

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 384

### “Do You Want Total War?”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Germany is one army poorer and one heroic saga richer.”

Wehrmacht Captain Theodor Habicht.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 384. Do You Want Total War?

When we last looked at the Eastern front, it was almost Christmas, and Manstein’s offensive to relieve the encircled Sixth Army had been foiled by yet another Soviet offensive, Operation Little Saturn.

Inside Stalingrad, morale remained fairly high in spite of the hardships. Most of the Sixth Army, especially the younger soldiers who had grown up under National Socialism, had faith in the *Führer*, the Party, and the German Army. Rescue was bound to arrive, eventually. When the Soviet NKVD interrogated German prisoners, they were astonished by their confidence. Why could they not understand their situation was hopeless?

It truly was. Supply to the city by air delivered only a small fraction of what the Army needed. Still, they held out in the face of hunger, cold, lice, and filth.

Back at the Wolf’s Lair, Adolf Hitler had wanted to take an extended Christmas vacation at the Berghof, but Kurt Zeitzler, his new Army chief of staff, persuaded him to stay at his command post, given the crisis at Stalingrad.

Neither the military nor the German government made any public statement regarding the situation. The last time Stalingrad had been mentioned publicly was in Hitler’s speech to the Old Fighters in Munich on November 8, when he declared that the capture of Stalingrad was only a matter of time. There had been no public acknowledgement that Stalingrad was surrounded, nor any mention of a Red Army offensive.

But the soldiers in the pocket at Stalingrad were able to send letters home on returning Luftwaffe supply flights, and as Christmas approached, the messages they sent to their families became increasingly grim. As news of the siege of Stalingrad spread by word of mouth, even Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels expressed his unhappiness with the veil of secrecy. A great battle was being waged in the East, he argued, and it should be used to stir patriotic feelings. The public was bound to find out about it sooner or later, even if the government chose to remain silent.

On Christmas Eve 1942, German radio broadcast a remarkable holiday program, during which the host contacted one by one soldiers stationed at 15 different posts on the front lines across Europe; the far-flung locations included Crete, Sicily, the English Channel coast, the Caucasus, the French Riviera, and Lapland. And there was one from Stalingrad. Once contact had been established, the host led them all in a rendition of the German Christmas carol "*Stille Nacht*," "Silent Night."

It was a remarkable technological accomplishment for the time, if it was real. In our time, many, I should say most, historians accept that the Stalingrad portion of the broadcast was faked. Some think the entire broadcast was faked. You never can tell with Nazis, but there is no conclusive evidence of fakery, and so long as the Sixth Army had a working shortwave radio, which they did have, it was technically feasible.

When Christmas Day came to Stalingrad, soldiers celebrated as best they could, decorating trees and exchanging little handmade gifts, although this expression of Christian charity did not extend to Soviet POWs. All available food was being distributed to German soldiers. POWs got nothing, and in some cases were reduced to eating the corpses of their dead comrades.

But the situation for the Germans was rapidly deteriorating. Soldiers sometimes got no more than one ladleful of vegetable soup for their day's ration. The combination of cold, hunger, exhaustion, and lack of sanitation bred diseases. Frostbite was everywhere. The Sixth Army's field hospitals ran out of drugs and anesthetics and were reduced to sawing off their patients' gangrenous limbs without anesthesia. Only the walking wounded got spaces on the flights out of Stalingrad; stretchers took up too much room.

On January 1, 1943, Adolf Hitler gave his customary New Year address to the German nation. It did not include any mention of Stalingrad. It was instead a familiar recitation of Nazi grievances: against the Treaty of Versailles, against the Bolsheviks, and, as always, against the Jews. He framed the war as Germany fighting for its survival against forces bent on its destruction. He praised the heroism of the German military and the German people and vowed they would prevail.

