The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 415
"Would They Obey You Any More Readily?"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Things were going badly for Germany on the Eastern Front, and Germany's *Führer* and supreme military commander, Adolf Hitler, knew exactly who was to blame.

Everyone but himself.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 415. Would They Obey You Any More Readily?

On January 1, 1944, Adolf Hitler issued his customary New Year messages to members of the Wehrmacht and to the German public. Both messages said basically the same thing, larded with plenty of false optimism. Hitler acknowledged that the fighting in 1943 had been difficult, but boasted that the Bolsheviks had not achieved their goals. As for the western plutocrats, let them make good on their long-threatened invasion of Europe. They would fail.

The previous year had been more than difficult; it had been disastrous for the German war effort. The Axis had been forced out of North Africa, Sicily, and southern Italy. Italy had defected to the Allies. The Allied strategic bombing campaign over Germany had created mass destruction. The story was even worse in the East. A year ago, Germany was fighting for Stalingrad. Now, it was fighting to hold the Dnieper. Most of Ukraine was back in Soviet hands.

In November, RAF bombers repeatedly attacked Berlin itself, causing extensive damage and triggering firestorms. Many German government buildings were destroyed, the old Reich Chancellery was damaged, and across the street, Berlin's famous grand luxury hotel, the Kaiserhof, was reduced to a ruin.

Joseph Goebbels was the Party chief in Berlin, which made him responsible for relief efforts. He threw himself into the job, coordinating relief and meeting with some of the more than hundred thousand Berliners whose homes had been destroyed. Hitler was impressed, which no doubt was

the point. He praised Goebbels's efforts and promised that by March of the coming year, Germany's new retribution weapons would reduce London to a smoldering pile of rubble that no one could live in. What he did not do was follow Goebbels's example by inspecting the damage and meeting with the victims himself.

The Teheran Conference had been held that same month, but the German leadership knew little about its outcome. The Allied communiqué was vague to the point of meaningless, and while it was a safe guess that the long-awaited invasion of France was discussed, the Germans had no knowledge of what, if any, decisions had been reached.

A quick glance might suggest Germany's military position was salvageable. As of January 1, 1944, the Wehrmacht collectively had 9.5 million uniformed soldiers and sailors. On the Eastern Front, German soldiers numbered about 2.5 million, plus 700,000 soldiers from other Axis nations, mostly Romanians and Hungarians. These numbers were roughly equal to what Germany had on the front lines at the beginning of Operation Barbarossa.

Germany could field these forces in spite of casualties in excess of four million killed, wounded, missing, or taken prisoner since the beginning of the war. But the Soviet Union, in spite of suffering twice that number of casualties, had more than six million soldiers in the field, virtually all of them facing the Axis on the Eastern Front. This number was nearly double what it had been at the time of the German invasion.

The Red Army of 1944 was very different from the Red Army of 1941. Gone was the craven fear that any trace of original thinking would bring down the wrath of the NKVD. Officers were now actually showing initiative. The Red Army had more tanks, more artillery guns, and more aircraft than the Wehrmacht, and morale was higher. Red Army soldiers were fighting to recover the lands of their own nation and liberate their own people. They had endured a surprise attack by the largest armed force ever assembled and were now rolling it back. Confidence was high, and the future looked bright.

As for the German Army, it was able to maintain its numbers only by incorporating more than a million forced laborers, many of them Poles, Czechs, or Red Army POWs. Residents of Alsace, Lorraine, Luxembourg, and ethnic German minorities from throughout occupied Europe were being drafted to fight for Germany, many of them reluctantly. The Waffen-SS was recruiting a hodge-podge of ethnic groups into service, from Belarusians to Bosnians, from Ukrainians to Walloons, as we have seen. Most of the German Army's most experienced and seasoned officers and NCOs had been killed, and the Army was losing around 2,000 soldiers killed, missing, or taken prisoner every single day.

In episode 408, I told you about the latest Soviet offensive, and how it pushed the German Army back as far as Ostwall, the Germans' line of fortifications intended to hold off the Red Army. Ostwall, unfortunately for the Germans, was more of a plan than a finished set of fortifications. Actually, it was more of a notion than a plan.

At the southern end of the front, though, the Germans meant to use the Dnieper River for their defensive line, which was a good idea, except that Red Army units had managed to secure bridgeheads on the western side of the Dnieper before the Germans had properly prepared their defenses. Also, the Dnieper makes a sharp bend westward before it reaches the Black Sea, but the Germans planned to hold the line farther east, in order to keep Crimea in German hands.

