The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 381
"Der Manstein Kommt!"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The will for victory which gives a commander the strength to see a grave crisis through is something very different from Hitler's will, which in the last analysis stemmed from a belief in his own "mission." Such a belief makes a man impervious to reason and leads him to think that his own will can operate even beyond the limits of hard reality—whether these consist in the presence of far superior enemy forces, in the conditions of space and time, or merely in the fact that the enemy also happens to have a will of his own.

Erich von Manstein.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 381. *Der Manstein Kommt!*

Last time we looked at the Battle of Stalingrad; it was late November 1942. The Red Army had just completed the encirclement of the city. That same day, Sixth Army commander Friedrich Paulus flew to the town of Nizhne-Chirskaya, which was outside the pocket in which his army was trapped, to discuss the situation with other senior commanders, and because the headquarters established there had secure telephone links to Army Group B headquarters and to the Wolf's Lair.

At the Wolf's Lair, Hitler flew into yet another of his rages when he heard that Paulus had left Stalingrad. He contacted Paulus, accused him of cowardice and of abandoning his soldiers, and ordered him back to Stalingrad immediately.

Paulus disregarded that order for the time being and remained in Nizhne-Chirskaya another day for talks, though he fumed to his fellow commanders over Hitler's insulting accusations. Paulus and his fellow commanders also thought Hitler's order that the Sixth Army hold on at Stalingrad rather than attempt to break out of the encirclement was unwise, to say the least, but they were unwilling to criticize Hitler's order too harshly without knowing the larger strategic situation.

Remember that just this past spring, Hitler had ordered Paulus to stay in place when Paulus wanted to retreat and that had led to a great German victory, so experience had taught him to trust the *Führer's* judgment.

However, when they consulted with Army Group B, the chief of staff there told them bluntly that Army Group B lacked the means to break through the encirclement and that Paulus was on his own. A message from Hitler told them that information on resupply by air was forthcoming, but the commanders at this meeting all agreed it would be impossible to supply a force as large as the Sixth Army entirely by air. The Luftwaffe simply didn't have that many planes. They agreed that a breakout and retreat west to rejoin the rest of Army Group B was the only reasonable course of action and assured each other that surely the *Führer* would soon reach the same conclusion. Even that choice would be a difficult one. Sixth Army was low on fuel and Hitler had already ordered their horses withdrawn, which meant they would have to leave behind most of their artillery, tanks, and other vehicles. Worse still, since the retreat would have to be on foot, any wounded soldier who couldn't march would have to be left behind to be taken prisoner. That would amount to about 10,000 soldiers altogether.

It doesn't seem to have occurred to them that time was of the essence. The Red Army forces behind them had not yet dug in and set up their defenses, and the Russian winter was looming. Every day of delay would make the proposed breakout that much more difficult. Nonetheless, Paulus refused to consider ordering a breakout against Hitler's instructions.

That evening, Paulus at last flew back to Stalingrad. Aboard the plane with him were several cases of a nice red table wine and a few more of champagne, because if you're going to be surrounded by the Red Army, you might as well do it in style, am I right?

Upon their return, and despite Hitler's orders, Paulus consulted with his corps commanders. Everyone agreed that a breakout attempt was the only answer. At 10:15 that evening, Paulus received a radio message from Hitler, reaffirming the order to stay put and promising that relief was on the way. Paulus and his staff began drawing up a plan for a breakout and retreat anyway, so it would be ready to put into motion as soon as Hitler gave the word.

As I told you last time, Hermann Göring consulted with the Luftwaffe command on the possibility of supplying the Sixth Army by air. He told them the Army would require around 500 tons of supplies per day, although the actual figure was more like 700 tons. They told him they could manage 350 tons per day, tops. This was about half of what the Army would need, and even at that, it was a very optimistic estimate. That was 350 tons per day under ideal conditions. If the weather turned bad—and remember we're talking about a Russian winter here—that would interfere with the supply operation. The transport planes would also be vulnerable to the Soviet Air Force or to Red Army anti-aircraft guns. How vulnerable? It was impossible to say. That depended on the Russians.

