

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 377

“Verdun on the Volga”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

There is no land for us behind the Volga.

Red Army slogan at Stalingrad.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 377. Verdun on the Volga.

We’re picking up today where we left off two episodes ago. September 14, 1942 was the date that units of the German Sixth Army moved into Stalingrad.

They had expected, or hoped, they could take the city in one day. They could not.

The Red Army’s 62nd Army was assigned the defense of the city. To call it an “army” makes it sound like a huge unit, but this particular army was down to a mere 20,000 soldiers, equivalent to about two divisions, tasked with holding off about eight German divisions.

Per Stalin’s orders, on the night of September 14, the 13th Guards Division crossed the river to aid in the defense of the city. Actually, the division commander ordered the crossing to begin before the sun had fully set, as he understood the urgency of getting reinforcements into Stalingrad as quickly as possible.

The soldiers crossed the Volga in everything from gunboats to rowboats. As their motley assembly of vessels slipped across the river, the soldiers on board could already hear the echoes of gunfire and artillery from the city ahead. As they approached, German artillery began to target them. Shells exploded in the river, throwing water into the air and drenching the soldiers. Dead and stunned fish began to float to the surface.

As they drew closer, they could see buildings were on fire across the city; occasionally they could make out the silhouette of a German soldier passing in front of the flames. The riverbank was cluttered with burned, wrecked boats.

When the first soldiers reached the west bank of the river, they jumped out of their boats and began charging up the steep bank without bothering to fix bayonets. They knew that the nearest German soldiers were a mere hundred meters away.

The 13th Guards division suffered 3,000 casualties just that night.

That same night, on the far side of the river, Georgy Malenkov, a member of the State Defense Committee accompanied by Georgy Zhukov, visited the headquarters of the Eighth Air Army and called for the unit's senior officers. He demanded the records to see which units were flying on which days, and handed out punishments to the commanders of units he deemed had not shown sufficient dedication to the fight. He singled out individual officers for criticism, including Major Vasily Stalin, the son of the general secretary. He ordered the younger Stalin in front of the other officers to explain why no one in his unit had shot down a single German airplane. "How are we to understand this?" he demanded. The other officers got the point. If Stalin's own son was not immune, no one was.

Air support was a weak spot in the Soviet war effort. The Luftwaffe had destroyed 2,000 Soviet planes, most of them on the ground, in the first week of the war. The Soviet Air Force had recovered, but Soviet-produced planes were inferior to what the Germans were flying and their pilots less experienced. But they were learning, and Lend-Lease was bringing in hundreds of British Hurricanes and American P-39 and P-40 fighter planes.

One remarkable unit was the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, an all-women unit. The Soviet Union was the only combatant nation in the Second World War to use women pilots. These pilots flew obsolete open-cockpit wooden biplanes from the 1920s. These aircraft were weak and slow, so they flew at night, as the name of the unit suggests, and close to the ground, sometimes only a few meters off the ground. These biplanes were slower than the stall speed (which is the minimum speed) of German fighter planes, making them hard to shoot down.

The pilots of this unit developed a tactic of night bombing that involved coming in very low, then gaining altitude just before their bombing run, when they would throttle the engine and glide down to their target, which meant they made little sound, other than an eerie whistling noise, which earned the unit the nickname "Night Witches." The spooky nighttime bombing helped fray German nerves, and the fact that German soldiers were being regularly pummeled by a bunch of girls no doubt did its part to frustrate and demoralize them.

As dawn broke on Tuesday, September 15, most German soldiers still expected to take the city fairly soon. They viewed the arrival of the 13th Guards as merely a temporary setback. The fighting went on. In Moscow, the mood was nervous at best. The American Embassy reported to

the State Department that Stalingrad was a lost cause, and the ability of the Soviet Union to remain in the war was now open to question.

On the evening of September 16, Stalin was brought bad news. Soviet military intelligence monitoring German radio picked up a report that Stalingrad had fallen. He sent a message at once to Krushchev, demanding to know the truth.