In his message to the soldiers of the Wehrmacht, he emphasized that the future of Germany was at stake, and promised them new and better weapons with which to continue the fight. To the Sixth Army, he promised he would do everything in his power to relieve them, though he probably knew that even "everything in his power" would not be enough.

Paulus probably knew it too, although he replied to Hitler with an obsequious message, describing how Hitler's assurances had bolstered the spirits of his army.

January 7 was Christmas Day in the Eastern Church. The USSR may have been officially an atheist society, but even the Soviets waited until the day after Christmas, January 8, before sending a radio message to the Sixth Army, calling on it to surrender. Paulus did not respond. On January 9, Soviet planes dropped leaflets across German positions, calling for surrender and declaring that the Red Army did not wish for them to die, and neither did their loved ones at home.

Paulus responded with a message to his army, declaring there would be no negotiations, and any Soviet peace envoy who approached them should be fired upon.

On January 10, Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu met with Hitler at the Wolf's Lair. Hitler told him the situation at Stalingrad was about to improve. Meanwhile, 1,700 kilometers to the southeast, a massive artillery bombardment announced the beginning of the Red Army's final offensive, aimed at squeezing and destroying the Sixth Army.

Within days, the Germans had fallen back to a new, narrower perimeter, surrendering two-thirds of what they'd previously held, including airfields that had been receiving Luftwaffe transports. The meager flow of supplies was further reduced.

On January 14, an officer from the Sixth Army flew to the Wolf's Lair to report on conditions at Stalingrad. Again, Hitler assured him things would get better, and sent him back.

On January 16, the OKW, the Wehrmacht High Command, indirectly acknowledged for the first time publicly that Stalingrad was surrounded and under siege, in an announcement that mostly boasted of Soviet losses. The German public was by now sufficiently familiar with its government's public statements to understand that even such an oblique admission implied that the situation at Stalingrad was perilous.

The German propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, disapproved of this approach. In his view, if Stalingrad was going to fall, the public should be properly prepared to receive the news. On January 22, he visited Hitler at the Wolf's Lair to discuss what we today would call messaging. As they were conferring, another officer arrived from Stalingrad to report on conditions in the city. The soldiers had nothing to eat, no more ammunition, and no more firewood, he told Hitler. They sit in their bunkers, slowly starving and freezing to death. And if that wasn't bad enough, the Red Army had captured the last airfield controlled by the Germans, cutting off even the thin lifeline of supply by air. The Soviet command again offered the Sixth Army the opportunity to surrender. Once again, General Paulus asked Hitler's permission, and once again Hitler refused to give it.

Goebbels saw in this sad situation a glorious narrative of sacrifice. Stalingrad was to be the Nazi version of the Alcázar, where Spanish nationalists fought bitterly to hold off a Republican siege. I told you about that in episode 299. The propaganda minister proposed to cast the siege of Stalingrad as an epic tragedy of heroism in the face of overwhelming odds. Hitler agreed, and the Nazis began to speak of the siege in these terms, hoping to cushion the blow when the city finally fell.

In Stalingrad, the end of the airlift was understood by all to be the end of hope. A few senior officers went to one or another of the 600 doctors in the German pocket and asked for something they could use to commit suicide. The doctors were no help; they were too busy with their patients, so many wounded that now two wounded shared every bed. There were no bandages. There was no plaster of Paris to use to make casts for broken limbs. Surgeons had to scrape the lice off their patients before operating on them.

The advancing Red Army fought its way past junkyards full of wrecked German guns and vehicles. These sights filled them with glee, but that feeling was soon dispelled when they came across heaps of frozen corpses of Red Army soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans. Those few prisoners who had survived were emaciated skeletons begging their rescuers for food. Soldiers handed them bread or bits of sausage; sadly, in many cases the prisoners were so far gone that these misplaced gestures of generosity killed them.

German soldiers fared little better. By now they had eaten all their horses, and all that was left were loaves of bread, frozen in the winter cold. German soldiers called it *Eisbrot*.

