

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 380

“Operation Uranus”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As the Germans pressed forward into Stalingrad, the Red Army resisted them furiously. No one on the German side suspected that the fierce Soviet defense was not only about holding a city. It was also about drawing their enemy into a trap.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 380. Operation Uranus.

We pick up today with the battle for Stalingrad. Last time I talked about this battle, three weeks back, I described to you the grinding misery endured by both armies as they fought each other viciously over every meter of ground.

The Germans were inching forward, building by building—sometimes floor by floor within a building. But although they were slowly moving forward, by October German morale was sinking. Conditions on the front lines were harsh and dangerous, and the Germans were all too conscious that in a few weeks, another frigid Russian winter would begin. Some soldiers were looking forward to it. They figured cold weather would reduce the intensity of the combat, as both sides would be forced into winter quarters.

Although the Red Army was slowly losing ground, their morale was rising. Soviet soldiers who had known nothing but defeat after humiliating defeat since the war began 16 months ago, now found themselves not only holding their own against the full might of the Wehrmacht, which was now focused on Stalingrad, but inflicting heavy losses on the world’s most feared military.

I already described to you the emergence of skillful and motivated snipers among the Red Army, who competed with each other for the greatest number of kills. Fear of snipers was deeply ingrained in the German Army, and it didn’t take long for Red Army officers to realize how badly their snipers were damaging German morale and to train more of them. Soviet snipers targeted officers and artillery spotters whenever they could, and took particular glee in inflicting

misery on the enemy by taking out German soldiers attempting to deliver food or water to their comrades on the front line.

There are even reports of Soviet snipers shooting civilians in Stalingrad, in cases where civilians were observed to be aiding the Germans by, say, bringing them water, which is sad when you consider how likely it is that these civilians acted out of desperation. Many were motivated by German offers of food or shelter in exchange for their help.

Red Army morale got another boost on October 9, when Stalin issued Decree No. 307, removing political commissars from the Red Army chain of command, altering the system that had been in place since the Civil War. Commissars would still be responsible for political education and enforcing loyalty—by execution, if deemed necessary—but they would no longer have the power to give orders or overrule the orders of the commander they were assigned to.

This decree was a rude awakening for the commissars, as they discovered—to their amazement—that they were *not liked* by the other soldiers. Imagine that! Rank and file Red Army soldiers generally had good relationships with their officers. Soldiers commonly addressed their officers as *батьа*, which you could translate as *papa* or *dad*. The commissars, not so much. It seems the soldiers didn't like having their attitudes and opinions policed, nor did they enjoy being subjected to lengthy discourses on the finer points of Marxism-Leninism. The political office of the Stalingrad Front sent a dispatch to Moscow decrying how the new arrangement had led to “incorrect attitudes” among the soldiers and lamenting how soldiers regarded their political officers as unnecessary. As for officers, they were positively jubilant that they no longer had to deal with political drones from Moscow looking over their shoulders and questioning their every move. In at least one case, a commander informed his commissar that the commissar was henceforth not to enter his office without permission.

You can't help but think that this moment marks something of a turning point in the quality and professionalism of the Red Army.

As the Battle of Stalingrad raged on, week after week, it eventually drew the attention of the whole world. Had the mighty Wehrmacht finally reached its limit? Stalin and his government boasted that the city would never fall, while Hitler and his government insisted that Stalingrad would be theirs any day now. Both sides heavily invested their political prestige, and it seemed to most observers this could be the climax of the war in the East. The fall of Stalingrad conceivably could trigger the collapse of the Soviet government, while failure to take the city would likely mean that Hitler had lost his great gamble.

I already described to you how on November 8, 1942, Hitler gave his annual address to the “Old Fighters” of the Nazi Party at the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich. Even as he spoke, Panzer Army Africa was in full retreat, with the British Eighth Army nipping at its heels, the British and American Armies were landing in French North Africa, and the bloody combat in Stalingrad

raged on endlessly, and yet the *Führer* confidently declared that the fall of Stalingrad was inevitable. If not today, then soon enough. “Time is of no importance,” he told the crowd.

