It happened on April 30, 1945. Photographs of the burning Reichstag appeared in the May 3 issue of the newspaper Pravda and the following day – in The Times of London. The photographs were made by military correspondent Viktor Tyomin,  who was shooting from a military plane assigned especially for that purpose by the Soviet military command. Fighting was still going on, and groups of diehard Nazis in the Reichstag stubbornly refused to accept the inevitable, but the photos Tyomin had made on board that plane already belonged to History.

Let alone the Victory Banner punctured by bullets and stained by the blood of the Red Army soldiers who hoisted it on top the dark-gray bulk of the Reichstag.  This sacred relic is now on display in the Army Museum here in Moscow. The banner was carefully held in Moscow for a whole 55 years. Only three years ago was it finally allowed to be temporarily displayed in the now-independent Byelorussia and Ukraine whose nationals fought side by side with their Russian brothers against the German hordes.  1945 was not the first time Berlin had fallen to Russian troops.  The first time was during the Seven Year War, back in 1760. It was then that Field Marshal Pyotr Shuvalov made European headlines saying that “St.Petersburg is a long way off from Berlin, but Berlin is fully within St.Petersburg’s reach.”

The second time Russians entered Berlin was in February 1813, when they were in hot pursuit of Napoleon’s retreating armies.  In 1945 it was already the Red Army’s turn to take Berlin for the third time. That last storming was also the bloodiest of all claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers who died in their final drive to capture the capital of the hated Nazi empire. The Soviet troops stormed the city despite heavy losses that were as huge as they were inevitable… Their task was crystal-clear – to seize the Reichstag – a sprawling structure, which, before the Nazi takeover, served as the country’s parliamentary headquarters.

Members of Marshal Zhukov’s staff had a whole nine Victory Banners prepared – one for each of the nine divisions closing in on Berlin. Today they are talking about flags custom-ordered to exactly replicate the Soviet State Flag.  In actual fact, no one knew what the Victory Banner should look like... The makers had neither quality, velvet-like, fabric nor instruments to make staffs with. As a result, they had to dye the fabric, make the staffs and install caps removed from ordinary curtains.  Quite predictably, the end result of that effort was pretty modest. One of those makeshift banners was then given to the 150th Division, which was bearing the brunt of the ongoing battle. This banner was destined to unfurl atop the dome of the fallen Reichstag. The daunting task of hoisting the Victory Banner was entrusted to Sergeants Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria. Technically and psychologically, the job was akin to mountain climbing or steeplejacking. In his memoir, Mikhail Yegorov writes that when he and Meliton Kantaria received the order, they started making their way to the Reichstag roof right above the main entrance.  The air was dense with artillery and small arms fire. At one point they saw a shell fragment cutting a hole in the belly of a stone horse prancing just a few yards away. Yegorov and Kantaria immediately stuck the staff into that hole. Looking from below you might think the Teutonic horseman was holding a red Soviet banner. The symbolism of the whole picture was hard to miss... However, as the two scouts were already halfway down, they saw a soldier sent by their commanders saying that the banner could be seen from one side only and so they would have to move it higher.  The two daredevils started crawling up the huge dome, all shattered, charred, the gaping holes from broken windows offering an unnerving picture of the deadly abyss below… The barrage continued unabated meaning that making one way to the very top and stick in the banner was a near impossible mission…  Unfazed by death flying all around them, however, Yegorov and Kantaria somehow managed to fix the banner at the very top of the Reichstag dome from where it could easily be seen by all… By the way, the hands of these two heroes remained forever scarred. In recognition of their heroic feat, Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria were both awarded the much-coveted title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

The Victory Banner was proudly fluttering over the fallen German capital. Down below, there was a jubilant crowd of Red Army soldiers happily congratulating each other with their much-awaited Victory.  They had paid a dear price to make that day happen, fighting near Moscow and in Stalingrad, on the Kursk Bulge and crossing the Dnieper. Proud and feeling vindicated, Russian soldiers were putting their signatures on the crippled walls and columns of the Reichstag…

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