I can see no other way out of the conclusive and catastrophic disintegration than the issuing of a general order for the unified cessation of hostilities.¹⁶¹

He then took his leave from his fellow-officers and retired into the bunker.

On 9 February the German positions on Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill came under relentless Soviet drumfire. The freshly deployed Soviet 25th Guard Rifle Division and several Hungarian volunteer companies that had changed sides advanced, backed by tanks, from Sashegy Hill towards the Citadel. In the German battery positions on Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill there was hand-to-hand fighting: 50 per cent of the defenders' guns were destroyed on this day alone.

A small Soviet assault group from Krisztina Boulevard recaptured the school in Attila Road, making a breach in the defence system of Castle Hill. Another group, with flame-throwers, installed itself in a house at the corner of Gránit-lépcső steps and Attila Road, with an anti-tank gun but

was pulverised by the university students.¹⁶² From the school, 20 Hungarian volunteers who had defected to the Soviets tried to enter the neighbouring building. Their commander remembers:

Our next objective was to capture the first floor. I started walking up the stairs... When we reached the bend in the staircase a mass of hand-grenades was thrown at us. We delivered a volley, but were thrown all over the stairs by the shock waves. There were many wounded, but we couldn't tell who and how, because the Germans had started a counter-attack... The walls crumbled, the ceiling fell in, there were moaning wounded and dead everywhere. Those who could would have taken cover, but there was nowhere to go. So we were shooting, and they were shooting. Soon, I don't know how much time had passed, none of us was unscathed... Looking at my comrades, there were broken heads and everyone bloody all over. With nobody left whole, there was nothing to be done, so I gave orders to retreat. The more gravely wounded were carried by the less. Climbing back down the ladder or jumping into the deep yard, dragging our wounded with us, we withdrew to our starting point. Meanwhile the Germans were firing at us from all sides. Three of us reached the school, the rest couldn't make it and perished.¹⁶³

By evening, Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill had fallen and Déli Station was entirely in Soviet hands. Soviet troops together with Hungarian volunteers were fighting their way from room to room in Avar Street, but their attempt to break through to Naphegy Hill failed and between 40 and 50 volunteers lost their lives. The front line now ran along Karácsonyi Street (today Kuny Domokos Street), Győző Street, the upper reaches of Mészáros Street, Hegyalja Road, Harkály Street and Alsóhegy Street. Between Lágymányos railway embankment and Villányi Road the situation was chaotic: some units were trapped in Bajmóczy Street, while others were struggling along Karolina Road and Bocskai Road with the Soviet units pushing towards Lenke Square (today Kosztolányi Dezső Square).

On 10 February Soviet armoured spearheads from Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill reached Döbrentei Square and began to threaten communications between the citadel, the Lágymányos quarter and the Castle District. Parts of a Soviet battalion consisting of degraded officers reached the Danube near Erzsébet Bridge, but were wiped out in a counter-attack by the Schöning Group. Fighting was particularly bitter in the upper section of Kelenhegyi Road, where many Hungarian volunteers fighting on the Soviet side, who tried to storm the citadel, were killed by the Germans. Soviet troops with flame-throwers crossed Vérmező Meadow and occupied a building in the southern part of Logodi Street which, however, was retaken by five members of the University Assault Battalion in a violent gun battle.¹⁶⁴ Private Péter

Noel's combat group attacked the school in Attila Road: 'We went into action before sunrise. We surprised the Russians by blowing up one of the windowless walls and retook the building in 10 minutes without any casualties.'¹⁶⁵ During the night Soviet troops and two Hungarian volunteer companies attacked the Lágymányos defence sector. One of the volunteers, Private János Szekeres, recalls:

Here and there one of our men appeared, wounded. I was carrying the red parachute silk, because whenever a Hungarian soldier joined us we cut a ribbon for his cap from that material. The thin layer of snow on the ground smelled of petrol and gunpowder. Burnt human bodies lay beside the wrecked tanks. The Soviet soldiers softened up the territory in front of us with shells.¹⁶⁶

Jenő Sulyánsky, a cadet aged 15, remembers:

During the night and morning a huge battle raged, particularly near Lenke Square. Burnt-out tanks, lorries, bodies everywhere. Our battery was completely scattered... Not far from us, in Horthy Miklós Road [today Bartók Béla Road], a retreating German military lorry had received a direct hit and was on fire. In and around it were bodies of German soldiers, partly or entirely charred.¹⁶⁷

On 11 February, early in the morning, the first Soviet advance guards were approaching the Gellért Hotel at the Danube end of Horthy Miklós Road. The command of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, billeted at 16 Horthy Miklós Road, had by then collected all weapons, and large numbers of Hungarian soldiers were crawling out of the cellars to stagger towards Budafok and be taken prisoner.

Later in the morning, the defenders along the Lágymányos railway embankment raised the white flag on the order of Major Gyula Viharos. South of Gellért-hegy Hill resistance was sporadic, and the majority of Germans withdrew to the Castle District. In the XI District the arms were almost silent by midday, although a Soviet jeep carelessly driven into Szent Imre Square (today Móric Zsigmond Square) was knocked out with a *panzerfaust* by a soldier apparently continuing a private war.

At the Gellért Hotel, Colonel József Kozma, the commander of the Hungarian anti-aircraft artillery, explained to the staff of the Hungarian 102nd Anti-aircraft Battalion that he regarded further resistance or a break-out attempt as pointless.¹⁶⁸ At noon, after jointly disarming the majority of the Germans, they raised the white flag on the building, and by evening any Germans refusing to surrender had been killed by Kozma's men and Soviet troops in hand-to-hand fighting in the underground passages. At 7pm the Soviets also captured the emergency hospital in Sziklakápolna Chapel.¹⁶⁹ Resistance had ceased in the whole of Buda.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Baló.
- 2 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, telephone diary, 25 December 1944.
- 3 Report from Ernst Schweitzer, 26 February 1945 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 4 HL TGY, Aurél Salamon, 3179, p. 65.
- 5 Tóth, 1975b, p. 336.
- 6 There are different accounts of the attack. According to the war diary of the 10th Infantry Division, the battalion panicked after retaking the original positions, while according to surviving members (for example, Galántay), the withdrawal was due to the approach of Soviet troops from the rear.
- 7 Bayer, p. 332.
- 8 Gosztanyi, 1992, p. 230.
- 9 HL VKF, box 306/b, situation report of 30 December 1944.
- 10 Tóth, 1975b, p. 336.
- 11 Csima, p. 50.
- 12 For example, Chebotarev, Necheporuk, Tóth, Máté, György, Balázs Szabó.
- 13 Gosztanyi, 1989a, p. 137.
- 14 I am indebted to József Baki for drawing my attention to Litteráti-Loótz's contradictions, which I subsequently verified personally.
- 15 Csebotarev, 1967/4, p. 724.
- 16 Gosztanyi, 1989a, p. 145.
- 17 Csebotarev, 1967/4, p. 725, suggests that the delegates were attacked with both shells and light weapons.
- 18 Klein, 1994 (private collections, manuscript in archive of Pongrácz); Gosztanyi, 1989a, p. 145.
- 19 Gosztanyi, 1989a, p. 142.
- 20 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 3, reiterated in a letter to the author in 1996.
- 21 Violations of international law were dealt with by a special section of the supreme command, whose task during the war was to start proceedings against both the enemy armies and Germans accused of war crimes.
- 22 BA-MA RW 4/900.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.* Pfeffer-Wildenbruch also received this order, but had it rescinded. Tóth (1974, p. 256) mistakenly dates it before the death of the delegates.
- 25 Zayas, *passim*.
- 26 HL, Trial of Hindy.
- 27 Klein, 1994, and undated letter (private collections, archive of Pongrácz).
- 28 5th Guard Artillery Division (17th Gun, 18th Howitzer, 95th Heavy Artillery, 27th Mortar Brigades), 16th Artillery Division (52nd and 109th Howitzer, 61st Gun, 90th Heavy Howitzer, 114th Mortar Brigades) 22nd Special Anti-tank Artillery Brigade, 41st Gun Guard Brigade, 152nd Army Gun Artillery Brigade,

- 48th, 66th, 80th Mortar Regiments, 5th Anti-aircraft Artillery Division (Zaharov, pp. 472–3).
- 29 According to Zaharov, pp. 472–4, the 3rd and 39th Tank Brigades and the 30th Independent Heavy Tank Regiment.
- 30 Interview with Hingyi.
- 31 Tóth, 1975a, p. 341.
- 32 Schweitzer, Report (in the collection of the author).
- 33 HL VKF, box 306, Budapest situation report of 31 December.
- 34 Czoma, p. 337.
- 35 There were no Tiger tanks in Budapest. Péchy probably confused them with Panther tanks.
- 36 HL TGY, Péchy, p. 161.
- 37 Csimá, p. 54.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Maier, p. 56; HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, 2–4 January 1945.
- 40 Tóth, 1975a, pp. 227–8.
- 41 Zaharov, pp. 264–5; Tóth, *ibid.*
- 42 Interview with Entzmann.
- 43 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, strength reports of 7 and 14 January 1945.
- 44 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 5.
- 45 KTB Hgr. Süd, report of 5 January 1945.
- 46 Letter to the author from Vályi, p. 5; interview with Mányoki.
- 47 Interview with Hanák.
- 48 Schöning (documents in the collection of the author).
- 49 Maier, p. 44.
- 50 Vározy, p. 22 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 51 Hingyi, Magyar, p. 43.
- 52 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, war diary, p. 93.
- 53 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, 9 January 1945.
- 54 *Hadtudományi*, p. 192.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Hadtudományi*, p. 76.
- 57 Vározy, p. 24 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 58 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, order book, 11 January 1945.
- 59 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b attachments, report of 11 January 1945.
- 60 HL TGY, Vajda, 2772, p. 112.
- 61 Interview with Baló.
- 62 Csimá, pp. 59–60.
- 63 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 13 January 1945.
- 64 HL TGY, Mucsy, p. 18.
- 65 Maier, p. 61; KTB Hgr. Süd, report of 13 January 1945.
- 66 Interview with Kutscher.
- 67 Interview with Kamocsay; Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 38.
- 68 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 14 January 1945.

- 69 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, 14 January 1945.
- 70 Billnitzer, VII, p. 22 (private collection; I would like to thank Sándor Tóth for allowing me to use this manuscript).
- 71 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 15 January 1945.
- 72 HL TGY, Mucsy, p. 19.
- 73 Interview with Bódy.
- 74 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 15 January 1945.
- 75 HL TGY, Bíró, 3251, p. 28.
- 76 Gosztonyi, *Politikusok*, p. 30.
- 77 HL TGY, Mucsy, p. 19.
- 78 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 16 January 1945.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 16 January 1945.
- 81 Gosztonyi, 1990, p. 189.
- 82 Maier, p. 63.
- 83 Interview with Kamocsay.
- 84 Interview with Ferenc X. Kovács.
- 85 HL TGY, Vajda, 2772, p. 118.
- 86 Benyovszky's diary (in the collection of the author).
- 87 Bayer, p. 347.
- 88 Interview with Wohltman.
- 89 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 39.
- 90 HL TGY, Gödry.
- 91 Hingyi, *Nyilas*, (private collections) p. 1.
- 92 HL, telephone diary of the 10th Infantry Division, 26 December 1944.
- 93 *Tétény-Promontor*, pp. 361–2.
- 94 *Hadtudományi*, p. 189.
- 95 HL TGY, Elischer, p. 16.
- 96 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 20.
- 97 Vározy, p. 22 (in the collection of the author).
- 98 Asik, p. 261.
- 99 Interview with Vasvári.
- 100 Interview with Major.
- 101 HL TGY, Horváth, p. 2.
- 102 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 15 January 1945.
- 103 Interview with Sasvári.
- 104 Galántay, *Boy* (private collections); lectures at the Sandhurst and Budapest military academies (in the collection of the author).
- 105 Galántay, *Defense*; interviews with Galántay, Vass and Sasvári.
- 106 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 30.
- 107 Interviews with Hingyi and Kokovay.
- 108 Interviews with Hingyi and Galántay.
- 109 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 16 January.
- 110 Sulyánszky, p. 17 (in the collection of the author).
- 111 Interview with Galántay.

- 112 Letter from Litteráti-Loótz to Gosztonyi, 1973.
- 113 HL, war diary of the 10th Infantry Division, 21 January 1945.
- 114 Letter from Litteráti-Loótz to Gosztonyi, 1973.
- 115 *Ibid.*
- 116 *Ibid.*
- 117 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 21 January 1945; diary of Vározy, p. 25 (in the collection of the author).
- 118 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 21 January 1945.
- 119 Letter from Galántay to the author, 17 August 1997.
- 120 The 30th Rifle Corps and 68th Guard Rifle Division had been deployed against the relief attempts, and all the other units in action in Pest until 18 January regrouped to Buda.
- 121 Zaharov, p. 260.
- 122 Tóth, 1975b, p. 355.
- 123 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 22 January 1945.
- 124 Notes by Dema, p. 2 (in the collection of the author).
- 125 HL, Documents of the 13th Panzer Division, report of 23 January 1945.
- 126 *Ibid.*, report of 24 January 1945.
- 127 Interviews with Hanák and Vározy.
- 128 Interview with Benefi.
- 129 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p. 39.
- 130 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division, war diary, 21 January 1945.
- 131 Interview with Bíró.
- 132 Interview with Hanák.
- 133 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 26 January 1945.
- 134 Friedrich, pp. 96–7 (private collections).
- 135 Report by Schweitzer, p. 4 (copy in the collection of the author).
- 136 Maier, p. 90.
- 137 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 138 Letter to the author from Galántay, 20 March 1995.
- 139 Billnitzer's diary, VII/p. 22 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 140 Maier, pp. 90–100.
- 141 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 8.
- 142 Interview with Galántay.
- 143 Maier, p. 100.
- 144 HL TGY, Horváth, p. 3.
- 145 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 31 December 1944.
- 146 Maier, p. 102.
- 147 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 2 February 1945.
- 148 Major, p. 2 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 149 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd, report of 4 February 1945.
- 150 *Ibid.*
- 151 Interview with Wáczek.
- 152 Hingyi, in Ravasz, p. 56.
- 153 Major, p. 3 (manuscript in the collection of the author).

- 154 Maier, p. 107.
- 155 Lukács, p. 175 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 156 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 6 February 1945.
- 157 Letter to the author from Joó.
- 158 Sárközi, 1995, p. 112.
- 159 Interview with Sasvári.
- 160 Interview with Keller.
- 161 HL, war diary of the 10th Infantry Division, 8 February 1945.
- 162 HL TGY, Kokovay, p. 10.
- 163 Tóth, 1980, pp. 40–1.
- 164 Vass, Dénes, p. 47.
- 165 Noel.
- 166 Tóth, 1980, pp. 43–4.
- 167 Sulyánszky, p. 29 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 168 Dombrády and Nagy, p. 124.
- 169 Bolyos, p. 67 (private collection; I would like to take this opportunity to thank Pál Dobay for giving me access to his collection); Tóth, 1980, p. 23.

IV

Relief Attempts

After the encirclement of Budapest the German command launched three major offensives code-named Konrad, in an attempt to relieve the capital and recapture the eastern section of the Margit Line. Contrary to popular assumption, the intention was not to rescue the garrison but to move further forces to Budapest.¹ By February 1945 all available reserves – including almost half of all panzer divisions in the east – had been relocated to Hungary for this purpose, and Hitler was desperate to show some success as a result.

By now the oil-fields of western Hungary were the German army's last remaining source of fuel, and this, together with the need to defend Vienna, greatly increased the importance of the Hungarian theatre of war. Between autumn 1944 and April 1945 – by which time the first Soviet tank was within 60 kilometres of Berlin – every briefing in the Führer's headquarters began with the Hungarian operations. Gerhard Boldt, one of the adjutants, recalls a mistake he made in February while preparing the maps:

Guderian began his comments on the Hungarian theatre of war. In the middle of his first sentence he stopped to give me a black look. Hitler was staring up at me with an inscrutable expression before leaning back in his chair with a bored gesture. I hastily stammered something incoherent, wishing that the ground would open and swallow me up. The general-staff maps were piled up in front of Hitler exactly in reverse order, with Kurland top and Hungary bottom.²

As already noted, Hitler had insisted from the outset on holding Budapest and forbidden any break-out attempt. On 24 December 1944, before the final closure of the encirclement, he had ordered the IV SS Panzer Corps and the 96th and 711th Infantry Divisions – some 200 tanks and 60,000 men – to Hungary, and placed them under the command of SS Obergruppenführer Otto Gille, who had been highly decorated for breaking out of the encirclement of Cherkassy. Himmler cabled Gille that Hitler had chosen him because he had the most extensive experience of being encircled and because his corps had proved the best on the eastern front.³

The cost of the relief attempts was soon to become manifest. The transfer of the IV SS Panzer Corps to Transdanubia deprived the Warsaw area of reserves, and on 12 January the Soviet offensive swept away the German front on the Vistula. The tanks of Marshalls Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov and Ivan Stepanovich Konev rolled on until they reached the Oder and even then stopped only because the Soviet command did not press the attacks any further.

The German Army Group South and Guderian disagreed about the use of the regrouped units, but there was general consensus that Budapest should be given up and the break-out approved as soon as possible. This suggestion was made to Hitler almost daily, but in vain.

The choice between two different relief routes was hard to make. An offensive from Székesfehérvár in the south (code-named Paula), given the greater distance, would have required 900 cubic metres more fuel and delayed the arrival of the troops by five days. An offensive from the north (code-named Konrad) involved a shorter distance and offered the element of surprise, but carried greater risks owing to the terrain. Although Guderian preferred Operation Paula, his representative, Colonel-General Walther Wenck, was persuaded by the reasoning of the German Army Group South, and the supreme command finally opted for the swifter Operation Konrad.

The regrouped units began to move into Hungary on 28 December. Hoping that the Soviets had not yet built strong defence positions, the German command gave orders to attack before all the troops had arrived. At that time only 32 per cent of the 5th SS Panzer Division (Wiking), 66 per cent of the 3rd SS Panzer Division (*Totenkopf* or Death's Head) and 43 per cent of the 96th Infantry Division was in place, and of the 711th Infantry Division there was no sign. The regroupment was not completed until 8 January. Guderian had arrived in Tata on 7 January to oversee the operation. Károly Beregfy, Minister of Defence in the Szálasi government, offered the participation of Hungarian troops. However, his forces – the 1st Hussar Division, the 2nd Armoured Division and the 23rd Reserve Division – were too exhausted to be used. Lieutenant-General Gyula Kovács, Inspector General of the Honvéd Army, was disappointed to find that Colonel-General Balck had no time to discuss the details of the entry parade into Budapest.

1

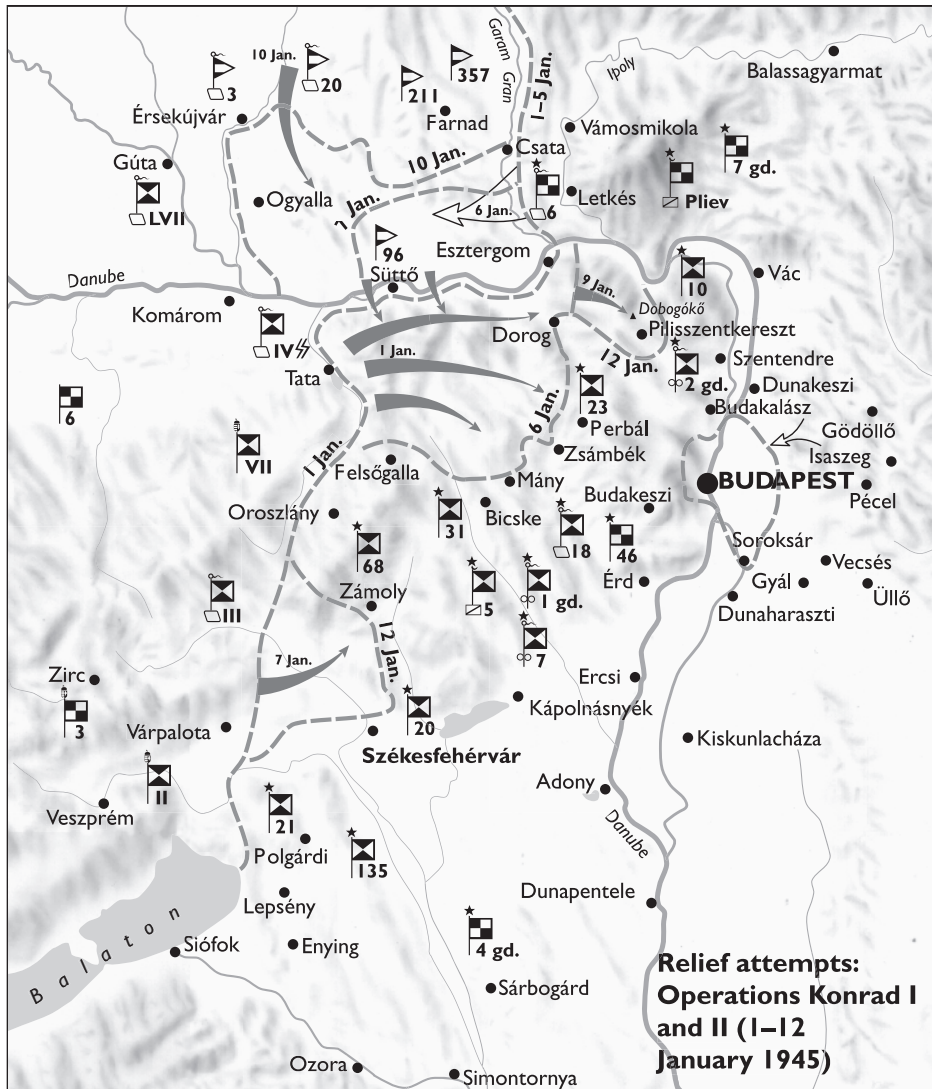
Operation Konrad I

On the evening of 1 January the IV SS Panzer Corps, only half of which had arrived at Komárom, launched a surprise attack in the Tata–Almásfüzitő region, while the 96th Infantry Division, crossing the Danube from the north by assault boat, established two bridgeheads behind the Soviet troops. The two battalions of the Hungarian Ney SS Combat Group (later Brigade)⁴ were deployed for the first time, attached as anti-tank grenadiers to the Wiking and *Totenkopf* SS Panzer Divisions. The attackers captured the Gerecse Hills, but on 6 January the Soviets stopped their advance near Bicske and Zsámbék.

Two topographical factors weighed against the offensive: first, in the Gerecse and Pilis Hills it was easy for the Soviets to set up roadblocks with anti-tank guns; second, the long and narrow pocket that would have developed alongside the Danube after a breakthrough could have been cut off by the Soviets without much effort. In the event the Soviets were able to slow down the assault of the German tanks and ensure that their reserves had enough room for manoeuvre.

Between 26 and 31 December Tolbukhin and Malinovsky had placed the Soviet units that had so far played the key parts in reserve, leaving one armoured corps, four mechanised corps and three cavalry corps – with 500–600 tanks – at the front to fend off the German relief attempts.⁵ Some Soviet troops were relocated from other regions: for example, the 19th Rifle Division took up position at Adony on the Danube after covering a distance of 190 kilometres from the southern shore of Lake Balaton in a day and a half. It was because he had overestimated the strength of the Germans that Tolbukhin had kept so many of his units in reserve until the situation became critical. As a result his forces suffered great losses but, unlike the Germans who had no reserves left, he had preserved his freedom of action. Table 19 compares the numbers of tanks and assault guns at the disposal of the German Army Group South and the various units of the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts on New Year's Day 1945.

On 2 January the Soviet 18th Tank Corps joined the battle, followed on 3 January by three other fast-moving units.⁶ In the Bicske region the prime target of the German offensive, the Wiking Division, was confronted on 3 January by one heavy-tank regiment, four assault-gun regiments, three rifle divisions, one mechanised brigade and six technical battalions – two or three times the Germans' strength.⁷ The same happened elsewhere along the breadth of the German onslaught, where by 4 January the Soviet 1st



Mechanised Guard Corps had also arrived from Adony. Thus no less than five Soviet mechanised, armoured or cavalry corps had lined up against the main thrust of the relief attempt, blocking any further advance towards Budapest. Only the group attacking in the north was able to capture Esztergom on 6 January and Pilisszentlélek on 8 January. The German and Hungarian losses between 1 and 7 January amounted to some 3500 – almost 10 per cent of the IV SS Panzer Corps's strength – killed, wounded or missing, and 39 tanks and assault guns destroyed.

Meanwhile, Tolbukhin had also made preparations to prevent a break-out from Budapest. He had erected defensive lines with anti-tank guns

facing both the relief forces and the potential escapees, and on 3 January ordered the cessation of attacks on Buda in order to release further forces.⁸ On 6 January seven divisions – roughly equal to the whole German and Hungarian garrison in the capital – stood in readiness between Zsámbék and Tinnye. In the event of a break-out the escapees would first have had to breach the encirclement ring round the city and then, after a long march, meet this formidable second formation. The chances of an organised break-out in any direction other than the north were therefore doubtful, and a break-out in the north could have succeeded only if the relief attempts in the Pilis Hills had not been stopped, as they eventually were.

Guderian, unaware of the real situation, planned to include the defenders in the stalled offensive: in addition to holding the capital they were to launch an attack towards the northwest and assist the operations of the relief units.⁹ The army group, more realistically, recommended that they either abandon the eastern bridgehead on 9 January and break out northwest or, failing this, fight their way through the ring in separate small combat units. However, this was rejected by Hitler.

2

Operation Konrad II

The setback to their northern offensive compelled the Germans to fall back on the southern option. The command of the German Army Group South decided to try and break through between Székesfehérvár and Mór with new forces (the Breith Group), the objective being not only to recapture the Margit Line but also to surround, jointly with the IV SS Panzer Corps, the Soviet units on the western slopes of the Vértes Hills. On 6 January the army group considered halting or scaling down the attack, but finally chose to go ahead, on the assumption that with the newly arrived 20th Panzer Corps it would be able to hold the front.

Tolbukhin, aware of the German troop movements, reinforced the 20th Guard Rifle Corps in the main trajectory of the attack, which was unleashed on 7 January. The Soviets benefited from the fact that on the preceding day Malinovsky's 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian fronts had in their turn launched an attack along the Garam river, north of the Danube, so that the two enemies were moving in opposite directions on either side of the river. By 8 January Malinovsky's units were within 3 kilometres of Komárom, heralding a major encirclement operation. Table 20 details the strengths of the opposing sides involved in the Konrad II operation.

The attack of the Breith Group – the southern branch of Operation Konrad II – met fierce resistance, and ran out of steam as early as 9 January. On the same day the German 7th Mechanised Corps launched a strike to prevent a Soviet breakthrough, but 57 of its 80 tanks were put out of action.¹⁰ In three days of fighting the fields of Zámoly became a veritable tank cemetery. With great losses on both sides the Germans made no further progress, but their salients remained in place.

After their failure at Bicske, both the German Army Group South and Gille, still hoping to avoid any major relocation, made plans for the IV SS Panzer Corps to breach the Soviet defence near Esztergom and relieve Budapest across the Pilis Hills, in what was to be the northern branch of Operation Konrad II. The increasingly ominous news from the capital made this appear even more urgent.

The new German attack was launched on 9 January from Esztergom, where 200 tonnes of supplies had been collected to be transported to Budapest immediately in the event of success. As a complementary measure, Colonel-General Balck ordered a reinforced battalion under Major Philipp to smash through the Soviet obstacles near the Danube and occupy Szentendre as a refuge for the defenders after their escape. However, everybody in the Wiking Division, including Gille and Philipp, considered the plan unworkable. As the division's staff officer put it, the Soviets were 'hardly likely to open the shore road for jaunts'.¹¹ It is also difficult to see how Balck expected the defenders to continue their withdrawal along the road from Szentendre to Esztergom, which was within the range of the Soviet weapons across the Danube. Fortunately for the Germans, the question did not arise in practice, because the relief unit's advance soon stalled, although the 711th Infantry Division attacking southeast of it managed to capture Dobogókő.

On 10 January, with one day's delay because of Hitler's prohibition, the Panzer Group of the Wiking Division, including the Westland Panzer-grenadier Regiment, was deployed to fill the gap. The same staff officer writes: 'Enemy weak, completely surprised. Difficult mountain terrain of pre-Alpine character. At midnight first reports of success, prisoners mainly baggage-train crews of divisions encircling Budapest. Anti-tank gun and mortar fire. No own losses. Westland making good progress.'¹²

By 11 January the Westland Regiment had crossed the Pilis-nyereg saddle and occupied Pilisszentkereszt, 21 kilometres from Budapest. First to enter the village in his armoured personnel carrier was SS Obersturmbannführer Franz Hack, who had been wounded twice during the preceding days and was awarded the Knight's Cross for the courage he had shown in this action. Many German vehicles and wounded prisoners were liberated



Second-Lieutenant S. I. Yermolaev, posthumously awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal for throwing himself in front of a German tank with his bazooka, although gravely wounded.

after being held by Soviets in the village for a fortnight. The German Army Group South again requested permission for a break-out, hoping to capture the airfield of Pomáz in order to remove the wounded and provide supplies for the spearheads expected from the capital.

By the evening of 12 January, the advance units of the Wiking Division had reached the Csobánka fork on the road to Pomáz, only 17 kilometres from Budapest, when they were ordered to withdraw, although no outflanking counter-attack by Soviet tanks through the valleys was to be expected and Gille would have had no reason to fear that his units would be cut off in the Pilis Hills by the large Soviet force in their rear at Dorog – at least if the aim of the German offensive had been merely to rescue the defenders, rather than to relieve Budapest. The Soviet 5th Cavalry Corps between Szentendre and Pilisvörösvár, 15 kilometres from the city, would almost certainly have halted a further advance, but a co-ordinated break-out might still have been achieved as the short distance and the bad terrain considerably restricted the Soviets' ability to resist.

In fact the Soviets actually hoped for a break-out. By this time Malinovsky was very nervous, because the siege had lasted so long. He wanted the

Germans to leave the capital as soon as possible, and in order to assist them, he had a 1-kilometre gap in the Buda encirclement opened.¹³ His chief concern was the capture of Budapest, and to avert Stalin's anger over the delay he was prepared to spare the defenders. Ironically it was Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's and Hitler's orders that prevented a successful break-out.

From the outset Hitler and Guderian had not expected Operation Konrad II to succeed, and had favoured an offensive from the Székesfehérvár region. On 10 January they had signalled to the German Army Group South that unless there was a radical change within hours Gille's troops would be regrouped. On 11 January, at the request of the army group, Colonel-General Wenck had spent two hours trying to persuade Hitler to allow the break-out, but 'all he achieved was the award of the Knight's Cross to SS Obergruppenführer Pfeffer-Wildenbruch'.¹⁴ The general staff wondered whether by the end of the belated operation there would be anybody or anything to relieve, but Hitler persisted in his original plan and issued the order for Gille's forces to regroup immediately, even before their new offensive reached its full force.

A 24-hour tug-of-war began between Gille and the army supreme command. Hitler's order was delivered to Gille at 8.20pm on 11 January. Three hours later Gille cabled that the offensive was making progress. Gille's superiors passed his cable to Hitler without comment. When Hitler repeated the order Gille appealed to Himmler, but in vain. As his troops had shown no spectacular results since the capture of Pilisszentkereszt he had lost his last trump card, and at 8pm on 12 January he ordered the retreat. By the evening of 14 January the Soviets had reoccupied the Dobogókő area and Pilisszentkereszt.

The cessation of the offensive has provoked heated arguments in memoirs and historical studies. In the unanimous opinion of the combatants, Hitler's order deprived them of certain success. However, several military historians argue that the Soviets would have cut off the Germans if they had continued their advance. The debate is rooted in diametrically opposed interpretations of Hitler's objectives. Gille and his officers were convinced that the relief attempts were intended as a rescue mission. In their view, their offensive could have opened a corridor for the defenders to escape, but could not have maintained a link over a longer period. Hitler and his generals, who were not sufficiently familiar with the situation, hoped that their limited forces would be able to restore the pre-Christmas status quo. For them, abandoning Budapest was out of the question.

By 1944–5 there were fewer and fewer individuals in the top echelons of the Third Reich who could have confronted Hitler with the reality, and

as a result, more and more absurd operational objectives came into being. The battles in Hungary from January to March 1945, in which new panzer units were continually being deployed while the strategic aims remained unchanged, reveal a total lack of co-ordination between different tactical assignments. Had these units been deployed simultaneously, their attacks would have had a real chance of success.

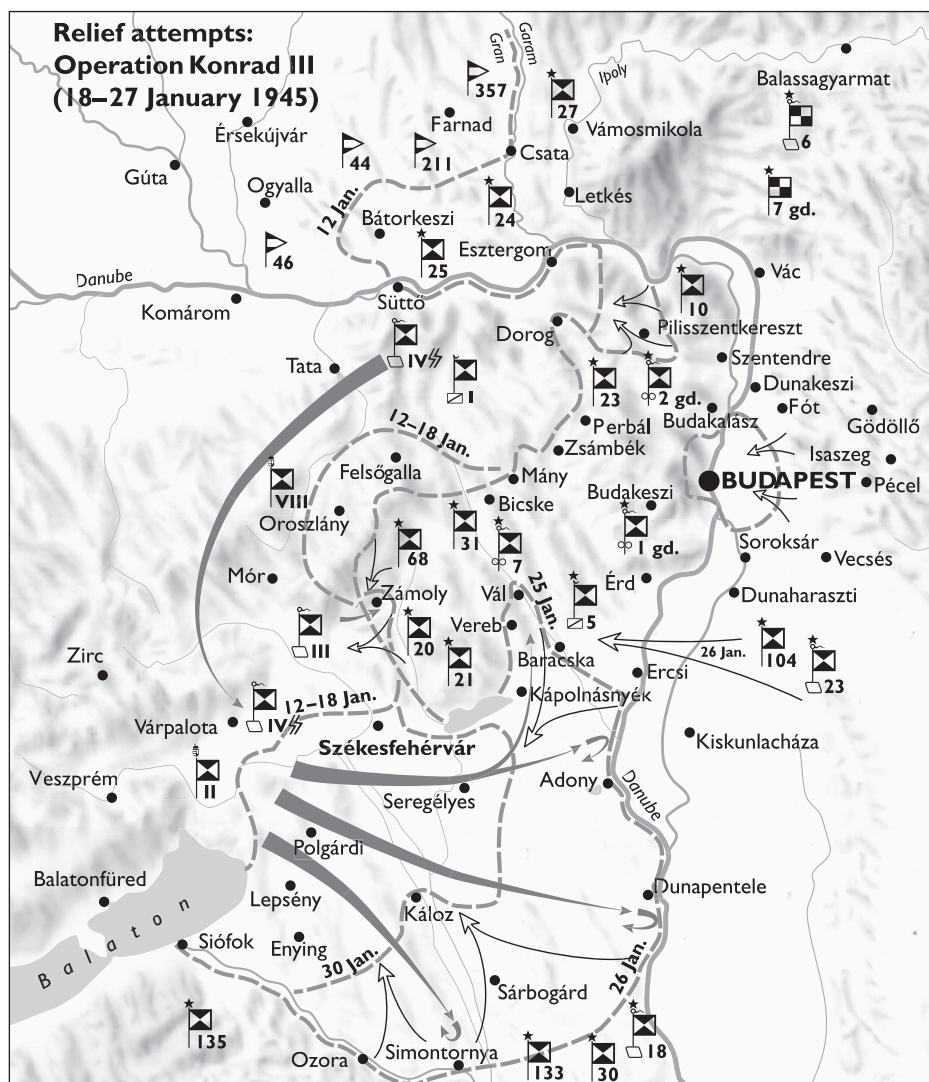
Time was working in favour of the Soviets, whose tanks had reached the edge of the Little Hungarian Plain on 8 January and were threatening Bratislava and Vienna. The German Army Group South would therefore have preferred to stop the relief attempts and regroup north of the Danube, which would necessarily have involved permission for the Budapest garrison to break out rather than being destroyed in a futile struggle. Hitler, however, preferred to gamble on the Soviet attack along the northern bank of the Danube stalling before Komárom. Events initially seemed to prove him right when the hastily regrouped tanks of the 20th Panzer Division pushed the 6th Armoured Guard Army back almost 50 kilometres, but even when the Soviets launched their grand offensive of 12 January on the Polish front and there were no significant German forces stationed between them and Berlin, he stubbornly ignored the general staff's advocacy of immediately abandoning the attempts to relieve Budapest and regrouping as the only possible way of preventing disaster at home.

3

Operation Konrad III

On 18 January the IV SS Panzer Corps, whose relocation to the region between Lake Balaton and Székesfehérvár had been completed in utmost secrecy on the previous day, was thrown into battle. Tanks with infrared sights for nocturnal operations were used for the first time. Table 21 shows the Soviet and German strengths engaged in Operation Konrad III.

According to Soviet authors, 'the reconnaissance section of the 4th Guard Army's staff did not have the situation under control'¹⁵ – the German offensive had taken their generals by surprise. Gille's tanks crushed the Soviet 7th Mechanised Corps's counter-attack, separating the 133rd Rifle Corps and the 18th Tank Corps from their rear lines. Only the lack of German infantry enabled the encircled Soviet units to break out of the ring. On 19 January the German tanks reached the Danube at Dunapentele, tearing the Soviet Transdanubian front apart. At the Danube crossings, in chaotic conditions, the Soviets moved more than 40,000



soldiers and large quantities of equipment to the east bank within a few days, although they were constantly being bombed by the Luftwaffe.¹⁶

On 22 January the Soviets lost Székesfehérvár after heavy street fighting. First to enter the city was the Ney Combat Group, which had by then reached division strength, although one quarter of its members was dead, wounded or missing. On 24 January the *Totenkopf* Division captured the southern section of Baracska, 30 kilometres from Budapest. Tolbukhin's troops developed a firm defence along the Váli-víz river, whose icy banks the German tanks could scale only with great difficulty, but by 26 January the offensive had reached a point roughly 25 kilometres from the ring around the capital.¹⁷

Towards the end of the war, Stalin was no longer inclined to take any major risks because he knew that his troops would soon be facing the British and US soldiers. Earlier his inflexible orders to persevere had sent millions into captivity or death, but now he contemplated evacuating southern Transdanubia and gave Tolbukhin a free hand, even though the equipment and supplies of two armies would have had to be left behind.

On 21 January the nervous Soviet command had blown up its own pontoon bridges near Dunapentele and Dunaföldvár, halting supplies to the units still in action.¹⁸ Tolbukhin now chose a more courageous option: he decided to hold the bridgehead because he believed that it would be pointless to give up the occupied territories in the hope of a smooth second crossing of the Danube. On 27 January – having taken charge of the 104th Rifle Corps and the 23rd Tank Corps, which had been concentrated near south Buda to prevent a break-out,¹⁹ and the 30th Rifle Corps, which had been sent to southern Transdanubia as a reinforcement – he began a counter-attack.

The German spearheads that had reached the Danube could at any time be cut off by Soviet divisions from Lake Velence in the north and Simontornya in the south. Recognising this advantage, Tolbukhin attacked from both directions. Although the Germans destroyed 122 Soviet tanks on the first day, they had to abandon many of the occupied territories, with the notable exception of Székesfehérvár. Near the village of Vereb alone, the wrecks of 70 tanks and 35 assault guns bore witness to the heavy fighting. Eventually the relentlessly counter-attacking Soviet forces invaded northern Székesfehérvár, and by the beginning of February the Germans were obliged to give up most of their territorial gains.

On 28 January Hitler decided to send his last reserves – the 6th Panzer Army, in the process of replenishment since the Ardennes offensive – to Hungary to make one more relief attempt, code-named *Frühlingserwachen* (Spring Awakening). However, by 13 February, when this offensive began, there was nothing left to relieve because all of Buda was in Soviet hands.

Notes

- 1 Letter from Ernst Philipp to Gosztonyi, 23 July 1985.
- 2 Boldt, p. 28.
- 3 Száva, 1975a, p. 224.
- 4 The Hungarian First Lieutenant and SS Obersturmbannführer Károly Ney – degraded and dismissed from the Honvéd Army for disobeying orders – recruited

this group, which by the end of the war numbered 5000 members, from right-wing veterans of the eastern front. After the war he worked as a CIA agent, organising clandestine arsenals and sabotage groups in Austria.

- 5 1st, 2nd, 4th, 9th Guard Corps; 7th Mechanised Corps; 5th, 18th, 23rd Tank Corps; 4th, 6th Guard Corps; 5th Cavalry Corps.
- 6 7th Mechanised Corps, 5th Cavalry Guard Corps, 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps.
- 7 Tóth, 1975a, p. 157.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 156. The units concerned were the 49th and 109th Guard Rifle Divisions and parts of the 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps.
- 9 Maier, p. 45.
- 10 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 898/b, report of 9 January 1945.
- 11 Maier, p. 53.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Information from Tóth (based on a report by Ferenc Krupicz, interpreter of the 37th Rifle Corps).
- 14 Maier, p. 55.
- 15 Zaharov, p. 245.
- 16 Száva, 1975b, p. 242.
- 17 Earlier studies wrongly report a distance of 18 kilometres. The bridgehead at Kajászószentpéter, the easternmost occupied village, was about 25 kilometres from the nearest point of the encirclement on Sashegy Hill.
- 18 Gosztonyi, 1989b, p. 55.
- 19 Veress, p. 169.

V

The Break-out

1

The antecedents

'I have nightmares every night because I am alive.' (Lieutenant-Colonel Helmut Wolff, one who escaped.)

The German command in Budapest made repeated plans to break through the encirclement and abandon the city. This would have been possible either in early January or later in parallel with the relief attempts, but Hitler persisted in refusing to give his permission. After the loss of Pest on 18 January, the 'fortress' Buda could at best tie down some Russian troops, but he nevertheless insisted on defending it. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch obeyed to the last moment. Rebutting all Soviet attempts at negotiating, he resisted for seven weeks, until 11 February. By the time he decided to break out it had become obvious that the few remaining parts of Buda (the Castle District and Naphegy Hill) would be in Soviet hands very shortly. His telegrams to the German Army Group South are characteristic: instead of using the word 'break-out' he only dared to write about 'freedom of action'.

It was by no means the case that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had no other option. Many German, Hungarian and Romanian commanders – notably Waffen SS Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser, Major-General Zoltán Szügyi and Marshall Ion Antonescu – had chosen to disobey orders and suffered no retributions. Between late December 1944 and mid-January 1945, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had every chance of accomplishing a successful break-out, but was not willing to take a personal risk on behalf of his subordinates until it was too late.

According to one school of thought it is a soldier's duty to fight to the last bullet rather than trying to survive. A much-quoted example is that of the French Imperial Guards in the Battle of Waterloo, who refused to capitulate, despite their hopeless situation, as long as they were able to

continue the struggle: this attitude became increasingly common among the German forces in the Second World War. Another approach is collective capitulation: in Budapest this would have required the German command either to take a stand against its own political system or to recognise that the situation was so hopeless that any further resistance would produce no worthwhile results and would be tantamount to helplessly submitting to slaughter. Although collective capitulation for the latter reason is legitimate in military terms, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch failed to choose this option, just as he failed to undertake an early break-out, and thus led his soldiers to their deaths.

Nor did the soldiers themselves dissent. During the whole war no German garrison surrendered to the Red Army when it had a chance of breaking out.¹ The reason, in addition to the odium of surrender, was fear of the Soviets and of Siberia. The Germans fought to the last bullet not only out of duty and loyalty but also because, given the ideological nature of the war on the eastern front, they were afraid of what might happen to them if they surrendered or were taken prisoner. An eye-witness remembers the last hours in the citadel:

It was 10 February and the hill was covered in fog. A thin layer of snow had fallen, and I was shivering with the cold. The Germans were acting as if they were on an exercise. They were writing official notes and, in the rooms of the Citadel, commands brought by messengers kept everybody awake. Groups of German officers, in correct uniforms, were giving instructions to some German infantry units. They were directing the alignment of the machine guns, pointing out the enemy lines and issuing orders to fire. The men were lying in the snow and firing, with the officers standing next to them and paying no attention to the whistling bullets. It all seemed like a dream. When one officer fell another took his place, apparently without realising that this was the end. Basically they were seeking death because they knew that for them there was no other solution.²

It was only then that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch decided to act. With Hitler's prohibition in mind he did not radio his intentions to the German Army Group South until the last moment, 5.50pm on 11 February:

1. Our supplies are used up, the last cartridges in the barrel. In Budapest the garrison only has the choice between capitulating and being butchered without a struggle.

I will therefore take offensive action with the last fit German troops, Honvéd soldiers and Arrow Cross men (to secure a new combat and supply base).

2. Will break out on 11 February at nightfall. I request reception between Szomor and Máriahalom. If reception not possible, will push ahead to the Pilis Hills. Request reception there in the sector north-west of Pilisszentlélek.

3. Flares:

Twice green: own troops etc.

4. Strengths:

Germans 23,900, including 9600 wounded

Hungarians: 20,000, including 2000 wounded

Civilians 80,000-100,000.³

After transmitting these words the radio operators began to destroy their equipment as ordered. The break-out was irreversible.

The defenders' heavy artillery, stationed between Gellért-hegy Hill and Castle Hill, had by then been lost or was engaged in close-quarter fighting. Of 120 armoured vehicles and more than 450 guns originally at the defenders' disposal, only 12 Panther, 9 Hetzer and 10–15 unidentifiable tanks, 6 assault guns, 50–60 guns of various calibres and an uncertain number of armoured cars were fit for action. Most of these were blown up shortly before the break-out,⁴ because they were stationed on Naphegy Hill and could not relocate to the point of the planned break-out unnoticed. A few tanks and armoured personnel carriers, stationed in the northern part of the Castle District, probably no more than 8–10, were spared contrary to orders so that they could be used in the break-out.

2

Strategic plans and ideas

On the morning of 11 February Pfeffer-Wildenbruch called a war council, which after a long debate decided to break out in small groups through the woods and to leave all heavy weapons behind. The use of tanks would in any case have presented problems, because road conditions would have made it difficult for them to reach the break-out point and any significant movement, at least in daylight, would have betrayed the enterprise to the Soviets. The worst problem, however, was that in practically every street near Széll Kálmán Square and Széna Square the defenders themselves had dug deep anti-tank trenches which could not easily be crossed, even by infantry. The assault groups were therefore to carry ladders.

The break-out was to start at 8pm the same evening. The first wave was to contain the 13th Panzer Division on the left and the Florian Geyer 8th SS Cavalry Division on the right, divided into groups of 30, each with one Hungarian who was familiar with the territory; their transport was to consist of 8–12 tanks or armoured trucks, 10 amphibious Volkswagen cars and 3 motor-bicycles for the field gendarmes who were to direct the operation.

The second wave was to comprise the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division, the 22nd SS Cavalry Division and the Hungarian units. The third was to be formed by the walking wounded and the baggage-train crews. Tens of thousands of civilians were also expected to join.

The initial onslaught from Széll Kálmán Square and Széna Square was to wipe out the Soviet positions in Margit Boulevard over a 1-kilometre stretch. The next objective was to reach the fork of Hidegkúti Road (today Hűvösvölgyi Road) and Budakeszi Road, about 2.5 kilometres northwest of Széna Square. The escapees were then to assemble on Remete-hegy Hill, about 2 kilometres further north, and move west through the low hills and forests. The critical point was a strip of flat arable land, bordered by meadows and vineyards, between the western edge of the forests and the east-facing German front line (15–18 kilometres and about 25 kilometres respectively from the break-out point). A second assembly in the forest was therefore planned before launching an attack on Tinnye and the area south of it, with the aim of joining the Germans after overrunning the Soviet front line from behind. This was to take place the following noon, 18 hours after the break-out – an impossible task, given the distance and the fact that the escapees had only light weapons and a limited amount of ammunition. It was hoped that the German Army Group South would start an attack in order to meet the escapees, but nothing was done because the group had not been advised in time.

The plan was top secret. On the German side the divisional commanders finally received their orders at 2pm, the regimental commanders at 4pm and the rank and file at 6pm. The Hungarian commanders and their units were also last to be informed at 6pm because the Germans were afraid of being betrayed by them. The only exception was Hindy, who received word at 4pm.

Nevertheless, the break-out had been in the air for weeks, and by the morning of 11 February (or the evening before) many had an inkling of when the action would start.⁵ That something was about to be happen could also be guessed from the fact that between 6 and 10 February a host of officers and men, particularly Hungarians, were suddenly awarded medals. First lieutenants and majors received the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit, second lieutenants the *Signum Laudis*, lieutenant-colonels and colonels the Officer's Cross, and privates the Badge of Courage. Some important members of the officer staff were also specially promoted: Hindy became a colonel-general, Billnitzer a lieutenant-general.

The wildest rumours were circulating about how the break-out would progress. Many soldiers expected to reach the German lines after a short

walk. Others believed that after marching 15–20 kilometres they would be opposed only by the Soviet service corps and that the relief units were awaiting them at Pilisszentkereszt. Yet others added that the break-out point was defended only by Romanians, who would immediately run away. An Arrow Cross officer announced:

The relief units are at Budakeszi. The break-out will be child's play. The Tigers will be leading, followed by the mechanised SS units, then the Arrow Cross units, the Wehrmacht and the Hungarian troops. In Transdanubia we'll have a rest and be given the new miracle weapons. I guarantee that in three weeks there won't be one Russian soldier in the country.⁶

Even high-ranking officers were not immune to illusions. Colonel-General Schmidhuber told his friends a few hours before he was killed: 'We won't let them trap us. The day after tomorrow we'll be sitting together again over a drink.'⁷ Many civilians, loading themselves with luggage and furniture, were preparing for the break-out with similar hopes.

Any sober observer, however, would have realised that the enterprise could not be entirely successful. It may not have been a coincidence that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and Dörner, with 500 SS policemen, chose the route through the underground culvert leading from Ördög-árok gully to the Danube, thus avoiding the necessity of crossing the Soviet lines, which would have been the most dangerous part of the enterprise. The Hungarian corps command was instructed to follow closely behind them.

Very little is known about the immediate operational preparations for the break-out. The attack in Széna Square at 8pm was to be led by the combat groups of Cavalry Captain Haller, Colonel Herbert Kündiger and Colonel László Veresváry. At 6pm, soldiers disguised as civilians – probably including a special unit of the Hungarian I Army Corps that operated in civilian clothes⁸ – slipped through the battle line at Margit Boulevard and elsewhere, with orders to hide in various buildings and then attack the enemy from behind, as had been done by the Soviets occupying Déli Station.⁹ It has also been suggested that the action was started by a German special commando unit in Soviet uniforms, pretending to be Soviet guards accompanying German prisoners, who disarmed the real Soviet soldiers guarding Széll Kálmán Square.¹⁰ Although Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and other surviving officers later maintained that the front was to be opened up by the Kündiger Group, evidence that the break-out began with groups of this kind is provided both in several interviews and memoirs¹¹ and in post-war Soviet studies.

The Soviets must have suspected that a break-out was in the offing, if only because they knew that the Germans generally resorted to this strategy.

They set up three defensive belts: the first was near Széll Kálmán Square, the second near János Hospital and the third on the slopes of János-hegy Hill. The intention was to withdraw from the first belt at the start of the break-out and trap the escapees in a pocket formed by Bimbó Road, Törökvész Road, the southeastern slope of János-hegy Hill, the Virányos quarter and Kis-Sváb-hegy Hill.¹² In Széll Kálmán Square and Olasz Avenue (today Szilágyi Erzsébet Avenue) the 180th Guard Rifle Division took up positions, supported by T-34 tanks dug in in Bimbó Road and at János Hospital. On 9–10 February – before Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had actually decided to break out – the civilians living around Széll Kálmán Square, Retek Street and Fillér Street were evacuated¹³ and the residents of the streets further back ordered to close all entrances and windows. One Soviet tank unit was stationed in the Dorog area to seal off the road between Tinnye and Perbál.

It has been claimed that the German plans were betrayed.¹⁴ However, there is no evidence that this was the case, and even if it had been, the plans would hardly have been divulged in every detail. In fact, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had not even called his war council when, on 10 February, Hungarian volunteer companies attached to the Soviets were ordered to take up preventive positions at the edge of the woods east of Budakeszi and in the Városmajor Grange area.¹⁵ The direction of a possible break-out could be guessed at simply by using common sense. The Germans were bound to choose the shortest route through the woods and avoid confronting the superior Soviet armoured forces in open country.

One particular story, exemplified by the following variant, is repeatedly told to prove that even the smallest details of the break-out had been betrayed: 'At 7.30pm sharp the Russians began to cover the Castle District and its neighborhood with a tremendous barrage. At the same time a mass of people began to pour out of the Castle District.'¹⁶ This is not true. None of more than 20 survivors who have been questioned remembers such a concerted and instantaneous barrage. The one exception occurred around Bécsi Kapu gate at the northern exit of the Castle District, where between 7.30 and 8pm a sudden heavy bombardment killed the assembled Arrow Cross Party activists, including their leader, Veresváry.¹⁷ Elsewhere the Soviets began by using small arms and mortars, and the artillery fire intensified only gradually, reaching its climax between 10 and 11pm.¹⁸

In sum, the Soviets were able to make an educated guess as to the place of the expected break-out, but they were probably unaware of the exact time. This is all the more likely because since the start of the siege the garrison had carried out over 20 counter-strikes, each of which could equally well have heralded a break-out.

3

The situation of the garrison at the time of the break-out

On the afternoon of 11 February the citadel on Gellért-hegy Hill was captured by Soviet troops approaching from Kis-Gellért-hegy Hill, together with a unit of Hungarian defectors, who suffered many casualties in the process. The loss of Gellért-hegy Hill severed communications between the Hungarian troops stationed in the Kelenföld District and those around the Gellért Hotel, who had failed to return to their earlier quarters in Fő Street in the Castle District, as ordered by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch the previous evening.¹⁹ The Germans had evacuated the area, but, according to some reminiscences, a number of German soldiers had also stayed behind, hoping that it would prove less dangerous to be captured with the Hungarians.

In the hours preceding the break-out the front line ran roughly along Hegyalja Road towards the saddle between Naphegy and Gellért-hegy Hills. At the foot of Gellért-hegy Hill the Rác baths were probably in German hands. However, the main German defence line, or what was left of it, stretched from the Danube side of Döbrentei Square – along part of Attila Road, Czakó Street, Hegyalja Road and Mészáros Street – to Mikó Street in the southeastern corner of Vérmező Meadow. While the undeveloped slopes in the Tabán quarter were no-man's-land, Naphegy Hill was thus still in German hands. Some Germans also remained ensconced further north in several buildings in Krisztina Boulevard between Maros Street and Bors Street (today Hajnóczi József Street), while the Soviets, leaving them behind in their advance along Krisztina Boulevard, took Vérmező Meadow as far as opposite Déli Station.