His speech was carried live over the radio, and quite a few jaws fell in Stalingrad as German soldiers listened in. Temperatures were dropping, the Russians were fighting like mad dogs, casualties were mounting, and our *Führer* says time is of no importance? Seriously?

As if to underscore their concerns, the following day, November 9, saw the first snowfall in Stalingrad, a foretaste of the coming winter.

Hitler not only oversold the battle for Stalingrad, he overmanaged it. Recall that, beginning with the failure of the 1941 offensive to defeat the Soviet Union before winter, Hitler increasingly came to believe that senior military commanders in the Wehrmacht were at best incompetent and incapable of carrying out his orders properly, or at worst, deliberately sabotaging him out of jealousy and spite. This, and not any error on his part, was his explanation for why the war was not going according to plan.

His response to these perceived obstacles was to take ever tighter control over the Wehrmacht. In modern parlance, we would say that he increasingly micromanaged the German military. Officers who worked with him in the first years of the war were frequently impressed by his keen mind and his attention to detail in military matters, but now it seemed he wanted to run the whole war himself.

Oddly enough, I am reminded here of Winston Churchill. All the way back in episode 106, I described to you how in the early days of the last war, Churchill, who was then First Lord of the Admiralty, took advantage of the new communication medium of radio to send orders to captains of individual Royal Navy ships across the world. As you can imagine, neither the Admiralty nor the captains themselves were especially enthusiastic about this innovation.

Now here we are, one war later, and Adolf Hitler is using the relatively recent innovation of long-distance telephone communication to receive reports and send orders to individual frontline commanders a thousand kilometers away, while poring over detailed street maps of Stalingrad.

These commanders had it even worse than those Royal Navy captains had. The captains only had to send and receive written messages (rather like texting), while the German commanders in Stalingrad had to converse with their *Führer*, which must have been nerve wracking, especially when they had to tell him something he didn't want to hear. Woe to anyone who provoked Hitler to anger; his reaction could be hazardous to one's career, not to mention one's health.

This is a terrible way to run an army. Yes, Hitler could communicate instantly with an individual commander when he wanted, but even so, collecting reports from many officers describing what is going on at the front, then collating this information to construct the big picture, then devising a plan, evaluating it, and communicating it back to the front is a process that can take hours;

enough time that the situation at the front might have drastically changed. Commanders would then be handed orders that made no sense in the current circumstances and had to weigh the situation in front of them against the consequences of disobeying—or seeming to disobey—the *Führer*.

Would you want to be in that position? When Erwin Rommel found himself in that position, he simply disregarded his orders, and he got away with it because of his prestige and popularity, but we can't all be Erwin Rommels now, can we?

This is especially ironic in view of the fact that the Red Army was saddled with exactly this problem in the early weeks of the German invasion. In the aftermath of the Great Purge, Soviet commanders were afraid to scratch their own noses without first running the idea past their superior officers, and this leaden, inflexible system was a major reason for the Red Army's poor performance. By November 1942, Soviet commanders were not only more experienced and more confident in their own decision making, but were no longer so fearful of close scrutiny. Stalin's decree removing the commissars from the chain of command is emblematic of how much the Red Army had changed.

In contrast, the German Army had traditionally granted its front-line commanders a great deal of flexibility to respond to changing conditions on the battlefield, and this has always been one of the German Army's greatest strengths. Now Adolf Hitler was taking away that flexibility from his own army, even as his opponents were discovering its advantages, and he was doing it for the worst possible reason: to protect his own delicate ego by blaming the failures of Operation Barbarossa on his generals.

