

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 395

### “A Definitive Mistake”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Germany began an offensive against the Soviet Union in 1941, but it failed. Germany began a second offensive against the Soviet Union in 1942, but again it failed. In 1943, Adolf Hitler ordered yet another summer offensive, though few in the German military expected it to succeed.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 395. A Definitive Mistake.

Today, I want to talk about Operation Citadel.

Operation Citadel was Adolf Hitler’s planned 1943 offensive against the Soviet Union. I’ve already said a little about the early planning for Operation Citadel in previous episodes, most recently in episode 384.

Operation Barbarossa was supposed to have defeated the Soviet Union before the end of 1941. Plan Blue was supposed to have defeated, or at least crippled, the Soviet Union before the end of 1942. Neither of these operations succeeded in defeating the Soviet Union; neither did either of these operations achieve their defined military objectives. The Soviet victory at Stalingrad had robbed Germany of that ineffable but vital military asset we call “momentum.” For the first time since the invasion began, the opposing sides on the Eastern Front were more or less balanced.

It is at this moment in the conflict that the prospects of a peace agreement between the Axis and the Soviet Union were strongest. Before Stalingrad, the only conceivable way this conflict could have been settled at the negotiating table was through a Soviet surrender. At best, it would have been a Soviet surrender in which the Germans conceded to Moscow a few small concessions: some fig leaves, as it were, some shreds of dignity, something like the armistice with France, that would have allowed a Vichy Russia, as it were, to carry on.

The British Foreign Office had been worrying about the possibility of an armistice virtually since the German invasion had begun, and the British repeatedly expressed this concern to the US government. There was no ideological problem with the USSR agreeing to an armistice with Germany under grossly unfavorable terms. They'd already done it once before, in 1918.

In 1942, the British government was inclined to grant Stalin's request that the Western Allies recognize the USSR's borders as of 1941, when Germany attacked, which would have meant conceding the independence of the Baltic States, and Soviet control over Eastern Poland, Bessarabia, and the territory taken from Finland after the Winter War. It was the US government that refused to go along. Apart from the moral reasons to oppose this arrangement, the Americans well remembered how concessions Woodrow Wilson made during the last war proved awkward and embarrassing to him at the Paris Peace Conference after it was over. Better to finish the war first, then negotiate.

From Stalin's point of view, the way the British and Americans kept making excuses to postpone the opening of a second front in Europe had to seem suspicious. In fairness to the Western Allies, these decisions to postpone were based on very real military considerations, and not out of political machination, but it's easy to understand why Stalin would have doubts. Perhaps the Western capitalists were hanging back, hoping that Nazi Germany and Communist Russia would destroy each other.

On the other hand, the viciousness of the German war on the Soviet Union from day one sent a strong signal that Hitler would not accept anything short of full capitulation, and indeed that even to broach the topic of a negotiated armistice would only encourage the Nazis to keep up the fight.

This diplomatic calculus began to change after Stalingrad. By spring of 1943, there was military parity, more or less, on the Eastern Front. It was even possible now to envision a Soviet victory, but such a victory would likely come only after further years of fighting, and at great cost to the USSR, and the refusal, or the inability, take your pick, of the Western Allies to open that second front would only drag out the war that much longer. A negotiated settlement that would end the war this year would be tempting, provided German demands were not excessive.

The Axis was in a comparable position. Publicly, Adolf Hitler was still confident the USSR could be beaten, although his actions during this time suggest he had private doubts. More about that in a few minutes. But with the second anniversary of Operation Barbarossa looming, Hitler could no longer claim that victory would come soon, or that the price would not be great. Even Goebbels, his propaganda minister, was out there calling for more effort, more sacrifice—total war. With the Axis position in North Africa collapsing, Mussolini saw as clearly as anyone that an Allied invasion of Italy would come next, and he very much wanted peace on the Eastern Front. The Japanese government, which was not at war with the Soviet Union, repeatedly offered to facilitate negotiations between its Axis allies and the USSR.

There is a dearth of primary sources that can tell us exactly what Moscow and Berlin were thinking in the spring of 1943, but there is evidence that armistice was in the minds of some in both capitals. One such piece of evidence is how quiet the front got after Stalingrad. That may have been only because both sides were exhausted and needed to rebuild. Or was something else going on?

