

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 375

“Time Is Blood”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Taking Stalingrad was proving more difficult than Hitler had expected. On September 12, General Paulus, commander of the Sixth Army, flew to the Werwolf to meet with Hitler, chief of staff Halder, and General von Weichs, commander of Army Group B, to discuss the capture of Stalingrad. Paulus later claimed that at this meeting he mentioned to Hitler his concern that the Romanian and Italian armies on his left flank were potentially vulnerable and needed reinforcement.

Hitler assured him of reinforcements, and told him besides that the Red Army had used up the last of their soldiers and equipment and had nothing left with which to begin an offensive. The Red Army had already attempted an offensive on Paulus’ left flank in late August. That offensive had demonstrated that the Red Army was poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly motivated, and the results had been pathetic. There was nothing to worry about.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 375. Time Is Blood.

Boris Mikhaylovich Shaposhnikov was born in 1882 to a Cossack family in the Urals. He joined the Imperial Army and studied at the Nicholas General Staff Academy. He served in the First World War, rising to the rank of colonel. When the Russian Revolution came, he was unusual among officers of his rank in that he supported the Bolsheviks.

He was useful to the Bolsheviks, in that he became one of the few Red Army officers who’d had formal military training. He advised Joseph Stalin on military matters, and Stalin respected him and his advice. He was one of the few people with whom Stalin was on a first-name basis.

In the late 1920s, Shaposhnikov wrote a three-volume work laying out his military theories. It was titled *Mozg Armii*, in English *The Brain of the Army*, which became the central text of Soviet military theory. In it, Shaposhnikov extolled the value of teamwork in military command, and

the subordination of the military to the Party. He was fond of quoting Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is a continuation of politics by other means."

Shaposhnikov survived the purges of the 1930s, because Stalin trusted him. In 1937, he was appointed Chief of Staff of the Red Army and in that position, he nudged Stalin toward releasing those thousands of Red Army officers who'd been purged and imprisoned. In 1940, he was named a Marshal of the Soviet Union, but stepped down from his chief of staff post soon after, for health reasons, it was said, although dissatisfaction with how Stalin conducted the Winter War may have had something to do with it.

Stalin replaced Shaposhnikov with another general, whose name I will not trouble you with, who held the chief of staff position for a mere five months before Stalin dismissed him, complaining he was too nice, and replaced him with Georgy Zhukov, whom no one had ever accused of being too nice. Zhukov had been made a Hero of the Soviet Union for his decisive defeat of the Japanese in 1939, episode 316. He also held the position of chief of staff for a mere five months, and you have to think that the Red Army going through three chiefs of staff in one year, at the same time it was called upon to occupy and garrison the Soviet Union's new acquisitions of the Baltic States, eastern Poland, and Bessarabia, contributed to its unprepared and disorganized state when Operation Barbarossa began.

Zhukov was himself dismissed as chief of staff a month after the German invasion began, after he recommended to Stalin that the Red Army units defending Kiev withdraw and abandon the city to avoid encirclement. Stalin refused, they stayed put, and nearly half a million Red Army soldiers were surrounded and captured, making it the largest encirclement in military history and destroying the Red Army's Southwestern Front, which had to be rebuilt from scratch.

Stalin recalled Marshal Shaposhnikov to resume the position of chief of the general staff, while Zhukov spent the rest of 1941 leading the successful defense of Leningrad, the successful defense of Moscow, and the Soviet counteroffensive that came afterward.

Shaposhnikov was by this time 60 years old and his health was dodgy, so his second tenure as chief of staff lasted less than a year. He used that time to train his replacement, the 46-year-old General Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Vasilevsky.

Like his mentor Shaposhnikov, Vasilevsky was a methodical kind of guy, skilled at organizing and coordinating different commands. He kept calm in a crisis, and unlike Zhukov, never lost his temper when dealing with Stalin. To the contrary, he was able to sit down with Stalin, walk him through a military problem, and persuade the dictator to accept Vasilevsky's proposed solution, not a simple feat.

