

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 346

“The Battle of Smolensk”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

For the first two weeks of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, it looked as though the conflict would play out as it had elsewhere in Europe, with a crushing German victory.

But only then did the Germans begin to understand exactly what they were up against.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 346. The Battle of Smolensk.

When we left off last time, it was early July 1941, just two weeks after the German Army began its massive invasion of the Soviet Union. With some 3,500,000 German and Romanian soldiers, this was the largest military operation in history, and from the Axis side of the front, it appeared everything was going swimmingly.

German panzer units tore through Soviet lands, leaving behind a swath of dust clouds and burning villages. Sometimes the panzers ran so far ahead of the front line that German He-111 bombers were pressed into service to drop supplies to them. Adept at battles of maneuver, these German panzers repeatedly got behind and encircled Red Army defenders, each time collecting prisoners numbering in the tens of thousands and capturing thousands of Russian tanks and artillery guns at a stroke.

Back home in Germany, the public was confident. People were taking bets on how long it would take Stalin to surrender. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels noted with discomfort that many German civilians believed their Army was already approaching Moscow, which was bad news because high expectations invite disappointment. Even a solid victory might seem unsatisfying.

At the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's headquarters in the east, the mood was euphoric. Goebbels described the atmosphere as more like a summer camp than a military command post. A cheerful Adolf Hitler, now liberated from the doubts that had haunted him in the days before Operation

Barbarossa began, took up his favorite pastime: making his subordinates listen to him monologue for hours at a time, and in July 1941, these monologues consisted mostly of his plans for how Germany would administer Russia after the war. We will talk more about those plans next week.

On the other side of the front, the Soviet side, chaos reigned. The Luftwaffe, as was its custom, destroyed most of the Soviet Air Force on the ground. Red Army units at the front disintegrated before they even had the opportunity to report to their superiors on what was happening, leaving Moscow in the dark for the first week. Throngs of refugees, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, fled the advancing Germans, carrying their meager belongings in handcarts or bundles.

By the second week of July, the leadership in Moscow fully understood the magnitude of the disaster they faced. The Germans were already through eastern Poland and the Baltic States and crossing into the pre-war Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers were dead, wounded, or taken prisoner by the Germans and subjected to appalling mistreatment. There were now only about 2,300,000 Red Army soldiers on the front line, just two-thirds the number of the attacking Axis soldiers.

I told you last week about how Stalin fled to his dacha for a few days, leaving the Soviet government floundering. When they came for him, he thought he'd be arrested; instead, they asked him to return to the Kremlin to direct the war effort.

Two days after Stalin's return, July 3, 1941, he gave a radio address that was broadcast throughout the nation. He opened the speech with "Comrades, citizens, brothers and sisters..." a far warmer mode of speech than the Soviet public was accustomed to. He did not minimize the danger to the nation, though he insisted it was in no way the fault of the Soviet government that the USSR was in this position. He reminded his listeners that Napoleon and the Kaiser had both invaded with what were believed to be invincible armies, and both were defeated by the combined efforts of Russia and England.

He expressed gratitude for the offers of assistance that had already come from the British and the Americans, and called for everyone in the Soviet Union to join in total war against the invader. In cases of retreat, everything useful to the enemy must be either taken along or destroyed. And he appealed to patriotism, referring to the "motherland" seven times. He never spoke the words *Communism* or *Marxism*, though he did warn that the goal of the invader was the appropriation of the wealth of the Soviet Union and the enslavement of its peoples. He was more right about German intentions than he knew.

But although on the surface, everything about the German campaign appeared to be going as well as anyone could ask, a few troubling problems were beginning to emerge. Red Army armored units had made a couple of attempts at counterattack, in the Baltic States and Ukraine. These counterattacks failed, but the Germans were disturbed to discover that the Soviet T-34 medium tank was better than anything Germany was fielding, and the Soviet KV-1 heavy tank

could take a direct hit from the gun of a Panzer IV, Germany's best tank, and emerge from the smoke unscathed and still advancing.