In Széll Kálmán Square, according to former combatants, the ground floor of the Post Office Palace had been taken by Soviet troops while the upper floors still remained in German and Hungarian hands. To flush the Soviets out, the combat group of the 12th Reserve Division and the remnants of the Vannay Battalion had launched a surprise attack through the air-raid shelter on 10 February. Although they had succeeded in forcing an entry they had been unable to drive out all the Soviet troops and had therefore set fire to the palace. As this had still not resulted in the liberation of the palace they torched it again during the break-out, and after the break-out it was found to have been completely burnt out. In Fény Street and Klára Street (today Ignotus Street), two groups of defenders had held on and even maintained telephone contact with the palace.²⁰

The rest of the front line ran from Széna Square along Margit Boulevard as far as the Buda end of Margit Bridge. In this sector the defenders

undertook only minor actions before the break-out – the condition of the boulevard would not have allowed any major troop movements in any case.

4

‘The First Act of Despair’

(Captain Helmut Friedrich on the first onslaught)

The break-out began at 8pm on 11 February. In Batthyányi Street, Mátray Street, Várfoke Street and Ostrom Street a huge crowd had built up in the dark. Many soldiers due to attack in the first wave arrived late and were unable to push their way to the front through the crush of some 10,000 others who were to follow in the second wave but had arrived before them. Thus most of the initial attacks came to a bloody end because there were not enough soldiers available to carry them out.²¹ Two participants recall:

Suddenly the narrow lanes of the Víziváros quarter are under mortar fire... The bombardment grows heavier. Anxiety hangs in the air. Shouts are heard. Flares light up the roofs. When they have burnt themselves out, the twilight in the lanes turns into total darkness. Now from all sides foot soldiers stream towards the north. Another mortar strike. Everybody seeks cover in doorways. More shouting, comrades have lost each other. The crush in the lanes gets worse and worse. All grope their way forward in the dark... Somewhere ahead, where the narrow lanes of Víziváros reach the grand Margit Boulevard, is where the front line is supposed to be. Where the boulevard widens into a major road junction, and a Russian ready to shoot may be lying in wait at every window, is where the break-out, that act of despair, is to occur. The place is called Széna Square... It is painful for a commander to watch how this break-out attempt is developing into an act of madness, an almost animal act of despair obeying only the instinct of self-preservation, without being able to do anything about it. Through a narrow gap between the black outlines of the rows of houses on both sides a blinding light glares like the neon signs and glittering shop windows in the boulevards of a metropolis in peacetime. It is easy to guess that all the fiery magic is made by shells, tracer bullets and a mass of flares. So that's where the front is, Széna Square... Through that bottleneck we all must pass. Left and right people jostle madly to start the break-out as soon as possible. They elbow their way ahead, pushing and kicking, like animals.²²

Then we are tearing across the open space. Bangs and crashes left, right and centre. Hand-grenades exploding, machine guns rattling, sub-machine guns chattering, rifle bullets cracking – firing everywhere. There is no time to think. The instinct of self-preservation comes before fear or courage. In front of me a



Victims of the break-out in Széll Kálmán Square (today Moszkva Square).

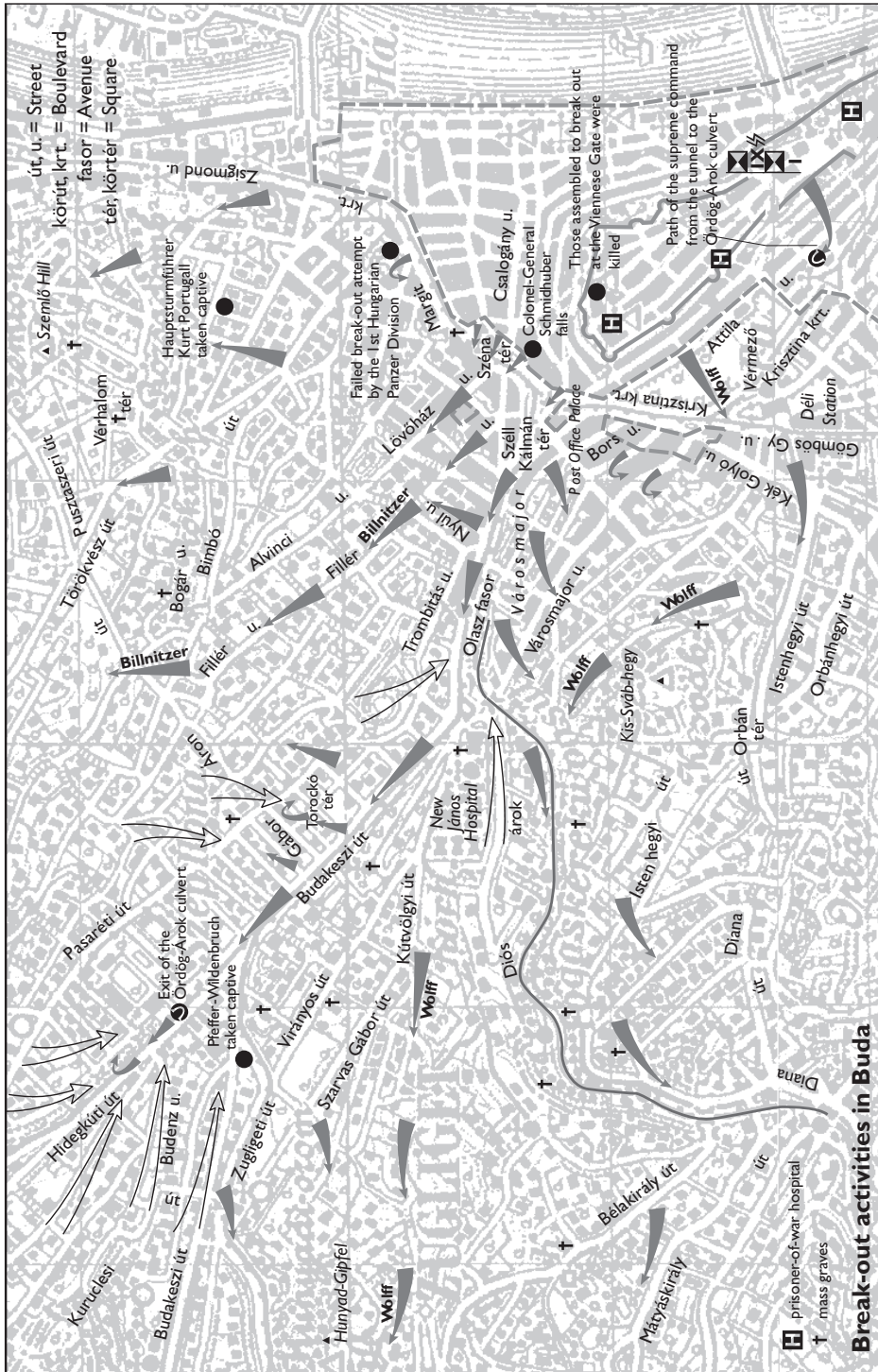
blazing tank. Somewhere ahead there must be a gun blasting into this mass of humanity. One direct hit after another. Whoever is hit remains behind. Like lemmings blindly driven to throw themselves into the sea, a mass of people, who were once disciplined, having abandoned all reason, now rushes down this road, headlong into disaster.²³

Széll Kálmán Square and Széna Square were lit up by Soviet flares and from the surrounding buildings a hail of machine-gun bullets hit the first group:

At Széna Square we came under terrible mortar and artillery fire and suffered more casualties... Then the remainder of our assault battalion attacked. Slithering across the ice in Széna Square we took cover beside the buildings and destroyed the Soviet mortar crew positioned in the Törökbástya Restaurant. In the momentary confusion some other units also got through, and the break-out gained ground towards Új Szentjános hospital.²⁴

What I saw there went beyond the wildest flights of the imagination. Széna Square and today's Moszkva Square were almost as light as day with the many tracer bullets, flare rockets and searchlights. The tracer bullets drew horizontal streaks of light behind them. Shell after shell exploded. I am not exaggerating a bit if I write that there were mountains of dead bodies everywhere.²⁵

The attack of the Kündiger Group failed for lack of combat strength, and three further attacks, launched at short intervals, were also repulsed by



Soviet fire. However, the bulk of the first wave, heading west for the Post Office Palace and Városmajor Grange, got through. They included the remnants of the Vannay Battalion, who had previously assembled in Ostrom Street next to Széna Square, having been issued snow wraps made of sheets, small bags containing chocolate, brandy and fatty bacon, and steel helmets and hand-grenades. They also had a few sub-machine guns, including Soviet ones, for which ammunition was readily available. Three of the men – a Bessarabian German, a Ruthenian and a Hungarian who had been a prisoner of war for 10 years –

spoke perfect Russian...they were carrying ladders they pushed horizontally across the anti-tank ditch to form bridges and – talking to the Russian guards in the dark – crawled across on all fours. – They reported back that the second group could follow. Meanwhile all hell had been let loose – heavy shelling, machine guns, sub-machine guns and other light weapons – but many of the second group got through and also reached the Post Office building.²⁶

A small number of German (and possibly three Hungarian) armoured vehicles broke through at Várfoke Street. Some of these, carrying ammunition and dressings, covered between 2 and 3 kilometres before they were abandoned, but most were destroyed near the Soviet front line. Another group of three or four tanks and a few armoured trucks tried to breach the Soviet positions in Városmajor Street. The truck leading the convoy had just climbed the barricade at the entrance to the street, when it received a direct hit: the crew was killed and the wreck blocked the group's further advance. Corporal Ernst Keller's tank was immobilised at the outset because its fuel had been contaminated with sugar.²⁷ Soviet heavy weapons stationed near János Hospital caused catastrophic losses, making any progress in this sector impossible until a surprise strike by a rare undamaged tank destroyed them.

In Városmajor Grange, near János Hospital and in Budagyöngye, the escapees incapacitated some of the Soviet tanks – which did not go into action until about 9pm – with their *panzerfausts*. However, they could carry only 6–7 kilogrammes of equipment – either a number of hand-grenades, or a rifle or sub-machine gun with no more than seven magazines or, occasionally, a *panzerfaust* – and very few had machine guns, which were very heavy and required two men to lift the magazine crates. Many therefore ran out of ammunition after the first kilometre.

Captain Frigyes Wáczek, chief of staff of the Hungarian 1st Armoured Division, has described one episode in detail. The divisional staff and an assault pioneer detachment numbering 30 men with sub-machine guns

tried to break out at Mechwart Square but were stopped by heavy Soviet opposition. They returned to Batthyányi Street and cut across Széna Square into Retek Street, where two tanks were ablaze. Expecting the ammunition in the tanks to explode, they took cover in the butcher's shop at the corner. There the divisional commander, Colonel János Vértessy, fell on his face and broke his last remaining tooth. 'It's not my day,' he sighed, perhaps with a premonition that he would soon be taken prisoner and shot within 24 hours. On the very same day 30 years earlier, after an emergency landing in the First World War, he had spent three years in prison camp before he had managed to escape. The group reached the junction of Olasz Avenue between 10 and 11pm. From Széll Kálmán Square a large crowd was approaching, including mothers pushing prams, old people and other civilians.

Suddenly three Soviet tanks rolled up from Pasaréti Road and from about 400 metres opened fire with grenades and tracer bullets on the tightly packed marchers...Next to me the grenades wiped out 8-10 people. If one tried to move out of the way one trod on somebody who cried out in pain. The crowd took refuge in the buildings. When at last the *panzerfausts* destroyed the tanks the people surged out, like meat squeezed from a sausage machine, shouting hooray. But soon the next tanks appeared and the slaughter restarted. Most of those still alive escaped into Fillér Street and continued northwest from there.²⁸

The first wave, consisting of several thousand men who had broken through the positions of the Soviet 180th Guard Rifle Division, advanced about 2.5 kilometres along Olasz Avenue as far as Budagyöngye. However, their losses were so enormous that those in the second wave – who reached the front line at Széna Square between 10 and 11pm – were too afraid to follow them. Ernst Schweitzer, a reserve first lieutenant in the 13th Panzer Division, describes the situation at Széna Square and Lövház Street:

We move about 300-400m west and reach an immense cluster of soldiers seeking cover behind a long barnlike building in front of a large open square. This is the front line. Hugging the edge of the building we see that the square is dominated from both sides by Russian machine guns and anti-tank guns. Further along, the square is strewn with wounded and dead. At our feet there are more than a dozen dead who bought it when they were pushed out from the cover of the building...Now we are being forced out into the firing line by those behind us. Without a moment's hesitation I grab the 1a's²⁹ hand and shout: 'Go!' We run for our lives across the square. Bullets whistle past us, but we are lucky. In a few seconds the death zone of about 300 metres is behind us. We are in a narrow lane flanked by buildings with four or five storeys. Rifle fire rings out, shots from the upper storeys and soldiers shooting upward: who knows where there is a friend or an enemy?³⁰

Many of the escapees gave up at this stage in total apathy. A medical orderly recalls the scene in Széll Kálmán Square: 'Dead and wounded are lying in every doorway and in the street. Moaning, swearing and pleading everywhere. "Shoot me, mate, shoot me, mate." And even more urgently: "Doesn't anyone have a heart? Here's my pistol, by my side. Please, shoot me because I can't. Both my arms are gone.'" ³¹

The commander of the 13th Panzer Division, Colonel-General Gerhard Schmidhuber, was killed in Retek Street immediately after crossing Széna Square. His body, with those of many of his comrades, was thrown into the anti-tank ditch in Ostrom Street. ³² Nearby, the commander of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division, Brigadeführer August Zehender, had his right leg blown off by a grenade and committed suicide. In the Zugliget area, the commander of the 8th SS Cavalry Division, Brigadeführer Joachim Rumohr, and three of his officers also killed themselves. Everywhere alongside the roads out of Buda wounded men were begging to be put out of their misery. A soldier in Billnitzer's unit, which reached Széna Square at about 11pm, remembers:

In the dark, with the din of battle in the distance, the only people who remained with me constantly were Uncle Bill [Billnitzer] and his adjutant. It may have been about midnight. In the centre of Széna Square a medium-sized tank with a clearly visible German emblem was burning. The flames lit up the whole square and one could see the traces of the fighting. The first break-out attempt towards Olasz Avenue had started from here. Everywhere we saw dead bodies and wrecked vehicles. We reached the beginning of the street leading to Olasz Avenue, where wounded German soldiers inside ground-floor windows were whimpering and asking for cigarettes to alleviate their suffering. They told me that their break-out had failed and they had seen a vast number of dead. At that time there was relative silence. One could hear the crackle of the burning vehicles and snippets of the voices of the resigned wounded. ³³

Near Mechwart Square the Soviets stalled the break-out for a while by bombarding the area between Margit Boulevard and the Castle District with a 7.62mm anti-tank gun hidden in a café. However, by about 11pm the Germans had advanced so far in the dark that they abandoned their gun and took refuge in the surrounding buildings together with the civilians they had forced to carry ammunition. Until dawn German and Hungarian soldiers, as well as civilians, continued to slip through the resulting gap towards Rózsadomb Hill, Fillér Street and the woods beyond. ³⁴

Soviet units also confronted the assault at Budagyöngye, Virányos Road and Törökvész Road. Some German troops (chiefly the 22nd SS Cavalry Division) turned south towards Svábhegy Hill, occupying Normafa Road, Mátyás király Road, Béla király Road, Költő Street and the territory between

Istenhegyi Road and Lénárt Street. In Húvösvölgyi Road, northwest of Budagyöngye, however, they were unable to make headway. Schweitzer reports:

We take refuge at the entrance to a courtyard. A few minutes later a bunch of divisional staff officers gather here. Most of them go down to the cellar because of the cold and pester a little old lady to show them their position on their street plan by candle light...I walk up and down in the courtyard, busy with my wound and my acute pain, until First Lieutenant [Hans] Lehmann, who has a large packet of bandages left, arrives and dresses my wound...An SS officer staggers into the courtyard, announcing: 'I'm wounded, I'm going to end it all.' I ask where he has come from. He answers that he has tried one of the side streets on the left, but there too everything is sealed off. 30 of his men had got that far, but more had been wounded or killed since. He shoots himself.³⁵

At Széll Kálmán Square and Széna Square it became relatively calm at around midnight. Billnitzer's soldier recalls:

A few hours later, when I got back to Széna Square with Uncle Bill, a new crowd instinctively set out again towards Olasz Avenue... We joined some groups. The movement was not all of a piece, some smaller or larger groups were also meandering back towards the city. In the silence of the night all were stubbornly, doggedly heading for somewhere or other, apparently without any organisation whatsoever. I clearly remember how, including Uncle Bill and his adjutant, we reached Bimbó Road and drifted uphill with the crowd. Suddenly we heard the sound of caterpillar tracks. We were dead silent and immediately threw ourselves on the ground beside the houses and fences, so that none of us could be seen. It was pitch dark.³⁶

Billnitzer himself adds: 'The noise of the tracks became louder and louder, till the tanks passed us with a tremendous rattle... Our experience that tanks are totally blind in the dark was confirmed once more.'³⁷

A few officers still had some grasp of the situation. Lieutenant-Colonel Helmut Wolff of the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division realised that no progress could be made towards Olasz Avenue. He ordered one of his battalions to attempt a breakthrough at Vérmező Meadow and Kékgolyó Street, and the action at this unexpected point proved successful. The soldiers crossed the Soviet positions without encountering any resistance. By dawn they were on the summit of Nagy-Svábhegy Hill (today Szabadság-hegy Hill) above the road to Budakeszi. During the day they were joined by some 2000 more, bringing their total to nearly 3200.³⁸

At the sight of the frenzied escapees throwing themselves into enemy fire regardless of casualties, panic began to spread among the Soviet soldiers. Judit Lichtenberg, a captive of the NKGB (People's Commissariat for State

Security) who was being marched from the Lipótmező quarter towards János Hospital late on 11 February, observed events in Kútvölgyi Road:

In Kútvölgyi Road... we had to wait for a long time at the stone wall of one of the most beautiful villas... Horses, startled by hooting cars, neighed and reared. Soldiers, shouting, tried to move cars stuck in the snow with wheels spinning. In the teeming crowd lorries lumbered like clumsy elephants. The many foreign men, animals and machines formed an inextricable knot on the narrow uphill road. It all bore the marks of anxiety, alarm and agitation... After a great deal of shunting and regrouping we reached Béla király Road and... the subway under the Cogwheel Railway.

Here and there a ghostly light would flare up from the weapon of an unknown soldier, but I didn't care. I had got used to it as part and parcel of the scene just like the endless motley column now passively waiting. Then I heard, rather than saw, rifle fire, and suddenly somebody was shouting so close by that I could clearly recognise the German words 'Hier, hier, herbei' [here, here, come here]... The crackle of rifles had unmistakably turned into concerted machine-gun fire and the Russkis, who had so far been trampling the snow together with us, plunged into the ditch or between and behind the vehicles. Half a minute later most of them turned about face and scampered away. I realised that they knew the ropes better than I did, and so I also decided to clear out... I bumped into a sergeant, who grabbed my arm and, shouting 'Devochka poshli' [Come on, girl], began to retreat with me at the double, stopping at each villa we reached. At one point we met a man who was probably some kind of inspecting officer, because I could understand the sergeant explaining what I was doing there, a civilian woman alone in the middle of the battle... I shouted, 'bang-bang Germanski!' The man knew perfectly well that I was telling him to fight back. Me, the prisoner. 'Ne commandant', he answered. I became furious. I felt like organising the defence myself... But the sergeant dragged me along, saying: 'Panic'.

Panic. Thank you very much. I could see that myself. Next to me a character in a fur hat was wailing: he had been hit by a bullet. The Germans were advancing behind us, step by step. The column, swearing about the obstruction caused by stalling vehicles, was clearing out and drawing back as fast as it could. I got separated from the sergeant, but soon a cook took my hand and we ran together until the loose sole of my boot got caught in a heap of snow and I fell. The right-hand front wheel of a car immediately behind me caught my left knee. Hearing my screams the officer in the car opened the door. A discussion followed between him and the cook, who pulled me across the snow to the nearest tree alongside the road, as he was ordered. He leaned me against the tree and calling out the familiar 'poshli' disappeared in the terrified mass...

When we reached Budakeszi Road... an incredible sight opened before my eyes. In rows of three, getting stuck again and again, pushing and shoving to



Street in Buda after the break-out.

gain a metre on each other, the Red Army was speeding hot-foot towards Budakeszi. It was a breakneck, every-man-for-himself flight, a panic that can only overwhelm a frightened, beaten army.³⁹

On the morning of 12 February a dense fog descended into the valleys around Buda. Several groups of between 2000 and 3000, including civilians, took advantage of this to make their way towards Svábhegy, Remete-hegy and Hármashatár-hegy Hills. Thus some 16,000 people escaped from the city into the hills.

5

The journey through the Ördög-Árok culvert

According to plans, the German and Hungarian commands, SS Oberführer Dörner's 500 assault troopers, the anti-aircraft crews, the glider pilots and a few other units were to escape through the culvert between Ördög-árok gully and the Danube. They were to start near the tunnel under Castle Hill about 2 kilometres in front of the Soviet lines and resurface about 2 kilometres behind them, covering about 4 kilometres underground.

The Hungarian commander Iván Hindy was not informed of this until after 3pm. In his trial after the war he stated:

On 11 February I heard that all food supplies had been used up and decided to negotiate with Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. As agreed by our adjutants I called on him in his office at about 3 o'clock. Before I could speak he said that he also wished to speak to me as he had two orders to give me. The orders were that the garrison was to break out at 7 o'clock that same evening. I told him that I thought it strange that he had not discussed this with me beforehand, and asked how he had come to this decision. He said that our divisions were subordinate to his divisions, who had received the orders, moreover he had discussed the matter with his divisional commanders on the previous evening, and as the food supplies had run out in the meantime he had had no other option. I remarked again that if he had not discussed the matter with me I would at least have expected to be informed in advance, because now I had only three hours left to prepare my staff and could not guarantee that everybody would receive the order in good time.⁴⁰

As Captain Ferenc X. Kovács, the head of the Hungarian I Army Corps's operative section, remembers, Hindy then 'summoned the officers to my office and...told us that he would not force anybody to take part in the break-out. He said that we would have to start at 11pm. He would join the Germans and if nobody had any objections or comments his wife would go with him (nobody had any comments).'⁴¹

Lieutenant-General Billnitzer was also due to go through the culvert, while his soldiers were to escape on the surface across Széll Kálmán Square. When he heard Hindy's instructions he decided to join the soldiers.

József Paulics, an officer cadet in the Hungarian I Army Corps, remembers the cocksure optimism shared by many at that time:

At the exit of the sewer [in reality the culvert only carried water] near the Bolyai Academy the corps command, the Hungarian and German general staffs and the office personnel will be received by combat groups, who will assist us in continuing our escape from our fortress, which has by now become indefensible. If we succeed, we guarantee that the heroic defenders of Buda Castle, from the lowest ranks to the highest, will be promoted and decorated and given 3 weeks' leave somewhere at the German seaside.⁴²

While many would not face facts even then, Hindy anticipated the end of the enterprise and looked on lethargically, as Károly Borbás, an officer in the army corps, records:

I last saw him before the break-out at a quarter to eight in the evening, when the groups were being assembled. The Arrow Cross men climbing into a Hungarian armoured truck wrapped in red blankets looked funny. Hindy was watching them silently. I asked him whether he thought this right, but instead of answering he was saying farewell to everybody.⁴³

The German and Hungarian commands left their headquarters at about 11pm.⁴⁴ They were preceded by some of Dörner's assault troopers. Kovács specifies: 'The Hungarian corps command came immediately behind Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. Ahead of them the assault group was carrying *panzerfausts*, mortars, machine guns and other heavy weapons.'⁴⁵ One of the soldiers recalls:

I was given a smoked chop, 2 kg. of sugar, 2 loaves of bread, some rice, salami, margarine and a flask of brandy. Unfortunately I could only take a small part of this with me because I also had to pack other things...The entrance to the sewer was about 200-300 metres from the exit of the tunnel in Krisztina Boulevard, I think at number 97. We walked this short distance amid shells, artillery fire and signal rockets...At last we got to the cellar of that building, from where, through a sloping barrel-shaped opening one metre in diameter and several metres in length, we reached the sewer...a circular passage about 3 by 3 metres with a ditch about 40cm in depth along the bottom...Luckily we had a few candles to bring some light into this otherwise completely dark underworld. I don't believe that mountaineers in the Alps advance more slowly than we did...From time to time we found ourselves under manholes with spiral staircases closed off by iron plates, where we could hear the din of the desperate battle above ground.⁴⁶

Various other groups entered the culvert without permission. Staff Medical Officer Werner Hübner remembers the chaos after the departure of the commands:

In the large tunnel, where the corps's communication vehicles were stationed, people were beginning to realise that they were trapped. A drunken staff doctor had taken charge and decided to escape with some soldiers through an underground culvert which was supposed to lead from the Danube to Budakeszi. Roaring insanely they started to look for the culvert. I never saw them again.⁴⁷

With so many men squeezing into the culvert, the water-level slowly rose and it became increasingly hard to make headway. 'For many their luggage grew too heavy, and knapsacks were soon abandoned right and left.'⁴⁸

The current brought every conceivable object with it, combat equipment, helmets, flasks, hand grenades, *panzerfausts*, which obstructed our progress. And among other things the body of a woman. I don't know how she had got here, but she probably belonged to the so-called better classes, about 40, fair, plump, wearing a foalskin coat, silk stockings and light coloured shoes with high heels, and gripping her handbag like grim death.⁴⁹

Many left the culvert before reaching its end. Lieutenant-Colonel Usdau Lindenau, chief of staff of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps, surfaced near

today's Körszálló Hotel and was soon wounded and captured. First Lieutenant Wolfgang Betzler, the corps's war diarist, did likewise and reached Labanc Road, where he burnt the diary in a cellar before surrendering.⁵⁰

Some Germans tried to follow a side culvert that branched off under Hűvösvölgyi Road towards Budakeszi. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch also chose this route, probably after discovering that Dörner's men could not advance beyond the exit near the Bolyai Academy:

The Russians launched a counter-strike with artillery and mortars, gradually pushing the Dörner group back into Ördög-árok... The artillery and mortar fire grew heavier and could be heard by those in the underground section of the culvert, including us. Then the following command was issued by Pfeffer-Wildenbruch: 'All SS officers join the Obergruppenführer in front! At once! Pass the message on!' – whereupon SS officers of all ranks rushed forward to join Pfeffer-Wildenbruch.⁵¹

Pfeffer-Wildenbruch waited neither for his Hungarian partner nor for his own officers, who were unable to follow him in any case because the rising water-level in the side culvert made any further advance impossible. He and his staff were the only ones to reach the surface after a few hundred metres. Between 10 and 15 of them hid in a villa in Budakeszi Road, where they were discovered by the Soviets in the morning. The political officer of the Soviet 297th Rifle Division writes:

During the struggle for that building we sent a Hungarian civilian who spoke German to the enemy to demand their surrender. To underline the ultimatum we positioned a 45mm gun, commanded by First Lieutenant M. U. Zagorian, opposite the building. Those inside replied that they would surrender on condition that

- a) we guaranteed that their lives would be spared,
- b) the Soviet officer receiving them will hold at least the rank of major.

Major Skripkin, the commander of the division's chemical defence detachment, dipped his finger in ink and wrote on a piece of paper that he was a major in the Red Army, ready to receive them.⁵²

Dörner, after being wounded, was probably captured in similar fashion.⁵³

As the Soviets were not keeping the entire culvert under constant surveillance some succeeded in climbing out near the Bolyai Academy unnoticed. A group of 10 people, led by a medical-corps lieutenant, ended up in local resident Iván Boldizsár's house in such a state of exhaustion that they immediately fell asleep. Others came out at Budagyöngye:

The coast was clear. The enemy must have been everywhere but probably didn't suspect anything. 'Officers forward!' Nobody moved. The few determined officers

were already in front, while the others, who had cold feet, were plodding on behind... One by one, we climbed the iron steps, wriggled through the tight manhole and took cover behind the snow piles in the suburban street. We must have been on the outskirts of Buda. In the east dawn was breaking.⁵⁴

Approaching lights caused panic among the escapees, as it was impossible to tell whether they came from the torches of their own comrades or from Soviet flame-throwers:

The only way to escape from this mousetrap was by climbing into the street through one of the gratings that normally let water drain into the culvert. It was not hard to remove the gratings, but much harder to work one's way up. The first man would get through, and the second too, most of the time, but by then the Russians seemed to have discovered our escape holes. When the next man stuck out his head he would fall back lifeless, hit by a Russian sniper. What could we do when an escape hole had been discovered? We walked on, the Russians could not keep all the gratings under fire. We had to make another attempt, our only thought was: out of this prison! Carefully my friend stuck his head out, a centimetre at a time. No Russian was to be seen, no shot to be heard. He pushed his whole body out and lay flat on the ground. Had they discovered him? Would they be taking aim at my head when I followed him? With my heart pounding I worked my way out centimetre by centimetre. It was still quiet. In one bound I was outside and we were running towards the nearby [Szépilona] tram depot.⁵⁵

Such groups were soon discovered by Soviet tanks patrolling the streets and chased into the surrounding buildings, where the round-up began on the morning of 12 February:

About noon a Russian delegate approached waving a white flag. He was received at the front door and taken to our 'leader'. He told us that anti-tank guns and mortars had just arrived and assumed firing positions against us. If we surrendered, nothing would happen to us, otherwise, if we didn't raise a white flag within half an hour, our building would be reduced to rubble in a matter of minutes. – Death or captivity. With heavy hearts we chose the latter.⁵⁶

Many Germans committed suicide – for example, 26 SS soldiers who had taken refuge in the garden of 2 Diósárok Street. Some panicked right at the outset and killed themselves even before the Soviets were anywhere near them.

Among the Hungarians there were hardly any suicides. Of the 60 staff members about 40 returned to the cellar of the building from which they had entered the culvert. The sole survivors of the 4th Hussar Regiment – two lieutenant-colonels and a major, who had undertaken an unarmed

reconnaissance mission alongside the Cogwheel Railway – surrendered in a nearby villa. Such instances were frequent.

The Ördög-árok break-out proved a dismal failure. None of those who took this route are known to have reached friendly lines or even to have got beyond the suburb of Hidegkút. A Hungarian participant writes:

The atmosphere was thick with confusion, shouting, tussles and desperate fear... By then the German corps commander and his officers were no longer in the culvert. Who knows where they were. There were only the few hundred desperate German soldiers and us. Climbing up the spiral staircase was tantamount to death. The men nearby said that those who had got that far were lying shot in a pile around the opening... About 20 metres or more from the manhole there was a side passage (service pipe). It was $1\frac{1}{2}$ metres in diameter, also barrel-shaped, with water about 20cm deep running out of it... The German soldiers attempted the impossible feat of escaping through this pipe. As there was room for only one at a time they crawled away on their knees, one after the other. The more that entered the pipe the higher the water rose. When there were about 100 inside, the pipe was almost half full of water, and all those bodies crawling on their knees had swelled it to such an extent that it was pouring out like a waterfall... When almost all the Germans had got into the narrow pipe they suddenly started to crawl back, screaming horribly and drenched to the skin. They had seen a light in the distance and concluded that Soviet soldiers with flame-throwers were coming towards them... Those of the wounded who could, fled. One, who had been hit in the thigh, was dragging himself along with his hands as if he were swimming, another was trying to save his wretched life sliding on his bottom, each as he was able.⁵⁷

In the afternoon Hindy and his entourage realised that the Germans were being pushed back from both the Ördög-árok exit and the Budakeszi section of the culvert. Kovács took the initiative:

Behind us was a group of Germans with various weapons, and from the end of the underground section a Soviet assault could be expected. We would have been the target between two fires. I suggested to Colonel-General Hindy and Staff Colonel Sándor Horváth that we separate from Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's party, turn back, and try to reach the surface somewhere... Wading through water up to our waists we pushed aside the many discarded objects obstructing us. Iván Hindy's wife followed us in a long skirt and we were clearing the way for her.⁵⁸

Another participant continues:

At last we reached the point where, as I have mentioned, the culvert was built like a waterfall. But this time we were going in the same direction as the water. We had to get down into the lower culvert, but it was full of water, about

1-1½m deep, up to our waists or armpits, depending on how tall we were. The slow movement of the water indicated a blockage somewhere. We remembered that at one point there was a floodgate, which might have been closed in order to drown us. Something had to be done because having reached the end of this terrible war we were not willing to be drowned, and even preferred the risk of being shot dead.

Two staff captains [Ferenc X. Kovács and László Kerekes] volunteered to open and smash the floodgate. A quarter or half an hour later – who knows how long the painful wait lasted – we at last heard the floodgate being smashed... The two captains returned and sat Hindy's wife on their arms to carry her towards apparent liberation. The poor old lady's heroic behaviour put the courage of many men to shame: not one word of complaint was heard from her.⁵⁹

In Széll Kálmán Square there was an exit covered by a small building, where the group stopped at about 5pm. Climbing the spiral staircase, Kovács heard Russian voices, and they continued their march. As they were unable to leave the culvert either at its Danube outlet or at Döbrentei Square, where the ceiling had caved in, they finally decided to return to their original starting point.⁶⁰

An hour and a half later we saw the 'ladder reaching up to heaven'... Captain Kovács again volunteered to climb out of the culvert first... We arrived safely. The cellar door was open and above us we heard the clatter of hooves and Russian voices. Apparently they had also noticed us, because two came downstairs. They were so surprised to see so many high-ranking officers [Hindy, Major-General Gyula Sédely, a staff colonel, a lieutenant-colonel, and three captains] together that they even forgot to use their weapons.⁶¹

6

The escapees' further progress

The closed units that had broken out above ground soon dissolved into several large groups, with the majority reaching the woods near Buda at various points and heading towards Hármashatár-hegy Hill. Assault Artillery Lieutenant Róbert Garád reports how one group came into being:

Uncle Bill [Billnitzer] and I...instinctively headed towards the hills. In some places the snow was up to 20cm deep and clearly showed our tracks. I tramped through the snow and Uncle Bill slowly followed me. The fences were either missing or flattened. We got to an unpaved road leading uphill. On a rough wooden board I could read 'Törökvész Road'. By now we had reached a wooded area. We climbed higher and rested among the trees. Then the surprise came.

Day was slowly breaking. In the valleys the battle noises became more intense, and fog spread everywhere. Behind us, along our tracks in the snow, an endless line of people was approaching... We were surrounded by civilians, soldiers, children, women and unshaven SS assault troopers with machine guns, who were asking Uncle Bill in Hungarian and German where we should now be going. Quite involuntarily Uncle Bill had become the centre of the murmuring crowd. The fog grew even thicker and Uncle Bill dispatched the group with the machine guns towards the spine of the hill as a vanguard... The German SS soldiers with the machine guns were in front. There may have been about seven of them. After a sleepless night they were forging ahead through the snow and between the bushes, crumpled, unshaven and impassive. Uncle Bill and I were next, and behind us the endless winding file of the others, all mixed together. A young German major, wounded and encased in plaster, was sitting on a small shaggy horse led by an orderly. Wailing women with children were trudging through the snow dragging their bundles behind them.⁶²

Cadet Gyula Kokovay, coming from Svábhegy Hill with probably the largest group, passed the site of the panic witnessed earlier by Judit Lichtenberg on his way to Hármashatár-hegy Hill:

About two o'clock we reached Béla király Road. Here we saw many abandoned cars, guns, horses and trucks loaded with ammunition. Next to a column of assorted lorries we saw many civilians who had been shot dead. We followed Béla király Road for quite a while, before we turned off and continued along a steep and narrow road. It was already growing light when we reached a cluster of buildings where many German soldiers and eight university students, survivors of the Winter group, were resting. There must have been at least six hundred of us.

I accompanied the captain on his search for a senior officer and we found a German major. After a brief consultation the whole group set out towards the Kossuth Monument, led by the German major and Captain [Zsombor] Nagy. Leaving this behind on our right, we passed through a valley with steep banks, with Russians firing at us from the villas above. We fired back.

By this time there were some dead and wounded among the Germans, but we Hungarians were still unscathed...

As there were Russians in Budakeszi we continued north across the wood. At about three o'clock word came from the end of the long column that we were being followed by Russian troops... We marched faster and on top of a wooded hill came under fire from all sides. Among the crowd on the hill we met Artillery Colonel [Lajos] Lénárd, an infantry captain and Arrow Cross member Áron Vajna.

After a discussion between Captain Nagy and the commanders of a few relatively well-organised German groups, we Hungarians, together with the Germans, waded north through the nasty deep snow and attacked a group of

Russians, who ran away after a lot of shooting, leaving a mortar behind. After this breakthrough the whole crowd from the hill followed us. None of the attackers was hurt, but while we were fighting in the wood the Russians had opened fire on the people on the hill top with heavy mortars, infantry weapons and the machine guns of two Stormovik planes. Many had been wounded or killed. The wounded included a German Major-General, Colonel Lénárd and the infantry captain...

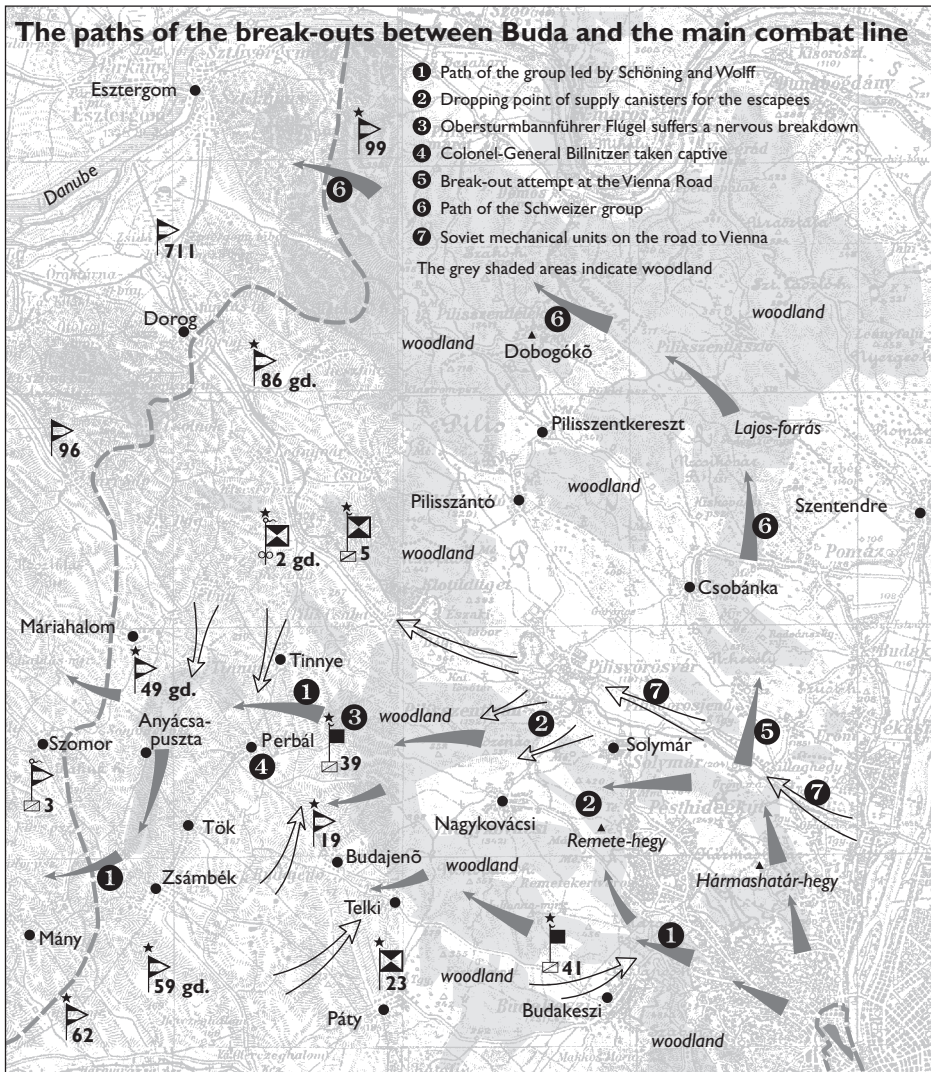
After dark we rested about six hours and those who had some food ate. Then we marched on until late into the night, leaving the wounded near a village (maybe Páty) with a few companions to look after them.

About midnight we stopped between some logs in a clearing. As we had no blankets we huddled together like bundles of firewood, but were constantly shivering in the strengthening wind and sleet. About two hours later our clothes, soaked with the sleet, began to freeze and we moved on.⁶³

From Hármashatár-hegy Hill some continued north towards Csobánka and the Pilis Hills, while the majority turned west through the woods above Nagykovácsi. Ernst Schweitzer remembers:

On a forest path several groups of privates are marching northwest. Now we recognise them, they are Germans from Budapest. There are many Hungarian civilians with them...In our column there are civilians carrying all their possessions on their heads. A wounded soldier, whose foot has been blown off above the ankle is sitting without a dressing on a horse without a saddle... Now Russian reconnaissance aircraft circle above. At 2.30 the first bombers spot us. There are dead and wounded. In a clearing a Russian outpost spots us. At almost regular intervals individual members of the column are picked off with rifles, until a captain persuades 10 soldiers to open fire on the outpost and cover our side. About 4 o'clock we reach the Pesthidegkút-Solymár road. Here Russian tanks are stationed and it is impossible to cross the road. The hill east of the road looks like a huge army camp. Now the Russians are shelling us. More casualties.⁶⁴

Suffering heavy casualties, one group, consisting mainly of SS soldiers, reached the western edge of the forest near Tinnye and Perbál, and another, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Helmut Wolff of the Feldherrnhalle Division, near Telki, Budajenő and Perbál. A third group ran into a Soviet ambush in Nagykovácsi.⁶⁵ Billnitzer and his followers swerved south towards Nagykopasz Hill and were taken prisoner near Perbál. Lieutenant József Bíró watched 'Germans in flight towards Solymár along the tourist path on the slope of Hármashatár-hegy Hill for two hours. They were carrying their wounded on stretchers. Only their rearguard was firing backwards, running from tree to tree.'⁶⁶ 'They tried to make headway along the Vienna road



but, rapidly running out of ammunition, were harassed at every clearing by Soviet crossfire and raids.¹⁶⁷

A large group, including many soldiers of the Maria Theresia SS Cavalry Division and the Hungarian contingent of First Lieutenant Litteráti-Loótz, had chosen a southwesterly route along the Cogwheel Railway. Some managed to scale Svábhegy Hill but were ambushed by Soviet troops, who slaughtered the Germans but spared the Hungarians. Others took Kis-Svábhegy Hill, before they were stopped by the Soviets. Most of the mass graves were later found in this district, four alongside the Cogwheel Railway and two between Orbánhegy and Kis-Sváb-hegy Hills.

On their way west, the escapees frequently came up against Soviet baggage trains. Such an encounter took place on the road to Budakeszi:

At the head of the column somebody starts shooting. A lieutenant and some machine gunners go to investigate, while the crowd surges back. Nobody wants to be wounded – anything but being left lying there. Some other courageous blokes go forward with the ammunition crate and are swallowed up by the fog. We can hear our MG 42s, Russian machine guns rattle in reply but are soon silent, and the episode closes with the dull thuds of hand-grenades. Now we can continue our march. A few dead Russians are lying around, and nearly a dozen wounded Germans.⁶⁸

The starving men were frantic and there was no discipline left:

As we were dragging ourselves along we saw some Soviet carts containing bread, captured by those ahead of us. A small crowd of people were fighting over the loaves. It was horrible to see these fugitives firing their pistols at each other. We stood helplessly a little distance away. The most savage of them soon disappeared, laden with loaves. The dead and wounded were left among the silent horses and the carts.⁶⁹

By now fewer and fewer were willing or able to continue the struggle:

There is not much fighting spirit left among us. Privates are constantly throwing their weapons and ammunition away. Partly because the stuff is becoming very heavy and even more because nobody wants to be around when the call 'Machine gunners and riflemen to the front' comes again.⁷⁰

Some were lucky:

Silent march through the forest in the night. Smoking forbidden. Suddenly loud voices, pistol shots ahead. Then a delighted 'Don't shoot, comrades.' In the middle of the forest those at the head of the line had reached a road where some German prisoners were being taken away on Russian horse carts...The Russians had bolted and our mates were free. What they told us gave us a foretaste of what would happen if... Pillaged down to their handkerchiefs and spoons, nothing to eat since last night [sic]. Those badly wounded had been shot immediately.⁷¹

But many gave up:

The Germans ahead of us suddenly stopped and we stopped too. We didn't know what was up, so I walked on with the lieutenant. The most senior German, Obersturmbannführer [Hans] Flügel, was lying in the snow, shouting that he had had enough of this madness, there was no point in anything any more, he wasn't going one step further etc. His soldiers just stood there.⁷²

Schweitzer's group had set up camp north of Pilisvörösvár when the Soviets struck:

A moment's respite with a cigarette ... Then suddenly, below us, Russians shouting hurrah. They fire on us. Like startled animals we leap up the steep hill towards the north. We soon run out of breath. Some more are killed with carefully aimed fire. An NCO walking directly in front of me is suddenly hit in the head and falls down like a tree. I can't bear it. I clutch a low shrub to avoid sliding down, wondering if I should end it all ... Up and on again, until we have climbed the 537m Kevély hill under constant fire ... We slither down the other side of the hill, sinking up to our elbows in the deep snow and aware that the Russians only need to follow our tracks to catch us. At the foot of the hill we seek shelter in a thicket. There are 13 of us left. Today's rations are a piece of chocolate, a sweet and a small cube of bread.⁷³

After two or three days, most of the escapees began to hallucinate. Some saw houses, kitchens and food in the snow-fields, others imagined that they were at Déli Station. Many were teetering on the edge of madness.⁷⁴ However, the worst was still to come. To reach the German lines near Máty, Zsámbék and Szomor, they had to leave the forests and cross the bare Zsámbék Basin where a tight Soviet tank barricade awaited them.

7

Arrivals

Of about 28,000 soldiers who took part in the break-out, some 700 reached the German front in the west. The first group, comprising a Hungarian officer, three German officers and 23 privates, crossed the German lines in Szomor Catholic Cemetery during the night of 13 February. They owed their success mainly to the local knowledge of their leader, First Lieutenant László Szilasi Szabó.⁷⁵

SS Hauptsturmführer Joachim Boosfeld and one of his men, running hand-in-hand, had dodged the hail of bullets in Lövház Street and slipped past some buildings where Soviet soldiers who had not heard of the break-out were making merry. Early next morning they caught up with a large group, mainly Germans, on Remete-hegy Hill. They set out north, lacking the energy to defend themselves against repeated Soviet attacks or to look for supplies dropped from the air. In the morning of 13 February, after spending the night on a thinly wooded hill and encountering no further obstacles, about 100 of them had reached the front line, where the Soviets had established positions on a height beyond a small stream. Boosfeld recalls: 'On the rising meadow leading to the German positions we could clearly observe small grey dots – German soldiers – working their way

forward. From the German side we received no fire assistance, while the Soviet snipers shot down one escapee after the other.⁷⁶ Only 10–20 of them finally reached their destination.

The largest single group, 300–400 men led by Helmut Wolff and Wilhelm Schöning, reached the western edge of the forest above Nagykovácsi on 13 February. After dark they broke through the Soviet defence ring at Budajenő and, fighting a series of gun battles, reached the positions of the German 3rd Cavalry Brigade.⁷⁷ To facilitate their progress they had split up into parties of 15–24 men. Sergeant Otto Kutscher had been in one of these:

Suddenly two green flares rose in the air. That had to be our own troops and front line. Every 500-1000m along the German line two more green flares went up. We had reached the Russian trench when we were challenged. We immediately opened fire on the Russians with our light weapons and those who still had a hand-grenade threw it into the trench. We jumped across the trench as fast as we could and then the Russians started shooting. A hand-grenade landed exactly midway between Schöning and me. Schöning was badly wounded in his right foot and I caught a large splinter in my left thigh. After crawling and limping a short stretch I was picked up by two soldiers who were positioned there, and carried to our own lines.⁷⁸

Schöning remembers:

Suddenly I felt as if my legs had been torn off. The divisional staff's medical officer Seeger, who was lying beside me, tried to help me. While he was leaning over me he was also wounded. His achilles tendon had already been exposed by a hit at the start of the break-out and now his whole bottom was ripped open. As my magazine was empty I ordered my lieutenant, who was himself wounded in the arm, to shoot me so that I would not be captured. He shouted: 'Only another 2,000 metres, Sir. We have got to make it.' I crawled up a slope through the snow, with the medical officer next to me... Under extremely heavy fire two wounded grenadiers of my combat group pulled us up by the arms, and with several wounds in my feet I dragged myself the 2 kilometres to the German position.⁷⁹

The Hungarian ensign Gyula Kokovay and some of his companions reached Anyácska-pusztá, after breaking through several Soviet positions despite attacks from ground troops on skis and fighter aircraft:

It was growing light when we came under rifle fire after 500-600 metres I was going to fire back, but my sub-machine gun had suddenly packed up. As there was no time in the middle of the assault to see what was wrong I threw it on my back and, running along, put my bayonet under the buckle of my waist belt to be handy.

When we were near the positions of the Russians they threw hand-grenades at us. One grenade hit me on the head and I fell, but because it landed in the

snow in front of me I lay there until it exploded, filling my eyes and mouth with snow and blowing my cap away. I picked my cap up and ran after the others, who had just reached the Russians' shelter. Eight or ten paces from me a Russian, stepping out from behind a tree, pointed his rifle at me. I could distinctly hear it click, but it didn't go off. He raised it above his head to knock me down, but he was too late because I rushed at him and sank my bayonet in his flank. He doubled up and fell to one side, while I caught up with the others, who had got beyond the shelter and to the edge of the forest. We dispersed and bounded towards the line of trees, hoping that our men were in there. Under heavy fire, crawling and sprinting for about half a kilometre, I reached the line of trees and took cover in the ditch behind it...

When we started again Áron Vajna was first to jump out of the river bed, but was dead after less than 10 steps. A bullet had hit him in the neck. About 10 o'clock those who had got through began to trickle in, 36 Germans and nine Hungarians of whom only three, József Jász, Béla Hidvégi and I, were unscathed; the other six were carried away on stretchers.⁸⁰

By 16 February a total of 624 had reached the German lines.⁸¹ Schweitzer and three of his men were among the 80–100 men who arrived later. Trekking towards Esztergom through the Pilis Hills, they found themselves at Lajos-forrás source on 15 February. Schweitzer recounts:

The sight of a house is enormously attractive because we are exhausted and starved. But first we must see whether there are any Russians there. We cautiously advance in pairs... The house is deserted, all the rooms looted, with the exception of the kitchen, where the utensils are lying around in a muddle. In the corner on the left there is a couch, but no food. All we want is sleep... while an old lance-corporal searches the house for something edible. He comes back with a shapeless mass that turns out to have been German army bread. So it is at least seven weeks old... We cut the rotten bits out and are left with a handful of crumbs interspersed with mould, whose origin can only just be recognised. These are fairly distributed...

The sun is high in the sky when my comrades wake me. I jump. We must disappear at once. It's uncanny. Suddenly some footsteps in the house. We stand rooted to the spot, staring at the door. Gingerly a head is pushed in. A Hungarian civilian. He is even more frightened than we. What are you doing here? Behind him two young people. One of them speaks German. They implore us to leave immediately. If the Russians came, as they do daily to collect hay or something, they would also be lost because they had not reported us. They have been robbed of everything down to their shoe laces. We prepare to leave and beg for something to eat... At half past three in the afternoon our morale is so low that we decide to return to the house, come what may, even though the Russians have not shown. Our three Hungarian friends turn pale with fright when we turn up. For their own safety they demand our weapons and

ammunition, which we hand over on condition that they return them before dawn next day. Then they would at least be able to say that they had disarmed and captured us if a Russian came along. We peel and boil the potatoes we found...I lie down and fall into a deep sleep. When the potatoes are ready my comrades try to wake me but without much success. Half asleep I eat two spoonfuls of potato and drop off again. At six in the morning we are up. The Hungarians give us some tea and a bite of bread. Now I feel fresh again.⁸²

The four men continued their journey past the tourist hostel on Dobogókő, the highest peak in the Pilis Hills. As the hostel was occupied by Soviet guards they had to follow the steep northern slope, which took a whole day in the deep snow, although the distance was only 4 kilometres. On 20 February, early in the morning, they were finally near Esztergom:

My feet hurt so badly that I have to take off my boots. I manage this with some help, but when we try to continue I am unable to get into them again and stand on my feet. I tell my comrades to go on, I would drag myself to the nearest hut I could find during the day and take a chance on whether it was in Russian territory or our own. My comrades decide to stay with me...At day-break, from the top of a hill, we see a town only a few hundred metres away. According to the map it is Esztergom. Ten days ago it was still in German hands. On all fours, on my knees and elbows, I crawl towards the first houses. One of us goes on ahead and reports back happily that the first house is a German billet. We have made it.⁸³

For a number of Germans the break-out lasted longer: afraid of being captured, some took refuge in the forests until the spring or even summer, while others hid in the capital and escaped in civilian clothes weeks or months later.

8

Events in the Castle District and the military hospitals

Up to 5000 soldiers, mostly Hungarians, had remained in the Castle District – either because they had never received the break-out order or because they regarded the enterprise as pointless. Several thousand badly wounded – in the military hospitals in the tunnel, in the vaults of the National Bank, and elsewhere – had also been left behind. The chief medical officer and his personnel had fled, abandoning their patients to their fate. Only Medical Officer Hübner returned after the failure of the break-out to care for some 2000 wounded who were deserted in the cellars of the Royal Palace:

In the Castle sheer madness ruled. The weeks of encirclement had driven everybody to the brink of insanity. Deprivation, misery and worry about the future provoked actions for which the individual could no longer be held responsible... Pistols were going off in every corner of the huge underground infirmary: nobody wanted to be captured by the Russians in a wounded state. I quickly lined up some sensible, only slightly injured officers, a staff paymaster and a group of eight NCOs and sergeants, whom I deployed at key points. We announced to the wounded by radio-telephone that we were immediately taking responsibility for their care... The Hungarians contented themselves with collecting the remaining weapons of the wounded and spreading horror stories. Only two doctors volunteered immediately and then remained good comrades and friends to the end...

There had been no need to starve the soldiers for weeks in the city's cellars and in the trenches. The soldiers stormed the supply stores in a frenzy. They gave vent to their fury over the deceit in pointless destruction. A young NCO had discovered the evacuated bunker of General Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and put on his abandoned uniform. One of the maniacs, taking him for the general, shot him dead before we could intervene...

Towards eight o'clock in the morning I started to amputate the arm of a badly wounded first lieutenant who had dragged himself back to the Castle. The operating room was in the deepest catacomb. Before long my lookouts reported that the first Russian had arrived, but nothing happened. Suddenly a Russian was standing in our operating theatre, pointing his sub-machine gun at us. With an immense calm replacing my earlier excitement, I continued, taking no notice of the visitor. After the operation we swigged a big gulp from the bottle. 'Ivan' did the same, and then we went up to surrender... Meanwhile Russians of all ranks had made themselves at home in the empty rooms and the vodka was flowing profusely... By evening nobody had attended to us and we went back to our work...