On January 26, the Red Army split the Stalingrad pocket into two parts. The Luftwaffe could now do no more than drop supplies by parachute, a haphazard process. When the parcels landed, the white parachutes covered them, making them hard to spot against the snow-covered ground. When German soldiers fired flares to guide the Luftwaffe drops, Soviet soldiers would fire flares of the same color to confuse the planes. Often relief supplies were dropped into Russian hands. Red Army snipers would set their sights on grounded supply drops and pick off desperate German soldiers trying to recover them.

Four days later came January 30, 1943, the tenth anniversary of Hitler's accession to the post of chancellor. It was his custom, as you know, to deliver a speech every year on this date. This year, though, Stalingrad could fall at any time, and it would hardly be good propaganda if the news arrived in the middle of Hitler's address. So he and Goebbels devised an alternative strategy, one in which Hitler remained at the Wolf's Lair while Goebbels would appear before the crowd at the Sportpalast in his place, announce that the *Führer* was too busy with his wartime duties to attend, and read out a speech on Hitler's behalf.

The speech was the usual litany of National Socialist accomplishments of the past ten years. There was only one brief reference to the "heroic struggle of our soldiers on the Volga." *Reichsmarschall* Göring's own speech later in the evening declared the Battle of Stalingrad the

greatest battle in German history and compared it to the Spartans at Thermopylae. Soldiers in Stalingrad listening to the speech on the radio did not find the analogy comforting.

Also on the 30<sup>th</sup>, Hitler handed out a slew of promotions to officers of the Sixth Army over the radio, in an attempt to bolster morale. The following morning, he gave one to Paulus, a promotion to field marshal. This was the third time in a year Paulus received a promotion, but in this instance the circumstances were ominous. Hitler pointedly noted that no German field marshal had ever surrendered. The implication was clear; he expected Paulus to die fighting, or at least to avoid surrender by the other available method.

Paulus was under no illusions concerning Hitler's unspoken suggestion. After reading the message, he said, "One can't help feeling it's an invitation to suicide."

Paulus would decline the invitation. He was Catholic and morally opposed to suicide. And by this time, the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup>, Soviet soldiers were already outside his headquarters, in the basement of a department store. Paulus and his staff were trapped and they surrendered, although later Paulus would claim he had been taken by surprise, which was sort of true.

The new field marshal was taken prisoner, but still he declined to order his army to surrender. They held out two more days before the acting commander, General Karl Strecker, ordered the last German soldiers to surrender on the morning of February 2.

German soldiers greeted the Red Army with calls of "*Hitler kaputt!*" The kinder Soviet soldiers replied, "*Krieg kaputt, Kameraden.*" More often, they simply barked, "*Komm, Fritz!*"

When Soviet soldiers entered the cellars where the many German wounded were being cared for, they ordered everyone capable of walking to leave and join the other prisoners. Those not capable of walking were shot dead.

At the Wolf's Lair, Adolf Hitler received the news of the fall of Stalingrad in stunned silence. At next day's situation meeting, he repeatedly expressed anger and disbelief that Paulus would allow himself to be taken alive.

The Soviets announced they had taken about 90,000 prisoners, out of the roughly 250,000 Germans and Romanians who had been trapped in the city. The Red Army had not prepared to receive so many prisoners, and it was days before they began receiving food. Half of them died within two months. The Red Army lost roughly half a million soldiers killed and a comparable number wounded. Large numbers of Soviet civilians died in the Battle of Stalingrad, hundreds of thousands of them. Remarkably, almost ten thousand Stalingraders remained in the city to the bitter end and lived to tell the tale, including some 900 children, the vast majority of whom were now orphans.

Over the entire campaign, the Axis side lost more than a million soldiers; the Soviet side two and a half million. This death toll marks the Battle of Stalingrad as the bloodiest single battle in the

long and bloody history of human warfare. As gruesome as the figures are for such battles of the last war as Verdun or the Somme, they all pale in comparison to Stalingrad.

