

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 370

“Not One Step Back”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Some stupid people at the front calm themselves with talk that we can retreat further to the east, as we have a lot of territory, a lot of ground, a lot of population and that there will always be much bread for us. They want to justify the infamous behavior at the front. But such talk is a falsehood, helpful only to our enemies.

Joseph Stalin, Order Number 227, issued July 28, 1942.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 370. Not One Step Back.

Back in episode 364, I told you about the preliminary steps the Wehrmacht had taken to prepare for Germany's 1942 offensive in the Soviet Union, codenamed Plan Blue. The Germans spent the spring of 1942, before the offensive proper would begin, attacking some advanced Soviet positions that would otherwise interfere. Two of them were on the Crimean peninsula: the city of Sevastopol and the Kerch Peninsula. Both were soon taken and some 250,000 Red Army soldiers taken prisoner.

The other was the Soviet salient near the city of Izyum. The Red Army began an offensive there in May and the situation got a bit dicey for the Germans, but again German panzers were able to encircle two Soviet armies, capturing 300,000 prisoners.

These victories boded well for the coming offensive. After a harsh winter that had almost destroyed the German Army, the arrival of spring allowed the Wehrmacht to pick up where it had left off in late 1941 and make a second attempt to defeat the Soviet Union. These early victories in 1942 demonstrated that the German Army was still a force to be reckoned with and the enemy was still vulnerable to the German style of warfare, based on rapid movement and encirclement. To all appearances, the Wehrmacht had its mojo back.

I've said before that the Second World War is best understood as five separate conflicts that merged together into one great global conflict. I'm referring to first, the Japanese war against China; second, the Italian campaign for hegemony in the Mediterranean; third, the German war against France and the UK following the invasion of Poland; fourth, the German war on the Soviet Union, and by 1942 we have our fifth, the Japanese war against the Netherlands, the UK, and the US for Japanese hegemony in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Once Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, the circle was closed and the war became a global struggle between two defined alliances of Great Powers.

I invite you now to consider this question: where in the history of the Second World War is the position of the Allies at its weakest? Or to invert the question: where is the Axis high water mark? At what point in time do the Axis seem strongest and most likely to win this thing?

You might choose June 1940, just after the Fall of France, when there was a very real possibility that the British might capitulate, but that wouldn't have ended the war in China, and Hitler most likely would have proceeded with the invasion of the Soviet Union just the same, and who knows what would have happened next?

You might choose the summer or fall of 1941, when it seemed as if the Wehrmacht really could defeat the Red Army before winter and Rommel had pushed the British back in North Africa.

But I'd say there's a strong case to be made that we are at the Axis high water mark right now, in spring of 1942. The war is the full war now, with even the United States involved, and recently everything has been going swimmingly for the Axis. As I just described, on the Eastern Front, the Wehrmacht is preparing its next offensive and is already surrounding and capturing Soviet soldiers in the hundreds of thousands. In the Pacific, the Japanese have had everything their own way since Pearl Harbor, with the exception of the Doolittle Raid which was great for political and propaganda purposes, but amounted to no more than a pinprick. In North Africa, Rommel has recovered from his earlier defeat and has pushed the British back to Tobruk. The Germans already had an Einsatzgruppe standing by to deploy to Palestine after Rommel captured it, and were in discussions with the Japanese to plan for a joint invasion of India.

Yeesh.

After those early victories in the Crimea and at Kharkov, the Wehrmacht began its full summer offensive on June 28, 1942. You might think of this as Operation Barbarossa 2.0. But this year was different. Last year, the Germans had begun the invasion with numbers about equal to the Red Army, roughly three million soldiers on each side. This year, the German Army was a bit smaller, though it had more support from Germany's Axis allies, but the Red Army was up to 5.5 million.

The German Army simply did not have enough soldiers and weapons to begin a general offensive all the way up and down the front line. Hitler had had to put out a call to his allies for

reinforcements. They answered with 53 new divisions—from Italy, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and even a division of volunteers from neutral Spain—but these units were not as well-trained or equipped as were their German counterparts.