Suddenly the infirmary was in total darkness. When we looked for our generator we saw it being towed away by a jeep and disappearing in the distance. Apparently it had interfered with the Russians' radio signal, but we would definitely be given a new one with a suppressor. I never saw it delivered. With the generator gone, the water supply also ended. The latrines overflowed and excreta floated between the straw beds of the wounded. In the darkness we could not find any candles. The Russians showed us how to make lights out of lard and rags, and these contraptions were smouldering everywhere... In every nook and cranny the wounded were doing their business, all discipline gone. In the dark we were continually treading on filth and excrement. The stench was unbearable. There was no question of nursing the wounded.

The number of dead was frightening. The bodies were piled up in the former kitchen in the deepest catacomb, where they stiffened into gnarled shapes. Between them medicines, tin cans, slashed paintings, precious china, laundry etc. were lying all over the place.⁸⁴

The Soviets decided to leave the hospital, and sought doctors among their prisoners to look after the wounded. One of these, Ensign Aladár Konkoly-Thege, describes his first encounter with Hübner and the hospital:

On the south side a dark entrance leads to the German military hospital in the cellars under the Castle. A German doctor, looking thin and tired, comes out with two medical orderlies. He says that he and his men can only manage the removal of the dead and there is no other treatment. We are divided into three groups with orders to ascertain how many people are needed on each floor and what we can do for the wounded.

I am sent to the second basement. We make slow progress, with only a few candles flickering in the dark. The air is thick and stifling. Pus, blood, gangrene, excrement, sweat, urine, tobacco smoke and the smell of gun powder mingle in a dense stench, which fills the passage. It is unbearably nauseating. The light of the torch picks images out of the gloom. On both sides of the passages the wounded are lying in long rows, some on plank beds or in bunks, many on the bare concrete... They are lying there almost motionless, feverish, weakened and helpless. For days there has been no treatment, change of dressings or cleaning, nor any food. As the doctor said, only the dead have been taken away. Groans, sighs, barely intelligible German laments, prayer, fragments of swearwords...

The lowest level contained the men who were wounded in the head, paralysed or blind, including some Hungarians. Those brought here were given a few pain killers as a farewell.⁸⁵

Several fires broke out, probably as a result of smoking, although some sources claim that in one ward Soviet soldiers poured petrol over the patients and set them alight. Some of the wounded were demonstrably burnt alive in the emergency stations in the tunnel and underneath today's Institute of Military History.⁸⁶ Hübner tells about events at his post:

On 18 February there was another fire on the upper floor. It came from a side wing under...our hospital, where there was an ammunition store. I had just recovered from a very uncomfortable situation. We were removing a splinter from the stomach of a young Hungarian when the door of the operating room was torn open and two savage-looking fellows burst in, furiously shooting at each other. One of them crouched at the foot of the operating table, shooting at his opponent, who in turn was shooting back across the open stomach of the anaesthetised patient. We took cover, trembling, until the marksman at the foot of the table lay on the floor with a hole in his head. Without saying a word the champion swaggered out, leaving us with an unknown body. We had earned a large brandy but had no time to look for it because by then the whole place was blazing fiercely.

The fire found ready fodder in the wall coverings, the wooden panelling and the patients' beds of straw. The ominous crackle of the fire merged with

the sound of shells and grenades exploding in the ammunition store and the desperate screams of people being burnt to death. The only way out was a door about 2 metres wide in the upper catacomb. There could be no question of rescuing the many wounded. We managed to pull about 100 people out of the fire, but most of them were going to freeze to death outside because all we could do was to lay them down in the snow as they were.⁸⁷

Konkoly-Thege continues:

Smoke billows from the exit and explosions are heard. Some wounded drag themselves into the courtyard. Others appear after them. They crawl along painfully, some on their knees and elbows inch by inch, pulling the stumps of their amputated legs behind them. Those who can, support each other. They are trying to escape from the blazing hell because the hospital in the cellar is burning. The German doctor cries in despair: 'Comrades...my comrades are being burned alive inside and I can't help them.'⁸⁸

According to some sources the fire claimed 300 lives, although others cite as many as 800. However, there were also a number of survivors:

In a side room separated from the catacomb by a heavy iron door, we had accommodated some badly wounded Hungarian and German officers. The door was completely warped, but from behind it I heard knocking. With our combined strength we broke it open. The officers were sitting in what seemed like a revolting stinking oven. They had undressed and watered the scorching walls with the content of their urine drum.⁸⁹

It was summer before the few survivors were able to return home.

9

The German Army Group South's reaction to the break-out

The high command of the German Army Group South received Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's radio message about the impending break-out at 7.45pm, but did not forward it until 10.30pm.⁹⁰ Colonel-General Balck, the commander of the 6th Army, immediately informed the army supreme command: 'I will try to meet the IX Mountain Army Corps via Zsámbék or Pilisszentlélek. We are honour bound to do this for the Budapest garrison. I envisage a joint strike of all available forces of the Cavalry Corps⁹¹ and such tanks of the panzer units behind them as may be placed at our disposal.'⁹²

However, the Red Army's 2nd Mechanised Guard Army Corps and 5th Cavalry Corps were assembling in precisely the same area. Moreover, the preparations for a German attack, even if immediately approved by the

supreme command, would have taken at least one or two days, and in any case there were not enough fast-moving units available. For want of anything better, Lieutenant-General Otto Wöhler, the commander of the German Army Group South, ordered farewell telegrams – printed days if not weeks earlier – to be dropped to the garrison from the air,⁹³ and Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was awarded the Oak Leaf medal in addition to his Knight's Cross.

Thus the commands of the German Army Group South and the 6th Army were obliged to watch the tragedy unfolding in front of them without being able to intervene. The initial plans soon evaporated together with the optimistic mood. The war diary of the group, not without errors, narrates the situation as follows:

Monday, 12 February 1945.

No detailed reports available from the garrison which broke out of the western part of Budapest last night. According to aerial reconnaissance they seem to be fighting their way northwest through the Pilis hills in several combat groups. A group of our own forces is being assembled south-east of Esztergom to launch a counter-strike...

Army Group Balck:

According to reconnaissance reports – in the absence of current radio contact with the corps – the main thrust is developing along the Pesthidegkút-Solymár-Pilisvörösvár-Pilisszántó-Pilisszentkereszt-Pilisszentlélek road. The head seems to have reached the Pilisszentkereszt area. Two grenadier regiments and an assault-gun brigade have therefore been ordered to assemble southeast of Esztergom...

Incomplete air reconnaissance since midday suggests that the Budapest garrison, counter to the original plan, is moving northwest, i.e. towards the Pilis Hills. At 17.50 the 1st general-staff officer reported... that some groups had been seen near Pesthidegkút and Solymár... German groups had also been seen at the southern entrance to Szentendre, in the woods west of Szentendre and even at the western entrance to Pilisszentkereszt... A short while ago German groups have apparently also been observed near Pilisvörösvár and Pilisborosjenő...

At 23.25 the Army Group Balck's chief of staff reported... that, since the Pilis Hills were clearly becoming a break-out destination, the army group had relocated its combat group to that area in order to open a gateway at the approach of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps. A forward squad was ready to provide initial assistance and medical care. The army group hoped that the first escapees would be arriving during the second half of the night. The left wing of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade and the right wing of the 96th Infantry Division are reporting battle sounds and flares 5 kilometres east of their front line.

Tuesday, 13 February 1945

Army Group Balck:

IX SS Mountain Army Corps: In the Szomor sector (3rd Cavalry Brigade) 3 German officers and 1 Hungarian officer with 23 NCOs and privates of the garrison

have fought their way through to our own front line. These soldiers had not formed a closed combat group since the beginning of the break-out but met after being scattered from several different groups... The 30 escapees followed a route from Budapest via Budakeszi and then through the forest between Perbál and Tinnye, where several more groups seem to be present. The roads are said to be heavily barricaded and partly impassable owing to ruined buildings, motor vehicles and dead horses... The break-out was due to be carried out in three groups, north, west and south, with Nagykovácsi as the assembly point. The escaping groups are reported to have run into a very strong defensive barrier, suffering many casualties and promptly falling into disarray. The second barrier, made of baggage trains, is reported to have been easier to penetrate.⁹⁴

On the same day German troops recaptured the village of Mány, probably in order to assist the escapees,⁹⁵ although the diary continues without mentioning this action:

Wednesday, 14 February 1945

Army Group Balck:

On both sides of Szomor several small groups of the Budapest garrison have fought their way through to our own lines. According to the escapees the main thrust of the break-out was directed west and northwest. Unified command of the escaping combat groups of the garrison has apparently been lost. We can still only expect small groups or individuals to arrive... Air reconnaissance has sighted parts of German units in the hilly region south of Pilisvörösvár and Pilisszentiván. This is where some groups were also observed yesterday. Likewise according to air reconnaissance, the village of Telki, 9 kilometres south and southwest of Pilisvörösvár, is being attacked from all sides. It is not known whether the attackers are German or Russian, but some German troops are likely to be enclosed in Telki. Another German group is assumed to be 3 kilometres east of Zsámbék. According to the morning report some groups, 100 men in total, have got through near Szomor.

This confirms yesterday's impression that most of the escaping groups have not chosen the longer and more arduous but perhaps more promising route through the Pilis hills, but the shorter one towards the west despite the strong enemy presence...

According to further air reconnaissance, battle noises, artillery fire and blazes have been observed in the western part of Budapest. This suggests that some of our troops are still holding out in that sector. At 21.48 the command of the Army Group Balck reported to the high command that a total of some 600 men had got through so far. The command expected the escapes to continue for about 3 more days...

Thursday, 15 February 1945

Yesterday it was reported that a group of escapees had gathered at Perbál. One of them had asserted that the entire enemy contingent had turned about face

to confront them. The cavalry corps had therefore decided to launch an attack from the sector of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. However, the enemy had been fully prepared for the attack, so that 50 escapees and 100 soldiers of the corps were lost. Therefore [the commander-in-chief] was unwilling to start an attack towards the Pilis Hills in order to rescue the groups of escapees allegedly located near Keszthely. Moreover, he considered an attack across the Danube, in concert with the *Südwind* [South Wind] enterprise,⁹⁶ more important and did not wish to jeopardise it through casualties or delays.

However, in the evening report at 17.40 the Army Group Balck's 1st general-staff officer stated that air reconnaissance had observed no more German groups in the Pilis Hills... No further escapees had arrived today. The commander of the Army Group Balck believed that any actions on the part of the army group would only put the trickle of small groups at risk.

Friday, 16 February 1945

Nocturnal air reconnaissance has produced no new information on the Budapest garrison. The Luftwaffe is continuing its search, but it is unlikely that any significant groups of escapees are left between Budapest and our own front lines. The number of escapees arriving at our lines has significantly decreased since the day before yesterday. Today only 14 arrived, and the total so far is 624.⁹⁷

Wöhler transmitted his closing message to the army supreme command at 11pm on 16 February 1945.⁹⁸ The Budapest garrison was not mentioned again in the daily reports.

10

Soviet views on the break-out

Soviet studies contain surprisingly few details of these events, although Soviet historians have had some access to Soviet archives. The break-out certainly did not come as a surprise: the Germans had always resorted to this method, and the Soviet command had taken the measures described above. In contrast to the situation in early January, it was no longer in Tolbukhin's interest to allow the garrison to leave, because the defence was in any case about to collapse, within days if not hours. Some Soviet recollections give a powerful impression of the fighting.

An officer of the Soviet 297th Rifle Division, who had been stationed at 38b Virányos Road in the main trajectory of the break-out, remembers:

At about 23.00 hours the Hungarians [fighting on the Soviet side] brought in a German soldier, who was subsequently discovered to have escaped from the encirclement. He had been separated from his group and when he saw some

Hungarians warming bath water (some in uniform) he took them to be from his side... We tried to discover how he had got behind our rear, but his replies were incomprehensible and we sent him to the divisional staff.

An hour and a half or two hours later massive rifle and machine-gun fire erupted at various points of the city, but above all north of us, and we could also hear grenades exploding and artillery fire.

During the night, at about 3 o'clock, reconnaissance and signal troops in the corps's sector stopped a group of 7 German soldiers headed by a first lieutenant, who in the dark had reached the vacant plot behind the villa. The lieutenant said that they had received orders to escape from the encirclement at all costs during that night.

We decided to prepare ourselves for all-round defence in the building and established contact with the staff of the mortar detachment stationed near us...

Early next morning a large enemy column, numbering about 1500-2000 and taking up the whole width of the street, appeared. They were escaping at the double, firing into windows and throwing hand grenades. In the neighbouring street (Szarvas Gábor Street) a German light tank was clanking along and had almost found cover when a shot from a bazooka paralysed it. The mortar detachment next to us immediately set up a 120cm mortar produced from somewhere in a hurry. The open plot made accurate firing possible and we showered the dense enemy crowd with shells. We barricaded the entrances and – almost without aiming – fired our rifles from the windows into the frightened mass swirling past us...

The Hitlerists continued their advance towards the city exit despite their huge casualties, but soon ran into our multiple rocket-launchers firing salvos at them from point blank range. It was a terrible sight.⁹⁹

The experience of the Soviet 37th Rifle Corps exemplifies the violence of the encounters:

It was a cruel night. The thunder of guns and the whistle of shells mingled with the frightened yells of the escapees and the death rattle of the wounded, as muzzle flashes lit up groups of people dementedly running to and fro in the deep darkness.

To prevent the break-out every able-bodied Soviet soldier took up arms. Positioned in the ditches alongside the road and behind the trees, commanders of every rank, together with all the men from the staffs and the workshops, were decimating the rows of escapees with their sub-machine guns or rifles.¹⁰⁰

A staff officer of the Soviet 23rd Rifle Corps recalls how the route of the escapees towards the western end of the Buda Hills was blocked:

On the night of 11 to 12 February the Hitlerists made a desperate break-out attempt through the positions of the 37th Rifle Corps. Over the dead bodies of their soldiers and officers they blindly charged west and northwest towards

Zugliget and Nagykovácsi. Finally 16,000 fascists managed to break through the inner encirclement ring and hide in the nearby woods.

On 12 February the corps commander withdrew the 19th Rifle Division from its positions and ordered it to organise the defence along heights number 262 and 544 and the eastern edge of Nagykovácsi, facing southeast to prevent the enemy filtering out of the woods towards the west. At the same time the 11th Cavalry Division was attached to our corps. The task of this division was to comb the woods and destroy the scattered enemy groups...

During the night of 13 to 14 February the telephone connection between the corps and the staff of the 49th Guard Division in Perbál...was unexpectedly cut off. About an hour later the calm and confident voice of Vasili Filippovich Margelov was suddenly heard on the receiver, saying that in the section of the divisional command in Perbál no fascist had succeeded in breaking through to the west.

However, it was later discovered that an enemy group with a sub-machine gun had slipped through the wood to the northeastern part of Perbál. The divisional commander alerted the staff and personally led the fight against the German enemy. The majority of the Hitlerists were destroyed and the rest taken prisoner...

The army corps's battles against the isolated enemy groups, who numbered about 400-600 and tried to escape through wooded territory far from roads and human habitation, lasted until 17 February. They were fought against enemy groups determined to break through towards the west regardless of the cost; leaderless and having lost all military bearing, they prowled only at night like a pack of wolves mad with hunger. By 17 February we had annihilated or captured the largest enemy groups that had tried to break through towards our positions. Our six units annihilated 400-700 Hitlerists and captured 1376, including many officers and two generals.¹⁰¹

The Soviet troops had begun to advance cautiously into the capital soon after the break-out. By the afternoon of 12 February, Széll Kálmán Square, Széna Square and parts of the Castle District were in their hands, although they took until noon on 13 February to advance along Olasz Avenue as far as János Hospital. On 15 February the Soviet command decided that the break-out as a strategic operation had ended, and the daily reports stopped mentioning it.¹⁰² The Hungarian Buda Volunteer Regiment, fighting on the Soviet side, had taken a significant part in the fighting, occupying the Royal Palace, rounding up German prisoners and fighting on Remete-hegy Hill and in the forests.

The failure of the break-out can be regarded as a success of the Soviet command in that only a small proportion of the escapees finally managed to get through the Soviet positions. However, the tactic of evacuating the

front line after holding it for a while may have been a mistake. The outcome of a break-out generally depends on the time factor. If it can be held up for long enough, panic ensues, the ammunition runs out, the command's control ceases, and the whole enterprise disintegrates. This also happened in Buda, but if the Soviets had set up several defence lines within the city they would have needed to expend less effort on pursuing the escapees on the outskirts, taken more prisoners and suffered fewer casualties.

11

The outcome

The break-out of the Buda garrison was one of the most futile enterprises of the Second World War. On 11 February Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had 43,900 soldiers. By 15 February 22,350 were prisoners and some 17,000 had been killed, mainly between Széll Kálmán Square and Húvösvölgy Valley in the first six hours. A maximum of 3000 were hiding in the hills, but by 17 February most of these had also been rounded up. About 700 reached the German lines and a similar number managed to hide in the city. Table 22 details the total losses of the garrison from the closure of the encirclement to the end of the break-out.

After the break-out, the escape routes showed an apocalyptic picture, with mountains of bodies, human remains carved up by Soviet tanks, and paving stones covered in blood and pieces of flesh.¹⁰³ In Széll Kálmán Square, Vérhalom Square and elsewhere bodies were piled up in pyres several metres high.¹⁰⁴ Others were buried in mass graves near the spots where they were found. Most of these graves have not been exhumed to this day, although 28 have been identified in the city and many more in 29 villages, holding a total of about 5000 bodies. At the time of writing traces of the fighting can still be seen, for example, on the walls of the former Ministry of Defence in the Castle District and some buildings in Széll Kálmán Square and Batthyányi Street.

The history of the siege and the break-out can only be appreciated against the background of total-war psychosis. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch deferred to Hitler's order to fight to the last bullet when the Soviets would have welcomed an offer of capitulation, and only authorised the break-out after the failure of the relief attempts, when it could no longer be successful. He regarded the hopeless escape bid as a better alternative than the dreaded capture, although when confronted with the reality he immediately



Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and Lindenau on their way to interrogation by the Red Army.

surrendered to save his own life. The German command covered up for him. Oblivious of Hitler's earlier orders to the contrary, the war reports speak of the 'break-out as ordered', and the tributes and obituaries in German newspapers show the same tendency.¹⁰⁵ However, this does not alter the fact that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and his officers, dominated by fear of the Russians, remained incapable of making the right decision to the very end: instead of jointly capitulating at the last moment, they drove their soldiers like lemmings to destruction.

Notes

- 1 This happened, for example, in late April 1945, when the 12th Army under Colonel-General Wenck broke through the Soviet encirclement of Berlin and was captured by the British and Americans. Even in May 1945 Germans continued to fight rather than surrender to the Soviets.
- 2 Garád, p. 5 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 3 BA-MA RH 10 V/60, in: Maier, p. 518.
- 4 Cf. letter from Wolff (copy in the collection of the author).
- 5 Cf. Garád (private collections), Hübner (BA-MA), and Mückl (BA-MA).
- 6 Nagy, László.
- 7 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 8.

- 8 Interview with Kokovay.
- 9 Interview with Hingyi.
- 10 Csebotarev, 1967/4, p. 128.
- 11 HL TGY, Kokovay; interviews with Galántay and Rác.
- 12 Although Soviet sources contain no indication of any plan in preparation for a German break-out, this can be traced accurately through Boldizsár's and Zolnay's memoirs and local residents' statements.
- 13 Letter to the author from Antalóczy, 9 February 1995.
- 14 Gosztonyi, based on an eye-witness account, claims that a woman living in a shelter next to the radio-communication centre of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps was a Soviet spy; the attractive blonde, who described herself as a Transylvanian refugee, had intimate relations with Germans, but was suddenly speaking Russian when she was taken away in a jeep occupied by NKVD officers after the break-out. These events are confirmed by the accounts of Wácsek and Hingyi, but they do not prove that the Soviets knew anything directly related to the break-out. Tóth (1980) suggests that the captain of the German radio-communication centre, seen after the siege in Soviet uniform, had betrayed the break-out, and that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's radio messages had been intercepted by a Hungarian officer who had defected to the Soviets. The betrayal hypothesis is not confirmed by any contemporary Soviet or Hungarian writers, who merely claim that the break-out did not surprise the Soviets. If the Soviet command had known about any betrayal there would be some archival sources to prove it. Nor would there have been any reason to keep such an event secret after the war.
- 15 Sárközi, 1995, p. 71.
- 16 Hübner, BA-MA MSg 2/238.
- 17 OSZK, Faragó, p. 66.
- 18 Cf. Friedrich (private collections), Schweitzer (BA-MA MSg and private collections) *et al.*
- 19 At 11am Győző Benyovszky, the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division's chief of staff since the defection of Béla Botond, had surreptitiously sent a patrol to Döbrentei Square, with orders to return with the news that the Soviet tanks had arrived there. This was intended to discourage the soldiers near the Gellért Hotel from setting out towards the Castle District.
- 20 Letter from Galántay (in the collection of the author).
- 21 Reports of Helmut Wolff, BA-MA N 643/vl3; Balck unpublished documents, BA-MA N 647/14.
- 22 Friedrich, p. 102 (private collections).
- 23 Bayer, p. 371.
- 24 Noel, p. 3.
- 25 HL TGY, Vajda, 2772, p. 139.
- 26 Letter to the author from Galántay. The same event is reported in Péchy, Blanka, p. 87.
- 27 Interview with Keller.
- 28 Interview with Wácsek.

- 29 A 1a was an officer in a division's operative section.
- 30 Cf. Schweitzer's diary and letters, partly in the collection of the author and partly at BA-MA MSg.
- 31 BA-MA RH, Nachtmann, p. 3.
- 32 The mass grave in Ostrom Street was exhumed in the 1950s.
- 33 Garád, p. 7 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 34 Notes by Dávid (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 35 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer.
- 36 Garád, p. 11 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 37 Billnitzer, p. 8 (in the collection of the author).
- 38 Letters from Wolff (Gosztonyi collection, 1961; Hingyi collection, 1988).
- 39 OSZK, Lichtenberg.
- 40 HL, Trial of Hindy.
- 41 Kovács, Ferenc X., p. 40 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 42 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 50.
- 43 Letter from Borbás, August 1979, in Gosztonyi, 1992, p. 239.
- 44 The exact time is not known. Ferenc X. Kovács claims that the action started at midnight, while one of his officers recalls 6 o'clock. Both versions are probably wrong.
- 45 Interview with Kovács.
- 46 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 53.
- 47 BA-MA MSg, Hübner, p. 11.
- 48 Noll, p. 4.
- 49 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 54.
- 50 Letter to the author from Betzler, 30 November 1996.
- 51 Kovács, Ferenc X. (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 52 Máté, p. 180.
- 53 Gosztonyi erroneously claims that Dörner was killed in a gun battle at the exit. Ferenc X. Kovács met Dörner on 13 February as he was being taken, gravely wounded, to a collecting point in Béla király Road. 'They will shoot us all,' Dörner said lethargically, and was never seen again.
- 54 Noll, p. 4.
- 55 BA-MA MSg, Mückl, p. 31.
- 56 Noll, p. 4.
- 57 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 60.
- 58 Kovács, Ferenc X., p. 6 (manuscript in the collection of the author), and interview.
- 59 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 60.
- 60 Interview with Kovács.
- 61 HL TGY, Paulics, p. 61.
- 62 Garád, pp. 8–9 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 63 HL TGY, Kokovay, pp. 2–3.
- 64 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 15.
- 65 Interview with Hingyi. Apparently a Soviet soldier in German uniform had told them that Nagykovácsi was deserted.

- 66 HL TGY, Bíró, 3251, p. iv.
- 67 Recollection of Corporal Dániel Váli, in letter to the author from Galántay.
- 68 BA-MA RH, Nachtmann, p. 4.
- 69 Garád, p. 12 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 70 BA-MA RH, Nachtmann, p. 4.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 72 HL TGY, Kokovay, p. 4. Eventually Flügel was helped to get away.
- 73 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer, p. 28.
- 74 BA-MA RH, Nachtmann; BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer.
- 75 Hingyi, p. 3 (in the collection of the author).
- 76 Interview with Boosfeld, by courtesy of Peter Zwack Jr.
- 77 Cf. letters from Wolff, 1961 and 1980 (in the Gosztonyi collection). However, Wolff remembered the geographical details incorrectly.
- 78 Interview with Kutscher.
- 79 Schöning's unpublished documents (in the collection of the author).
- 80 HL TGY, Kokovay, pp. 5–6.
- 81 Gosztonyi, without naming his sources, cites 785 men, possibly based on Wolff's reports. This incorrect figure first appeared in 1957 in an article entitled 'Als Budapest zum erstenmal starb' ['When Budapest died for the first time'] in the *Wiking Ruf* journal, from where it was probably adopted by all other writers. Wolff's memory seems far from perfect, particularly if one compares his later letters with his report of 15 February 1945. According to the German Army Group South's documents, 624 men had got through by 16 February (Maier, p. 120). Most were Germans belonging to the SS and the Wehrmacht.
- 82 BA-MA MSg, Schweitzer.
- 83 *Ibid.* Schweitzer's toes were subsequently amputated.
- 84 BA-MA MSg, Hübner, pp. 12–13.
- 85 HL TGY, Konkoly-Thege, pp. 152–3.
- 86 Cf. M.v.K. (private collections); interview with Hingyi; OSZK, Faragó, p. 67.
- 87 BA-MA MSg, Hübner, p. 14.
- 88 HL TGY, Konkoly-Thege, p. 155.
- 89 BA-MA MSg, Hübner, p. 14.
- 90 Bayer, p. 112.
- 91 The cavalry corps in question, led by Lieutenant-General Gustav Harteneck, was stationed between Csákvár and Esztergom and included the 711th and 96th Infantry Divisions, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade and the 6th Panzer Division, as well as the Hungarian 1st Hussar Division, but had no significant armoured units of its own.
- 92 Maier, pp. 113–15.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 519.
- 94 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.
- 95 Interview with Kokovay, who escaped through Máty.
- 96 The objective of the Südwind operation was to destroy the Soviet forces that had broken through north of the Danube.
- 97 BA-MA RH 19V/61; Maier, p. 520.

- 98 Maier, pp. 520–1.
- 99 Komisarov, pp. 139–40.
- 100 Tóth, 1980, p. 52.
- 101 Andriusenko, pp. 141–2.
- 102 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 103 Interviews with Finta, Aurél Salamon, Dobay and Wáczek.
- 104 Wáczek saw between 400 and 500 bodies in Vérhalom Square.
- 105 BA-MA. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's unpublished documents contain many contemporary newspaper cuttings of this kind.

VI

The Siege and the Population

1

The plight of the Hungarian population

'Therefore nobody needs to worry that the Hungarian capital will become the scene of street-fighting.' (*Magyarság*, 9 November 1944)

While the front was drawing closer to Budapest in the autumn of 1944, no political decision was taken about the fate of the population. The Hungarians would not have been able to carry out an evacuation, and the Germans were not interested in helping them. The million inhabitants were therefore initially invited to leave the city voluntarily. Posters to that effect were appearing by 7 November 1944. At the same time the evacuation of schools began but slow progress was made.¹ Szálasi originally intended to leave the capital with his entire government, and changed his mind only when Edmund Veessenmayer, the German envoy, informed him on 8 November that the German Embassy would stay in Budapest even if the Hungarian leaders departed.²

As an 'overture' to the siege, at 2pm on 4 November, a section of Margit Bridge, between Pest and Margit Island, was blown up. Although the guns could not yet be heard in the city, the explosion stunned the inhabitants. Miklós Kovalovszky writes in his diary:

When we arrived in front of the Comedy Theatre we were shaken by a tremendous explosion...I ran back to the Danube Embankment, where a huge crowd had gathered. It was a terrible sight. On the Pest side two arches of the bridge had collapsed. Trams, cars and hundreds of people had fallen into the river. Two shattered carriages of the number 6 tram jutted out of the water and the moans of the injured could be heard. Bodies were hanging from the railings, and in the swirling water there were dead and wounded. Ships, boats and police craft were trying to save whoever they could. About 800 people had been on the bridge at the time of the explosion.³



Colonel-General Hans Friessner surveying the wreck of Margit Bridge, 4 November 1944.

The exact number of victims is still unknown: a contemporary inquiry cites some 600. According to the same inquiry, the blast occurred because the Germans had been installing primed charges on the bridge as an exercise and the fuse had been ignited by a spark from a passing vessel. The dead included 40 German pioneers fitting the charge.⁴

Various directives to evacuate the suburbs of Pest appeared in succession. On 10 November orders were given for the evacuation of the most sensitive areas – Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc and Soroksár – but only a few inhabitants moved to the central districts of the city. Ten days later the order was rescinded, because no accommodation for the evacuees could be found. On 4 December the evacuation of Csepel was decreed, but the effort failed owing to the protests of the population. By the time the encirclement was completed on 27 December some 100,000 people had fled from the capital, but the majority preferred to stay behind. Sándor Magyarossy, the government's Commissioner for Evacuation, notes:

The evacuation ordered on 26 November was mainly obstructed by the sabotage of MÁV as only 35 carriages out of 353 earmarked for the evacuation were delivered...Neither the boilermen nor the engine drivers showed up at the station...The overwhelming majority of the city's population, rather than fleeing, chose the horrors of occupation by the Bolshevik horde.⁵

The Russian colony in Budapest continued to function even during the siege. Its members included a number of historic figures: Count Kutuzov-Tolstoy, General Shulgin, the last adjutant of the Czar, and Count Pushkin,

the pastor of the Pravoslav parish. Kutuzov-Tolstoy, as representative of the Swedish Embassy, remained in charge of a hospital for severely injured Soviet prisoners of war, manned mainly by Polish doctors, who were allowed to work undisturbed during the siege.⁶ A niece of Winston Churchill also stayed in Budapest and was most distressed by the temporary loss of her favourite dog.⁷

Civilians were first drafted to build defences on 7 November. Fifteen thousand people assembled in Kispest, but – as a result of air-raids, artillery fire and lack of organisation – dispersed even before they started work.⁸ No further action of this kind was undertaken in earnest. On 19 November only a few hundred reported for duty, despite the statutory obligation to do so.

The Arrow Cross Lord Mayor of Budapest, Gyula Mohay, was inaugurated on 14 November. On the next day, he ordered all men born between 1912 and 1923 to go to the earthworks. Only some 500 turned up because, as was discovered later, those drafted early in November had been ‘informed after walking several kilometres to the assembly point that the order had been rescinded’.⁹ On 20 November in Csepel only 200 people could be recruited. Many police and gendarmerie officers had either been transferred to the fighting units or decided to sabotage the pointless orders, and without their participation the civilians could not be forced to work. From the beginning of December, Arrow Cross Party activists appeared in all private and public offices and demanded from each employee a day’s voluntary labour.¹⁰ However, the population remained totally passive.

By winter 1944, Budapest was being described as a ‘second Stalingrad’, both in Hungarian military reports and in Soviet propaganda leaflets dropped from the air. It is no coincidence that on 23 December the command of the Hungarian I Army Corps ordered the introduction of a special badge for the defenders along the lines of the Crete, Africa, Crimea and other combat badges of the German army.¹¹ The Germans planned a similar badge for Budapest, of which a prototype was found during the break-out: it showed the imperial eagle enthroned above the burning royal castle, and a sky full of aircraft and parachutes carrying canisters.¹² The Arrow Cross government further intended to create a decoration called Cross of the Heroes of Budapest,¹³ but by February 1945 there was hardly anybody left to whom it could have been awarded. Thanks to bureaucratic delays even those few Hungarian soldiers who had escaped from the city failed to receive it.

In November the food situation began to worsen. Some items were available only at irregular intervals, and fresh meat became a rarity. Because



Notices on the ghetto wall. Left: 'Jewish Quarter. Christians forbidden to enter.' Right: 'On the mayor's orders Jews may enter this locality.'

of administrative deficiencies even existing stocks could not be used effectively. The large pig farm in Tétény was suddenly evacuated on 10 December, and many animals escaped to nearby Kamara-erdő Forest. One shocked eye-witness recalls:

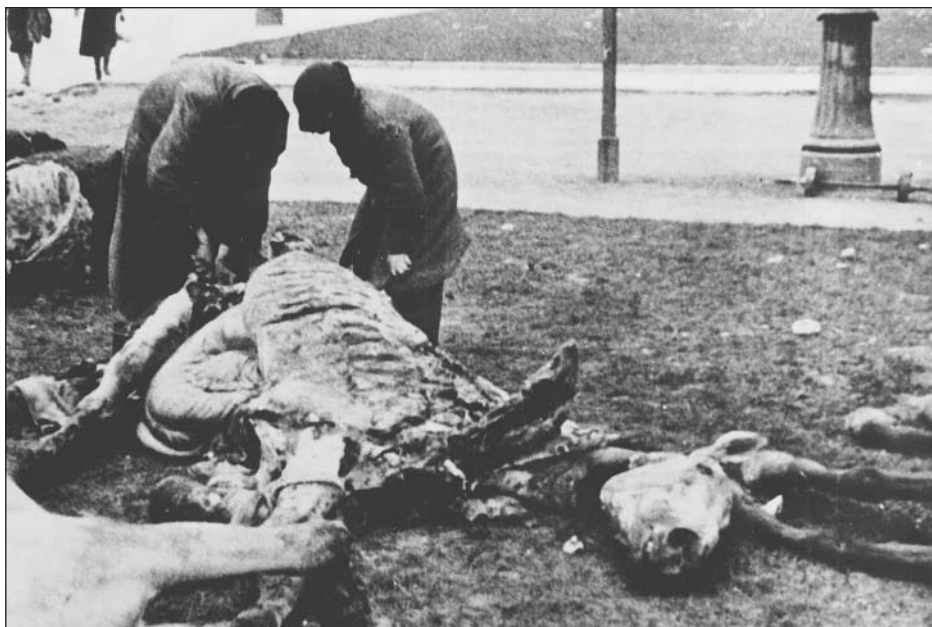
People were sawing at the throats of the poor animals with pen knives and dragging them away half dead. Those pigs still alive were licking the blood of the others in their hunger, while their heads were being bashed in with rocks. A soldier also took part in this terrible hunt. People were asking him to shoot the pigs and he bumped them off for 50-100 pengős. It was like one of those summer restaurants where people choose the poultry scratching about in the courtyard before it ends up on their plate as roast chicken.¹⁴

On 23 December Szálasi asked the German Army Group South for help. This is how he describes the plight of the population:

I have been informed by Minister Kovarcz that it is not possible to guarantee supplies to the capital from the capital's own stocks, which are, in fact, catastrophic. The number of deaths by starvation is already alarmingly high, particularly among children. In addition, hunger riots must also be expected.¹⁵

On 24 December Endre Rajk, the Arrow Cross Secretary of State and brother of the communist leader László Rajk who was later executed by his own comrades, reported that food supplies would last only 12 days. The rations had been reduced several times since the Arrow Cross had come to power: by mid-December people were receiving 150 grammes of bread a day and at Christmas, 120 grammes of meat. The International Red Cross's offer of food aid worth 50 million pengős was rejected by Szálasi because of the condition that part of it be delivered to the ghetto.¹⁶

In that year, many families in Budapest decorated their Christmas trees with anti-radar aluminium strips dropped by British and US aircraft, while others, lacking firs, decorated fig trees. Midnight mass was held in the afternoon. Instead of visiting each other, people telephoned:



Siege food: civilians carving up a dead horse.

The evening's sensation came over the phone. We called the family we had spent 15 October with in Pasarét... They said that some strangers had arrived in front of their villa. We understood from this hint that the strangers could only be Russians... Half an hour later three or four others called us, asking if we had heard. Naturally each time the reports became more and more sensational. Some thought that the Russians were at Széll Kálmán Square, others even believed that Russian advance guards had reached the Buda end of Margit bridge.¹⁷

Similar news arrived from Széher Road in the Kurucles quarter: 'They are here. So far there are no problems. I must stop because they are coming again. In a day or two it'll also be over for you, and then we can talk.'¹⁸ The majority of the population had no idea what the siege of a capital city meant as they watched events naively and passively. Ensign István Szalay remembers the bizarre mood:

On 25 December people brought Christmas pastry with nuts and poppy seeds on dishes and baking trays and distributed it indiscriminately among us soldiers. They brought something from every house and apartment and asked us what we knew about the military situation. I am sure they were not expecting defeat.¹⁹

On the same day, during mass, Bishop István Zadravetz reprimanded his congregation as if they themselves had invited the Soviets in: 'You, you are to blame for this terrible Christmas we are having'.²⁰ The last trams started from Széll Kálmán Square in the morning, but during the day most were

hit by shells, and public transport ceased entirely. Nevertheless, some people still did not want to face facts. Ervin Galántay, the 14-year-old dispatch runner of the Vannay Assault Battalion, tried to arrest a conductor who had told him that the Russians were already at Budagyöngye, for panic-mongering.²¹

After Christmas organised food supplies ceased almost completely. As the population had not been prepared for a prolonged siege, most people began to starve after a few days. Many survived only thanks to the 30,000 or more horses that had been brought to the city by the Hungarian and German cavalry and artillery units.²² The fodder had run out by early January and the starving animals – reduced to nibbling the woodwork in the churches and shops serving as stables²³ – had to be put out of their misery in any case. By the end of January, with only horse meat and carrots or peas available, the soldiers were also starving. The greatest problem, however, was the distribution of what food there was. Some people were positively feasting, while others had hardly anything to eat. Reinhard Noll, an NCO of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division, writes:

Our life was full of contradictions. There was barely enough water for a soup a day, but the best spirits were available in huge quantities. We got only one slice of army bread a day, but were fully supplied with lard, jam and the like... The most expensive Hungarian cigars we had never even heard of surrounded us in our cellars by the case. I became a chain smoker, otherwise I couldn't have survived this last great nervous strain.²⁴

Some bureaucrats were not prepared to open their stores without orders, even as the Soviets were approaching. Officer Cadet Norbert Major's requests, for example, were refused at the food store in Lehel Street, although enemy machine guns were already firing in the neighbouring streets: 'Leave me alone with such defeatist talk. Who do you think you are? In three months the siege will still be on, and what am I going to give the people then,'²⁵ the store commander told Major, who nevertheless succeeded in 'liberating' a few cases of supplies behind the commander's back.

Civilians were forbidden on pain of death to touch the contents of the canisters dropped by parachute, and the penalty was actually carried out by some of the German units. Often the water shortage could only be alleviated by melting snow, but this could also be fatal because soldiers of both sides would open fire indiscriminately on any civilians who ventured out of doors. Many civilians were killed by hand-grenades or phosphorus thrown through cellar windows.

On 26 December Hindy addressed the population over the radio, describing the seriousness of the situation but promising that the capital

would be relieved shortly. On 30 December he sent the following dispatch to the Minister of Defence and the Honvéd Army's chief of staff:

Food supplies to the army and the civilian population in the first week of January will be catastrophic. Today I have been informed that supplies to the ghetto, which is said to contain 40,000-60,000 Jews, have ceased completely and as a consequence the Jews are restless. If these Jews were driven by hunger to break out of the ghetto the consequences could be very unpleasant. For the time being I have ordered some cornflour to be delivered to the ghetto... The population of the capital, according to information received, regards the situation as desperate... In the city the wildest rumours are circulating. Several days ago I and my staff officers, as well as the German general staff, were said to have left Budapest by air... The masses, while not expecting the Russians to come as liberators, have been reduced by the barrage to such a state that they are at least resigned to Soviet occupation. The local patriotism of the citizens of Budapest is so great that they are not crying about their own fate but are desperate about the destruction of the city...

Neither the officers nor the privates expect to be relieved any longer... The majority of the officers are carrying out their tasks dutifully. Some would like to save their own skin unnoticed, but the serious and disciplined officers have been talking about the possibility of a break-out and have submitted serious and thoughtful proposals to me.

Naturally I am unable to express an opinion on these proposals, particularly as I am not in charge of the defence of Budapest and can only suggest possibilities to the commander of the German IX SS Army Corps who, in response to my request, has informed me today that there are no plans for a break-out.²⁶

The Hungarian command was rarely kept informed about events by the Germans. On 31 December Hindy did not even know whether the purpose of the promised German counter-offensive was to free the capital or to rescue the garrison. In an attempt to clarify matters he cabled the Minister of Defence: 'The strength of the people of Budapest is rapidly declining. To inspire them psychologically with the will to persevere, I consider it necessary to issue a proclamation. For this proclamation I request an appropriate situation report based on concrete facts.'²⁷

During the relief attempts in January, the Hungarian command set up the Henkei Group as a crisis-management unit which was due to deliver 'food supplies in the event of the liberation of Budapest'.²⁸ The supplies would have been transported by train to Bicske and Dorog and then by road to the capital. Within six hours of the relief it would have been possible to dispatch three consignments, weighing in total about 1000 tonnes, which would easily have satisfied the needs of the population, and

the lorries would also have been used to evacuate civilians. On 14 February, the day after the capture of Buda, the group was dissolved.

Hindy received visits from representatives of various embassies and the International Red Cross, and from Angelo Rotta, the Papal Nuncio. Rotta had sent the Arrow Cross Foreign Minister, Gábor Kemény, sharp notes condemning the deportation of Jews on 13 November and 23 December. On 27 December, jointly with the Swedish ambassador, he tried to persuade Hindy to stop the fighting, but Hindy sent him away, saying that he did not have the power to do so.

The International Red Cross, in a cable of 6 January, requested the German and Soviet commands to permit the evacuation of the civilian population, and suggested a ceasefire of limited duration for that purpose. Hitler agreed in principle, but asked the military for their opinion.²⁹ The German command, afraid of unauthorised actions by the Hungarians, advised the Hungarian Minister of War, Károly Beregfy, that there could be no negotiations until orders were given from above.³⁰ The Soviets in turn may have balked at the prospect of the garrison being able to divide its scarce supplies among smaller numbers after the evacuation of the civilians. In any case the Red Cross's proposal came to nothing.

On 3 February Rotta and his secretary, Archbishop Gennaro Verolino, called on Pfeffer-Wildenbruch. Verolino recalls:

Wherever we went, wounded were lying in every room and in every corridor, and operations were in progress on ordinary tables. We heard moaning and whimpering everywhere. It was hell. Eventually we reached the German general somewhere in the depths of his bunker, and he said: 'If anybody wants to defect to the Russians, he can. The Danube is frozen, one can walk across the ice.'³¹

When the shocked Rotta asked him why he would not agree to a ceasefire, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch said that he was not authorised to do so, but promised to apply to his superiors, although he must have known that this would not produce any results.

Relations between the Hungarian and German commands became more and more strained. Initially Hindy tolerated the insults of the Germans, noting only the most blatant cases in his reports: for example, on 30 December:

A German pioneer captain blithely blew up a barricade in Ostrom Street, regardless of the fact that he was also blowing a water pipe 800mm in diameter sky high. Consequently there has been no water in the Castle for three days... I have reported this to the commander of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps... But, given my experiences so far, I do not expect my protest to bear any fruit... As a rule the Germans not only behave aggressively, but they also flatly refuse to

give the names of their units, threaten the employees of industrial installations with their weapons, and any vehicles and fuel they commandeer by armed force are of course lost for ever...

I myself get on well with the commander of the German army corps and his chief of staff. We have never had any differences of opinion that could have interfered with our co-operation. As it is he who has been given the task of defending Budapest, I consider it natural that I should comply with all his wishes and lend him a helping hand with everything... Nevertheless I must also report that by now the commanders of all the Hungarian units have appeared in front of me and asked me to take over the tactical command.³²

In reality, the two commands were hardly on speaking terms. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch never consulted the Hungarians, and only informed them of his plans and orders after the event. Hindy's growing bitterness shows in his reports about the plight of the capital in the daily reports he submitted in mid-January:

The lack of fighter aircraft protection was decisive in the destruction of Budapest.³³

Among the civilian inhabitants fear of death is relegating all other questions to the background; their fate and plight are desperate. In many places the city centre is now only a pile of burning ruins.³⁴

1. In the southern parts of the Pest bridgehead only the strongpoints are still holding on. With enemy pressure increasing further, Buda can soon expect a similar fate. 2. The constant air raids and bombardment by mortars and artillery are causing immeasurable losses to the massed troops and matériel. 3. The streets are blocked by huge heaps of rubble. There is no hope of clearing them. 4. The water supply is exhausted. At the few wells there are huge queues. 5. Infestation by lice is spreading rapidly. 6. Many German soldiers have acquired civilian clothes. 7. Lieutenant-General Kalándy has been badly wounded. 8. The combat value of the troops is deteriorating by the hour, most noticeably among the German troops.³⁵

Hindy finally lost his patience on 30 January, when the Germans reported that the majority of the Hungarian army and gendarmerie had defected to the Soviets. Beregfy had sent the text to Hindy, demanding an investigation. Hindy's reply includes the following:

Civilians, bombed out of their homes and shelters, stripped of their possessions, and tormented by hunger, lack of water and both friendly and enemy fire, are increasingly expressing their hatred of the Germans and the Arrow Cross through an unstoppable whispering campaign, because they regard their own suffering and the destruction of the capital as pointless. They hate the appearance of our own soldiers in the shelters, where Russians have distributed cigarettes and brought water to civilians on some occasions. Therefore the

Russians are awaited as liberators by many. The Russians respond to every military movement by shelling, but they do not fire on civilians. The concerted Russian propaganda is also confirmed by the behaviour of the Germans towards the Hungarian civilians and soldiers.

More than once Hungarian civilians and soldiers have been arrested by the SS for no apparent reason and kept in the most terrible conditions until they were freed by the Hungarian I Army Corps... Officers have been insulted and beaten without cause. During attacks the Germans lag behind, goading the Hungarian soldiers ahead with their arms, while German units rob the Hungarians' barracks. Unarmed workers have been forced to take part in attacks simply in order to create a commotion, and have suffered bloody losses in consequence.³⁶

After citing further examples of German brutality and emphasising the daring of various Hungarian units, he declares that the defending army is at the end of its tether and even the best officers' nerves can no longer bear the siege. His reports in early February are equally explicit:

The Germans have turned the Capuchin Church in Corvin Square into stables. Relatives of soldiers and other civilians, tormented by hunger, setting aside all modesty and shame, are calling at the command posts and the kitchens of the Hungarian units to beg.³⁷

The Germans are taking the civilians drafted for labour to the front line. Enemy fire is causing casualties and obstructing their work. In most cases they return home under mortar and infantry fire without having done any work. Looting of private homes is on the increase.

According to the Germans only minimal food supplies are arriving by air. They do not pass any of these on, but where possible even seize the scarce supplies issued for the civilians or made available, under inadequate surveillance, by the Hungarian army's collecting agencies... It is impossible to resist the more and more frequent requisitions and robberies by numerous armed Germans behind the front line.³⁸

The mood of the civilians is desperate. Their relations with the Hungarian soldiers are good, but they dislike the Germans because of their aggressive behaviour. The civilians no longer see the Germans as a liberating army. They say that was a fairy tale.³⁹

Hindy's reports were somewhat one-sided – the morale of the Hungarian units was worse than that of the Germans, and military co-operation as a rule presented no problems at the lower level. What the reports reveal is that the Hungarian general regarded the continuing defence of Budapest as senseless and even culpable, although he still failed to break ranks with the Germans.

Work at the metropolitan public utilities ceased comparatively late, because most of the plants (water, gas and electricity) fell into Soviet hands

gradually. Gas supplies broke down on 28 December, water supplies on 3 January. Telephone connections continued to function until the end of December, and in some places – particularly near the Buda telephone exchanges – even until the beginning of the break-out in February. Electricity supplies finally failed on 30 December after the loss of the Kelenföld and Révész Street sites. During the artillery bombardments gas pipes were frequently damaged: the main under Vérmező Meadow, for example, caught fire and the flames shooting out of the ground presented a ghostly spectacle for days.

Despite the breakdown of telephone links the population continued to receive information about events in the city. News about the death of the Soviet parley delegates or the capture of the notorious Arrow Cross leader Father Alfréd Kun, for example, reached the deepest cellars in Buda.⁴⁰ When a red German parachute got caught on the dome of the Parliament Building, rumours spread like wildfire. Most took it for a Soviet flag, while some embroidered the narrative further, claiming that the Hungarian standard with the Virgin Mary (patron saint of Hungary) was hanging next to the Soviet.⁴¹

For weeks, the cellars of the large apartment blocks sheltered hundreds of thousands, although many people 'on the run' did not go there even during the bombardments, because they had reason to fear that some of the others would denounce them.

The worst thing about the shelters was that they had only been designed for short air raids and not for large crowds staying there day and night for weeks on end. Therefore most only held a few benches, some fire-fighting equipment and a first-aid cabinet. Sometimes a wireless was later added to this primitive equipment... People moved into the shelters in stages. The first were usually families with small children, who would have had difficulty running down to the cellar from the third or fourth floor when the air raids began, and then back up again. The lifts in most apartment blocks had not been working since December... The better shelters were tiled or plastered. Almost everywhere the breath of so many people condensed on the walls, and the ceilings were constantly dripping.⁴²

The greatest conflicts among the occupants erupted over cooking, water carrying and washing. Only a few buildings had a well of their own, so that drinking water had to be brought mostly from far away and in life-threatening conditions. By the end of December, the Káposztásmegyer waterworks had fallen into Soviet hands, and water for Pest could be obtained only from the wells near the Parliament Building and on Margit Island. First Lieutenant Vladimir Oldner claims that the Soviet troops did

not prevent supplies reaching the unoccupied parts of the city even after the capture of the waterworks,⁴³ but this is contradicted by many other recollections.

The population of Buda obtained water from the medicinal springs near Gellért-hegy Hill and from wells drilled under residential buildings, which were more numerous than today and which increased substantially in number during the siege. In some places, however, for example in the Castle District, the shortage became catastrophic. Normally, between 15 and 20 families had to share a cooker for cooking and heating water. Those with foresight organised communal cooking, which reduced not only the preparation time but was also more economical and had the further advantage that meals did not create a sense of inequality. Where communal cooking was absent there were more conflicts. People eating in secret to avoid provoking others sometimes gave themselves away by the sound of chewing in the night.

Following the breakdown of water supplies, the lavatories also stopped working. Where people tried to use them regardless, the dried-out drains soon discharged a suffocating stench. 'The toilets are full, now it's the turn of the baths, but some guys wrap it in paper and burn it in the stove' is how Blanka Péchy lists the remaining alternatives in her diary.⁴⁴ Because of the excrement lying around everywhere, by January there was a risk of epidemics in the shelters.

The ever-growing quantities of refuse caused similar problems. After the collapse of the public disposal system the inhabitants began to carry their accumulated household waste to the streets and parks. It was not until summer 1945 that the mountains of rubbish began to be cleared away.

On 26 December the Arrow Cross Mayor of Budapest had broadcast instructions for the party leaders in the various districts and their families to report to the Danube side of Gellért-hegy Hill on the following morning, in order to attempt a break-out in the city's buses, for which Hindy had promised the assistance of the Hungarian army. However, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had forbidden the action.⁴⁵

In fact, the majority of Arrow Cross members had already tried to leave earlier. Wilhelm Höttl, the representative in Hungary of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, and Norbert Orendy, commander of the Arrow Cross secret police, had departed on 24 December together with the majority of the German security service and the Gestapo. Adolf Eichmann, head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt's section in charge of Jewish affairs, had flown out on 23 December after visiting the office of the Jewish Council in the ghetto for unknown reasons. By the time the encirclement was completed

on 27 December, only a few district leaders had been left behind. Lieutenant-Colonel Béla Almay, one of the last to leave Budapest by air, recalls: 'I had orders to report to the Minister for Total Mobilisation (Emil Kovarcz) in the Castle at 8 o'clock every morning... Amazingly, we found nobody there... The strongboxes open... A complete mess... Some drunk Arrow Cross men said: "They all scrambled during the night."'⁴⁶

The Arrow Cross Party had split into several armed factions. Two of these, the Armed National Service and the Party Service, had actually been fighting each other, and on 24 December members of the latter had kidnapped the commander-in-chief of the former.⁴⁷ After the flight of the Arrow Cross potentates the power of the uncontrolled party militia, restrained neither by the police nor by the military, had become almost absolute.

The post of Chief District Commander had been temporarily taken by Kurt Rechmann, before Szálasi tried to end the chaos by appointing Imre Nidosi (who proceeded to call himself Budapest Arrow Cross Party Police Chief in his edicts) head of the capital's party organisation, and the chemistry student Erich Csiky military commander of Budapest, although neither was given any practical function. On 9 January Ernő Vajna (brother of Interior Minister Gábor Vajna), who had arrived in Budapest on 1 January as Szálasi's personal representative, made both of them lieutenant-colonels, while styling himself Party Representative for the Defence of Budapest. The party saw fit to announce these appointments by posters in the deserted streets.

The organs responsible for internal security, apart from those Gestapo sections left in the city, were the Armed National Service, the Party Service and a detachment of the Arrow Cross secret police. Almost 25 per cent of the Party Service were convicted criminals. Vilmos Kröszl, party chief of the XIV District, for example, had stolen the car of a Wehrmacht unit.⁴⁸ The Arrow Cross secret police not only spied on, arrested and tortured real and supposed enemies of the system, but also investigated various right-wing individuals, even opening a file on SS Obergruppenführer Winkelmann, which was only closed after his vigorous protests.⁴⁹

Relations between the Arrow Cross Party and the Germans were neutral, but those between the Arrow Cross and the Hungarian military were extremely tense. Honvéd Army officers despised the Arrow Cross 'proles', who missed no opportunity to demonstrate that they were now in charge. The Arrow Cross mob loathed both the semi-feudal Hungarian social system and the officer class. It was no coincidence that some of the first measures of the Arrow Cross regime were to abolish the exalted status of officers and to enable NCOs to be promoted.

Some gendarmes, previously regarded as reliable, had also joined the party. Sergeant Fehér of the Galántai Gendarmerie Battalion, for example, let slip that the Arrow Cross was using him to do the 'rough work' during interrogations, and defended his actions by saying that he had been promised an officer's rank as a reward. Another sergeant, blameless before he joined the Arrow Cross, dragged a Jew whose boots had taken his fancy out of a group of prospective deportees and chained him to his bed until he found time to kill him on the following morning.⁵⁰ The same sergeant participated daily in the ill-treatment of Jewish prisoners.