Another piece of evidence is a speech Stalin gave on February 23, 1943, which was Red Army Day, a Soviet holiday first celebrated in 1919. He spoke on the war, naturally, but presented it solely as a conflict between the USSR and Germany, never once mentioning his allies. This caused some sleepless nights in the State Department and the Foreign Office. The US ambassador in Moscow was publicly complaining about the conspicuous failure of the Soviet government to publicly acknowledge the generosity of America's Lend-Lease aid, while the British ambassador, under instructions from London, bluntly inquired of both Molotov and Stalin what exactly was going on. The replies he got were, in his words, "not in very friendly terms."

Then there was the sudden chill in relations between Moscow and the Polish government in exile following the news of the mass graves discovered in Katyn Forest. While London and Washington supported the government in exile and were committed to a restoration of pre-war Poland, Moscow was demanding the Poles concede Eastern Poland, while also setting up their own Polish resistance organization, the Union of Polish Patriots, which could and did serve as an alternative pro-Soviet Polish government in exile.

Both Germany and the USSR had diplomatic delegations in neutral Stockholm, which were staffed by some of each country's most prominent and experienced diplomats, which is suggestive that some kind of negotiation may have been going on, or was at least contemplated, by April 1943. It was rumored that the German side was willing to consider peace in exchange for the creation of a Ukrainian state with a German puppet government, plus the restoration of pre-war trade agreements, while the Soviet side was holding out for a return to the status quo of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

But if this is so, the evidence also suggests that by May, Stalin was drawing away from thoughts of negotiation. If so, the German revelation of the Katyn Massacre in April probably had something to do with this. It wasn't only that the Germans had made the initial revelation; Goebbels had made it the centerpiece of his anti-Soviet propaganda, while the British and American governments grudgingly went along with the Soviet claim that the graves contained the bodies of victims of a Nazi atrocity, not a Soviet one.

We do know that on May 1, Stalin began to display a change of attitude. On that day, he issued a statement dismissing the idea of a separate peace and blaming any talk of such a thing on the Nazis who, in Stalin's words, "judge their adversaries by their own standards of treachery." He added that the war could only end after a German unconditional surrender, although he did not link this declaration to Roosevelt's call for unconditional surrender at Casablanca in January.

These comments by Stalin heralded an uptick in relations with the UK and the US. The Soviet press began praising the Western Allies' victory in North Africa, despite earlier complaints that the North Africa campaign was a minor sideshow. Much more important, on May 23, Moscow announced the dissolution of Comintern, the Communist International. The very existence of Comintern had long been a sticking point in Moscow's diplomatic relations, since Comintern had been created expressly for the purpose of overthrowing every other government in the world and replacing it with a Communist one. The move to shut it down was welcomed in the West.

Clearly, if Stalin was considering a separate peace, by May he had abandoned the idea. The Katyn revelations may have had something to do with it. Stalin may also have anticipated that a German 1943 summer offensive was looming, so now was not the time to rebuff his allies.

Which brings me back to the subject of Germany's planned 1943 offensive, Operation Citadel. As I indicated earlier, Hitler claimed to remain confident that Citadel would be a success, but his behavior suggests otherwise, especially his repeated postponements of the offensive. I told you in episode 384 that in May, Hitler postponed Operation Citadel until late June. In June, he postponed it until early July.

Let me emphasize again how harmful these delays were. Operation Citadel was aimed at a big Soviet salient in the front line around the city of Kursk. A quick glance at the map of the front line in Spring 1943 is all you need to see for yourself how tempting a target that salient was. The problem for the Germans was that the Red Army could read maps as well as anybody and would surely guess German intentions. Surprise with regard to place was therefore impossible. The only other possibility was surprise with regard to time. Over the course of this war, the Wehrmacht had repeatedly surprised its enemies by attacking sooner than expected, but Hitler's procrastination had frittered away that possibility.

Hitler's stated justification for the delay was to allow time for more of Germany's newest models of tanks to reach the front. Is this a good time to talk about German tank production? Hey, any time is a good time to talk about German tank production.

Recall that the British invented the tank, and calling them tanks was a bit of wartime misdirection. The cover story was that these machines were motorized water tanks meant to supply British troops in the desert.

The German term for tank during this period was *Panzerkampfwagen*, often abbreviated Pzkw. *Panzer* is the German word for armor, and *Panzerkampfwagen* means something like armored fighting vehicle, which is also the more technical English term for tank. Today I believe the Germans use the term *Kampfpanzer*, which you could translate as battle armor.

The word *panzer* has infiltrated the English language, and in English it can refer to a German tank, in the same way that U-boat is used to mean German submarine. Panzer can also be used in the name of a German armored formation, as in panzer division, panzer corps, or panzer army.

