

Twenty-seven.

On the morning of January 24th, the forces of the Protectorate struck back: and struck back with a savage vengeance. The previous afternoon an amphibious division had steamed at high speed out of the Baltic and made straight for the eastern coasts of England. This fleet was protected by minesweepers, destroyers and two medium-sized aircraft carriers, in the cause of air cover. At eighteen knots it soon began to close the English coast, and its commanders reported that the fleet would be ready for action shortly after dawn.

An entire airborne division was also on standby to the east of Berlin, and another at a complex of military airfields in western Poland. In the event, however, their services were not to be called upon: for the Protectorate had much greater forces at its immediate command, and much closer at hand too.

From the earliest days of the Protectorate, a gigantic area north-west of the Caledonian Canal, in a line running from Fort William to Inverness, had been dedicated to the exclusive use of the the Protectorate's military forces and hunting preserves. A naval base had been established at Loch Ewe in Wester Ross, where the wartime convoys to Murmansk had assembled. The surrounding hamlets had been bombed and machine-gunned from the air, the existing wartime installations enlarged, and a medium-scale squadron of amphibious-forces ships brought to the harbour's heavily defended quays and anchorages. A little to the north, on an island in Gruinard Bay, biological-warfare forces were installed to continue wartime research into the military applications of anthrax. And a little to the south, at the northern end of the island of south

Rona, a squadron of submarines was installed, in conditions of extreme secrecy. There was a further fleet of heavy vessels brought to the Cromarty firth on the eastern coast of the county, and a third detachment of shallow-draft fast-attack vessels held in readiness at Orkney's Scapa Flow, safe in the arms of Hoy and Mainland and South Ronaldsay.

The region was also home to much of the Protectorate's air power. On the flat lands of Caithness, a gigantic air-base had been built, capable of taking the heaviest distance bomber on its extremely long runways. Other aircraft, modified for action against disturbances in high-density urban areas, were dispersed to existing or new runways on the isles of Lewis and Tiree: while a third airbase was developed at the south-western end of the Kintyre peninsula. Each of these was also equipped to deploy, at very short notice, units of airborne assault-troops specially trained for civilian insurgency.

There were also considerable land-forces stationed in the region: two hundred thousand men in all, one quarter of them in motorised units. Significant units of armour and artillery were also stationed in or around the green and narrow coastal plain that sweeps north from Inverness around the Beaully and Cromarty firths.

And there were still very considerable forces loyal to the Protectorate in enclaves all round the country. In Scotland, these enclaves were to be found in the country's north-east corner, near Fraserburgh; around Braemar; on the coast of East Lothian and up into the Lammermuir hills; on the Galloway peninsula, commanding the ferry routes to northern Ireland; and in a long ribbon to the north of Glasgow, from Dumbarton to Crianlarich.

In Wales, there were three of these Militia enclaves. The first was on the island of Anglesey, whose harbour at Holyhead was full of Soviet naval vessels. The second was established around the harsh slate quarries of Blaenau Ffestiniog, where the miners had been machine-gunned on the screens by Militia forces and the little town burned. There was a third enclave in the Clwyd valley, running from Ruthin to St Asaph, where the Paramilitaries had established a communications-centre in a mansion at St Beuno's.

In England too, there were numerous and heavily-armed Militia enclaves, on the coast or inland hills, close to insurgent centres of population. Paramilitaries held the Lake District and the Militia controlled the forest of Bowland in Lancashire, as well as Teesdale, Wensleydale and the north Yorkshire moors. Soviet marines held the Wirral peninsula, while Regulars were in control of the coast from Scarborough to the Wash. In the heart of England the Militia held Northamptonshire, and also most of Suffolk. Control of the Channel ports was still being contested after four days of very savage fighting. The Protectorate had re-taken the Southampton and Plymouth areas. Bristol also remained in their control, and the nearby coastal areas, as far south as Weston and as far north as Gloucester. Large areas of Bristol had, however, been burned-out in the fighting for the city, and refugees were already pouring in a steady stream to the east in search of shelter and food and warmth.

These refugees were the first to witness the response of the Protectorate to the insurrection. At midnight, armed motor-cycle sidecar units swept out of Bristol and cleared the roads of refugees. Shortly afterwards the rumble of heavy transport was heard approaching from the distance; then a convoy of medium-calibre artillery guns was trucked past on low-loaders. Fifty armoured

personnel carriers followed these guns: and though some of the refugees strained into the night to identify the direction in which they were headed, nobody could be sure. Some said Oxford; others said Bath; some more supposed that the guns might be headed north for Birmingham, or east for London. But nobody could be sure; and when the convoy had passed, the refugees resumed their steady march away from Bristol.