The excesses of Arrow Cross gangs did not even spare the Hungarian military. Lieutenant-Colonel Kern, for example, was killed at his combat post in the Ludovika Academy because he had refused to hand his car over to them. 'Burn him, boy,' one of the Arrow Cross men said to his adjutant, who took his sub-machine gun from his shoulder and emptied the magazine into the lieutenant-colonel, before the lieutenant-colonel's adjutant shot the 'boy' dead and wounded his companion with his own sub-machine gun.⁵¹

The Arrow Cross terror also threatened diplomats and others who issued protective documents. On 17 November 1944, for example, Arrow Cross militiamen grievously injured József Cavallier, the president of the Hungarian Holy Cross Association, by pushing his head through a window pane as a punishment for distributing passes from 'Stalin's friend, the Pope' to persecution victims.⁵² On 29 December party activist Father Kun robbed the Swiss chargé d'affaires Harald Feller, after having him stripped to establish that he was not circumcised. Feller lodged a complaint with Csiky, who had earlier been employed by a Swiss firm, and Hindy returned his 100 Napoleon gold coins with apologies.

All the licensed newspapers of the Arrow Cross and other right-wing groups continued to appear until Christmas Day. In the early part of January the dailies *Új Magyarág* and *Összetartás* were printed. Later on, the daily *Budai Összetartás* published from 22 January to 11 February, and *Budapester Kesselnachrichten*,⁵³ published since the beginning of the encirclement, served as the official 'fortress press'. The few incomplete copies of these papers still in existence are regarded as rarities of press history. The following extracts are from *Budai Összetartás*, published by the Arrow Cross in the XI District:

[22 January:] Apartment-block commanders must collect rents and pay outstanding property taxes to the district tax office immediately, as war relief can be disbursed only if the corresponding funds are at the tax office's disposal.

[24 January:] The owners of shops selling horse meat are informed that slaughter may be carried out only in the Bicskei Street garage, under supervision of the

medical officer. Slaughter time is 8am. A well-digging team commanded by technical director Ferenc Fancsaly has been formed and will begin digging wells in successive groups of buildings in the district.

[27 January:] A maternity clinic has been opened... Sign writers are to report to the party.

[5 February:] Life was beautiful, but is still beautiful with all its sufferings, sacrifices and tribulations. If you lose heart, brother, think of the words of Ferenc Szálasi: 'Without Good Friday there is no resurrection.' This is Budapest's Good Friday... Lajos Dövényi Nagy.⁵⁴

[7 February:] Pumping the water of the Gellért Baths up into the water-supply network and repairs to the network have enabled water supplies to resume on both sides of Horthy Miklós Road...

In Budapest under siege a new type of woman is being born: her face is no longer covered in lipstick and powder, but in soot and lime dust. It is the soot of burning houses and the lime dust of collapsing walls, but it becomes her better than any cosmetics, for it bears witness to her heroic soul.

[9 February:] Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Szöllősy published a message to the people of the capital in the Budai Összetartás newspaper. Subsequently the paper repeatedly and emphatically reminded block administrators to remit rents immediately to the City Council. State employees could collect their salary at the same location.

Today it is almost unimaginable that the activities mentioned in the paper could be kept up under the daily barrage and air-raids. It seems grotesque that people were required to pay property tax when 80 per cent of the buildings had suffered damage of some sort.

Béla Almay, as mentioned above, was one of the last to be flown out of Budapest. This is what he saw:

The streets are deserted, the shops closed, the people in the unheated cellars. Gas is not available and electricity only in a few places in Pest. Demolitions by non-experts often make the water pipes unusable for days. Since 1 January the population has been receiving 50 grammes of bread a day. As from 31 December all the horses are being slaughtered. Food supplies cannot last longer than 10-14 days, even if systematically collected. The hospitals are unheated. There is not even enough fuel for the operating theatres. The deprivations of the population are beyond imagination.⁵⁵

Conditions were worst in the sick bays. Thousands of civilian and military wounded were lying in the cellars of the Parliament Building, the Museum of Military History, the State Printing Press and the Castle District. Klára Ney, a local resident whose brother had been hit by a shell-splinter while fetching water, reports:

At the Szentháromság Street entrance, on the top step, we are overpowered by the rising heat and stench. No wonder, for on the stairs leading two floors down into the cellar dead bodies are lying on stretchers. Since they bricked up the Lovas Road entrance... the temperature has been 30 degrees Celsius... The patients are lying on the floor on both sides, with only a narrow passage between them. It takes my breath away. I can't see Gyurka anywhere, although we are almost beside his bed. We didn't recognise him! Like all the patients here, he is lying in the infernal heat stark naked. In nine days he hasn't been washed once. If he finally gets his cup of soup or vegetable it's after several hours' delay... Nobody cares. Some people practically starve to death...

The inner section of the public shelter... was appropriated by the Germans as a 'military hospital' during the second week of the siege. The sick bay in the rock, a scene of terrible suffering, is a paradise of civilisation and hygiene compared with this 'military hospital'. There is some electric light here, but nothing else. Gloomy passages, branching out in all directions. People crammed together in indescribable filth and misery. Under the bare rock faces on the black soil human wrecks, with only one arm or one leg, disfigured by wounds, are lying literally one on top of the other on makeshift pallets contrived from planks, doors and stretchers... In addition, everything is positively crawling with millions of lice.⁵⁶

After Christmas a number of motherless babies were left in the maternity ward of a hospital, where it was becoming impossible to feed them for lack of mother's milk and other nutrients. In despair the nurses clutched the babies to their breasts, so that they might at least enjoy the comfort of a warm human body before fading away. After a while the nurses found themselves producing milk, and the babies were saved from starving to death.⁵⁷

The civilians were obliged to watch the killing and the destruction of their city for weeks without being able to intervene. On 2 January a Soviet incendiary bomb set the roof of the Parliament Building alight, with flames tinted an unearthly shade of blue and green by the melting lead covering. The explosions of German and Hungarian ammunition stores caused a great deal of damage: a six-storey building in Klotild Street blew up on 13 January, a building used by Germans in Rothermere Street (today Balaton Street) on 15 January, and the Regent Building on the corner of Margit Boulevard and Bimbó Road on 22 January.⁵⁸ These disasters alone claimed about 1200 lives. In an area near the front line László Deseő, aged 15, recorded the progress of the tragedy, hour by hour, in his diary:

7 February... The front has arrived. They are installing machine guns on both balconies of the upper floor. In my room they wanted to set up an automatic

cannon. I was talking with one of the Germans in the hall when a mine exploded in front of the door and the German collapsed. A splinter had neatly shaved his fingers off down to the roots. The poor devil is screaming.

They are carrying firewood from the garden to build barricades in the windows. They are also putting furniture into the windows. While they build a barricade in one room I pull it down in the other...

8 February...The wounded are innumerable. In the house opposite there are Russian snipers, if anyone appears at the window he is shot at...Wagner [a press-ganged ethnic German private] is badly wounded. Only two hours ago he admitted, laughing, that he had been responsible for the destruction of the whole house, because he could just as well have led the horses into the empty cellar next door. There is heavy firing throughout the evening.

9 February...Half past eight in the morning. I am standing near the stairs to the cellar. A little while ago 17 Germans arrived to defend the house, among them an SS man of English origin. Five of them are standing next to me. We are not talking. They are very nervous. They smoke one cigarette after the other. Their hands are shaking. They load their sub-machine guns. One is a pilot. His plane was shot down and now he is one of the defenders. A large signal pistol is dangling at his side...So far two have asked for permission to put on civilian clothes. On the upper floor it's OK, but down here in the shelter we don't allow them to change...

10 February...At 10.05 they are bandaging a German wounded by a grenade. He has thigh and hand wounds. I've had a look at them. The blood doesn't bother me any more. A splinter has torn off his fingernail down to the bone. You can see the bone...

At half past five they sit down in the big cellar. They won't negotiate. The cellar must now be constantly guarded.

At six they demand a kilo of potatoes and they get it. It's impossible to refuse them. One of the German wounded told me that the wounded are dying like abandoned dogs, nobody takes care of them. A man called János Schreiber who was wounded some time ago can't walk yet and says that he has to hide from the Germans because with his leg he wouldn't be able to escape from the Russians and so the Germans would probably shoot him. The man wounded last night...didn't get any supper because his mates gave him nothing and said they too were only getting food once a day. They gave the poor devil a few spoonfuls of bean soup, but only because my father asked them several times. He is very afraid that his mates will shoot him when the Russians get close. The situation of the wounded is indescribably bad. In the apartment there are already six dead horses. Apparently six are still alive.

10 February...A quarter to ten. One of the soldiers looked out of the lounge window (curiosity killed the cat), bang, shot in the head. When I was trying to crawl through the lounge underneath that window (I didn't fancy showing myself) I accidentally put my hand in the bloody brain matter that had spilled

on the floor. At lunch I remembered I hadn't washed my hands, but went on eating calmly. Washing hands is a luxury... They are shooting from the shelter stairs. This is how I imagined war to be. But now I'm pretty fed up with it.

The mortar fire is intense. In the caretaker's flat there are already four dead bodies. In the shelter you sometimes can't see anything because of the lime dust. The lamp swings for a long time. The light is refracted by the specks on the plaster. Deathly silence. Then again the rattle of machine guns, mines exploding. Today we didn't even light a fire because the chimney is so shot up that we wouldn't be able to stand the smoke.

Krisztina Church is in Soviet hands, the house at number 50 also. I looked out on the street through the one remaining window. One can already see the Russian dead with the naked eye.

11 February. The Russians have reached the Preisingers' house, the third down the street. At 5 the Germans leave because they have heard that they are encircled and the Russians are attacking from Naphegy Hill... Half past 8. The Germans come back. At 9 they have gone again. The shelter is empty. I sneak up to have a look. In the apartment there are still Germans. Dead horses everywhere. The smell of blood with a whiff of cadaver smell, nicely mixed with smoke. It's cold. In the rooms the muck is knee high... The Germans look rather frozen. They have become tame. They even inform me in a friendly manner that they will shoot me if I don't go back to the cellar, as civilians have no business to be in the front line. I assure them that it won't stay the front line long, and they calm down. Apparently the station has been set on fire.

11 February. The Germans finally leave the house.

12 February. At a quarter to three in the morning the first two Russians arrive. They look smart. They have machine guns. They are jolly... I go up into the apartment. One could howl, walking through the rooms. There are eight dead horses in the apartment. The walls are red with blood as high as a man, everything is full of muck and debris. A room-sized section of the loft cover has fallen down. All doors, cupboards, furniture and windows are broken. Nothing is undamaged. The plaster is almost all gone. In front of the house there are abandoned German supply vehicles... From the bedroom window to the window in Katica's room the wall is missing. One steps over dead horses. The horses are soft and springy. If you jump up and down on them, small bubbles, hissing and bloody, rise near the bullet wounds.

13 February. When I was in the street a Russian handed me a wicker bottle and tried to make me go with him. Then the caretaker of the house next door came along, I gave the bottle to him and so the Russian led him away. I'd be interested to know where he took him.

Today the girls went to see Uncle Zoltán. Their house had been hit by eight bombs. They live in the Térffy villa. The Russians have robbed them massively. During the robbery they had been locked in a closet. They took 35,000 pengő, watches, food, clothes, simply everything.

14 February. In the morning four Russians came twice and robbed us. They broke open whatever was locked and took away an incredible amount of stuff. The horses are worrying us a lot. The cadavers are beginning to swell up because of the warmth.

15 February. I have heard from several sources that free looting is at an end. If you call an officer he will tell the looting Russki to get lost.

I have seen a Jew in Russian uniform. He looked really good in the Russian clothes.

In many places they are raping women. Women are being hidden everywhere.⁵⁹

On Rókus-hegy Hill almost all the villas had been destroyed. Böszőrményi Road, Déli Station, Széll Kálmán Square and Margit Boulevard had been reduced to rubble. The villa on the site of today's Körszálló Hotel, where the Gestapo hoarded silver, gold, china, tapestry and carpets stolen from Jews, had been blown up and all the valuable objects ruined. The streets of the Castle District could hardly be found, and people were often walking on the roofs of the razed buildings. The author Sándor Márai describes the apocalyptic picture:

What I see in Óbuda is at first sight horrifying, but after every hundred metres becomes more and more grotesque and improbable. The mind boggles. It is as if the wanderer were passing not through city districts but excavations. Some streets must be guessed at: this was the corner house with the Flórián Café, this is the street where I once lived – no trace of the building – this pile of rubble at the corner of Statisztika Street and Margit Boulevard was a five-storey block with many flats and a café a few days ago... Here is a wall of a building where friends used to live, there the remnants of a street, in Széll Kálmán Square the wrecks of trams, and then the devastation of Vérmező Meadow, the Krisztinaváros quarter, Naphegy Hill and the Castle.⁶⁰

The zoo also suffered heavy damage. Of the 2500 animals, only 14 survived. In the final week of the siege, when the hail of bullets had killed three attendants, all attempts at feeding ceased. Many animals were slaughtered by local residents for their meat. The glass walls of the palm garden were shattered by the shock waves of explosions, and in the pool behind it the crocodiles died when the heating system received a direct hit, although the hippos lying in the warm water of an intact artesian well were saved by their fat reserves. Several large carnivores escaped from their broken cages and devoured each other or were shot by soldiers in nearby gardens. A few birds of prey flew away and kept alive by scavenging carrion. One lion hid for weeks in the tunnels of the underground railway, eating stray horses, until a task-force set up by the Soviet city commander, Lieutenant-General Ivan Terentevich Zamertsev, caught him.⁶¹ Two Shetland



Bombed-out residents escaping down the Great Boulevard, c. 18 January 1945.

ponies disappeared in January but returned to their stable in March, after spending two months unscathed in the starving city. According to one source they had been abducted by a cart driver who brought them back after the siege because he was afraid of punishment.

All the sculptures in the capital's squares were disfigured by shrapnel and bullets, and many were completely destroyed. Some were demolished by Communist Party activists after the fall of the city. Others, including the bronze lions in front of the Parliament Building, were taken away by Soviet plunderers. The metal of an equestrian statue of the 1848 revolutionary Artur Görgey was used to cast a statue of Stalin; half a century later it was recast and placed on the plinth of a former statue of Lenin in Felvonulás Square.

In the last tragicomic episode of the siege, on 1 March 1945, parliament adopted Szálasi's recommendation to confer the title City of Heroic Resistance on Budapest by analogy with the Soviet title of Heroic City bestowed on Leningrad, Stalingrad and Moscow. After the fall of Budapest, Károly Beregfy, as commander-in-chief of the Honvéd Army, prepared a radio speech in tribute to the defenders, which was recorded by the security and propaganda section of the supreme command. A group of soldiers, on their way to deliver the recording to the radio station, stopped at a bar, where one of them, no doubt after a few drinks, sat on the disc and shattered it.

The soldiers were probably saved from severe punishment by a first lieutenant of the propaganda section who was famous for his imitations of other people's voices and who happened to be there. He re-recorded the speech, and even Beregfy was unable to tell the difference.⁶²

2

The persecution of the Jews

'I would not wish any of these gentlemen to live in one of those houses.' (Gábor Vajna's report to the Hungarian parliament on the establishment of the International Ghetto.)⁶³

During the siege of Budapest, crimes sanctioned or tolerated by the state, and unparalleled anywhere else in Europe under Nazi rule, were committed against Hungarian Jews.

After the failure of Horthy's ceasefire attempt of 15 October 1944 the Arrow Cross regime immediately embarked on the 'final solution of the Jewish question'. By this time the only Hungarian Jews not deported to German concentration camps were those in the capital and in the forced-labour service. The deportation had been organised by Adolf Eichmann – who had come to Hungary in the wake of the German invasion of 19 March for that purpose – with the assistance of the Jewish Council that had been set up on German orders one day later.

On 18 October Eichmann reappeared in Budapest. The SD⁶⁴ and the Gestapo⁶⁵ took up quarters in the Royal Hotel in the Great Boulevard and the Mirabella, Majestic and Lomnic boarding houses on Svábhegy Hill near the terminus of the Cogwheel Railway. Gestapo official Hans Geschke, who had already proved his 'expertise' by murdering the population of Lidice, was appointed head of the SD in Hungary, and his colleague Alfred Trenker was appointed head of the SD in Budapest.

For Szálasi and his gang, making Hungary 'Jew-free' seemed to be more important than anything – perhaps even than winning the war. There can be no other explanation for their totally irrational behaviour, the sole purpose of which was to humiliate, eliminate and annihilate the Jews. This must have struck even some of the Arrow Cross leaders who, while failing to examine the ideological justifications of the inhuman measures taken, questioned their usefulness in the existing circumstances. Gábor Kemény, the Arrow Cross Foreign Minister, for example, asked whether 'we are rich enough to lose four million working hours a day'.⁶⁶ However, his fellow-ministers shouted him down, and later the Hungarian government

actually complained to the German authorities for allowing Jewish forced labourers digging entrenchments along the German border to work on Hungarian soil, demanding their immediate removal.

The German leadership also insisted on deportation and constantly pressed the Hungarians to take action. On 21 November, for example, Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop sent a first-class telegram to Edmund Veessenmayer, the Reich's representative in Hungary, urging him to explain to Szálasi that the speedy elimination of the Jews was essential for the defence of the capital.⁶⁷ In reality Jews – with the exception of the Warsaw ghetto – hardly ever offered any organised resistance even on the verge of annihilation.

On 17 October, as a prelude to the deportation, the residents of buildings marked with stars in the VIII District received orders to assemble in the courtyards next morning. On 18 October they were marched, hands above their heads, along Rákóczy Road to the Tattersaal Racecourse north of Kerepesi Cemetery, and on 19 October to the Danube Embankment. When they were lined up facing the river a German officer stopped the imminent execution and they were sent home. In some buildings the assembly order had been delivered in surprise raids by police and Arrow Cross militia, who beat up the residents and even killed some who would not go at once. An old man at 6 Teleki Square who was unable to walk was dragged down the stairs from the fifth floor by his feet with a long trail of blood pouring from his broken skull, and left dead in the street.⁶⁸

The deportation marches to Germany began soon after. After a first stop at the Óbuda brickworks, some 6000 Jews every day were made to set out on foot by three different routes and cover on average 30 kilometres, driven by Arrow Cross militia who openly killed and tortured many of them along the way. From 20 October the residents of marked buildings were rounded up to dig defence works regardless of their physical condition: they even included a man of 81.⁶⁹ Most of the anti-tank ditches were made by them.

The first Jewish suicide was registered by the police at 7.32pm on 15 October. The first shooting beside the Danube was noted in the diary of the ambulance service on 23 November, although Jews had been shot there daily since 15 October. From 25 November police reports like the following multiplied:

Labour-service man András Pitschoff, 22, was recovered by police officers numbers 2017 and 2048 from the Danube with a gunshot wound.

Jews were shot at Széchenyi Quay on the Danube and several got stuck in the canal.⁷⁰

A favourite place for mass executions was the Danube Embankment, although at night the Arrow Cross killers aimed badly, so that their captives were often able to jump into the icy Danube and clamber out at bridge ends or drain outlets. The following report of the Hungarian I Army Corps command reports such an incident in a characteristically roundabout way: 'In the early morning of 30 December a police officer on duty stopped 5 Jewish-looking men, running and soaked to the skin, who were so confused that they were unable to say who they were or how they had fallen into the Danube'.⁷¹

In retrospect one wonders how such inhuman conditions could have developed. Before the end of the siege a government official told the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz that in the whole city there had been only 4000 armed Arrow Cross militiamen. Under normal circumstances, 4000 could not have terrorised a million. Nowhere in Nazi-occupied Western Europe were people publicly killed in large numbers merely because of their origins, and in the Soviet Union such events ceased after the early phases of the occupation.⁷² In Hungary nobody would have been called to account by the Germans for trying to prevent the slaughters, and the authorities would only have needed to abide by existing regulations. Nevertheless, the police, the gendarmerie and the military idly watched the Arrow Cross atrocities. This could not have happened without a deep and far-reaching moral crisis among the population,⁷³ which may be illustrated here by a few contemporary notes:

The officer told us that the Jews had been stripped to their shirts, shot at the Danube Embankment and thrown into the water. 'The trouble is not that this was done', he said, 'but that some were left alive, because so long as they aren't completely exterminated they'll all turn into vindictive swine.'⁷⁴

Two deaconesses are having a conversation. One says: 'It's certain that the Arrow Cross are preparing something dreadful against the ghetto.' The other: 'I'm sorry for the poor people, but maybe it's just as well, because then they won't get a chance to take revenge.'⁷⁵

On the road a man joins me. He has fled from Lajosmizse and regrets it. 'I fell for the propaganda', he says. I assure him that he will soon be able to go home. He mumbles with embarrassment: 'I've got two acres of Jewish land. Do you think I'll be allowed to keep it?'⁷⁶

The Arrow Cross rulers' concern that the excesses of the militia might induce the population to pity the Jews is reflected in parliamentary deputy Károly Maróthy's rider to his speech advocating executions: 'We must not allow individual cases to create compassion for them...Something must



Bodies in the garden of the Dohány Street Synagogue.

also be done to stop the death rattle going on in the ditches all day, and the population must not be allowed to see the masses dying... The deaths should not be recorded in the Hungarian death register.⁷⁷ A statement by the national Police Commissioner Pál Hódosy was in the same vein: 'The problem is not that Jews are being murdered, the only trouble is the method. The bodies must be made to disappear, not put out in the streets'.⁷⁸

The behaviour of the Arrow Cross militia may be exemplified through two eye-witness accounts:

In one of the streets leading to the Danube I saw a column of 30-40 people, all in white. As they approached I saw men and women in shirts, underpants and petticoats, with the snow and broken glass crunching under their bare feet. Appalled, I stopped in my tracks, and when they reached me asked one of the Arrow Cross men who they were. I shall never forget his cynical reply: 'The holy family.' I stood petrified for a long time, until the sound of sub-machine gun salvos from the Danube Embankment made me realise that it had been these people's last journey.⁷⁹

They were herding Jews along the Great Boulevard. Four or five Arrow Cross boys aged 14-16 were escorting them in Kecskeméti Street towards Erzsébet Bridge. An old woman collapsed. Understandably, she couldn't cope with the march. One of the boys started to beat her with his rifle butt. I went up to him in my uniform: 'Haven't you got a mother, son? How can you do this?' – 'She's only a Jew, uncle', he said.⁸⁰



'Jewry and Soviets: the death of Hungary' – contemporary poster.

Many Arrow Cross men had a 'token Jew' they treated well, whom they later tried to use as proof of their sympathy towards Jews when tried for war crimes. The law student István Kelecsényi, head of the Arrow Cross Department for the Elimination of Jews and deputy director of the Anthropological Department in Charge of Racial Screening, was prepared to certify the Aryan descent of wealthy Jews, at a price.⁸¹ The wife of Gábor Vajna, the Interior Minister, became the party's national social organiser, although she had partly Jewish ancestors, and only resigned when her background had been discovered and her husband divorced her.⁸²

Occasionally the viciousness of the Arrow Cross militia revolted not only the generally indifferent Hungarian population but also some Germans. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, for one, forbade his soldiers to take part in anti-Semitic actions. The German political leadership, however, found it convenient that somebody else was solving the 'Jewish question' even more brutally than they. Veessenmayer received instructions from Berlin to assist the Arrow Cross 'in every way' because it was 'in our particular interest that the Hungarians should now proceed against the Jews in the harshest possible manner'.⁸³

As a result of the Arrow Cross terror the number of Jews in Budapest declined by 105,453 between 15 October 1944 and 13 February 1945. Of some 50,000 'loan-Jews', who had been handed over to the Germans before

the closure of the encirclement to build fortifications, about 7000 became Soviet prisoners and 6000 died outside the city. Forced labourers in uniform falling into Soviet hands had little chance of being spared prison camp, and even after the siege the Soviets captured people regardless of whether or not they had been persecuted.⁸⁴

Most police and gendarmerie officers had disliked collaborating with the Arrow Cross from the outset. When party militiamen in Zugló, for example, noticed that they were recapturing more and more individuals whom they had earlier delivered to the police station, the party leaders in the area decided that any undesirable elements should be liquidated by their own men. The first multiple murder of this kind took place on 12 November after the opening ceremony of the party headquarters, when about a dozen prisoners were executed on the bank of the Rákos stream.

The only protest against these actions, which were theoretically illegal, came from the Angyalföld branch of the party, whose leader angrily objected to others leaving 'carcasses' in his district, where it was 'hard enough to justify their own to the population'.⁸⁵ Among the murderers was a boy aged 15, who became an officer in the Hungarian air force after the war and was arrested in 1966, together with other members of his group, as a result of investigations into former Arrow Cross activists. He and his companions carried out continuous executions, preceded by savage torture and perversions. On Christmas Day alone they shot more than 50 people, and in total killed at least 1000–1200. The murders took place on the Danube Embankment, in Városliget Park, alongside the Rákos stream, on the backs of lorries circulating in the city, and in the laundry room of the party headquarters, where interrogations continued until the drain was blocked by clotted blood. The bodies were usually left at the scene as a deterrent. On the benches in Városliget Park and Stefánia Road so many had piled up in November that it took several days to remove them.

Practically all party activists were obliged to take part in tortures and executions, which served as a so-called 'loyalty test'. Boys aged 14–15 and women also participated in the bloodshed, the most notorious of the latter being Mrs Vilmos Salzer, 23, and the former nurse Piroska Deli. Party militiaman Péter Pál Katona, conducting a group of 1100 from the Óbuda brickworks to the ghetto, personally shot 62 stragglers. Father Kun, who directed several bloodbaths, admitted after the siege to 500 murders. His order usually ran: 'In the name of Christ – fire!'

Some 8000 Jews had been exempt from persecution by special legislation. The Arrow Cross government reduced this number drastically. Seventy-one who had received the golden Hero's Medal in the First World



Body on the Danube Embankment.

War were awarded exceptional status by Szálasi, while 500 others were granted immunity by the Interior Ministry.

Commissioned by the International Red Cross, the Swedish Embassy, under ambassador Carl Ivan Danielsson, was first to issue letters of safe conduct to Jews after the German invasion of 19 March. Subsequently Raoul Wallenberg, who had been sent to Hungary by the Swedish government and the US War Refugee Board, introduced special passes on his own initiative. These documents – which had come into being without any legal foundation and were retrospectively approved by the Swedish government – stated that the Swedish Red Cross or the Swedish state had a particular interest in their holder, who was therefore under Swedish protection.

The various protection papers were honoured by the Sztójay government and also accepted by the new Foreign Ministry after Szálasi had come to power. Although the Foreign Minister, Gábor Vajna, had declared on 18 October that he did 'not recognise any letter of safe conduct or foreign passports received by a Jew of Hungarian nationality from anyone or anywhere',⁸⁶ the Arrow Cross government, under pressure from the countries concerned, eventually recognised 34,800.⁸⁷ In reality more than 100,000, either genuine or forged, were in circulation, and the embassies themselves significantly exceeded the permitted quotas. Various other methods of saving lives were developed by Wallenberg, who was among the first to establish 'protected houses' and organise supplies for their occupants, often risking his own life. Jews of military age were drafted into 'protected' labour-service companies, although on 29 November they were loaded into cattle trucks and handed over to the Germans.⁸⁸

Like the Swedes, the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, the Portuguese diplomat Carlos Branquinho and the Papal nunciature supplied protection papers. Friedrich Born, chief delegate of the International Red Cross, issued 1300 identity cards serving as letters of safe conduct. The B section of the Red Cross, directed by the evangelical pastor Gábor Sztehlo, under the Good Shepherd Children's Action, set up 32 homes for children who had lost their parents, saving 1540 from deportation or death by starvation. In addition, the Red Cross ran 18 hospitals and emergency clinics. The El Salvador Embassy distributed 800 special certificates of citizenship, and the Nicaraguan Embassy distributed 500.

The most daring rescues, perhaps, were accomplished by Giorgio Perlasca, the 'Spanish chargé d'affaires'. Perlasca was actually an Italian citizen who had been interned on 19 March 1944 because of his anti-German views. After escaping he took refuge in the Spanish Embassy, where he joined the life-saving missions. The Arrow Cross tolerated the actions of the embassy, hoping that the Szálasi regime would be recognised by the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. The Spanish chargé d'affaires Angel Sanz-Briz had firm instructions to the contrary. He sent enthusiastic but meaningless statements to the Arrow Cross Foreign Ministry, where the truth remained unrecognised for a long time, which enabled the embassy to adopt a more aggressive approach than its Swedish and Swiss counterparts. It called the Arrow Cross to account for every single atrocity and demanded a special train for protected Jews, calculating that the regime, unable to meet these demands, would be prepared to make other concessions. On 29 November Sanz-Briz left for Spain, as the Arrow Cross's pressure for an unequivocal answer was beginning to make his position untenable. Before leaving he gave Perlasca a German visa and promised to help him escape through Switzerland. Perlasca, however, would not desert his charges. He told the Arrow Cross that Sanz-Briz had gone to complete the recognition formalities and left him behind as chargé d'affaires designate. He was thus able to save the occupants of the Spanish protected houses, as they were about to be taken to the ghetto. Until the closure of the encirclement he constantly supplied the Foreign Ministry with misleading information and even resorted to blackmail, claiming that several thousand Hungarian hostages could be found in Spain if anything happened to his protégés. By the time his activities came to an end the number of Jews under his protection had grown from 300 to 5000.

When Perlasca confessed his lies to Angelo Rotta, the Papal Nuncio, he was only told not to mention them to Archbishop Verolino, who was 'so punctilious that he wouldn't be able to sleep afterwards'. However, when

he later asked Rotta to threaten the Arrow Cross regime with breaking off diplomatic relations, the Nuncio replied that "he couldn't do it without asking the Vatican". Unable to bear this, I said a few sharp things about diplomats and ran away. I was so upset that I even forgot to kiss his ring.⁸⁹

The case of Miksa Domonkos, a member of the Jewish Council, was equally bizarre. When an Arrow Cross gang tried to loot the council's headquarters in Síp Street immediately after Szálasi's coup of 16 October, he phoned gendarmerie superintendent László Ferenczy to ask for help. The superintendent, who was in charge of the deportation, merely replied: 'Everything is fine. Now the Jews have got what they wanted.'⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Domonkos advised the Arrow Cross thugs to leave because Ferenczy was sending patrol cars, and they obeyed. Later on Domonkos, in captain's uniform, began to distribute 'official certificates' in Ferenczy's name, saving many Jews from deportation and liberating several members of the Jewish Council from Arrow Cross captivity. He carried such authority that he was eventually appointed police chief of the ghetto, as he was thought to represent the Ministry of Defence and nobody realised that he was himself Jewish.⁹¹ When Arrow Cross militia operating in the neighbourhood captured Jews outside the ghetto they would deliver them to his 'command post' in Síp Street – if they did not shoot them on the Danube Embankment.

The anti-Jewish laws of 1942 had been supported in parliament by the representatives of Hungary's three principal churches. But by 1944, having witnessed the inhumanity of the deportation, many church organisations began to save Jews. In early summer the Reformed and Evangelical churches submitted a joint Protestant Memorandum to Prime Minister Sztójay, and on 29 June Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi wrote a circular condemning the persecutions. Sztójay responded by banning the publication of the memorandum and the reading in church of the circular. In the course of the summer – again without much public response – Bishop László Ravasz of the Reformed Church, followed by Serédi, repeatedly spoke out against the deportation. In a letter written five days after the Arrow Cross seizure of power, the bishop asked Szálasi to declare Budapest an open city, and in another, written on 1 December, to halt the persecutions.⁹² Smaller church organisations joined in rescue missions with the knowledge of church leaders. However, in many instances only selected groups – converts in particular – received assistance.

The (police) Chief Constable of Budapest, Gyula Sédey, and his deputy, Gyula Gyulai, also tried to help the inmates of the ghettos. There were even a few humane Arrow Cross Party members who took part in rescue

missions. Best known among these was Pál Szalai, who had left the party in 1942 and rejoined it after Horthy's ceasefire attempt, becoming its police-liaison officer. In this post he was able to do even more good than before. He banned the removal without official warrant of possessions from apartments vacated by Jews, thus preserving 50–60 per cent of movable property. He persuaded party organiser József Gera to protest against the atrocities and managed to set some police investigations in motion. He informed Wallenberg about a planned pogrom in the ghetto, and his deputy, Ferenc Perjési, actually moved into the ghetto in an attempt to improve conditions.

Ara Jerezian, a doctor of Armenian origin, had been the Arrow Cross's deputy youth leader until his expulsion in 1939. After the ceasefire attempt he decided to protect 1 Zichy Jenő Street. He rejoined the party and became its second deputy leader in the VI District. As the only functionary with legible handwriting, he was assigned the task of completing all the official warrants, which enabled him to save several lives. For 1 Zichy Jenő Street he obtained a protection certificate from the Swiss Embassy, and then procured orders from the Interior Ministry to convert the protected building into a Jewish hospital, although officially it was supposed to be a free Arrow Cross clinic. More than 400 Jews, including 40 doctors, survived here.

On several occasions Jerezian avoided discovery thanks only to his presence of mind. In January 1945 an Arrow Cross commander with 30 armed men surrounded the building and arrested him, announcing that everybody inside would be massacred according to regulations. After invoking the Interior Ministry order in vain, Jerezian invited the commander to carry out an inspection. A group of people wounded by an exploding shell had just arrived, and the visitors were obliged to make their way past the beds of groaning and dying patients. Jerezian's report paints a somewhat romanticised picture of the outcome:

The nerve-racking inspection lasted almost an hour and a half, after which he returned my pistol and asked me to summon the doctors...Some women began to feel sick; one unfortunate soul, unable to bear the uncertainty, jumped out of a third-floor window, and the ...orderlies could only recover her dead body.

When the doctors had assembled in one of the rooms the commander positioned himself in the centre and began:

'I was sent here today with orders to massacre 400 Jews said to be hiding in this place together with their leader Jerezian. I came with that intention, but what I have seen and experienced here goes beyond imagination. I wouldn't have believed, and I don't think anybody could have thought, that such a perfectly functioning institution could have been created in the heart of the

city within a few short weeks. What you have done and are doing here is such an achievement that I must bow to it even though I know that it is being performed by Jews. From now on your magnificent work won't be disturbed by anybody, I will see to that. Hold out a few more days. The liberating troops are on their way.

As far as a reward for your extraordinary achievement and heroism is concerned, rest assured I will see to it ... that in the new Hungarist state you will not be classified as Jews.⁹³

The Jewish hospital survived unscathed, although Jerezian was arrested and deported by the Soviets on trumped-up charges by a doctor, and was only released months later. In 1981 he received the Yad Vashem order, the highest distinction in Israel awarded to those who had saved Jewish lives.

The embassies of the neutral states lodged continuous protests. On 21 October Papal Nuncio Rotta negotiated for more than two hours with Szálasi. On 17 November, jointly with the neutral embassies, he addressed a note to the Arrow Cross government, demanding the immediate cessation of the deportation and humane treatment for the Jews. On 23 December the neutral powers sent another note to the government, which had fled in the meantime. The suggested evacuation of the embassies was rejected by all. On 5 January 1945 Wallenberg addressed a comprehensive final note to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch.

On 12 November 72 buildings near Szent István Square in the VI District in Pest had been placed under Swiss protection, and from 15 November this area became officially known as the International Ghetto. It was intended to concentrate all Jews with foreign passes in these protected houses, which had been designed to hold 3969 people, but which began by taking in 15,600 and ended with nearly 40,000. In theory the houses were extraterritorial and each should have been guarded by two police officers, but Arrow Cross hit squads regularly raided them regardless.

The International Ghetto was far more dangerous than the 'ordinary' ghetto – which was created little later in the VII District – because the proximity of the Danube Embankment and easy access to the houses encouraged the Arrow Cross to perpetrate bloodbaths. By the end of November, when only 32,000 Jews instead of the expected 100,000 had moved into the 'ordinary' ghetto, the Arrow Cross grew suspicious, and when tens of thousands (instead of 7800) sought refuge in the 'Swiss houses' of the International Ghetto, it became clear that many protection papers were forged. These houses were searched as a priority, and because it was difficult to distinguish between genuine and forged documents, many people were deported indiscriminately.

The creation of a segregated quarter for Jews without protection papers in the VII District had begun on 18 November 1944. The formal order for the conversion of this quarter into the 'ordinary' ghetto was issued by Interior Minister Gábor Vajna on 21 November, and all Jews without protection papers were ordered to move here by 2 December. On 10 December the area was closed off with wooden boards, leaving only four exit gates. About 60,000 people were packed into 4513 apartments, sometimes 14 to a room. According to plans, all the Jews – with or without protection papers – were eventually to be brought here. Officially the daily food ration was 900 calories plus any supplies available from the Jewish Council and the neutral embassies. In reality five soup kitchens provided barely 790 calories. Occasionally food carriers were robbed or hit by shells, and then the occupants of the houses concerned starved all day. The one police station within the ghetto had been closed on Vajna's orders, and internal security was provided by unarmed Jewish policemen, of whom Arrow Cross raiders bent on robbery took no notice. An eye-witness recalls conditions in late December:

In narrow Kazinczy Street enfeebled men, drooping their heads, were pushing a wheelbarrow. On the rattling contraption naked human bodies as yellow as wax were jolted along and a stiff arm with black patches was dangling and knocking against the spokes of the wheel. They stopped in front of the Kazinczy baths and awkwardly turned into the lattice gate. In the courtyard of the baths behind the weatherbeaten façade bodies were piled up, frozen stiff like pieces of wood...I crossed Klauzál Square. In the middle people were squatting or kneeling around a dead horse and hacking the meat off it with knives. The animal's head was lying a few metres away. The yellow and blue intestines, jelly-like and with a cold sheen, were bursting out of the opened and mutilated body.⁹⁴

The Arrow Cross committed innumerable atrocities against the inmates of each ghetto, and even invaded neutral diplomatic missions elsewhere in the city: members of the Swedish Embassy in Jókai Street were murdered on 7 January, and blood was also shed at the Swiss Embassy in Vadász Street.⁹⁵ The Germans were relatively humane: although they frequently rounded up Jews for work on fortifications they always sent them back to the ghetto alive.⁹⁶

Between 14 November 1944 and 18 January 1945, the average daily number of deaths in the ghetto was 80, and by the end of March it was 50: the comparable number in peacetime would have been eight.⁹⁷ For a while, between 50 and 60 Jews who had been shot through the base of the skull were brought to the Forensic Institute every day. In one incident on 28 December, Arrow Cross activists, joined by some Germans against their

orders, dragged a sizeable group of men from the hospital in Bethlen Gábor Square to the Danube Embankment and executed them. The number of Jewish suicides in one week exceeded the total of all suicides in Hungary in 1943. 'Old men, young girls, pregnant women killed themselves. Some mothers knocked their reluctant daughters unconscious with rolling pins and laid them under the open gas taps.'⁹⁸ On 3 January Inspector General István Lőcsei, the Ministerial Commissioner for the Concentration of the Jews, ordered the immediate formation of 12 Jewish labour regiments. The order could not be carried out because by that time the starving inmates were hardly able to walk.

On 1 January 1945 Szálasi's special representative, Ernő Vajna, had issued his first order for all the occupants of the International Ghetto to be transferred to the 'ordinary' ghetto, purportedly for 'for military reasons', but in reality to facilitate the murders. On 4 January he repeated the order, and this time even Wallenberg found it impossible to prevaricate. On 5 and 6 January 5000 occupants of the 'Swedish houses' were marched, under fire from Soviet fighter aircraft, to the 'ordinary' ghetto. The Arrow Cross declared that if foreign states did not recognise their government, they in turn were not obliged to honour any agreements. On 7 January the evacuation was stopped, after Wallenberg's offer to give any surplus food in the protected houses to the Arrow Cross, but on the same day Arrow Cross men attacked the 'Swedish house' in Vadász Street, herded some 130 people to the Danube Embankment, and machine-gunned them.⁹⁹ A survivor remembers:

After me they interrogated my mother, a woman of 67. They stripped her naked and three of them beat her up with rubber truncheons. When she fell they trampled on her and tore her hair out. Then I was...beaten up again by three men...At midnight I had to go to the cellar, where about 30 torturers stood in line. All 30 of them had clubs, straps and cudgels, and all set about me. From the cellar I was pushed into the laundry room, where there were already about 30 people with blood pouring from them. In the cellar the younger women were stripped and beaten with rubber truncheons. In the hall Arrow Cross man [Dénes] Bokor then told me to ask for a Hungarist blow in the face. Afterwards I had to stand in the doorway, where they started kicking me. They did the same to women of 60, they hit us till we fell. At three o'clock we were tied together in pairs with leather belts and sent off, allegedly to the ghetto. I was constantly watching how they were carrying their rifles and machine guns. At the Chain Bridge there was a German guard, who let our group of 45-50 pass. On the Chain Bridge the weapons were levelled, which looked ominous. I began to loosen the belt. I was tied together with a man called Guttmann, who was only wearing a pair of pants and a shirt. When we

turned off from the Chain Bridge to the Danube Embankment the situation had become totally hopeless. I let go of my mother and released the belt completely. After 20 metres they stopped and ordered us to line up on the embankment and face the Danube, because they were going to shoot us. I had got to the embankment first with Mr. Guttmann. The torturers' leader, a stocky fellow with a small moustache, ordered me to go a bit further. I pretended to obey and dived into the Danube, with the machine guns firing at me. From the water I could hear them execute the fifty people.¹⁰⁰

First Lieutenant Iván Hermándy describes a similar execution on the embankment:

I peeped round the corner of the Vigadó Concert Hall and saw the victims standing on the track of the number 2 tram line in a long row, completely resigned to their fate. Those close to the Danube were already naked, the others were slowly walking down and undressing. It all happened in total silence, with only the occasional sound of a gun shot or machine-gun salvo. In the afternoon, when there was nobody left, we took another look. The dead were lying in their blood on the ice slabs or floating in the Danube. Among them were women, children, Jews, Gentiles, soldiers and officers.¹⁰¹

To stop the constant massacres 100 police officers were ordered into the ghetto on 10 January, but the very next day 45 Jews were murdered in Wesselényi Street only a few steps from the police shelter. Their bodies were deposited in the garden of the Kazinczy Street synagogue and in Klauzál Square, as nobody had the time or the inclination to follow the cynical advice of Ferenc Orsós, the professor of medicine and former member of the international commission investigating the massacre of Polish officers: 'Throw the dead Jews into the Danube, we don't want another Katyn'.¹⁰²

On 16 January, when the Soviet troops had reached the Great Boulevard near the ghetto, the Arrow Cross decided to mount a pogrom. The plan was betrayed by a police officer to Pál Szalai, the Arrow Cross police-liaison officer. Szalai called on Ernő Vajna, who told him that he knew about the plan and had no intention of stopping it. With Wallenberg's agreement Szalai warned Colonel-General Schmidhuber, the German commander of Pest, that he would be held responsible for the actions of his subordinates. Schmidhuber promptly summoned Vajna and the German and Hungarian initiators of the plan, arrested an SS sergeant and forbade the pogrom.¹⁰³ To ensure that his order was obeyed he sent his Wehrmacht soldiers into the ghetto.

On 17 January Soviet troops reached the edge of the ghetto in Wesselényi Street. László Benedek, a doctor in the temporary Jewish hospital at number 44, persuaded a Hungarian anti-aircraft battery stationed there to abandon



Arrow Cross Militia putting up posters; in the background, Father Kun with a pistol holster on his monk's habit.

the struggle. He admitted the soldiers as patients, having their uniforms burnt in the hospital's ovens. Next day, after a short street battle, the ghetto was liberated.

In Buda, however, the persecution continued. On 14 January a gang from the Arrow Cross headquarters in Németsvölgyi Road, led by Father Kun, murdered 170 patients and others hiding in the Jewish hospital in Maros Street. On 19 January they slaughtered 90 people in the Jewish almshouse in Alma Street, and on 21 January another 149 in the Jewish hospital in Városmajor Street. At the Városmajor Street hospital they ordered any occupants who could prove their Christian origin to come forward, and when some produced their forged documents they shot them. The rest were told to line up in the street to be 'taken to the ghetto' in Pest – which was already in Soviet hands and in any case unreachable as the Danube bridges had been blown up – and gunned down as they were waiting. Patients unable to walk were killed in the wards together with their nurses, and their dying screams could be heard for two hours.¹⁰⁴ Only one woman survived, by hiding among the dead bodies in the street.¹⁰⁵

The same gang also attacked the high-ranking police officers responsible for the security of Chief Constable Gyula Sédey. They forced the officers to hand over their arms and left. However, at midnight they returned with



Father Kun. The officers were stood against a wall and abused by Kun for 'hiding while others are suffering for victory in the front line'. The six officers present were taken to the Arrow Cross headquarters. The seventh, Chief Inspector László Beliczky, who had hidden in the lavatory, alerted Sédey, but a police detachment sent to free the officers was disarmed by the Arrow Cross men. 'Brothers, here's Dr. [Imre] Marosvölgyi of the detention centre', one of them, a former convict, shouted when he saw the captives – who were already well-known to the party membership as their duties had included interrogating dangerous criminals. Now the moment of revenge had come: 'The door burst open. Father Kun was first to rush out and to make a start. He rammed his fist into the face of one captive and then, for good measure, added a hard slap with his open hand. "Well, you bastard, we've got you at last", he said and pushed the man into the room he himself had come from.'¹⁰⁶ The captives could only be freed by a second, reinforced police detachment. Father Kun and his accomplices were arrested, although Kun managed to escape during the break-out. Péter Szabó, the leader of the gang, had kept a detailed diary, which he buried together with his identification papers and photos, but which were later found by chance and handed over to the police. The exact record of the crimes, including the rape of nuns, also enabled other members of the group, who had been in hiding, to be brought to trial. Kun was finally sentenced to death by the People's Court and executed. Table 23 lists the principal events in the persecution of the Jews of Budapest during the siege.

3

The resistance

Internal resistance in Budapest features in many Hungarian studies published after 1945, primarily because the communist state had an interest in recording anti-fascist activities in detail. It is hardly mentioned in contemporary German and Hungarian military documents, possibly because its strategic significance was minimal.

Military units fighting the Soviets seldom came under attack from resistance groups. Germans, whom Hungarians did not generally regard as enemies, were rarely targeted, so that Alfred Trenker, the Gestapo commander in Budapest, declared that for Germans a year in Hungary was less dangerous than a day in Yugoslavia. The Arrow Cross, however, was feared and hated. According to German reports, even among Hungarian army officers only 3–5 per cent were in favour of the regime, and many rejected



Air-Force Colonel Sándor András, commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division.

the propaganda of the extreme right. Consequently the resistance engaged mainly in saving lives, sabotaging deportation and increasingly undertaking armed operations against Arrow Cross units and party buildings.

After the Arrow Cross coup several politicians who had been forced to go underground began to develop the rudimentary resistance movement. Based on the illegal Hungarian Front, which had been operating since the German invasion, the Liberation Committee of the Hungarian National Uprising (MNFFB) was founded on 9 November, with Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky as president and János Csorba as deputy president. Its military arm was set up on 11 November, with Lieutenant-General János Kiss as chief of staff and Major Jenő Nagy as his deputy, assisted by staff officers Vilmos Tartsay, Pál Németh and István Beleznay, technical officers József Kővágó, Pál Almásy and Imre Radványi, Hussar Captain Kálmán Révay, and many others. The MNFFB was joined by various illegal organisations, formerly of the Hungarian Front: the Independent Smallholders' Party, the Social-democratic Party, the Legitimist Dual Cross Association, the Hungarian Communist Party and the National Peasants' Party.

Hoping to prevent the siege and destruction of Budapest, the MNFFB planned to open the front line to the Soviets and trigger a simultaneous uprising: it even approached the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division,

commanded by Sándor András, and several KISKA auxiliary units with this suggestion. On 13 November Major Ernő Simonffy-Tóth, the Hungarian VI Army's chief of operations, flew to the Soviets as the Hungarian Front's representative. He had spent the preceding days dictating to his secretary behind closed doors and was later discovered to have been describing the air-raid protection and fortification system of the capital.¹⁰⁷ Eventually he became a Red Army propagandist urging the Hungarian defenders to change sides.

On 22 November, having been betrayed by Captain Tibor Mikulich, the military staff of the MNFFB were arrested during a meeting. Imre Kovács, a leader of the Peasant Party, owed his life to his late arrival:

I had not reached Andrassy Road when I heard shots being fired near the Opera. I walked faster and could hardly believe my eyes: the neighbourhood of the Opera looked like a battlefield. From gateways and from behind trees and advertising pillars field gendarmes and party militiamen were firing like mad on a car, which was returning their fire. The bodies of four gendarmes were lying on the road covered by soldiers' coats.¹⁰⁸

The fray had been unleashed by Ensign Pál Széchenyi and Lieutenant Messik, who had also arrived late. Both were killed and more than 30 people arrested. Subsequently the majority of the organisation, numbering several hundred, were rounded up. János Kiss, Jenő Nagy and Vilmos Tartsay were sentenced to death by a special court of the Hungarian army and executed in the military prison in Margit Boulevard on 8 December. Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was hanged in Sopronkőhida on 24 December. Most of the remainder received prison sentences of between 10 and 15 years.

A resistance group of university students, KISKA units and others was organised by Staff Captain Zoltán Mikó, head of the supreme command's defence section, who belonged to the MNFFB but had evaded arrest. In the supreme command Mikó had supervised the KISKA auxiliaries, and towards the end of November was entrusted with organising subversion and espionage units; he had also been placed in charge of the Prónay commandos and a gendarmerie investigation detachment. Early in November he had set up the Görgey Battalion, a sabotage unit designed to procure legitimate identity papers for people in hiding and members of the resistance, which consisted entirely of deserters, left-wing activists, outlawed politicians and resistance fighters, although it was officially part of the Prónay commandos and the Arrow Cross. Through Wallenberg, he continuously sent food from the battalion's supplies to the protected houses. Thanks to his connections with the head of the State Security Centre, Chief Superintendent Lajos Kudar, a gendarmerie unit was sent in November to the International Ghetto, where it fought several gun battles with Arrow Cross marauders.

For a month the Görgey Battalion took part in exercises alongside the Prónay commandos, while surreptitiously carrying out acts of sabotage and attacking Arrow Cross men. On 21 November one of its members, a Jewish deserter from the labour service, was recognised by a sergeant on duty in the Prónay food stores and arrested with his yellow star in his pocket. Ten more labour-service deserters in the battalion were seized by the Arrow Cross secret police and executed in the prison in Margit Boulevard on 4 December. Mikó transferred the battalion to the Börzsöny Hills north of the Danube, using the need for 'training' and a request from Germans for the deployment of Arrow Cross partisans as pretexts.

Mikó had recruited some 800 armed resistance fighters, comprising 250 members of the Görgey Battalion, 500 members of various KISKA units, and 50 members of his own staff stationed at 54 Bimbó Road. A contingent of this size seemed capable of undertaking serious operations. On 20 December Imre Kovács and three other representatives of the MNFFB visited the Soviets in the Börzsöny Hills to discuss the possibility of changing sides. However, Kovács was arrested by suspicious Soviet counter-espionage officers and did not escape until the end of February.

As the encirclement was about to be completed, Mikó made plans to defect and open the front line to the Soviets in Zugló and on Rózsadomb Hill. On 25 December the University Assault Battalion delivered a Russian prisoner called Krylov to his unit; he had lived in Hungary since the First World War and had been returned to Budapest as a scout after being captured by the Soviets at Szentendre. Mikó sent Krylov back to the Soviets as an intermediary. After obtaining the German commander's permission to take over the defence of Kapy Street on Rózsadomb Hill he alerted his men, but instead of the expected 300–400 only 70 turned up: the majority had been either unwilling to risk their lives or unable to cross the Danube from Pest to Buda.

In despair Mikó approached the commander of the University Assault Battalion, Captain Sipeki Balás, a former fellow-student at the military academy, whom he hoped to persuade to defect with him. Sipeki took Mikó – who had arrived with eight armed companions including First Lieutenant Vilmos Bondor, who was wearing a large number of medals – for an *agent provocateur*, and prevaricated. Mikó's final argument was:

So far I haven't told you the whole confidential truth. The differences between the German and Hungarian commands have become so acute that tonight there will be a complete volte-face. At 8pm in four important sections of the front line the Hungarian troops will lay their arms down and let the Soviet forces pass.¹⁰⁹

When Sipeki replied that he was going to make inquiries at the army-corps command, Mikó knew that his bluff had been called. Some members of the group, at 54 Bimbó Road, decided to call off the defection and disappear as fast as possible. Mikó fled with his secretary to the Turkish Embassy, where he survived the siege. Others decided not to disband, hoping that something would turn up, although it should have been clear that Sipeki would not defect on his own initiative.

There are two versions of what happened next. According to Bondor and his companions Sipeki deliberately betrayed them. Sipeki himself claims that he had every reason to distrust Mikó, as nobody at the corps command mentioned any intention to defect and he could not ask because he was not sure who else was involved. He maintains that he was about to leave, when a gendarmerie Chief Inspector approached him:

He asked me who I was and whether I had reported that Mikó had come to see me about defecting. I said that I had not. He took me to a colonel, whom I did not know but who could have been the head of the corps's 1.b section.¹¹⁰ The colonel received me by saying it was a pity that I had not reported of my own free will that I had been invited to defect. I was to tell everything exactly as it had happened if I did not want to find myself in an even more awkward position.¹¹¹

The Arrow Cross secret police had kept Mikó's group under surveillance since 26 December, when the University Assault Battalion apprehended some Russian soldiers in civilian clothes carrying identity papers issued by Mikó.¹¹² Bondor was summoned to Bimbó Street, ostensibly for a meeting, and arrested together with his companions. After the siege it was the Russians who arrested Mikó and Bondor and sentenced them to death for espionage. Bondor's sentence was converted to 25 years in prison; Mikó was executed in Odessa on 15 August 1945,¹¹³ even though he had voluntarily co-operated with the Soviets – for instance, in identifying Arrow Cross members among the prisoners of war in Budafok.¹¹⁴

After the failure of Horthy's ceasefire attempt, many Hungarian officers had defected to the Soviets. They included Colonel Sándor András, commander of the 10th Infantry Division,¹¹⁵ who was aided by the anti-espionage and intelligence section of his unit,¹¹⁶ and Colonel Ottó Hátszeghi-Hatz, the Hungarian VII Army Corps's chief of staff, who had taken part in the ceasefire negotiations as a military diplomat. On 7 November 1944 Hátszeghi-Hatz flew to Szeged, where he delivered detailed sketches of the Margit Line to the Soviets. Subsequently he performed propaganda missions for the Soviets and from February to 5 April 1945 held the appointment of liaison officer at the Soviet military command in Budapest. Having been arrested by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) on false

charges and sentenced to 15 years in a labour camp after seven years on remand, he was acquitted on 30 June 1955.

Dezső Németh, chief quartermaster of the Hungarian I Army Corps, played a particularly important part in the resistance, issuing false papers to persecution victims, assisting in the defection of Simonffy-Tóth, hiding Soviet soldiers and sabotaging the capital's defence. When the closure of the encirclement was imminent he deliberately moved the food stores to the outer suburbs. He kept most of the corps's ammunition in railway wagons on Margit Quay, hoping that the Soviets would destroy it. This indeed happened, but the enormous explosions also destroyed the adjacent buildings, killing all the occupants.¹¹⁷ Together with his staff, Németh defected to the Soviets on 7 February 1945, and subsequently fought against the German and Hungarian garrison as a company commander, being wounded in the process. In 1949 he was sentenced to death in a communist show trial and executed.