In August 1942, once it became clear that the German Army Group South was aiming for Stalingrad, Zhukov, the commander whose big claims to fame were his successful defenses of Mongolia, Leningrad, and Moscow, was sent south to Stalingrad to coordinate its defense on

behalf of Stavka and serve as liaison between Moscow and commanders on the scene. Stalin gave Zhukov the title of Deputy Supreme Commander, which meant he was second only to Stalin himself in the chain of command. In late August, as the Germans drew near to Stalingrad, Zhukov oversaw a Red Army offensive aimed at the German left flank along the Don River. This was meant to hamper the advance on the city, but the Germans were able to brush the attack aside with little difficulty.

This is the offensive Hitler cited to Paulus at that September 12 meeting I told you about at the top of the episode. It had failed, but it did a lot of good for the Soviet cause in an unexpected way: it tempted the Germans into overconfidence.

I should say a word here about the geography of the city of Stalingrad, which is a bit unusual. It was an industrial city and a river port on the right bank of the Volga. Stalingrad was a narrow strip of a city, stretching some 25 kilometers up and down the bank of the Volga, but reaching scarcely five kilometers to the west. At some places, the western edge of the city lay scarcely two kilometers from the river. It was home to about 600,000 people in 1942.

At the southern end of the city stood its huge grain elevator, the main railroad station, and the riverside terminal that served the ferries that in happier times carried people and goods across the river. I should emphasize here that at the time there was no bridge across the Volga at Stalingrad; the ferry was your only option. Today there is a highway bridge over the river at what is now known as Volgograd. It was completed in 2009.

Farther north, we come to the thin part of the city, just two kilometers wide. Here stands a tall hill called Mamaev Kurgan, which is actually a tumulus, or ancient burial mound. Its peak is the highest point in the city. General Chuikov moved the headquarters of the 62nd Army here, to take advantage of the view of the city it offers.

As we proceed farther north along the river, we come to Stalingrad's most important industrial works. First is a steel mill, built in 1897 and renamed by the Bolsheviks the Red October Works, a reference to the October Revolution. Next is a munitions plant, built by the Imperial government in 1914 to supply the army during the First World War, and afterward renamed the Red Barricades factory, another reference to the Revolution.

At the northern end of the city lay the mammoth Dzerzhinskiy Tractor Factory, which was built by the Communist government, with American assistance, and opened in 1930. The plant was originally part of the government's effort to mechanize and modernize Soviet agriculture. When the war began, the plant was retooled to make T-34 tanks, using steel provided by the Red October Works, just down the street, as it were. As I mentioned last time, in the early days of the Battle of Stalingrad, tanks literally came off the assembly lines here and were immediately driven to the front lines to fight the Germans.

These three plants were the pride of Soviet modernization efforts. They were also key war industries. The Dzerzhinskiy Tractor Factory was producing something like 20% of the total Soviet tank production. So apart from the fact that the Volga makes for an excellent spot for the Germans to halt their advance and set up a defensive line, seizing these three factories would be a significant blow to Soviet war production. Right there you have two excellent reasons to take the city.

On the subject of Soviet war production and German overconfidence, Hitler held as an article of faith, an ideological principle, that the Slavic peoples of the Soviet Union were inferior to Germans in every way, and he didn't allow anything as mundane as facts to change his mind. The German Abwehr, military intelligence, did not concur in his assessment. Three months ago, General Halder had shared with Hitler an intelligence report which concluded that while Germany was producing 500 tanks every month, the Soviet Union was producing 1,100. Hitler dismissed the report as nonsense. It had to be wrong. After a year of heavy fighting, and with their most important industrial centers in German hands, there was no way the primitive Slavs of the Soviet Union could so much as match the production of the heavily industrialized and ultramodern Reich, let alone double it.

In fact, the intelligence estimate *was* wrong. Over the course of 1942, the USSR averaged 2,200 tanks per month, twice the Abwehr estimate and more than quadruple what Germany was producing.