As a side note, allow me to observe that after the war ended, Hitler was dead, while many of his senior commanders were still alive and able to defend themselves, which made it very easy for them to turn the tables and blame Hitler for everything that went wrong in the war. While there is no doubt that Hitler's military meddling from 1942 forward was a big net negative for the German war effort, consider this: the contemporary evidence shows no sign that senior Wehrmacht commanders had many qualms about Hitler's conduct of the war at least as far as the invasion of the USSR in 1941. This means that if you want to blame Germany's defeat on Hitler's meddling, then you're going to have to argue that had Hitler not taken control of the military in December 1941, the Wehrmacht commanders could have taken the position their military was in at that point, and led it to victory.

This suggestion might charitably be described as farfetched.

[music: Wagner, *Siegfried*.]

In September 1942, Stalin and his senior commanders, Zhukov and Vasilevsky, had developed a plan for a counterattack at Stalingrad. The soldiers of the 62nd Army, fighting in and for the city, were not fighting solely to defend Stalingrad. They were, perhaps, not even fighting primarily to

defend Stalingrad. They were fighting to draw the German Army into a meat grinder, while Zhukov and Vasilevsky prepared their counterstroke.

Meanwhile, Hitler was issuing dubious orders. He told the Sixth Army to pull back its 150,000 or so horses to positions hundreds of kilometers to the rear of Stalingrad. Ostensibly, this was to shorten the distance over which the army had to truck fodder for these horses, thus reducing the strain on German supply lines, but it also meant that German infantry units in Stalingrad would lose mobility, and perhaps that was the point. Without horses, they would find it difficult to retreat.

Even worse, Hitler ordered Paulus to send all his tanks into the combat in Stalingrad. Paulus, who had learned not to question Hitler's orders, complied, even though tanks are much less effective in the confines of urban combat than they are in the open terrain of the countryside. This decision to entangle the Sixth Army's armor assets in city combat would have serious consequences.

I already described to you how a captured Soviet officer revealed that the Red Army planned an offensive against the Romanian Third Army, north and west of Stalingrad, to begin at 5:00 AM on Thursday, November 19. The information was relayed to the Germans, who did not believe it. That morning, 5:00 came and went with no sign of impending attack, which seemed to confirm their skepticism.

They were wrong about that. The night before, Red Army sappers in white camouflage had crept across the snow to disarm the anti-tank mines along the Romanian front line. When 5:00 AM came, the Soviet side held their fire because of a thick fog. At 7:20 AM Russian time, 5:20 AM German time, visibility had not improved, but Red Army commanders decided they had waited long enough. The signal to begin was sent across the front by trumpets, so many that even the Romanians could hear them. Ten minutes later, the Russians opened fire on the Romanians with artillery, mortars, and Katyushas.

The fire was aimed at two designated points in the Romanian line, meant to open corridors for a Red Army advance. They were firing blind through the fog, and no spotter could see well enough to suggest corrections, but they had already calculated the ranges to their targets in the days leading up to the attack, and their fire was landing close enough.

Our friend the Olympic gold medalist, Lieutenant Ströck, made his second phone call to Sixth Army headquarters. This time he reported that a massive bombardment had begun, and expressed doubt that the Romanians could hold up against it. This time, the headquarters staff did not hesitate to wake up their commander.

Red Army infantry assaulted the Romanian lines, but were beaten back. Next came columns of tanks, followed by more infantry. The T-34s struggled to make their way across the muddy ground, churned and pockmarked as it was by artillery fire. Some lost their way along the path

the sappers cleared for them and struck mines, but most made it through. The Romanians had no anti-tank guns capable of stopping a T-34, so the tanks ground on, crushing first the Romanians' barbed wire, then rolling over Romanian trenches and any Romanian soldiers unfortunate enough to still be inside them.

Behind the tanks came the cavalry. Yes, the Red Army was still using cavalry units, soldiers armed with submachine guns, riding tough little Cossack ponies, which were known for their stamina. The cavalry attacked the flanks of the Romanian lines, widening the gap the armored column had made.

Thirty minutes later and thirty miles to the west, another Soviet tank column, followed by another cavalry column, punched a second hole through the Romanian line, isolating the Romanian force in the middle. Luftwaffe commanders judged the fog too thick to risk launching aircraft, but the Soviet Air Force had no such qualms. Their planes were in the sky, bombing the retreating Romanians.