[music: Brahms, "Selig Sind die Toten," from *Ein Deutsches Requiem*.]

Across the Soviet Union, people celebrated the victory. The nation's confidence soared. The Red Army had not only survived everything the Wehrmacht had thrown at it, they had destroyed the German force meant to destroy them. Ultimate victory was no longer in doubt.

The Red Army reassigned units from the Battle of Stalingrad to other sectors up and down the front line, so that their experience and their spirit would inspire their comrades. Red Army commanders were showered with rewards. Gold braid and gold shoulder boards, accoutrements of the old Imperial Army that had been banned in the new Soviet Union, were reinstated.

Joseph Stalin was made a Marshal of the Soviet Union, because of course he was. In the first year of the war, Stalin's name and image were kept out of the newspapers when they reported Soviet reversals. Now Stalin was presented as the genius who had led the Red Army to a stunning victory, and those earlier reversals implied to be part of a cunning plan to stretch the Germans thin before crushing them.

Victory at Stalingrad inspired not only the Red Army and the Soviet people. It inspired everyone everywhere who opposed the Nazi menace. Even the staunchest anti-Communist politicians in other Allied nations praised Soviet determination. Never again would anyone among the Allied leadership express doubt about the survival of the USSR, and the Soviet Union won renewed admiration for how it had not only held off three-quarters of the German military, but had handed it a decisive defeat.

The growing resistance movements in occupied Europe were also inspired. In most countries, the resistance was divided between nationalists, who wanted to restore their homeland's pre-war independence, and Communist-aligned resistance movements, often born out of the persecution of Communists in occupied countries. While the former group were encouraged by Stalingrad, the latter took it as a demonstration that the only antidote to Nazism was Communism.

You might also say this was the moment that the Soviet Union became a superpower.

On February 3, the day after the surrender, German radio announced that Stalingrad had fallen to the enemy, but only after soldiers and officers of the Sixth Army stood shoulder to shoulder and resisted to their dying breaths. The radio then played funeral music and observed three minutes of silence. A three-day mourning period was declared, during which cinemas, concert halls, theatres, and other entertainment venues would be closed.

Joseph Goebbels was behind all this, a plan he devised after consultation with Hitler, but despite his best efforts, the German public received the news with shock. Most Germans had confidently assumed their army would triumph at Stalingrad, as it had in every other battle since the war

began. There were many questions asked about why the public had been kept in the dark about the situation for so long.

And there was grumbling about Adolf Hitler, more than had ever before been heard in ten years of Nazi rule. Hitler had been presented as the genius who had led Germany to so many victories; now he inevitably drew criticism as the architect of this stinging defeat. Germans well remembered how less than three months ago, Hitler had confidently announced that the capture of Stalingrad was only a matter of time.

A joke began circulating that went like this: “What is the difference between the sun and Hitler? The sun rises in the east; Hitler falls in the east.” Graffiti began to appear that read, “Enjoy the war—the peace will be much worse.”

Hours after the news was announced, an underground anti-Nazi group at the University of Munich called the White Rose distributed anti-Hitler leaflets and painted graffiti across the campus that read “Down with Hitler!” and “Freedom!” Two weeks later, the members of the White Rose were arrested by the Gestapo, tried, and beheaded, but word of their actions spread across Germany. The Nazi movement began in Munich, people whispered. Perhaps the anti-Nazi revolution would begin there as well.

The details of the defeat at Stalingrad were impossible to keep secret. Not even the Nazis could manage that feat. A hundred thousand German families had received letters from their loved ones in Stalingrad, describing the dire conditions. Germans who dared to listen to the BBC learned that, contrary to what their government was saying about the Sixth Army fighting to the last, the Soviet government had announced the capture of more than 90,000 prisoners.