The only thing that could take out a KV-1 was the German 88mm antiaircraft gun. These guns, known to the Allies as the "88s," would become one of the most famous weapons in the German arsenal. Even though they were designed as anti-aircraft weapons, they could be and often were used by German soldiers as anti-tank guns, and in both roles they were lethal.

The Germans were still coming out ahead on engagements with Soviet armor. Their tactics and training were better, German tanks had radios, which made coordination easier, and by now the Germans had two years' experience in tank combat. And there were the Stuka dive bombers, which could land a bomb on or near an enemy tank with eerie precision.

There was a second difficulty. The German Blitzkrieg tactic of punching the panzers through the enemy line, then encircling and trapping large enemy formations wasn't working out as well as it had in earlier campaigns. The Germans called a pocket of enemy soldiers a *Kessel*, or cauldron, and this combat tactic *Kesselschlacht*, or cauldron battle. Everything about this invasion was on a much larger scale than anything the Germans had seen before, including the cauldrons. Instead of encircling thousands of enemy soldiers, the panzers were swallowing up tens of thousands at a time, and occasionally hundreds of thousands.

On the Western front, when French units found themselves surrounded, most of them meekly put down their weapons and accepted the inevitable. Red Army soldiers fought to the bitter end, requiring German infantry units to engage in tough, bloody, protracted combat to eliminate the pocket, and while that was happening, Red Army units both inside the pocket and behind it would throw everything they had against the thin strip of territory held by the panzers after they completed the encirclement.

Panzers are great for seizing ground quickly; they are not so great at holding that ground against a determined enemy counterattack. To hold ground, you want infantry. Even in 1941, most infantry units, even German units, marched on foot. These foot soldiers were the ones attacking the pocket from the front. To reinforce the closure at the back of the pocket, you need to send in motorized infantry, which are infantry units that ride in armored transportation if they're lucky; if not, they ride in the back of a truck as it bounces its way along a road that has seen better days, but these units are the only infantry that can keep up with the panzers, so they are the ones sent to the back of the pocket.

The Germans had about 600,000 trucks at their disposal in 1941, only enough to motorize a fraction of their entire infantry, and they were lucky to have that many. It was only because the French Army had left its own inventory of trucks to be captured and added to the German motor pool, that *Kesselschlachten* on this scale were even possible. Joseph Stalin was quite bitter about that.

The enormous scale of Operation Barbarossa posed additional challenges. Because of *Kesselschlacht*, the German front line was no longer smooth; it was a convoluted series of pockets and salients that stretched a line that should have been 1,500 kilometers long into one that was more like 2,500 kilometers. The longer the front line gets, the more soldiers you need to cover it.

The sheer vastness of Russia could boggle the mind. Imagine a German soldier who had grown up in Bavaria or the Rhine valley confronting the monotonous flatness of Russian terrain that stretched toward a horizon dozens of kilometers away, unbroken by a single hill or a single tree. It was like marching across an endless ocean of grass.

[music: Mussorgsky, *Night on Bald Mountain*]

One week into the invasion, the German Army took the city of Minsk, the capital of Belarus, after encircling and capturing hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers, and virtually destroying the entire Soviet Western Front.

Minsk was just a few miles east of the pre-war border between the USSR and Poland. Less than two weeks later, the German Army Group Center was approaching the city of Smolensk, which lies approximately midway between Minsk and Moscow. Two weeks to get to Smolensk, two or three more to get to Moscow, and the boys will be home in time for Oktoberfest, right?

Not quite. By July 6, some measure of order had been restored to the Soviet front lines. Remember the military truism that as an attacker moves forward, their lines of communication and supply grow ever longer, while those of the retreating defender become ever shorter. With something like stability restored on the front lines, Stavka immediately ordered the Red Army to counterattack.

They did their best, up and down the line, to little effect. In most cases, the Germans barely seemed to notice, but of these counterattacks, the most ambitious one was directed against the spearhead of Army Group Center, headed for Smolensk. Here the Soviets had gathered two mechanized corps, equipped with 1,500 of those tanks of theirs that were superior to the Germans', and sent them against the advancing German panzers.

Unfortunately for the Red Army, the Wehrmacht's 88s combined with the Luftwaffe's dive bombers proved devastating. The mechanized units took heavy losses and all but disintegrated after a few days of heavy fighting.