At noon, there was still no sign the German command was particularly concerned about the Soviet offensive. Adolf Hitler, who was vacationing at the Berghof at the time, personally ordered the German XLVIII Panzer Corps to advance toward that second breach in the Romanian line, the western one, but otherwise little action was taken. The Sixth Army continued its attacks in Stalingrad, not even attempting to disengage the two panzer divisions Hitler had previously ordered into the city. The Soviet attack had landed within the Romanian Third Army's area of responsibility, not the Sixth Army's, so General Paulus carried on as usual, until such time as he received new orders from his superiors at Army Group B. Army Group B, meanwhile, first had to consult with the *Führer*, who was vacationing in Bavaria.

In normal circumstances, that advancing German panzer corps would have been enough to halt the Soviet advance. But the circumstances of Army Group B, fighting deep inside Soviet territory, were far from normal. The corps had only about 30% of its full complement of tanks and was so low on fuel it had to borrow some from the Romanians. The Soviet tanks advanced through the snow and the mist; by noon they were ten kilometers behind the Romanian front line, and rear echelon units were beginning to flee in panic. This chaos, plus a heavy snow that began to fall, hampered German efforts to assess the situation. Ground units were disorganized and air reconnaissance was out of the question.

This was winter, so night fell early, by 4:00 in the afternoon. The Soviet tanks turned on their headlights and continued their advance through the growing snowdrifts that rippled the steppe. By 5:00, they were thirty kilometers behind the Romanian line when they encountered XLVIII Panzer Corps, which was only able to delay, not halt, the Red Army advance. Typically, when Hitler heard this news, he ordered the commander of the corps arrested.

At Army Group B headquarters, the command staff were only now beginning to grasp what they were up against. They studied maps and worried that the Russian advance might reach the crucial

rail line the Germans were using to supply Stalingrad. It had not yet occurred to anyone that the Red Army might have set its sights on an even more ambitious goal.

At 10:00 that night, the order at last came to General Paulus to suspend all offensive operations in Stalingrad immediately. All mechanized and motorized units in the city were to disengage and redeploy to the west to support the Romanians. This order would prove difficult to carry out, because the Soviet 62nd Army in Stalingrad had begun its own offensive expressly to keep the Germans tied down.

The following morning, Friday November 20, the scenario repeated itself along the front line of the Fourth Romanian Army, south of Stalingrad: hours of ferocious artillery bombardment, followed by a tank assault. The Romanian soldiers were already aware of what was happening to their comrades farther north. They plainly heard yesterday's bombardment, even though it had taken place more than a hundred kilometers away.

Advancing Soviet tanks ran over and crushed the Romanian anti-tank guns that had been set up to stop them. Romanian soldiers began surrendering in large numbers, throwing down their weapons and calling out "*Antonescu kaputt!*"

German commanders believed that yesterday's breakthrough, the one north and west of Stalingrad, was the bigger threat and were concentrating on containing the Red Army there. In an ominous development, those Soviet tank units that had broken through yesterday and were now more than 40 kilometers south of what had been the Romanian front line, began to turn east.

It was only the following day, Saturday, November 21, that German commanders finally grasped the full reality of the threat they faced. Army Group B headquarters notified Sixth Army headquarters that Sixth Army was endangered on both flanks. Indeed, Sixth Army headquarters itself now lay almost directly between the two Soviet columns, which were now advancing toward each other. Headquarters was forced to relocate to the east, closer to Stalingrad. Left behind were Sixth Army's supply dumps, airfields, and vehicle repair facilities, soon to be overrun by the Soviets. The Germans destroyed as much as possible before withdrawing.

The two advancing Soviet forces intended to meet each other at the town of Kalach-on-the-Don, where the Germans had built a bridge across the river. The Sixth Army had only a handful of support and security units there, including an anti-aircraft battery, and they were unprepared for ground combat.