Seeing an opportunity, the NKVD began distributing postcards to their new prisoners and inviting them to write home to let their families know they’d survived. The German government refused to allow the postcards to be delivered into Germany, so the NKVD printed the messages from some of the postcards onto leaflets and dropped them across German lines. Many German soldiers risked reading the leaflets. Some of them wrote letters to the addresses printed in the leaflets, advising them their loved ones were alive. A few soldiers mailed the actual leaflets.

Hitler summoned the regional leaders of the Nazi Party to the Wolf’s Lair to give them a pep talk. He acknowledged that the loss of Stalingrad had been a “serious setback,” but proclaimed his faith in victory. He reminded them of the challenges the Party had faced in the past, and pointed out that even Frederick the Great had had some bad days. He also issued a warning, one that he would repeat many times between now and the end of the war: If the German people proved to be too weak, they would deserve to be obliterated by a stronger people, without mercy and without pity.

What Hitler did not tell them was that the situation on the Eastern Front was even worse than it seemed. In late December, after weeks of argument, Kurt Zeitzler, the new Army chief of staff,

had finally persuaded Hitler to allow Army Group A to withdraw from its advanced position in the foothills of the Caucasus, back to Rostov. This withdrawal had been completed by the time Stalingrad fell, and it was a good thing too, or else they might have been lost as well.

The harsh reality was and is that though you can criticize Hitler for refusing to allow Paulus to break out of the pocket and withdraw from Stalingrad, and though you can criticize Paulus for not doing it anyway, orders be damned, the sacrifice of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad saved Army Group A. Had Paulus retreated, the large Soviet forces around Stalingrad could have disrupted the withdrawal of Army Group A and perhaps destroyed it.

The retreat of Army Group A meant an end to those grandiose plans to press south into the Middle East and rout the British. It meant an end to the scheme to capture Soviet oil fields and use them to supply the Wehrmacht, which now was critically short on fuel and would remain so for the rest of the war.

In the north, the Red Army had opened up a precarious supply line to Leningrad. In the south, Army Group Don was just a shadow of its former self. The Sixth Army and much of the Fourth Panzer Army had been annihilated, the Italian and Romanian formations that used to form part of the army group were gone. Axis forces that remained could not hold the line. Army Group B was in no better shape. Hitler reluctantly approved the withdrawal of these two army groups to a more defensible line, but insisted that Kursk and Kharkov be held whatever the cost.

On February 8, Kursk fell. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Rostov fell. Kharkov followed on February 16. German morale sank further.

A few days later, Adolf Hitler flew to Zaporozhye, where stood the headquarters of what was now Army Group South again. It took two days of arguments for Field Marshal von Manstein to convince Hitler to allow him to go to a more mobile defense strategy. Even as they argued, the Red Army advance continued. As Hitler prepared to board his plane on February 19, the rumble of Soviet artillery could be heard in the distance.

But the Russians had pushed too far. Manstein counterattacked with his panzers, and on March 14, retook Kharkov. That was more like it. The front line in the south was solidifying, but the new front line lay almost exactly where the old one had before Plan Blue had begun last June. Everything Germany had done in 1942 and the heavy price Germany had paid in 1942, was all for nothing.

Even worse, the plan for Germany to secure victory in the East before the British and Americans were ready to challenge Germany in the West had also failed. The dreaded two-front war was now the German reality.

Adolf Hitler showed increasing signs of strain. He spent hours in self-imposed isolation and gave up films and music, which used to be his favorite recreations. He declined to appear in public



and would not even allow German newsreels to show the public footage of their *Führer* that had already been filmed. Unlike other high-level Nazis, Hitler wasn't touring sites of British bombings to show solidarity with his people. So seldom did he appear in public that rumors began to swirl that he was suffering from some kind of serious illness.

