

The Prague Uprising 1945

By the beginning of May 1945 Nazi Germany had been decisively defeated by the Allies. Berlin was on the verge of capitulation to Soviet forces. However in south-eastern Germany, parts of Austria, and Czechoslovakia there were still large bodies of active German troops, notably Army Group Centre and the remnants of Army Group Ostmark.

On May 2nd General Alfred Jodl, Chief of Staff of Germany's Armed Forces High Command ordered these forces to avoid being captured by the Soviets; rather they were to move west in order to negotiate with the Western Allies, knowing they would receive better treatment as prisoners of war rather than being shipped back to labour camps in Siberia. As the situation in Germany worsened however the High Command's control of these forces in central Europe diminished, allowing many units, particularly SS units, to unite and set orders amongst themselves.

The Nazi regime increasingly saw these forces in Czechoslovakia and the surrounding areas as the last Nazi stronghold, should Berlin fall. Thus Prague as the Czech capital was considered a major stronghold to be defended, from which a Nazi counter offensive could be started. Berlin finally capitulated to the Soviets on May 2nd, and once the news reached the inhabitants of Prague the situation there began to destabilise as they also knew that the Soviets were advancing from the east.

Both Stalin and Churchill knew that occupied Prague was a significant strategic prize, the seizure of which could influence the eventual political make up of Czechoslovakia after the war had ended. Stalin determined to occupy the city before the other Allies; thus on May 1st he gave orders for the 1st Ukrainian Front to disengage from the fighting for Berlin and head towards Prague, along with the 2nd Ukrainian Front that was to approach Prague from the south-east. Stalin was already aware that the American VIII Corps of the 9th Army and the V Corps and XII Corps of the 3rd Army were to the west of Prague. However he was not aware that the Americans had been given orders not to enter Prague. Eisenhower the Supreme Commander in the west wished to minimise American casualties in this part of Europe, just as he had in the battle for Berlin; hence he accepted that the Soviet Red Army should be the first

Allied power to enter Prague. Nevertheless the nearby American presence stimulated the civil uprising in Prague, the populace not knowing at this point that the Americans had agreed not to enter Prague first.

On May 5th, prompted by the Russian Liberation Army defecting from supporting the Nazis to instead helping the Czech cause, the citizens of Prague began a revolt against their German occupiers. It started with Czech Radio making broadcasts in the banned Czech language. People began congregating on the streets, some defacing Nazi posters, others tearing down Nazi flags to replace them with the Czechoslovakian flag. Tram operators refused to accept Reichsmarks for fares or to give the name of tram stops in German as had been required. Lone German soldiers were ambushed and killed. In retaliation some German soldiers fired into the crowds. Karl Hermann Frank, the local Nazi Police General, in an effort to quash the uprising broadcast a message to the nation, in which he said he would destroy the city and kill any citizens rising up against German authority.

At noon Czech Radio put out a series of broadcasts appealing for help in fighting off a unit of SS soldiers who had entered the building. The appeals increased the intensity of the uprising with large crowds of unarmed civilians overwhelming German barracks and stores. Non-combatant Czechs assisted in setting up makeshift hospitals to cater for the increasing numbers of wounded, others took food and water to those at the newly erected barricades. The Czech forces managed to seize thousands of firearms including five armoured vehicles. By the end of the day most of the city east of the river Vltava was in Czech control. In gaining control of the telephone exchange the Czechs were able to intercept communications between German units and their commanders. The Germans however still had control of the city west of the River Vltava, including the Gestapo headquarters and Ruzyne airfield.

German Waffen SS units were ordered away from fighting the Red Army further east and sent to Prague in order to quell the uprising. On hearing of their redeployment and imminent arrival in the city, Prague Radio broadcast a plea for help in both Russian and English asking for Allied attacks on the approaching SS units. General Patton of the US Army, upon hearing this, asked permission from Eisenhower to intervene and support the Czechs. That permission was denied.

Throughout the night of May 5th thousands of Czech civilians worked to erect over 1600 barricades, in order to slow down the progress of the German SS units when they arrived in the city.

On the morning of May 6th SS General Carl Friedrich von Puckler-Burghaus ordered the Luftwaffe to fire- bomb Prague. However the attack was limited owing to a lack of fuel. Nevertheless there were many civilian casualties. At midday the First Battalion of the Russian Liberation Front entered Prague and attacked the Germans, disarming about 10,000 German soldiers.

In the early hours of May 7th in Western Europe the Germans signed an unconditional surrender. This gave the Germans 48 hours in which to cease all hostilities. Eisenhower hoped that this would bring an end to the conflict in Prague and so avoid the need for any American intervention. The German forces in Czechoslovakia and the surrounding areas however denounced the ceasefire, by stating that it did not apply to Nazi forces fighting the Red Army or Czech insurgents. Under the cover of fighting the Germans also wanted to move as many troops as possible westwards, in order to surrender to the Americans rather than the Soviets.

Later on that day the SS reinforcements arrived in Prague with armoured and artillery units. They began to destroy the barricades erected by so many citizens, and indeed to use citizens as human shields in their fighting against the Russian Liberation Army. Extensive damage was done to many of Prague's historic buildings, including the Old Town Hall. The Russian Liberation Front was successful in slowing down the SS advance towards the centre of the city, but inevitably were forced to withdraw their forces over the afternoon and evening of May 7th. They were no match for the superior German forces, retreating west to surrender to the Americans. With the bulk of the Russian Liberation Front gone the poorly trained Czech insurgents were no match for the Germans. By the end of the day the Germans had taken back much of the rebel held territory east of the River Vltava. Remaining Russian Liberation Front soldiers in the city however were able to capture the airfield at Ruzyne destroying several aircraft.

On May 8th the Germans renewed their air and artillery bombardment. Faced with military defeat and no prospect of help from the Americans,

the Czech National Council comprising representatives from various different Czech political parties, who had taken control of the city, agreed to negotiate with the German Wehrmacht led by General Rudolf Toussant. He was desperate to evacuate the rest of his troops westwards. It was thus eventually agreed, in the early hours of May 9th, that the Czechs would allow the German troops to pass westwards through Prague, and in exchange on their way west would surrender their arms to the city.

Early on May 9th the last of the German troops having left the city, the first units of the 1st Ukrainian Front simultaneously reached the suburbs, fighting to remove the remaining isolated SS units. Within hours however, any further resistance being overcome, fighting ended as Soviet troops reached the city centre. The house to house fighting that had characterised the battles for Vienna, Budapest and Berlin did not occur in Prague. At 8am on May 9th Czech Radio announced the arrival of the Soviet forces and that hostilities were over.

The Prague Uprising of 1945 was seen by many Czechs as the greatest military action to establish Czech freedom and national independence fought on their own territory. The Western Allies failure to liberate Prague reinforced the Czechoslovakian belief that the West had little concern for their nation, first demonstrated by the carving up of the country in the Munich Agreement of 1938. Such attitudes within the Czech population, together with the liberation of Prague by the Red Army, caused many Czechs to turn to communism in the immediate post war years. Not surprisingly in 1948 the democratic government of Czechoslovakia was toppled by a communist takeover. Czechoslovakia became a satellite of the Soviet Union.