The German radio report was premature. The defenders of Stalingrad were still keeping the Germans busy. In fact, earlier that very day in a famous episode, Red Army soldiers had recaptured the Mamaev Kurgan, the hill that had served as a park and picnic grounds in happier times and was now covered with bare churned earth littered with shell fragments, which Soviet soldiers now used as ready-made trenches. In a moment that would never be forgotten, a Soviet soldier pulled down the flag the Germans had planted at the top of the hill and stomped it into the dirt.

The Germans stormed the Mamaev Kurgan repeatedly in the days that followed, but each time, they were driven back and suffered appalling losses.

Another major battlefield was the grain elevator by the river near the southern end of the city. German panzers had surrounded it, but the next night a platoon of reinforcements arrived, bringing with them two Soviet 14mm antitank guns and two First World War era machine guns.

The following morning, a German officer accompanied by his Russian translator approached the elevator under a truce flag and called for them to surrender. The defenders replied by firing a round from one of their anti-tank guns.

Ten times German infantry stormed the elevator that day; ten times its Russian defenders drove them back. On September 20, the defenders were almost out of ammunition when the Germans stormed the elevator again. By this time, days of tank and artillery fire had pulverized the concrete of the buildings; the air was so thick with dust that visibility was almost zero. The Red Army defenders communicated by calling out to each other; when German soldiers heard a Russian voice, they fired in that direction. The surviving defenders escaped the building that night; they had been forced to leave behind their wounded.

The relentless German aerial and artillery bombardment of Stalingrad had reduced most of its buildings to piles of rubble. As for the ones that still stood, small numbers of Red Army soldiers would hide in them and dare the Germans to come and get them. They would peer out the windows, pick off any German soldier who was careless about becoming visible on an open street, and dare the enemy to try to take the building, be it a warehouse, a department store, or an apartment block. Anything still standing.

As was the case with the grain elevator, the Germans would eventually take the building, but only after multiple dangerous and exhausting assaults, while the surviving Red Army soldiers

would fight bitterly and then slip away, having cost the Germans a far higher price in blood and equipment than they had paid themselves. I told you that the main railroad station changed hands four times in the first day of fighting. It changed hands seven more times in the days that followed, until the Germans finally secured it for good.

One famous case is the so-called Pavlov's House—it was actually a four-story apartment building—named after Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, who commanded the platoon defending the building. It was situated on a street corner that gave its defenders clear views down the streets to the east, west, and south, making it impossible for the Germans to approach without being subjected to rifle and anti-tank fire. The platoon held the building against innumerable German assaults for nearly two months before relief came in the form of a Soviet counterattack.

Fighting in the ruins of Stalingrad had more in common with the trench warfare on the Western Front of the last war than it did with the sweeping battles of encirclement that had become the Wehrmacht's trademark in this war. With the broad Volga at the Red Army's backs, there would be no encirclement this time.

Combat in this environment was not only dangerous for the Germans, it was nerve wracking. The city streets were littered with tanks and dead bodies, mingled with heaps of rubble that had fallen from nearby buildings. Intermingled with the bricks and masonry were the detritus of the broken lives of Stalingrad's inhabitants: bed frames, bathtubs, kitchen tables, and the like.

Red Army soldiers observed General Chuikov's order to stay within fifty meters of the enemy, making German bombardments almost as dangerous for the Germans as for the Russians. German soldiers dropped to the ground when a bomber appeared; whether it bore a red star or a black cross scarcely mattered. Bombs and artillery fire were far more dangerous in the city; not only were soldiers subject to the explosions themselves, but anytime a building was hit, the blast would rain bricks down upon whoever was unfortunate enough to be underneath.