As an aside, one of the reasons the Soviets could manage this feat was their willingness to employ women in factory work while the men were off at the front. Women had played a critical role in fomenting what became the October Revolution, and equality for women was thereby baked into Communist ideology. Women factory workers were also common in the United Kingdom and the United States during the war, but not in Germany, where Hitler opposed the idea, again for ideological reasons. Women belonged in the home, raising children. The Nazi method for replacing the workers sent to the front was to employ slave labor and literally work them to death. How's that going for you, Adolf?

When Hitler met with Paulus, he wasn't interested in talking about flanks or Red Army offensives. He only wanted to know one thing: how long would it take to capture Stalingrad. Paulus estimated ten days to occupy the city, plus an additional fourteen to clear out the last of its defenders. Hitler told him to proceed, and also to begin preparations for the next phase of the operation. After Stalingrad fell, the Sixth Army should move south, to secure the west bank of the river all the way to Astrakhan.

The same day General Paulus was meeting with Hitler, September 12, which was a Saturday, General Chuikov in Stalingrad was assessing his new command. On paper, the 62nd Army was a huge formation, encompassing 19 infantry divisions, plus a tank corps and twelve artillery regiments. On the ground, however, he commanded no more than 20,000 soldiers and 60 tanks,

with which to defend against an enemy who could marshal ten times those numbers. He did have some 700 artillery pieces in his command. Those would certainly come in handy; Chuikov ordered them all withdrawn from the city to the opposite bank of the Volga, where they could fire on the Germans, but would be relatively safe from counterattack. This would prove a shrewd decision.

Morale in the 62nd Army was terrible. Most of its soldiers believed the same as Hitler—that Stalingrad would fall in a matter of days, and their top priority was getting themselves across the Volga in one piece before it was too late. Reports were coming into Army headquarters of senior officers deserting their units to escape across the river. In one case, a sergeant in an armored unit had forced a driver and radio operator out of their tank at gunpoint, then climbed in and headed for German lines to surrender, though he was captured before he made it. That sergeant was court-martialed and executed.

Chuikov dealt with his morale problem in classic Red Army fashion: he started shooting people. He contacted the commander of the NKVD division in Stalingrad and ordered him to station troops at the ferry dock and every other point in the city where a boat might be available to cross the river. Any Red Army soldier found attempting to desert should be executed on the spot, regardless of rank.

In principle, Army commanders had no authority over the NKVD. Its chief, Lavrenty Beria, had been known to threaten the life of any Red Army officer who showed the temerity to attempt to issue orders to his units, but in this instance, the NKVD commander in Stalingrad decided that cooperation with the military was his best option.

Chuikov told his staff there was only one way to hold the city. “Time is blood,” he declared. In other words, only by sacrificing lives could they hope to slow the German advance.

And on this very same ominous Saturday of September 12, 1942, General Zhukov was in Moscow, called on the carpet in Stalin’s office to explain the failure of that late August offensive everyone keeps talking about. With him was chief of staff Vasilevsky. Zhukov explained to Stalin that the three armies ordered into that offensive had been understrength and had lacked the armor and artillery support that were essential in any effort to take on the Germans.

What *would* be required to take on the Germans, Stalin wanted to know. Zhukov told him he would need another army, plus a tank corps, an air army, and substantial artillery support. Vasilevsky agreed with him. Stalin said nothing. He picked up a map of available reserve forces lying on his desk and began looking for the assets Zhukov needed.

As Stalin was absorbed in this task, Zhukov and Vasilevsky withdrew to the far corner of the room and discussed the matter between them. If Comrade Stalin couldn’t authorize the forces they had requested, an alternative solution would be required.

Unfortunately for them, Stalin's hearing was better than they realized. He demanded at once to know what was this alternative solution they were whispering about. The two generals sputtered, trying to come up with a coherent answer. Stalin ordered them to meet with Stavka tomorrow and consider carefully how to deal with the developing situation at Stalingrad, then come back to him with a recommendation.