In episode 408, I took the story of the Soviet offensive as far as the Teheran Conference in November 1943. But at this stage of the war, Soviet offensives don't end. They just keep going from one operation to the next to the next. Just days after the conference in Teheran ended, another Soviet push at the southern end of the line broke through German defenses. By December 1, the Red Army reached the Black Sea coast west of Crimea, which meant the peninsula was cut off.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group South, traveled to the Wolf's Lair on January 4 to ask permission for his forces to fall back and to evacuate Crimea by sea. For a second time, Hitler refused. Evacuation of the peninsula would be an implicit admission that the German Army did not expect to regain control of Ukraine. He worried that Soviet bombers based in Crimea would be able to attack those crucial Romanian oil fields. Even worse, the loss of Crimea might spur Romania and Bulgaria to leave the war, or drive Turkey into the Allied camp.

Manstein then raised again his suggestion that a single commander be appointed with the power to direct operations over the entire Eastern Front. The enemy now had greater numbers of tanks and artillery guns and aircraft than did the Germans, Manstein conceded, but he argued that was only part of the reason for the difficult situation on the Eastern Front. It also came down to inefficient military leadership. There was the OKW, the Wehrmacht High Command, and the OKH, the Army High Command. Then there was the Luftwaffe, the Waffen-SS, and even the Navy, which operated in the Baltic Sea. This clumsy structure had German military formations sometimes working at cross purposes. The situation called for one supreme commander with full authority over the conduct of the war in the East.

Hitler realized Manstein was implicitly suggesting himself as supreme commander. He told Manstein, "The field marshals do not even obey *me!* Would they obey *you* any more readily?" Manstein quietly replied that he was having no difficulty getting his subordinates to obey *his* orders. At this point, Hitler angrily ended the meeting and began giving thought to replacing Manstein.

Hitler was desperate to keep what is known as "right-bank Ukraine" under German control; that is, the region of Ukraine on the right bank, which is the west bank, of the Dnieper River. Right-bank Ukraine included that nation's richest farmland, as well as iron and manganese mines needed for German war production.

Perhaps even more important, the Soviet Red Army had been driving westward at a remarkable speed. If the Germans didn't force them to halt, the front line would soon be drawing near to the frontiers of Hungary and Romania.

The first two winters of the campaign in the East, 1941-42 and 1942-43, had been unusually cold and had inflicted much suffering on the German Army. The winter of 1943-44, on the other hand, was unusually mild, particularly in Ukraine, at the southern part of the line. But here, a mild winter meant rain, which meant the severe muddy conditions of the *rasputitsa*. The mud bogged down the Germans, making it hard for them to maneuver, while Soviet T-34 tanks, with their wide tracks, were able to press on.

And press on they did. On December 24, 1943, the First Ukrainian Front, commanded by General Nikolai Vatutin, spearheaded a new Soviet offensive, this one aimed at the gap between the German Army Group Center and Army Group South. This was potentially catastrophic for Army Group South, as Vatutin was threatening to cut its lines of communication back to Germany. Manstein attempted counterattacks, but his own forces were exhausted of equipment and spirit. Manstein requested from Hitler permission to withdraw; once again, Hitler refused.

The Soviet Second Ukrainian Front, commanded by General Ivan Konev, began its own offensive on January 5. Two German corps that were holding the line at the Dnieper just south of Vatutin's advance—some of those units that Hitler had refused to permit to withdraw—were surprised and surrounded on January 24 by tank armies from each of the two Soviet fronts. History knows this as the Korsun Pocket. Inside the pocket were about 60,000 German soldiers from two panzer corps, or six divisions in total, including the elite SS Wiking Division, plus an SS battalion of Walloons and another of Estonians, and several thousand Soviet POWs now working for the Germans.

Commanders on both sides recognized the situation as potentially another Stalingrad. Red Army commanders were delighted, and set to work organizing attacks to collapse the pocket and capture everyone inside. Behind the German lines, Manstein was equally aware of the parallel and organized an offensive intended to open a corridor that would allow the units inside to withdraw behind German lines.

Adolf Hitler had other plans. He ordered Manstein to substitute a different plan: instead of opening one corridor to the pocket, Manstein was to divide his attack into two spearheads that would advance north and south of the Korsun pocket, with the aim of encircling and trapping those two Soviet tank armies that had surrounded the pocket, turning the tables on the Red Army.

In the meantime, once again the Luftwaffe attempted to supply German units trapped in the Korsun pocket by air, using an airfield the Germans held within the pocket. It was a good effort, and the return flights evacuated more than 4,000 German wounded, but supply by air barely delivered half of what the German forces needed.