Still, a delay is a delay. By July 10, the Germans were prepared to resume their advance. The Third Panzer Group captured the city of Vitebsk in a day and continued its advance, aiming to circle north of Smolensk, while the Second Panzer Group, commanded by Heinz Guderian, would advance south of Smolensk. The two groups planned to meet up east of Smolensk and trap the two Soviet Armies, numbering hundreds of thousands, committed to the defense of the city.

One of Guderian's motorized infantry divisions entered Smolensk from the south on July 20, but the Red Army resisted bitterly, making the Germans fight for every block. But Guderian, being Guderian, focused his panzers on driving forward, aiming to take the town of Yelnya, which would give them a bridgehead over the river Desna and bring them one step closer to Moscow.

The commander of the Third Panzer Group, Hermann Hoth, was becoming annoyed with Guderian. Had he forgotten that the plan was to close up behind Smolensk and trap those Russian armies? Hoth pushed south with his own panzers, meaning to link up with Guderian, but the terrain was marshy and they would have to cross the Dnieper River, meaning this would be no quick romp for his tanks. The two panzer groups got within 16 kilometers of each other, but the Russians had interposed a force between them and fought back fiercely, while the units meant to be trapped in the Smolensk pocket were given time to retreat east and escape.

In the midst of the Battle of Smolensk came *Führer* Directive Number 33. Hitler instructed the Army to halt the advance on Moscow. You see, Army Group Center had reached Smolensk, and at the southern portion of the line, near the Black Sea, Army Group South was advancing deep into Ukraine, but between them was a huge Soviet salient, in which four armies were putting up a stiff defense of the key city of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Hitler wanted Guderian's panzer group to turn south and complete the encirclement of that city, while Hoth's panzer group would turn north and assist in the capture of Leningrad.

Army commanders from Chief of Staff Halder on down to the field commanders were unanimous in their opposition to this plan. Moscow was the capital of a sprawling but highly centralized Soviet state. Its loss would paralyze the government of the USSR. Moreover, Moscow was not merely the capital; it was also a major industrial center, and the transportation hub of European Russia. All you had to do was look at a map and you could see for yourself how all the major roads and railroads in the region spread outward from Moscow like spokes on a wheel.

The Red Army would certainly understand the pivotal role of Moscow. They would drop everything and rush reinforcements to the capital's defense, were it seriously threatened. In that way, an assault on Moscow would weaken resistance along the rest of the Soviet line. The battle before the gates of Moscow would be the one battle where the Red Army wouldn't be able to retreat. Moscow would be their last stand, and when the Wehrmacht broke them there, that would be the end of the war.

Halder made these arguments to Hitler in a memo, and Hitler sent a curt reply: "The Army's suggestion for continuing operations in the east does not conform to my intentions."

In Hitler's view, his military commanders were fine soldiers, but they didn't understand politics or economics. Leningrad was a major Soviet industrial center. It was the city where the Bolshevik Revolution had begun and it bore the name of the Revolution's leader. Now it would be the city where the Revolution died. Its fall, the fall of the city named for the venerated Lenin,

would be a morale blow from which the Bolsheviks would never recover, and it would allow the German Army to link up with the Finnish Army, now that the Finns had entered the war on the German side.

In the south, Hitler's economic vision centered on the wide, fertile lands of Ukraine. He was determined that the bread basket of Russia become the bread basket of Germany. On the eastern side of Ukraine lay the region known as the don-BASS or Donbas, as most English speakers pronounce it. The name is a portmanteau of Donets Basin, and it is a key industrial area. With Ukrainian industry and Ukrainian farms in German hands, Germany could fight the war for years to come, if need be, while the loss of these lands would cripple the Soviet Union, and the capture of Ukraine would open the way to seizure of the Caucasus region. Its prodigious oil wells would insure the panzers kept rolling and the Luftwaffe kept flying.

Moscow, in Hitler's view, was less important than either of these objectives. You might speculate that the Russian mechanized counteroffensive along the road to Smolensk had shaken him a bit. Hitler's perspective may have been exactly the opposite of his generals; that is, the Red Army would always put its best units in front of Moscow and fight most aggressively there; therefore, it would be wiser for the German Army to attack in places less well defended.