The Hungarian Students' Freedom Front (MDSZF) was formed on 7 November by amalgamating seven illegal university organisations. Led by László Kardos, Sándor Kiss and Tibor Zimányi, the front represented the radical wing of the people's movement. Many of its members enlisted in the University Assault Battalion, the Görgey Battalion and the Táncsics Mihály Battalion. An illegal newsletter published by the MDSZF brought it to the attention of the Arrow Cross secret police, which raided its headquarters and arrested many of its members on 12 December.

The Táncsics Mihály Battalion, camouflaged by the official name I Hungarist University Reconnaissance Battalion, was mainly recruited from the National Guard at the Budapest universities. It had between 350 and 400 members, who issued hundreds of false identity papers and carried out several armed attacks on the Germans and the Arrow Cross. When their attempt to defect was foiled by Arrow Cross militia and German troops, they dispersed to await the arrival of the Soviets in Budapest.

In various offices of the City Hall of Budapest, resistance groups were formed after the German invasion. These concentrated mainly on providing certificates of immunity from persecution and other protective documents. Their military nucleus was the KISKA company in the VI District, with whose help they intended but failed to take over the City Hall and various public utilities. They were also in touch with resistance fighters in the MÁVAG arms factory, led by Endre Mistéth and Ferenc Koczkás, who sequestered some anti-tank guns for the MNFFB. On 19 November a number of their members were uncovered, together with the MÁVAG Group.

The Hungarian Freedom Movement, led by Frigyes Pisky-Schmidt, which was close to the Social Democratic Party, primarily engaged in intellectual resistance. From 1943, with the tacit support of the government of Miklós Kállay, it had run a clandestine radio station and published a newspaper entitled *Feltámadás*. After the German invasion it became more active, and after the Arrow Cross coup it published an illegal newspaper entitled *Szabadságharc*. By agreement with Árpád Szakasits, executive president of the MNFFB, it also deployed an armed group to protect the illegal Légrády printworks from being dismantled. In a gun battle on 25 December the group's leader Béla Stollár and 23 of his companions were killed, but the works were saved because the workers had taken the bulk of the equipment to their homes.

The Future in the East Group consisted of civilians and cadets of the Security Battalion. They were preparing to save some public buildings and factories mined by the garrison, but on 10 November 27 of them, including their leader, Captain Sándor Fürjes, the commander of the Security Battalion's 2nd Company, were arrested, and the group disintegrated.

The Congregation of Marist School Brothers hid Jewish children, French and Alsatian SS soldiers on the run, and escaped French and Belgian prisoners of war. The Wehrmacht arrested them on 19 December, but their protégés were saved.

The poet Zseni Várnay, together with the biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi, a winner of the Nobel prize, had begun to organise a resistance group on the day of the German invasion, recruiting several officers of the river guard and the manager of the Taurus factory. After Horthy's ceasefire attempt, Szent-Györgyi took refuge in the Swedish Embassy, while the group developed a base in a cave on Ferenc-hegy Hill. Early in December the Germans raided the cave and arrested its occupants.

Since September 1944 two rival factions of the Communist Party (one led by Pál Demény, the other following the Moscow party line) had been setting up small resistance groups. The leaders of the Moscow faction weathered the siege in an apartment in Hungária Boulevard and a cellar in Francia Road, fed by György Aczél, who was to become an active cultural politician in the Kádár era. The military committee of this faction included György Pálffy-Österreicher, Lajos Fehér and László Sólyom, with János Kádár as liaison officer.¹¹⁸ Their task was to organise, arm, and direct the operations of the Szír, Laci, Marót and other 'action groups'. In Csepel, where Demény's co-operation was indispensable, the two factions, together with the Social Democrats, set up a committee of 13¹¹⁹ to co-ordinate the resistance, which most notably prevented the dismantling of factories and

sabotaged the production of armaments, including the rocket commonly known as 'Szálasi popper'.

The most important operation of the resistance in Csepel¹²⁰ was the prevention of the evacuation. On 4 December posters appeared ordering the civilians to leave within 24 hours. This caused enormous anger, and several thousand people gathered at the town hall, where windows were broken in a spontaneous demonstration against the Germans and the Arrow Cross. Hungarian soldiers and police officers promised their support. Arrow Cross militiamen, arriving at the scene, fled after some of them had been pelted with rocks and two beaten up by local women. Feelings against the evacuation were running so high that those who tried to obey were attacked by the demonstrators and had their possessions scattered all over the area.

On 5 December the chief public notary and his assistant joined the protesters, declaring: 'They are right, we aren't moving an inch either'.¹²¹ The Arrow Cross arrested them, and when the demonstrators demanded their release they also arrested eight workers in the crowd. Four armed communists charged the Arrow Cross headquarters and liberated the captives: the communist László Kormos killed three Arrow Cross men before he was shot dead. The demonstrators then moved from the town hall to Piac Square, where a German soldier on a motorcycle opened fire on them, killing a woman,¹²² which further inflamed their fury. On 6 December soldiers stationed in the Királyerdő quarter began to distribute their arms to civilians, and the evacuation was halted.

In Pestszentlőrinc the evacuation also foundered on the opposition of the population. Here a deputation called on the authorities to rescind the order, which could not have been carried out in any case for want of troops.

In Kőbánya, Károly Kiss and István P. Horváth created a 40-strong communist-resistance group in November. They stole a wagonload of weapons, explosives and uniforms from Ferencváros Station, with which they formed a KISKA unit. Disguised in Arrow Cross uniforms some of them shot 'Brother' Csordás, the district's Arrow Cross chief, and two other party leaders. Most important among their many armed operations were the blowing up of the Rákoskeresztúr Arrow Cross headquarters and, jointly with the Stollár Group, the defence of the Légrády print works.

Another outstanding communist resistance group was that in Újpest, led by László Földes. Its best-known actions were the rescue of the Újpest water tower which had been mined by the Arrow Cross on 31 December and the blowing up of the Újpest Arrow Cross headquarters after the liberation of 48 political prisoners held there on 9 January. In the latter action

12 members of the group entered the headquarters in Arrow Cross secret-police uniforms, demanded the handover of the prisoners for 'execution' and, on the way towards the Danube, released them. They then returned to the headquarters and delivered a time-bomb made of 14 kilograms of picric acid, claiming that it was gold. By the time the ruse was discovered, 28 Arrow Cross militiamen had been buried under the ruins of the building.¹²³ The total number of substantial operations carried out by the Újpest group was 53.

There were several more bomb attacks by communist partisans. On 6 October the Marót Group destroyed a statue of Gyula Gömbös, a former right-wing Prime Minister of Hungary, and on 22 November the Szír Group devastated the Metropol Hotel, where high-ranking German officers were billeted. On 2 December the Szír Group blew up the pillars at the entrance to the Municipal Theatre, where the Arrow Cross Party Congress was due to be held. By 3 December the rubble had been cleared, but on the same day members of the Marót Group threw two acetone bombs into the crowd that had gathered there. Through this most spectacular of their actions the communists prevented the first and only mass-meeting planned by the regime.

Eventually several members of the Szír Group were arrested, and only Gábor Csillik managed to escape in late December. He promptly reorganised the group and carried out further operations. Ironically, he was rearrested on 13 January by the Soviets, as was Dezső Weinberger, known as Szír, who later disappeared in the Gulag.¹²⁴ The 'liberators' were suspicious of everybody, and after the passing of the first wave Soviet officers with more time on their hands often took resistance fighters prisoner together with others.

The Ságvári Group, organised by Lajos Turcsányi, an activist of the Communist Youth Federation, suffered a similar fate. Its members, 'borrowing' the necessary uniforms, documents and office equipment, established themselves in the vacant premises of the German Volksbund organisation as the 'staff of the 101st Mechanised Chemical Warfare Battalion'. In this disguise they carried out several armed operations. Eventually they were captured by the Soviets and only released from the Gödöllő prison camp thanks to the intervention of the Communist Party.¹²⁵

Fourteen members of the communist Red Brigade were denounced and arrested by the Arrow Cross on 2 January. At the secret-police station in the Royal Palace they were subjected to brutal torture. The worst was probably suffered by Éva Braun, as one of her fellow-prisoners remembers:

While I was being interrogated I could hear terrible screaming and panting from the next room. The gendarme interrogating me behaved relatively decently. When he noticed that I was listening to the screams from the next room he

told me that they were 'doing' Éva Braun. He said that she was being raped with a piece of wood. After my interrogation I was led through that room where I saw Éva Braun lying on the floor half naked and weeping.¹²⁶

Later in January many of the prisoners were executed by Hungarian gendarmes on a terrace of the Royal Palace.

The Jewish resistance was primarily engaged in saving lives. Ottó Komoly, leader of the Hungarian Zionists and the Budapest Jewish Rescue Committee, had made contact with the Hungarian Front in 1943, and before the German occupation the committee had helped persecution victims from neighbouring countries find refuge in Hungary or Romania. In September 1944 Friedrich Born, the representative of the International Red Cross in Budapest, had put Komoly in charge of the Red Cross's 'A' Office for International Affairs. In reality this office was a cover for the Zionists, and one of its sections was directly involved in the resistance. After the Arrow Cross coup Komoly issued several hundred letters of safe conduct, some genuine and others false, and had food delivered to the ghetto. On 1 January 1945 two Hungarian officers called at his office, which had extraterritorial status, and invited him to a meeting to 'talk things over'. Komoly accompanied them and was never seen again.¹²⁷

From the beginning of the German occupation, the Jewish resistance issued tens of thousands of forged identity cards, letters of safe conduct, passports, registration certificates and exemptions for munitions workers. Members of the radical Zionist Hashomer Hatsair organisation, founded in the 1930s by Ernő Szilágyi, also undertook armed operations. In half a dozen cases, wearing Arrow Cross uniforms, they carried out rescue missions or killed genuine Arrow Cross activists. On 24 and 26 December respectively, with false 'open orders', they liberated 30 and 137 captives from the prison in Margit Boulevard, including György Nonn, who later became a notorious communist public prosecutor.

The Jewish communist actor György Aczél, who had converted to Christianity, worked as a liaison officer in the Zionist resistance. His task was to receive money, arms and food for the Communist Party from the Zionists. His superiors were Gábor Péter, later the head of the communist secret police, and György Donáth. After Horthy's ceasefire attempt he disguised himself by growing a moustache, and reports about his escapades vary:

Aczél was remembered wearing either a gendarmerie, Gestapo or German army officer's uniform, or a dress uniform, or a camouflage coat... He was seen in a large black car or, according to others, in a jeep... He was repeatedly heard shouting orders in German, pretending not to speak Hungarian (although in fact he did not speak German).¹²⁸

Many army, police and gendarmerie officers helped to save fugitives, of whom tens of thousands were hiding in the capital. Colonel András Dienstl, for instance, received an Arrow Cross gang looking for Jews in his house in his dress uniform, covered with medals, and simply sent them away. Gendarmerie Chief Inspector István Parádi attended to Wallenberg's personal protection and prevented numerous operations against Jews. Even in the entourage of the head of the State Security Police, Péter Hain, there were some who sabotaged the 'final solution'.¹²⁹

However, shortage of time, anti-Semitic propaganda and lack of unanimity in the Hungarian middle class precluded the development of a concerted movement against the implementation of the anti-Jewish legislation. Some individuals tried, with little success, to appeal to the public, as did for instance the wife of Count István Bethlen, who was arrested when she tried to persuade Christian women to pin a yellow leaf to their garments as a sign of solidarity after the introduction of the yellow star.¹³⁰ Pál Tetéltleni, managing director of the Bauxit company, was executed together with his pregnant wife and two small daughters for sheltering fugitives. Everywhere posters announced that anybody hiding Jews would be punished by immediate execution, and Arrow Cross militia carried this out whenever possible.

Early in October 1944 the US Army's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) sent the Hungarian-American First Lieutenant Pál Kovács to Hungary to organise resistance and obtain military intelligence. Using Béla Jánosi's Dallam Group with its 20 members as his base, he contacted the Hungarian Front and several resistance organisations, but was arrested on 5 December. Forty-six others were also seized and most of them murdered by the Arrow Cross secret police between 15 January and 11 February.

The British dropped paratroopers on secret missions into Hungary. Among others, 22 Hungarian-Canadians were trained for that purpose, but only one of them managed to escape after being captured by Hungarian police, and make his way to Budapest, where he was hidden by the resistance group of the number 11 garrison hospital.

The resistance movement created several KISKA battalions, with those in the III–VIII, XIII and XIV Districts in particular carrying out armed operations. Most important was the XIII/1 Battalion, led by First Lieutenant Lajos Gidófalvy. This was formed on 18 October, and at the time of its dissolution in early January claimed to have 1200 members, although many only belonged to it on paper. This group, liaising with others, issued forged certificates, attacked Arrow Cross militia and prevented the destruction of Ferdinánd Bridge and several factories. It planned to open the

front line to the Soviets, but on 8 January most of its members were arrested by Arrow Cross security forces. Gidófalvy and several of his companions, who had managed to hide, were killed a few days later, probably while trying to prevent Erzsébet Bridge being blown up.

In September 1944 Aurél Desewffy, János Brencsán, János Szécsy and Antal Viczián – four members of *Emericana*, the largest university students' union – had formed a National Guard battalion which subsequently became a KISKA battalion. Apart from producing false documents, the students participated in rescue missions and armed resistance. By the time the encirclement was completed they had stolen five wagonloads of food and military matériel (10,000 uniforms, 20,000 hand-grenades, three anti-aircraft guns with ammunition, 5000 pairs of boots, and other equipment), which they threw into the Danube before the arrival of the Soviets. When the first Soviet soldier appeared, practically all of them defected, but most ended up in prison camp.¹³¹

The primary task of a group led by Imre Radó and Endre Magyari, with 457 members operating under the guise of the Hungarian Publishing Company, was to forge documents, which were supplied even to German soldiers. On 29 December, as a result of betrayal, 71 members were arrested and – in the largest mass execution of resistance fighters – shot together with 30 others in the courtyard of the school at 52 Wesselényi Street.

József Ferenczy, subsequently a press tycoon, had organised several anti-war missions since the German invasion. On 15 October he established the VII/2 KISKA Company in order to provide legal status for his 86 men, who carried out several armed operations and hid fugitives. Hussar Captain Ede Gobbi produced forged exemption forms, which were distributed by his daughter, the actress Hilda Gobbi.

As the KISKA units had proved unreliable, the Arrow Cross authorities ordered them to be disbanded on 6 January – although several could only be broken up by armed force. Some of their members were drafted into the Hungarist Legion, while the majority either defected or escaped.

The work of Soviet reconnaissance is least documented. Major Mariya Fortus of the 3rd Ukrainian Front wrote several books about her activities, mixing myth and reality, as demonstrated, for example, by her report on the 'Balaton operation'.¹³² In January 1945 she claimed to have obtained documentation guarded by a Hungarian unit in the casemates of the Castle District concerning a 'new German supertank'. However, no German 'supertank' was being manufactured in 1945 and no such documentation would have been kept outside Germany – least of all in a fortress surrounded by the enemy and without any manufacturing capacity. Nor would the

Germans have passed any documentation about a 'wonder weapon' yet to be produced to others, particularly to a fickle ally: in summer 1944 they had even refused to grant production rights for any of their existing tanks. Finally, neither Frigyes Wáczek, chief of staff of the unit concerned, nor its quartermaster Alajos Vajda knew anything about their division holding such documents. The main operations of the various resistance groups are listed in table 24.

4

Hungarian soldiers on the Soviet side

After Horthy's ceasefire attempt growing numbers of Hungarian soldiers began to defect to the Soviets, although most were not motivated by anti-fascist feelings but by the belief that it was pointless to continue the struggle. Major-General Kornél Oszlányi's order of 23 November 1944 exemplifies the response of the leadership:

Incitement or conspiracy to desert will be punished by hanging. Commanders must use their weapons against deserters. Field gendarmes are to comb the woods and shoot any soldiers hiding or deserting. Those captured alive are to be court-martialled and punished by confiscation of their property and reprisals against their families. Defectors to the enemy must also be shot. The difficult situation is no longer due to the enemy but to the fact that the troops are contaminated and enemy propaganda is falling on fertile ground among some. Commanders must take more forceful action.¹³³

The number of soldiers hiding in Budapest ran to tens of thousands. The most resourceful set up fictitious military formations to cover their activities. Apart from the KISKA units these included the '101 Recruitment Centre', which served only to hide fugitive soldiers. Defections were encouraged by the front-line propaganda of the Soviets, who often sent prisoners of war back to persuade those still fighting to cross over. During the entire siege the Soviets dispatched 739 Hungarian and 53 German soldiers on such missions, and 580 Hungarians and 27 Germans returned with 6208 and 219 of their respective comrades.¹³⁴ Defections of whole units began in late January 1945, when, according to Soviet reports, the 74th Artillery Battalion, the 204th and 206/II Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalions, the IV Motorised Army Corps Battalion and the I Bem József Mounted Artillery Battalion changed sides.

As the siege progressed defectors were often given the choice between prison camp in Siberia and deployment against their fellow-countrymen.

With memories of Russian captivity during the First World War still rife, they generally opted for the latter. For the first time ever, defecting Hungarians were allowed to fight in Buda alongside the Soviets.

Previously, on Stalin's orders, even units that surrendered as a whole had been sent to prison camps, where recruitment for the Hungarian Legion and similar organisations had been discontinued by the end of 1943 because the Soviets had no desire to share the approaching victory with non-communists. The reason why Hungarian volunteer units could be formed in Buda, mainly from the end of January 1945, was that the exhausted Red Army needed reinforcements, which its own command was unable to supply. The success of agitation among Hungarian soldiers made it seem reasonable to arm the defectors. Moreover, the ceasefire agreement of 20 January 1945 between the Soviet Union and the Hungarian Provisional National Government, which had been inaugurated on 22 December 1944, had removed any legal obstacle to the creation of Hungarian combat units.

Hungarian volunteers were first deployed with the Soviet 18th and 37th Soviet Rifle Corps. The difficulty of securing volunteers is described by one researcher as follows: 'Initially many officers in particular were reluctant to fight alongside the Soviet troops. The vacillation of the officers prevented many soldiers volunteering, although conversely many officers were induced to volunteer by the example of their men.'¹³⁵ Hussar Lieutenant Aurél Salamon remembers the problems of volunteering:

Next morning there was another roll call. The soldiers were reeling with hunger and thirst. One or two fell down as a result of starvation or possibly nervousness.

A Hungarian-speaking officer stood in front of the row and uttered the decisive words: 'Hungarian soldiers, those willing to fight the fascist Germans jointly with the Red Army in the new Hungarian units step forward. Everybody will keep his rank and receive the same treatment as the Soviet soldiers.'

Initially very few responded. The men suspected a trap and were thinking hard. It may have occurred to them that they could find themselves confronting their own relatives or be caught between the Germans and the Soviets...

We knew that before the German campaign the great Stalin had liquidated thousands of his trained officers (for which a heavy price had then to be paid) without sparing even his marshalls, for fear that one of them might turn into a Soviet Napoleon... Then the shadow of Katyn, the massacre of Polish officers, loomed...

The Hungarian soldier, facing nothingness, had a choice. He could become a victim of Hitler's ideology like thousands of his comrades or end his pointless life in some murderous prison camp, if he ever got there.

The other way pointed to the fight against the Germans. Whose heart had not been rent by the sight of our proud bridges tumbling into the water and

the mournful cloud of smoke swirling above the city? The vainglorious crimes of the Nazis...

They began to undress the better dressed and equipped among the hesitating Hungarians. An infantry ensign came up to me and tried to unbuckle my belt. 'You won't need this, Lieutenant', he said with an insolent grin. 'I'll smash your head if you touch it', I snapped at the hyena, 'I'm joining the unit against the Germans.' The 'comrade' slunk away with his tail between his legs. This was what had finally made me change sides.

When the looter had retreated, more and more people gathered around me. Three of our hussars, including my batman Miklós Króczkai, opted for prison camp. 'Miklós', I said to him, 'you'll regret it...' But no, he didn't want to go back to the front. So be it. We embraced each other, and he was the only one I ever saw again, more than three years later. The other two, Dobos and Koska, ended up in the mass grave of the camp.

Our diagnosis proved to have been correct. The numbers of those lost in the camps and on the front line did not differ greatly.¹³⁶

It was probably Ferenc Krupicz, the interpreter of the Soviet 37th Rifle Corps, who set up the first volunteer units, followed by 11 others during the siege. The volunteers were allocated, after 1–2 days' training, to separate Hungarian groups numbering up to 183, the prescribed company size.¹³⁷ Reserve Artillery Captain Kázmér Várady's group, the first to join battle on 21 January in Farkasrét Cemetery, suffered the heaviest casualties: by the end of the siege all its members but two, who had been gravely wounded, were dead.¹³⁸

The Hungarian volunteers were deployed at the most dangerous points, which resulted in extraordinary casualties: several companies lost 50–80 per cent of their strength.¹³⁹ In all other respects the Soviet commanders treated them as comrades. The 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade's chief of staff, for example, issued the following order when Hungarians were attached to his unit: 'Give them full provisions, regard them as our equals and avoid any rudeness or incident'.¹⁴⁰ The commander of the 37th Rifle Corps, Major-General Kolchuk, repeatedly invited officers of the Hungarian companies to dinner. The battle positions of other Soviet commanders were guarded by Hungarian volunteers.

More than 2500 Hungarian volunteers defected – mainly in the final week of the siege – and fought on the Soviet side, primarily around Déli Station, Németsölgyi Road, Márvány Street, Csörsz Street, Attila Road, Gellért-hegy Hill and the Castle District. They wore Hungarian uniforms, with strips of red German parachute silk tied round their arms and hats. Some 600 were killed. On 15 February 1945 the volunteer companies were amalgamated with a volunteer battalion set up three days earlier under



Central Budapest, January 1945: soldiers' graves with starving horse.

Lieutenant-Colonel Oszkár Variházy to form the 1st Hungarian Volunteer Regiment (later called Buda Volunteer Regiment).

During the last fortnight of the siege Hungarians were capitulating in large numbers. The 10th Infantry Division had been trying to evade the fighting ever since the closure of the encirclement. Suspecting that the Germans would defend the Castle District to the bitter end, it had moved from nearby Rózsadomb Hill to Horthy Miklós Square (today Bartók Béla Square) further south, and on the eve of the break-out Captain Győző Benyovszky, the division's chief of staff, falsely reported that the route back was blocked by Soviet tanks. As a result, on the morning of 11 February, 6000–7000 Hungarian soldiers, including several unscathed units of the division – for example, the 10th Signal Battalion and the 6th Infantry Regiment – were captured with all their equipment. The Soviets lined up the Hungarians on Budafoki Road and called on them to join the common struggle. Benyovszky remembers:

A Russian captain climbed on a table and told those who wanted to fight the Germans to turn right. When the whole crowd turned right he was somewhat taken aback because he hadn't expected such a success. He said that he needed a combat-ready unit, and so the soldiers of the Signal Battalion, who hadn't taken part in any fighting, became a volunteer company.¹⁴¹

Benyovszky struck up a conversation with a Soviet lieutenant-colonel, who invited him to help with the organisation of a new army in Debrecen. In

the confusion he was arrested by a Soviet sergeant and forced to join a passing transport of prisoners. Variházy, with the majority of his subordinates, was initially taken to a cellar in Budafok, where, according to his adjutant, First Lieutenant Gyula Létay, he 'completely went to pieces... the Russians even took away his leather coat'.¹⁴²

On the next day the Soviets asked again who wanted to fight. Everybody, except the officers in charge of mail and duplicating, volunteered, and Létay even dragged two protesting field chaplains with him.¹⁴³ This produced the first exclusively Hungarian volunteer battalion: until then volunteers had only been able to fight in company strength alongside the Soviet units.

The Buda volunteers took a particularly active part in resisting the break-out, which the Soviets rewarded by allowing them to raise a Hungarian flag on the Royal Palace beside their own. The palace itself was surrendered by the Germans on 12 February to a volunteer group led by First Lieutenant László Cseresnyés.¹⁴⁴

As a result of the Soviet security forces' habit of indiscriminately consigning any 'dangerous elements' to the camps, some volunteer units were also taken prisoner. Thus, on 15 February, 2534 members of the Buda Volunteer Regiment were assembled in the suburb of Kelenvölgy, disarmed and directed to Jászberény, 80 kilometres east of Budapest, to be incorporated in the emerging 1st Infantry Division.

The fact that Hungarian units could participate in the action on the Soviet side should not be underestimated. Their very presence had a powerful effect on the population. They prevented many acts of violence and persuaded many Hungarian soldiers to abandon the struggle. Despite huge losses, they helped to shorten the siege and thereby reduce the number of victims.

5

Zero hour – it's all over

On the morning of 12 February 1945 a strange silence descended on the city. Only sporadic shots or machine-gun salvos could be heard. While the battle continued in the Buda Hills, the streets of Buda were completely deserted except for some stray animals and a few Hungarian or German soldiers, half-demented with hunger and fear, searching for a hiding place. As the Soviet troops had also left, there were no armed forces in the centre for several hours.

After six weeks in a cellar and encouraged by the silence, the civil servant József Finta set out to see his former workplace in the Castle District:

In Retek Street I saw some burnt-out tanks, but they weren't smoking any more. Walking along Ostrom Street, I reached Bécsi Gate. I didn't meet anybody... not a soul – only dead bodies. No Russians either...

I got to the Castle District, not a soul anywhere. I walked along Werbőczy Street [today Táncsics Mihály Street]. Nothing but bodies and ruins, supply carts and drays... I got to Szentháromság Square and decided to look in at the Council in case I found somebody there. Deserted. I went up to the office. Everything turned upside down, and not a soul. I went down the stairs and turned right. In Szentháromság Street a man was dragging himself along in front of me with his head drooping. When I was level with him I realised that he was István Bárcziházy Bárczy, the Prime Minister's under-secretary of state. He lived in Uri Street. A broken man, turned grey. When I got quite close he looked up. 'Mr Under-secretary, where have you been?' I asked. 'Jóska', he said, 'leave me alone... go and see for yourself if you can bear it...'

I walked to the Prime Minister's Palace. The corner section of the beautiful Baroque building was in ruins... Opposite the gate in the courtyard was the coach house. I stepped in, and there was the carriage the King of Italy had used when he came on a state visit, smashed to pieces. Next to it the stables. I decided to have a look, perhaps there were some horses left alive. Two dead horses were lying on the floor and not far from them, perhaps one or two metres away, a dead man, face down. I was so shaken that I turned round and ran out without looking where I was going...

When I was about twenty metres from the entrance to the temporary military hospital I saw two German soldiers coming out. Without weapons or anything, just like that. When they saw me they started running... towards Vérmező Meadow. They disappeared at the bottom of the steps and I walked back to Bécsi Gate. I saw some dead bodies here and there, but no Russians.

In the deathly silence on my way home I didn't meet any Russians either.

This time I walked down Várfok Street... towards Moszkva Square [formerly Széll Kálmán Square]. I was in such a state that I was only looking in front of my feet to make sure that I didn't stumble over a body.¹⁴⁵

The student Dénes Kövendi went out at about the same time:

In the morning I walked into the college shouting 'Hurrah, we've been liberated', but was met by silence and black looks. It transpired that during the night several women had been raped and 10-15 students hiding there had been taken away for 'malenki robot' [light work] (although they were allowed back home three days later)...

I immediately set out to see what had happened to my father and sister, from whom I hadn't heard since Christmas. They had taken refuge in the Baár

Madas boarding school, which had been regarded by people from the country as a particularly safe haven in Budapest. I understood that the Russians had got there about New Year.

However, I had no way of knowing what the situation was like now. There were vague rumours about the break-out and about some Germans being left in the Castle District. So I started towards Alkotás Street with a great detour... intending to follow today's Határőr Street towards Városmajor Grange, but when I turned into Alma Street some shots were fired. I wasn't sure whether they were meant for me, but in any case I sought shelter in a nearby villa... In the doorway I found three young men who also wanted to go down that street. Eventually we started, and this time there was no shooting...

When we reached the row of trees near the Cartographical Institute about 20 dead soldiers were lying on the opposite pavement. I think they were Hungarians and Germans. We didn't look at them very closely, but we could see more dead soldiers on the ground floor of a burnt-out building that looked like a big shop or office... To this day I can't imagine how so many of them could have got there: we hadn't seen any dead bodies anywhere else in the neighbourhood...

I left my temporary companions as I had to walk up Trombitás Street and they were going somewhere else. In the autumn I had heard that a former classmate of mine was living at number 2, and it seemed natural to drop in and find out what had been happening there.

When I opened the front door I got the first (and last) real fright during the whole siege. 10-15 apparently high-ranking German officers were standing on the stairs in a line stretching from the front door to the mezzanine... I had been programmed to be afraid of the Germans and to expect the Russians to liberate us (albeit somewhat unpleasantly). Now in my first confusion I thought that I had been captured by Germans. I mumbled something about what I had come for but didn't dare to ask about my classmate. All I wanted was to get out as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, I suspected that they weren't in a world-conquering mood either and might even have been frightened a little by my appearance. As they were going to be captured anyway they were nervously waiting to get it over as soon as possible. They asked if I had seen any Russians. I said, not in that neighbourhood. I asked whether I could continue up the road (meaning: would they please let me go). 'As a civilian you can certainly go', one of them said, and I ran for my life.

From Trombitás Street I sneaked into the boarding school from the back, without seeing either a Russian or anyone else. There I found my loved ones... Suddenly somebody brought word from the Russian soldiers posted at the gate to Lorántffy Street that nobody was to go out into the street because at half past two (or three?) they were going to start mopping up the German and Hungarian soldiers who had dispersed during the break-out.

Next morning I walked back to the college, feeling completely safe. I had no idea that they were rounding up thousands of young men in civilian clothes in the streets. In any case I got home without any mishap.¹⁴⁶

Within the ghetto in Pest there had been no significant encounters, but the inmates nevertheless experienced some of the last skirmishes as the front line passed by them:

On 17 January towards 10pm some SS men appeared from 8 Klauzál Street, having broken through the emergency passage between the shelters. They told us that they would be followed by a whole company within the hour and left, breaking through the emergency passage to 12 Klauzál Street. An hour later, however, a platoon of Red soldiers arrived from the street through the normal entrance to the shelter. The block commander (who had probably learnt Russian as a prisoner in the First World War) told them what the SS men had said. They sent us out of the room into which the emergency passage opened...and hid behind the concrete water tanks in the larger room to await the Germans.

It could have been midnight when they arrived. The Russians let five or six enter before opening fire with their sub-machine guns. Luckily they could see even in the semi-darkness that one German was carrying a *panzerfaust*, and they shot him before he could use it. Another threw a hand grenade at the Germans, which made quite a mess. It smashed three water tanks and the water poured into our part of the cellar, half a metre below the large room. We climbed on the wooden boxes we had turned into beds, trying to think of a way to reach the emergency exit if the water rose higher... Of course we didn't feel like going out into the street, where we could still hear the battle going on. In any case it was so cold out there that when we did go out next day the dead bodies piled up to be burnt didn't even smell.

It could have been about one o'clock when they herded us from the cellar to the ground floor apartments, where we waited till morning. The wounded SS man was still breathing heavily when we walked past him. His *panzerfaust* was lying on the corner of one of the concrete water tanks. No Red soldiers committed the slightest atrocity against anybody in the building while this platoon was there.¹⁴⁷

The buildings on the front line had been evacuated immediately before the break-out. On the afternoon of 10 February the residents of Olasz Avenue, Fillér Street, Fény Street and Káplár Street were marching towards Budakeszi:

Along Olasz Avenue, with civilians from the neighbouring streets and German prisoners of war, our procession grew to several hundred. That is how we reached the wooded stretch of land between the edge of the city and Budakeszi...

The peaceful silence of the picturesque landscape was broken by swearing and the stamping of hooves. As we were stomping through the creaking snow, a Russian soldier appeared on horseback, with a sub-machine gun and drum magazine hanging from his shoulder on a leather strap. At that time I didn't know any Russian and couldn't understand the abuse he was letting loose on one German soldier who was walking along with his comrades, painfully dragging



Margit Boulevard after the siege.

his thickly bandaged foot. We automatically stopped when we saw the Russian force his horse to knock the wounded man down and stamp on him...

The German tried to get up and hobble on. The previous scene was repeated three times – as we heard while we walked on horrified – and then we could only assume that he hadn't got up again and had been left behind in the snow, either wounded or dead.

The Russian's fury was humanly understandable. He might have seen or suffered many German cruelties in the war...and come to hate all Germans. But...why had this particular prisoner among hundreds aroused his unbridled fury? If he wanted to kill him in revenge why didn't he simply shoot him rather than torture him to death? Why did he alone want revenge and none of his comrades who were escorting us? Could his thirst for revenge have turned on us as well?

To this day I can't find a satisfactory answer to these questions.¹⁴⁸

When the Soviets allowed some evacuees back home the day after the break-out one of them witnessed the following scene:

On 12 February in the morning it was still dark when a patrol of three came in, saying: 'Go home – the siege is over'. They called at every villa... We went back the way we had come, along Fillér Street, but in Nyúl Street we turned off towards Olasz Avenue. My son and I had great difficulty pulling the sledge because the snow had melted in the meantime. By then we could see fully

equipped German soldiers lying dead everywhere. In Olasz Avenue we met people coming from the Cogwheel Railway and they told us what it was like there – the road covered in dead bodies. Hundreds of us, from Lövőház Street, Retek Street and Széll Kálmán Square, had gathered.

In Olasz Avenue three armed Russians were walking ahead of us. When we reached the Cartographical Institute the Russians stopped us. We didn't know what was going on. We were in the third row behind the patrol, followed by the crowd, women, children, sick people. Suddenly I saw a ragged, down-at-heel, stooped man in German uniform, without weapons or anything, coming towards us from Retek Street. The poor devil had made one mistake. He hadn't buttoned up his coat and his iron cross was showing. As the patrol was deliberating we stood and waited to see what was going to happen. After talking for a while one of them beckoned to the German soldier: 'Come along'. He escorted him to the tracks of the Hűvösvölgy tram line on the other side of the street. Of course by then the tram wasn't running and the tracks were full of snow. He made the German walk ahead of him and when he had almost reached the track shot him in the base of the skull in front of our eyes. The German fell forward...and was left lying on the ground.¹⁴⁹

6

The treatment of the prisoners of war

I was trudging towards Olasz Avenue with a large Russian soldier. He had a purple surcingle tied round his waist (who knows which prelate he had got it from) and kept showing me a silver chain that looked like gold... It occurred to me that the surcingle symbolises the taming of physical desires. I wonder if it did this warrior any good.¹⁵⁰

They really took a lot. From me a pair of boots, my spare jodhpurs, my torch – into which I had scratched 'Stolen from First Lieutenant Péchy' – and many other trifles.¹⁵¹

Victors generally commit more outrages than those facing defeat. German atrocities against Soviet soldiers during the siege were relatively rare, and not many are known today.¹⁵² Contrary to international practice, the Germans forced prisoners to carry ammunition but treated them relatively humanely, not least because they knew that if they were captured – as was becoming more and more likely – they would be called to account for any acts of brutality. Typically, when Germany became a battleground, Hitler issued a special order: 'Prisoners taken during the capture of towns or villages... must not be killed near the front because later on the civilian

population would have to pay for it'.¹⁵³ In Hungary only a few German atrocities caused a stir,¹⁵⁴ and these were duly exploited by the Soviet propaganda machine. Nor were the claims entirely groundless. In isolated cases Germans had indeed executed wounded Soviet soldiers: a German sergeant attached to Major Viharos's combat group, for instance, had assembled a number of wounded in a cellar and shot them.¹⁵⁵

On the Soviet side the execution of wounded prisoners, particularly SS and auxiliary servicemen wrongly named 'vlasovists',¹⁵⁶ was common. The latter, allocated mainly to the Service Corps, represented 5–10 per cent of the German forces. A member of the Morlin Group remembers: 'The Russians started to chase the Russian/Ukrainian prisoners who had been serving in the German army ... out of one of the houses with their rifle butts. As they reached the square after running the gauntlet between the Russians they were shot into a heap in front of us.'¹⁵⁷ Another prisoner recalls:

When we had lined up, a Russian officer asked which of us were Russians. I knew the Russian mentality and language well enough to guess what that meant. About 15-20 stepped forward. There were probably some Hiwis among them, but most were ethnic Germans from Russia who had served in the Waffen SS. Before our eyes the Soviets set about them with their swords and when they were lying on the ground, battered and stabbed all over, they were finally killed with a sub-machine gun.¹⁵⁸

The executions were unpredictable:

They were herding us towards Rózsadomb Hill. We stopped in front of a large villa. Two rows ahead of me they shot a prisoner in the head after a short exchange. He was wearing a Hungarian uniform but also spoke Russian. Was he a vlasovist? As he was dying with blood pouring from his head we stepped over him.¹⁵⁹

In the German military hospital underneath today's Széchényi Library Soviet soldiers addressed each patient individually, and those in German uniforms who did not answer in German were shot on the spot.¹⁶⁰ They raped and stabbed several nurses and threw hand-grenades into the wards.¹⁶¹ Similar atrocities against German wounded occurred in almost every hospital.¹⁶²

The Soviet soldiers often took no prisoners and slaughtered even those Germans who surrendered. According to survivors 'dead German soldiers with their hands above their heads were lying in serried ranks on the embankment of the Cogwheel Railway',¹⁶³ and similar executions are reported by many other sources.¹⁶⁴

The Waffen SS and the wounded were most at risk.¹⁶⁵ The former were killed for political reasons, the latter because their care would have required

too much effort and they could not work. In the sports ground in Budakeszi SS soldiers were forced to dig their own graves before being shot.¹⁶⁶ In Pilisszentkereszt both the Soviets and the Germans used axes to dismember prisoners who had been wounded in street fighting.¹⁶⁷ Some wounded prisoners who could not walk were dragged along the road behind trucks or crushed alive by tanks.¹⁶⁸ The latter fate befell the patients of the military hospital near the Ministry of War, who were carried out into the street expressly for that purpose.¹⁶⁹ Ensign Norbert Major witnessed the following incident:

Two human figures were lying in Tóth Árpád Promenade. Suddenly we saw one of them raising his hand and then feebly dropping it. Nobody dared to do anything, but several of us asked the Soviet lieutenant who was escorting us to help. He drew his pistol, walked up to them and ... shot them in the back of the neck. That completed the first aid.¹⁷⁰

Soldiers captured during the break-out, when the Soviets no longer feared reprisals, were most likely to be executed. This is confirmed by the mutilated bodies exhumed from the mass graves in the environment of Buda, and by the reminiscences of the foresters and other villagers who buried them. German and Soviet dead were often interred in common graves with a red star placed above them, as for instance in Csolnok. German graves were destroyed by the Soviets in Pilisszentlélek and elsewhere.

One particularly dark episode was the death march of prisoners to Baja, when those unable to walk any further were shot through the base of the skull and thrown into the ditch on the roadside by Soviet soldiers bringing up the rear.¹⁷¹ Iván Hermándy had witnessed four such executions when he too faltered and lay down, resigned to his fate. When the Soviets discovered that he was a Hungarian, they bundled him on a passing peasant cart that took him to a prison camp, where he was refused admission because he had arrived on his own. Finally he was abandoned propped up against a tree.¹⁷²

At that stage the prisoners received hardly any food. The first meal given to one group transferred from the Sósút camp was maize with salami, cooked in a petrol drum, which they were unable to eat, although they soon wished they had.¹⁷³ One survivor remembers: 'Sometimes we were allowed to rest. Then all the prisoners threw themselves into the puddles and ditches to drink. If there was a field of corn along the road we all rushed to grab some, ignoring the shots fired at us at random. Hundreds died of dysentery after drinking the dirty snow water.'¹⁷⁴

The executions were not carried out according to any master plan. The Soviet army command, unlike the German, issued no unequivocal orders,

but instead engaged in constant propaganda portraying the enemy as vile, diabolical and only fit to be executed.¹⁷⁵

In every war Stalin's official propagandists called the enemy troops 'wild beasts', 'murderers', 'scum', 'barbarians' and 'animals'. During the winter war of 1939 they had described the Finns, who behaved in a relatively civilised manner, in such terms, and the daily reading of Soviet soldiers included articles about men having their eyes gouged out or being burnt alive, and about the barbarities of Finnish Red Cross nurses.¹⁷⁶ During the Second World War they labelled the Germans 'cannibals', 'filth', 'monsters' and 'brutes'.¹⁷⁷ Printed envelopes issued to soldiers for their letters home frequently showed the picture of a child begging: 'Dad, kill a German.'¹⁷⁸ In some units forms called 'Personal Revenge Account' were distributed with blanks for the number of Germans killed, the type of weapon used and the confirmation of the commander.¹⁷⁹

In his propaganda piece *The German*, the Soviet author Ilya Ehrenburg styled even ordinary German conscripts 'murderers', 'wild beasts' or 'starving rats' and declared: 'We do not regard them as human beings... Europe has long known that the best German is the dead German.'¹⁸⁰ Similar phrases are found in the writings of Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Fadeev, Aleksei Tolstoy and the historian Evgeni Tarle, or in the novel *The Science of Hatred* by the Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov.

Articles by Ehrenburg and his colleagues, which had been appearing in the front-line newspapers since July 1941, were compulsory reading for the Red Army. The mood they created was responsible for the deaths of many German prisoners. However, the experiences of Soviet soldiers who had personally witnessed the Germans' treatment of Jews and other civilians, also played an important part in triggering atrocities.

The Soviet leadership must have been aware of the soldiers' conduct. The command of the political section of the 2nd Ukrainian Front stressed in a report that the German soldiers preferred death to captivity.¹⁸¹ The Red Army contained many officers who had served in the political police (Cheka, OGPU, NKVD) or the notorious OSNAS¹⁸² sabotage units. In his memoirs, Lieutenant-Colonel Chebotarev recalls commanding an 'extermination unit' of the NKVD in the fight against Caucasian tribes in the 1930s.¹⁸³ Others acquired ample experience in operations such as the suppression of the Tambov peasants' uprising (when projectiles filled with poison gas were used against civilians for the first time in history), the campaign against the kulaks or the Katyn massacre. Regiments, battalions or NKVD units of this kind – professional murderers, trained to kill even innocent people – were attached to every Soviet army.¹⁸⁴ Eye-witnesses report that they often



Artist Sándor Ék painting his poster
'The fascist beast cannot escape'.



'GPU: it would be the same here' –
contemporary poster.

took away the identification discs of those about to be executed in order to prevent them being recognised in the future.¹⁸⁵

The opposite sometimes also happened. First Lieutenant Wolfgang Betzler was congratulated by a Soviet soldier on his medals, and given a hat by another when he had lost his own. SS Hauptsturmführer Kurt Portugall writes:

After asking for my name, rank and unit they offered me a piece of bread and some vodka, remarking that I had probably not had anything to eat or drink for days and must be hungry... The heat of the room made me break out in a sweat. The Russian major told me to open my camouflage suit. When I did so he studied my stripes, SS runes and medals with interest. Then he said: 'I have great respect for the soldiers of the Waffen SS. You will now be transported to our hinterland. In our base there are as many bastards as in yours. I advise you to take off the SS runes and medals, it would be better for your health. I don't want your medals, none of us here wants them, because we are members of the guard units, who are the Russian Waffen SS.'¹⁸⁶

A few minutes earlier two men who turned out to speak Russian

were given a terrible beating. The Russians made them kneel down and swear by the Mother of God that they would never again take up weapons against their fatherland. These two comrades were Germans from the Volga who had

emigrated in 1939 as a result of the pact between Hitler and Stalin. They were allowed to rejoin our line after being treated by Russian nurses, and each had a loaf of bread tucked under his arm.¹⁸⁷

An incident involving a number of Germans and Hungarians, captured in Detrekő Street on Rózsadomb Hill, was typical of the unpredictability of the Soviets. The prisoners were lined up and shot one after another by their vengeful captors. When they came to Staff Captain Béla Barabás a Soviet officer dashed out of a nearby villa and roared at the Soviet soldiers to stop the executions. In another incident some postmen and conductors, captured near Hegyalja Road, were saved by a Russian-speaking Hungarian officer who explained to the Soviets that their uniforms were not those of the Arrow Cross militia.¹⁸⁸

Sometimes well-meaning Soviet soldiers practically invited Hungarian prisoners to escape. Thus First Lieutenant István Kaszás, asking for water, was told by a Soviet guard to go wherever he liked, although after drinking a few mouthfuls he rejoined the column because he was afraid of being unable to prove his identity if he was left behind.¹⁸⁹ Elsewhere, at the end of a march, the officers were ordered to step out of line: instead of being shot as they expected, they were allowed to sleep in the farmhouses together with their guards, while the lower ranks slept in the barns.

Sometimes people were captured by pure coincidence. The wounded Hussar Lieutenant István Tabódy was asked by a Soviet soldier if he spoke German. As soon as he had uttered an eager 'ja' the soldier, with an enormous kick, propelled him into a batch of prisoners – he never had a chance to explain that he was a Hungarian.¹⁹⁰

As a result of the unbridled propaganda, 'lawless behaviour, unworthy of human beings' had spread among the Soviet soldiers and 'some units had become uncontrollable'.¹⁹¹ From 1945, therefore, firm orders prohibiting the ill-treatment of innocent prisoners of war and civilians were given to almost every unit.¹⁹² A copy of such an order issued by Marshall Malinovsky, for example, fell into the hands of German and Hungarian troops early that year.

The Soviet atrocities in Budapest were not the only ones committed during the war and bear no comparison to the crimes of the German *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union or of Soviet soldiers in East Prussia.¹⁹³ The fact that they occurred does not mitigate the culpability of the German National Socialist system.

7

The Soviet crimes*Institutional offences*

To some extent every army fighting a war violates human rights. The Red Army was no exception. However, there were significant differences between the two sides as to the manner and extent of these violations. Before the siege Hungary had been a theoretically independent ally of the Germans, who therefore committed fewer atrocities there than, for example, in the Soviet Union. Although Germans participated in the persecution of the Jews, their role was largely restricted to 'paperwork' – those most directly responsible were the Arrow Cross government and its executive organs.

German crimes in Budapest occurred primarily during the last phase of the siege, but generally remained confined to looting and destroying property, as for instance in Pestszentlőrinc, where a number of workers' homes were blown up to provide a clear field of fire for the artillery. One of the most serious acts of violence against civilians took place in Dunaharaszti, where a group of Germans shot villagers protesting against the confiscation of their cattle.¹⁹⁴ At 3 Hegytető Street on Sashegy Hill another group drove a family with whom they had been billeted out of their own home, killing their young daughter in the process.¹⁹⁵ However, such cases did not exceed a few dozen.

The Red Army had reached the Carpathian Basin in very different circumstances. The Soviets rightly regarded Hungary as an enemy state, and they also found communications with the population more difficult, because very few Hungarians spoke Russian. Soviet soldiers were rarely granted leave and there were no field brothels, which accounted for many of the rapes. They were allowed to send home parcels weighing up to 10 kilogrammes, which was a hidden incentive to loot, as there was nothing else to send. Most, including the highest officers, had directly or indirectly experienced the behaviour of the German and Hungarian occupiers of their country and were therefore frequently bent on revenge.

Although the near-genocidal activities of the Germans and Hungarians in the Soviet Union received a great deal of publicity from Soviet propagandists, they bore no immediate relation to those of the Soviet soldiers, who also perpetrated atrocities in Czechoslovakia or allied Yugoslavia. The causes of war crimes are mainly found in the system that tolerates, supports or instigates them, determining the extent to which the rule of law and

justice may be ignored and where institutional (and, to a degree, personal) limits to criminal behaviour should be set. Armies commit crimes because the military command has an interest in deterrence. In the totalitarian Soviet state, with its partly Asiatic structures, the destructive impulses awakened by this approach surfaced with particular violence.

Many Soviet crimes, in addition to those committed by individuals on their own initiative, were ordered from above. In Budapest, as in other large cities, special units of the Red Army promptly began to collect valuables for the Soviet Union. According to the Swiss Embassy, a small but meticulous group of officers 'plundered the strongboxes – particularly American and British – in every bank and took away all the cash' shortly after the end of the siege.¹⁹⁶ The Jews paid dearly for their 'liberation': 95 per cent of the works of art that were stolen are thought to have belonged to famous Jewish collectors including Móricz Kornfeld, Bertalan Demény and Sándor Harsányi.¹⁹⁷

The country's public collections were systematically robbed by officers trained in art history, which is how the collection of Ferenc Hatvany disappeared from the safe of the Bank for Commerce (today the Interior Ministry). The only well still working in the neighbourhood was in the cellar of the bank, and people who came to fetch water were able to observe Soviet soldiers carrying valuables away for days.¹⁹⁸ It may have been no coincidence that the art dealer Márton Porkai, who lived next door, was seized by the NKVD at the same time. Events in the Hungarian General Credit Bank (today the Ministry of Finance) were reported by the manager as follows:

On 20 January 1945 a group of Russian officers came to the bank. They opened every safe and strongbox, at times by force. They took away 113 million pengős in cash as well as about 800 suitcases and other containers deposited by clients, and emptied 1,400 safe-deposit boxes.

It is impossible to estimate the value of the objects taken, but it is certain that it was a very large amount. They also took securities worth several hundred million pengős, which belonged partly to clients and partly to the bank.¹⁹⁹

The Weiss Manfred Works in Csepel were dismantled and carried away by the Soviets on the grounds that they were German property (the Weiss family had handed its shares over to the SS in exchange for being allowed to escape to Switzerland). Jewish possessions stored in the vaults of the National Bank also fell into the hands of the Soviets, who continued loading crates of them onto lorries for days.²⁰⁰

In tandem with the Soviet occupation of the city the 'cleansing' of the Communist Party began. The resistance activist Pál Demény, whose followers

comprised the majority of the Budapest Communist Party, was arrested on 13 February, allegedly because his faction had opposed the Moscow party line. No notice was taken of the fact that on 16 February, shortly after being released from Arrow Cross detention, he had written to the Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi, asking for clarification of his position. The first step in 'uniting the workers' in order to secure a Communist takeover was always the removal of dissidents.

A particularly murky case was that of Raoul Wallenberg, perhaps the most famous victim of the pathologically suspicious Soviet counter-intelligence service. His fate has repeatedly been attributed to the fact that he had seen documents concerning the Katyn massacre.²⁰¹ In 1943 the Hungarian forensic pathologist Ferenc Orsós had reported on his inspection of the scene of the massacre, and the Polish resistance had also sent details to Hungary. These documents were stored in the Hungarian General Credit Bank. Like Wallenberg, Béla Varga, the president of the Hungarian National Assembly in 1945, and Zoltán Mikó, the prominent resistance fighter, were familiar with the results of the investigation. It was therefore no coincidence that all three were seized by Soviet counter-intelligence. The two Hungarians were initially sentenced to death. Béla Varga was saved by his interpreter, a Soviet colonel of Hungarian origin, who told him what to say: 'Most important, if they ask you about Katyn, you know nothing'.²⁰² Mikó was executed on 15 August 1945. Mikó's assistant, Vilmos Bondor, who was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment, was repeatedly asked during interrogations what he knew about Wallenberg and the 'documents'. Wallenberg himself was arrested on 19 January 1945 in Rákosszentmihály and died in the Soviet Union in unknown circumstances.

In addition, Wallenberg, Mikó and Bondor had committed capital offences, according to Soviet logic, simply by having contacts with espionage organisations. Wallenberg, whose position at the Swedish Embassy was merely a blind, was financed by the US World Refugee Board, which Soviet counter-intelligence believed – not entirely without reason – to have links with the US secret service.²⁰³ Mikó and Bondor for their part had commanded an Arrow Cross sabotage and intelligence unit. These facts alone would have been sufficient for the Soviets to treat the three men with utmost severity.

The paranoia of the Soviets was so great that they even arrested Communist members of the armed resistance and accused Zionist activists of spying for the Germans.²⁰⁴ Hardest hit were people who had been engaged in intelligence or counter-intelligence, held the post of public prosecutor, or done business with foreign firms:

Everybody was a suspect and when somebody was caught all of his acquaintances, friends, relatives, debtors and business partners whose names were found in his notebooks were arrested. Every exporter was suspected of being a spy and his documents were searched with the greatest enthusiasm; and if for some reason an unfortunate citizen was named in the files of an export company – whether as an employee, an expert, an inquirer, a lawyer or a tenderer – he was locked up in a front-line prison.²⁰⁵

The fact that such occupations and connections were associated by the Soviets with the worst crimes right from the outset reflects on their own totalitarian system. As an inevitable consequence of Stalinism Soviet soldiers distrusted even their fellow-soldiers and kept constant watch over each other.

The Wallenberg affair continued to claim victims long after the war. In 1952, in parallel with the 'Jewish doctors' trial' in Moscow, a show trial of Zionists was mounted in Budapest. The leaders of the Pest ghetto and the organisers of rescue operations were to be convicted of the 'murder' of Wallenberg. Several hundred people were arrested, and in the course of interrogations many suffered injuries from which they never recovered. Miksa Domonkos, one of celebrated rescuers, died as a result of torture on 25 February 1954. It was only thanks to the death of Stalin that the trials were broken off.²⁰⁶

Even diplomats were not always spared, as Carl Lutz, the Swiss chargé d'affaires, experienced:

Shortly after the capture of Budapest the Russian military also descended on us in the ruins of the British Embassy. An officer demanded our embassy cars, some of which were no longer functioning, and gave me 5 minutes to get the missing 'spare part'. Then he drew his pistol, ran after me into the bunker and shot at me several times. I barely managed to escape through the emergency exit of the air-raid shelter. Subsequently we were harassed and looted for 10 days and nights by drunken soldiers.²⁰⁷

A report of the Swiss Embassy about the treatment of its staff and the loss of Jewish property reads:

Soon after the arrival of the Russians the head of the Swiss Embassy, Herr [Harald] Feller, and his chief clerk, Herr [Hans] Mayer, were arrested by the GPU [actually the NKVD, which had absorbed the GPU in 1934]. They have not been heard of since...The premises of the Embassy were looted four times. During one of the raids a Russian even put a noose round the neck of an embassy employee, Herr Ember, in an attempt to force him to hand over the safe key. When he still refused the noose was drawn so tight that he lost consciousness. The Russians took the key from his pocket and cleared out the safe, taking deposits worth several million with them...One of the large safes

of the Swedish Embassy that the Germans had not managed to remove was removed by the Russians with all its contents.²⁰⁸

In several cases during the fighting Soviet soldiers had forced unarmed civilians to walk ahead of them as living shields.²⁰⁹ After the fall of Budapest, Malinovsky granted his troops three days of 'free looting' – which included forcing women to act as prostitutes and holding them captive for a fortnight if they were considered attractive²¹⁰ – to celebrate their victory.²¹¹ There were some well-meaning Soviet officers who warned their Hungarian acquaintances of the imminent danger.