About one in the morning, there was a report of strange activity in the southern North Sea. A pair of distant-water trawlers, returning from a three-week trip to Iceland, witnessed clear evidence of a Soviet naval operation. Though the trawlers were used to naval exercises in the vicinity, this one was thought to be of an unusual type: and the wireless operator on one of the trawlers radioed his office in Grimsby to this effect. The call was monitored by insurgent radio enthusiasts along the north-east coast: but no more was heard from the trawlers, nor was anything ever seen of them again.

In the far north, there was further activity. That night, residents living some miles distant from the gigantic Soviet air-base in Caithness were woken by sudden aircraft activity overhead, and by the arrival of what they supposed to be a number of very large bombers. By two o' clock in the morning the base was, most unusually, ablaze with lights. Shortly afterwards, six very heavy aircraft took off, circled the base three times, and then disappeared in a southerly direction. They were soon followed by a fleet of smaller aircraft. These were towing what appeared to be gliders; but in the half-darkness nobody could be certain about this.

At the same time the fleet of Soviet war-vessels lying off Invergordon put to sea without warning. Then the railway line to Inverness became a scene of considerable military activity. Since

the early days of the Protectorate, it had been dedicated exclusively to military uses: and now a train of flatbed cars carrying tanks made its slow way round the Beaulieu firth for the Highland capital. Under conditions of very strict security, and through deep snow, the train arrived in Inverness at three in the morning. There it remained until five. Then six tanks were de-trained, and driven out of town to a position on the frosty farming braes to the south and east. The rest of the train then departed on the east coast route for Aberdeen. Just before daybreak a second flatbed train arrived. After an hour's delay, it was sent south by the route that led to Perth, and on to Edinburgh, Newcastle and London.

By dawn, there was evidence all round the coast of Soviet naval activity. A fleet of landing-craft was reported in the treacherous shallows to the west of the Mersey. Aircraft were heard circling above Cardiff and Swansea. There was a burst of naval activity off Plymouth, and numerous light-aircraft movements in and out of the Isle of Wight. From a dozen inland locations, there were reports of Fraternalists, Regulars and Paramilitaries taking control of road and rail junctions, electrical power stations and water pumping works. The Channel ports were closed to all commercial traffic, and guns and tanks were being landed there. Heavy aircraft were also heard over London, though nothing was seen of them.

Then there were reports of a full-scale invasion of amphibious forces on the coast near Tyneside. During the last hours of darkness, special forces came ashore and rendezvoused with Militia formations. Just before dawn, one hundred landing craft came onto the beaches, and heavily-armed troops hurried inland. Simultaneously, there were another dozen of these landings all round the coast.

Just after daybreak, parachutists were also seen to fall from the sky in the vicinity of hundreds of inland villages. Heavy gunfire was heard out at sea for a time. Some early shepherds in Northumberland saw a convoy of armoured personnel carriers on the Otterburn road. Others, towards the coast, saw a convoy of tanks on low-loaders proceeding quickly towards Newcastle. Then, in the space of an hour, Soviet special forces took control of all the bridges over the Tyne. Coastal fishing-villages were also seized by marines in the last hours of the dark.

And by nine, with the day risen, it was evident that a Soviet exercise was under way all round the coasts of England and Scotland. As yet, however, its purpose was unknown.

By lunchtime, with the National Convention still in stormy session, combined formations of Soviet marines and Militia were coming into contact with Popular Guard units. In the principal centres of insurrection outside London, it became clear that essential services were collapsing. In Leeds and Newcastle, and a dozen other cities, the electricity and gas supplies died about mid-day, and shortly afterwards the supply of fresh-water to the cities also dried up. Almost at once, Liverpool began to be shelled from a heavy cruiser anchored six miles offshore. Shortly afterwards, squadrons of fighters with red stars plainly visible on their wings began to machine-gun the streets at roof-top height. A number of dive-bombers followed, and quite shortly the centre of the city was on fire and burning rapidly.

In south Wales the principal centres of population were also bombed systematically, and fighter aircraft again strafed the streets at will and swept them clear of inhabitants. Newport in particular was very heavily bombed, first with high-explosive ordnance and

then with incendiary, so that by mid-afternoon it was engulfed by a fire that seemed to be entirely out of control.