They returned to Stalin's office the following day. Stalin shook hands with each of them, which was itself uncharacteristic of the *Vozhd*, then asked them what had they decided, and which of them was going to give the report. Vasilevsky told him it did not matter which of them gave the report, as the two of them were in complete agreement. The German thrust into Stalingrad had created a salient, the flanks of which were guarded by Romanian armies far inferior in quality to the Germans. They proposed that the Red Army make every effort to defend Stalingrad, but the key word here is *defend*. There would be no counterattacks, merely a lengthy and hard-fought campaign of delay. While the Germans were concentrating their forces on taking the city, Stavka would assemble in secret large numbers of fresh reinforcements at points some 150 kilometers north and south of the city.

When all was ready, these two forces would begin armored offensives against the two Romanian armies, punch through their lines and circle rapidly into the German rear, trapping and isolating the entire German Sixth Army. In short, they proposed to give the Germans a taste of their own medicine.

Stalin was hard to convince. He worried this plan might lead to the fall of Stalingrad, which would be a major blow to Soviet morale, not to mention personally humiliating, to lose the city that bore his name. Stalin examined the map and proposed a watered-down version of the proposal, in which the offensives would be brought in closer to the city, say 50 kilometers on either side, instead of 150. No, no, said his generals. If the offensives began that close to the city, the German Sixth Army would divert its own units from Stalingrad to meet them, and the trap would fail.

Stalin conceded. The plan was codenamed Operation Uranus.

[music: Borodin, *The Steppes of Central Asia*.]

One of the Red Army's most valuable sources of intelligence was the capture of enemy soldiers, whom the NKVD would then interrogate. Interrogations of Romanian soldiers had confirmed that their morale was low, they didn't want to be there, and they resented the high-handed way German soldiers pushed them around. Their anti-tank defenses were built around an obsolete horse-drawn German anti-tank gun of Spanish Civil War vintage that fired 37 millimeter shells. Soviet tank crews referred to these guns derisively as "door knockers" because their own T-34 tanks could take a direct hit from one of them with no effect other than to shake up the tank crew a little.

These guns were German Army hand-me-downs, as the Germans themselves had upgraded to a 50 millimeter antitank gun in 1940 and a 75 millimeter gun by 1942. Plus they had those 88 millimeter anti-aircraft guns that worked pretty darn well against tanks, too. By this stage of the war, in autumn of 1942, the Germans' own anti-tank weapons could disable the best of the Soviet tanks.

Also by this stage of the war, prisoner interrogations were revealing to the NKVD the shocking numbers of Soviet POWs and civilians who were working for the Germans. The Germans called these people *Hilfswillige*, which you could translate as *willing helpers* or maybe *volunteer assistants*. *Hiwis* for short. Some of them were Soviet civilians living behind German lines who volunteered to help either because they were committed anti-Communists (especially in Ukraine and the Baltic States) or out of simple desperation, since working for the Germans at least meant you got food and shelter.

Others were defectors, Red Army soldiers who went over to the enemy side. On the southern part of the front, where the Germans were conducting their Plan Blue offensive, something like a third of the Red Army soldiers facing them were ethnic Ukrainians. Most of these soldiers came from cities, towns, and villages under German occupation and had no information about the welfare of their families, friends, and neighbors back home, not even whether they were still alive. The Abwehr, German military intelligence, understood this, so the Germans dropped leaflets on the Soviet front lines promising that any Red Army soldier who crossed over and surrendered would be permitted to return home. But because this is Nazi Germany we're talking about, soldiers who took them up on their offer quickly discovered it was a lie. Instead of going home, they were put into German uniforms and told they were fighting for the Wehrmacht now.

But most of the *Hiwis* were Soviet prisoners of war, who volunteered to help the Germans because who could blame them? The official German policy for Soviet POWs was to starve them to death, but prisoners who agreed to do labor for the Germans would at least get food. A certain amount, anyway.