The Soviets tried a propaganda offensive, making use of the League of German Officers. This was a Soviet-sponsored organization of captured German officers opposed to the Nazis. The head of the League was General Walther von Seydlitz, who had been captured at Stalingrad. Eventually Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, the overall commander of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, also joined the organization.

The Soviets very much wanted to present their own version of the traitor General Vlasov and his anti-Communist Russian Liberation Army. Anti-Nazi German POWs and Seydlitz himself visited the front and made appeals by radio and leaflet to the soldiers and officers inside the pocket to surrender. The leaflets functioned as safe conduct passes; any German soldier taken prisoner who presented one of the leaflets would be permitted to join the anti-Nazi troops. Some 6,000 German soldiers took advantage of the offer. As for Seydlitz, he was sentenced to death *in abstentia* in Germany and Hitler ordered retribution be taken against his family.

The Germans were unable to rescue their soldiers inside the pocket. After three weeks of fighting, the pocket collapsed and survivors were taken prisoner, though about half of the soldiers inside were able to escape the Red Army and make their way back to German lines, albeit at the cost of leaving behind their weapons, equipment, and vehicles.

Soviet propaganda hailed the battle as a huge Soviet victory. The Red Army claimed 130,000 German casualties; a figure about four times the real number. Ivan Konev, commander of the Second Ukrainian Front, was made a Marshal of the Soviet Union.

Nikolai Vatutin might also have been made a Marshal of the Soviet Union, only he was dead. Less than two weeks after the battle, Vatutin and his bodyguard were ambushed by guerilla fighters of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a partisan group opposed to both the Germans and the Soviet Union. Vatutin was mortally wounded and died a few weeks later. He was 42 years old.

The Germans claimed the battle as a triumph for Germany. Exhausted, frightened, bedraggled German soldiers who reached German lines after escaping from the pocket were quite surprised to hear that they had won a “great victory” for the Reich.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*.]

Adolf Hitler became increasingly concerned about his security at the Wolf’s Lair, fearing an Allied bomber attack. In late February, he left the facility for four months, while workers reinforced the bunkers with additional concrete.

He spent those four months at the Berghof, where he took advantage of the opportunity to meet with other Axis leaders. The first was Marshal Antonescu of Romania. Hitler assured Antonescu that after the Western Allies’ invasion in the west was thrown back into the sea, Germany would be able to reinforce its lines in the East and go on the offensive once again. The two dictators

agreed on the importance of holding the Crimea, where both German and Romanian troops were stationed.

After the Korsun Pocket, the Red Army offensive paused. German commanders interpreted the pause to mean the Red Army was exhausted and the Germans expected the front to be quiet for a few months.

They were wrong. Just two weeks later the Red Army began another offensive, spearheaded again by the First Ukrainian Front, now commanded by Marshal Zhukov. It was early March at this point, the time of the spring *rasputitsa*. The Red Army was able to move in the muddy conditions, thanks to T-34 tanks with their wide treads, and American trucks with four-wheel drive. The Germans struggled with the muddy conditions. Their trucks were two-wheel drive.

Once again, the First and Second Ukrainian Fronts combined their efforts to encircle a German formation. This time it was the First Panzer Army, much larger formation of some 220,000 soldiers. Manstein traveled to the Berghof to confer with the *Führer*. He requested that Hitler rescind his order that units in danger of encirclement should stand fast and form strongholds that would serve as obstacles that would halt the enemy's offensives. Twice that tactic had been tried, and twice it had brought the German Army to the brink of disaster. Maybe over the brink. He requested that units in danger of encirclement be permitted to retreat. Hitler agreed.

Manstein also requested reinforcements to deal with the latest crisis, and he got them, including the II SS Panzer Corps, a powerful Waffen-SS unit stationed in France. The redeployment of that corps from France to the Eastern Front was very good news for the Western Allies, who were now just weeks away from executing Operation Overlord.

It was, however, bad news for the Red Army. Soviet intelligence failed to detect the arrival of the reinforcements, and they were able to open a corridor to the First Panzer Army. Most of the soldiers were able to escape the pocket, but were forced to leave behind more than 300 tanks, 140 self-propelled guns, nearly 600 armored personnel carriers, and 20,000 trucks and other vehicles that they were unable to move through the mud.

Hitler was becoming increasingly distrustful of his military commanders. The betrayal of General Seydlitz, one of the military's senior commanders, was to Hitler proof that the military was promoting officers without regard to their loyalty to Nazism or their general trustworthiness. And in his mind, Manstein was showing signs of a similar disloyalty, as were many of his other commanders.

Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels was disturbed by this; he felt this mistrust between Hitler and the military could seriously hinder the war effort. So, at Goebbels's suggestion, Germany's top military leaders drafted a declaration denouncing Seydlitz and swearing their loyalty to the *Führer*. Not only did they all sign it, they came to the Berghof as a group on March 19 to present the document directly to Hitler in person. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Germany's most

senior commander, whom Hitler had made commander of German forces in Western Europe, read the declaration aloud.

Hitler appeared moved by the declaration, but soon afterward, he summoned Manstein and Field marshal Ewald von Kleist, commanders of Army Group South and Army Group A, respectively, to the Berghof to inform them that he was relieving them of their commands. He blamed them for the reverses in Ukraine. To replace them, he chose Generals Walter Model and Ferdinand Schörner. In Hitler's view, they had qualities their predecessors lacked; namely, National Socialist zeal and full confidence in the *Führer* and in ultimate victory.

The Army chief of staff, Kurt Zeitzler, strongly disagreed with Hitler's treatment of Manstein and Kleist and asked that he be relieved of his post as well. Hitler refused.

Hitler renamed Army Group South and Army Group A. Now they would be known as Army Group North Ukraine and Army Group South Ukraine. By this time, the German Army barely held any of Ukraine at all; the names were presumably meant to demonstrate that these forces would soon retake their namesake territories. Good luck with that.

Just days later, the Red Army began another offensive; this time directed against the Crimea. The Red Army had already cut off the land approaches to Crimea, but the 17th Army, the Axis force on the peninsula, was being supplied by sea. It consisted of about 240,000 soldiers, three-quarters of them German, the rest Romanian.

The 17th Army was unable to hold against the Soviet offensive and were retreating toward Sevastopol after barely a week. Hitler planned for the army to occupy Sevastopol and hold it as a fortress, the way the Soviets had done in 1941 and 1942, but the city and its defenses had been badly damaged during the previous siege, and Hitler was forced to order an evacuation by sea.

Convoys of civilian ships conducted the evacuation, escorted by Axis naval forces in the Black Sea, including the four destroyers of the Romanian Navy, which were the largest Axis warships in the Black Sea. Soviet air and naval forces repeatedly attacked evacuation ships. About half the Axis soldiers in the Crimea successfully evacuated; the others were killed, missing, or taken prisoner. General Erwin Jaenecke, commander of the 17th Army, was blamed for the loss of Crimea. He was court-martialled and dismissed from the Army. He only narrowly avoided execution.

He wasn't the only one. Hundreds of lower-level commanders in the two army groups were relieved of duty for failure to hold the line against the Soviet advance. Many of them were also court-martialled.

The series of hammer blows the Red Army dealt to the Germans from the first offensive at Kursk last August through April 1944 shattered the newly-christened Army Groups North Ukraine and South Ukraine and foiled every German attempt to set up a stable defensive line. Ten German

divisions were destroyed; ten others were so depleted they had to be withdrawn from the Eastern Front and sent west to be rebuilt and reequipped. Dozens of other divisions were kept at the front, but were seriously short on soldiers, forcing the Army to draw on its reserves. Romanian losses were also heavy, amounting to more than a dozen divisions.

Thirty-four German divisions had to be drawn from postings elsewhere in Europe or from Army Group Center in order to reinforce the southern part of the front, which, by the end of April 1944, had been pushed back past the 1939 Soviet border. Red Army soldiers now held positions inside the pre-war borders of Romania and Poland. If you were to look at a map of the front line as of April 30, you would see a substantial bulge in the southern part of the line, exposing the right flank of Army Group Center, which still held western Belarus.

The section of the front held by Army Group Center was still holding. That sector had been quiet during the Red Army offensives farther south. As the German forces in the south did their best to regroup and dig in, they awaited with dread the next Soviet offensive. There would surely be a 1944 summer offensive, and the collapsing southern section of the front would be the obvious target, right?

But what about Army Group North? Well, I'll tell you. That story begins at Leningrad. You'll recall that when we last looked at the situation at Leningrad in 1943, the Red Army had opened a narrow corridor that allowed for a rail line to be built into the city, partly relieving the siege. I say partly because it was a tenuous lifeline. It was enough to supply the approximately 600,000 people still living in the city, about 20% of the pre-war population, but German artillery was just a few kilometers from the rail line, so it was far from secure.

