

This Day in History... April 25, 1945

US and Soviet Troops Link-Up at Elbe

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When the Battle of the Bulge ended in January 1945, Hitler's forces were no longer a serious threat on the Western front. With reserves exhausted, armor scarce, motor fuel drying up, and the Luftwaffe virtually gone, the defeat of Germany was inevitable. Despite the obvious however, Hitler gave orders to fight on.

In an effort to effectively eliminate the enemy, the Allies began their final campaign on the Western front. Russian forces already in Poland and East Prussia began a massive offensive from the east on January 12th. Meanwhile, the US began its own offensive in the west. Strategic bombing continued, raining destruction upon German cities day and night. In April, the industrial Ruhr valley, with its entire force of 400,000 soldiers was captured by US troops. Meeting no real opposition in the east, Soviet forces continued to push forward, fighting their last great battle in Berlin.

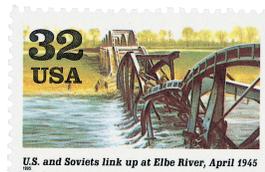
On April 12th – the day President Roosevelt died – the US Army crossed the Elbe River, the agreed upon dividing line between Soviet and Western zones of postwar occupation. On April 25th, US and Soviet troops met at the Elbe River. The first contact came near Strehla, after US First Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue crossed the Elbe River and met three men from an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Gordeyev. That same day, William Robertson and two others met a Russian patrol under Alexander Silavshko on the destroyed Elbe bridge of Torgau.



Germany surrendered less than two weeks after the link-up.

US and Soviet commanders met the following day at Torgau and arranged for an official meeting, the “Handshake of Torgau” on April 27. That handshake was between Robertson and Silavshko and was widely photographed. The photo was released by the American, British, and French governments, who all reaffirmed their dedication to destroying the Third Reich. Even though the Allies had cut Germany in half, Hitler ordered his soldiers to fight on, before committing suicide on April 30th.

In the years since, monuments to the Elbe link-up were built at Torgau, Lorenzkirch, and Bad Liebenwerda. There's also a “Spirit of the Elbe” plaque at Arlington National Cemetery. During the Cold War, the link-up was frequently cited as a reminder for peace and friendship between the US and Soviet Union. One of the soldiers present at the link-up petitioned the UN to make April 25 a “World Day of Peace,” though it was never officially declared. Russia later issued a coin commemorating the 50th anniversary of the event. In 2010, the US and Russian presidents issued a joint statement honoring April 25 and the “spirit of the Elbe.”



From the WWII – 1945: Victory at Last sheet

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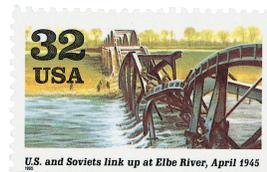
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