

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 348

“Five Minutes to Midnight”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

September’s victories at Leningrad and Kiev persuaded Adolf Hitler it was still possible to capture Moscow and perhaps end the war against the USSR before the end of 1941.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 348. Five Minutes to Midnight.

On October 3, 1941, Adolf Hitler returned to Berlin to deliver a speech at the Sportpalast. I’ve mentioned the Sportpalast before, but I’ve never explained exactly what it was, so let me take a moment to remedy that. The Sportpalast is an indoor arena in Berlin, built in 1910. It seated 14,000, making it the largest indoor venue in the city. In the past, it had hosted hockey and ice skating, bicycle races, boxing matches and beer festivals, this being Germany. During the Weimar Republic era, all of the major political parties, including the Nazis, hosted political rallies at the Sportpalast. Those other political parties were gone now, but Hitler and the Nazis still used it for that purpose. In years to come, the Sportpalast would host concerts by Louis Armstrong, Jimi Hendrix, and Pink Floyd, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

This would be Hitler’s first public speech since the successful conclusion of the Balkan campaign. He’d been holed up at the Wolf’s Lair for three months, preoccupied with the war against the USSR, and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels expressed some concern over whether Hitler still had it after all this time with no public appearance. He needn’t have worried. Hitler was as sharp as ever, declaring that the war was forced on Germany by a conspiracy of democrats, Jewish people, and freemasons, and that the invasion of the Soviet Union was a necessary pre-emptive strike, made to prevent an attack on Germany. He told the crowd that “the enemy is already broken and will never again rise up.”

The speech brightened spirits and raised morale, even as casualty figures on the Eastern Front were rising. Most people knew a family with a dead or wounded soldier, but when Hitler said the

enemy was broken, most Germans took him at his word and accepted that the worst was over. Adolf Hitler had never before lied to the German people about the war. Until now, he'd never needed to.

Hitler knew something the German public did not. He had already issued *Führer* Directive Number 35, ordering the Army to prepare for the final assault on Moscow by the end of September, codenamed Operation Typhoon. A couple of months ago, Hitler had overruled his military commanders, when they recommended an assault on Moscow, but since then, things had changed.

Army Group North was now at the gates of Leningrad, where it was waiting for the city to starve into submission. Army Group South had been stymied before the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, until a panzer army borrowed from Army Group Center had succeeded in surrounding the city and forcing its surrender. Over 600,000 Soviet soldiers had been captured. An exuberant Adolf Hitler predicted that the southern end of the Russian defensive line had collapsed and that Army Group South could now proceed east to Kharkov, the second-largest city in Ukraine, through the Donbas and on to Stalingrad, against an opposition that would be hopelessly scattered and disorganized.

With the objectives of Army Group North and Army Group South now within German reach, Hitler was ready to order Army Group Center to attack Moscow. Operation Typhoon began on September 30, a couple of days before Hitler boarded his train for Berlin to give that speech.

The opening moves of Operation Typhoon went well for the Germans. The German Second Army pushed east from Smolensk along the road to Moscow, while panzer units to the north and south advanced and encircled the defenders. By October 10, multiple Soviet armies were trapped in two pockets, one near the city of Vyazma, on the road to Moscow; the other was farther south, along the road to Tula. Within these two pockets, more than half a million Red Army soldiers were trapped.

The front before Moscow had been quiet for a month, as the Germans focused their efforts on Leningrad and Kiev, so it was only when a fighter pilot reported seeing a long German column moving east, a sighting then confirmed by further reconnaissance flights, that Moscow began to get the idea. NKVD chief Lavrentiy Beria's first response was to threaten to prosecute the reconnaissance unit's commander for spreading panic. Stalin had a more constructive response. He sent for Georgiy Zhukov, whom he had assigned to the defense of Leningrad, and ordered him to assume responsibility for defending Moscow.

Zhukov reported to Stalin at his office in the Kremlin on October 7. Zhukov later said that when he entered the room, Stalin was telling Beria to make use of NKVD contacts to sound out the Germans on the possibility of an armistice.