Despite this dodgy math, Göring confidently assured Hitler that the Luftwaffe was up to the job. With that assurance, any possibility that Hitler would come to see reason had evaporated. The fate of the Sixth Army was now sealed. On November 24, three days after the encirclement was completed, and two days after Paulus' return, Hitler issued him detailed orders mapping out the defensive lines the Sixth Army should take up to hold what Hitler was now calling "Fortress Stalingrad." When these instructions arrived in Stalingrad, Paulus and his staff realized that the order to break out would never come.

Shortly before that order was received, one of Paulus' corps commanders, General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, took matters into his own hands. Seydlitz had already sent Paulus a lengthy memorandum laying out the argument that staying put was, in his words, "completely unthinkable." He concluded it was the duty of Sixth Army's commanders to disregard Hitler's order and begin to withdraw on their own authority. Seydlitz practiced what he preached that evening by ordering the divisions under his own command to destroy their supply stores, demolish their defensive positions, and begin a withdrawal from the northern part of Stalingrad. His soldiers set to work, building bonfires and casting into them their stocks of supplies: overcoats, boots, foodstuffs. Seydlitz personally cast equipment into the flames. Needless to say, the supplies Seydlitz ordered destroyed would be very much missed in the weeks to come. The nighttime fires and explosions also attracted the attention of the Red Army. One of the withdrawing German divisions was caught out in the open and attacked, suffering many casualties.

The Soviet 62nd Army was trapped inside the pocket along with the Germans. The months of bitter fighting in the city had gradually squeezed them down into small pockets along the river. This being Russia, by late November the surface of the Volga River was dotted with ice floes, making it increasingly difficult to reinforce or resupply Soviet forces in the city.

Here's a question that has no doubt entered your mind as you've listened to me tell the story of Operation Uranus: How? How did the Red Army pull this off? How did they surprise the Germans, then surround and isolate a quarter million Axis soldiers in the midst of the most important battle on the Eastern Front?

Last week, I talked a little about *maskirovka*, Soviet tactics used to conceal and misdirect the enemy, but you also have to consider the mistakes the Germans made.

First and foremost was the failure of Adolf Hitler and the German military command to recognize the danger. If you look at a map of the Eastern Front just before the Soviet offensive began, you can see that the Sixth Army at Stalingrad sits at the tip of a German salient stretched from the Don to the Volga. It was an obvious target for a Soviet counteroffensive.

Beyond failing to recognize that specific danger, the German side persisted in their belief that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse. The whole rotten structure had not come crashing down after the Germans kicked the door in 1941, but Hitler maintained the USSR was at the end

of its rope and would disintegrate by the end of 1942. Hitler believed this for ideological reasons, yet he had also made himself the commander of the entire German Army. There are two kinds of military leaders in the world: there are those reject empirical evidence and take their decisions purely on ideological grounds, and then there are…winners.

The Wehrmacht's top commanders might not have based all their thinking on Nazi ideology, but they have been living and working under Hitler and the Nazis for going on ten years by this time, and a German general didn't have to be a Nazi to be dismissive of Russians and their military, as many of them were. They didn't believe the Red Army was capable of an offensive on this scale, either.

But Germans being caught off guard is only one part of the story. You also have to credit the planning, preparation, and effort that went into Operation Uranus. First off all, Russia is a huge country with a large population and ample resources. This is how the Red Army was able to absorb appalling losses in the opening months of the war and yet come back bigger and stronger than ever.

The USSR was fielding new army divisions at an astonishing rate, far in excess of what its enemies believed it was capable of. You can ding Hitler and German military intelligence for failing to anticipate this, but you also have to credit the Soviet government and military for accomplishing what no one thought them capable of.