Hearing all this, you might be thinking, how can anyone stand the strain of living for days or weeks under these conditions? The short answer is: they can't. Soldiers' morale crumbles, they lose their nerve, their sense of time, and ultimately their ability to wage war. It's usually harder on the attackers, because the onus is on them to push forward, which involves getting out into the open. Defenders only have to find a safe place and hunker down in it. For the Germans, who began this assault two weeks ago with high hopes of taking the city quickly from a disintegrating Red Army, the strain of the battle drained morale, as did the losses of so many comrades, far more losses than the Germans ever expected. They began to refer to this new and terrible form of combat as *Rattenkrieg*: rat war.

Far from the front lines, the *Führer* and the German public woke up every morning waiting for the announcement that Stalingrad had fallen. Joseph Goebbels' propaganda ministry sent a film crew to the city, so they could record for the newsreels the historic moment when Stalingrad had fallen and brave German soldiers raised the swastika flag over its buildings. On September 18,

three Soviet armies north of Stalingrad and west of the Volga attacked the left flank of the German Sixth Army. As had happened three weeks earlier, the attack failed. German Stukas counterattacked in the air and German panzers on the ground, where the broad, flat steppe favored mobile combat.

On September 23, just hours after the Soviets had transported another infantry division across the river, the Germans began pushing forward in the center of the city. The fresh soldiers were immediately deployed to resist them, but it wasn't enough. The Germans reached the river's edge on what was, coincidentally, General Paulus's 52nd birthday.

The defenders of Stalingrad were now split into two pockets, as the Germans began to press the southern pocket, which was much smaller. Red Army officers commanding units in that pocket withdrew across the river, ostensibly to confer with their superiors. Once the soldiers left behind realized that was a lie, and that their officers had abandoned them, panic broke out. Soldiers rushed down to the river and built makeshift rafts to escape across the Volga. Some rode pieces of driftwood. A few tried to swim. When the Germans realized what was happening, they began targeting the river with their artillery, killing many of them.

The officers who escaped tried to cover up what they had done, but were caught and charged with violating Order No. 227, the "Not One Step Back!" order. It is not known for certain what happened to them, but it is safe to assume their punishment was severe.

[music: Mussorgsky, *The Capture of Kars.*]

On September 24, Adolf Hitler took out his frustration over the delay in capturing Stalingrad by at last firing his army chief of staff, Franz Halder, with whom he'd grown increasingly dissatisfied.

A few days afterward, Hitler flew to Berlin to inaugurate the 1942 Winter Aid Campaign with a speech at the Sportpalast. He told the crowd that the past winter had been the low point of the war and better times were coming. He taunted Winston Churchill, inviting the British prime minister to attempt a landing in Western Europe. Churchill would be lucky to stay on the beach for nine hours, he proclaimed. (Why nine hours in particular?)

Though it was a secret that the German state had systematically murdered more than one and a half million Jewish people in the year past, Hitler couldn't resist gloating anyway. "The Jews once laughed at my prophecies...I do not know whether they are still laughing or whether they have choked to death on their laughter. I assure you that they will choke on their laughter everywhere."

As for Stalingrad, Hitler boldly declared that the city would fall any day now and vowed that once it did, "no one will ever again drive us away from that place." With those words, Hitler put his personal prestige on the line, even though just yesterday he had received a lengthy

memorandum from a senior Army commander arguing that the war in the East was no longer winnable and that Germany should open peace talks with the Soviet Union. Hitler disregarded his advice.

A week later, October 1, Hitler met with regional Nazi Party leaders and reiterated his prediction, telling them that the fall of Stalingrad was an inevitability. In his three-hour address, he spoke of what would come afterward. After depriving the USSR of its oil, German forces would move south into Iraq and Iran and take Britain's oil as well. "At the moment these are still abstract plans, but they are thoroughly within the realm of possibility," he told them, concluding with the assertion that the Allies had already lost the war, whether they realized it yet or not.

Some of Germany's military commanders, concerned by the heavy casualties in the fighting at Stalingrad, suggested to Hitler a shift in emphasis from capturing the city outright, in favor of reinforcing the Sixth Army's flanks and widening the German salient by pushing north and south from Stalingrad. Hitler rejected this advice, and on October 6, two days after he returned to the Werwolf, he ordered that Army Group B set aside all other objectives and concentrate on the capture of Stalingrad.