This year, Army Group Center, the force in front of Moscow, where the Red Army was strongest, would maintain a defensive posture. Army Group North would focus on isolating and starving Leningrad. The offensive push would be led by Army Group South, in the sector of the front that stretched from Kursk to the Sea of Azov.

Stalin and most of his commanders expected the Germans to renew their drive on Moscow. The Germans encouraged them in this thinking with Operation Kremlin, which was supposedly the plan to take Moscow. The Luftwaffe stepped up reconnaissance flights on that sector of the front, while the Army distributed maps of Moscow to soldiers on the front line.

Even after the Soviets shot down a German reconnaissance plane and captured maps detailing the real Plan Blue on June 19, they dismissed that as the deception ploy and continued to believe in Operation Kremlin.

The first stage of the offensive used the Fourth Panzer Army, borrowed from Army Group Center, to advance along Army Group South's left flank to the Don River and take the city of Voronezh on the Don. The panzers advanced rapidly and reached the outskirts of the city on July 5, barely a week into the offensive. Once German infantry caught up, they began the difficult job of slogging through the streets of the city, fighting from block to block.

Even at this point, the Soviet side continued to believe the Germans' ultimate goal was Moscow. They expected that the Germans wanted to drive east to Voronezh, then turn their panzers north in an effort to get behind the front line and circle behind Moscow. So they poured reinforcements into the city to slow the German advance and make them pay a dear price in blood. In that regard, the Battle of Voronezh was a foretaste of what was to come at Stalingrad.

But Moscow didn't figure into the German plan. Once the infantry caught up, which took a few days, the Fourth Panzer Army didn't turn north; it turned south and east, following the right bank of the Don River toward Stalingrad. South of the Fourth Panzer Army and also moving east was the German Sixth Army, the panzers to the north guarding its flank as it advanced on Stalingrad.

Why Stalingrad? There were a few reasons; the first had to do with American and British aid. The Americans in particular were remarkably generous to the Soviet Union. The Roosevelt Administration had extended Moscow a one billion dollar line of credit; Soviet purchasing agents were prowling arms, aircraft, and vehicle factories across the United States, placing orders and often taking measurements and collecting trade secrets. One especially inquisitive agent was caught peeking under the cover at a Norden bomb sight, America's most sensitive piece of military technology, and had to be shooed away.

Moscow burned through the whole billion dollars by the end of 1941; the Americans, unruffled by this development, promptly increased the Soviet line of credit to two billion dollars. By summer of 1942, Allied aid was pouring into the Soviet Union, but you have to consider how it got there.

There were three main routes by which Allied aid was shipped to the Soviet Union. The one Stalin liked the least was by sea to Vladivostok in the Far East. Now, you may be thinking, “Don’t the Japanese Home Islands lie squarely in front of Vladivostok, like a giant wall? And the Japanese are at war with the Allies, right?” All this is true, but all it took was for the US to transfer about 70 cargo ships. These ships, now flying the Soviet flag, passed back and forth past Japan carrying Lend-Lease aid; the Japanese government and Navy did nothing to stop them, as Japan was not at war with the USSR. This arrangement only extended so far as non-military goods, but that was fine. A lot of Lend-Lease aid was non-military anyway. Things like food supplies. The German government applied diplomatic pressure to Japan—the only kind of pressure available to them—in an effort to get the Japanese to block these shipments, but Tokyo refused to touch them.

Sweet. The catch is that the arriving supplies and equipment then have to be loaded onto trains for a long, slow, expensive ride on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to get to the front lines. Airplanes were a little easier. The US delivered aircraft bound for Russia to Alaska, where Soviet pilots took over and flew them on to Vladivostok. The Soviet government insisted on doing it that way; they would not permit American pilots to land planes on Soviet soil. Even so, Stalin liked this route the least, and in the USSR, what Stalin says goes. That’s why everyone referred to him as *Vozhd*, a Russian word that means leader, or maybe boss. Not unlike the word *Führer* in German.