Into this propaganda vacuum stepped Joseph Goebbels. After some effort, he persuaded Hitler to give a speech in Berlin on March 21, 1943, but he spoke for a mere ten minutes, and his delivery was nothing like the energetic, passionate speaking style everyone was accustomed to. His public appearance allayed fears of a serious illness, but even people listening on the radio could tell something was not right.

Goebbels, meanwhile, was holding discussions with such figures as minister of armaments Albert Speer, economics minister Walther Funk, and Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the Wehrmacht, to discuss what the next step should be. Keitel warned that the front line in the East was dangerously thin. The Army would need hundreds of thousands of new recruits in order to maintain the offensive in 1943.

Goebbels oversaw the development of a plan that would free up factory workers and government officials previously deemed essential to leave their jobs and serve in the military. He also recognized that the Nazi movement had to give up its aversion to women factory workers. He persuaded Hitler to sign a decree that called for the registration of all German men from ages 16 to 65, and all German women from 17 to 50, as a first step toward identifying those who could be assigned to work in the factories. Plans were prepared to shut down the manufacture or trade of goods deemed nonessential.

The Nazis were still attuned to the danger of another 1918, when the long-suffering German people rose up to end the war. They were determined that was not going to happen this time. Yes, there was rationing, but the Nazis had been working overtime to spare the public the burdens of the war as far as possible. Now, Goebbels felt, it was time for a new strategy.

Hitler approved Goebbels's ideas, but as was typical of his administrative style, he would not appoint Goebbels to lead the effort. Hitler was careful never to allow anyone under him to accumulate too much power. A three-member committee, which included Keitel and Martin Bormann, was supposed to oversee these plans to ramp up the German war economy, but Hitler preserved the autonomy of his cabinet ministers, who refused to give up their powers willingly to the new committee. Hitler thus achieved his goal of divided power, at the cost of a divided Germany.

As for Goebbels, he decided that if Hitler was going to limit him to his role as propaganda minister, then he would exercise the powers of that office to the maximum extent in support of this effort. On January 17, the propaganda ministry's weekly paper, *Das Reich*, published an editorial by Goebbels titled "Total War," in which he wrote, "The more radically and totally we wage war, the more quickly we will arrive at a victorious conclusion."

On January 30, when he spoke in Hitler's stead at the Sportpalast, he elaborated on this theme, and audience members called out "It's about time!" Goebbels took the lesson to heart: the German public was already out in front of him on this issue. It was time to catch up.

Goebbels put together another rally at the Sportpalast on February 18, at which he would press ahead with his call for total war. He crafted his speech carefully and spent days practicing it. He meant it to be the greatest speech of his career, and that's what it became.

The event began at 5:00 PM. The auditorium was packed with 14,000 people, hand-picked by the Propaganda Ministry to include the most loyal Party comrades along with film stars and other celebrities, there to excite public interest. The rest of the crowd were an assembly of people representing various occupations and regions of Germany, each of them a loyal Nazi. Above the stage hung swastikas and a huge banner declaring, "*Totaler Krieg—Kürtzester Krieg*," that is, "Total War—Shortest War." The speech was recorded for broadcast that evening over German radio.

He began by telling the crowd he was going to give them an honest and unvarnished account of the situation. The loss of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad was a tragedy, but it was also a wake-up call to the nation. If the Bolshevik menace went unchecked, the "storm from the steppe," as he called it, would sweep across Germany and all Europe. Germany's leaders and intellectuals would be massacred and the rest of the nation subjected to "Bolshevik-Jewish slavery."

In other words, he was accusing the Soviet Union of planning to do to Germany exactly what the Nazis planned to do in the East, and had in fact already done in the lands Germany had occupied, though he didn't mention that part. He vowed Germany would never yield to what he called "the Jewish threat," and pledged its complete and radical—

Well, there he began to say the German word for "extermination," but caught himself and changed it to a similar-sounding word that meant "disconnection" or "cutting off." Was that a slip of the tongue, from someone who had practiced this speech for days? Or was he being coy, almost acknowledging the Holocaust, but then pulling back, in a "nudge nudge, wink wink, say no more" kind of way?