The commander of a Soviet tank brigade was told by a Russian civilian that German tanks always had their headlights on when they crossed the bridge. Before dawn the following morning, Sunday, he tried a risky gambit. He put two captured German tanks at the head of his column, and ordered all his tanks to turn on their lights and drive straight down the road and onto the bridge.

By the time the small security detachment guarding the bridge realized what was happening, it was already too late. Soviet tanks fired on them and drove them off, then captured the bridge before the Germans could demolish it. The Soviet units fired green flares to alert their comrades to their position. Soon the leading units of the two attack forces, one from northwest of Stalingrad, the other from south of Stalingrad, met. Red Army soldiers hugged each other and broke out their stores of sausage and vodka to celebrate. Later, they would be asked to re-enact the scene for the newsreel cameras.

Disorganized and bedraggled German support units and the remnants of two Romanian armies retreated toward Stalingrad, harried along the way by Soviet cavalry. The Axis soldiers had no horses, so Soviet POWs were pressed into service as beasts of burden. The healthier ones, that is. The weak were left behind to be discovered by the advancing Red Army, alive or, more often, dead. When Soviet units discovered the prisoners, they called for photographers to document the atrocities. Moscow publicized the photographs and accused the Germans of war crimes, while soldiers at the front took their revenge on any German prisoner they could get their hands on. Soviet nationals caught serving in or assisting the German Army, mostly Ukrainians, were executed on the spot.

Sick and starving Soviet civilians told their liberators of the brutalities of the German occupation. Homes had been burned and civilians tortured until they gave up every farm animal and every sack of grain in their possession. Civilians who had named NKVD agents to the Germans during the occupation were now named themselves and arrested.

German prisoners were marched to the river, where they were sent across on barges and then on to prisoner camps in Siberia. Gleeful Red Army soldiers joked that the Germans were at last living out their dream of crossing the Volga.

The Soviet encirclement of Stalingrad and the Sixth Army was completed on Sunday, November 22, which happened to be Totensonntag, the day German Protestants commemorate the departed faithful.

[music: Mikhalkov and Ureklyan, "State Anthem of the USSR."]

On November 20, the second day of Operation Uranus, Adolf Hitler ordered the Axis armies directly involved with the Soviet offensive to form a new Army Group Don, to be commanded by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. The armies included were the Sixth Army, the Fourth Panzer Army, and the Romanian Third and Fourth Armies—what was left of them.

On November 21, even before the Soviet encirclement was complete, Hitler issued an order to the Sixth Army to stay put in Stalingrad and make no attempt to withdraw even in the event of a "temporary encirclement," as he put it.

On the 22nd, the day the jaws of the trap closed, Hitler decided he had to cut short his vacation at the Berghof and return to the Wolf's Lair command center in East Prussia. The trip on his private train took almost a day, because of the need to stop every four hours and consult with the OKH.

In Stalingrad on the 22nd, the news spread by word of mouth across the units of the Sixth Army: "We're surrounded." This was certainly unwelcome news, but not too worrisome. During the Soviet offensive last winter, there had also been occasions when the Red Army had surrounded German units, but in every case, the Germans had been able to break out of the cauldron.

On that day, General Friedrich Paulus, the commander of the Sixth Army, was not in Stalingrad. He and his chief of staff had flown to the town of Nizhny-Chirskaya, outside the encirclement, where they met with General Hermann Hoth, commander of the Fourth Panzer Army, to discuss how to respond to the Soviet offensive, and communicated by telephone with the staff of Army Group B.

The commanders assumed that Hitler's order to stand fast was a temporary measure, and that naturally the order would soon come for the Sixth Army to break out of its encirclement. How was this to be accomplished? The answers to that question were troubling. Sixth Army would need fuel and ammunition to attempt a breakout. This could only be delivered by air, but Luftwaffe commanders told them that they did not have the transport capacity to meet the Army's needs. Without fuel and without horses, they would have to leave behind their big guns and their wounded to be taken by the Red Army, a grim prospect.