Germany produced only a handful of experimental tanks in the latter days of the last war. The Treaty of Versailles prohibited Germany from producing or deploying any tanks, so in the Weimar period the German military manufactured small numbers of what they called tractors, which were in reality prototype tanks, which were used for training and testing in the Soviet Union, back in the days when the Soviets were helping the Germans evade the terms of the treaty.

The Panzer I tank was designed in 1932, and production began in 1934, after Hitler came to power and started a secret German rearmament program. The Panzer I wasn't much of a tank. It was small, had relatively thin armor, and its only weapons were machine guns, because it was conceived as an anti-infantry weapon. The Panzer I was used for training, and in the Spanish Civil War. By the time the Second World War broke out, Panzer Is were used in the invasions of Poland, Norway, and France, in North Africa, and in the early months of Operation Barbarossa. Although they were basically obsolete, they still had their uses. They were fast, they had radios, which allowed for better coordination, and the Germans were more experienced in armored warfare and had developed a sophisticated tank doctrine.

When rearmament began in 1934, it was already clear that the Army would need a better tank. A key figure in developing this new tank was our old friend Heinz Guderian. He drafted specifications for two new, heavier tanks—what came to be known as medium tanks—meant to be the main German battle tanks. These became the Panzer III and the Panzer IV.

“What happened to the Panzer II?” I hear you ask. Well, the Panzer I was incapable of taking on an enemy tank, and the new IIIs and IVs would take time to develop and produce, so the Panzer II was produced to fill in the gap. It was similar to the Panzer I, but in addition to machine guns, it carried a 20mm cannon. The first Panzer IIs reached the German Army in 1936.

In the early stages of the Second World War, up to the invasion of France, German armored units were using Panzer Is and Panzer IIs, augmented with hundreds of pretty good Czech tanks captured when the Germans occupied Czechia.

Guderian conceived the Panzer III to be Germany's main combat tank, with a 37mm and later a 50 mm gun. The Panzer IV was at first armed with a howitzer and intended as an anti-infantry weapon. Small but gradually increasing numbers of IIIs and IVs saw action in Poland, Norway, France, North Africa, the Balkans, and the Soviet Union.

By the time Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941, the Panzer III was the most numerous tank fighting on the Eastern Front. But the Germans were in for a nasty surprise when they discovered that the Red Army's corresponding medium tank, the T-34, was superior to the Panzer III. It had a bigger, more powerful main gun and its sloped armor made it virtually invulnerable to German tanks.

As you know, the Germans did very well in the 1941 campaign anyway, at least until winter set in. They destroyed thousands of T-34s. Despite the Soviet tank's advantages, German panzer units were much better trained and experienced in how to use their own tanks.

Nevertheless, it was obvious to the German Army that they needed better tanks. One quick change they could make was to upgrade the guns on their existing tanks. They chose to do this with the Panzer IV, because it had a bigger turret that could handle a bigger gun, and these upgraded Panzer IVs, now with 75mm guns, became the German Army's main tank, with the Panzer III demoted to anti-infantry combat. In other words, the two models swapped roles.

That was a stopgap solution, but in the longer term, Germany would need better tanks. Plans were approved in spring 1942 for a new Panzer V medium tank. The German government had already begun development of a new heavy tank, meant to counter the Soviet KV heavy tanks.

This new heavy tank, the Panzer VI, picked up the nickname *Tiger* while still in development. The Tiger would have thick armor and fire an 88mm gun, since the Germans had such good luck with 88mm guns. The smaller Panzer V was armed with a 75 mm gun. The Panzer VI and the Panzer V were meant to have the same engine; since the Panzer V was smaller, that would make it faster and more nimble than its larger cousin, the Tiger, so it got tagged with the nickname *Panther*.

A prototype Panther was evaluated and approved in September 1942. Production began in December 1942, with a goal of producing 600 Panthers every month, though Germany never got close to this goal. The Tiger was rushed into production without a prototype.

The first few Tigers had been sent to defend Tunisia in early 1943. They were powerful, but few, and the Allies were able to drive the Axis off the African continent despite them. The first Panthers were sent to the Eastern Front in preparation for Operation Citadel.

These were the weapons which Hitler hoped would regain Germany the upper hand in the 1943 Eastern offensive. They were fearsome tanks, to be sure, but they were also new, meaning there were still kinks to be worked out, both in their designs and in the manufacturing. They were complex weapons, more difficult and expensive to manufacture than the tanks they replaced. And they were sent into offensive action on the Eastern Front just days after the last of them had arrived, meaning German Army tank crews had not had much time to learn how to use them.