How could they do it? Here are five reasons: First, Russia has a big population. Long-time listeners will recall that back in the Belle Époque days of the podcast, I was telling you at the beginning of the century how the other European powers feared Russia's sheer manpower. They worried that Russia could field armies large enough to overwhelm any of them, maybe all of them.

Remember how back in those days everything was about mobilization? A key reason why the First World War happened was the consensus view that a fully mobilized Russian Army could steamroll over any opponent, but that it would take Russia six weeks or more to mobilize. Therefore, the key to avoid getting steamrolled was to mobilize your own military faster and defeat the Russian Army before it becomes too big to beat. When Russia began a general mobilization of its army during the July Crisis, Kaiser Wilhelm and his military commanders felt they had no choice but to mobilize the German military. To delay was to run the risk of leaving Germany unprotected against a massive Russian invasion.

Long-time listeners will also recall that yes, Russia mobilized a huge army in 1914, but that army was critically short on equipment and ammunition. Russia didn't even have enough rifles to arm all its soldiers; unarmed soldiers were told to wait in the rear until a comrade was wounded, then pick up their weapon. This brings me to the second reason: Whatever you may think of the Bolsheviks, of Lenin, or of Stalin, you have to acknowledge they recognized Russian industry was backward and spent two decades working to expand and modernize it. They also recognized

that in the last war, too much of Russian industry was in the western part of the country, where it could be seized by the Germans. It was therefore Communist policy to build new industries farther east, as far east as the Ural Mountains or even beyond, to keep them out of reach of any future invader.

One good example of this is the Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works, which began operation in 1932. I told you the story of its establishment in episode 235. It was modeled after Gary, Indiana in the United States, that is, a one-industry city designed and built around a huge steel works. Magnitogorsk contributed huge quantities of steel to the Soviet war effort, and the Wehrmacht never got within a thousand kilometers of it. Not a single German bomb ever fell on it.

What about the industry that was in the west; that the Germans could and did seize control over? If you remember when I told you about Operation Barbarossa, the initial German invasion, I also told you how the Soviet government ordered the machinery and workers from more than a thousand such factories packed up and moved east. This is the third reason. Production from these factories declined throughout the second half of 1941, as they moved. At the end of 1941, overall Soviet industrial production was down to half the pre-war level, but over the course of 1942, most of those factories began production at their new locations.

The gross domestic product of the USSR never reached the level of Germany's GDP throughout the war, but the USSR was able to put a far larger share of its economic output into military production. Here's a sample statistic: the year 1942, with a large part of the nation under enemy occupation, was the low point for Soviet GDP. That year it was only half of Germany's. Yet Germany produced 5,500 tanks that year, while the USSR produced 22,000.

Fourth, there was Lend-Lease from the UK and especially from the US, which was pouring into the Soviet Union by 1942, when it was desperately needed. The Western Allies sent tanks and planes, yes, but perhaps more important were shipments of more mundane goods. It's more fun to think about Sherman tanks and Hurricane fighters, but the Allies' shipments of jeeps and trucks and telephone equipment and Spam were a great help to the USSR. Telephone lines allow for commanders to receive reports and issue orders much more quickly, and contrasted with radio, telephone lines are secure; the enemy can't listen in.

Trucks, as I've already noted, allow infantry to move faster and make it easier to keep them in supply. At the beginning of the war between the Soviet Union and Germany, 80% of German infantry and virtually 100% of Soviet infantry got from here to there by marching. Trucks aren't very comfortable, and soldiers riding in trucks are extremely vulnerable to an enemy attack, if they're unfortunate enough to encounter one, but it sure beats walking.

I can't help but be reminded of Hermann Göring's dismissal of Americans as capable only of making refrigerators and razor blades. I rather wish someone had asked the Reichsmarschall if he thought the Americans were good at making trucks, and whether he thought trucks might have some military applications.