German commanders believed those trapped units, amounting to some seven or eight Soviet armies organized into two fronts, represented the last gasp, the final Red Army effort to defend Moscow. Hitler was confident enough that Moscow was now within his grasp that he issued an order that Moscow be surrounded and starved in the same manner as Leningrad. If the city should offer surrender, that surrender should be rejected. I mean, why should Germans assume the burden of administering Moscow and then starving it, when it could be starved while still under Stalin's control?

Hitler was so confident that on October 8, he drafted a public statement, which was sent to Berlin and made public on October 9 at the German Foreign Office before a group of domestic and foreign journalists. The German Army's most recent offensive had smashed the Red Army and "the Soviet Union is finished."

An American journalist named Howard K. Smith was present at this press conference. He later recalled the pandemonium that broke out when the statement was read out. Foreign journalists rushed to the telephones to deliver this breaking news to their editors, while reporters from Germany and its Axis allies threw up Roman salutes and applauded the news.

The following morning, this was the top news story in Germany and many other places. The Nazi Party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, bore a headline that read, "Campaign in the East Decided." German civilians told each other that their loved ones at the front would be home in time to celebrate Christmas.

One German who was not celebrating was the propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, who thought the statement premature. He spent the following days tamping down the excitement, telling the public that the war might be decided, but it was not yet over. Goebbels would later say that this press statement was the Nazis' biggest propaganda mistake of the war.

At the front, the encircled Red Army units refused to accept defeat. They fought on, slowing the German advance toward Moscow and tying up more than two dozen divisions of German infantry until October 21. Even so, when the Soviets were finally forced to surrender, the Germans captured a half million more Red Army prisoners.

Zhukov had put the time the defenders in Vyazma and Bryansk had bought him to good use, building a new defensive line about 100 kilometers west of Moscow. Red Army units garrisoning the Far East against a possible attack from Japan were brought along the long rail journey west to assist in defense of the capital. Intelligence reports from Tokyo indicated the Japanese were preparing a strike against the British and Americans, suggesting that the Russian Far East was safe from the Japanese for the moment.

At about the same time the *Völkischer Beobachter* was declaring victory back in Germany, the first snow was falling on the Germans as they approached Zhukov's new defensive line. By this time, there were only about 90,000 Red Army soldiers between the Germans and Moscow, far

fewer in number than the enemy they faced. The Germans fought the Red Army at the village of Borodino, the same place where Napoleon won a battle against the Russians that allowed him to capture Moscow, though that campaign did not end well for Napoleon. In 1941, Red Army soldiers, acutely aware of the historical significance of the site, fought fiercely to defend it, but the Germans forced them back anyhow.

The Luftwaffe was bombing Moscow, although it had suffered serious losses and was stretched thin. The Germans had more and better airplanes than the Soviet Air Force, but the Soviets were quickly replacing their losses, and Russia was so big that the Luftwaffe couldn't be everywhere at once. Wherever they were not, Soviet planes appeared.

In Moscow, some 250,000 women and boys were conscripted to dig trenches for the defense of the city. Some of them were killed in strafing attacks by Luftwaffe fighters.

In September, Stalin ordered the deportation of nearly 400,000 ethnic Germans living in Russia and Ukraine, known as "Volga Germans," to Siberia. As the Wehrmacht approached the capital, he ordered the process be accelerated. The NKVD also set to work rigging explosives on important sites in and around Moscow, including Stalin's dacha, so they could be destroyed before the Germans captured them. NKVD fighters were hidden in safe houses around the city, ready to begin a guerilla resistance against German occupiers.

At the front lines north of Moscow, German panzers captured the town of Kalinin, cutting off the northern rail line out of the city, and advanced on the canal connecting Moscow to the Volga River. South of Moscow, Guderian's panzers could not take Tula, so they circled east around the city, a pincer within a pincer, if you will.

