



Why Didn't General Eisenhower Try to Capture Berlin?

By the end of March 1945, the European phase of the Second World War was close to an end. The Soviet armies were thirty miles east of Berlin and encountering fierce resistance on their way to Germany's capital. General Eisenhower's armies were about 200 miles west of Berlin, but encountering light resistance as they rapidly advanced eastward.

Eisenhower was advised to strike toward Berlin. Winston Churchill sent the Supreme Commander cables urging him to order his 21st Army Group under Field Marshal Montgomery to attack and capture the capital city. General George Patton believed Monty's forces could get to Berlin in less than three days and implored his friend Ike to order the attack. Instead, in mid-April, Ike ordered his allied armies to halt all eastward movement at the Elbe river line leaving the 21st Army Group about 70 miles from Berlin, and then to move both south into Czechoslovakia and north to the Baltic Sea to eliminate remaining elements of the Wehrmacht.

Many allied leaders — including his own 9th Army commander General William Hood Simpson, whose forces were poised to attack the city if Ike would give them the order — bitterly criticized Eisenhower for this decision. To this day, some military and political historians characterize this order as Dwight Eisenhower's major command failure of World War II. Why did he halt instead of attack? Their critiques deserve an answer: Why did Ike halt the Allied advance at the Elbe?



In Early March 1945 Churchill tried to talk Ike into capturing Berlin. (Dwight D. Eisenhower Library)

Ike had earlier made it clear that he intended to seize the German capital. During the invasion of France in June 1944 he personally announced to the media that his ultimate military target was Berlin. As the allied armies moved through France toward Germany during the rest of that year, many of Ike's subordinate commanders, including Montgomery, Bradley, Patton, Simpson, and others, frequently announced their intentions to take Berlin and force a German surrender.

But Yalta changed Ike's plans. At the Yalta summit meeting in February 1945, Churchill and Roosevelt presented Stalin with a proposed map of Germany to go into effect after the war ended. The map divided Germany into four zones, each of which was to be governed by the Soviet Union, France, Great Britain, or the United States. Stalin agreed to this division of the enemy's territory. Under this proposal Berlin would be in

the Soviet zone of control about 200 miles away from the nearest allied zone. Also at Yalta, Stalin agreed to have the Soviet Union join the United Nations after the war. This was very important to Roosevelt, who believed establishment of the U. N. would be a major element of the postwar settlement and would make for world peace. He was willing to make concessions to Stalin in order to secure his agreement.

After Yalta there seemed to be little incentive for Eisenhower to race to Berlin, capture it, turn it over to the U.S.S.R., and then retreat 200 miles to the American occupation zone. Eisenhower's orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the military leaders of Britain and the U.S., were to defeat the German army in northwest Europe, and they did not require him to capture Berlin. Eisenhower was meticulous about matters of command. His military actions were subject to the strategic commands issued by the Combined Chiefs, just as they were subject to the political commands of Roosevelt and Churchill.

In later years, Eisenhower justified the decision not to take Berlin by pointing out that many American soldiers would have been sacrificed in the effort. The Soviets endured over 380,000 casualties in their battle for the German capital. Even with the advantage of hindsight, Ike could not see any military reason to have American soldiers killed or wounded in capturing a city his forces would have to abandon. He left unexplained, however, his most important reason for halting at the Elbe.

When Churchill demanded that he race to Berlin and capture the city, Eisenhower realized that the only remaining reason to do it was political and not military. He therefore cabled General George Marshall in Washington on April 7th and explained that he did not plan to capture Berlin. But he added: I "would cheerfully adjust my plans" if the Combined Chiefs ordered me to do so. General Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army and the dominant force on the Combined Chiefs of Staff, usually discussed these kinds of wartime political decisions with President Roosevelt. But in this case he didn't need to talk to the President. He knew fully well that Roosevelt wanted no conflict with the Soviet Union, and Marshall agreed with Eisenhower's conclusion that there was no military justification for changing Eisenhower's orders. General Marshall and the other United States military chiefs overruled Churchill and the British military chiefs and refused to order Eisenhower to capture Berlin.

Ike followed those orders and his forces did not take Berlin. This was not the first or the last time that Dwight Eisenhower publicly accepted responsibility for a controversial policy without blaming those who actually made the decision.

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