If you think about all this in connection with Operation Uranus, you can begin to understand how the USSR was able to deliver large numbers of soldiers, planes, and tanks to the Stalingrad front so quickly, and then move them behind German lines so quickly, encircling the Sixth Army in a matter of days with a force large enough to resist German attempts to break through it. More about that in a few minutes.

This leaves us with our fifth and final reason. You already know the Red Army could and did raise a lot of new units in 1942. Part of the training for these new units inserted them on the front lines for a time, so they could get a taste of live combat, then withdrawing them and reassigning them elsewhere. Often it was in the Moscow region of the front that these training assignments took place. It was a good way to train units, but it also had the fringe benefit of confusing German intelligence. The Germans picked up on the large number of new formations appearing along the Moscow front and interpreted this as evidence of an impending offensive there.

I have to tread carefully here, because this was more than just *maskirovka*. On November 25, just days after Operation Uranus began down at Stalingrad, the Red Army initiated Operation Mars, an offensive aimed at encircling and destroying the German Ninth Army near Moscow.

A key historical question is whether Operation Mars was a diversion, or a full offensive, equal to and parallel with Operation Uranus, and it is a question historians still debate in our time. British military historian Sir Anthony Beevor, whose work I relied on to help me understand the Spanish Civil War and the present war, is firmly of the opinion that Operation Mars was a diversion. He argues that Stavka did not spend nearly as much time and effort planning Mars and that Mars didn't receive nearly as much ammunition and support as Uranus. There is evidence that the NKVD deliberately leaked information concerning Operation Mars to German military intelligence as part of the deception.

Other historians, though, will tell you that more soldiers participated in Mars than in Uranus and that Operation Mars cost the Red Army around 70,000 soldiers killed and twice that many wounded. If it was meant to be a separate and coequal offensive, it failed decisively. If it was a mere deception, it was a very costly one. Their argument goes that Soviet military history recast Operation Mars as a deception only after the fact to cover up its failure as an offensive.

Either way, there is no doubt that Operation Mars tied down German units in Army Group Center and deterred the Germans from any thought of transferring units from there to Stalingrad to help break the siege of the Sixth Army.

[music: Holst, "Mars," from *The Planets*.]

Adolf Hitler's response to the encirclement of Stalingrad was very much on brand. He summoned the Romanian dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu to the Wolf's Lair to blame him for the encirclement, berating him over the failure of those two Romanian armies to hold the front line. The two dictators got into a shouting match, and all this was hardly fair to Antonescu. He

was the most loyal of Hitler's Axis partners, the one most supportive of Nazi ideology and the first to join with the Germans in the war against the Soviet Union.

The attitude of most German soldiers mirrored Hitler's. They were angry that the Romanians had "allowed" the encirclement to happen, and German officers and soldiers both criticized and argued with their Romanian counterparts whenever they met. The Romanians could only point out that they had been complaining for months to the German command that they lacked guns powerful enough to stop a Soviet tank and would be unable to hold back a Soviet armored offensive, yet their pleas for better equipment had gone unheeded.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Air Force was dropping a hundred thousand propaganda leaflets over Romanian positions, calling on the Romanians to quit the war. Soon Hitler came to his senses and issued a decree to the Army, ordering a halt to all criticism of the Romanians.

Hitler also ordered that all news of the encirclement be suppressed. The German public heard only that there had been a Soviet offensive somewhere near Stalingrad; reports emphasized German counterattacks and Soviet casualties, giving the impression that the offensive had been a costly failure for the Soviets. The Nazis believed, or hoped, they could keep news of the encirclement under wraps until after Stalingrad was relieved.

The responsibility for relieving Stalingrad and breaking the Soviet siege fell to the now-Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. We've crossed paths with him before. It was Manstein, as a staff officer, who proposed making a surprise assault through the Ardennes the central strategy for the war against France. Hitler had already been thinking along the same lines. They tried it. It worked brilliantly, and Manstein became one of Hitler's favorites.