The depredation of the capital became more and more systematic as the occupation progressed. In concerted actions the entire equipment of the hotels on Margit Island was stolen, as were many sculptures in public places. In Budafok, a suburb famous for its wine cellars, the Soviet district commanders and their political officers were replaced twice in quick succession because their exploits under the influence of free alcohol had come to the attention of the supreme command.²¹²

In March 1945 the Swiss Embassy reported on the methods of the 'liberators':

Looting was ubiquitous and thorough, albeit not always systematic. One man had all his trousers stolen but not his jackets. Some small groups specialised in valuables, looking for gold, silver and other metals with detectors. Trained dogs were also used... Immovable furniture and large works of art were often simply destroyed. Often the looted homes were finally set on fire...

Today order is being kept by Hungarian police. However, Russian soldiers frequently stop passers-by to relieve them of the contents of their pockets, particularly watches, cash and sometimes even personal documents...

The insecurity is made worse by the Russian practice of abducting people from the streets or flats to secure labourers for public works... In this way thousands of people are forced to work in the countryside and in Budapest itself. After a while they are generally allowed to return home, but are never given the opportunity to inform their relations of their whereabouts. The current Minister of Public Works, Count Géza Teleki, and a Mayor of Budapest were led away without prior warning and found only two days later, when a Russian officer to whom they were able to talk finally released them. Prince Pál Esterházy was discovered in a cemetery burying dead horses. Near Gödöllő a large concentration camp has been set up with about 40,000 internees, who are being deported to an unknown destination in the east. It is common knowledge that these internees are given very little food unless they sign a statement that they wish to join the Red Army or to work in Russia of their own free will.²¹³

The concept of public work was rather loosely interpreted by the Soviets:

If some work had to be done for the military, such as moving a gun into position, pulling a broken-down car from the road or loading goods from a store onto a lorry, the Russians simply stopped pedestrians and set them to work... Sometimes the forced labourers worked for half an hour, at other times for half a day. They were either given food or not, just as the Russians pleased.²¹⁴

The Soviets' favourite spots for seizing labourers were those with the heaviest pedestrian traffic. The Anker Palace corner, the intersection of Kossuth Lajos Street and Múzeum Boulevard, and the junction of the Great Boulevard and Rákóczy Road were particularly hazardous, and so were the bridges, where they used the trick of announcing that people would only be allowed to cross in groups of a hundred, whereupon all those rushing to be in the first group were forced to carry rubble instead of continuing their journey.

In February 1945 Malinovsky had some 50,000 men rounded up²¹⁵ in order to deliver the 110,000 prisoners he had reported to the Soviet supreme command. Police officers, postmen and firefighters in uniform were classified as prisoners of war from the outset, and many members of the pro-Soviet Buda Volunteer Regiment suffered the same fate. As this was still not enough, people with German names listed in the municipal records were seized in their homes, as were many passers-by in the streets, including former victims of the fascists. To fill the gaps left by captives escaping from marches, residents were dragged out of their houses. The most notorious camps were those in Gödöllő, Cegléd, Jászberény and Baja. Imre Kovács remembers Gödöllő:

We stumbled across the railway lines and the three- or four-storey buildings of the magnificent high school appeared in front of our eyes, surrounded by a double barbed wire fence. Both inside and outside the fence guards were doing the rounds, constantly yelling and shooting. In front of the fence huge groups of women, children and old people stood calling out, and from behind it frightening shadows waved and answered. The guards did all they could to keep the visitors at a distance, firing warning shots at the more daring who advanced closer... We really had the impression that the whole of Budapest was crammed together before us. Fur-coated gentlemen, distinguished in their bearing but shabby and worn out, were marking time in the courtyard next to tram conductors, streetsweepers, postmen and policemen... For some reason the camp command was continually taking stock of the people. Names were flying through the air and there was swearing and cursing.²¹⁶

Only a small percentage of the Hungarians captured in Budapest and its environs could really be regarded as prisoners of war. The deportation of civilians assumed such proportions that János Gyöngyösi, the Foreign

Minister in the Hungarian Provisional National Government, personally requested the head of the Allied Control Commission for Hungary, Marshall Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, to end them.

Many houses that were still habitable remained occupied by Soviet soldiers for months. The owners were at best allowed into the gardens to rummage among the objects smashed and thrown out by the victors. One of them remembers what she found when she could finally return home:

The Russians stayed in the villa for over six months. All that time they had not even carried the rubble out of the wrecked rooms. When they suddenly left at the end of the summer a shocking sight awaited us. They had taken away practically everything they had not burnt as firewood or thrown into the bomb craters. The piano, the paintings, the furniture, the carpets – at least those they had not cut up to make horse blankets or ‘curtain fringes’ for their trucks – they had taken them all. And they had also taken 13 doors and a total of 72 window frames...

In every room the remnants of my grandfather’s library were stacked high: a pile of human excrement, an open book placed on top of it, another pile, another book, and so on... The paper required for this ‘activity’ had of course been torn out of the books in handfuls... These towers stood in rows like proud skyscrapers, giving off an unbearable stench.²¹⁷

The Soviets brutally retaliated for any action taken against them. When an Arrow Cross sniper shot a Russian officer from an upper floor in Halmi Road all the men found in the vicinity were herded to the park in Sósfürdő Street and executed in front of the assembled residents of the district as a ‘warning’.²¹⁸ After the capture of Buda mass executions took place in the courtyard of Margit Boulevard prison, Széna Square and Torockó Square.²¹⁹

Looting and rapes

What he told us was nothing short of hell on earth. 70 percent of women, from girls of twelve to mothers in the ninth month of pregnancy, raped; most men deported; every home looted; the city and its churches in ruins; in the restaurants and stores horses; in the streets, cemeteries and ransacked shops thousands of unburied bodies; in the cellars people half-demented with hunger, cutting pieces of flesh from horses dead for days; and so on. This is how things may have been in Jerusalem when the prophet Jeremiah uttered his laments.²²⁰ (Bishop József Grósz)

To some inhabitants of Budapest, the Soviet occupation meant life and freedom, or at least deliverance from the Arrow Cross, to others – who often bore no direct responsibility for the fascist crimes – it meant mass graves, rapes or being sent to Siberia.

The worst thing was the sense of absolute defencelessness. Although the danger of being killed had been greater during the siege, it had in some ways been easier to bear than the precarious existence that followed. Since the air-raids in summer 1944 everybody had known that the war would also claim civilian victims, but few had expected the utter lawlessness and insecurity that came with the 'liberation'.

The atrocities varied from one area of the city to another. Where fighting had been most prolonged, the suffering of the population was greatest. In Buda, particularly around Gellért-hegy Hill, the Castle District and Rózsadomb Hill, law and order had not returned even by the beginning of March 1945. Here almost all the houses were looted several times by marauding Soviet soldiers or deserters, Soviet patrols called in to help or Hungarian criminals.

The looters' behaviour was unpredictable. Sometimes they killed whole families, at other times they started to play with a child's toys and left peacefully. Even the Soviet city command was not spared: Lieutenant-General Zamertsev's car was stolen while he was in the theatre. Ferenc Kishont (Ephraim Kishon), the Israeli humorist, who lived in Budapest at the time, recalls:

We thought that the men who had defeated the gigantic National Socialist war machine were superior in military terms. However, all the Soviets we met were just gifted black marketeers and passionate rag-and-bone men. They were wearing a colourful medley of clothes from the occupied territories. Some were pulling prams filled with plunder from their looting campaigns.²²¹

Both during and after the siege it was primarily the women who looked after their families and often risked their lives, carrying water, queueing for food, nursing the sick and trying to protect their families. Most men did not venture out of the cellars, either because they had reason to fear capture – first by the Arrow Cross, then by the Soviets – or because they were less brave. Intruders were more often resisted by women, who often paid for their courage with their lives. A Swiss Embassy report reads:

The worst suffering of the Hungarian population is due to the rape of women. Rapes – affecting all age groups from ten to seventy – are so common that very few women in Hungary have been spared. They are sometimes accompanied by incredible brutalities. Many women prefer suicide to these horrors... The misery is made worse by the sad fact that many Russian soldiers are diseased and there are absolutely no medicines in Hungary.²²²

Mrs Ödön Faragó kept a diary throughout the siege and stopped temporarily when the second wave of Soviet soldiers replaced those on the front line and the rapes began:

I haven't been able to write for a week. This week has been hell. What we have been through is indescribable. We tremble whenever we hear a Russian. We fold our hands and pray to God to let him walk on. We have nothing left. They have taken our clothes, household linen, food, drink, everything. We have been up day and night, trembling. The seven weeks of the siege were child's play compared with the three weeks of torture we have endured since.²²³

In February 1945 the communists of Kőbánya submitted the following appeal to the Soviets:

For decades the workers of the world have been looking to Moscow like the ignorant labourer to Christ. It was from there that they expected... liberation from the barbaric vandalism of fascism. After long and painful persecution the glorious, longed-for Red Army has come, but what a Red Army!...

Kőbánya was the place where the liberating Red Army arrived on 2 January after heavy house-to-house fighting, leaving destruction, devastation and desolation in its wake. This was not because there were fascists among the rags and bits of furniture in the homes of the people who had been wage slaves for decades: among the working people of Kőbánya very few were pro-German and the rest hated the Nazis. Rather, it was an outbreak of rampant, demented hatred. Mothers were raped by drunken soldiers in front of their children and husbands. Girls as young as 12 were dragged from their fathers and mothers to be violated by 10-15 soldiers and often infected with venereal diseases. After the first group came others, who followed their example... Several comrades lost their lives trying to protect their wives and daughters...

The situation in the factories is terrible. Russian officers have created impossible conditions by ignoring the workers' committees, which contain many Communist Party members. The workers toil for 3 pengős an hour on an empty stomach with no more than a lunch of peas or beans all day... The former fascist managers are treated with more respect than the workers' committees, because they supply the Russian officers with women... Lootings by Russian soldiers are still the order of the day... We know that the intelligent members of the army are communists, but if we turn to them for help they have fits of rage and threaten to shoot us, saying: 'And what did you do in the Soviet Union? You not only raped our wives before our eyes, but for good measure you killed them together with their children, set fire to our villages and razed our cities to the ground.' We know that Hungarian capitalism bred its own sadist brutes... But we do not understand why a Siberian soldier talks like that... when the fascist attacks... never even reached the Urals, the dream of German fascism, let alone Siberia...

It is no good praising the Red Army on posters, in the Party, in the factories and everywhere, if men who have survived the tyranny of Szálasi are now herded along the roads like cattle by Russian soldiers, constantly leaving dead bodies behind...

Comrades sent to the countryside to promote land distribution are being asked by the peasants what use the land is to them if their horses have been taken away from the meadows by the Russians – they cannot plough with their noses. If these things were stopped it would outshine all the frantic propaganda and the Hungarian workers would regard the Red soldiers as gods.²²⁴

In spring 1945 the leadership of the Hungarian Communist Party received this complaint from the branch in the village of Bicske:

Although the front line is now a long way from here Bicske is in an even worse position than when we were evicted from our village for 9 weeks [during the relief attempts from December 1944 to February 1945]. We have been robbed of everything, but marauding soldiers are still constantly stealing and looting. In peacetime we had more than 1000 horses, now only 30, and the soldiers are still stealing them daily... The people live in fear... the women are treated most shamelessly... Every day that passes the people have less confidence in the Party.²²⁵

In the village of Pilisszentkereszt, which changed hands twice during the relief attempts, the local priest writes in his diary:

Till 6 January 1945 things were relatively quiet, although the soldiers, and even the officers, did a lot of looting and pillaging. Led by an officer, they robbed me three times... From 6 to 11 January the GPU constantly interrogated me, twice opening fire with a sub-machine gun behind me (as a threat)... Anti-tank mines have so far claimed 13 dead and 87 more or less seriously wounded [of a total population of about 950]... We have been ordered to destroy the mines that are being found. By now we have disarmed many hundred. Four men have been shot by the Russians... The Russians camped in the church for two weeks. They broke the tabernacle open and scattered the host on the floor. They spread mattresses taken from my house and elsewhere in front of the altar, and raped girls and women on them. They used the side altars as tables and the tabernacle as a store cupboard for jam, lard, bacon etc. They ruined the organ by playing dance music on it during their parties. They cut the vestments into thin ribbons... to make military insignia, decorations for their hats and stripes for their trousers. They unscrewed the chalices after copiously drinking from them...

They were going to execute me because – as a ‘bourgeois’ who has a phone and a radio and can speak German – I must be spying for the Germans... My home has been completely plundered by the Russians... 80 percent of my furniture is a thing of the past. It was used as firewood. I have nothing left.²²⁶

In various places specially hired prostitutes entertained the Soviets, while elsewhere housemaids sacrificed themselves for their employers, or mothers for their daughters. Generally women tried to look older than they were.

Many wore shapeless clothes and smudged their faces or pretended to be suffering from diseases.²²⁷

There are no precise records of the number of women raped in Hungary. Zamertsev spoke of 1800 to Sándor Tóth, but this was clearly only a fraction of all cases. The picture is also distorted by the fact that the existing figures do not show how many women died due to rapes, or were raped several times. In any case the situation was so grave that even Mátyás Rákosi, Secretary General of the Communist Party, appealed to the Soviet authorities.

Statistics show that two million women in Germany were raped, and some 60,000 children were born as a result.²²⁸ Of the 1.4 million female inhabitants of Berlin at least 110,000, were raped and 1156 subsequently gave birth.²²⁹ In Hungary similar statistics could be prepared only in towns temporarily recaptured by German and Hungarian troops. In Lajoskomárom 140 out of 1000 women residents sought medical treatment, and in Székesfehérvár 1500 women were reported raped, but the estimated number was between 5000 and 7000, or 10–15 per cent of the population²³⁰ – all this after a Soviet occupation lasting 30 days. In Budapest, according to information available to date, about 10 per cent of the population was raped. In addition, about 1000 German women in the Wehrmacht were captured, probably suffering most at the hands of the Soviets.

Significantly, in territories occupied by the Red Army, for example in Germany, the number of people suffering from venereal diseases had grown by a factor of 20. In Hungary a compulsory treatment centre was set up in every town with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and elsewhere as necessary.²³¹ In Budapest after the war 35,000–40,000 clandestine prostitutes were known to the police, apart from those listed in official records.²³² This number is also more than 20 times the number before 1945. Nor was the increase caused by loose morals: when the fighting was over, the sense of helplessness, hunger and sheer need to survive often drove women to prostitution.

The rapes are only partly explained by the fact that the soldiers wanted to satisfy their sexual urges. They usually occurred in appallingly unhygienic conditions (with the victims unable to clean up for weeks in some cases) and often within a few metres of indifferent onlookers awaiting their turn. The soldiers could hardly have derived much pleasure from them, while running a considerable risk of contracting diseases which were incurable, as penicillin was not available in the Soviet Union at the time.

Mass rape as an archaic army rite was a much more common practice among the Soviets than in any other European army. The defilement of women, providing the victors with a kind of collective recompense and

gratification, has existed as a psychological phenomenon ever since the wars of ancient times. The better-organised an army, the less likely are its soldiers to give in to such archaic urges. This is not to say that even the most civilised soldier may not commit sexual violence on some occasion, but he would be seeking his pleasure as an individual rather than as a conqueror. That is why the German or Hungarian soldiers' way of indulging in such excesses was completely different from that of the Soviets.

A horrifying picture is painted by a variety of reminiscences and reports. The youngest rape victims were less than 10, the oldest over 90. Some women were raped up to 22 times. Four cases of men being raped by female soldiers are also known.²³³ All this seems to confirm that these crimes were not simply sexually motivated, but arose from more complex psychological impulses. One of several letters written by Soviet soldiers which fell into German hands illustrates how they felt about the women concerned: 'There are enough women and they don't speak a word of Russian. So much the better: we don't have to try and persuade them – we just point the pistol at them, the order "lie down" settles the matter, and we can move on.'²³⁴

Apart from the human aspect, the rapes probably did more harm to socialism as represented by the political system of the Soviet Union (and, tragically, to Russian culture) than the most savage National Socialist propaganda. Even those who sympathised with the Soviet Union, or belonged to the Communist Party, were unable to understand these crimes. All they could do was remain silent or resort to euphemisms: for example Lajos Fehér, writing about his efforts to bring his fiancée to safety, said: 'Because of the situation that has arisen I have decided to rescue aunt Diera's daughter Éva urgently from the Filatori fields'.²³⁵ Iván Boldizsár characterises the same 'situation' through a cynical joke:

Grisha pulls out his wallet and hands his wife's photo round. She is a typical Caucasian, large and dark-eyed, beautiful rather than pretty. He is about to put the wallet away, but the others in a chorus demand to see the rest of the photos. For a while Grisha plays hard to get, but finally produces them.

'This is Ilonka, this is Marianna, this is Sári, this is Amália, this is again Ilonka, this is Magda, this is Márta, this is again Ilonka...' We all laugh. The pictures represent every age and social class.

Through a gesture I ask him whether he had got them with his pistol.

A new wave of laughter. Before Grisha can answer Vassily explains:

'A little bread, a little flour, a little lard, a tiny little bit of sugar.'²³⁶

The Soviet supreme command did not really appreciate the problem, although in some cases it handed out punishments harsher than they would have been in Western Europe. A case in point was Yugoslavia. The

leadership of the Yugoslav Communist Party protested to Stalin against the rapes, which it regarded as particularly grave, given that the country was an ally of the Soviet Union.²³⁷ As Milovan Đilas recalls, Stalin rejected the protest: 'Doesn't Đilas... understand that a soldier who has marched thousands of kilometres through pools of blood and through fire and water will want to have a little fun with a wench or steal a trifle?'²³⁸

The saddest psychological consequence of the mass rapes, however, was not so much the discreditation of the Soviet system as the fact that for half a century these unspeakable and unforgettable experiences remained in the foreground, preventing the Hungarian people from personally confronting what had happened in their history before and during the Second World War. Whenever the question of direct or indirect individual responsibility for the fate of the Hungarian Jews or Hungary's involvement in the war arose, the Soviet soldiers' behaviour was immediately cited as a supposedly logical answer. 'We also suffered a lot' was the common response.

While these experiences barred Hungarians from coming to terms with their responsibility at a personal level, the Soviet political system imposed on Hungary did so at a social level. Márai, in his diary, describes what should have started in 1945: 'The Jewish part of the problems has been resolved for a long time to come thanks to the arrival of the Russians: the liberation of the Jews has happened. Now the harder part of the problem is beginning: the liberation of the gentiles.'²³⁹ Before long he had to recognise that nobody had really been liberated. The outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Kunmadaras, Ózd, Makó and Miskolc – often instigated by Communist Party members – provided sombre proof that nothing had been resolved and no social or political liberation had taken place.

8

The Soviet soldiers' mentality as reflected in contemporary recollections

"'Were you looking forward to the arrival of the Russians?' – 'Yes, as if they had been our own family. Rafi, for example, ran to meet them like a madman and embraced the first Russian in tears. The Russian said: Here, Jew, give me your leather coat.'"²⁴⁰

There have been many attempts to analyse the distinctive features of the Soviet troops' behaviour. The reminiscences of contemporaries suggest that Soviet soldiers were more likely to act on extreme impulses than their western or central European counterparts. In Hungary, as a result of the

war and the subsequent Stalinist dictatorship, the negative aspects were more vividly remembered than the humane gestures shown towards the population by many of the occupiers, whose spontaneity manifested itself not only in violence but also in kindness at both personal and institutional levels. Soviet soldiers frequently took children or whole families under their protection, and the same Soviet army that deported tens of thousands of innocent civilians to Siberia set up mobile kitchens for those left behind without asking for anything in return.

Budapest was the first Western-style metropolis in which Soviet soldiers were confronted with the material amenities of 'bourgeois' culture after heavy fighting. In Bucharest and Belgrade they had been welcomed as allies, while Warsaw had been totally destroyed before their arrival. To many of them water closets, large book collections, spectacles and many other things were a novelty.²⁴¹ Swiss consul Carl Lutz, who set out to look for the Soviet high command after the break-out, tells:

We climbed over burnt-out flame-throwers and tanks in the long tunnel under the Castle District, and when we finally reached the Soviet headquarters we were met by an infernal racket. The officers were celebrating their victory, dancing on the tables blind drunk. I was allocated a Ukrainian as guard, but he ran away on the second evening.²⁴²

Occupation by the Red Army brought with it a clash of two fundamentally different cultures. The Hungarians regarded the Germans as civilised but capable of great cruelty and the Soviets as basically well-meaning but savage, with ideas very unlike their own about the meaning of private property, duty and responsibility.

The only thing many Soviet soldiers knew about the West was that at every step they would be meeting the 'bourgeois', which included anybody who possessed a watch, a bed or a stove. They often had no idea of how to use water closets, which they called 'stealing machines'²⁴³ because they 'swallowed' everything – including objects left in them for cooling or cleaning – when they were flushed.

Watches and clocks seemed to have a mythical significance. The writer Endre Illés tells the story of a professor who had made friends with a group of Soviet privates and whose watch was stolen by some others. The professor's friends immediately set out to put matters right and soon he was wearing a watch again – but not his own.²⁴⁴ An eye-witness of the 'liberation' of the emergency hospital in Lovas Road remembers:

Suddenly two Soviet soldiers appeared at the entrance. One ... told us in a loud voice to hand over our watches and jewellery, while his companion was pointing

his sub-machine gun at us, with the safety catch released. Not a word was heard, until a woman...began to sob violently. The warrior, who had scarcely outgrown his childhood, was moved. 'Don't cry', he kept saying as he stroked her and, reaching in his pocket, pressed two wrist watches into her hand. Then he went on looting.²⁴⁵

Months after the siege a newsreel of the Yalta conference was being shown in Budapest cinemas. When US President Franklin D. Roosevelt raised his arm to point something out to Stalin and his wrist-watch became visible, several jokers in the audience shouted: 'Mind your watch!'

Despite their propensity for savage acts the Soviet soldiers had many taboos. One was hurting children. The following recollection could be paralleled many times over. The speaker, then aged three, was discovered with his grandparents in a shelter by a Russian captain:

'Daddy', I said because his stubble made me think that he was my father, home from the front. The captain asked the others what I had said. Somebody answered in Serbo-Croat and he burst into tears. He hugged me, saying that he was a teacher with a child of the same age, and showed us a picture. Later he kept bringing us food. After the break-out he posted a guard in front of our house to protect us, and at times of free looting wouldn't allow any of us out into the streets.²⁴⁶

An incident reported by Kishon is equally instructive:

My sister Ági decided to thank our liberators personally. One evening, soon after the retreat of the Germans from our suburb, she dolled herself up in a dress with a low neckline and set out for the nearby Soviet command post. We waited for her half the night, worried out of our minds. She came home in the small hours in high spirits, telling us how politely the Russians had treated her. They had hugged and fed her and given her a food parcel to take home.

In the afternoon we...discovered that in the whole district my sister was the only woman not to have been raped.

My sister was very young and naïve at the time, which was probably what had saved her from the worst on that terrible night. But it is also possible that the Russians, like Moslems, respected a madwoman...

They were simple and cruel like children. With millions of people destroyed by Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin or in the war, death, to them, had become an everyday affair. They killed without hatred and let themselves be killed without resisting.²⁴⁷

The soldiers had tremendous respect for doctors and – because of their supposed political influence – writers. Márai recalls a fierce cossack who forced him to carry a sack full of loot several kilometres before asking him about his profession: 'When he heard the magic word "writer" he took the

sack from me. With a frown, he pulled out his knife, cut a loaf of bread in two halves, handed one half to me, tucked the sack under his arm and plodded on by himself.²⁴⁸

Contrary to expectations, people were pressed into labour, plundered or raped by the Red Army regardless of their religion. This caused great disillusionment among the Jews. Márai writes about the first meeting between the rabbi of Leányfalu and a Russian soldier. When the 'patriarchal figure... revealed that he was a Jew' the soldier kissed him on both cheeks and said that he was also a Jew. Then he stood the whole family up against the wall and, searching the house with the thoroughness of a Moscow burglar, stole every valuable object.²⁴⁹

A good impression of how the Soviets ran public affairs in Budapest is given by one observer:

In the West the populations of territories about to be occupied received early radio broadcasts from General Montgomery instructing them what to do when the British and American troops arrived. After the capture of Budapest weeks went by without either individuals or the authorities knowing which Russian commands to approach when the need arose. In fact the Russians themselves did not know. Typically, the first Russian order appeared on 5 February, and the second, marked number 1, on 6 February. They were not signed by the commander-in-chief or the city commander but by a certain Major Nefedov.²⁵⁰

The end of the siege brought no relief to Budapest. People spoke about another city as a land of milk and honey: 'Szeged is enjoying perfect law and order. There is no looting, in the streets the lights are burning and the trams running, in the theatre plays are being performed, in the cinemas American and English films are being shown, and in the market everything is available.'²⁵¹ Of Budapest, however, the opposite was true. Apart from regular soldiers there were thousands of Soviet deserters in the city, living on pillage and fighting pitched battles with the NKVD and the police. As late as February 1946 eight robberies with murder occurred on a single day. Most of the culprits were Soviet soldiers, although many Hungarian criminals also took advantage of the power vacuum after the defeat.

On a happier occasion a group of Russian soldiers commandeered a bus and forced the driver at gunpoint to take them on a sightseeing tour, and some of the occupiers tried to become regular residents:

If a Russian took a fancy to the bourgeois way of life or to a Hungarian woman he decided to stay. He simply changed into civilian clothes and nobody cared. In our neighbourhood a Russian who had been a cobbler at home, attracted by the good income and freedom, became a shoemaker's apprentice...A Russian female soldier turned up on our caretaker's doorstep asking him for

accommodation in the block as she wanted to leave the army; she had already found a proper job and promised to be a good tenant who would not disturb the others.²⁵²

Hungarians soon started to defend themselves. As a first sign many tied ribbons in the British, US, French, Yugoslav, Swedish, Romanian, Portuguese or Czechoslovak colours round their arms, while others carried the insignia of the Red Cross or public services such as Budapest Transport, the Hungarian State Railways or the police. The last two were particularly popular because they were usually respected by the Soviets. Civilian guards were positioned in many apartment blocks. At the time of the air-raids various metal objects had been fixed in front of every building and struck to announce the approach of the bombers. Now they were used to alert the security patrols when looters were coming.

During the interregnum after the siege caretakers became virtually absolute rulers. They negotiated with the Soviets, traded possessions found in their blocks and laid down the duties of the tenants. As a leftover from the multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy, many were of Slav descent, spoke a Slav language, and sympathised with their fellow-Slavs. When Mrs K. B. resisted a Russian officer's attempt to rape her in a cellar the caretaker offhandedly remarked: 'Why are you making such a fuss? You're a grown-up woman.'²⁵³

Many complaints about the excesses of soldiers were submitted to the Soviet authorities, which often took a strict line, executing the perpetrators on the spot. Malinovsky was said to have personally shot a Soviet major for rape. Naturally the opposite also happened. The commander in Csepel, arguing that 'the command wishes to spend its time in more useful ways', requested permission to call to account anybody who slandered the Red Army within his jurisdiction. Permission was granted, and the complaints miraculously ceased.²⁵⁴

9

Life goes on

Sheltering in the window of a ruined shop in Vas Street a woman was selling potato fritters at 10 pengő each. The fritters were cold, unappetising and of doubtful cleanliness... But the starving people were no longer fussy, they stopped to buy and eat them.

Near the National Theatre a young man was touting his merchandise: 'Soviet stars to wear!... Only two pengő each!... Buy Soviet stars!'

The fritters were more popular.²⁵⁵

When the din of battle had subsided, the civilians began to return home from the cellars, the areas behind the front line and the ghetto. As they entered their homes – particularly the villas on Sashegy, Gellért-hegy and Rózsadomb Hills – they stumbled over dead German, Russian or Hungarian soldiers. Covered in plaster dust, between collapsed walls, fallen ceilings and shattered glass, the bodies lay frozen stiff in unlikely postures, with their weapons, ammunition and other possessions scattered around them. Their boots were usually missing, their clothes torn and black with dried blood, their documents strewn all over the floors by Russians searching their pockets. It was often necessary to sand down the furniture or window frames to remove the blood and brain matter that had soaked into them, or to dispose of the stained fabric of sofas and armchairs on which somebody had died. One of the first tasks was burying the decomposing bodies – both human and animal – that were found everywhere. The Soviet army drove all available civilians, including children as young as 12, out of their homes to do this.²⁵⁶

Before Christmas 1944 and during January 1945 state employees were paid three months' salary in advance as the military situation was expected to make further payments impossible. For the average civil servant this amounted to between 1200 and 2000 pengős. When the fighting ended everybody wanted to make up for being unable to shop for weeks. By February people were paying 100 pengős for 1 kilogram of flour, 400 for sugar, 6000–7000 for a suit and 3000 for a pair of shoes – although this was nothing compared to the hyperinflation that followed later.

Conditions began to cause concern even to the Soviet high command. The first city commander, Major-General Chernishev, who had been motivated entirely by self-interest, was replaced in late February by Major-General Zamertsev, who was to remain in charge until 1948. Colonel Kálmán Gál, head of the Budapest Security Battalion until 17 October 1944, became the first Hungarian city commander on 13 April 1945, but Zamertsev continued to make all the important decisions.

Four resistance fighters – Marquis Pál Odescalchi, the landowner Imre Biedermann and First Lieutenants Guidó Görgey and Jenő Thassy – had arranged to meet their comrade László Sólyom, who had supplied them with explosives during the fighting, at the National Museum the day after the fall of Pest. Thassy recalls what happened when they arrived there on 19 January:

The sun was shining. The broken pavement was covered in snow, blood and mud. The place was swarming with Soviet soldiers arguing. The only civilians we could see were groups herded along by the Russians. The National Museum

was still standing, although it had been damaged, and we could hardly believe our eyes when we saw László Sólyom standing at the iron railing near the entrance... At one point a Soviet patrol stopped us, but their commander seemed to be satisfied by the piece of rubber-stamped paper Sólyom shoved under his nose, and we were able to continue... to a yellow building with several storeys opposite the Municipal Theatre. Its façade still carried the inscription 'Volksbund', but above it there was a freshly painted wooden board announcing 'Budapest Central Office of the Hungarian Communist Party'... and next to it was a red flag with the hammer and sickle... Sólyom led us to the far end of the corridor and told us to wait. He disappeared in one of the offices and soon came back with a lanky individual, who planted himself in front of us and said: 'My name is János Kádár. I am the secretary of the Budapest section of the Communist Party. Comrade Sólyom has told me that you took part in the armed struggle for liberation. In recognition of your merit we offer you the opportunity to join our party. This is a particular honour... I would like to have your answer immediately, you must make up your minds now.'²⁵⁷

The four men refused the offer and left. At the next street corner three of them (having parted from Biedermann) were arrested by Soviet soldiers. Thassy continues: 'We confidently protested and presented the bilingual [Hungarian and Russian] documents we had received at the party office. The Russian NCO spat, tore up all three documents, and shoved us into the row of prisoners'.²⁵⁸

Kádár and the Budapest Communist Party leadership had met the first Soviet soldiers on 13 January 1945 in Kőbánya: as none of them spoke Russian it took them a long time to explain who they were. Ten days later Kádár was appointed Deputy Police Commissioner for Budapest. He was fully aware of the Soviet transgressions, about which he submitted a strictly confidential report on 9 February:

Despite all difficulties the organisation of the National Guard began immediately after the arrival of the Soviet troops... This was extremely difficult as the Soviet authorities were arresting the police officers at the police stations and barracks. Every day only 50 percent of the police officers who set out on their rounds reached their destination. The arrests assumed such proportions that by now there are 2000-3000 police officers of all ranks in the Gödöllő prison camp. The Soviet commands made our work very difficult, particularly in the early phases, and are still doing so. The newly established police stations and headquarters were overrun by NKVD units, whose continuous presence and unreasonable demands are still wasting a large amount of our time and crippling our work... The confusion was exacerbated by the fact that in a number of places several police forces were formed at the same time. In some cases two individuals were acting as police chiefs at the same station as a result of orders given,

without thinking of the consequences, both by political parties and by ill-informed Soviet commands... Another characteristic phenomenon is the Jewish infiltration... I must also mention the activities of illegal police forces such as the 'Hungarian GPU', the 'Miklós Guard' and the 'Social-democratic Organisation for Internal Security'. These have been, or are being, liquidated.²⁵⁹

In view of the catastrophic situation security forces from Debrecen and other provincial towns were brought to Budapest and armed by the Soviets (initially police patrols had only been equipped with batons). As Kádár notes, the civilians at first received these forces with joy, but were soon bitterly disappointed by their abuses.

Arbitrary 'people's judgments' and arrests by the Communist Party and its nascent police had begun even before the end of the siege. Labour-service supervisors József Rotyis and Sándor Szivós were charged with 124 fascist murders and publicly hanged in Oktogon Square on 4 February 1945.²⁶⁰ Public executions, which were sometimes turned into popular festivals for political reasons, went on for several years. One eye-witness remembers:

The new communist audience continuously shouted in chorus at the hangman: 'Slowly, Bogár. Slowly, Bogár.' Many of us asked the Ministry of Justice to put an end to this barbarity... When I visited Justice Minister István Ries he refused my appeal. He said: 'The Jews need some satisfaction after suffering so much.'²⁶¹

By 12 April 1945 the number of 'fascist and other reactionary elements' arrested in Budapest had reached 8260, of whom only 1608 were eventually released.²⁶²

On 20 January the Provisional National Government had agreed a ceasefire with the Soviet Union. One condition was that the Hungarian government take full responsibility for feeding the entire Red Army in Hungary – which had in any case confiscated most of the available food stocks and paid for them solely with military currency printed without any cover. This irresponsible currency-issue was one of the causes of the subsequent hyperinflation.

Despite the pleas of the Communist leaders, Malinovsky refused to supply any food to the Hungarian authorities. In view of the crucial importance of feeding the capital, the coalition parties vested extraordinary powers in Zoltán Vas, appointed the government commissioner for public supplies on 13 February 1945. Vas confiscated all the food that had not been appropriated by the Soviets and ordered the arrest of anyone who obstructed his work. He only changed his mind once: when János Gundel, owner of the famous Gundel Restaurant, was interned for allegedly over-charging, the intellectuals of Budapest raised such an outcry that he had to



Soviet soldier feeding Hungarian children.

be released. Vas's first directives included the evacuation of Budapest's children and the creation of emergency kitchens in the city. The first food delivery arrived on 17 February. The minimum requirement was 10 wagon-loads a day, but initially this could not be achieved. In the interim many factories fed their own workers, bartering their products for food in the provinces. By spring 1945 the communal kitchens were feeding 50,000 people. Three hundred selected artists and scholars received special rations, nicknamed 'Vas parcels'.

Distributing food in the ruins was a major task: at first everything was transported by steam trains on tram lines repaired in a makeshift fashion. On 25 February Vas ordered the introduction of food coupons in the city centre. The rations amounted to 500 calories daily until the end of March and 1000 calories after – 25 and 50 per cent respectively of the minimum requirement. Things began to improve rapidly when the Soviet command agreed to lend the Hungarian government some of the supplies it had confiscated and to hand back many of the impounded public works: first to resume production, on 27 March, was the Gizella Mill, although the 'communal bread factory' with the largest capacity did not return to civilian use until the end of June. The suburbs of Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Újpest and Csepel were included in the coupon system on 1 April, Mátyásföld, Cinkota, Hidegkút and Nagytétény on 1 June.



The 'new' foreign ministry.

Commerce centred on the Stock Exchange (today the Television Building) with the square in front of it, and Teleki Square. Apart from currency and securities, people bought and sold fat, plum jam, copper vitriol and everything else under the sun. Most dealers kept no merchandise, but knew where goods could be purchased. Rucksacks were among the most common fashion accessories, carried by all those who travelled to the countryside to do business, or who simply hoped that something would turn up. Equally popular were red silk shirts made from German parachutes hidden by civilians, either with some further use in mind or because of the Soviets' habit of opening ferocious artillery and mortar fire on whole residential areas where they saw signs of ammunition canisters having been dropped from the air.²⁶³ In the countryside such a shirt could even buy a goose.

In addition to watches, the Soviets were particularly keen on lighters and fountain pens, all of which ranked almost as a currency. Watches with 'red stones' were most popular, and some smart operators dotted the mechanisms inside with red enamel paint to fake the non-existent jewels. A peculiar aspect of these commercial activities is highlighted by

Mayor Vas's ban, announced in the newspapers, on dealers placing in their shop windows notices in Russian about wanting to buy gold, silver, leather and textile goods. Such notices would show the heroic Russian army of liberation



Procession of the Social-Democratic Party's XII District section.

in an untruthful light by fostering the belief that its members are marketing unlawfully acquired wares.²⁶⁴

The owner of a shop in the city centre placed the following warning in Hungarian and Russian in his window: 'I keep no merchandise in my shop. Please refrain from breaking in.'²⁶⁵

Most cars had been destroyed during the siege, and the remaining few confiscated by the Soviets. The first tram line began to operate between Újpest and Forgács Street in Angyalföld on 8 February.²⁶⁶ Others did not follow suit until April and May, but by November most were running. Bus

traffic resumed on 20 February, with a single vehicle produced by the bus company in Istvánmezei Road after the Soviet command had ordered it to do so within three days.²⁶⁷ The first horse-drawn cab appeared on 19 March. Telephone communications and radio broadcasts were restored on 1 May, as were mail deliveries. Industrial production restarted with the match factory in Budafok: the Soviets had undertaken to provide the factory with armed protection against looting by their own soldiers and the workers initially received their wages in the form of matches.²⁶⁸ The gas-works were back in action from 7 February, although as late as November, because of the damage to the pipes, only about 50 per cent of the reconnected households were receiving supplies. Last to recover were the drains and sewers, which had scarcely reached 2 per cent of their pre-war performance by November. The collection of 45,000 cubic metres of rubbish in public squares began in April and took several months to complete.²⁶⁹ The Soviets had only demanded the immediate removal of dead bodies, which was necessary to prevent epidemics – a task carried out mainly by the local population.

As water supplies remained erratic, laundry was often washed at public fountains and springs. The hot springs in Városliget Park were particularly popular, and the bronze statues in nearby Hősök Square served as clothes-horses. Many people dug up their gardens to cover at least part of their food requirements – in summer 1945 in the XIV District alone 35,000 people were growing their own vegetables.²⁷⁰

The first cinema reopened on 6 February 1945 in Pest with the Soviet film *The Battle of Orel*. Soviet heroes were further celebrated with statues erected, on the orders of the 2nd Ukrainian Front's War Council, opposite the Gellért Hotel in Buda, in Szabadság Square and on the Danube Promenade in Pest – after the areas concerned had been forcibly cleaned by civilians living nearby. Cabaret in Pest also began to come to life: the comedian Kálmán Latabár received a standing ovation when he appeared on stage and, pulling up his sleeves and trouser-legs, revealed about 30 watches. His puns and jokes about the looting Russians reduced audiences to helpless laughter.²⁷¹

The villages near Buda had suffered greatly from the siege: many had changed hands several times and Pilismarót, for example, had remained on the front line for three months. Between 10 and 20 per cent of the inhabitants had been abducted, and all were robbed by the victors. Their destitution reached such proportions that by early March they were disinterring dead bodies in order to barter their clothes for seed corn in the more prosperous villages of Transdanubia. In Csolnok some villagers dug up a Soviet soldier, whom they had earlier been ordered to bury, and found

five pairs of trousers stolen from a local Swabian on him, two of which proved perfectly usable. Boots were also recovered and bartered in this way weeks after the burial of their owners.²⁷²

By April 1945 the population of Budapest had been reduced from 1,200,000 to 830,000, with 166,000 more women than men surviving. Losses in the I and II Districts in Buda in particular amounted to 44 per cent and 33 per cent respectively. British and US air-raids before the siege had damaged 38–9 per cent of all buildings, hitting hardest the IX and XII Districts in Pest and Buda respectively. Further details are found in tables 25 and 26.

Notes

- 1 13. *Panzerdivision*, p. 7.
- 2 Ránki, 1968, p. 910.
- 3 Kovalovszky, p. 88.
- 4 HL TGY, Almay, 3091.
- 5 Glatz, p. 144.
- 6 Kutuzov-Tolstoy, pp. 330–1.
- 7 Zamercev, p. 54.
- 8 Glatz, p. 142.
- 9 Teleki, p. 166.
- 10 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 79.
- 11 HL, Documents of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, attachments.
- 12 Interview with Hingyi.
- 13 Teleki, p. 335.
- 14 Kovalovszky, pp. 207–8.
- 15 HL KTB Hgr Süd 897/b, 23 December 1944.
- 16 Teleki, p. 213.
- 17 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 79.
- 18 Seidl, Marietta, p. 2 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 19 HL TGY, Szalay.
- 20 Interview with Nádasdi.
- 21 Interview with Galántay.
- 22 According to a report by Hindy, the Hungarians had 22,000 horses. Gosztonyi, 1990, p. 46.
- 23 Interview with Bódy.
- 24 Noll, p. 2.
- 25 Interview with Major.
- 26 Gosztonyi, 1990, pp. 46–9.
- 27 HL VKF, box 306/b, 31 December 1944.
- 28 HL 21, I. 107, Documents of national Chief Inspector, Henkei Group, situation report of 31 January 1945.
- 29 BA-MA RH 2/1950.

- 30 Maier, p. 49; KTB Hgr. Süd, daily report of 8 January 1945.
31 'Verolino'.
32 Gosztonyi, 1990, pp. 48–50.
33 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 15 January 1945.
34 *Ibid.*, report of 16 January 1945.
35 *Ibid.*, 17 January 1945.
36 HL VKF, box 306/b, letter from Beregfy to General Hans Greiffenberg.
37 HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 3 February 1945.
38 *Ibid.*, 5 February 1945.
39 *Ibid.*, 6 February 1945.
40 Cs. Lengyel, p. 193.
41 Bárdos.
42 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 97.
43 Oldner.
44 Péchy, Blanka, p. 68.
45 Gosztonyi, 1994, p. 53.
46 HL TGY, Almay, 3091, p. 31.
47 Teleki, p. 132.
48 Sólyom and Szabó on Kröszl.
49 Teleki, p. 123.
50 Interview with Lám.
51 Kovács, Ferenc X., p. 9 (manuscript in the collection of the author); interview with Kovács.
52 *Képes figyelő*, 1945, no 13.
53 Although no copy of the latter has been preserved, Galántay confirmed its existence in an interview. The Soviets published a propaganda paper with the same title, a copy of which is held in the Museum of Military History.
54 The works of Lajos Dövényi Nagy, an extreme-right-wing writer, include the notorious volume *Tarnopolból indult el* [*Starting Point Tarnopol*].
55 Gosztonyi, 1990, p. 56.
56 Ney, *Budapest*, pp. 41–5 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
57 Reported by Dr Katalin Sárlai of the Fővárosi Szent István Hospital, who had heard the story from a former nurse. The phenomenon, known as induced lactation, is frequently mentioned in medical literature.
58 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 91.
59 Diary of Deseő (in the collection of the author).
60 Márai, 1945.
61 Zamercev, p. 123.
62 Eszenyi, pp. 411–12.
63 Teleki, p. 145.
64 In addition to the organisation of Jewish transports to the concentration camps, the SD (Sicherheitsdienst) carried out intelligence and counter-intelligence duties in parallel with the Gestapo.
65 The Gestapo had also taken on the duties of the Abwehr (military intelligence) from 19 February 1944.

- 66 Szirmai, p. 270.
- 67 Ránki, 1968, p. 912.
- 68 Interview with Aczél.
- 69 Lévai, 1947, p. 24.
- 70 Lévai, 1946; Szürke, p. 128.
- 71 Gosztonyi, 1990, p. 50.
- 72 Some German units publicly executed Jews and pogroms took place, for example in Lemberg and Riga.
- 73 Especially Bibó.
- 74 Péchy, Blanka, p. 67.
- 75 Fenyő, 3 January 1945.
- 76 Márai, 1990a, p. 285.
- 77 Teleki, p. 150.
- 78 Lévai, 1946; Szürke, p. 120.
- 79 Memoir of Dema (in the collection of the author).
- 80 Interview with Rácz.
- 81 Lévai, 1946a, p. 226.
- 82 *Népbírószági Közlöny*, 25 May 1946.
- 83 Teleki, p. 135.
- 84 Stark, pp. 33–40.
- 85 Sólyom and Szabó, p. 123.
- 86 *Soproni*, 18 October 1944.
- 87 Teleki, p. 139.
- 88 Lévai, 1947, p. 59.
- 89 Elek, p. 92.
- 90 Lévai, 1947, p. 76.
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 92 Lévai, 1946b, p. 88.
- 93 Jerezian, p. 61.
- 94 Kis, pp. 24–6.
- 95 Lévai, 1947, p. 104.
- 96 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 97 Lévai, 1946a, p. 262.
- 98 Lévai, 1947, p. 113.
- 99 Határ, p. 918.
- 100 Szekeres, p. 571.
- 101 Interview with Hermándy.
- 102 Lévai, 1947, p. 135.
- 103 *Ibid.* Gosztonyi in his writings erroneously attributes the rescue of the ghetto to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and his SS soldiers. Schmidhuber never belonged to the SS.
- 104 Szekeres, p. 578.
- 105 OSZK, Csécsy.
- 106 HL TGY, Lám, pp. 147–8.
- 107 Kovács, Ferenc X., p. 19 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 108 Kovács, Imre, p. 112.

- 109 Sipeki, p.3 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 110 Possibly Colonel Béla Tatay. The 1.b section was the anti-espionage and intelligence section.
- 111 Sipeki, p.3.
- 112 Vass, *Egyetemisták* (private collections), p.17.
- 113 Bondor, p.187. Works of reference usually give wrong dates for Mikó's execution.
- 114 *Ibid.*; interview with Ferenc X. Kovács.
- 115 In 1946 András was arrested by the ÁVO (State Security Police) on trumped-up charges and received a death sentence, converted to 10 years' hard labour.
- 116 Interviews with Benyovszky and Bíró. Major Aladár Zvolenszky, commander of the 1.b section, had already contacted the Soviets in the Carpathians, and eventually defected with his entire unit on József Boulevard.
- 117 Kovács, Ferenc X. (manuscript in the collection of the author); Péchy, Blanka, p.43.
- 118 Kádár spent much of the siege as an administrator employed by a baroness. His younger brother, Jenő Csermanek, also participated in the resistance and was killed three years later when he fell from a balcony while trying to raise a red flag at his place of work, 60 Andrásy Road.
- 119 According to party-line historians, the members of the Moscow faction 'prevailed in the Committee leadership, not because of their number but because of their experience of illegal struggle, their sensible programme and their personal courage' (Gazsi and Pintér, p.174). In reality the Demény faction was stronger in every respect.
- 120 Gazsi and Pintér, pp.179–85.
- 121 *Ibid.*, p.182.
- 122 Csepel, p.392.
- 123 *Újpest*, p.208.
- 124 Benedek and Vámos, p.39.
- 125 *A magyar antifasiszta*, pp.283–4.
- 126 Gazsi and Harsányi, p.682.
- 127 Grossman, pp.271–2.
- 128 Révész, p.19.
- 129 Szita, pp.86–8.
- 130 *Ibid.*, p.88.
- 131 Kiss, M., p.300.
- 132 Fortusz, p.48.
- 133 HL TGY, Bíró, 3053, p.21
- 134 Száva, 1975a, p.267
- 135 Tóth, 1980, p.25
- 136 HL TGY, Salamon, Aurél, 3116, pp.16–17.
- 137 *Hadtudományi*, 1994/10, p.185
- 138 Száva, 1975a, p.282.
- 139 HL TGY, Sárközi and Csécsy, p.18.
- 140 Tóth, 1980, p.27.
- 141 Interview with Benyovszky.

- 142 Interview with Létay.
- 143 *Ibid.*
- 144 Gosztonyi, 1992, p. 240.
- 145 Interview with Finta.
- 146 Letter to the author from Kövendi.
- 147 Letter to the author from Válas.
- 148 Reminiscence of Salfay (in the collection of the author).
- 149 Interview with Finta.
- 150 HL TGY, Salamon, Aurél, 3116, p. 28.
- 151 HL TGY, Péchy, p. 165.
- 152 Among Hungarian reminiscences known to the author, only those of Konkoly-Thege (HL TGY), Aurél Salamon (HL TGY) and Gyalog mention a few cases.
- 153 HL KTB Hgr. Süd, 898/b.
- 154 Zaharov, p. 250.
- 155 HL TGY, Konkoly-Thege, p. 116.
- 156 Lieutenant-General Andrei Vlasov was captured by the Germans in 1942 and commissioned in September 1944 to organise the anti-Soviet 'Russian Liberation Army'. Although none of his soldiers were sent to Budapest, Soviet propaganda described every Soviet national serving on the German side as a 'vlasovist'.
- 157 HL TGY, Rhédey, p. 8.
- 158 Bayer, p. 389.
- 159 HL TGY, Konkoly-Thege, p. 156.
- 160 M.v.K. (in the collection of the author).
- 161 BA-MA, letter from Carl Lutz to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, N 370/6.
- 162 In addition to the sources above, interviews with Mrs Ferenc X. Kovács, Baló and Entzmann.
- 163 HL TGY, Salamon, Zsigmond, p. 3.
- 164 Interviews with Hingyi, Tomcsányi and Aurél Salamon, and reminiscences of local residents. In the Buda Hills and around Perbál and Tök many Germans were found executed. Payer (p. 209) reports the execution of 300 people in Perbál, and an anonymous letter in Gosztonyi's collection, similar atrocities near Tök. These examples can be multiplied.
- 165 In an apartment at 2 Trombitás Road, Soviet soldiers emptied a sub-machine gun into a gravely wounded German officer who was lying on a couch (interview with Tomcsányi). By 13 February, wounded Germans were still being 'accidentally' shot around Széll Kálmán Square (interview with Aurél Salamon).
- 166 Friedrich, p. 140 (private collections).
- 167 Interview with Dobay.
- 168 Reports by Ottó Fritzsich, István Janositz and Ferenc Stofficz in the Dobay collection, and interview with Dobay.
- 169 Interview with Aurél Salamon.
- 170 Interview with Major.
- 171 Bayer, pp. 388–9; Portugall, p. 7 (manuscript in the collection of the author); interviews with Bartha and Ferenc X. Kovács.

- 172 Interview with Hermándy.
- 173 Interview with Bódy.
- 174 Bayer, p. 388.
- 175 The German command had given orders for two groups of prisoners to be executed: Jews and political officers. The 'commissar order', relating to the latter group, was not carried out consistently and was finally rescinded in 1942: subsequently many former political officers played a leading role in the Vlassov Army. Initially the position of prisoners in Soviet hands was unclear, because on the one hand the Soviet Union did not recognise the prisoner-of-war status and on the other many commanders interpreted the slogan 'death to the German intruders' as meaning that any prisoners were to be liquidated. This situation ended in 1942, when Stalin issued a special order to the effect that the Red Army would take German soldiers and officers prisoner if they surrendered. Boog, pp. 778–90.
- 176 Hoffmann, pp. 85–6.
- 177 Marshall Buddonny's battle order no. 5, 16 July 1941: BA-MA, RH 24-3/134.
- 178 Sander and Johr, p. 124.
- 179 Walendy, pp. i, 10.
- 180 Boog, p. 784; Hoffmann, pp. 85–6.
- 181 Száva, 1975b, p. 266.
- 182 Cheka: Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, 1917–22; GPU: State Political Administration (political police), 1922–3; NKGB: People's Commissariat for State Security, from 1941; NKVD: People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, from 1922; OSNAS: units with special designations within the NKVD.
- 183 Csebotarev, 1967/4, p. 713.
- 184 According to an account given to the Hungarian press by Aleksandr Lebed, a former commander of the 14th Moldavian Army, on 16 July 1941 Stalin had ordered the creation of special units to execute fugitives and other suspects, and on 17 November he set up further units to destroy all settlements adjoining the front line. Some units operating behind the front were to wear German uniforms in order to increase hatred for the occupiers. Although their activities were not as thoroughly organised as those of the SS *Einsatzgruppen*, they also ignored the conventions governing war.
- 185 Interview with Tamás Katona, who witnessed such an incident at the age of 13.
- 186 Portugall, p. 7 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 187 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 188 Lukács, p. 176 (manuscript in the private collection of Mrs Ernő Lakatos).
- 189 Interview with Kaszás.
- 190 Interview with Tabódy.
- 191 BA-MA RH 19 XV/6, 22 February 1945; RH 2/2685, 26 March 1945.
- 192 Hoffmann, pp. 274–6.
- 193 For the latter see de Zayas.
- 194 Szekeres, p. 565.
- 195 Interview with Benefi.

- 196 Gosztonyi, 1989a, p. 175.
- 197 *Szombat*, 1997, no 2.
- 198 Gazsi, 1995, p. 28.
- 199 Kogelfranz, p. 96.
- 200 Letter to the author from Czagány, 19 February 1995.
- 201 For example, Bondor; Gazsi, 1995.
- 202 Gazsi, 1995, p. 29.
- 203 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 204 Benedek and Vámos, p. 59.
- 205 Kovács, Imre, p. 186.
- 206 Ember.
- 207 BA-MA, letter from Lutz to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, N 370/6
- 208 Montgomery, p. 206.
- 209 HL TGY, Péchy, p. 161; HL VKF, box 306/b, report of 15 January 1945.
- 210 Interview with Sasvári.
- 211 Kogelfranz, p. 96.
- 212 Zamercev, p. 67.
- 213 Montgomery, pp. 203–9.
- 214 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 145.
- 215 The records are incomplete. Existing documents refer to 94,788 and 18,977 people deported from today's Hungary and Budapest respectively, but the real figures were multiples of these: researchers are unanimous that 50,000 were taken away from Budapest alone. About 20 per cent of all the deportees were women and children. (Ravasz, p. 498).
- 216 Kovács, Imre, p. 191.
- 217 Seidl, Marietta, p. 2 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 218 Interview with Rádi.
- 219 Interviews with Finta and Wáczek.
- 220 Szakács and Zinner, p. 19.
- 221 Kishon, p. 74.
- 222 Montgomery, p. 207.
- 223 OSZK, Faragó, p. 66.
- 224 Szakács and Zinner, pp. 10–12.
- 225 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 226 *Ötven* (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 227 The sufferings of rape victims are described in shocking detail in Polcz.
- 228 Sander and Johr.
- 229 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 230 HL, Documents of national Chief Inspector, box 21, no. 667.
- 231 *Képes Figyelő*, 1945, no. 13.
- 232 *Ítélet*, no. 38, 3 October 1946.
- 233 Interview with Szablya; communication by Vadász.
- 234 BA-MA RH 2/3031.
- 235 Fehér, 1979, p. 575.
- 236 Boldizsár, 1982, p. 178.