But I digress. I said there were three routes, the one Stalin liked best and the one Stalin liked least. Between those extremes, in the Goldilocks zone, was the third route, the one that ran through Iran. In episode 360, I told you that the Soviets and the British jointly invaded and occupied Iran in 1941; one major reason was to secure a supply line through which the British, and later the Americans, could send military aid to the Soviet Union. This aid was delivered by sea to the Iranian port of Bandar Shahpur, at the head of the Persian Gulf. From there it was loaded onto railroad cars and traveled by rail over the newly completed Trans-Iranian Railway to the Caspian Sea, where it went back onto boats, which shipped it north to the USSR.

As you know, in the summer of 1942, after the disaster of the PQ 17 convoy, the British suspended shipments to Archangel because the long summer days in the Arctic made their convoys too vulnerable. The trans-Pacific route was a very long boat ride followed by a very long train ride, and there were only so many boats and trains, meaning it wouldn’t be easy to quickly increase shipments by that route. That left the route through Iran, or Persia as many people still called it in 1942, as the only route that could pick up the slack after the British discontinued the Arctic route.

Once ships from the Caspian Sea reach Astrakhan, the Soviet port at the north end of the sea, where do they go from there? They continue north into the Volga River. The Volga is the longest river in the USSR—the longest river in Europe, for that matter—and a major inland waterway. A canal links the Volga to the Moscow River and the Soviet capital; it was built by prisoners as one of the projects in the Second Five-Year Plan.

So the Volga River is a tremendously important transportation route in Russia. But you already knew that, didn't you?

[music: Traditional, "Song of the Volga Boatman"]

If the Germans could reach the west bank of the Volga, they would be in a position to fire on any boats carrying these vital Lend-Lease shipments upriver, effectively shutting off military aid from the US and the UK. German aircraft and submarines had already denied the Allies the use of the Arctic route; now the German Army was poised to shut down the route through Iran.

There's the first answer to the question, "Why Stalingrad?" The second is the simple fact that the Volga would make an excellent defensive position for the German Army. The river is wide, and in many cases steep cliffs rise from its western bank. The tops of those cliffs would make formidable defensive positions.

Plan Blue called for Army Group South to advance to the west bank of the Volga at or near Stalingrad, then move south and secure the west bank all the way to Astrakhan, where the Volga empties into the Caspian Sea.

From the beginning, the goal of this invasion was for the German Army to advance to a line running roughly from Archangel to Astrakhan. That was the piece of the Soviet Union Hitler wanted for German colonization. He had no interest in the lands beyond, and assumed that once German soldiers reached that line, Soviet lands to the east would collapse into anarchy and barbarism, which was of no concern to Hitler; the Army would build a defensive line to keep the chaos away from the new German settlers.

There's a third reason: oil. Probably you already thought of this; goodness knows I've talked about it often enough. Soviet petroleum production is located in the Caucasus, which would be cut off from the rest of the USSR once German troops reached the Caspian Sea. The Caucasus was also rich in valuable minerals, like copper, tungsten, and manganese.

By the summer of 1942, one year after Germany invaded, and lost the USSR as a source of oil imports, the Wehrmacht was feeling the pinch. German panzer units were sometimes forced to siphon fuel out of captured or wrecked Soviet tanks, or even to leave their biggest gas guzzlers behind, for lack of fuel to bring them forward to the front.

Control over Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus would alleviate that problem, as well as denying fuel to Soviet tanks, trucks, and airplanes. How long could the Red Army keep fighting without their trucks and T-34s?

Also note that Soviet oil production originates in the Caucasus and most of it is shipped up the Volga to the Russian heartland. If the Germans controlled the Volga, they could cut off those shipments at that point too.

Stalin and his top commanders, like Georgy Zhukov and Aleksandr Vasilevsky, were surprisingly slow to recognize this threat. They kept pouring reinforcements into the Battle of Voronezh, thinking here was the tip of the spear aimed at Moscow. In fact, that battle had been delegated to the infantry, while the panzers were moving south along the west bank of the Don, headed toward the real target: the Volga.