The next day, Stalin ordered most of the Soviet government, foreign diplomatic missions, and foreign journalists relocated from Moscow to Kuibyshev, the city formerly known as Samara, about 850 kilometers to the east, although those foreign journalists were instructed to continue to put Moscow on their datelines. Moscow itself went mad. Many civilians were fleeing along with the government officials; others were looting the shops in the city. People were scanning the skies for German paratroopers, while the NKVD began shooting looters on sight.

But the German advance was not going nearly as well as those panicky Muscovites assumed. The second week of October brought with it the first snowfalls of the season. This was bad news for the Germans, and not because it presaged winter. At least, not yet. The snows quickly melted, but the melt water turned the ground into an ocean of mud. It was the *rasputitsa*, the mud season, and it made the roads impassible. Tanks, trucks, and horses were immobilized.

This was particularly a problem for the Germans. The entire German style of warfare depended on rapid movements by panzer units into the enemy rear. For the next few weeks, there would be no rapid movement of anything. Perhaps worse than that, though, the mud choked off German supply lines. German soldiers had been advancing deeper and deeper into the Soviet Union for

going on four months now, stretching their supply lines thin, and now the *rasputitsa* had cut them off altogether. German soldiers needed food and ammunition. They needed boots; many soldiers found their boots worn out from months of marching, and there were no replacements to be had.

And what about winter uniforms and overcoats? For crucial weeks, Hitler had resisted all suggestions of shipping winter clothing to the Eastern Front as defeatism. When he finally gave in, it was too late. Germany did not have enough winter clothing for all its soldiers, and it lacked the means to ship to the front what they did have.

Desperate German soldiers took to looting Russian homes, chasing away the families living in them and confiscating whatever food or clothing they could find. German officers complained that their soldiers looked like Russian peasants; try to imagine what became of those peasant families, driven out of their homes and into the cold, their warm clothes confiscated by the Wehrmacht.

On seeing the chaos in Moscow, Stalin resolved to stay in the city to bolster morale. And it worked. Later Stalin came up with an even bolder idea: this year's annual military parade, celebrating the October Revolution, would go on as planned. The Soviet Defense Council was shocked by the suggestion, but it worked. On November 7, Stalin took his usual place atop Lenin's now-empty tomb and reviewed the parade, only this year the parade was made up of reinforcements from the Far East marching to the front. Stalin made sure the event was filmed and the film made available for both domestic and foreign newsreels.

The following day, Adolf Hitler was at his usual place, in Munich, giving a speech to the old fighters on the anniversary of the 1923 *putsch*. Hitler boasted that never before in history had a nation as large as the Soviet Union been defeated so quickly, but unlike past years, Hitler ordered that this speech not be broadcast over the radio, perhaps a sign that he himself was not entirely convinced of the truth of his claims.

By November 15, Hitler was back at the Wolf's Lair. The *rasputitsa* was over, because the mud had frozen. Hitler and his commanders ordered Army Group Center to resume the offensive and encircle Moscow. The commanders at the front thought these orders unrealistic. Marshal Bock pleaded with his superiors not to overestimate what his units were capable of. And, he warned, it was "five minutes to midnight."

What he meant by that was that his army group had only a narrow window of opportunity to complete the offensive before the Russian winter became too harsh to continue. When the cold came, his forces would need to hunker down and focus their efforts on holding on to what they had already taken.

The Germans advanced once again, but Army Group Center was in no condition to replicate the sweeping panzer movements of the past summer, as temperatures fell to -20 Celsius. North of the

city, panzers reached the Moscow-Volga Canal and had even crossed it, but were then driven back by a Soviet counterattack. In the south, Guderian's panzers were approaching the Moscow River, although Tula stubbornly held out. The Germans advanced on the central front as well. Bock visited the front line and was able to make out the spires of the Kremlin through his binoculars.