From throughout England, the popular councils desperately tried to make contact with the National Convention in London. But by late afternoon the telephone system was down almost everywhere, and the roads blocked to the few motor-cycle messengers who tried to get through. From that point, each regional centre was on its own: and on its own was it crushed. Both Manchester and Birmingham were subject to heavy bombing by aircraft flying in relays from the Caithness heavy-bomber base: and as in Liverpool, squadrons of fighters machine-gunned the streets at rooftop height.

With fires raging in the city centres, and no water for the fire services, the cities then came under attack from Soviet assault formations which had been landed by parachute shortly after nine o' clock that morning. These units were supported by motorised formations of the Militia; and later in the afternoon by re-formed Paramilitaries and Regulars. Armoured cars and light tanks joined the battle late in the afternoon, and these quickly carried the attacking forces towards the burning city centres. As dusk began to fall, it was clear that the cities faced a night of savage and murderous reprisal.

Newcastle, meantime, was subject to heavy bombardment from offshore vessels and carrier-launched fighter-bombers. The double-headed train of flat-car tank transporters which had passed through Inverness during the early morning - and forced a passage down through the snow at Drumochter - was brought to a halt north of the city. Fifty tanks were detrained before noon, and shortly thereafter began to punch and smash their way into the northern

suburbs. By dusk, they had extinguished effective resistance in all areas north of the Tyne: and there they waited, while those districts to the south of the river came under renewed bombardment. Shortly afterwards, the tanks began to move across the bridges, their turret-hatches thrown open, and their machine-gunners sweeping the streets, houses and shops as they passed.

Then Protectorate forces began to converge on the towns around London. On the north bank of the Thames estuary, combined forces of Militia and Soviet marines took possession of all the towns from Southend to Tilbury. The Channel port routes had been taken by reinforced parachute brigades at Maidstone and Chatham, and assault commandos had fought their way into the outskirts of Dartford. All the roads and rail lines into London were cut from the north round to the south-west, at Guildford.

Paratroops had landed around Windsor in the early morning, and taken possession of the town and its castle by late afternoon. And all day, bombers and fighter-bombers cruised in lazy circles above London. But there was, at yet, no sign of what was to come.

The last regional centre to fall was Glasgow. At first, it seemed as if the city would escape attack. But towards noon there were large movements of Protectorate forces in the vicinity of Dumbarton. Soon, it became clear that motorised battalions of Militia, reinforced with artillery, were pouring towards the city from the direction of Loch Lomond. Other units, equally well equipped, were fighting their way up from the Clyde coast: for the port of Ardrossan had been taken by marines at dawn. And from the direction of Edinburgh, a column of tanks was approaching quickly and fanning through the eastern districts of Glasgow.

In the early afternoon aircraft bombed the meat and fish markets, the power stations, the telephone exchanges and all the ships lying in the George V dock. Soon, it was clear that commando units had penetrated the city's defences, and taken control of the principal railway stations at Buchanan Street, Queen Street and Central. There was heavy fighting at Cowlairs, until a unit of tanks made their way into Springburn and routed the Popular Guard forces defending the junction.

By mid-afternoon there was house-to-house fighting in Govan and Gorbals on the south side of the river, and Bridgeton and Calton on the north. There was also savage street-fighting in an arc from Maryhill through Woodside to Finnieston and the banks of the Clyde; but the Popular Guards in these districts were slowly driven into the city-centre by the artillery, tanks and aircraft brought to bear against them.

By dusk, resistance was extinguished. The electricity supply to most parts of the city had been cut, and the water mains diverted to run in the streets. Armoured cars equipped with loudhailers toured the liberated areas, announcing an indefinite curfew; any infringement of which would result in summary execution. Categories of insurgents were announced. Members of such categories were to present themselves at once to the security authorities. It was a capital offence to shelter any such person. Rewards would be paid on the spot to any loyal citizen who would bring to the attention of the authorities such person or persons.

Shortly afterwards, the city's telephone system went dead, for Paramilitary commandos had taken the general post office at George Square. A battalion of Aldredists was still holding out in the city chambers, to the east side of the square. But Militia forces held the

post office, diagonally opposite. And Paramilitary commandos held the Buchanan and Queen Street stations on the north side of the square. Through these stations, they were by midnight able to transport into the battle zone counter-insurgency howitzers. Nine tanks were also fighting their way through the darkened streets towards the Aldredist redoubt. Three of these tanks were destroyed by petrol-bombs and a truck-axle bazooka in the vicinity of the cathedral.