Some of these *Hiwi* laborers worked behind the lines, peeling potatoes, cleaning the stables, filling in the bomb craters on Luftwaffe runways, stuff like that. Others did work farther behind the lines including, it must be said, serving as laborers and guards in the German murder camps.

Other *Hiwis* became soldiers in the German Army, as I alluded to a moment ago. One year plus into the War in the East, the Germans were short on soldiers. In some of the infantry formations in the Sixth Army assaulting Stalingrad, half of the soldiers were former Soviet POWs.

Many of these *Hiwis* were motivated either by anti-Communism or by sympathy to Nazism, usually sympathy with Nazi anti-Semitism. By the autumn of 1942, German military intelligence had come to the conclusion that Germany's best hope of defeating the USSR was to embrace anti-Communism as its main goal in the East, or at least pretend to, and invite citizens of the

Soviet Union to take up arms alongside them and join the campaign to overthrow Stalin and the Communist Party, once and for all.

Or, to put it another way, the key to defeating the Soviet Union was to reignite the Russian Civil War that had ended twenty years earlier.

It is quite likely true that this political strategy represented Germany's best hope to defeat the USSR, but Hitler would not countenance it, as it was inconsistent with Nazi ideology. The goal of the war was not to overthrow Communism; not entirely, anyway. The goal was to subjugate, enslave, and displace the Slavic *Untermenschen* of Eastern Europe so that their lands could be settled by their German betters. If Slavs were armed and taught how to fight, disarming them and cowing them into slavery after the war was over would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Despite the ideological issues, more than a hundred thousand Slavs were in fact incorporated into German Army units, where they held German Army ranks, wore German Army uniforms, and ate the same food the Germans in their unit ate. You might be wondering how the Nazis reconciled this with their stated ideological principles. The answer is that these recruits were reclassified. They were no longer Slavs. Officially, they were now Cossack soldiers, because unlike having Slavs fighting for you, having Cossacks fighting for you was cool and perfectly acceptable, from a racial standpoint.

The news that so many Soviet citizens were willing to aid the invader came as a nasty surprise to the NKVD. They concluded that soldiers in the Army needed more political training and that greater effort had to be put into identifying and rooting out those harboring traitorous thoughts before they had a chance to act on them. More purging, in other words. What else would you expect the NKVD to say?

Put this in the context of Stalin's decree that Red Army soldiers were expected to fight to the death rather than surrender and be taken prisoner, even—or especially—those who found themselves trapped in one of those huge encirclements the Germans kept springing on them. From the Soviet point of view, any Soviet soldier in German custody had already disobeyed orders. Working for the Germans was just the poisoned icing on the traitorous cake, so to speak.

There were instances of Soviet POWs who escaped German custody and found their way back to the Soviet side of the line. Their reward was to be assigned to one of the Red Army's punishment battalions, where they would henceforth serve the Motherland by stomping around German minefields until one of the mines blew up and killed them, or the war ended, whichever came first.

The NKVD and the Red Army also worried that Soviets working for the enemy might become dangerous infiltrators and saboteurs. That was a reasonable fear. On the German side, they and their Axis allies also feared infiltrators, Red Army soldiers who would slip in by night and find and capture one or two hapless soldiers who had strayed too far away from their comrades, then

spirit them away to the Soviet side of the line. This was also a reasonable fear. It was in fact happening with some regularity and the soldiers knew it.

The fear of being kidnapped and ending up in an NKVD interrogation chamber was not too different from the general German soldiers' fear of being killed by enemy civilians. I've told you about this before. Remember how the Germans in Belgium in 1914 told stories of teenage snipers and children sneaking up on sleeping soldiers and other such horrors? These sorts of wild rumors of killer civilians ambushing innocent German soldiers were a regular feature of the last war and of this war, only now, in Russia, there truly was someone out there to be afraid of.