As the Army advanced, Hitler returned to Berlin for an unpleasant duty, to attend the funeral of Ernst Udet. Udet, a First World War flying ace, had risen to the position of director of procurement for the Luftwaffe, but in the past year he had been clashing repeatedly with Hermann Göring over the allocation of resources to the Luftwaffe. On November 17, in despair over the sorry state of the Luftwaffe, Udet killed himself. The public was told that he had died bravely, test-flying an experimental aircraft.

Farther south on the front line, in Ukraine, Army Group South secured the Donbas. The Romanians finally took Odessa, after an extended siege, and the German Eleventh Army was besieging Sevastopol, the Soviet Union's key naval base on the Black Sea. On November 21, German panzer units, racing along the northern shore of the Black Sea, had captured the city of Rostov-on-the-Don, with its crucial crossing of the Don River. With the Black Sea now behind them, the road to the Caucasus and the oil fields Hitler coveted so much, the oil fields that he valued above the capture of Moscow, now seemed wide open.

But those panzers were over-extended. The Red Army took advantage of the frozen river to counterattack, forcing the panzers to retreat and surrender the city. For the first time since Operation Barbarossa had begun, the German Army had surrendered a captured city to the enemy.

Hitler's reaction was a mix of rage and disbelief. He ordered that the retreat be cancelled. Marshal Rundstedt, the commander of Army Group South, offered his resignation instead, which Hitler accepted. Hitler flew to the headquarters of Army Group South, in the city of Mariupol in Ukraine, to assess the situation for himself. He reluctantly concluded that Rundstedt had made the right decision, but did not restore him to his command. Instead, Hitler ordered that he be paid a bonus of 250,000 Reichsmarks for his service to the Fatherland.

That setback in the south was nothing compared to what was about to happen to Army Group Center. By early December, its offensive had slowed to a crawl. Exhausted German soldiers could not continue the fight. The Luftwaffe was grounded; most German tanks and motor vehicles could not be started because their engine lubricants froze solid. German soldiers first had to build fires under their vehicles to get them started. Infantry rifles and machine guns also jammed in the cold. Even German radios did not work reliably.

German horses struggled with a cold they were not used to and a lack of fodder. Frostbite had become the number one cause of German casualties. It became impossible to build trenches or defensive works in ground that had frozen solid.

Still, no one suffered worse than Germany's Soviet POWs, who were being forced to march westward in the cold with little or no food. German guards thought it was funny to make the prisoners go for a morning run before beginning the day's long march.

By December 1, Moscow was within range of German artillery. Aided by a surprise appearance by the Luftwaffe, the Germans began their advance toward the city. Zhukov put all his remaining reserves onto that front to oppose them. Three days later, December 4, the front line had stabilized. The temperature was -30. As fate would have it, the winter of 1941-42 would be even colder than the winter of 1939-40. It would, in fact, be the coldest winter in Europe for the entire twentieth century.

The commanders of Army Group Center realized their soldiers had done all that was humanly possible and were not capable of further offensive action. Every senior German military officer was by this time thinking about Napoleon and his disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812. He had even captured Moscow, but it had done him no good, and his retreat had destroyed his army.

Under these brutal winter conditions, retreat could easily devolve into disaster. The best choice would be to avoid retreat if possible. Much safer it would be to hunker down, to build defensive works and concentrate on holding what had already been gained until the spring of 1942.

The Germans consoled themselves with the thought that the Red Army must be every bit as battered by the combat and the cold as was the German Army. The occasional Luftwaffe reconnaissance flight returned with the pilot reporting massing Soviet troops, but these reports were dismissed. How could they possibly be true?

In fact, Zhukov was planning a counterattack, directed at the German salients north and south of Moscow, the remnants of the failed pincer movement meant to surround the Soviet capital.

The Red Army of December 1941 was a much more sophisticated fighting force than the Red Army of June 1941 had been. No longer were Soviet commanders terrified of showing initiative, out of fear of the NKVD. The Red Army was properly prepared for winter combat, with heavy winter jackets colored in white and gray winter camouflage. Russian tank and aircraft engines used lubricants that worked in cold temperatures.