When Franz Halder was relieved as Army chief of staff, General Paulus lost his most important supporter. Halder would defend Paulus whenever Hitler or other military commanders began to ask why the capture of Stalingrad was taking so long. Now he had no defenders. He was getting bombarded with messages questioning or criticizing his conduct of the attack.

German soldiers hated the bitter, house-to-house combat required to gain ground in Stalingrad. Often German and Russian soldiers battled each other from different floors of the same building. The German casualty rate was alarmingly high. German military intelligence, however, insisted that Russian casualties were at least double German casualties, and promised that the Red Army could not keep this up much longer.

Some commanders began to compare the assault on Stalingrad to the ill-fated German assault on Verdun in 1916, episodes 121-4. As had been promised then, the capture of Stalingrad was supposed to collapse the enemy line. If it could be achieved.

And if it couldn't? If Stalingrad did not fall, then it truly would be Verdun on the Volga, with the German Army suffering massive casualties with nothing to show for it.

And speaking of the First World War, the German Sixth Army had to reinvent the stormtrooper tactics the Army had developed in the last war, in which special assault teams would storm a bunker or cellar with machine guns and flame throwers.

There was a method to the Soviet defense. Infantry units would garrison and defend selected buildings so as to guide advancing Germans onto certain streets where mines, camouflaged anti-

tank guns, or T-34 tanks had been pre-positioned. Many of these tanks could no longer move and had been towed into their ambush position.

The Germans would advance down the street with tanks in the lead and infantry following. The Russians would use mortars to fire over the tanks at the street just behind them, to drive back the infantry, freeing the gunners to open fire on the tanks.

Most of the fighting though, was in a huge number of tiny confrontations between squads of six or so soldiers. General Chuikov ordered that attacks on German soldiers be fought at night whenever possible. Night combat negated German air superiority, since the Luftwaffe could not operate at night, but beyond that, Chuikov believed German soldiers were easily frightened in the dark.

Small squads of Soviet soldiers would slip into the German lines at night, sometimes through the sewers, to hunt down German soldiers one by one. Often they eschewed rifles or grenades in favor of knives and shovels, with which they could kill in silence. Sometimes their comrades would fire flares at German positions some distance away, to keep the Germans awake and focus their attention in the wrong direction.

Red Army soldiers who fought in this way described themselves as graduates of the Stalingrad Academy of Street Fighting. These tactics, along with the Night Witches sailing through the breezes over their heads, kept German soldiers awake, exhausted, and wracked with anxiety. The slightest sound was likely to spook a German into firing his rifle, which would trigger a chain reaction of frightened sentries up and down the line firing their own weapons. This goes a long way to explaining the Germans' huge consumption of ammunition during this battle.

And then there were the Soviet Katyusha rocket launchers. Let me take a moment to dive into this topic. Nearly every major combatant in the Second World War went into the conflict with their own special secret weapon. The British had their radar and sonar, the Americans had their bomb sight, the Germans had their Stukas and their paratroopers, the Japanese had their Zeroes...

...and the Soviets had their Katyushas.

Russia was perhaps the first nation in the world to take rocketry seriously. I talked a little about Konstantin Tsiolkovsky all the way back in episode 48, when I told you that in 1903, the same year the Wright Brothers first flew their airplane, Tsiolkovsky was already publishing work laying out the mathematics of rocket thrust and describing how rockets might be used to achieve escape velocity and make space travel possible. At this same time there were respected Western scientists asserting firmly that there existed no conceivable technology that could accelerate a vehicle to escape velocity. Some were still asserting this in 1942.