Manstein's star rose farther after he became commander of the German Eleventh Army and captured Sevastopol in July 1942. Hitler promoted him to field marshal for this and sent him and the Eleventh Army north to do the same to Leningrad. That didn't work out so well, and I promise you we'll get to the siege of Leningrad in a bit, but in late November, when Stalingrad was surrounded, Hitler brought Manstein back to the south and put in command of the newly created Army Group Don, which made him Paulus' superior, and now the commander who had made his name with a successful siege was handed the job of breaking one.

Manstein was not especially fond of the Nazis. He detested both Göring and Himmler, and had taught his pet dachshund Knirps to raise a paw in salute when Manstein said, *"Heil Hitler!"* Upon receiving his orders, Manstein rode from the Leningrad front down to Stalingrad in a sumptuous railroad car that before the war had belonged to the Queen of Yugoslavia. Along the way, he stopped for a meeting with the commander of Army Group Center, Field Marshal Hans Günther von Kluge, for a briefing on the situation in Stalingrad.

Kluge told him bluntly that the Sixth Army could not hold out. He also told Manstein bluntly that the *Führer,* with his tendency to issue orders himself to individual units down to the battalion

level was part of the problem. He warned Manstein that Hitler credited the German Army's survival of the past winter in Russia "not to the morale of our own soldiers and all our hard work, but exclusively to his own skill."

Welcome to the German Army high command, field marshal. You are now an overpaid NCO.

The day Manstein's train arrived at Army Group B headquarters, November 24, was the same day Hitler issued his order for the Sixth Army to take up defensive positions and wait for air supply. This day also happened to be Manstein's 55th birthday, and he assumed his new command with a surprising degree of optimism. He was one of the few who believed there was a way out of this predicament for the German Army.

Other senior commanders, the less optimistic ones, quietly hoped Paulus would find it within himself to disregard his orders and break out of the encirclement. It's what Rommel would have done, but remember that Paulus is no Rommel. Paulus is the guy you send when you want to rein Rommel in, as OKH had actually done last year, see episode 357.

A survey of letters sent home from the Sixth Army to loved ones back in Germany in the first few weeks of the encirclement reveals a generally optimistic attitude among the soldiers, who repeated to their families their commanders' assurances that the siege would soon be broken. Some of this may have been motivated by a desire not to worry their families, but many German soldiers in the early days of the siege clung fast to their faith in Adolf Hitler. The *Führer* said he would get them out, and the *Führer's* word is all you need.

The Soviet side at first didn't realize how many enemy soldiers they had trapped. Red Army intelligence estimated the number at 80,000, less than a third of the true number. Surprisingly, Red Army soldiers continued to defect to the Sixth Army even after it was surrounded, simply because they dismissed their officers' claims as propaganda. They were in for a nasty surprise when they reached German-held territory, only for the Germans to confirm what their officers had already told them: that Stalingrad was surrounded.

As for the airlift, when it began it could not deliver even the minimal 350 tons per day senior Luftwaffe commanders had promised Göring. It barely managed 350 tons in the first *week* of operation, and most of the tonnage they flew into the pocket was aircraft fuel, needed to supply the fighters that provided protection for the transport planes.

Soldiers' rations were soon cut to one half. Then to one quarter. The Germans began slaughtering the few horses that remained. They could no longer be fed; at least they could be used for food.

Defense of the pocket boiled down to First World War-style trench warfare, with all the misery that entailed. Red Army soldiers had it pretty bad as well, but they were encouraged by the great victory they had just won. The Red Army played music over loudspeakers for the German

soldiers, interspersed with recorded propaganda appeals, warning them that escape from Stalingrad was impossible, surrender their only alternative. They liked to play tango music, which the Soviets believed sounded appropriately foreboding.