The generals didn't agree, and for the first time since Dunkirk, the leadership of the German Army began to doubt Hitler's competence as a military leader. Halder confided to his diary that Hitler's meddling in the conduct of the war was "intolerable." Yet he tolerated it all the same. He considered resigning, but he wanted to resign together with the Army's Commander-in-Chief, Walther von Brauchitsch. Brauchitsch refused to consider resigning, so that was that. Brauchitsch sent his own memo to the commanders of Army Group Center, instructing them that the *Führer's* orders were to be strictly obeyed.

Halder's last ditch attempt was to send Heinz Guderian to the Wolf's Lair. Hitler admired Guderian, one of the most able, most experienced, and most successful generals in the Army. But even Guderian was unable to persuade him. In fact, the opposite happened. Guderian returned to the front committed to carrying out Hitler's plan.

Meanwhile, the Battle of Smolensk raged on. On July 27, the two panzer groups finally closed the pocket. A week later, in early August, the Germans had some 350,000 new prisoners. On the plus side, for the Soviets, more than 50,000 Red Army soldiers had fought their way out of the pocket and avoided capture, so that was something.

The Red Army lost about 150,000 soldiers killed, 300,000 wounded, and 350,000 captured in the battle. The sources vary on the numbers. The Germans lost about 30,000 killed and 100,000 wounded, roughly one-fifth of the Soviet losses.

[music: Mussorgsky, *Night on Bald Mountain*]

The Germans came out ahead in the Battle of Smolensk, if you look at the numbers of Red Army soldiers killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, but it took until the early days of August, about a month, to close up that pocket and then eliminate the force inside.

Look at the calendar, do the math, and you will come to the same conclusion German commanders were reaching by this time. Just a few days from the Polish partition line to the eastern Polish border, then two weeks to Smolensk, then four weeks to take the city. How long will it take to reach Moscow, and how much longer to encircle the city and force its surrender?

The Wehrmacht command, overconfident after its lightning victory against France, had calculated that it could shatter the Red Army in the first weeks of the war. Afterward, Moscow would be only a matter of marching. The events in the first weeks of the invasion seemed to confirm their calculations. The Red Army was broken and in retreat. By this point in early August, enemy casualties—killed, wounded, and taken prisoner—were approaching two million out of the 2.9 million soldiers that had garrisoned Russia's western border, and yet Russian resistance had not collapsed. To the contrary, it was getting stronger.

Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, the commander of Army Group Center, remarked, "The Russians are unbelievably tough." Chief of Staff Halder acknowledged that the Army had underestimated their enemy. He wrote, "At the start of the war, we anticipated around 200 enemy divisions. But we have already counted 360...when a dozen are destroyed, the Russians bring forth another dozen." For the first time, German commanders began to contemplate the awful possibility that the war might continue into the dreaded Russian winter.

With the benefit of hindsight, some of them might even have wondered whether it might not have been better to have sent winter uniforms and overcoats into Russia along with the soldiers.

At the Wolf's Lair, the festive atmosphere had dissipated, and Hitler fell ill. He complained of nausea and excused himself from the daily staff meetings. He too began to speak of planning for winter, and wondering aloud if Stalin might be ready to discuss an armistice. Yeah, how did that work out for you with Churchill?

The news from the front was not all bad. Guderian's turn to the south broke through the Soviet line. Army Group South's panzers succeeded in surrounding two Soviet armies, the 6th and the 12th, near the Ukrainian town of Uman. These formations were full of new recruits, equipped with old weapons and low on supplies. Their commanders were aware of the danger and sent messages asking for help to break through the German encirclement and retreat.

No help came, and the Germans foiled every attempt at escape. On August 7, the two armies surrendered. The Germans had killed or wounded 100,000 Red Army soldiers and taken a further 100,000 prisoner, at the cost of 5,000 of their own killed and 15,000 wounded. The captured Red Army soldiers included 11 division commanders, four corps commanders and the commanders of both armies. When Stalin heard the news of their surrender, he ordered their execution.