For the first time since the beginning of the war, the Soviet Air Force controlled the skies, as the Luftwaffe's finest sat immobile on the ground. T-34 tanks had wider tracks that allowed them to move more easily through snow, and the Red Army had ski infantry.

On December 6, Red Army units squeezed the northern salient from both sides. South of Moscow, Soviet units broke out of the Tula pocket and threatened to cut off Guderian's panzers. Guderian sensed something was up and rapidly drew his panzers out of the developing Soviet pocket, saving his own units from destruction, but at the cost of withdrawing some 80 kilometers and exposing the flanks of the German units to his north and south.

Red Army soldiers had by this time all heard about the brutal treatment of their comrades held prisoner by the Germans and were in no mood to be chivalrous. Red Army ski units harassed the German rear, sometimes linking up with partisans and airborne units dropped behind German lines. They destroyed German depots and attacked undefended artillery units. They took note of the pathetic German soldiers, dressed like old women, in clothes stolen from old women, but felt no pity. They only wished that the weather would get even colder.

Then came December 7, and dramatic news from the other side of the world.

[music: "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean"]

When word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor reached the Wolf's Lair, Hitler and his military commanders received the news with jubilation. The bad news coming from Army Group Center receded into the background. At the Wolf's Lair, it was generally accepted that this was excellent news; the entry of Japan into the war significantly improved German prospects.

Hitler felt that under the terms of the Tripartite Pact, he had no choice now but to declare war on the United States in solidarity with Japan, "but that is not so bad," he said. Hitler did not see this obligation as any kind of burden or setback for Germany. To the contrary, he believed that with Japan threatening the United States on its Pacific flank, America would be forced to reduce its aid to Britain and Russia in order to see to its own defense. German victory was now assured, Hitler told his commanders, because "[w]e now have an ally that has not been defeated in 3,000 years."

In fact, Germany was not under any obligation to support Japan. The Tripartite Pact only required Germany to assist Japan if Japan were attacked by a third nation. Even so, the Japanese had been making inquiries in Berlin since April of 1941 as to whether Germany would join Japan if Japan went to war against the United States. Hitler and Ribbentrop had repeatedly answered these inquiries by assuring Japan's ambassador in Berlin, Ōshima Hiroshi, that Germany would in the event of war immediately join with Japan and pledged that Germany would not make a separate peace with the US. Mussolini had given Japan similar assurances, although the Japanese did not give either Berlin or Rome advance notice of the impending attack on the US and Britain.

Hitler came to Berlin on December 9 for a previously scheduled session of the Reichstag the next day. That session had to be postponed a further day, until December 11, so Hitler could revise his speech. That morning, at the foreign office, Ribbentrop met with Japanese ambassador Ōshima and Italian ambassador Dino Alfieri to sign a joint declaration of war against the United States. That afternoon, the declaration was presented to the staff at the US embassy in Berlin. The reason given for the war declaration was that the US had violated the conditions of neutrality and committed acts that amounted to war against Germany.

Shortly afterward, the Reichstag met. Hitler gave a 90-minute speech, in which he boasted of Germany's accomplishments in the war for some time before getting around to the subject of the

United States. He directed a number of crude personal insults against Franklin Roosevelt, including that he was mentally ill, as much as Woodrow Wilson had been, according to Hitler, and also that Roosevelt had allowed himself to become the instrument of the international Jewish conspiracy, Hitler's all-purpose bogeyman.

At first blush, Hitler's decision to declare war on the United States might seem unwise, even reckless, and in the years since, much effort has been put into either trying to explain why or in speculating what might have happened had Germany refrained from jumping into the conflict between the United States and Japan.

In fact, Hitler's decision is easy to understand, for a few simple reasons. First and most important, Hitler believed the United States was already waging an undeclared war against Germany and was already doing all it could to support Britain and Russia, and that it was only a matter of time before the Americans entered the war officially. He was probably right about this.