[Lehrer, “The Masochism Tango”]

Russian soldiers began the practice of sneaking into no-man’s-land at night and erecting an effigy of Adolf Hitler, then taunting the Germans by inviting them to shoot at it.

German soldiers resisted these attempts to lower their morale at first, but as the fighting went on, winter set in, and rations were cut, the propaganda became increasingly effective.

As the battle raged on in the city, Stalin and his senior commanders were already planning their next offensive, codenamed Operation Saturn. As originally conceived, Saturn was even bolder and more ambitious stroke than Uranus. Once again, the Red Army would take advantage of a weaker allied army on the German flank—this time, the Italian Eighth Army, which held part of the line north and west of Stalingrad, just past the point where Operation Uranus had begun. Operation Saturn would see an offensive begin there, punch through the Italian line, then drive south and west to Rostov-on-the-Don. The fall of Rostov would at one stroke cut off all German forces to the east, meaning not only Manstein’s Army Group Don, but Army Group A, which was still fighting in the Caucasus.

Zhukov, however, correctly foresaw that Manstein would attempt to relieve Stalingrad, and that the attack would originate south and west of the city. Stalin and Stavka conferred and decided that now was not the time for Operation Saturn. The Red Army would instead concentrate on reducing and eliminating German forces in Stalingrad. Operation Saturn would be downgraded to an offensive that would still punch through the Italian lines, but this would be done only after the Germans began their relief effort. The offensive would then turn east instead of west, attacking the German relief force on its left flank, forcing the Germans turn and face their attackers, and abandon Stalingrad. This more limited operation became known as Little Saturn.

Manstein was indeed preparing an offensive to break open the encirclement and relieve the Sixth Army, in consultation with Hitler. It was dubbed Operation Winter Storm. Manstein, however, judged that the Sixth Army could not hold Stalingrad over the winter, even if Winter Storm was a success. He therefore developed a second, secret plan to evacuate the Sixth Army once the Soviet encirclement was breached, which he named Operation Thunderclap.

Operation Winter Storm began on December 12, and was led by panzer units from the Fourth Panzer Army, which had just received delivery of the first of the new generation of German tank: the Tiger, with its powerful 88mm gun. Hitler and senior commanders were anxious to see how it fared against Soviet T-34s.

The German artillery bombardment that began Operation Winter Storm landed less than a hundred kilometers from the southern end of the Stalingrad pocket; close enough that soldiers inside could hear it. Excited soldiers passed the news around the front lines: *Der Manstein kommt!* Manstein is coming. The *Führer* was as good as his word.

Back at the Wolf's Lair, however, Hitler continued to insist that Sixth Army must stay put in Stalingrad. It must not try to link up with the Fourth Panzer Army. It must not abandon the city, or else, in Hitler's words, "the whole meaning of the campaign" would be abandoned with it.

Winter Storm took the Red Army by surprise; they had not expected the German offensive to begin so soon. The first couple of days were promising. The new Tiger tanks advanced to a position less than 70 kilometers from the Sixth Army, assisted by the Luftwaffe, which threw everything it had into the battle.

Manstein ordered one of his intelligence officers flown into Stalingrad to confer with General Paulus and brief him on Operation Thunderclap, but Manstein was unwilling to contradict the *Führer* explicitly by giving Paulus a direct order to withdraw from the city. The most he would do was have his intelligence officer suggest the possibility and hope Paulus would take the hint. But Paulus was too obedient a soldier to act without orders.

You might ask why Manstein didn't meet with Paulus personally. Security concerns were certainly an issue; flying into or out of the Stalingrad pocket was dangerous. The Russians sometimes shot down German transports. Still, if Manstein had spoken with Paulus face to face, he might have been able to convey off the record that he wanted Paulus to order a breakout, and that he and the army group would support such an effort. On the other hand, if Paulus began disobeying his orders immediately after a meeting with Manstein, Hitler might well have put two and two together, whether Manstein was on the record or not. Maybe that was what held him back.