The Bolsheviks were using their "devilish" methods of mobilizing their entire nation to support their war effort. It was time for Germany to do the same. You can't take a bath without getting wet, as he put it. He called for sacrifice, while promising the Nazi government would ensure that everyone, high and low alike, would sacrifice equally.

He told the audience they represented the German people and he called out a series of questions: "Do you believe with the *Führer* and us in the final total victory of the German people? Are you and the German people willing to work, if the *Führer* orders, 10, 12 and if necessary 14 hours a day and to give everything for victory? Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today...?"

The crowd responded with an emphatic “Yes!” to every question.

The event created a huge sensation, in Germany and around the world. Allied propaganda had been suggesting the German people were growing tired of the war, which was true, but Goebbels had at least orchestrated the appearance that all Germany was behind its *Führer* and was determined to fight on, whatever the cost.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Andy for his kind donation, and thank you to Adam for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Andy and Adam 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](http://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 take a little breather to look at popular music in Britain during the war and watch the BBC struggle to work out what its own wartime duties might be. The Thingamabob That’s Going to Win the War, in two weeks’ time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Goebbels’s “Total War” speech at the Sportpalast was a propaganda coup, but the “Total War” effort, such as it was, amounted to little.

Hitler remained preoccupied with the war and unwilling to devote time or energy to domestic matters. The committee of three Hitler appointed to oversee the effort never amounted to anything. Goebbels was miffed at having been excluded from that group, so he met with Hermann Göring in the hope of devising an alternative. Göring was nominally the chair of the Ministerial Council for the Defense of the Reich, a working group that had been created before the war, but had gone inactive, mostly because Göring couldn’t be bothered to call any meetings.

Goebbels made an effort to get the Council going again, but it was blocked by Hitler, who was now furious with Göring over the Luftwaffe’s inability either to supply the Sixth Army at Stalingrad as promised or properly defend the Reich from the British bombing raids.

In April, Hitler appointed Martin Bormann “Personal Secretary to the *Führer*,” a position that gave Bormann the ability to choose who got to meet with Hitler, which made him into one of the most powerful figures in the German government. He wasn’t interested in bothering the *Führer* with the details of war production.

Hitler retained his distaste for the idea of German women working in arms factories. The effort to shut down businesses deemed nonessential to the war effort foundered. Hermann Göring personally intervened to protect his favorite restaurant from getting shut down, and across Germany it was the same story. Whether a business could remain open had more to do with how well connected its owner was to the local Nazi Party than it did to its relevance to the war effort. The drive to free up workers who could be reassigned to combat only managed to come up with about 150,000, a small fraction of what was needed.

The biggest lie about fascism is that it’s efficient.

German arms production had to be bolstered somehow, so the Nazis turned to their favored solution: slavery. In 1941, Germany had about three million forced laborers, mostly French POWs and Polish civilians drafted into service. After the failure of Operation Barbarossa to defeat the Soviet Union, Hitler overcame his objection to using Soviet POWs as forced labor instead of simply killing them. The Army also began seizing able-bodied Soviet citizens living in the occupied territories and transporting them against their will to German factories, more than a million in 1942.

By 1943, Germany had more than six million forced laborers in its factories and on its farms. A quarter of the farm labor in Germany was done by foreigners; in some arms factories, more than three-quarters of the workers were foreign slaves. Forced labor made it possible for Germany to hold out against the Allies for months longer—perhaps a year or more longer—than would otherwise have been the case.

Predictably, the Nazis imposed a racial hierarchy on its foreign laborers. Some from Western Europe lived in Germany in relative freedom, while at the bottom of the hierarchy, Poles and Soviet citizens had to wear special badges and reside in concentration camps. Their low status and mistreatment were common knowledge; an accepted part of everyday life in Nazi Germany.

[music: Closing War Theme]