In Hitler's view the Americans had essentially weaponized their neutrality, by making it impossible for German U-boats to attack shipping in the western Atlantic; those aid shipments headed for Britain or the USSR, which was now also getting Lend-Lease support from America. The Kriegsmarine had already been chomping at the bit for permission to attack US Navy vessels and US flagged ships. Hitler finally gave them the go-ahead on December 8, three days before the official declaration of war.

Even so, some at the German Foreign Office recommended that it might at least serve German propaganda purposes better to wait for the Americans to declare war first, but Hitler dismissed this proposal. Great powers do not wait around for war to be declared upon them by others, as Ribbentrop put it. It may also have been that the disappointing campaign in the East, in which the USSR failed to collapse by Christmas as predicted, left Hitler eager for some means by which he could demonstrate that Germany—and he—had not lost their mojo.

Second, the Soviet counteroffensive around Moscow had already begun, but at this point losses had not been too bad, and Hitler persisted in believing this must be the Soviet last gasp, because the USSR must be on the brink of collapse, and that Germany would finish off the Bolsheviks in 1942 at the latest. Nazi ideology told him so. He was entirely wrong about this, but did not yet know it.

Also, Hitler believed that war with Japan would force the US to direct its military resources to the Pacific, which would benefit Germany by reducing aid available for Britain or Soviet Union, thus weakening Germany's enemies. Also, Japanese attacks on British holdings in the Pacific would further burden the Royal Navy and further reduce the threat from Britain.

Third, Hitler seriously underestimated the United States. There is a quote from Hermann Göring which he may or may not have actually said at about this time, that the Americans were very good at making refrigerators and razor blades, the implication being that US industry was adept

at manufacturing consumer products, but its ability to manufacture the machinery of war was suspect. Whether or not Göring actually said this, this attitude was prevalent among the top Nazis. Recall that in the last war, the American forces in Europe in many cases had to fight with European-manufactured aircraft and weapons because the US couldn't produce its own quickly enough.

Hitler also believed that Germany's position on the European continent was secure and that neither the UK nor the US could threaten it. To those of us who know about D-Day, this belief is transparently wrong, but you have to understand that such a mass naval invasion had never before been attempted. In 1941, the nearest historical precedent was the British landing at Gallipoli in the last war, and that had turned into a costly failure. The conclusion taken from that experience was that naval invasions were expensive and risky, and it was not only Nazis who had drawn that conclusion.

As for the historical counterfactual: what would have happened had Hitler refrained from declaring war on the United States? It was likely Hitler was correct in assuming that it was only a matter of time before the US declared war on Germany anyway. It had done so in the last war, after a long delay. Roosevelt had already signed the Atlantic Charter, which committed the US to the destruction of Nazism. And until war was declared, the US would continue sending aid to Britain and Russia.

Speaking of Russia, what about that December Soviet counterattack that was just beginning as the US entered the war? Much as I would love to tell you, we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Tom for his kind donation, and thank you to Barry for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Tom and Barry 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*. The intrusion of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is forcing me to pause the European narrative for a time. We haven't looked at the situation in the Far East since episode 301, and obviously there have

been...developments, so we'd better get caught up on those. Why Do the Winds and Waves Rage So Turbulently? Find out next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. One of the casualties of the Battle of Bryansk was a 22-year-old Soviet T-34 tank commander named Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov. This young man wrote poetry in his spare time; he was also a pretty good mechanic and engineer. He was in the hospital for five months, and during that time he got an earful of complaints from his fellow patients, infantry soldiers griping about the unreliability of their rifles. Kalashnikov decided he would try his hand at creating a better assault rifle.

His early proposals were not accepted by the Red Army, but after the war, his designs were more sophisticated, particularly the assault rifle he submitted in 1947, designated the Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947, that is, "Kalashnikov's 1947 Automatic." It became the standard issue assault rifle of the post-war Red Army, universally known by the shorthand name AK-47.

Mikhail Kalashnikov died in 2013, at the age of 94. His AK-47 and its variants remain one of the most widely used assault rifles in the world, even in our time.

[music: Closing War Theme]