- 237 'In autumn 1944...soldiers of the Soviet Union often committed such grave atrocities against the population and the officers of the Yugoslav army that this became a political problem for the new order and the Communist Party.' Đjilas, p. 81.
- 238 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 239 Márai, 1990a, p. 287.
- 240 Benedek and Vámos, p. 67.
- 241 For information on rapes, see also the diary of Lieutenant Khoroshich in HL TGY, Lisszay.
- 242 BA-MA N 370/6, letter from Lutz to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, 14 February 1956.
- 243 Interview with Mrs Kovács.
- 244 *Ibid.*
- 245 Steinert, p. 388.
- 246 Interview with Benefi.
- 247 Kishon, p. 75.
- 248 Márai, 1990b, p. 10.
- 249 Kiss, Károly, 1 April 1995.
- 250 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, pp. 144–6.
- 251 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 252 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 253 Interview with Mrs K. B.
- 254 Zamercev, p. 97.
- 255 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 239.
- 256 Interview with Sasvári.
- 257 Thassy, pp. 458–9.
- 258 *Ibid.*, p. 461.
- 259 Szakács and Zinner, pp. 83–4.
- 260 The Hungarian Communist Party had asked in advance for the Soviet city command's permission, to ensure that 'the demonstrators attending would not be rounded up for labour' (Szakács and Zinner, p. 94).
- 261 Sulyok, p. 275.
- 262 Szakács and Zinner, p. 94.
- 263 Interview with Gábor Seidl.
- 264 OSZK, Tonelli, 1944–45, p. 244.
- 265 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 266 *Szabadság*, 8 February 1945.
- 267 Szirtes, p. 10 (manuscript in the collection of the author).
- 268 *Tétény-Promontor*, p. 365.
- 269 *Vas*.
- 270 *Kossuth Népe*, 10 June 1945.
- 271 Bárdos.
- 272 Interview with Dobay.

VII

Epilogue

The battle for Budapest is remembered in history as one of the bloodiest city sieges of the Second World War in Europe. According to Soviet statistics, the Red Army's casualties in the struggle for the capital and in associated actions – including those against the German relief attempts – amounted to 240,056 wounded and 80,026 dead.¹ The latter figure represents half of all the Soviets who died within the current – post-1946 – Hungarian borders, and on this count every other soldier killed in Hungary gave his life for Budapest. The losses of matériel were of a similar order. In the 108 days of the Budapest operations – dating the siege, as the Soviets did, from 29 October 1944 – Malinovsky's 2nd Ukrainian Front and Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front lost a total of 135,100 small arms, 1766 tanks and assault guns, 4127 pieces of heavy artillery and 293 aircraft.² In Soviet statistics the total losses of the 2nd Ukrainian Front (29 October 1944–13 February 1945) and the 3rd Ukrainian Front (12 December 1944–13 February 1945) are attributed to the Budapest operation, even if they occurred in the Ercsi, Hatvan or Nagybjom region. Thus it is extremely difficult to compare the losses of the two sides, particularly as figures given for those of the Germans and Hungarians during the operations in question are only approximate.

According to the author's own calculations, 25 per cent of all Soviet casualties connected with Budapest stemmed from the relief attempts, 55 per cent from the battle for the city itself, and 20 per cent from actions that, in German and Hungarian records, were not directly associated with the capital. For operations within the territory of Hungary (as defined by the Trianon Treaty), the Hero of the Soviet Union medal was awarded to 382 individuals. Among the number of awards referring to specific locations, operations in and around Budapest – particularly the Danube crossing at Ercsi – account for a surprisingly large proportion, as shown in table 27.

The number of German and Hungarian military casualties can only be estimated, because we do not know whether any Hungarians are included

in the figures given for the relief attempts (making a possible difference of up to 10 per cent). The total cannot have exceeded 60 per cent of the Soviet casualties, even though practically the whole garrison was killed or wounded. The picture is further complicated by the fact that between November 1944 and the closure of the encirclement, numerous units were withdrawn from, and others moved to, the capital. The comparison in table 28 is based on the available incomplete war reports and the author's own calculations.

The diversion of Soviet troops to Budapest enabled the Germans to maintain their crumbling positions elsewhere in Hungary for some time. Even after Christmas 1944 they held the front line in Transdanubia, albeit only because the capital tied down substantial Soviet forces which they could not have matched. As the arrival of reinforcements enhanced the strength of the German front lines, the importance of Budapest as a fortress to be defended at all costs rapidly declined. In any case the defenders, because of supply problems, even lacked the potential combat strength commensurate to their numbers – by the end of the first few weeks, for example, they had no heavy arms left. After the failure of the relief attempts it became clear that the stabilisation of the front until the end of December would be paid for by the entire equipment of four German divisions and nearly 100,000 German and Hungarian soldiers, who could never be replaced.

The German command therefore could only expect to profit from the siege for a brief period. Nevertheless, it adhered to the same strategy to the very end. Three times enormous German reserves were concentrated for a counter-attack, but were pre-empted by the Soviets. The actions of these huge forces either remained largely defensive or miscarried because of lack of fuel, as in the last German offensive when tanks had to be blown up to prevent them falling into Soviet hands.

The number of divisions, tanks and assault guns thrown into the Hungarian theatre of war by the Germans reflects the importance they attached to Hungary. Table 29 refers to three key dates between autumn 1944 and spring 1945. The increasing numbers appear even more significant if one remembers that during the period in question four divisions were completely annihilated and disappeared from the battle order. In March 1945 half of the German panzer divisions on the eastern front (about 30 per cent of the total) were operating in Hungary, even though the Soviet troops were already within 60 kilometres of Berlin.

Although the Red Army finally succeeded in its objective, the siege, from the Soviet point of view, amounted to a series of defeats. Malinovsky's attempt to take the city failed four times: each time – on 7 November, in the third week of November, and in the first and last weeks of December

1944 – the date had to be changed because the supreme command's orders were impracticable. Malinovsky himself was furious about the protracted fighting: 'If I weren't obliged to account for your head in Moscow, I'd have you hanged in the main square of Buda', he roared at Pfeffer-Wildenbruch when he was at last able to interrogate him.³ The delay in the capture of the capital made it impossible to release sufficient Soviet forces for an effective stand against the Germans; typically, in early February 1945, when the Germans had only just begun to move their 6th Panzer Army to Hungary, most Soviet units were still depleted as a result of the Konrad operations. Colonel-General Shtemenko, Chief of the Red Army's general staff in 1945, admits in his memoirs that the Soviet 'plans to reach Vienna by the end of December and southern Germany in March were upset mainly by the lengthy siege of the Hungarian capital'.⁴

Battles for towns and cities differ in various respects from other types. In open-field battles one side generally collapses relatively early, while street battles may last weeks or months. One factor making the defenders' task in a city relatively easy is that utilities break down only gradually, enabling both soldiers and civilians to persevere despite the agony. Another factor is that the attackers have much greater difficulty finding their way in the confusing mass of buildings. Central control often ceases and the operations disintegrate into dozens of small-scale actions, led by the commanders of units of between 50 and 250 soldiers. The effectiveness of the heavy weapons is greatly reduced, and the defence must usually be overcome in hand-to-hand fighting. In Leningrad, for example, the garrison did not capitulate even after hundreds of thousands had starved or frozen to death. The rebels in the Warsaw ghetto were able to resist the German flame-throwers, bomber aircraft and tanks for over 30 days, although they had only small arms. And even US-style carpet-bombing failed to obliterate the entire population of Germany's big cities.

As the attackers advance in a city, the fighting intensifies. The defenders' strength temporarily increases because their retreat, usually in concentric form, reduces the extent of the territory to be defended, with a larger proportion of heavy weapons available to defend each of the remaining sectors. During the encirclement of Budapest the length of the front line decreased by 90 per cent, and the territory held by the defence shrank to 3 per cent of its original size within seven weeks. At the same time the rate of the decrease slowed: on 24 December the front line measured 87 kilometres in length, on 15 January 21 kilometres and on 11 February 5 kilometres. The number of defenders lessened even more slowly, as table 30 shows.

Nearly 30 per cent of the military operations of the Second World War were battles for built-up areas. A sizeable proportion of these took the form of city sieges, which proved the bloodiest of all. On the Italian front the average number of German casualties between 1943 and 1945 was 400 per week, and even on the western front it did not exceed 1000 in the same period. On the other hand, the suppression of the Warsaw uprising alone cost the German command 1250 troops a week.⁵ In Budapest the number of German defenders fell from 45,000 to 24,000 in seven weeks: in other words, every week almost 3000 German troops were lost, three times as many as on the western front, and that in addition to the Hungarian casualties. For the Soviets the siege of Budapest also proved to be one of the most costly operations of the Second World War. Table 31 lists the losses of the Red Army in the battles for the five largest cities. In these five offensives alone (from a total of 51 significant defensive or offensive actions recorded by Soviet historians) over 1,690,000 soldiers of the Red Army were killed or wounded, and 24,100 guns and mortars, 7700 tanks and 2670 aircraft were lost – that is, almost as many men and more matériel than the British or US armies in the whole of the Second World War. The only operations that took the Soviets longer to complete than the battle of Budapest were the defence of Stalingrad and the Caucasus, and the liberation of Ukraine (125, 160 and 116 days respectively), although even at Stalingrad the actual siege ended sooner and with considerably fewer civilian casualties than in Budapest. The staggering casualty figures throughout demonstrate that the Soviet supreme command considered no sacrifice too dear in the pursuit of its objectives.

To the German defenders in their hopeless situation, the battle of Budapest appeared as a 'second Stalingrad'. In Stalingrad, too, the fighting had continued to the last bullet, and when those still alive surrendered they were no longer fit for action. It is symptomatic that a much smaller number than was usual of those captured at Stalingrad survived the ordeal of the camps: of 96,000 prisoners, only 4000 ever returned home. While no similar details about prisoners captured at Budapest are available, the overall number of German and Hungarian casualties can be estimated, on the basis of the incomplete reports and the author's own calculations, as in table 32.

Budapest withstood the siege longer than any other city defended by the Germans, although such specious delays could also be observed elsewhere during the war. In his order of May 1944, Hitler had declared numerous cities 'fortresses' and ordered them to resist the enemy until relief arrived. This order was generated by his pathological distrust of the Wehrmacht

generals, who in his view did not take the National Socialist idea of total war seriously enough. He clung to the 'fortress' theory even when it had clearly proved to have been at least partly responsible for the destruction of the German Army Group Centre in Byelorussia in the summer of 1944. On that occasion the attacking Soviet spearheads simply bypassed the cauldrons, and after a few days there was already a distance of several hundred kilometres between the defenders and their own retreating units. Relief was therefore impossible and the troops, left to their own devices, chose to break out rather than surrender. Some soldiers trekked 700 kilometres, hiding or fighting when necessary, to reach their comrades.

The German troops' morale remained unparalleled, even during the last weeks of the war: they literally fought to the last house and the last room before laying down their arms. Although their remarkable endurance prolonged the existence of the National Socialist dictatorship, it was not rooted in any loyalty to the regime. As suggested earlier, an important factor, apart from the traditional German military virtues, was the ordinary German privates' perception of the war as a total one, which left them no personal choice. Even those who had reservations about the totalitarian system had been influenced by the constant terror bombing, fear of the enemy and the anti-German invectives of Morgenthau and Ehrenburg quoted in Nazi propaganda.

The situation of the Hungarian soldiers was different. For them the war was not an existential issue. In 500 years of history Hungary had lost every war, so that the Hungarians were more familiar with defeat and its consequences than the Germans. The fact that most Hungarian soldiers, being poor country folk, had little or nothing to lose did not improve their morale, and they were further handicapped by being obliged – with vastly inferior weapons and therefore much less hope of success – to fight alongside the Germans who, to make matters worse, treated them as inferior beings.

In numerical terms, as shown above, the casualties of the Hungarians did not exceed those of the Germans and remained far below those of the Soviets. Nevertheless, their sacrifice was the most senseless of the three. The Hungarian soldiers – whichever side they joined – could only play the part of extras in the destruction of their country. Many felt that way but considered themselves bound by their military oath to fight, even when they could clearly see the outcome of the war; others capitulated after Horthy's ceasefire bid. Ultimately they only had the choice between a greater and a lesser evil: perseverance prolonged a lost war for a bad cause, and surrender brought no true liberation.

Notes

- 1 Krivosheev, pp.211–12. Gosztonyi (1994, p.59) without source references, refers to 240,136 wounded and 79,946 dead.
- 2 Krivosheev, p.372.
- 3 Gosztonyi, 1992, p.239.
- 4 Gosztonyi, 1982, part 4, p.160.
- 5 Glatz, p.99.

Tables

Table 1: Balance of forces in Hungary at the beginning of October 1944¹

	Divisions	Tanks and assault guns	Ration strength
German Army			
Group South	31	293	400,000
2nd Ukrainian Front	59	825	698,200

Table 2: Balance of forces near Debrecen at the beginning of October 1944²

	Divisions	Tanks and assault guns
German and Hungarian forces	11	227
Pliev and Gorshkov Mechanised Cavalry, 53rd Army, 6th Guard Tank Army	39	773

Table 3: Hungarian and German forces between the Danube and Tisza rivers on 31 October 1944³

Unit	Combat strength ⁴	Hungarian 3rd Army			Combat value/Notes ⁵
		Tanks and assault guns	Guns		
10th Infantry Division	2000	0	9		IV (arriving from Carpathians)
7th Assault Artillery Battalion	0	9	0		II
23rd Reserve Division	3600	0	26		Less than IV
1st Hussar Division	3700	0	30		II
1st Armoured Division	700	20	7		III
5th and 8th Reserve Divisions	3300	0	26		Less than IV
20th Infantry Division	1500	0	15		IV
23rd Panzer Division (German)	1000	50	30		II (arriving from east of the Tisza on 31 October–1 November) with 503rd Heavy Armoured (Tiger tank) Battalion
24th Panzer Division (German)	1600	18	45		II (behind the front line)
Total	17,400	97	188		

Table 4: Soviet forces between the Danube and Tisza rivers on 31 October 1944⁶

Unit	2nd Ukrainian Front – Soviet 46th Army			
	Combat strength	Armoured vehicles	Guns	Notes
2nd Mechanised Guard Corps	c. 12,000	248	c. 60	entirely replenished, fresh unit
4th Mechanised Guard Corps	c. 6000	73	c. 50	arriving from Belgrade on 1 November
10th Rifle Corps	c. 8000	0	c. 90	entirely replenished, arriving from Mezőhegyes on 1 November
23rd Rifle Corps	c. 10,000	0	c. 90	
31st Guard Rifle Corps	c. 8000	0	c. 90	
37th Rifle Corps	c. 8000	0	c. 90	
Total	c. 52,000	321	c. 470	

Table 5: German units regrouped to the Great Hungarian Plain⁷

Unit	Infantry combat strength	Tanks and assault guns	Guns	Time and place of arrival
1st Panzer Division	1000	13	30	Pilis-Cegléd, 1 November
13th Panzer Division	1100	9	14	Dunakeszi-Ócsa, 1 November
Feldherrnhalle Panzer-grenadier Division	900	21	15	Örkény, 1 November
8th SS Cavalry Division	3060	10	37	Üllő, 2 November
22nd SS Cavalry Division	7000	9	57	Dunaharaszti-Soroksár, 1 November
503rd Heavy Armoured Battalion	0	41	0	Örkény-Pilis-Üllő, 3 November
Total	13,060	103	153	

Table 6: Soviet tanks destroyed between 31 October and 12 November 1944⁸

31 October	25
4 November	20
11 November	54
12 November	33
Total	132

Table 7: German and Hungarian combat forces in the Hatvan region⁹

Unit	Infantry combat strength	Heavy anti-tank guns	Tanks and assault guns	Guns
67th Infantry Division	1000	9	7	32
Parts of the Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division	800	2	16	24
18th SS Panzergrenadier Division	1000	8	5	42
4th SS Panzergrenadier Division	900	9	13	32
Parts of the 13th Panzer Division	700	1	6	36
46th Infantry Division	900	15	5	62
357th Infantry Division	800	8	5	42
German and Hungarian Total	6100	52	57	270
Soviet opposition	c. 50,000	?	510	2074

Table 8: The 2nd Ukrainian Front and the opposing German and Hungarian forces¹⁰

Men and matériel	Soviet	German and Hungarian	Ratio
Personnel	528,000	127,000	4.2:1
Guns	10,867	2800	3.9:1
Mortars (not including katyushas and smoke-bomb throwers)	3974	880	4.5:1
Tanks and assault guns	565	c. 140	4:1

Table 9: Total forces stationed in the Budapest area between 5 November and 24 December 1944

	German and Hungarian	Soviet and Romanian
Divisions	7	12
Ration strength	c. 60,000	c. 110,000

Table 10: German and Hungarian units on the Margit Line¹¹

Unit	Defended front sector	Combat strength
Sections of German 271st Volksgrenadier Division and Hungarian 23rd Reserve Division	20 km	3000
8th SS Police Regiment (non-Germans)	10 km	800
Keszeő Group and sections of Hungarian 1st Hussar Division	30 km	800
German 153rd Field Training Division	20 km	c. 1500
German 1st Panzer Division	10 km	c. 900
Hungarian 20th Infantry Division	10 km	800
Total	100 km	c. 7800

Table 11: Soviet and German/Hungarian forces west of Budapest between 24 and 25 December 1944

Unit	Tanks and assault guns	Infantry
Soviet 18th Tank Corps	c. 109 T-34 tanks and 24 assault guns ¹²	c. 3000
Soviet 31st Guard Rifle Corps	0	c. 16,000
Soviet totals	c. 133	c. 19,000
Hungarian 16th and 20th Assault Gun Divisions	29 Hetzer assault guns	0
Parts of German 271st People's Grenadier Division	0	c. 1500
Hungarian 20th and 23rd Infantry Divisions	0	c. 1200
German Division Group Pape (on the way)	62 tanks IV and V	c. 1000
German and Hungarian totals	91	c. 3700

Table 12: The progress of the encirclement, 24–7 December 1944

24 December 1944	
Dawn	Soviet tanks from the south cross the Budapest–Vienna railway line between Biatorbágy and Bicske
Morning	Soviet tanks near Budakeszi, the last village before Budapest German tanks temporarily recapture Törökbálint
11am	Soviet tanks, pushing through Budakeszi, reach the western boundary of Budapest at the Szépjuhászné-nyereg saddle
Late morning	Soviet infantry spearheads on the wooded heights of Csillebérc behind the western boundary of the city
1pm	The first Soviet tank, from the Szépjuhászné-nyereg saddle, is hit at Szépilona
2pm	The BESZKÁRT official on duty at the Zugliget tram terminus, below the Csillebérc heights, reports the arrival of Russians
2–4pm	Soviet infantry from Csillebérc reach Széchenyi-hegy Hill, the upper terminus of the Cogwheel Railway and the convent below
3pm	Fierce exchanges of fire at Szépilona tram depot Soviet tank brigades reach Tök and Perbál, northwest of Buda
4.30pm	Soviet tanks reach Tinnye, northwest of Perbál Soviet tanks reach Jászfalu, north of Perbál
8pm	The I University Assault Battalion moves into position on Rózsadomb Hill to obstruct the expected Soviet advance from Hűvösvölgy Valley and Szépilona towards the inner districts of Buda; the Székelyudvarhelyi Gendarmerie Battalion moves into position at the Bólyai Academy and in the Törökvész area, east of Rózsadomb Hill; German troops move into Marczibányi Square in inner Buda
Evening	Last bus and train journeys At Piliscsév Soviet troops open fire on the last train to Esztergom
Late evening	Soviet infantry reach Kamara-erdő Forest, south of Buda

25 December 1944

4am	Soviet armoured units from Perbál take Szomor
Dawn	Soviet infantry from Hűvösvölgy Valley reaches the road fork to Pesthidegkút and Nagykovácsi
Early morning	Soviet troops in Pesthidegkút and Nagykovácsi; northwest of Szomor armoured spearheads reach the first houses of Dorog and Csolnok
7am	Soviet tanks in Piliscsaba on the main road to Esztergom; a few hours later Esztergom cannot be reached even by the distant minor roads in the Pilis mountains
Late morning	Patrols of the I University Assault Battalion secure a line from Gábor Áron Road to Pusztaszer Road on Rózsadomb Hill; Soviet advance guards, pushing from Piliscsaba towards Esztergom, reach Piliscsév
12 noon	Soviet tanks from Dorog in Tokod and Sárísáp
1pm	From Szépilona and along the Cogwheel Railway, Soviet infantry trickle towards Buda city centre, reaching the upper section of Kútvölgyi Road
2pm	The Soviet flag is raised on the lookout tower of János-hegy Hill, between Csillebérc and Hűvösvölgy Valley
7.30pm	Soviet troops take Dorog
Evening	Last journey of the suburban railway to Szentendre; Soviet troops advancing east from Piliscsaba reach Pilisvörösvár

26 December 1944

1am	Soviet tanks reach Tábor, a suburb of Esztergom
Dawn	Soviet tanks at the southern edge of Esztergom
7.30am	Retreating German troops blow up the Danube bridge at Esztergom; the entire town falls into Soviet hands
Morning	Soviet tanks from Pilisvörösvár advance northeast to Csobánka
Late morning	Soviet tanks from Csobánka in Pomáz
12 noon	Soviet mechanised units reach Pilismarót, the first village along the Danube Bend east of Esztergom.
12.30pm	Soviet advance guards from Pomáz reach the edge of Szentendre

27 December 1944

Morning	Soviet troops from Pilisvörösvár and Pomáz reach Pilisszentkereszt and Pilisszentlászló; Soviet tanks reach the Danube at Szentendre, completing the encirclement.
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Table 13: Hungarian units in the Budapest cauldron on 25 December 1944

Unit	Ration strength	Combat strength (deployable infantry only) ¹³	Guns	Tanks and assault guns	Heavy anti-tank guns
10th Infantry Division ¹⁴	7500	1000	25	0	13
12th Reserve Division	4000	500	26	0	12
12st Tank Division ¹⁵	5000	500	3	7	3
I, II University Assault Battalion	1000	1000	0	0	0
Vannay Flying Squad Battalion	1000	800	0	0	1
Parts of I Hussar Division ¹⁶	1000	250	8	0	4
Parts of 6 assault artillery battalions ¹⁷	2000	1000	0	30–32	8
6 anti-aircraft and searchlight battalions ¹⁸	2000	800	168	0	0
5 gendarmerie battalions ¹⁹	1500	1000	0	0	0
Technical and pioneer groups ²⁰	7000	2000	0	0	0
Budapest Guard Battalion ²¹	800	800	0	0	4
I, II Budapest Assault Companies ²²	1000	1000	0	0	0
Combat groups drafted in Budapest ²³	2000	1600	0	0	10
Budapest Security Battalion ²⁴	300	300	0	0	0
Army artillery ²⁵	500	0	20–30	0	0
Budapest police and its combat groups ²⁶	7000	2000	0	0	0
Budapest military institutes and supply units ²⁷	3000	0	0	0	0
Hungarist combat units ²⁸	1500	500	0	0	0
KISKA units	7000	0	0	0	0
Total	55,100	15,050	250–60	37–9	55
Excluding KISKA and military institutes	45,100	15,050	250–60	37–9	55
Combat troops (excluding police)	38,100	13,050	250–60	37–9	55

Table 14: German troops and proportions of German and Hungarian troops in Budapest on 24 December 1944²⁹

Unit	Ration strength	Guns	Tanks and assault guns (deployable or under repair)	Heavy anti-tank guns
8th SS Cavalry Division ³⁰	c. 8000	c. 30	29	17
22nd SS Cavalry Division ³¹	11,345	37	17	14
Feldhermhalle Panzergrenadier Division ³²	7255	38	24	9
13th Panzer Division ³³	4983	35	17	8
Parts of the 271st Volksgrenadier Division ³⁴	c. 1000	c. 6	0	c. 4
1st SS Police Regiment	c. 700	0	0	?
I/40 Heavy Anti-aircraft Battalion	c. 500	12	0	0
12th SS Police Armoured Vehicle Company	c. 100	0	0	0
Various combat groups	c. 1500	0	0	c. 10
12th Anti-aircraft Artillery Assault Regiment ³⁵	c. 1000	c. 48	0	0
573rd Heavy Anti-aircraft Detachment	c. 200	12	0	0
Europa Battalion	c. 300	0	0	0
500th Battalion for Special Use (penal battalion) ³⁶	c. 200	0	0	0
Non-combatants and others trapped in Budapest ³⁷	2500	0	0	0
Troops directly attached to the IX SS Mountain Army Corps ³⁸	c. 1500	c. 9	0	0
Sick and wounded caught up in Budapest	c. 1500	0	0	0
Total	c. 42,600	c. 234	87	c. 62
Total excluding sick and wounded	c. 41,000	0	0	0
Total including Hungarian forces³⁹ (armoured infantry vehicles)	c. 79,000	c. 489	c. 125 (221)	117
Percentage of Hungarians	46	53	30	47
Percentage of Germans	54	47	70	53

Table 15: Soviet units in action in Pest and Buda (excluding artillery and direct attachments)⁴⁰

At the Pest Bridgehead and on Csepel Island	
3–5 November 1944	2nd, 4th Mechanised Guard Corps
3 November– mid-December 1944	10th Guard Rifle Corps (49th, 86th, 109th Guard Rifle Divisions), 23rd Rifle Corps (99th, 316th Guard Rifle Division, 68th Guard Division merged with 18th Rifle Division on 20 December)
3 November– 1 December 1944	37th Rifle Corps (320th Rifle Division, 59th, 108th Guard Rifle Divisions)
15 November 1944– 16 January 1945	Romanian 7th Army Corps (2nd, 19th Infantry Divisions, 9th Cavalry Division), 66th Guard Rifle Division
15 November 1944– 18 January 1945	36th Guard Rifle Division
from 12 December 1944	30th Rifle Corps (25th, 36th Guard Rifle Divisions, 151st, 155th Rifle Divisions)
from mid-December 1944 ⁴¹	18th Special Rifle Corps (297th, 317th Rifle Divisions)
3–18 January 1945	337th Rifle Division
In Buda	
from 24 December 1944	75th Rifle Corps (59th Rifle Division, 108th Guard Division, 320th Rifle Division), 83rd Marine Infantry Brigade
24 December 1944– 3 January 1945	2nd Mechanised Guard Corps, 49th Guard Rifle Division, 10th Guard Rifle Division (180th, 109th Guard Rifle Divisions), 23rd Rifle Corps (99th, 316th Rifle Divisions)
3–21 January 1945	37th Rifle Corps (from troops of 10th Guard Rifle Corps), 99th, 316th Rifle Division without its staff)
from 21 January 1945	18th Special Rifle Corps (66th Guard Rifle Division, 297th, 317th Rifle Divisions)

Table 16: Ration strength of Soviet troops on 1 January 1945⁴²

3 army corps of 3rd Ukrainian Front (Pest side)	66,900
2 army corps of 46th Army and 2nd Mechanised Guard Corps (Buda side)	c. 70,000
Other formations (2 tank brigades, 1 marine infantry brigade, 2 artillery divisions, fighter aircraft etc)	c. 40,000
Total	c. 177,000

Table 17: Divisions of the 2nd Ukrainian Front in November 1944⁴³

Date	Division strengths and numbers of divisions							
	3500	4000	4500	5000	5500	6000	6500	7000
15 November	1	2	15	12	5	5	2	1
20 November	–	9	20	6	5	4	–	1
25 November	4	12	14	6	5	2	–	1

Table 18: Respective strengths of the defenders and attackers, 24 December 1944–11 February 1945⁴⁴

	Strength of German and Hungarian forces (excluding wounded)		Strength of Soviet and Romanian forces		Proportions	
	Ration strength	Combat strength	Ration strength	Combat strength	Ration strength	Combat strength
24 December 1944	79,000	35,000	177,000	100,000	1:2.2	1:2.9
3 January 1945	70,000	30,000	145,000	80,000	1:2.1	1:2.7
20 January 1945	45,000	16,000	80,000 ⁴⁵	40,000	1:1.8	1:2.5
11 February 1945	32,000	11,000	75,000	36,000	1:2.3	1:3.3

Table 19: Tanks and assault guns of the German Army Group South and the Soviet forces in the Carpathian Basin on 1 January 1945

	Tanks and assault guns	Note
German Army Group South	494	554 more under repair numbers under repair unknown arriving from 18 December (from 4th Ukrainian Front), by 31 January 162 tanks and assault guns ready for action
2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts ⁴⁶	1066	
1st Mechanised Guard Corps	246	
2nd Mechanised Guard Corps	54	from 8 January attached to 6th Tank Army
4th Mechanised Guard Corps	c. 60	
5th Cavalry Corps	c. 50	
7th Mechanised Corps	101	on 28 January 37 tanks and assault guns
6th Armoured Guard Army (5th Armoured Guard Corps, 9th Mechanised Guard Corps), 27th Special Tank Brigade	162	according to German reports 57 tanks lost by 10 January and 40 left on 27 January ⁴⁷
18th Tank Corps	150	on 13th January 72 tanks and assault guns left ⁴⁸
23rd Tank Corps	193	on 25 December 165 tanks and assault guns
Tanks and assault guns directly responsible to the fronts	50	the corps was not deployed until the second half of January and reported 152 tanks on 24 January ⁴⁹
		the two fronts probably had 7 assault gun regiments, whose exact combat strength is unknown ⁵⁰

Table 20: German and Soviet strengths in the southern section at the time of Operation Konrad II (7–11 January 1945)⁵¹

Unit	Tanks and Assault Guns	Guns	Infantry (combat strength)
4th Cavalry Brigade	c. 43	28	1800
1st Panzer Division	c. 19	36	1100
3rd Panzer Division	5	28	900
23rd Panzer Division	c. 24	24	1900
503rd Heavy Panzer (Tiger) Division	c. 25	0	0
German total	116	116	5700
20th Guard Rifle Corps, 6 artillery regiments	0	c. 140	c. 6000
7th Mechanised Corps	c. 70	80	c. 2000
93rd Rifle Division	0	c. 20	c. 1500
63rd Cavalry Division	0	c. 20	c. 1000
Soviet total	c. 70	c. 260	c. 10,500

Table 21: Soviet and German strengths at the time of Operation Konrad III (19–27 January 1945)

	Tanks and assault guns	
	18 January	27 January
Soviet ⁵²	c. 250	c. 500
German ⁵³	c. 300	c. 250

Table 22: Military losses during the siege and the break-out (approximate percentages)

	Number	Percentage
Garrison on 24 December 1944	c. 79,000	100
Captured or killed in Pest ⁵⁴	c. 22,000	28
Captured or killed in Buda up to 11 February	c. 13,000	17
Garrison at the start of the break-out ⁵⁵	c. 44,000 (incl. 11,600 wounded)	56
Captured during the break-out between 11 and 15 February ⁵⁶	c. 22,350	28
Captured after 15 February (estimate)	max. 1000	1
Escaped	max. 700	1
Hidden in the hinterland ⁵⁷	max. 700	1
Total killed during the break-out⁵⁸	c. 19,250	24

Table 23: Principal events of the persecution of the Jews during the siege

17 October	The residents of the 'Jewish houses' in the VIII District are marched to the Tattersaal Racecourse
18 October	Interior Minister Gábor Vajna temporarily suspends recognition of protection papers
20 October	Forced marches to German concentration camps begin; residents of houses marked with stars first ordered to dig defences
21 October	The Papal Nuncio, Angelo Rotta, negotiates with Szálasi about the deportation
12 November	First mass murders in the cellars of the Arrow Cross headquarters in the XIV District
15 November	Establishment of the International Ghetto
17 November	First protest note of Papal Nuncio Rotta and the ambassadors of neutral states about the deportation
18 November	Preparations begin for the 'ordinary' ghetto in the VII District
21 November	Interior Minister Gábor Vajna formally orders the establishment of the ghetto in the VII District
23 November	First police diary entry about a Jew found shot in the Danube
25 November	Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi protests to Szálasi against the persecution of the Jews
29 November	Labour-service companies of Jews with protection papers are deported to Germany; Giorgio Perlasca, pretending to be the Spanish chargé d'affaires, begins his rescue work
1 December	Bishop László Ravasz protests to Szálasi against the persecution of the Jews
23 December	Second protest note of Papal Nuncio Rotta and the ambassadors of neutral states against the deportation
28 December	Execution by Arrow Cross and SS members of patients from the Bethlen Gábor Square hospital on the Danube Embankment
Late December to early January	On the Danube Embankment and at Arrow Cross headquarters mainly in the XIV and IX Districts – captured Jews are murdered almost daily
1 January	Erő Vajna, special Arrow Cross representative flown to Budapest, orders the immediate evacuation of the International Ghetto; Jews with protection papers are forced to move into the ghetto in the VII District
Early January	Between 50 and 60 bodies shot in the base of the skull are delivered daily to the Institute of Forensic Science
3 January	István Lőcsei, Ministerial Commissioner for the Concentration of the Jews, orders the establishment of 12 Jewish labour-service regiments
4 January	Vajna renews his orders for the evacuation of the International Ghetto
5 January	The transfer of inmates from the International Ghetto to the ghetto in the VII District begins; Swedish chargé d'affaires Raoul Wallenberg delivers a final note to Pfeffer-Wildenbruch
7 January	The transfer of inmates from the International Ghetto is halted in response to Wallenberg's offer of food supplies
10 January	To curb the atrocities of Arrow Cross militia, 100 police officers are sent to the ghetto in the VII District

Table 23 continued

14 January	Arrow Cross bloodbath in Wesselényi Street and the Jewish hospital in Maros Street; Arrow Cross plans for a pogrom in the ghetto
15 January	Colonel-General Gerhard Schmidhuber, commander of the Pest bridgehead, details a German guard to the ghetto
17 January	The ghetto in the VII District in Pest is liberated by the Soviet army
19 January	Arrow Cross bloodbath in the Jewish almshouse in Alma Street
21 January	Arrow Cross hit squads murder the occupants of the Jewish hospital in Városmajor Street

Table 24: The main resistance operations 1944–5

25 September	Introduction of KISKA units
From September	Communist resistance groups (Szír, Marót, Laci etc) are formed under György Pálffy-Österreicher, Lajos Fehér, László Sólyom and others
October	Creation of Táncsics Mihály Battalion, officially I University Reconnaissance Battalion
Beginning of October	US First Lieutenant Pál Kovács flown to Budapest by the OSS to organise resistance
6 October	Marót Group blows up statue of Gyula Gömbös
18 October	XIII/1 KISKA Company is set up under Lajos Gidófalvy and subsequently carries out many successful resistance missions
End of October	József Ferenczy sets up VII/2 KISKA Company, which later carries out armed operations
Beginning of November	Imre Mikó creates the Görgey Battalion as a haven for deserters and resistance fighters
November/December	Members of the Görgey Battalion carry out sabotage operations
7 November	Ottó Hátszeghi-Hatz, chief of staff of the Hungarian VII Army Corps, defects to Soviets; seven illegal student organisations are amalgamated into the Hungarian Students' Freedom Front
9 November	Liberation Committee of the Hungarian National Uprising is set up by Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky
10 November	Members of Future in the East Group are arrested and the group disintegrates
13 November	General Staff Major Ernő Simonffy-Tóth flies to the Soviets as delegate of the Hungarian Front
19 November	A resistance group of the MÁVAG factory is arrested, followed by others in the City Hall
22 November	Leaders of MNFFB are arrested; the Szír Group blows up the Metropol Hotel
Beginning of December	Germans raid the hideout of Zseni Várnai's group on Ferenc-hegy Hill
2–3 December	Szír and Marót Groups bomb the Municipal Theatre, preventing Arrow Cross mass-meeting
4 December	Anti-evacuation demonstrations in Csepel

5 December	Pál Kovács is arrested with the Dallam Group, many of whose members are executed
6 December	A communist group storms the Arrow Cross headquarters in Csepel, freeing prisoners arrested after anti-evacuation demonstration
December	Revolt against evacuation in Pestszentlőrinc
December	Károly Kiss and István P. Horváth form a fake military company, which blows up the Arrow Cross headquarters in Rákoskeresztúr
8 December	Death sentences carried out on János Kiss, Jenő Nagy, Vilmos Tartsay
12 December	Leaders of MDSZF arrested by Arrow Cross secret police
19 December	German security arrests members of the Congregation of Marist School Brothers for hiding children, prisoners of war and deserters
20 December	Zoltán Mikó and Liberation Committee of the Hungarian National Uprising send Imre Kovács and three other delegates to Soviets
24 December	Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's death sentence carried out; prisoners liberated from prison in Margit Boulevard by Hashomer Hatsair Zionist organisation
25 December	Béla Stollár and 23 other members of the Hungarian Freedom Movement killed in gun battle at Légrády print works
26 December	More prisoners freed from Margit Boulevard prison by Hashomer Hatsair
29 December	Imre Radó, Endre Magyari and others killed in mass execution by Arrow Cross militia at Wesselényi Street school
31 December	Group led by László Földes prevents blowing up of the Újpest water tower
End of December	Zoltán Mikó tries to organise defection of Hungarian troops to Soviets
Beginning of January	Lajos Gidófalvy, with XIII/1 KISKA Battalion, prevents blowing up of Ferdinánd Bridge
6 January	Arrow Cross orders disbanding of KISKA units
9 January	Group led by László Földes blows up Újpest Arrow Cross headquarters and frees 48 political prisoners
16 January	András Sándor, commander of the Hungarian 10th Infantry Division, defects to the Soviets
17–18 January	Lajos Gidófalvy is killed while trying to prevent Erzsébet Bridge being blown up
7 February	Staff Captain Dezső Németh of Hungarian I Army Corps and his subordinates defect to Soviets

Table 25: Hungarian losses due to the siege

Civilians		
a	Population in June 1944	1,200,000
b	Population in April 1945	830,000
c	Killed by military action	13,000 ⁵⁹
d	Killed by starvation, disease etc	25,000
e	Sub-total of dead (c + d)	38,000⁶⁰
f	Jewish dead (included in e)	15,000 ⁶¹
g	Dead by execution (included in e)	c. 7000 ⁶²
h	Deported for forced labour	c. 50,000
i	Failing to return from forced labour	c. 25,000 ⁶³
j	Taken prisoner of war	c. 50,000
k	Failing to return from prisoner-of-war camps	c. 13,000 ⁶⁴
l	Total of dead (e+i+k)	c. 76,000
Soldiers		
m	Taken prisoner of war	c. 40,000
n	Failing to return from prisoner-of-war camps	c. 12,000
o	Killed, 3 November 1944–15 February 1945	c. 16,500
p	Total of dead (n+o)	28,500
r	Grand total of dead (l+p)	c. 104,500

Table 26: Condition of homes after the siege⁶⁵

Homes	Number	Percentage
Habitable	215,653	73.0
Partly habitable	47,322	16.0
Uninhabitable but reparable	18,775	6.4
Completely destroyed	13,588	4.6

Table 27: Hero of the Soviet Union medals awarded for operations in Hungary (within its 1938 borders)⁶⁶

	Number	Percentage
Total of localised awards	276	100.0
Danube crossing at Ercsi	115	42.7
Actions on the outskirts of Budapest	15	5.4
Actions in Budapest	24	8.7
Defensive actions against the break-out	6	2.2
Defensive actions against the relief attempts	4	1.4
Total for operations related to Budapest	164	60.4
For other operations	112	39.6

Table 28: Comparison of the military casualties of the siege

Casualties from 3 November 1944 to 11 February 1945	Wounded	Dead	Prisoners	Total
Casualties of the Soviet army ⁶⁷	c. 130,000	c. 44,000	max. 2000	c. 176,000
Casualties of the Romanian 7th Army Corps ⁶⁸	c. 12,000	c. 11,000	max. 1000	c. 24,000
Casualties of the Hungarian and German garrison	included among prisoners	c. 40,000	c. 62000	c. 102,000
Soviet casualties of Konrad operations	c. 60,000	c. 15,000	c. 5100 ⁶⁹	c. 80,000
Hungarian and German casualties of Konrad operations ⁷⁰	c. 26,000	c. 8,000	max. 1000	c. 35,000
Total Hungarian and German casualties	c. 26,000	c. 48,000	c. 63,000	c. 137,000
Total Soviet and Romanian casualties	c. 202,000	c. 70,000	c. 8000	c. 280,000

Table 29: Number of divisions in the German Army Group South⁷¹

	German divisions		Tanks and assault guns	
	Total	Panzer	Deployable	Under repair
25 September 1944	14	4	192	85
10 January 1945	28	9	499	603
15 March 1945	29	12	772	1024

Table 30: Decline of the Budapest garrison

Date	Ration strength (excluding wounded)	Combat strength
24 December 1944	79,000	c. 35,000
24 January 1945	c. 40,000	c. 15,000 ⁷²
11 February 1945	c. 32,000 ⁷³	c. 11,000

Table 31: Losses of the Soviet army in its major offensives⁷⁴

Operation (length)	Casualties		Tanks		Guns and mortars		Aircraft	
	Total	Daily	Total	Daily	Total	Daily	Total	Daily
Budapest (108 days) ⁷⁵	320,082	2964	1766	16	4127	38	293	2–3
Vienna (31 days)	167,940	5417	603	19	1005	19	614	20
Berlin (23 days)	352,475	15,325	1997	87	2108	92	917	40
Stalingrad (76 days)	485,777	6392	2915	38	3591	47	706	9
Moscow (34 days)	379,955	10,910	429	13	13,350	393	140	4

Table 32: Hungarian and German military casualties during the siege

	Hungarian	German	Total
Strength of defence on the Attila Line at beginning of November 1944	c. 54,000	c. 48,000	c. 102,000
Casualties (dead, missing, wounded, taken prisoner) in Pest between 3 November and 24 December 1944	c. 17,000	c. 6000	c. 23,000
Prisoners of war (among the above)	c. 9500	c. 500	c. 10,000
Strength of defence on 24 December 1944	c. 38,000	c. 41,000	c. 79,000
Casualties in Pest between 24 December 1944 and 18 January 1945	c. 12,000	c. 10,000	c. 22,000
Prisoners of war (among the above)	c. 9000	c. 1000	c. 10,000
Casualties in Buda between 24 December 1944 and 13 February 1945, including break-out	c. 26,000	c. 31,000	c. 57,000
Prisoners of war (among the above)	c. 20,000	c. 10,000	c. 30,000
Total casualties	c. 55,000	c. 47,000	c. 102,000

Notes

- 1 Ölvédi, pp. 114, 121. For the ration strength of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, see Krivosheev, p. 227.
- 2 The numbers of German tanks and assault guns refer to those available for action, while those undergoing repair, which could be anything between 50 per cent and 100 per cent of that number, are not listed in the sources. For the Soviet tanks we can only assume that the number given does not include those under repair.
- 3 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd RH 19/V54, situation report of 25 October 1944.
- 4 Combat strength, according to German military terminology, signifies the number of troops available in any one unit for deployment on the front line, not counting artillery men, army service corps, radio operators, pioneers etc. The combat strength usually amounts to some 30–50 per cent of the unit totals.
- 5 The German combat value reports list four different categories. I: entirely fit for attack; II: partially fit for attack; III: entirely fit for defence; IV: partially fit for defence.
- 6 Tóth, 1975, pp. 15–16. Figures qualified by ‘c.’ are the author’s estimates.
- 7 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd RH 19/V 54, situation reports of 25 October and 3 November 1944. The figures for the 503rd Heavy Armoured Battalion have been estimated by the author.
- 8 HL KTB Hgr. Süd, war-diary entries 11 October–25 November 1944.
- 9 The situation reports of the German divisions are found in the attachments to the war diary of the German Army Group South (HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a,b).
- 10 Hazánk, p. 70. Minasyan’s figures needed amendment, with the help of the German Army Group South’s war diary, only in respect of the German tanks and assault guns.
- 11 HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/a, attachments.
- 12 Gábor Nagy, 1983, p. 429. Figures marked ‘c.’ are estimates of the author.

- 13 HL, Documents of the 10th Infantry Division. According to telephone diary, 16 December 1944, the ration strength of the division was 7990.
- 14 Most of the artillery remained outside the encirclement and operated within the Szent László Division.
- 15 The sources for this item are the war diary of the 10th Division, the studies in the Archive of Military History in Budapest and interviews with the commanders and members of the units. In earlier accounts, numerous units are either omitted or listed incompletely or wrongly.
- 16 4th Hussar Regiment, 2nd Anti-tank Company, I Bem József Cavalry-Artillery Battalion, I Special Hussar Battalion, 4th Motor Pioneer Company.
- 17 1st, 7th, 10th and fragments of 13th, 16th, 25th Assault Artillery Battalions.
- 18 201st, 206th, 208th, 217th I Anti-aircraft Battalions and 201st Anti-aircraft Searchlight Battalion.
- 19 Galántai, Zilahi, Székelyudvarhelyi, Besztercei, Pécsi Gendarmerie Battalions. Their ration strength oscillated between 150 and 700 and is therefore calculated as 300 on average.
- 20 A total of 11 battalions and 25 companies.
- 21 One battalion per district plus ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University) KISKA Battalion and Táncsics Battalion (at the time code-named I Hungarist University Reconnaissance Battalion), totalling 16 battalions.
- 22 These had been set up in November 1944 under the command of Ferenc Kubinyi and Gustáv Hellebronth (interviews with Hingyi and Hellebronth).
- 23 Berend, Korányi, Déri, Morlin, Viharos Combat Groups. The first three had been made up largely from anti-aircraft units which had lost their guns, and the fourth from students of the Nagyvárad cadet academy.
- 24 Consisting of cadets.
- 25 9th, 21st Field Artillery Detachments, 106th Heavy Artillery Detachment, 20/4 Mortar Battery, 4/2 Artillery Battery.
- 26 1 security regiment, 1 bicycle battalion, 2 anti-aircraft companies, 1 training battalion, 1 armoured vehicle detachment and other police contingents.
- 27 IV Motor Supply Detachment (and probably some other units with unknown designations).
- 28 Central Hungarist Combat Group (Pál Prónay), North Pest Hungarist Combat Group (István Evetni), Svábhegy Group (Antal Ostián), City Centre Hungarist Combat Group (Béla Kollarits), Óbuda Group, Zugló-Kőbánya Combat Group, Csepel Hungarist Combat Group (commanders unknown).
- 29 The only strength reports still in existence are those concerning the 8th and 22nd SS Cavalry Divisions, the Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division and the 13th Panzer Division. Figures given there were reduced by the number of troops left outside the capital after 24 December (BA-MA RH 10/139). Of the heavy arms listed only 60–70 per cent were usable. For the units, see the strength reports in KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b and the reports of the IX SS Mountain Army Corps in the Archive of Military History in Budapest. Counter to Gosztonyi's statement, the 6th SS Police Regiment was never in Budapest.
- 30 BA-MA RH 10/105.

- 31 BA-MA RH 10/328, excluding about 800 soldiers of the pioneer battalion left outside the cauldron after 24 December.
- 32 BA-MA RH 10/206, excluding 1 battalion, 2 panzer companies and 3 artillery batteries left outside the encirclement.
- 33 Only 60 per cent of the 13th Panzer Division was in action in Budapest. One panzer battalion, 1 anti-tank battalion, 1 anti-aircraft battalion and the II Battalion of the 93rd Panzer Grenadier Regiment were either left outside the encirclement or were not even in Hungary. BA-MA RH 10/151.
- 34 Remnants of 977th and 978th Grenadier Regiments, 2 artillery batteries and 1 SS police company.
- 35 Including the 147th, 632nd, I/40 and II/241 Artillery Battalions (BA-MA RH 10/139).
- 36 The Bataillon zur besonderen Verwendung (Battalion for Special Use) served as a penal unit for Wehrmacht soldiers, who were eventually allowed to rejoin their original units if they committed no further offences.
- 37 Parts of 26th Field Gendarmerie Detachment, 9th Anti-tank Gun Battalion, 3rd SS Artillery Regiment, 4th SS Police Regiment, parts of the 109th SS Signal Detachment.
- 38 959/I Artillery Battery, 504th Nebelwerfer Battalion, I and II/127 Pioneer Brigades, I/771 Pioneer Company, parts of 59th Pontoon Battalion. BA-MA RH 11 III/40 K3 and HL KTB Hgr. Süd 897/b, strength report of 1 January 1945.
- 39 This figure is confirmed by the confession of General Staff Colonel Gyula Vörös, who had defected to the enemy: Luknitsky, p. 100.
- 40 Tóth, 1975a, pp. 128, 247; BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd RH V/58-62 and situation maps. The table is incomplete because of the inaccessibility of Soviet sources and contradictions in publications to date. In addition to the units named, the following took part in the siege to the end: 21st Airborne Regiment, 123rd Cannon Artillery Brigade, 202nd Special Light Artillery Brigade, 110th Special Anti-tank Division, 28th Mortar Brigade, 9th and 60th Anti-aircraft Artillery Divisions, 11th, 12th and 14th Technical Brigades, 12th and 16th Special Signal Regiments, 336th Frontier Guard Regiment, 3 divisions and 13 regiments of 3rd Fighter Aircraft Army Corps, and several other special battalions and regiments, all of which were given the epithet Budapest.
- 41 On the supreme command's order of 14 November, the 18th Special Rifle Corps and the 30th Rifle Corps were regrouped to the 2nd Ukrainian Front from the 4th Ukrainian Front in the Carpathians. The regroupment was not completed until mid-December, and the 30th Rifle Corps first moved to the northeastern defence ring of Budapest after the breakthrough at Hatvan.
- 42 The estimate of 300,000 Soviet attackers (Gosztonyi, 1992, p.232) has no foundation.
- 43 Tóth, 1975a, p. 62.
- 44 The figures are based on the sources cited, with the exception of the author's own estimates for Soviet combat strengths.
- 45 The Romanian 7th Army Corps, the 30th Rifle Corps and the 68th Rifle Division were withdrawn from the siege on 18th January.

- 46 Svirin (p. 77) cites 1016 tanks and assault guns, not including the independent tank and assault-gun regiments.
- 47 Veress, pp. 131, 170.
- 48 Minasyan, p. 357.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 363.
- 50 30th Special Heavy Armoured Regiment, 78th Armoured Breakthrough Guard Regiment, 1202nd Assault Gun Regiment, 366th Heavy Assault Gun Guard Regiment, 373rd Special Assault Gun Guard Regiment, 382nd Assault Gun Guard Regiment, 1453rd Assault Gun Regiment.
- 51 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd 898/b, report of 9 January 1945. The Soviet figures are estimates of the author.
- 52 Veress, pp. 169–73.
- 53 BA-MA KTB Hgr. Süd RH 19 V/59, strength reports.
- 54 Soviet sources cite 35,830 men and 291 tanks, but the date (possibly 3 November) is not clear. The Hungarians suffered the larger part of these losses because the majority of them, by chance or by design, had not transferred to Buda.
- 55 By 11 February 35,000 men were killed, missing or captured.
- 56 As reported to the Soviet supreme command on 16 February 1945.
- 57 Mainly Hungarians.
- 58 The Soviet 23rd Army Corps reported 4700 enemy soldiers dead and 1300 captured (Andrjusenko, p. 52). The 5th Guard Cavalry Corps and the 10th Guard Rifle Corps, which also took part in the prevention of the break-out, reported similar numbers.
- 59 *Hadtudományi*, 1994/10, p. 161.
- 60 Before 1944 and after 1945, 18,000 people a year on average died in the capital. In 1944 the figure rose to 25,855, and in 1945 to 49,364 – an average of 37,600 in the two years comprising the siege. A significant proportion of the population had fled beforehand. Many had been killed by Allied air-raids.
- 61 This figure covers both the Arrow Cross terror and the Soviet occupation.
- 62 Lévai reports 6200 cases tried by the People's Court. The most notorious Arrow Cross group, in Zugló, alone killed 1200 people.
- 63 *Hadtudományi*, 1994/10, p. 162.
- 64 According to Tamás Stark, on average 70 per cent of prisoners returned home from Soviet captivity. *Hadtudományi*, 1994/10, p. 163.
- 65 Kővágyó, p. 47.
- 66 Tóth, 1975b.
- 67 As noted above, 25 per cent of the total Soviet losses were attributed to the Konrad operations, and 55 per cent to the siege of the capital.
- 68 Estimates based on *Hadtudományi*, and incomplete details in Maniescu and Romanescu.
- 69 According to the summary report of the German Army Group South, between 24 December 1944 and 10 February 1945 a total of 5138 people were taken prisoner. In Soviet sources, prisoners appear under 'dead and missing' as they were originally listed as missing.

- 70 The Balck Army Group reported 34,108 casualties between 24 December 1944 and 10 February 1945, which did not include those missing – at least 1000 according to our calculations (KTB Hgr. Süd, Maier, p. 521).
- 71 BA-MA RH2 Ost Karten (Panzerlage), 4999–6257.
- 72 HL, Documents of 13th Panzer Division, report of 24 January 1945.
- 73 Pfeffer-Wildenbruch reported 43,900 before the break-out, including 11,600 wounded.
- 74 Krivosheev, pp. 174, 182, 212, 217, 219, 224–7, 368–73.
- 75 The battle for Budapest lasted 108 days according to Soviet records (which date it from the beginning of the entire operation on 29 October 1944), and 102 according to German and Hungarian records (which date it from the arrival of Soviet forces at the administrative border of the capital on 4 November 1944).

Bibliography

In the notes, references to books and articles are given by the surname of the author or editor, or an abbreviated title. The location of archival material (contemporary documents and collections of studies in Hungarian, Wehrmacht files and collections of manuscripts in German, manuscripts in Hungarian) is indicated through the abbreviated name of the archive and section concerned. Memoirs, reports, diaries, letters etc in private collections, and interviews conducted by the author with survivors, are identified as such. Many of the sources used by the author are only available in Hungarian: in these cases an English working title is supplied in square brackets. Where the author has used Hungarian translations of books published in other languages, the titles of the originals are also quoted, as are the titles of any published English versions. The names of Russian writers whose works were used by the author in Hungarian translation are transliterated according to Hungarian conventions in the page references, and according to both Hungarian and English conventions in the lists below. Quotations from the war diary of the German Army Group South (KTB Hgr. Süd), taken from the holdings of either the Hungarian Archive of Military History in Budapest or the German Federal Archive's Military Archive in Freiburg are marked HL and BA-MA respectively. In the section on books and articles, the title of the journal *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* (*Publications in Military History*), in which many of the articles appeared, is abbreviated as HK.

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I am indebted to the following researchers for allowing me to use material from their collections: Péter Gosztonyi, Pál Dobay, Dénes Vass, Péter Zwack Jr, Sándor Tóth, László Hingyi. Further material, in written or oral form, was provided by the individuals listed in the section entitled 'Interviews and Letters'.

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Interviews and Letters

My special thanks are due to those named below. This book could not have been written without their help and advice.