Incidentally, Hitler later ordered that the Panzer V, that's with a Roman numeral V for five, be referred to exclusively as the Panther and banned the numerical designation. I wonder what Hitler's problem with the letter V was.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5*.]

Adolf Hitler had delayed the start of Operation Citadel from May to June and at last to early July. July 5, to be exact. The delay led to a setback in May, when Soviet reconnaissance spotted

Luftwaffe planes gathering at airfields near to where the Operation Citadel offensive would take place. Pre-emptive Soviet air strikes destroyed hundreds of German planes on the ground. Not that the Germans had enough aviation fuel for all of them anyway.

Hitler continued to exude optimism, at least in front of his military commanders. He told them the new tanks were the finest in the world, and that when Operation Citadel began, it would be to the Russians like a bolt from the blue.

That was dubious. Some of the senior military commanders, including Alfred Jodl and Kurt Zeizler, questioned why there should be a German offensive at all. The Soviets were surely preparing their own offensive. Wouldn't it make more sense to put those new tanks into an armored reserve force behind the front line, a force that could quickly move to block any Soviet offensive?

Heinz Guderian, who was now in charge of tank production, met with Hitler on June 18 and warned him that the new tanks still had some mechanical issues and their crews needed more time to familiarize themselves with them.

Guderian then also expressed doubts over the necessity of an offensive primarily intended to retake the city of Kursk. Hitler claimed that recapturing that city would be a political and propaganda victory for Germany; Guderian argued that hardly anyone in the world could find Kursk on a map and no one would care which side controlled it. Hitler admitted that thinking about Operation Citadel gave him a queasy stomach, but he would not consider cancelling it.

The Soviet side was indeed aware of German plans. The British had passed along information gleaned from Enigma intercepts, heavily redacted to conceal the source, that revealed details of the pending operation. The Soviets had their own sources of information now, such as their own reconnaissance planes, plus information on German activities behind their front line, gathered and relayed to them by organized bands of partisans.

The Red Army had already begun preparations for its own offensive in the same region, near Kursk. An entire front—the Steppe Front, consisting of five armies and four armored and mechanized corps, had been moved in secret behind the bulge in the Soviet line, ready to blunt any German offensive and then spearhead the Soviet counteroffensive. The Soviets relied on *maskirovka* techniques to encourage the Germans to believe that their own offensive would be farther south, including sending construction teams to build airfields, suggesting preparation for an attack there.

Upon receiving information about the upcoming German offensive from the British, Stalin at first wanted to marshal Soviet forces and begin their offensive at once, in order to disrupt the German attack. Fortunately, Vasilevsky and Zhukov were able to talk him out of it. They pointed out that greater losses could be inflicted on the Germans by letting them attack into carefully

prepared Red Army defenses. Afterward would come the time for an offensive, against a weak and exhausted German Army.

Stalin conceded the point and agreed to their plan. This marks quite a change from the Stalin of 1941. In those days, his answer to every German victory was: attack, attack, and keep attacking! Now, two years later, he was willing to take advice from his military commanders—at least, the ones he trusted.

The Red Army relied upon its new doctrine of defense in depth. A series of no fewer than six lines of trenches and fortifications were constructed at the points in the front line where German attacks were expected. Instead of trying to hold the line at the front, the Red Army would allow them to advance through these defenses, while wearing them down every step along the way.

In fact, as May led into June and June into July, Stalin began to doubt the reality of this supposed German offensive that was predicted to begin at any time. But that was merely Hitler's procrastination. Operation Citadel was coming.

On July 4, the day before the offensive was to begin, a German intelligence officer warned Zeitzler that the Soviets knew about Operation Citadel and had prepared defenses against it. He added, "I consider the intended operation a definitive mistake that will rebound heavily against us."

Later that night, just hours before the German offensive was scheduled to begin and at the other end of Europe, the prime minister of the Polish government in exile, General Władysław Sikorski, was in Gibraltar, boarding a plane to return to Britain after completing a six-week tour of Polish forces fighting in the Middle East. Shortly before midnight, his plane, an American B-24 Liberator, took off from the airfield. Sixteen seconds later, the plane crashed into the ocean, killing ten of its eleven occupants, including Sikorski. Only the plane's pilot survived. I told you that story in episode 392.