Over the course of July 1942, the Soviet side gradually realized what the Germans were up to. The Germans secured Voronezh on July 24, after a long and bloody fight that killed some 200,000 Red Army soldiers versus 20,000 German soldiers. By this time, the Soviets realized that the pivot from Voronezh they were expecting had not been north toward Moscow, but south.

As this realization dawned on the Soviet side, the German Sixth Army had advanced east all the way to the Don River, where it met up with the Fourth Panzer Army coming from the north. It's important to understand the peculiar geography of this region. Two great rivers flow south through the vast steppe: the Don and the Volga. The Don empties into the Sea of Azov and then the Black Sea, while the Volga empties into the Caspian Sea.

But don't imagine these two rivers run parallel. In fact, about 300 kilometers before they reach their respective outlets, the Volga bends westward and the Don bends sharply eastward, so that the two rivers approach to within 65 kilometers of each other before the Volga turns east and the Don turns west once again. The city of Stalingrad lay on the great bend in the Volga, which means that when the Sixth Army reached the west bank of the Don, they were just 65 kilometers away.

The Sixth Army had advanced nearly five hundred kilometers, across the endlessly flat steppe, in about a month. It was just like the good old days of blitzkrieg. Or was it? Something was missing. It was the huge encirclements that had characterized the Barbarossa offensive of last year. With one exception, at the town of Millerovo, the German Army was not pulling off those huge *Kesselschlachten* anymore, bagging helpless Red Army soldiers by the hundreds of thousands.

The Red Army had learned its lesson since 1941 and was far more alert to the danger of encirclement. The flat terrain made it easier to spy an approaching enemy and escape. Moreover, by this time the Red Army was becoming motorized, courtesy of the United States. The US and the UK were shipping large quantities of military aid to the USSR, yes. This included obvious

items, like tanks and fighter planes. It included foodstuffs, since the USSR had lost its most productive farmland in Ukraine and needed to feed its enormous army; from abroad came millions of tons of wheat, powdered milk, and the famous American processed canned pork product, originally known as “spiced ham.” The name was later shortened into a contraction: Spam. Nikita Khrushchev would later write, “Without Spam, we wouldn’t have been able to feed our army.”

US Lend-Lease aid also included field telephones—56,000 of those—and over 600,000 kilometers’ worth of telephone wire. About 90% of the telephone wire produced in the United States during this period was shipped to the Soviet Union. Those telephones and miles upon miles of wire aided Red Army communications, and no doubt made it easier to warn units before they were surrounded.

Perhaps most important of all were the nearly 7,000 jeeps and tens of thousands of humble Studebaker trucks the Americans had sent. These allowed the Red Army to move its soldiers quickly and keep them supplied after they reached their positions.

At the Wolf’s Lair, Adolf Hitler was becoming dissatisfied with Army Group South’s inability to encircle and destroy large enemy formations. On July 17, Hitler sacked Army Group South’s commander, Marshal Fedor von Bock. You may recall that Bock had commanded Army Group Center last year, and had asked to be relieved after Hitler gave his “no retreat” order. After being relieved for this second time, Bock would never again hold a major command. He died less than a week before the end of the war, on May 3, 1945, when the car in which he was riding was strafed by a New Zealand fighter pilot.

His replacement was General Maximilian von Weichs. Actually, he had two replacements, because on July 7, Hitler revised the war plan. The Wehrmacht’s fuel shortage was becoming critical; they needed those Soviet oil fields, and they needed them now.

Hitler split Army Group South into two parts, now designated Army Group A and Army Group B. Army Group B, commanded by Weichs, would continue the drive toward the Volga River and capture Stalingrad, a campaign designated Operation Heron. Army Group A, commanded by Marshal Wilhelm List, would push south toward the Caucasus and take the Soviet oil fields. This campaign was called Operation Edelweiss.

The speed of the German advance across the steppe convinced Hitler that instead of carrying out these two operations sequentially, per the original plan, they could be accomplished simultaneously, and the Fourth Panzer Army, which had been advancing toward Stalingrad with the Sixth Army, was diverted south, since it appeared to Hitler that the Sixth Army was doing fine on its own. The Fourth Panzer Army would instead help capture those valuable oil fields.