Men on active service during the Battle of Budapest are listed with the rank they held and the unit to which they belonged at the time. Local residents and researchers from whom I have received assistance are identified as such. The interviews were carried out between 1993 and 1997 and are recorded on cassettes or in manual notes.

- Aczél, Ferenc (Budapest resident)
- André, Dr. László, Deputy Commissioner (Galántai Gendarmerie Battalion)
- Antalóczy, Mrs. Tibor (Budapest resident)
- Árvay, Resző, (University Assault Battalion)
- Baki, József (researcher)
- Baló, Zoltán, Second Lieutenant (1st Armoured Division)
- Barabás, Béla, Captain (Head of operational section, 1st Armoured Division)
- Baross, Dénes, First Lieutenant (4th Hussar Regiment)
- Baróthy, Miklós, Captain (1st Armoured Division)
- Bartha, Endre (KISKA)
- Bartha, István, Second Lieutenant (101st Military Police Company)

Baumgart, Leo-Franz (241st Flakstormregiment)
Benefi, Géza (Budapest resident)
Benyovszky, Győző, Captain (Chief of Staff, 10th Infantry Division)
Berend, Károly, Captain (Berend Group)
Betzler, Wolfgang, Lieutenant (Diarist of IX SS Mountain Army Corps)
Boosfeld, Joachim, SS Hauptsturmführer (Florian Geyer 8th SS Cavalry Division)
Böttcher, Heinz, Captain (13th Panzer Division)
Bődy, Oszkár (Morlin Group)
Csány, Balázs, Lieutenant (16th Assault Artillery Detachment)
Csipkés Jr, Ernő (Budapest resident)
Csongrády, András (Budapest resident)
Czagány, József (Prónay commandos)
Czecidlowszky, Béla, Lieutenant (40th Artillery Detachment)
Deseő, László (Budapest resident)
Dobay, Pál (forester and researcher)
Emmerich, Wolfgang (son of survivor)
Entzmann, Martin (Maria Theresia 22nd SS Cavalry Division)
Finger, Johannes (Florian Geyer 8th SS Cavalry Division)
Finta, József (Budapest resident)
Friedrich, Helmut, Captain (13th Panzer Division)
Galántay, Ervin (Vannay Battalion)
Geiss, Erhard (13th Panzer Division)
Gencsy, Tibor, Lieutenant (4th Hussar Regiment)
Gencsy Tiborné Hellenbach, Klotild (Budapest resident)
Grelle, Martin (13th Panzer Division)
Hanák, Sándor, Captain (10th Assault Artillery Battalion)
Haraszi, István (Budapest resident)
Hellenbronth, Gusztáv (Commander, II Budapest Assault Company)
Hermándy, Iván, First Lieutenant (1st Armoured Division)
Hernády, Béla, Captain (1st Armoured Division)
Hingyi, László (researcher)
Horváth, Dr. Lóránd (Budapest resident)
Irmay, Ferenc, General Staff Captain (Head of operational section, 12th Reserve Division)
Jerezian, Ara (Arrow Cross Deputy District Commander, rescuer of Jews)
John, Adolf, SS Unterscharführer (Florian Geyer 8th SS Cavalry Division)
Joó, Oszkár (12th Reserve Division)
Kákosy, Dr. László (Budapest resident)
Kamocsay, Gyula, Honvéd (Train Group)
Kaszás, István, First Lieutenant (1st Armoured Division)
Katona, Dr Tamás (historian)
Keller, Ernst, Corporal (Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division)
Kerekes, Medárd (University Assault Battalion)
Kézdi-Beck, Géza (Budapest resident)
Klein, Andreas (22nd SS Cavalry Division)

Klein, Erich, Captain (Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division)
Klein, Michael, SS Unterscharführer (Maria Theresia 22nd SS Cavalry Division)
Kohánszky, Béláné (Budapest resident)
Kokovay, Gyula, Cadet (University Assault Battalion)
Kovács, Ferenc X., General Staff Captain (Head of operations, I Army Corps)
Kovács, Ferencné (Budapest resident, wife of Ferenc X. Kovács)
Kövendi, Dénes (Budapest resident)
Kükedi, József (Budapest resident)
Kurdi, József (10th Infantry Division)
Kutscher, Otto (13th Panzer Division)
Lakatos, Ernőné (Budapest resident)
Lám, Béla, First Lieutenant (Galántai Gendarmerie Battalion)
Lénárt, Lajos, Ensign (16th Assault Artillery Battalion)
Létay, Gyula, Captain (10th Division, Buda Volunteer Regiment)
M.K. Mrs. (Budapest resident)
Major, Norbert, Ensign (101st Horse-drawn Chemical Warfare Battalion)
Mányoki, István, First Lieutenant (1st Assault Artillery Battalion)
Marthy, János (Budakeszi resident)
Martin, Kornél, Ensign (Szent László Reserve Division)
Mátté, József (local historian)
Mucsy, Iván (Morlin Group)
Nádasdi, Richard (Budapest resident)
Neuburg, Pál (former Budapest resident)
Ney, Klára (Budapest resident)
Nyárády, Gábor (1st Armoured Division)
Nyárády, Richárd (Budapest resident)
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Pollok, László, Lieutenant (16th Assault Artillery Battalion)
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Rácz, Ernő (Budapest resident)
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Rüblein, Richárd (a.k.a. Szuly, Gyula) (Vannay Battalion)
Safáry, Endre (general staff captain)
Salamon, Aurél, Lieutenant, (military hospital Commander, 4th Hussar Regiment,
later Buda Volunteer Regiment)
Salfay, István (Budapest resident)
Sasvári, Endre (researcher)
Schweitzer, Ernst, First Lieutenant (Diarist 13th Panzer Division)
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Seidl, Marietta (Budapest resident)
Sélley-Rauscher, Aurél, Captain (25th Assault Artillery Detachment)
Schäffer, Georg (Maria Theresia 22nd SS Cavalry Division)
Solt, Pál, General Staff Captain (Chief Quartermaster, 12th Reserve Division)
Stanley, László (Budapest resident)

Sulyánszky, Jenő, Cadet
 Szablya, János (Budapest resident)
 Szabó, Dr. László, Cadet (25th Assault Artillery Detachment)
 Szántay, Lajos (University Assault Battalion)
 Szentendrei, László, First Lieutenant (10th Infantry Division, Feldhernhalle Division)
 Sztrilich, György (researcher)
 Takács, János, Private (University Assault Battalion)
 Tasnádi, Frigyes (Maria Theresia 22nd SS Cavalry Division)
 Tesszáry, Zoltán, Lieutenant (1st Armoured Division)
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 Toperczer, Oszkár, Captain (1st Armoured Division; researcher)
 Tóth, Sándor (Budapest resident)
 Ungváry, Gerő (12th Reserve Division)
 Ungváry, József (Morlin Group)
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 Vajna, Edéné (Budapest resident)
 Válas, György (Budapest resident)
 Vályi, Dr. Lajos, Ensign (1st Assault Artillery Battalion)
 Vasvári, Tibor, Lieutenant (Viharos Group)
 Városy, Péter, Cadet, Sergeant (1st Assault Artillery Battalion)
 Vass, Dénes, Private (University Assault Battalion)
 Wáczek, Frigyes, General Staff Captain (Chief of Staff, 1st Armoured Division)
 Wohltman, Willi, First Lieutenant (13th Panzer Division)
 Wolff, Helmuth, Lieutenant-Colonel (Feldherrnhalle Panzergrenadier Division)
 Zwack Jr, Peter (researcher)
 Závori, Lajos, Lieutenant (I Army Corps)
 Zeisler, Erwin (13th Panzer Division)
 Zsohár, György (Maria Theresia 22nd SS Cavalry Division)

Photographic Acknowledgements

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 272, 300, 301
 Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft: p. 67 left
 Fővárosi Szabó Ervin Könyvtár Budapest: pp. 79, 240, 277 right
 Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum: pp. 32, 71, 73 left, 77, 78, 85, 123, 139, 141,
 148, 149, 166, 187, 211, 217, 242, 250, 253, 267, 277 left, 299
 Archive of László Hingyi: p. 67 right

People Index

The following list contains the names of all those who play an active part in the narrative. The authors of books, articles, letters and other documents (including personal interviews) appear in the Bibliography. Individuals to whom the author owes special thanks are listed at the end of the Preface.

- Aczél, György 258, 261
 Adavkin, Guard Sergeant 104
 Afonyin, Ivan Mikhailovich 108, 117, 139
 Aggteleky, Lieutenant-General 70–1
 Almásy, Pál 253
 Almay, Béla 228, 230
 Antonescu, Ion 1, 172
 Antonov, Aleksei 4
- Bader, Josef 99
 Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, Endre 253, 254, 328, 329
 Bakó, Barnabás 104
 Balck, Hermann 42–3, 68, 94, 101, 161, 165, 204, 205–7
 Barabás, Béla 278
 Bárczy, István Bárcziházy 269
 Baumann, István 75
 Beleznay, István 253
 Beliczky, László 252
 Benedek, László 249
 Benkő, László 147
 Benyovszky, Győző, xi, 43, 69, 118, 123, 267
 Beregfy, Károly 161, 223, 224, 235, 236
 Bethlen, István 262
 Betzler, Wolfgang 190, 277
 Bieber, Martin 69
 Biedermann, Imre 296, 197
 Billnitzer, Ernő 23, 69, 74, 111, 118, 135, 143, 145, 175, 184, 185, 188, 193, 195
 Bíró, József 43, 59, 64, 119, 195
 Bogár 298
 Bokor, Dénes 248
 Boldizsár, Iván 190, 290
 Boldt, Gerhard 160
 Bondor, Vilmos 78, 255, 256, 281
 Boosfeld, Joachim 198
 Borbás, Károly 188
 Born, Friedrich 243, 261
 Boros, Izabella 56
 Botond, Béla 119
 Branquinho, Carlos 243
- Braun, Éva 260–1
 Breith, Hermann 12, 30
 Brencsán, János 263
- Cavallier, József 229
 Chernishev, Major General 296
 Churchill, Winston xvii, 3, 218
 Ciano, Galeazzo xiv
 Conrad, Gerhard 62–3
 Csécsy, Imre 52
 Cseresnyés, László 268
 Csiky, Erich 288, 229
 Csiky, Lajos 86
 Csillik, Gábor 260
 Csipkés, Ernő 31, 81
 Csorba, János 253
 Csordás, 'Brother' 259
 Czech, Captain 70
 Czeczidlowszky, Béla 46
- Danielsson, Carl Ivan 242
 Deli, Piroska 241
 Demény, Bertalan 280
 Demény, Pál 258, 280
 Déri, István 129
 Deseő, László 231
 Desewffy, Aurél 263
 Deutsch, György 84
 Dienstl, András 262
 Dirlwanger, Oskar 21
 Dobos 266
 Domonkos, Miksa 244, 282
 Donáth, György 261
 Dörner, Helmut 109, 137, 176, 187, 189, 190
- Ehrenburg, Ilya 276, 315
 Eichmann, Adolf xvii, 227, 236
 Ekesparre 104
 Elischer, Gyula 47, 54, 79, 85, 86, 87, 128
 Ember, Herr 282
 Esterházy, Prince Pál 283
- Fadeev, Aleksandr
 Aleksandrovich 276
 Fancsaly, Ferenc 230
- Faragó, Mrs Ödön 286
 Fehér, Lajos 258, 290, 328
 Fehér, Sergeant 229
 Feller, Harald 229, 282
 Ferenczy, József 263, 328
 Ferenczy, László 244
 Finta, József 269
 Flügel, Hans 197
 Földes, Gyula 72
 Földes, László 259, 329
 Fortus, Mariya 263
 Franco, Francisco 243
 Fretter-Pico, Maximilian 25, 29, 33, 42
 Friedrich, Helmut 179
 Friessner, Hans 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 21–2, 30, 32, 33, 40, 42, 76
 Fűrjes, Sándor 258
- Gál, Kálmán 296
 Galántay, Ervin xiii, 138, 221
 Gera, József 245
 Gerhard, Sergeant 53
 Geschke, Hans 236
 Gidófalvy, Lajos 124, 262, 263, 328, 329
 Gille, Otto 134, 142, 160, 165, 166, 167, 168
 Gobbi, Ede 263
 Gobbi, Hilda 263
 Gömbös, Gyula 260, 328
 Görgey, Artur 235
 Görgey, Guidó 296
 Gorshkov 316
 Gosztonyi, Peter x, 56, 97, 101
 Grolman, Helmuth von 42, 94
 Grösz, Bishop József 285
 Guderian, Heinz 7, 8, 9, 13, 21, 25, 26, 32, 40, 41, 42, 160, 161, 164, 167
 Gundel, János 298
 Guttmann, Mr 248, 249
 Gyöngyösi, János 284
 Gyulai, Gyula 244
 Gyulay-Molnár, Ferenc 82

- Hack, Franz 165
 Hahn, Sergeant 136
 Hain, Péter 262
 Haller, Captain 176
 Hanák, Sándor 21, 59, 110, 111, 118, 142
 Harsányi, Sándor 280
 Hátszeghi-Hatz, Otto 256, 328
 Hatvany, Ferenc 280
 Hausser, Paul 172
 Hermándy, Iván 249, 275
 Hidvégi, Béla 200
 Himmler, Heinrich 42, 67, 160, 167
 Hindy, Iván 31, 35, 43, 44, 66, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 79, 95, 101, 102, 147, 148, 152, 175, 187, 188, 192, 193, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 227, 229
 Hindy, Mrs. Iván 192, 193
 Hitler, Adolph 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 42, 46, 68, 72, 82, 94, 95, 142, 150, 152, 160, 161, 164, 165, 167, 168, 170, 172, 173, 208, 210, 211, 223, 265, 273, 278, 314
 Hirschler 124
 Hodenko, Nikolai 95
 Hódosy, Pál 239
 Horthy, Miklós xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, 2, 8, 67, 70, 72, 236, 245, 256, 258, 261, 264, 315
 Horváth, Dénes 53
 Horváth, István P. 259, 329
 Horváth, Sándor 46, 56, 70, 192
 Höttl, Wilhelm 227
 Hübner, Werner 189, 201, 203

 Illés, Endre 292
 Isaev, Alexei 138

 Jánosi, Béla 262
 Jász, József 200
 Jerezian, Ara 245, 246
 Joó, Ferenc 105

 K.B., Mrs 295
 Kádár, János 258, 297, 298
 Kajdy, Gusztáv 105
 Kalándy, Imre 74, 224
 Kállay, Miklós 258
 Kammerer, Ernő 93
 Kamocsay, Gyula 47
 Kardos, László 257
 Kaszás, István 278
 Katona, Péter Pál 241
 Kelecsényi, István 240
 Keller, Ernst 182
 Kemény, Gábor 223, 236

 Kerekes, László 122, 193
 Keresztes, Sándor 73
 Kern, Lieutenant-Colonel 229
 Kesseő, László 28
 Keynes xv
 Khrushchev, Nikita 76
 Kisfaludy, József 35
 Kishont, Ferenc 286
 Kiss, János 253, 254, 329
 Kiss, Károly 258, 329
 Kiss, Sándor 257
 Klein, Erich 102
 Koczkás, Ferenc 257
 Kokovay, Gyula 194, 199
 Kolchuk, Major-General 266
 Kollarits, Béla 84, 129
 Komoly, Ottó 261
 Konev, Ivan Stepanovich 161
 Konkoly-Thege, Aladár 203, 204
 Kormos, László 259
 Kornfeld, Móríc 280
 Koska 266
 Kovách, Endre 82
 Kovács, Ferenc X. xiii, 3, 25, 45–6, 122, 188–9, 192–3
 Kovács, Gyula 161
 Kovács, Imre 254, 255, 284, 329
 Kovács, Pál 262, 328, 329
 Kővágó, József 253
 Kovalovszky, Miklós 3, 9, 216
 Kovarcz, Emil 47, 55, 78, 80, 86, 219, 228
 Kövendi, Dénes 269
 Kozma, György 23
 Kozma, József 154
 Kravchenko, Andrei G. 27
 Króczkai, Miklós 266
 Kröszl, Vilmos 228
 Krupicz, Ferenc 266
 Krylov 255
 Kubinyi, Ferenc 333
 Kubinyi, Tibor 113
 Kudar, Lajos 254
 Kun, Father 226, 229, 241, 250, 252
 Kündiger, Herbert 69, 108, 176
 Kutscher, Otto 199
 Kutuzov-Tolstoy, Count 217–18

 Latabár, Kálmán 302
 Lazhko 105
 Lehmann, Hans 185
 Lehoczky, Lajos 152
 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich xv, 235, 293
 Létay, Gyula 268
 Lichtenberg, Judit 185, 194
 Lindenu, Usdau 46, 66, 67, 68, 189

 Litteráti-Loótz, Gyula 96, 97, 98, 99, 102, 136, 137, 196
 Lőcsei, István 248, 327
 Lutz, Carl 238, 243, 282, 292

 Magyari, Endre 263, 329
 Magyarossy, Sándor 217
 Major, Norbert 151, 221, 275
 Malinovsky, Rodion 4, 6, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20–1, 25, 27, 29, 56, 76, 77, 92, 96, 108, 112, 121, 162, 164, 166, 278, 283, 284, 295, 298, 311, 312–3
 Managorov, Ivan 139
 Mann, Thomas xv
 Mányoki, István 110
 Márai, Sándor 234, 291, 293, 294
 Marosvölgyi, Imre 252
 Maróthy, Károly 238
 Mayer, Hans 282
 Mehlis, Lev Zakharovich 3, 4
 Merkviladze, Sergeant 93
 Messik, Lieutenant 254
 Mikó, Zoltán 43, 79, 254, 255–6, 281, 328, 329
 Mikulich, Tibor 140, 254
 Mistéth, Endre 257
 Mitzlaff, Major 66
 Mohay, Gyula 218
 Montgomery, General 294
 Morgenthau 315
 Morlin, Imre 87

 Nagy, Jenő, 253, 254, 329
 Nagy, Lajos Dövényi 230
 Nagy, Zsombor 141, 194
 Nefedov, Major 294
 Németh, Dezső 57, 62, 148, 257, 329
 Németh, Pál 253
 Ney, Klára 230
 Nidosi, Imre 228
 Nikolaichuk, Captain 104
 Noel, Péter 153–4
 Nonn, György 261
 Nyisztor, Zoltán 80

 Odescalchi, Pál 296
 Oldner, Vladimir 226
 Orendy, Norbert 227
 Orlov, First Lieutenant 99, 100
 Orsós, Ferenc 86, 249, 281
 Ostapenko, Ilya Afanasevich 96, 99–101, 102
 Ostián, Antal 47
 Oszlányi, Kornél 35, 75, 264

 Pálffy-Österreicher, György 258, 328
 Pape, Günther von 22, 69
 Parádi, István 262

- Paulics, József 188
 Péchy, Blanka 227
 Péchy, György 104
 Perjési, Ferenc 245
 Perlasca, Giorgio 243, 327
 Péter, Gábor 261
 Petrov, Ivan xvii, 2
 Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, Karl
 31–3, 41, 43, 44, 56, 63,
 66–8, 94, 95, 99, 100–1,
 102, 109, 121–2, 135, 142,
 144, 145, 147, 148, 149,
 167, 172, 173, 174, 176,
 177, 178, 188, 189, 190,
 192, 202, 204, 205, 210,
 211, 223, 224, 226, 240,
 246, 313, 327
 Philipp, Major 165
 Pintér, Géza 44, 45
 Pisky-Schmidt, Frigyes 258
 Pitschoff, András 237
 Pliev, Aleksandrevich 2, 12,
 17, 317
 Porkai, Márton 280
 Portugall, Kurt 277
 Preisingers 233
 Prónay, Pál 52, 78, 79, 80
 Pushkin, Count 217

 Radó, Imre 263, 329
 Radványi, Imre 253
 Rajk, Endre 219
 Rajk, László 219
 Rákosi, Mátyás 281, 289
 Rázt, Tibor 59, 138
 Ravasz, Bishop László 244, 327
 Rechmann, Kurt 228
 Révay, Kálmán 253
 Ribbentrop, Joachim 237
 Ries, István 298
 Roosevelt, Franklin D. 293
 Rotta, Angelo 147, 223, 243,
 244, 246, 327
 Rotyis, József 298
 Rumohr, Joachim 68, 184

 Salamon, Aurél 15, 265
 Salzer, Mrs Vilmos 241
 Sanz-Briz, Angel 243
 Sándor, András 329
 Sasvári, Endre xiii
 Schmidhuber, Gerhard 66,
 68, 69, 100, 109, 110,
 112, 142, 144, 152, 176,
 184, 249, 328
 Schöning, Wilhelm 69, 110,
 111, 153, 199
 Schreiber, János 232
 Schweitzer, Ernst 183, 185,
 195, 197, 200
 Sédey, Gyula 244, 250, 252
 Seeger, Officer 199
 Serédi, Jusstinián 244, 327

 Shakhvorostov, Major 99
 Sholokhov, Mikhail 276
 Shtemenko, Sergei 4, 12, 313
 Shulgin, General 217
 Simonffy-Tóth, Ernő 254,
 257, 328
 Sipeki Balás, Lajos 87, 129,
 140, 255, 256
 Skripkin, Major 190
 Smirnov, Sergeant 19
 Solyom, László 258, 296,
 297, 328
 Sova, Nicolae 121
 Stalin, Josef 3, 4, 6, 12, 14,
 16, 43, 77, 96, 167, 170,
 229, 235, 265, 276, 278,
 282, 291, 293
 Steinmetz, Miklós 96, 98,
 99, 100, 102
 Stollár, Béla 258, 329
 Sulyánsky, Jenő 154
 Szabó, László Szilasi 198
 Szabó, Peter xiii, 252
 Szakasits, Árpád 258
 Szalai, Pál 245, 249
 Szálasi, Ferenc xvi, 2, 9, 29,
 30, 32, 58, 80, 82, 84,
 128, 161, 216, 219, 228,
 230, 235, 236, 237, 242,
 243, 244, 246, 248, 259,
 287, 327
 Szalay, István 84, 220
 Szamódi, Olaf 129
 Széchenyi, Pál 254
 Szécsy, János 263
 Szekeres, Captain 82
 Szekeres, János 154
 Szent-Györgyi, Albert 258
 Szilágyi, Ernő 261
 Szívós, Sándor 298
 Szögyény, Ferenc 44
 Szőke, Andor 74
 Szöllősy, Jenő 230
 Szombathelyi, Ferenc 80
 Sztéhlo, Gábor 243
 Sztójay, Döme xvii, 244
 Szügyi, Zoltán 172

 Tabódy, István 278
 Tarle, Evgeni 276
 Tarnay, Tasziló 47, 54
 Tartsay, Vilmos 253, 254, 329
 Tassonyi, Edömér 10, 13
 Tegethoff, First Lieutenant 44
 Teleki, Pál xiv, xvi
 Terstyánszky 20
 Tetétleni, Pál 262
 Thassy, Jenő 296–7
 Thuróczy, György 23
 Timoshenko, Semion
 Konstantinovich 16–17, 25
 Tolbukhin, Feodor 16, 17,
 19, 20–1, 25, 27, 28, 29,
 76, 77, 96, 130, 162, 163,
 164, 169, 170, 207, 311
 Tomka, Emil 20
 Tóth, Sándor ix–x, 56, 98, 289
 Trenker, Alfred 236, 252
 Turcsányi, Lajos 260

 Vajda, Alajos 122, 264
 Vajna, Áron 194, 200
 Vajna, Ernő 228, 248, 249,
 327
 Vajna, Gábor 228, 236, 242
 247, 327
 Vannay, László 79, 80–2, 84,
 94
 Várady, Kázmér 266
 Varga, Béla 281
 Varga, László 73
 Váriházy, Oszkár 267, 268
 Várnay, Zseni 258
 Vas, Zoltán 298–9, 300
 Vass, Dénes 141
 Vázsonyi, Vilmos 80
 Veessenmayer, Edmund 32,
 216, 237, 240
 Veresváry, László 53, 75,
 176, 177
 Verolino, Gennaro 223, 243
 Vértessy, János 75, 183
 Viczián, Antal 263
 Viharos, Gyula 129, 130,
 154, 274
 Vörös, János 7, 8
 Voroshilov, Kliment
 Yefremovich 285

 Wáczek, Frigyes 24, 35, 148,
 182, 264
 Wagner 232
 Wallenberg, Raoul 242, 245,
 246, 248, 249, 254, 262,
 281–2, 327
 Wenck, Walther 161, 167
 Weinberger, Dezső 260
 Weller, Karl 135
 Wilson, Woodrow xiii
 Winkelmann, Otto 31,
 32–3, 42, 228
 Wöhler, Otto 42, 205, 207
 Wolff, Helmut 68, 69, 172,
 185, 195, 199

 Zadravetz, István 220
 Zagorian, M.U. 190
 Zamertsev, Ivan Terentevich
 234, 286, 289, 296
 Zehender, August 68, 184
 Zhazhikov, Kuzhabai 56
 Zhukov, Georgi
 Konstantinovich 161
 Zimányi, Tibor 257
 Zolnay, László 48
 Zsakó, István 47, 86

Place Index

In the list below the names of localities without qualifications usually refer to towns, villages, suburbs or city quarters: more details appear in the narrative. Rivers, hills, buildings etc are identified in the list as such. Terms for streets, squares etc are given in English: for further reference the following Hungarian equivalents may be helpful.

Avenue = fasor

Baths = fürdő

Boulevard = körút

Bridge = híd

Cemetery = temető

Hill = hegy

Island = sziget

Palace = palota

Road = út

Row = sor

Square = tér

Station = pályaudvar, (vasúti) állomás

Street = utca

Acsa 21
Adony 162, 163
Albertfalva 53
Alcsút 40
Áldás Street 140, 141
Alkotás Street *see also*
 Gömbös Gyula Road 134,
 149, 270
Alma Street 250, 270, 328
Almásfüzitő 162
Alsó Törökvesz Road 140
Alsógöd 7
Alsóhegy Street 153
Alsónémedi 9
Alsórákos 105
Amerikai Road 113
Andor Street 129
Andrássy Road 254
Androniki 76
Angolpark (Park) 116
Angyalföld 113, 116, 118,
 241, 301
Angyalföld Station *see also*
 Magdolnaváros Station
 112, 113
Anker Palace 284
Apponyi Square 78
Aquincum 126
Archive of Military History
 (Hadtörténelmi Levéltár)
 xi
Aréna Road (today Dózsa
 György Road) 113, 116
Árpád Bridge 135, 138
Astoria Hotel 118

Asztalos Sándor Street 116
Átrium Cinema 145
Attila Line 7, 9, 12, 22, 30,
 33, 55, 92, 332
Attila Road *see* Béla király
 Road 145, 147, 148, 152,
 154, 178, 266
Avar Street 151, 153
Baár Madas (boarding
 school) 269–70
Baja 2, 275, 284
Bajmóczy Street 153
Bajna 49
Bajza Street 117
Balassagyarmat 17
Balaton (Lake) 7, 26, 52,
 162, 168
Bank for Commerce
 (Kereskedelmi Bank)
 (today Interior Ministry,
 Belügyminisztérium) 280
Baracska 21, 28, 59, 169
Baross Street 121
Bartók Béla Road 154
Bartók Béla Square 267
Batthyányi Square 54
Batthyányi Street 179, 183,
 210
Bécsi Kapu (gate) 177
Bécsi Road 81, 126, 134
Békásmegyer 126
Béla király Road (today
 Attila Road) 145, 184,
 186, 194

Belgrade 17, 292, 318
Bem Barracks (Bem
 laktanya) 49
Berlin xi, xii, 42, 95, 101, 160,
 168, 240, 289, 312, 331
Berlin Square (today
 Nyugati Square) 121
Bethlen Gábor Square 248,
 327
Bethlen Gábor Street 118
Bia 20, 40, 41, 52
Biatorbágy 320
Bicske 29, 40, 41, 42, 44,
 162, 165, 222, 288, 320
Bimbó Road 54, 138, 177,
 185, 231, 255, 256
Bíró Street 140
Bochum 69
Bolyai Academy (Bolyai
 Akadémia) 48, 126, 188,
 190
Bors Street (today Hajnóczi
 József Street) 145, 178
Börzsöny (Hills) 255
Böszörményi Road 135, 146,
 149, 234
Breslau (Wrocław) xi
British Embassy 282
Bródy Sándor Street 121
Buda Castle (Budavár) xi,
 xvii, 29, 42, 55, 63, 80,
 188
Buda Hills 41, 49, 208, 268
Budafok 52, 53, 94, 154,
 256, 268, 283, 302

- Budafoki Road 267
 Budagyöngye 43, 47, 48, 182, 183, 184, 185, 190, 221
 Budajenő 43, 195, 199
 Budakalász 55, 126
 Budakeszi 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 52, 176, 177, 185, 187, 189, 190, 192, 194, 197, 206, 271, 275, 320
 Budakeszi Road 45, 47, 49, 53, 175, 186
 Budaörs 20, 41, 44, 48, 52, 62, 137
 Budaörsi Road 146, 149
 Budatétény 52
 Bűrök Street 54, 131
 Carpathian Basin 1, 3, 42, 279
 Carpathians (mountains) xv, 1, 2, 8, 14, 16
 Cartographical Institute (Térképészeti Intézet) 270, 273
 Casino 137
 Castle District 30, 52, 66, 75, 127, 135, 145, 151, 152, 153, 154, 172, 174, 177, 178, 184, 201, 209, 210, 227, 230, 234, 263, 266, 267, 269, 270, 286, 292
 Castle Hill (Várhegy) 66, 130, 144, 145, 150, 152, 174, 187
 Cegléd 12, 284, 318
 Chain Bridge (Lánchíd) 122, 123, 139, 145, 149, 248, 249
 Cinkota 95, 104, 299
 Circular Railway (Körvasút) 104, 105, 135
 Citadel 70, 130, 152, 153, 173, 178
 City Hall (Városháza) 257, 328
 Cogwheel Railway (Fogaskerekű Vasút) 45, 47, 48, 54, 125, 127, 130, 138, 140, 186, 192, 196, 236, 273, 274
 Comedy Theatre (Vígyszínház) 216
 connecting railway bridge (Összekötő vasúti híd) 126
 Corvin Square 225
 Csaba Street 128, 140, 141
 Csákvár 20
 Csanády Street 108, 118
 Csátárka 138
 Csátárka Street 138
 Csepel 15, 22, 62, 84, 136, 217, 218, 258, 259, 280, 295, 299, 328, 329
 Csepel Island 12, 14, 15, 16, 52, 94, 105, 109, 110, 113, 324
 Cserhát (Hills) 7
 Csillaghegy (Hill) 126
 Csillebérc 45, 320, 321
 Csobánka 55, 166, 195, 321
 Csolnok 50, 275, 302, 321
 Csömör 42, 82, 92, 93, 103, 104
 Csömöry Road 112
 Csörsz Street 266
 Czákó Street 178
 Dág 50
 Dagály Street 116, 117
 Damjanich Street 117
 Danube (river) 6, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27, 30, 50, 52, 54, 55, 56, 84, 94, 96, 106, 108, 109, 112, 116, 117, 121, 124, 126, 127, 135, 136, 139, 140, 142, 143, 147, 153, 154, 162, 164, 165, 168, 170, 176, 178, 187, 189, 193, 207, 223, 227, 237, 238, 239, 249, 250, 255, 260, 263, 311
 Danube Bend 36, 50, 56, 106
 Danube Embankment (Dunapart) 82, 119, 216, 237, 238, 239, 241, 244, 246, 248, 249
 Danube Promenade (Dunakorzó) 302
 Dány 13, 24
 Daróczi Road 140, 142, 146
 Debrecen 1, 2, 3, 8, 14, 24, 267, 298
 Dékán Street 144
 Déli Station (South Station) 74, 111, 143, 146, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 176, 178, 198, 234, 266
 Detrekő Street 278
 Diósárok Street 191
 Dobogókő 55, 165, 167, 201
 Döbrentei Square 153, 178, 193
 Dömös 50
 Dorog 50, 166, 177, 222
 Dózsa György Street 108
 Dráva Street 108
 Dunaföldvár 170
 Dunaharaszti 7, 9, 10, 279
 Dunakeszi 7, 310
 Dunapentele 168, 170
 Ecser 7, 9, 92
 Eger 16
 Egressy Road 110, 112
 Ercsi 16, 19, 20, 21, 311, 330
 Érd 12, 28, 29, 40, 41, 52
 Érd-Ófalu 20
 Erdei Lak Restaurant 129
 Érmelléki Street 127
 Érsekújvár (Nove Zamky) 86
 Erzsébet Boulevard 108, 117, 121
 Erzsébet Bridge 122, 124, 142, 153, 239, 263, 328
 Esztergom 25, 27, 41, 44, 49, 50, 55, 163, 165, 200, 201, 205, 320, 321
 Ezredes Street 48
 Farkasrét Cemetery 125, 129, 131, 135, 137, 138, 146, 147, 149, 151, 266
 Fehérvári Road 126
 Felsőerdő Row 117
 Felvonulás Square 235
 Fenőgyöngye 129
 Fény Street 144, 178, 271
 Ferdinánd Bridge 108, 118, 262, 329
 Ferenc Boulevard 108
 Ferenc József Bridge (today Szabadság Bridge) 121
 Ferenc-hegy (Hill) 138, 258
 Ferencváros Station 113, 118, 259
 Ferihegy 10, 62, 95, 104
 Festetics Palace 147
 Filatorigát 126
 Fillér Street 142, 177, 183, 184, 271, 272
 Fiume xv, 74
 Fiumei Road 108, 116
 Flórián Café 234
 Flórián Square 137
 Fő Street 145, 178
 Forensic Institute (Törvényszéki Orvostani Intézet) 247
 Forgács Street 301
 Fót 22, 92, 93, 104
 Francia Road 258
 Frangepán Street 116
 Gábor Áron Road 54, 321
 Galgamácsa 21
 Galicia 17
 Garam (river, Hron) 27, 164
 Gellért Hotel 154, 178, 302
 Gellért-hegy (Hill) 99, 144, 150, 154, 174, 178, 227, 266, 286, 296
 General Credit Bank (Általános Hitelbank, today's Ministry of Finance, Pénzügyminisztérium) 119, 280, 281

- Gerecse (Hills) 162
ghetto 49, 219, 222, 227,
236, 237, 238, 241, 243,
24-5, 246-250, 254, 261,
271, 282, 296, 313, 327,
328
Gizella Mill (Gizella-malom)
299
Gödöllő 24, 34, 69, 260,
283, 284, 297
Goldmark Károly Road *see*
Kis-sváb-hegyi Road
Gomba 9
Gömbös Gyula Road (today
Petőfi Road, Haladás
Road, Alkotás Street) 98,
149, 150
Gránit-lépcső (steps) 152
Great Boulevard
(Nagykörút) 108, 118,
119, 121, 122, 236, 239,
249, 284
Great Hungarian Plain 1, 2,
3, 4, 6, 12, 72, 318
Great Market Hall
(Nagyvásárcsarnok) 121
Gubacsi Road 110
Gumbinnen 69
Gvadányi Road 104
Gyál 10, 96
Győr 106
Győző Street 153

Haladás Road *see* Gömbös
Gyula Road
Haller Street 108
Hamburg 68
Hankóczy Jenő Street 142
Harkály Street 153
Hármashatár hegy (Hill) 40,
125, 127, 129, 187, 193,
194, 195
Határ Road 113
Határőr Street 270
Hatvan 12, 16, 17, 21, 33,
311
Hegyalja Road *see* Wolff
Károly Street
Hegytető Street 147, 279
Herceghalom 41
Hermánd Street 138, 140
Hidegkút 192, 299
Hidegkúti Road (today
Húvösvölgyi Road) 45,
47, 52, 53, 175
Hofherr-Schranz (factory)
98, 110
Holt-Duna (Dead Danube,
river branch) 14
Horthy Miklós Bridge 121
Horthy Miklós Road 154, 230
Horthy Miklós Square 46, 267
Horváth Mihály Square 118
Hősök Square 302
Hunfalvy Street 84
Hungária Boulevard 108,
112, 113, 116, 118, 258
Hunyadi Road 111
Húvösvölgy (Valley) 42, 44,
46, 47, 52, 53, 82, 126,
210, 273
Húvösvölgyi Road *see also*
Hidegkúti Road 125, 185,
190

Ignotus Street *see also* Klára
Street 144
Ilona Street 83
Institute of Forensic Science
(Törvényszéki Orvostani
Intézet) 247
Institute of Military History
(Hadtörténeti Intézet) xii,
203
Ipoly (river) 19, 21, 26
Isaszeg 7, 12, 13, 23, 24
Istenhegy (Hill) 125, 138
Istenhegyi Road 143, 146,
147, 185
Istvánmezei Road 302
Italy xv, 74, 269
Izabella Street 118

János-hegy (Hill) 40, 53, 177
János Hospital (János
kórház) 48, 53, 54, 82,
125, 127, 130, 138, 177,
182, 186, 209
Jász Street 116
Jászai Mari Square 124
Jászberény 12, 268, 284
Jászberényi Road 105
Jászfalu 49
Jókai Street 247
József Boulevard 108, 121
József Street 119
Józsefváros Station 108, 111,
116

Kálvin Square 118, 119, 121
Kamara-erdő (Forest) 53, 219
Káplár Street 271
Kápolnásnyék 28
Káposztásmegyer 226
Kapy Street 255
Karácsonyi Street 153
Karola Line 7, 14
Karolina Road 146, 149, 153
Károly Boulevard 108
Károly király Barracks
(Károly király laktanya)
(today Petőfi Barracks,
Petőfi laktanya) 131, 138
Kartal 17
Katyn 86, 249, 265, 276, 281
Kazinczy baths 247
Kazinczy Street 247, 249
Kecske-hegy (Hill) 127, 129
Kecskemét 3, 6, 9, 10
Kecskeméti Street 239
Kékgolyó Street 143, 146,
151, 185
Kelenföld 52, 125, 126, 129,
178, 226
Kelenföld Station 126
Kelenhegyi Road 153
Kelenvölgy 268
Keleti Station (East Station)
68, 118
Kerepesi Cemetery 116, 237
Kerepesi Road 93, 112, 116
Kesztlőc 207
Királyerdő 15, 94, 109, 259
Királyhágó Square 147, 149,
150
Kis-Duna (Little Danube,
river branch) 15
Kis-Gellért-hegy (Hill) 149,
151, 152, 153, 178
Kis-Sváb-hegy (Hill) 138, 140,
143, 147, 150, 177, 196
Kis-sváb-hegyi Road (today
Goldmark Károly Road)
143
Kiscell 138
Kiscelli Road 134
Kiskőszeg (Batina) 17
Kiskunhalas 37
Kisoroszi 56
Kispest 3, 9, 109, 110, 111,
217, 218, 299
Kisrákos 62
Kistarcsa 95
Klára Street (today Ignotus
Street) 178
Klauszál Square 247, 249
Klotild Street 118, 231
Kőbánya 109, 110, 259, 287,
297
Kőbánya-alsó Station 111
Költő Street 184
Komárom 49, 51, 55, 162,
164, 168
Kőműves-lépcső (steps) 148
Königsberg (Kaliningrad) xi
Könyves Kálmán Boulevard
108
Korong Street 113
Körszálló Hotel 138, 190, 234
Kossuth Square 54
Kosztolányi Deszók Square
see Lenke Square
Kozma Street 104
Krisztina Boulevard 145,
146, 147, 149, 151, 152,
178, 189

- Krisztina Church (Krisztina templom) 233
 Krisztinaváros 234
 Kunmadaras 291
 Kuny Domokos Street *see* Karácsonyi Street
 Kurucles 220
 Kurland 160
 Kútvolgy (Valley) 80, 84, 125
 Kútvolgyi Road 130, 186
- Labanc Road 190
 Lágymányos 75, 84, 87, 129, 131, 137, 138, 140, 153, 154
 Lajoskomárom 289
 Lajosmizse 238
 Lakihegy 15, 94, 109
 Látó-hegy (Hill) 126, 128, 138, 140
 Leányfalu 106, 116, 294
 Légrády (printworks) 258, 259
 Lehel Street 113, 117, 221
 Lénárt Street 185
 Leningrad (St Petersburg) xi, 235, 313
 Lenke Square (today Kosztolányi Dezső Square) 153, 154
 Lepence (stream) 50
 Léva (Levice) 27
 Lidice 236
 Lipótmező 54, 186
 Little Boulevard (Kiskörút) 108
 Little Hungarian Plain 19, 21, 168
 Lomnic (boarding house) 236
 Lónyay Street 118
 Lovas Road 231, 292
 Lövőház Street 183, 198, 273
 Lübeck 44
 Ludovika Academy (Ludovika-akadémia) 70, 84, 117, 229
- Magdolnaváros Station (today Angyalföld Station) 112, 113
 Maglód 7, 23, 92, 96
 Majestic (boarding house) 236
 Makkosmária 45
 Makó 1, 291
 Mány 198, 206
 Marcibányi Square 48
 Margit Boulevard 82, 139, 143, 144, 145, 146, 150, 175, 176, 178, 179, 184, 231, 234, 254, 255, 261, 285
 Margit Bridge 124, 145, 146, 178, 216, 220
- Margit Island 135, 144, 216, 226, 283
 Margit Line 7, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 125, 160, 164, 256
 Margit Quay (Margit rakpart) 257
 Mária Valéria Bridge 50
 Máriahalom 173
 Maros Street 178, 250
 Mártonhegyi Road 47, 54, 131, 135, 146
 Martonvásár 21, 40, 52
 Márvány Street 150, 266
 Mátra (Hills) 7
 Mátray Street 179
 Mátyás király Road 184
 Mátyás Street 118
 Mátyásföld 62, 103, 104, 299
 Mátyás-hegy (Hill) 130, 137, 138, 144
 MÁVAG arms factory (MÁVAG fegyvergyár) 257
 Mechwart Square 139, 183, 184
 Meredek Street *see also* Miasszonyunk Street 145
 Mészáros Street 153, 178
 Metropol Hotel 260
 Mexikói Road 112, 113
 Miasszonyunk Street (today Meredek Street) 145
 Mikó Street 178
 Ministry of Defence (Honvédelmi Minisztérium) 71, 85, 147, 210, 244
 Mirabella (boarding house) 236
 Miskolc 16, 17, 291
 Mogyoród 7, 92
 Monor 10
 Mór 52, 164
 Móric Zsigmond Square *see also* Szent Imre Square 46, 154
 Moszkva Square *see also* Széll Kálmán Square 128, 180, 269
 Munkácsy Mihály Street 49
 Municipal Theatre (Városi Színház) 260, 297
 Museum of Military History (Hadtörténeti Múzeum) 230
 Múzeum Boulevard 108, 284
- Nagy Sándor Street 111
 Nagy-Svábhegy (Hill) (today Szabadság-hegy) 185
 Nagybajom 311
 Nagykőrösi Road 55
- Nagykovácsi 53, 195, 199, 206, 209
 Nagykovácsi Road 52
 Nagyszálló Hotel 136
 Nagytétény 299
 Nagyvárad (Oradea) 1, 34
 Naphegy (Hill) 153, 172, 174, 178, 233, 234
 Nárcisz Street 146
 National Bank (Nemzeti Bank) 201, 280
 National Museum (Nemzeti Múzeum) 118, 121, 296
 Németsvölgy 150
 Németsvölgy Cemetery 150, 151
 Németsvölgyi Road 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 250, 266
 Népliget (Park) 112, 113, 116
 Népszínház Street 119
 New Communal Cemetery (Új Köztemető) 104
 Normafa Road 184
 Notre Dame de Sion (convent) 44, 45, 66, 130
 Nyíregyháza 2
 Nyugati Square *see also* Berlin Square 121
 Nyugati Station (West Station) 117, 118, 124
 Nyúl Street 272
- Óbuda 126, 138, 234, 237, 241
 Óbuda Island 138
 Ócsa 9
 Oktogon Square 298
 Olasz Avenue (today Szilágyi Erzsébet Avenue) 48, 53, 54, 125, 127, 138, 177, 183, 184, 185, 209, 271, 272, 273
 Old Cemetery (Régi temető) 126
 Opera 41, 127, 254
 Orbánhegy (Hill) 125, 135, 137, 138, 143, 146, 147, 148, 196
 Orczy Road 108
 Orczy Square 116, 117
 Ördög-Árok (culvert) 134, 187
 Ördög-árok (gully) 176, 187, 190, 192
 Öreg-Duna (Old Danube, river branch) 12
 Oroszlánszikla (rock) 127
 Örs vezér Square 105, 109
 Ostrom Street 46, 179, 182, 184, 223, 269
 Ózd 291

- Palatinus baths 136
 Párkány (Stúrovo) 50
 Parliament Building
 (Parlament) 226, 230,
 231, 235
 Pasarét 44, 48, 125, 138, 220
 Pasaréti Road 183
 Pasaréti Square 48
 Páty 41, 43, 49, 195
 Pécel 7, 9, 13, 23, 92, 93, 95
 People's Stadium
 (Népstadion) 62
 Perbál 43, 49, 74, 177, 195,
 204, 206, 209
 Perényi Road 126
 Pesthidegkút 53, 195, 205
 Pestszenterzsébet 109, 110,
 111, 217, 299
 Pestszentimre 7, 10, 53, 94,
 103, 104
 Pestszentlőrinc 94, 103,
 104, 217, 259, 279, 299
 Pestújhely 93, 104, 105,
 109, 110, 112
 Petőfi Bridge 121
 Petőfi Road *see also* Gömbös
 Gyula Road
 Piac Square 259
 Pilis (Hills) 50, 116, 162,
 164, 165, 166, 173, 195,
 200, 201, 205, 206, 207
 Pilis–nyereg (saddle) 165
 Pilisborosjenő 205
 Piliscsaba 43, 50, 75
 Piliscsév 50
 Pilisjászfalu 50
 Pilismarót 50, 302
 Pilisszántó 205
 Pilisszentiván 43, 50, 206
 Pilisszentkereszt 50, 55, 165,
 167, 176, 205, 275, 288
 Pilisszentlélek 163, 173,
 204, 205, 275
 Pilisvörösvár 20, 49, 50, 55,
 166, 197, 205, 206
 Podmaniczky Street 118
 Pomáz 50, 55, 126, 134, 166
 Post Office Palace 144, 146,
 149, 150, 151, 178, 182
 Prime Minister's Palace
 (Miniszterelnökségi
 palota) 269
 Pusztázámor 40
 Pusztaszeri Road 54

 Racecourse (Lóversenytér)
 62, 63, 105, 109, 110,
 111, 112
 Ráckeve 14
 Rác baths 178
 Radetzky Barracks
 (Radetzky-laktanya) 49

 Rákóczy Road 118, 121,
 237, 284
 Rákos (stream) 104, 105,
 108, 113, 241
 Rákos Station 108
 Rákoscscaba 9, 94
 Rákosfalva 105, 110
 Rákoskeresztúr 94, 95, 104,
 259
 Rákospalota 103, 104, 109,
 112
 Rákosszentmihály 110,
 112, 113
 Rákosszentmihály 95, 103,
 104, 281
 Ráth György Street 134
 Regent Building (Regent-ház)
 139, 231
 Remete-hegy (Hill) 126,
 129, 175, 187, 198, 209
 Remetehegyi Road 126
 Retek Street 127, 144, 177,
 183, 184, 269, 273
 Révész Street 226
 Rézmál 140
 Rigó Street 119
 Róbert Károly Boulevard
 108, 113, 118
 Rókus-hegy (Hill) 140, 234
 Roman baths 126
 Róna Street 111
 Rothermere Street (today
 Balaton Street) 231
 Rottenbiller Street 108, 116,
 117, 118
 Royal Hotel 236
 Royal Palace (Várpalota)
 201, 209, 260, 261, 268
 Rózsa Street 118
 Rózsadomb (Hill) 46, 54,
 126, 130, 138, 143, 145,
 184, 255, 267, 274, 278,
 286, 296

 Salesian boarding school
 (szalézi internátus) 83
 Sándor Palace 66
 Sárísáp 50
 Sashalom 93, 104
 Sashegy (Hill) 66, 70, 129,
 130, 131, 135, 137, 138,
 140, 145, 146, 147, 148,
 149, 150, 151, 152, 279,
 294
 Seismological Institute
 (Szeizmológiai Intézet)
 130
 Simontornya 170
 Síp Street 244
 Sopronkőhida 254
 Solt 9, 62
 Solymár 195, 205

 Soroksár 7, 9, 10, 12, 15, 92,
 103, 109, 110, 217
 Soroksári Road 113
 Sósfürdő Street 285
 Sósút 275
 Stalingrad xi, 61, 76, 77, 96,
 106, 218, 235, 314
 State Printing Press (Állami
 Nyomda) 230
 Statisztika Street 234
 Stefánia Road 116, 241
 Stock Exchange (tőzsde) 300
 Süttő 50
 Svábhegy (Hill) 45, 47, 54,
 126, 142, 143, 184, 185,
 187, 194, 196, 236
 Swedish Embassy 218, 242,
 247, 258, 281, 283
 Swiss Embassy 245, 247,
 280, 282, 283, 286
 Szabadság Bridge *see* Ferenc
 József Bridge)
 Szabadság Square 302
 Szabadság-hegy (Hill) *see*
 Nagy-Svábhegy (Hill)
 Szabolcs Street 116, 117
 Szamos Street 127, 140
 Szarvas Gábor Street 208
 Szarvas Restaurant 148
 Széchenyi Library
 (Széchenyi könyvtár) 274
 Széchenyi Quay (Széchenyi
 rakpart) 237
 Széchenyi-hegy (Hill) 45, 47
 Szeged 256, 294
 Széher Road 220
 Székesfehérvár 25, 26, 28,
 29, 41, 161, 164, 167,
 168, 169, 170, 289
 Széll Kálmán Road 145
 Széll Kálmán Square (today
 Moszkva Square) 83,
 128, 144, 146, 147, 174,
 175, 176, 177, 178, 180,
 183, 184, 185, 188, 193,
 209, 210, 220, 234, 269,
 270
 Szemlő-hegy (Hill) 142
 Széna Square 44, 46, 69,
 140, 144, 174, 175, 176,
 178, 179, 180, 182, 183,
 184, 185, 209, 285
 Szent Imre Square (today
 Móricz Zsigmond Square)
 154
 Szent István Boulevard 108,
 122, 124
 Szent István Square 154, 246
 Szentendre 54, 55, 56, 134,
 165, 166, 205, 255
 Szentendre Island 36, 55, 56
 Szentháromság Square 269

- Szentháromság Street 231, 269
 Szentkirályi Street 81
 Széplóna 42, 45, 46, 47, 48, 89, 125, 191
 Szépjuhász né saddle (Szépjuhász né-nyereg) 44, 45, 52
 Szépvölgyi Road 142
 Sziklakápolna (chapel) 154
 Szilágyi Erzsébet Avenue *see* Olasz Avenue
 Szilas (stream) 95, 103
 Szinyei Merse Street 108
 Szolnok 2, 12, 74
 Szomor 20, 49, 50, 173, 199, 205, 206
 Tabán 178
 Tabán Park 62
 Tahi 56
 Táncsics Mihály Street *see* Werbőczy Street
 Tarján 50
 Tárogató Road 45
 Tát 50
 Tata 51, 161, 162
 Tatabánya 50, 51
 Tattersaal (Racecourse) 237
 Tavaszmező Street 119
 Teleki Square 116, 237, 300
 Temes Street 127
 Teréz Boulevard 108
 Tétény 219
 Tímár Street 81
 Tinnye 49, 164, 175, 177, 195, 206
 Tisza (river) 2, 6, 13
 Tisztviselőtelep 116
 Tök 49
 Tokod 50
 Tököl 15
 Toldy High School (Toldy gimnázium) 82, 83
 Torockó Square 285
 Törökbálint 41, 52, 53
 Törökbátya Restaurant (Törökbátya vendéglő) 180
 Törökőr 116
 Törökvész 126, 142
 Törökvész Road 140, 177, 184, 193
 Tótfalu 56
 Tóth Árpád Promenade (Tóth Árpád sétány) 275
 Town Hall (Csepel) 259
 Transdanubia 17, 19, 21, 25, 29, 32, 77, 161, 170, 176, 302, 312
 Transylvania xvi, 1, 2, 3, 19
 Trombitás Street 127, 170
 Turkish Embassy 258
 Tűzberek 23
 Új Szentjános (János) Hospital 48, 53–4, 82, 124, 128, 130, 139, 177, 180, 182, 186, 209
 Újlak church 143
 Újmajor 94, 95
 Újpest 109, 112–13, 259, 260, 299, 301
 Ukraine 76, 314
 Üllő 9, 10, 318
 Üllői Road 10, 55, 93, 96, 98, 104, 116
 Úri Street 269
 Üröm 49, 55
 Üröm Station 126
 Vác 12, 19, 20, 22, 24, 56, 75
 Váci Road 113
 Vadaspark (Park) 127
 Vadász Street 81, 247, 248
 Vak Bottyán Road 111
 Vál 40
 Váli-víz (river) 169
 Valkó 23, 24
 Vámfház Boulevard 108, 121
 Várfoke Street 179, 182, 269
 Városliget (Park) 112, 116, 117, 241, 302
 Városmajor (Grange) 48, 53, 127–8, 134, 135, 137, 138, 140, 141, 143, 144, 177, 182, 270
 Városmajor Street 127, 143, 147, 151, 182, 250, 328
 Vasas Stadium (Vasas sportpálya) 138
 Vaspálya Street 111
 Vasváry Pál Street 98
 Vecsés 10, 23, 92, 94, 96
 Velence (Lake) 25, 26, 28, 40, 170
 Vereb 170
 Veresegyház 7, 24
 Vérhalom 140, 142
 Vérhalom Square 140, 142, 210
 Vérmező (Meadow) 48, 62, 130, 142, 143, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 151–2, 153, 179, 185, 226, 234, 269
 Vértes (Hills) 51, 164
 Vidámpark (amusement park) 116
 Vigadó (Concert Hall) 119, 249
 Villányi Road 50, 153
 Virányos 177
 Virányos Road 125, 184, 207
 Visegrád 116
 Vistula (river) 42, 163
 Víziváros 179
 Vojvodina xvi, 2
 Volga (river) 277
 Voronezh 80
 Vörösmarty Street 118
 War Academy (Hadiakadémia) 75
 Warsaw xi, 30, 161, 237, 292, 313, 314
 Werbőczy Street (today Táncsics Mihály Street) 66, 269
 Wesselényi Street 249, 263, 328, 329
 Wolff Károly Street (today Hegyalja Road) 145
 Zámoly 165
 Zemplén (Hills) 6
 Zichy Jenő Street 244
 zoo (állatkert) 116, 234
 Zsámbék 43, 162, 166, 198, 204, 206
 Zsámbék Basin 44, 198
 Zsigmond Square 143
 Zugliget 45, 53, 184, 209, 320
 Zugló 109, 110–11, 112, 241, 255