Sikorski's death proved quite convenient for Stalin, and to a lesser extent to Roosevelt and Churchill, so much so that many Poles then and now suspect the crash was not an accident, but deliberate sabotage, orchestrated to smooth over conflicts within the alliance. No evidence of sabotage emerged, then or since, but neither can it be definitively disproven. We may never know.

Operation Citadel was scheduled to begin at 5:00 AM on July 5, but when the moment came, the Red Army began a massive artillery barrage against German positions. Some Germans thought the Soviets were about to begin their own offensive, but no, this was a preemptive bombardment meant to disrupt the German attack.

The Soviet bombardment forced the Germans to postpone the beginning of their offensive until the shelling ended, about two hours later. The Soviet air force also attempted a preemptive strike



on Luftwaffe airfields, but unfortunately for them, the Luftwaffe was already in the air and ready to fight back. The attempt ended badly, with over 150 Soviet planes shot down, in exchange for only modest losses on the German side.

Similarly, the Soviet artillery bombardment inflicted little damage on the Germans, though it did force a brief delay, but it was also a clear sign that the Red Army knew all about Operation Citadel and had already made preparations to oppose it. So much for surprise.

It's a rule of thumb in military planning that a successful attack needs roughly a 3:1 numerical advantage to succeed. Operation Citadel was 625,000 German soldiers against 1.9 million Red Army soldiers, flipping that ratio upside down. The Red Army had a comparable proportional advantage in numbers of tanks, artillery guns, and aircraft. The Wehrmacht had routinely defeated larger Soviet formations for the past two years, but the Red Army of 1943 was better equipped, more experienced, and better led.

And the Germans had made good use of encirclements in the past two years. Recall that Operation Citadel was supposed to be another such dramatic victory. Hitler planned for two assaults on opposite sides of the Soviet salient at Kursk, with the goal of breaking through and surrounding Red Army units inside the salient.

In spite of everything, the first day of the attack went reasonably well. The southern attack was led by the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army, spearheaded by the new Tiger tanks. It broke through the first Soviet defensive line by 9:00 AM, and by sunset it had reached the second defensive line, despite large numbers of concealed Red Army antitank guns along the route. Red Army commanders were forced to commit all their reserves to stopping the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer, and it was still just the first day.

The Ninth Army led the northern attack. It was commanded by General Walter Model, and unfortunately for him, his army was short on tanks. Model also used his new Tiger tanks as the spearhead, but relied on infantry and antitank guns to do most of the fighting. His panzers he held in reserve, ready to take advantage of any breakthrough to sweep behind Soviet lines.

That was a bit of wishful thinking on his part. As his subordinates argued, a breakthrough was unlikely, and those panzers would be better used on the front line. But the Ninth did advance some ten kilometers on the first day, which wasn't too shabby.

The next day, the southern force was able to advance 20 kilometers. The new German tanks were clearly superior to Soviet T-34s. The 88mm gun on a Tiger tank could knock out a T-34 from a distance of two kilometers, while the T-34, well, the T-34 in 1943 was mostly the same tank as the T-34 of 1940. The German Panther tanks, on the other hand, though effective, were plagued with technical problems. They broke down frequently and displayed an alarming tendency to catch fire. The German Army lost as many Panthers to mechanical breakdowns as it did in combat.

A couple of days' worth of advances would be all the Germans would get. On July 9, commanders of the 9<sup>th</sup> Army, fighting in the north, concluded that no farther advance was possible. They had covered less than half the distance they would need to link up with the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army advancing from the south. The 9<sup>th</sup> Army fought on, hoping to tie down enough Soviet units to enable the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army to break through and meet up with them.

But the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army had its own problems. On the evening of that same day, July 9, the Red Army's 5<sup>th</sup> Guards Tank Army intercepted their advance at the town of Prohorovka, and there followed three days of heavy fighting.

Later that same night came bad news from an entirely different direction. The Western Allies were landing troops on the island of Sicily. This was not a surprise to Hitler. He'd been expecting something like this, although he thought Sardinia would be the target. Italian forces on the island fought without enthusiasm, and German forces on the island were too few to hold off the invasion by themselves.

On July 12, more bad news. The Red Army began its own offensive, Operation Kutuzov. The following day, Hitler summoned his senior commanders to the Wolf's Lair and told them he was calling off Operation Citadel after barely a week. Field Marshal von Manstein, commander of Army Group South and therefore senior commander of that southern advance that was still fighting in earnest at Prohorovka, objected. He thought a breakthrough was still possible and wanted to give it a few more days.