Tsiolkovsky began his work when Nikolai II was still ruling Russia and continued through the Bolshevik Revolution, which he supported. He died in 1935, at the age of 78, and by then scientists and engineers in the Soviet Union were already coming up with practical applications for rocket technology. One of these technologies was rocket-propelled artillery shells, which were originally intended to be launched from aircraft or from a fixed rocket base, but in 1938, Soviet researchers began building launchers for them, in various designs. Typically, these launchers would consist of a set of parallel rails or tubes. You fitted the rockets onto the rails or into the tubes; struts underneath then raise the rails or tubes to an appropriate firing angle, and the rockets would be launched. Early models launched 6 or 8 rockets at a time.

Not everyone in the Soviet military was convinced these rocket launchers offered any advantage over a traditional artillery gun or howitzer. Yes, they could launch a salvo of rockets all at once, but it could take the better part of an hour to reload. Later, they got the reload time down to a few minutes.

But there were advantages that more than compensated for these liabilities. For instance, these rocket launchers were basically simple metal frames, relatively lightweight and easy to manufacture. In contrast to tanks or artillery guns or anti-tank guns, which are heavy and require precision machining, these rocket launchers could be manufactured in smaller light-manufacturing facilities that lacked the machinery those bigger weapons required, meaning they could be produced in large numbers economically.

And because these rocket launchers were light and portable, you could fire off a salvo of rockets, then pack up the launcher and relocate before your enemy has the opportunity to pinpoint your location and hit back with artillery or dive bombers.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Red Army had only a handful of these rocket launchers in the field. Despite the run of German successes in the early weeks of the war, the rocket launchers proved valuable assets in combat and the USSR began building them in quantity, then designing and manufacturing bigger ones, capable of launching increasing numbers of rockets. Instead of 6-8 rockets, later models put in service as the war progressed could launch 12 or 16 or 24 or 48. A few were even bigger than that.

Since the launchers were lightweight, the most effective means of deploying them was on a vehicle. This also makes it easy to shoot and skedaddle before the Germans begin firing back. The Soviets experimented with mounting them on tanks or other armored vehicles, but this proved to be unnecessary. A simple truck would do. Or lorry, as our British friends would say.

And as you know, if you've been paying attention, in 1942 the United States flooded the Soviet Union with trucks by the thousand, and one particular American truck proved to be nearly ideal as a platform for one of these rocket launchers: the Studebaker US6, which was a 6x6 2.5 ton truck. The US6 was a rugged, durable, six-wheel cross-country vehicle. It was reliable in all

kinds of weather, and not too picky about the quality of the gasoline you put into it. In other words, it was the ideal truck for the Russian front.

By autumn of 1942, the Red Army had found that the US6 made an ideal platform for one of these rocket launchers. It was a marriage made in heaven.

I haven't told you what these rocket launchers were called yet. They didn't have names, only the designation BM, which stood for *боевая машина*, which simply means *combat vehicle*, plus one number that stood for the model of rocket it was designed to launch and a second number that indicated how many rockets it could launch at one time. So, for example, the model most commonly mounted on those Studebaker trucks was designated BM-13-16, meaning it could launch 16 of the model M-13 rocket. The M-13 rocket had a range in excess of 7 kilometers and carried a 5 kg payload.

Since this was the Soviet Union, even these letter-number designations, like BM-13-16, were classified. Various code names were used when soldiers were introduced to the weapon. Many of these rocket launchers were marked with the letter *K*, indicating they were manufactured at the Comintern Factory in Voronezh. The soldiers saw this letter, and it inspired some of them to call these weapons Katyushas. The name caught on. Katyusha is a double diminutive of Ekaterina, the Russian version of the English Catherine. Women named Ekaterina are often referred to by the diminutive nickname Katya, and Katya itself has its own diminutive, Katyusha.

If this sounds strange to you, please note that we do exactly the same thing in English. Someone named Catherine might be called Kate for short, but Kate has its own diminutive, Katie. So you see, it's not really so strange.

But why Katyusha specifically? It's the title of a Russian song, popular during the war. The song is about a young woman named Katyusha waiting patiently and loyally for her beloved to return from the war.