Even as General Paulus was meeting with Hitler in the Werwolf to discuss the capture of Stalingrad, German artillery and Stuka dive bombers began pounding the city, softening up its defenders before the assault began the following morning, Sunday the 13th.

From his headquarters at the Mamaev Kurgan, Chuikov observed the bombardment. Building after building across the city exploded. The air above turned yellow as the sky filled with a fine dust made of what used to be bricks. The general quickly lost contact with his forward units as the bombardment severed telephone lines, forcing him to send runners to deliver messages by hand, but the life expectancy of a soldier running through the German bombardment was awfully short.

The bombardment continued on Monday the 14th. Early in the morning, General Chuikov, despite his desire to stick close to the front-line units, decided he had no choice but to relocate his headquarters back to the riverside bunker. German infantry began their advance into the city. Many of them expected to secure Stalingrad that day. One German unit, the 71st Infantry Division, advanced all the way to the city center, threatening the main railroad station and even the crucial riverside ferry landing. Other German units were advancing on the Mamaev Kurgan and the grain elevator at the southern end of the city.

These German advances were celebrated at the Werwolf. News of them reached Stalin at the Kremlin while he was discussing Operation Uranus with Vasilevsky and Zhukov. He told Vasilevsky to send another infantry division across the river that night to bolster the defense of the city: the 13th Guards, one of the Red Army's seasoned units. "And see what else you can send over," he added. Within an hour after the strategy session broke up, Zhukov was aboard a plane headed back toward Stalingrad.

The 71st Infantry Division took the railroad station that morning. Then the Red Army took it back. Then the 71st captured it again that afternoon. Then an NKVD unit recaptured it before nightfall.

In his bunker, General Chuikov met with General Aleksandr Rodimtsev, commander of the 13th Guards, the unit which would enter the battle tonight. Chuikov instructed Rodimtsev not to bother bringing the division's heavy equipment along with them. His soldiers would need only

their rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank guns. Oh, and be sure to bring along every grenade you can get your hands on.

Chuikov had observed the German style of combat, and was devising counter-tactics. The Germans relied heavily on their bombers and their artillery to soften up their enemy, to destroy their entrenched positions and force them to scatter. But German infantry entered close combat reluctantly and gingerly. At night, they drew back from the front lines for fear of ambush.

The proper response to all this was to get in close. If Red Army soldiers knew anything, they knew how to sacrifice. They should take advantage of the Germans' fear of intimacy and get in close. Frighten them. Teach them to expect a Russian soldier in every window and around every corner. Make them fear for their lives every waking moment and give them no rest. Close quarter combat also neutralized the Germans' best weapons; their dive bombers and artillery would not dare fire on targets so close to their own soldiers.

As for the Germans, Monday had been a disappointment. The fighting in Stalingrad had been bitter and they had not even come close to their goal of taking the city. Their commanders had told them that once they took Stalingrad, it would mark the successful end of the 1942 campaign. Afterward, there would be time to rest. There would be leave to travel back to Germany, perhaps to spend Christmas with their loved ones.

Now many German soldiers began to suspect they would be fighting in Stalingrad for a long time, possibly until Christmas and even beyond. And that was a grim thought.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to PJ for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and PJ 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.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I'm going to be attending this year's World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow. If there are any Glaswegians listening, maybe we can get together. Dunediners are welcome, too.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we as we turn away from Stalingrad for a week to they were used to examine the situation in North Africa. Rommel and Montgomery are still facing off at El Alamein, and there's something else going on. Two Hammers, One Anvil, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Today at the top of Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd stands a huge statue commemorating the Battle of Stalingrad. It is 85 meters tall, or 280 feet, and is named *The Motherland Calls*. The statue depicts a woman, the personification of Mother Russia, with arm outstretched and a sword raised above her head.

The Motherland Calls was the tallest statue in the world when it was dedicated in 1967. It is almost twice as tall as the Statue of Liberty in New York.

[music: Closing War Theme]