This change of plan in the middle of its execution was criticized after the war, especially by apologists for the German Army, eager to blame what is to come on Hitler’s fickle leadership.

That's why it is important to note there is little sign that Hitler's commanders voiced any objection to this change of plan at the time. One notable exception was OKH chief of staff Franz Halder, who did oppose Hitler's decision, but whose advice was disregarded.

Army Group A began Operation Edelweiss by taking Rostov-on-the-Don on July 23. You'll recall that Army Group South had briefly taken Rostov last autumn, only to be driven back by a Soviet counterattack. This time, with heavy assistance from the Luftwaffe, the city fell easily. Rostov sits where the River Don empties into the Sea of Azov. It represents the northeast corner of the Black Sea, which means its capture opened the way for Army Group A to turn south and advance toward the Caucasus.

Now the goals of the German offensive were crystal clear to Stalin and to Stavka. The split into Army Group A and Army Group B had opened a gap in the part of the German line facing toward Astrakhan and the Black Sea. That was the good news. The bad news was, the Red Army had no way to exploit it. There was nothing in that region. Everything was farther north, defending the line from Voronezh to Stalingrad. The Red Army did have a North Caucasian Front, but this formation would have its hands full holding the line against Army Group A and defending those precious oil fields. And speaking of oil fields, once Army Group A captured Rostov and crossed the Don, they cut off the only rail link between the Caucasus and the rest of the Soviet Union. Shipping fuel along the Volga was still possible, but it was now obvious the Germans meant to cut off that route as well.

The Caucasus was the source of the Soviet Union's petroleum. It also provided strategic minerals, necessary war production. When factories were evacuated from Ukraine in 1941, more than 200 of them were relocated here. There was a very real threat that the loss of all these assets could cost the Soviets the war. But don't take my word for it; let's see what Stalin had to say about it.

On July 28, as the Germans approached that critical rail line, Stalin, in his capacity as People's Commissar of Defense issued the famous—perhaps I should say infamous—Order Number 227. To call Stalin ruthless would be a serious understatement. He never got within a hundred miles of Ruth in his whole life. Allow me to remind you of the order he gave a year ago, during the dark days of 1941, in which he declared that he expected every soldier in the Red Army to fight to the death rather than be captured. To allow yourself to be captured, or voluntarily surrender, would be considered treason and anyone taken prisoner would be treated as such upon return to Soviet jurisdiction. This also meant family members of Soviet POWs were liable to arrest and imprisonment.

You think he didn't mean it? When he announced this order, his own son was a German prisoner. That would be Lieutenant Yakov Iosifovich Dzhugashvili, his eldest and his only son by his first wife, who died shortly after Yakov's birth. Yakov had been an artillery officer, and Stalin felt shamed by his son's capture; perhaps that was some of the motivation behind the

order. True to his word, Stalin had Yakov's wife, his own daughter-in-law, Yulia, imprisoned. The couple's daughter Galina was entrusted to the care of Stalin's daughter, Svetlana.

Stalin's latest order, Number 227, mandated the formation of squads of soldiers to be posted behind Red Army units of questionable reliability. The duty of these special squads, known as "blocking detachments," would be to shoot any soldier attempting to flee the front line, and thus, in Stalin's words, "help the honest soldiers of the division execute their duty to the Motherland."

The order also decreed that soldiers and officers guilty of acts of cowardice contrary to their orders should be assigned to special penal battalions, which would be deployed in "difficult sectors," which would, again in Stalin's words, "give them an opportunity to redeem by blood their crimes against the Motherland." These penal battalions typically were used to make—say it with me—frontal assaults on an entrenched enemy armed with modern weapons; the Germans, in this case. They were expected to charge straight ahead into machine gun fire or minefields, which they generally did, since if they didn't, the blocking detachments to their rear would shoot them anyway. Any member of a penal battalion who managed to survive one of these assaults would be reassigned to a new penal battalion and have to do it all over again. Nearly 500,000 Red Army soldiers were assigned to these penal battalions; hardly any of them lived long enough to see the end of the war.