The Battle of Stalingrad was one of the first in which Katyushas were used in large numbers. Soviet soldiers worked out a very effective way to use them. Trucks carrying Katyushas were stationed on the west bank of the Volga, at the bottom of the cliff. After they were loaded with rockets, the trucks would advance almost to the water's edge, then fire their rockets up and over the cliff, to land on German positions. Then the trucks would pull back from the river to the base of the cliff, where they were out of reach of German artillery counterstrikes from the city above. Once they were reloaded, they pulled out to the river and launched again. Rinse and repeat.

It's hard to express how frightening and demoralizing these Katyusha rocket attacks can be, particularly when a number of them are coordinating their strikes. German soldiers first heard the rockets' distinctive sound: an eerie howl. Then the rockets would land, setting off dozens or hundreds of small explosions all at once everywhere around them. German soldiers often

mistook Katyusha rockets for bomber attacks, because the strikes were so widespread, like a bomber dropping a large number of smaller bombs.

Because some models of Katyushas used an array of tubes to launch their rockets, and because of that special sound, the Germans nicknamed them *Stalinorgel*, that is, Stalin's organ. That nickname also caught on, and spread into many other languages, including English.

The Red Army put their Katyushas, and their artillery guns, placed on the other side of the Volga, to good use. Anytime the Soviets detected signs of German soldiers massing at some point in the city in preparation for an assault in force, they would hammer that position with artillery and rockets, forcing the Germans to disperse and making it nearly impossible to put together an attack.

As if the Night Witches and the Katyushas and Russian night fighters sneaking up on sentries in the dark weren't enough to terrify a German soldier, there were also the snipers. As the Battle of Stalingrad raged on, the Red Army cultivated skilled snipers. If a soldier showed sufficient skill in picking off Germans with his regular-issue rifle, he might be issued one of the Red Army's scarce sniper rifles with a telescopic sight and be put to work.

The most famous of these snipers was 27-year old Vasily Grigoryevich Zaitsev, who was made a Hero of the Soviet Union for his accomplishments. He grew up in the Ural Mountains as a shepherd and learned to shoot on hunting trips with his grandfather. Zaitsev learned to conceal himself in unlikely locations, such as under a pile of rubble, and snipe at the Germans, never staying in one place very long. He vowed to kill 150 German soldiers by the anniversary of the October Revolution, though he didn't quite manage that feat. He only got 149. Soviet sources claim the German Army brought in its most successful sniper trainer to hunt down and take out Zaitsev; after several days of cat-and-mouse, Zaitsev spotted his adversary hiding under a sheet of corrugated steel and killed him.

Zaitsev was tapped to train other snipers. His surname means hare (H-A-R-E) in Russian, so his students inevitably came to be called *zaichata*, which means *harelings*; maybe you could translate it as "bunnies."

Zaitsev's successes encouraged other soldiers to give it a try, and soon soldiers competed to see who could get the most kills, while their officers fudged the numbers to make their units look good. This competition is reminiscent of the Stakhanovite competitions during the Second Five-Year plan. I talked about that back in episode 275.

Zaitsev was the first, but he wasn't the most successful. That title goes to the 19-year-old Anatoly Chekhov, who often fired at the Germans from the tops of tall buildings. This sounds like a good idea, but it can be dangerous, because it takes time to escape from the building once the enemy figures out where you are, but Chekhov must have made it work, as he killed 256 German soldiers. His favorite targets were Germans delivering food or water to their comrades

on the front line. Sometimes he single-handedly cut off a German unit's water supply, forcing the soldiers to drink out of puddles and other such contaminated sources.

Again this raises the questions, how can soldiers live and fight under these conditions for a period of several months without going mad. The sad reality is that many of them did succumb to what in the last war was called "shell shock" and in our time is called "combat stress reaction." In the Second World War, it was known as "battle fatigue," and it contributed significantly to the casualty totals in every army.