Over the winter of 1943-44, even as Hitler was redeploying divisions from Army Group North to reinforce the collapsing front in the south, commanders of Army Group North were devising a plan to fall back to Ostwall, creating a front line that would be shorter and easier to defend, but again Adolf Hitler refused to permit any withdrawal. In his view, it was vital the Red Army be kept as far as possible from the Reich. He also feared that a German withdrawal from Leningrad would induce the Finns to make peace with the Soviet Union and quit the war.

As for the Soviets, okay, bear with me here for a minute. Leningrad was a port city, of course. It sits at the end of the Gulf of Finland. Out in the Gulf, some 30 kilometers west of the city sits Kotlin Island. On the island is the port of Kronstadt, which was the base of the Soviet Baltic Fleet. South of this island, on the Russian mainland, sits the town of Oranienbaum.

The Red Army was able to hold Kotlin Island and Oranienbaum along with Leningrad itself, due to the presence of the Baltic Fleet and its defenses. Both Kronstadt and Oranienbaum could be resupplied by sea from Leningrad (when there were supplies to share.) In the 21st century, Russia built causeways that connect the island both to Oranienburg, which is today called Lomonosov and to Leningrad, which is today called St. Petersburg, meaning that now you can drive a car directly from St. Petersburg to Kotlin Island and then on to Lomonosov.

Those bridges didn't exist during the winter of 1943-44, but the Red Army was able in secret to move its Second Shock Army, the force that had been a key part of earlier efforts to break the siege, into the Soviet-controlled territory at Oranienburg, first by moving it across the frozen Lake Ladoga into Leningrad, and then by ship from Leningrad to Oranienburg.

On January 14, 1944, the offensive began. Large numbers of Soviet bombers and artillery guns opened up on the German line at night, and in the morning, as a dense fog blanketed the region, the Red Army advanced from all three points: from the front line west of the city where they were defending the rail line, from Leningrad, and from Oranienburg.

The weakened Army Group North could not hold them back. By the end of January, German forces had been pushed back about a hundred kilometers from Leningrad and Stalin declared the siege over, after an astonishing 872 days, about two and a half years. By March, the Red Army reached the Estonian border.

Both Hitler's quest to score the economic victory of capturing Leningrad's factories and his symbolic quest to raze the city that was the cradle of Bolshevism had failed. On the other hand, the German Army had mostly succeeded in depriving the USSR of Leningrad's industrial capacity, which only became fully available after March 1944.

Leningrad was a shattered city. More than a million of its citizens had died, most of them starved to death. Most of the survivors had fled. The remnant who remained seemed to walk around in a state of shock, according to Russian-British journalist Alexander Werth, who was one of the first foreign journalists to visit the city. Just about everyone who lived through the siege had had to do something sketchy or underhanded to survive, and suffered with survivor guilt because of it. Outside the city, as the German Army withdrew, it forced hundreds of thousands of Soviet civilians to travel west with them, in order to deny the Soviet Union and the Red Army their labor.

Red Army soldiers, outraged by the conduct of the German Army during and after the siege, took their revenge on any German they found. In one sad case, recorded by a Red Army soldier named Vasily Churkin, Red Army soldiers captured four Russian teenage boys in German uniforms and immediately executed them. Only afterward did they realize that the boys had been wearing the uniforms because the Germans had conscripted them into forced labor and made them wear the uniforms.

The retreat of Army Group North induced Hitler to dismiss its commander as well and replaced him with Field Marshal Walter Model, whom Hitler regarded as his best defensive commander. But not even Model could halt the Soviet offensive. Just weeks later, Hitler reassigned him.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to Andrey for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Andrey 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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I've been thinking about doing a question-and-answer episode, in which I would answer questions from you, my listeners. It would depend on whether I had enough listeners who had enough questions to fill up an episode, so let's find out. If you have a question for me that you'd like to hear me answer on the podcast, send it to the email address, historyofthetwentiethcentury at gmail dot com. Also please let me know if and how you'd like to be named if I use your question, and let's see what happens.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the next phase of the Western Allied campaign in Italy. Spoiler alert: Italy is not exactly the soft underbelly Winston Churchill made it out to be. The Iron Gut of Europe, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When Soviet soldiers recaptured the Great Gatchina Palace, which had been an Imperial residence since the 18th century, they were appalled and disgusted by what they found. The Germans had stripped the palace of its art treasures. German soldiers occupying the palace had soiled the building by—how shall I put this?—by going to the bathroom without bothering to go to the bathroom. Or outside. One wing of the palace had been turned into a German officers' brothel.

The Palace has not been restored, even in our time.

[music: Closing War Theme]