Stalin's order also provides an explanation for these new policies. He noted the losses of Voronezh and Rostov-on-Don to the Germans and lamented that in some cases Red Army units withdrew without permission. He mentioned the threat to the Caucasus and its supplies of oil and grain.

He went on to note that German advances had already taken from the Soviet Union 70 million people and the annual production of 800 million pounds of bread and ten million tons of metal. The Soviet Union no longer had an advantage over Germany in terms of factories, metals and minerals, food production, or human resources, the *Vozhd* declared.

Therefore it is necessary to eliminate talk that we have the capability endlessly to retreat, that we have a lot of territory, that our country is great and rich, that there is a large population, and that bread always will be abundant. Such talk is false and parasitic, it weakens us and benefits the enemy, if we do not stop retreating we will be without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw material, without factories and plants, without railways.

This leads to the conclusion, it is time to finish retreating. Not one step back! Such should now be our main slogan.

It is for that one line, "Not one step back," or in Russian, "*Ni shagu nazad*," that Order No. 227 is best remembered. Stalin said it should be our slogan, so of course that's what it became almost immediately.

I should note that although Stalin's slogan, "Not one step back," sounds very much the same as Adolf Hitler's "no retreat" order during last winter's Red Army counteroffensive, they were different in practice. Stalin meant that no soldier could retreat without permission. Hitler meant that no soldier could retreat without permission, and in no circumstance would that permission ever be granted.

It does make a difference. Hitler had ordered his army to stand in place and defend whatever position they were in, no matter what. Stalin was not ruling out the use of withdrawals as a tactic and yes, many times tactical withdrawals were authorized. He was telling his army not to retreat without authorization.

You may be surprised to hear that Stalin expected Order No. 227 to raise morale in the Red Army. Even though it is almost literally Stalin saying, "The shootings will continue until morale improves." It was a powerful call for soldiers to do their duty, and a frank assessment of the threat to the nation, but maybe too powerful a call and maybe too frank an assessment. In fact, the effect of this order on Red Army morale was mostly negative.

There was one group of soldiers for whom the effect was positive, whose spirits were lifted by Stalin's words. These were German soldiers. Millions of copies of the order were printed and distributed to Red Army soldiers at the front, and since the Germans were advancing and the Red Army withdrawing, in the course of things, copies of the order fell into German hands. They read Stalin's words and felt encouraged. The Soviet dictator was openly acknowledging the effectiveness of the German campaign and the desperate situation into which it had placed the enemy. Their own superiors were telling them that a successful campaign into the Caucasus would end the Bolsheviks' ability to wage war; here was the head Bolshevik effectively admitting it. So let's push on and get the job done.

The German offensive will push on, into August and beyond, but we have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Sean for his kind donation, and thank you to Spencer for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Sean and Spencer 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. 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 return to the Pacific Theater. When last we were there, the Americans were preparing to invade the Solomon Islands; now we'll see how that went. Operation Shoestring, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned that Yakov Dzhughashvili, Stalin's eldest child, was captured by the Germans in 1941. When the Germans realized who they had, they moved him to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which sounds bad, but it's an improvement over the camps where the Germans were keeping their Soviet POWs.

The Germans used Yakov for propaganda purposes, dropping leaflets over Red Army units with pictures of Yakov comfortable in German custody and asking Soviet soldiers why they should fight to the death when Stalin's own son surrendered.

After the fall of Stalingrad, the Germans sounded out the Soviets about exchanging Yakov for either Field Marshal Paulus or Leo Raubal, the son of Adolf Hitler's sister, Angela. Stalin rejected both proposals.

Yakov Dzhughashvili died on April 14, 1943, of electrocution on the Sachsenhausen camp's electrified fence while trying to escape. Leo Raubal remained in Soviet custody for 12 years, until 1955, when he was repatriated to Austria, where he lived the rest of his life. He died in 1977, at the age of 70, while on vacation in Spain.

[music: Closing War Theme]