Unfortunately for the soldiers fighting in Stalingrad, neither of their militaries acknowledged battle fatigue. More than ten thousand Soviet soldiers were executed for cowardice during the Battle of Stalingrad, and it's a safe bet that many of those soldiers, probably a majority, were actually suffering from battle fatigue. We don't have solid figures for how many soldiers were executed or otherwise disciplined on the German side, but we do know that in the German Army, battle fatigue was often dismissed as cowardice. Numerous cases within one unit could be chalked up as the fault of the commanding officer for failing to provide "leadership."

The emergence of the sniper competition is one bit of evidence for the rising—or at least the solidification—of Soviet morale as the Battle of Stalingrad dragged on. That the 25th anniversary of the October Revolution came and went with Stalingrad still holding out inspired patriotism.

Early in the morning of Thursday, November 19, before dawn, the telephone rang at the German Sixth Army headquarters. The caller was Lieutenant Gerhard Stöck, who was serving with the Romanian Third Army. He called to report that the Romanians had captured a Red Army officer who, under interrogation, had disclosed that the Red Army planned an offensive against that sector of the front, to begin at 5:00 that morning.

Here's a fun fact: Lieutenant Ströck had won the gold medal in the javelin throw at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Summer Games. Also the bronze medal in shot put. Huh.

Since it was already after 5:00 AM when Stöck's phone call came in, the officer who answered the phone judged the report likely a false alarm. There had been a lot of reports coming from the Romanians of Red Army activity in their sector, and none of those had led to anything. The duty officer decided this was more of the same, and it wasn't worth waking up the general.

He was wrong about that.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Morgan and John for their kind donations, and thank you to Tyler for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Morgan and John and Tyler 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

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we go back to Egypt, where General Montgomery is about to begin his long-awaited attack. The End of the Beginning, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The sheer brutality of the Battle of Stalingrad is well remembered in history, but one group is often overlooked: Stalingrad's civilians.

As the Germans advanced on the city, Soviet authorities refused to allow civilians to flee, thinking it bad for morale. Some fled anyway, but they risked imprisonment if they got caught. Publicly, the government claimed those civilians were staying by choice, so they could assist in the defense of their homes.

In the first days of the German attack, the authorities continued to deny Stalingraders the opportunity to escape the combat because they were reserving space in the boats for high-priority evacuees, such as wounded soldiers and Party officials. Eventually, evacuation became open to anyone, but it was dangerous. German artillery regularly targeted the boat traffic criss-crossing the river. Remarkably, tens of thousands of Stalingrad's civilians chose to stay and accept the risks of remaining in the city over the risks of leaving.

Life was tough for those who chose to stay. Most of them hid in basements or other places of shelter and only dared come out at night. They struggled to find food and water. Water was more important. Stalingrad's water system was destroyed, so people had to forage for water wherever it could be found. The most important source was the Volga. If you could get there, water was plentiful, but the water was contaminated. Dead bodies floating in the river were a common sight, so boiling the water was essential, but boiling did not rid the water of contamination from the oil and fuel constantly leaking into the river.

Families who had children typically delegated the foraging to them. Soldiers were less likely to see children as a threat and shoot at them. Red Army soldiers could often be persuaded to share a little food with a child. Even the Germans could, sometimes. Sometimes boys, especially orphans, might be informally inducted into a Red Army unit, where they would do odd jobs for the soldiers, in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter.

As winter set in, soldiers on both sides began to rob civilians of their winter clothing, complicating their efforts to survive. The Germans worried that civilians might be spies and saboteurs, leading to an order from Hitler to execute all civilians in the city, on the grounds that they were all committed Communists.

Many were killed. Many others were shipped out of the city to German prison camps, which was merely a slower form of execution. A few of the healthiest, and luckiest, were sent to Germany to work as slave laborers.

Incredibly, in spite of the hardships, some 70,000 Stalingrad civilians, about 10% of the city population, survived the battle.

[music: Closing War Theme]