This was a bit of role reversal. Until now, it had usually been Hitler who wanted to keep fighting while his commanders urged withdrawal. Hitler gave Manstein his few more days, but the breakthrough Manstein was looking for never came.

Hitler was now, for the first time, facing Allied offensives on two fronts, the dreaded situation Germany had so far managed to avoid. His attention turned now primarily to Italy. If the Allies took Sicily, an invasion of the Italian mainland would surely be their next move, and that could lead to the collapse of Italy. How long before the Anglo-American forces were at the Brenner Pass?

Operation Citadel had failed in a matter of days. There would be no grand encirclement of the five or six Soviet armies deployed inside the Kursk salient. No major victory, no propaganda boost. Germany would not get the hundreds of thousands of Soviet POWs it needed to use as slave labor in support of the German war effort.

Germany would never regain the initiative in the East. In fact, for the rest of this war, you should not expect to hear me utter the words *German* and *offensive* next to each other. At least not on the Eastern Front.

Now the Soviets held the initiative, and their own offensive, Operation Kutuzov, was in full swing. Operation Citadel was over, but the Battle of Kursk was only beginning.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Clinton for his kind donation, and thank you to Dan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Clinton and Dan 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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We're in the period now where we're preparing for our son's surgery, so allow me to remind you that we are on a biweekly schedule for the time being—hopefully not too long. So I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the Battle of Kursk. The Germans took their shot; now the Red Army will take theirs. That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I made a little joke earlier about Adolf Hitler and why he might have had an aversion to the letter V. This story begins with a Belgian named Victor de Laveleye. He was a veteran of the First World War and a member of the Belgian Olympic teams in 1920, 1924, and 1928. He became a lawyer and went into politics, where he became head of the Belgian Liberal Party and served as minister of justice.

In 1940, he fled the German invasion of Belgium for France and then for Britain. In Britain, he was invited to take charge of Radio Belgique, the BBC Overseas Service broadcasts to Belgian listeners. In a radio message broadcast in January 1941, he called on Belgians to adopt the letter V as a symbol of opposition to the German occupation. He chose the letter V because it was quick and easy to write and it could be interpreted as *vrijheid*, which means freedom in Dutch or Flemish, or as *victoire*, which is victory in French. And of course, in English it can also be interpreted as standing for victory.

Listeners in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France were encouraged to find ways to display the letter V as a sign to the German occupiers that they were not welcome, and perhaps not safe. A V can be written in two strokes, so it can quickly be applied to a wall or sidewalk as graffiti.

The campaign took on a life of its own. Citizens of occupied countries flashed V signs with their fingers at one another as a gesture of solidarity. BBC broadcasts suggested ever more creative

ways to get the message across, such as setting cutlery on the table in the shape of a V or setting stopped clocks at 11:05. The public were encouraged to sit at sidewalk café tables with their legs extended in a V shape. Some brave souls even managed to chalk large Vs on the backs of German soldiers' coats.

The letter V in Morse code is three dots and a dash, which suggested a whole other set of tricks, such as knocking on doors like this: [sound: three short knocks, one long] or honking car horns or blowing train whistles in that pattern.

And then there was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with its unforgettable four-note motif that replicates the sound of the letter V in Morse code: [music] Which was pretty clever of Beethoven, especially since he composed that symphony thirty years before Morse code was invented. The BBC took to playing the symphony as a gesture of defiance and urged people on the Continent to do likewise. Beethoven himself had once described that four-note motif as representing "fate knocking at the door." Now fate stood at the Nazis' door and was announcing its arrival. In Morse code.

When the United States entered the war, Americans also embraced the V symbol, displaying it everywhere. American propaganda posters regularly incorporated the V motif. Women wore V-shaped pins. The regular 3-cent postage stamp issued during the war depicted an American eagle with its wings stretched high, in the shape of a V.

Winston Churchill got into the act, too. He quickly adopted the V hand gesture with the first two fingers extended, and displayed it at virtually every public appearance. There was just one little problem. Among working-class people in the British Isles, extending your first two fingers toward someone with the back of the hand facing them has a vulgar and insulting connotation, roughly equivalent to an American making the same gesture with only the middle finger extended. Therefore, the proper thing to do was to make the V gesture palm forward and back of the hand toward yourself.

Churchill, being upper class was unaware of the vulgar gesture, so he went about displaying his V sign the wrong way. Embarrassed assistants and staff repeatedly coached him on the proper way to do V for victory, but he frequently forgot. Consequently, in our time you can find many photographs of Churchill making an obscene gesture.

[music: Closing War Theme]