As the advance continued south, Georgy Zhukov, the Red Army's Chief of Staff, warned Stalin that Kiev was in danger of being surrounded and suggested the Southwestern Front, a force of six armies, withdraw from the city and retreat eastward. Stalin refused to consider this, so Zhukov resigned his position as chief of staff. Stalin appointed him commander of the Reserve Front.

On August 18, farther east, the Red Army attempted to slow the German advance into Ukraine by blowing up the hydroelectric dam on the Dnieper River at the town of Zaporozhye. This dam had been built by the Soviet government between 1927 and 1932 and was the largest dam in Europe and one of the greatest accomplishments of the First Five-Year Plan. The dam harnessed the waters of the Dnieper to power five huge generators built by General Electric in the United States. Those generators powered industrial development in the region, most notably a plant that produced aluminum, critical to the manufacture of aircraft.

But Stalin said "scorched earth," so the dam was blown. The resulting torrent flooded the river valley below the plant, killing tens of thousands of civilians and soldiers from both sides.

On August 28, Hitler received a special guest at the Wolf's Lair: Benito Mussolini. I should explain. On the day the invasion began, June 22, the only armies fighting on the Axis side were those of Germany and Romania, and a small force contributed by the small nation of Slovakia. Mussolini had prior notice of the invasion, although he hadn't been told the exact day. When the invasion began, he offered an Italian infantry corps to help fight the Russians; Italian troops began arriving on the Eastern front in July.

This decision was not universally popular in Italy. There was grumbling. Many Italians saw the war in the East as a purely German project and wondered why Italy should be sending forces there while the fighting in Africa was not yet over.

Hungary did not participate in the initial invasion either. The Great Depression had been hard on Hungary, but trade with Germany and Italy helped revive the Hungarian economy. Closer relations with the Axis powers also paid off for Hungary territorially, helping it to reclaim territories taken from it by the Treaty of Trianon. In 1938, the First Vienna Award restored to Hungary some lands in Czechoslovakia. In 1940, the Second Vienna Award restored to Hungary some lands in Romania. In 1941, Germany invited Hungary to participate in the invasion of Yugoslavia, in return for the return of some Yugoslav lands that had formerly been part of Hungary.

The German government did not invite Hungary to participate in the war against the Soviet Union, although there were those in Hungarian government who argued for Hungary to lend its aid. They feared that if Romania helped the Germans and Hungary did not, Germany might favor Romania over Hungary in some future dispute.

This discussion became moot on June 26, the fifth day of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, when Soviet bombers bombed the town of Kassa, formerly a part of Slovakia, now reclaimed by Hungary. This was probably a mistake; it is likely the Soviet planes intended to bomb a target in nearby Slovakia, but it was enough to persuade Hungary to declare war on the Soviet Union. Hungarian Army units would also be taking positions on the Eastern Front in July.

Hitler wanted Finland to join the fight. Finland, for its part, resented the loss of territory to the Soviet Union a year ago, but the German occupation of Denmark and Norway ruled out Finnish reliance on Britain for support, so Finland turned to Germany.

Germany stationed military units on Finnish soil, an act that annoyed the USSR; you'll recall I told you how Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov came to Berlin last November to discuss this and other sore spots in Soviet-German relations. The Germans wanted the Finns to participate in Barbarossa, but Finland refused, unless the Soviet side attacked them first. When German planes based in Finland attacked Soviet targets, Soviet bombers attacked Finland in retaliation. These attacks were meant to hit only German military targets, or so Moscow said, and bombing accuracy being what it was at the time, it's even possible that was even true, but still most of the bombs landed on Finnish civilian targets anyway. These bombing raids gave Finland the excuse it needed to join in the war against the Soviet Union.

This means that by the end of July, the war against the USSR was being fought by a six-nation alliance: Germany, Italy, Romania, Finland, Hungary, and Slovakia, along with volunteers from a number of other nations, notably Spain and Croatia; even a handful from German-occupied countries like France. This had propaganda value for Germany, which could claim the invasion was not an act of solely German aggression, but a pan-European effort to eliminate the threat of Bolshevism.