The Red Army put Little Saturn into motion on December 16, the fourth day of the German offensive. Three Soviet armies attacked the Italian portion of the line. The weather was cold and misty and the Italians had peppered their defenses with landmines, so the attack did not get off on the right foot. Still, after two days of heavy fighting, the Soviets broke through the Italian line. There had been a German panzer division stationed behind the Italians as a mobile reserve, but it was no longer there. It had been sent to join Operation Winter Storm.

Five days after the Soviet breakthrough, December 23, an order came through to the German panzer corps pushing toward Stalingrad. The order instructed them to pull back immediately. No explanation was given. The order came as a shock to everyone. They had believed they would break through and relieve Stalingrad, perhaps by Christmas. The sudden withdrawal instruction amounted to an order to abandon their comrades in Stalingrad to their fate. Why would such an order be given? Only one explanation made sense. As one commander on the scene put it, "Something ugly must have happened."

The Red Army was ravaging the German rear, cutting rail lines and forcing retreating German soldiers to destroy stockpiles of supplies. A captured Soviet officer told the Germans about the plan to advance to Rostov and cut off the two army groups. The situation grew graver still when on that very December 23, a Soviet tank corps reached the town of Tatsinskaya, the location of the Luftwaffe airfield that was the main departure point for those supply flights into Stalingrad.

Here was the something ugly, roughly 80 kilometers west of the advancing German panzer corps that received the puzzling order. Tatsinskaya airfield was controlled by the Luftwaffe, whose officers on the scene were aware of the Soviet breakthrough, but had also received orders from *Reichsmarschall* Göring himself they were not to abandon the airfield until it came under Red Army artillery fire. It had apparently not occurred to Göring that Soviet tanks might reach the airfield before Soviet artillery found it.

The airfield's Luftwaffe defenders did what they could. They had no heavy weapons apart from a battery of 88mm anti-aircraft guns, so they deployed them to defend the road to the airfield while ordering every one of the 196 Junkers-52 transports stationed at the airfield to take off immediately. The advancing Soviet T-34s began firing on the airfield. Planes exploded. Other planes were forced to taxi around and through the burning wrecks to reach the runway. A total of 124 transports escaped; 72 were destroyed by Red Army tanks. In many cases the tank drivers simply rammed the planes. After capturing the airfield, Red Army soldiers discovered more Ju-52s, still sitting in pieces on railway cars, waiting to be assembled and put into service.

In a few hours, the main base for aerial resupply of Stalingrad had fallen to the Red Army, and the Luftwaffe had lost at least 10% of its total transport capacity, perhaps much more; German and Soviet reports on the battle disagree wildly on the numbers.

Approaching German panzers, diverted from the advance on Stalingrad, quickly surrounded and isolated the Red Army tank corps holding the airfield. The Soviet force held out against German attacks for five days before withdrawing, leaving most of their tanks and heavy equipment behind.

Soviet losses were heavy, though no one has exact figures. Even so, Little Saturn has to be regarded as a Soviet victory. The Luftwaffe never again operated from what was left of Tatsinskaya airfield. They now had fewer transport planes and had to send them from a more distant base, compounding the already difficult task of supplying the Sixth Army.

More important, the Soviet offensive forced an end to Operation Winter Storm, which was the Germans' last chance to relieve the siege of Stalingrad. The city's fall was now just a matter of time.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Rachel and Ollie for their kind donation—happy birthday, Ollie—and thank you to Eric for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Rachel and Ollie and Eric 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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This month, September 2024, marks the ninth anniversary of *The History of the Twentieth Century*, and what can I say? They say you should keep busy in your retirement, and so I'm following their advice. When I began this project in 2015, I scarcely could have imagined where it would lead me; I also expected to be finished by now, but that's okay, because I'm having fun. I want to extend a sincere thank you to everyone who listens to the podcast. It wouldn't be worth doing if it weren't for you. Thanks also for the kind comments, emails, and reviews you all keep sending me. I wish I had more time to devote to interacting with my listeners, but it's hard because I'm awfully busy. If you have sent me a message or email and I haven't responded, I apologize, but sometimes I can't keep up.