There was savage hand-to-hand fighting in the Necropolis, illuminated by the ghostly light of flares, six at a time. There was further fierce fighting in the immediate vicinity of John Knox House, whose occupants - shipyard workers from south of the river - soon retreated into the cathedral. Only determined work by Militia men, armed with grenades and flamethrowers, managed to dislodge them, drive them into the open, and pursue them through the mighty monumental gravestones of the Necropolis. Then the remaining tanks rumbled down through Townhead and the High Street, and by two in the morning the battle was approaching its end. Once again armed with flamethrowers and grenades, the Militia troopers smashed their way into the marbled halls of the City Chambers and fought their way to the roof. There was some shouting in tones of triumph, and an occasional single gunshot; and the battle for Glasgow was over.

Now, only London remained to be taken; and that it would be taken could not be in doubt, for by dusk on the 24th, the city was surrounded by forces loyal to the Protectorate. Sometime that evening, the electricity and gas supplies to the city were cut. So too was the supply of clean drinking water; and later, the sewage-pumping stations were closed down. All food supplies to the capital

were also cut; for every road and rail link into London was in the hands of the Protectorate.

The night was a desperate one in the cold, dark and increasingly hungry city. Worried crowds surged in London's public places, and congregated at the huge bonfires which burned all night in these public places. In the early hours of the new day, news of the disasters in the rest of the country began to circulate. The morale of the insurgents began to fall. Criminal gangs became increasingly brazen in their endeavours and looting was widespread. At three, aircraft were heard over many parts of the city, and soon afterwards they began to strafe the huge crowds gathered around the fires. Then parachute flares began to drift overhead, and bombers began dropping incendiaries across the centre of the city.

At daybreak, the electricity service resumed. So too did BBC transmissions. On account of what the BBC called the grave emergency in the capital, the following measures were to be observed. All visitors to the city should prepare to leave at once by the most convenient route open to them. All trains from the Stalingrad station would be given safe passage by the forces of the Protectorate. Similar arrangements would pertain for the stations at King's Cross and Euston, from which passengers could expect a non-stop journey to destinations in the north. Those unable to secure passage by train should make their way on foot, or by other means, to the outskirts of the city, where they would be assisted by Protectorate forces. All visitors from the Southampton area should proceed in that direction by the Guildford road. Any person found in London after midnight without a permit for residence would be subject to immediate punishment. All citizens should stay indoors,

without exception, until further notice. Any infringement of this regulation would be considered a capital offence subject to summary process. The city was surrounded, and Protectorate forces would shortly commence operations to retake it. Insurgents should lay down their arms at once, and prepare to welcome in a constructive manner these Protectorate forces. The remainder of the country, in its entirety, was in the hands of these same forces. For those who surrendered, they might expect mercy. For the gangsters in the so-called National Convention and Popular Guards, there would be no mercy whatsoever. There would be no further announcement until the city had been liberated.

The national anthem was then played twice. When it was finished, the transmission went dead. It was ten o' clock in the morning and it had just started to snow again.

Imperceptibly at first, support for the National Convention began drain away. Soon, support was ebbing in a flood. Tens of thousands of those who had so tumultuously taken the capital began to head for its outskirts. The rail stations came under siege, though Popular Guards kept control as best they could. Railworkers - the backbone so recently of general strike and insurgency - marshalled what locomotives and stock as were available. Perhaps thirty trains got out of each of the principal stations during the remaining hours of daylight, in passenger coaches, closed wagons, coal trucks and flatbeds.

The Underground had operated intermittently during the previous few days. With the resumption of the electrical supply, it carried scores of thousands to its termini on the outskirts of the city. Scores of thousands more may have crept out by a thousand other routes during those same hours. By late afternoon, a desperate

column of twenty thousand people was trekking towards Guildford alone, while fighter aircraft swooped overhead.

In London, the remaining armed forces of the National Convention prepared for battle. While Daniel bands prayed for miracles and burned idols in the city churches, pitifully armed Popular Guards prepared to defend the city. Convention forces took up defensive positions at the Stalingrad bridge, the palace of Westminster and the lower reaches of Whitehall. Food was already in extremely short supply, and it was very cold. A strange silence grew over London.

At the north end of the Stalingrad bridge, someone played a fiddle for a time, while the palace building was looted for wood and books for the bonfires. When the fiddler stopped, aircraft could be heard in the distance. There were many of them, flying very low. They disappeared, but were clearly heard to turn. In column, they re-appeared over Hyde Park. Paratroops began to fall, in perfect silence. The aircraft went away, but were at once replaced by another incoming wing. They too dropped paratroops in the park. There were ten groups of planes in all. Nobody could say how many soldiers had been dropped into the park, but it seemed to be a very sizeable number. Somebody wondered where else paratroops were being dropped. The fiddler began to play again, but he was soon urged to stop.