When Mussolini arrived at the Wolf's Lair, Hitler took him on an inspection tour. They toured the fortifications at Brest-Litovsk, which the Red Army had defended so fiercely until German bombs and artillery shells reduced it to rubble. Next the two dictators flew to the headquarters of Field Marshal Rundstedt, commander of Army Group South, located in Uman, where just weeks earlier, Germany had won a great victory, assisted by units of its Italian and Hungarian allies. Afterward, Hitler and Mussolini released a joint communiqué, declaring that the eradication of Bolshevism would lead to a new order in Europe, one of peace and cooperation among its nations.

September 1, 1941 marked the second anniversary of the invasion of Poland. The Second World War was now entering its third year, and the mood among the German people was uneasy. Hitler and his government understood very well how badly the German people had suffered under the hardships of the last war. Food shortages had driven Germans to revolution. The Nazis were determined this would not happen again, even if it meant stripping the larders of the nations under German occupation to keep the folks at home well fed.

Even so, the economic hardships of the war were hitting home. A nation the size of Germany can only field an army of three million soldiers for so long. How much longer could Germany keep this up? And despite the official confidence, ordinary Germans need do no more than look at a map to see that the rapid advance of the first two weeks of the invasion had slowed considerably. The soldiers on the front knew this as well. Could the campaign be concluded before the dreaded *rasputitsa*, the Russian mud season, made rapid movement impossible? And if it couldn't be concluded before winter, what would that mean?

And why hadn't anyone thought to send the soldiers coats and winter uniforms?

We will examine these and other important questions in future episodes, but we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Bryan and Padraig for their kind donation, and thank you to Roman for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Roman and Bryan and Padraig help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. And it's that time of year again. The holidays are upon us, so let me just remind you that donations to and patronages of *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift, for me. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a break from front line combat and take in the bigger picture. What exactly are Hitler's plans for Russia after the war? It's grim stuff. The Green Folder, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*. And let me offer a trigger warning for discussions of mass murder and genocide. In fact, if you don't want to hear about mass murder or genocide, you might want to skip ahead about 100 episodes.

Oh, and one more thing. I haven't said anything about Army Group North. This was the formation that was assigned to capture Leningrad. On August 20, the advancing forces of Army Group North cut the rail line between Leningrad and Moscow. Ten days later, on August 30, the Germans cut the last rail link between Leningrad and the rest of the Soviet Union. On September 8, German troops reached the shores of Lake Ladoga, meaning Leningrad was now surrounded. The city and its immediate environs were isolated on the Karelian Isthmus, with the Baltic Sea to

the west, Lake Ladoga to the east, the German Army to the south and the Finnish Army to the north.

Speaking of the Finns, the Finnish Army advanced down the Karelian Isthmus, but then halted at the old border, some 30 kilometers from the center of Leningrad. Wehrmacht chief of staff Alfred Jodl visited Finland on September 6 to urge the Finnish leadership to press on and assist Germany in the capture of Leningrad, but he went home empty handed. The Finnish President, Risto Ryti, and the commander-in-chief, Field Marshall Carl Gustav Mannerheim, were in agreement that the capture of Leningrad was not one of Finland's war goals and Finland would not participate.

In September, units from Army Group North were reassigned to Army Group Center and made part of the advance on Moscow. Army Group North's primary task now was to maintain the siege of Leningrad. That's maintain the siege, not capture. The OKH, the Army High Command, with Hitler's blessing, decided that capturing Leningrad would make the Army responsible for feeding its three million people. Instead, the Army would maintain the siege and let those three million people in Leningrad starve to death. Afterward the city would be demolished. Army Group North was specifically ordered that even if Leningrad offered its surrender, they were not to accept it.

The Wehrmacht calculated that Leningrad would starve in a matter of weeks. In fact, the Siege of Leningrad would last until 1944. More about that in future episodes, but for now, let me just note that as we continue the story of the war on this front, you won't be hearing much more about Army Group North. That's because Army Group North will be focused on maintaining the siege, even as the High Command strips it of units to reinforce the front elsewhere.

[music: Closing War Theme]