And as to the question everyone keeps asking, how long to do expect this thing to keep going, well, I have no intention of quitting, and I expect we're probably halfway through or more. Whether I am physically able keep this up for another nine years, that I cannot say. We'll have to find out together.

But there will definitely be an episode next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, in which we return to the Pacific to observe the denouement of the Battle for Guadalcanal. Turning Point, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Incredible as it may sound, tens of thousands of civilians chose to remain in Stalingrad during the battle. Well, I say "chose," but it was not really much of a choice.

Initially, as we've seen, Soviet authorities didn't want Stalingraders to leave the city, for morale and propaganda reasons, and because Stalingrad's major factories were important to the war effort, and the authorities wanted to keep the workers at their jobs.

Once the Germans began their all-out effort to take the city, the Soviet authorities relented and began an evacuation. Those given first priority included educated people with valuable skills, men of military age, and of course Party officials. Women, children, and older people had to wait their turn.

Permission to evacuate was a mixed blessing. The evacuations were far from orderly and the ferry crossing was regularly bombed by the Luftwaffe and shelled by German artillery. The docks were crammed full of desperate people gathered among piles of rubble and discarded belongings. Dead bodies littered the riverbank; others drifted past, carried along in the currents of the Volga. Crying children were everywhere, many recently orphaned.

Even evacuees who escaped the dangers and made it safely across the river initially had no place to go, no shelter to take, nothing to eat. Soldiers approaching the ferry for transport into Stalingrad sometimes found themselves swarmed by desperate evacuees begging them for food.

Over time, Soviet authorities began to address some of these problems and later evacuees got better care, but many of those remaining in Stalingrad heard the stories and decided that staying put was safer than attempting to leave. Families with small children, or sick or elderly relatives, found unbearable the thought of subjecting their loved ones to these dangers, especially with winter setting in, and persuaded themselves that staying in the city would be safer, and that tales of German atrocities against Soviet civilians were probably just propaganda.

The official Soviet line was that everyone in Stalingrad was offered evacuation; those who stayed did so out of a patriotic desire to defend their home town and their homeland. In some cases, this was true. Tens of thousands of civilians in Stalingrad assisted the Red Army in various ways.

Most civilians who stayed moved into basements and cellars, often sharing spaces with soldiers from one or the other of the battling armies. Some did menial work for soldiers in exchange for food, things like cooking, cleaning, or tending the wounded.

Food and especially water were tough to find. Most families who had children sent them out to forage. Children were faster and more nimble than adults, and soldiers on both sides were more likely to hesitate before shooting a child. After all, most of the soldiers had children of their own back home, or at least nieces, nephews, or younger siblings who were dear to them.

Soldiers on both sides commented on the large numbers of children roaming the streets of the devastated city, picking around through the rubble. Families with young women shaved their heads to make them look sickly and less appealing to the soldiers.

As the battle dragged on, and conditions for the soldiers deteriorated, they began to compete with civilians for food and clothing. German soldiers stole food, clothing, or blankets, even from women and children. Occasionally Soviet soldiers did, too.

Eventually, both armies decided that the presence of these civilians was straining their military operations and began forcing civilians out of the city. The Germans did what they always did with Soviet civilians: marched them out of the city with no provisions for food or shelter. The strong were used for slave labor; the weak died. The lucky escaped and made their way back to

the city. The Red Army was kinder, but soldiers found they often had to force civilians down to the ferry at gunpoint to get them to leave, and even then, many of these people also escaped and made their way back to the city.

Despite everything, when the Red Army surrounded the Sixth Army, there were still some 20,000 civilians living—and hiding—in Stalingrad.

[music: Closing War Theme]