The mood of the insurgents had changed dramatically. It was now very cold indeed. The spotter-planes which had lazily droned over the city since morning disappeared. At length it began to grow dark. And then the assault on London began in earnest.

This was a short-lived affair, though the last pockets of resistance held out until late the following afternoon. Just after dark,

motorised units of Fraternal winter-assault infantry, and counter-insurgency gendarmerie, engaged the Convention's fighting units right round the perimeter of London. Armed as they were with howitzers, heavy machine-guns, light armour and flamethrowers, allied to their overwhelming weight of numbers, they had smashed and destroyed the Convention's forces within a matter of hours. Engineers were then rushed forward to clear the tank traps, ditches and barricades which had been so furiously erected in the previous days: and columns of heavy armour began to enter the city from a dozen points on its periphery. At each inner ring of resistance, they engaged the Convention forces with unbridled savagery - for a standing order of the action was that no prisoners were to be taken - and by the early hours of the morning, four of these columns were approaching the city centre.

By now, many of the capital's key locations had been secured by the paratroop forces dropped in the city's open spaces the previous afternoon: but fierce fighting continued throughout the night against continuing pockets of resistance. Heavy machine-guns were used at Camberwell Green to dislodge a Popular Guard force from the spike, and from the nearby church and graveyard. At the headquarters of the port of London authority, artillery was brought forward to dislodge the insurgents. There was savage combat in the vicinity of the George V and Albert and Victoria docks, and more hand-to-hand fighting on ships moored in the Pool.

For a time, nightfighter aircraft were deployed over the Surrey dock. Artillery was also used at the Southall gas-works, resulting in gigantic explosions which were heard across London. There was fierce fighting around the Tower and in the vicinity of the Bank of England, St Paul's cathedral, and the Royal Exchange. Savage

hand-to-hand combat also rolled through the international telephone exchange, before the Faraday buildings were finally taken.

By daybreak it was still snowing, and the conflict was moving ever closer to the heart of the city. Soon, there was fighting in the turbine houses of the Battersea power station, at the BBC's headquarters in Portland Place, all through the Law Courts to the north side of the Strand, and on every floor of the Savoy hotel to the south. Protectorate forces swarmed into the Underground system and, station by station, fought their way through its tunnels into the heart of London. An armoured train smashed its way through to the Stalingrad station. The twenty tanks it carried at once began to fight their way over the bridges to the north side of the river. Then the snow stopped and the sky cleared. Almost at once, there was a further drop of paratroops into Hyde and Green parks, dense in number and very low in jump-height. When a squadron of tanks began to climb over the obstructions on the Stalingrad bridge, it became clear that the end was near.

Westminster clock tower gave the Convention forces a high, commanding field of fire: but shelling from the tanks at point-blank range soon extinguished it. The National Gallery on the north side of Trafalgar Square held out for a time; but a unit of Paramilitary flamethrowers soon put an end to the insurgents there. There was desperate fighting in the ruins of the Abbey too. A unit of Militia drove insurgents from the wrecked Choir and Sanctuary by bayonet, and pursued them into the ruins of St. Margaret's. And there, below Henry VIII's great stained-glass window above the altar, they soon put an end to them.

By early afternoon, the city had in effect fallen; though there were still final pockets of resistance in the heart of Westminster. But

paratroops had already swept through Mayfair and Belgravia, and taken Victoria Station. More tanks soon arrived at the station, and were at once sent into the surrounding streets. Buckingham Palace - held by fanatical Daniels - was bombed repeatedly until no sign of further resistance could be observed.

Not long afterwards a huge white flag was slowly hoisted over the Westminster clock tower. Some moments later, and by stages, all gunfire slowed and stopped. The battle for London had ended.

That evening, broadcast transmissions resumed. Order had been restored in the capital. A programme of stabilisation would shortly be announced. A column of refugees near Guildford had been machine-gunned from the air as a reprisal for its involvement in the recent insurgency. Further reprisals could be expected. One in every ten of those Popular Guards already captured had been hanged in the streets of central London. Others still at liberty should surrender themselves at once to the authorities in the cause of justice.

And the Protectorate had given urgent consideration to the matter of constitutional reform. As a result, a republic would shortly be declared. Further details would be available shortly.

Around the country, transmission was cut. The high-pressure system that had sat out over the northern North Sea for so long had moved at last towards the White Sea. It stopped snowing. Perhaps it might start to rain soon. Six or seven weeks, and it would be spring again.

It was the evening of January 25th, 1948.