But the news would soon grow worse. When Hitler learned that Paulus was in Nizhny-Chirskaya, he went into a rage. He accused Paulus of abandoning his troops and ordered him to return to Stalingrad at once. Paulus, naturally, was deeply offended by this accusation. His meeting was a perfectly ordinary part of his duties as the Sixth Army's commander, and it had been conducted at Nizhny-Chirskaya because from there they could reach Army Group B headquarters by telephone.

Hitler arrived at the Wolf's Lair on Monday, November 23, the day after the Soviets completed their encirclement. He met immediately with the new Army chief of staff, Kurt Zeitzler. Zeitzler reported to Hitler that the commander of Army Group B, Maximilian von Weichs, had concluded that there was no alternative but to order Sixth Army to break out of the encirclement and pull back to the Don River, where a new defensive line could be organized. Zeitzler added that he concurred with Weichs' judgment.

Adolf Hitler most emphatically did not concur with Weichs' judgment. He and Zeitzler got into a heated argument, punctuated by the sound of Hitler pounding his fist on the table over and over while shouting "I am not leaving the Volga! I am not leaving the Volga!" General Paulus also conferred with Hitler over the radio, requesting permission to break out of the cauldron. Hitler again refused.

The only senior military commander in the German Army who concurred with Hitler's position was Field Marshal von Manstein, the commander of the new Army Group Don. He took the view that there was no reason to break out so long as the Sixth Army could be supplied by air. More important was the task of organizing a relief force farther west, one capable of punching through the Red Army and opening a corridor to Stalingrad.

Paulus confessed privately to von Manstein, in a letter, that he was torn between his judgment that leading his troops out of the pocket was the only rational course of action and his duty to the *Führer*. Manstein told Paulus that he no choice but to follow the *Führer's* orders. What happened afterward was not his responsibility.

What about air supply? Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring was on it. He met with the senior transport commanders to discuss the prospects. Sixth Army would need an estimated 700 tons of supplies per day to maintain its position in Stalingrad. Göring was told that was impossible. What about 500 tons per day? Still impossible. 350? Maybe 350 tons per day, but they could not guarantee how long the Luftwaffe could deliver supplies at that rate.

That was all Göring needed to hear. He proudly told Hitler that the Luftwaffe could keep the Sixth Army in supply. Göring's reputation with Hitler had suffered greatly from his failures first, to bomb the British into submission, and second, to adequately defend the Fatherland from the RAF's bombing campaign. Now he had found a way to work himself back into the *Führer's* favor.

As for the soldiers trapped in Stalingrad—the Sixth Army, part of the Fourth Panzer Army, and remnants of the Romanian Third Army, more than a quarter of a million soldiers in all—their fate was now sealed.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank David, Sebastian, and Alexie for their kind donations, and thank you to Ryan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Alexie, Sebastian, David, and Ryan help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, 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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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we consider the German response to Operation Uranus, an attempt to break the encirclement of the Sixth Army. *Der Manstein Kommt*, in two weeks time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. It was not an easy thing for the Soviet Union to move a million soldiers into positions near Stalingrad in secret so that Operation Uranus would come as a surprise. But they managed it, even though the offensive had to be delayed two weeks from its intended start date due to supply issues.

Red Army military doctrine had always emphasized misdirection and deception, known in Russian as *маскировка*, literally "masking" or "disguise." In this case, the Red Army relied on techniques already in its toolkit, such as disguising the buildup of soldiers by evacuating civilians from the region and billeting the soldiers in civilian homes, to make it appear that nothing had changed. Vehicles were covered with tarps and camouflage. Most significant was that the Red Army created at least the appearance of a whole other offensive, Operation Mars, farther north along the line, near Moscow.

Most German commanders saw that buildup, Operation Mars, as the greater danger. They did have an inkling that the Red Army was reinforcing the lines near Stalingrad, but too many of them were lured into Adolf Hitler's wishful thinking that the Red Army lacked the resources to attempt any serious counteroffensive.

[music: Closing War Theme]