The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 439
"Doctor Win-the-War"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

When Franklin Roosevelt attended the Teheran Conference in November 1943, he appeared to all to be the picture of health. Eyewitnesses at the conference described him as healthy, energetic, and cheerful.

Six months later, he was…not.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 439. Doctor Win-the-War.

A week after his return from the Teheran Conference, Franklin Roosevelt spent Christmas with his wife Eleanor at Springwood, the Roosevelt home at Hyde Park, along with their two youngest, Franklin Jr. and John, both of whom were on leave from the US Navy, and their daughter Anna, an editor and columnist for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* newspaper. It was the first time the Roosevelt family had gathered at their Hyde Park home for Christmas since Franklin became President.

Anna intended to return to her job in Seattle after Christmas, but her father asked her to stay and work for him instead. Anna agreed at once. She never had an official position at the White House, nor was she paid a salary, but she effectively became a Presidential aide.

The President held a press conference three days after Christmas. One of the reporters asked him if the term "New Deal" was still applicable to his administration. Roosevelt said no. He likened the New Deal to a doctor, treating a patient called the United States of America for a grave internal disorder. Doctor New Deal's prescription for the patient included federal deposit insurance, the Securities and Exchange Commission, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, Social Security, rural electrification, public works, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and many more programs.

But after the patient recovered, on the seventh of December 1941 he had a very bad accident and broke several bones. Doctor New Deal was an internist, so he brought in his associate, an orthopedic surgeon called Doctor Win-the-War, to treat the patient. Today the patient was back on his feet and no longer using crutches, the President continued, but he wasn't completely well yet, and would not be until he won the war.

A quick-witted reporter asked a follow-up question: "Does all that add up to a fourth term declaration?"

Roosevelt replied, "Oh, now…we are not talking about things like that right now."

By early 1944, it was evident the 62-year-old President's health was declining. He always had circles under his eyes, but now they were darker. He was chronically tired. His hands shook. In late March, the developed a fever of 104 degrees Fahrenheit. He cancelled all his appointments and stayed in bed for a week.

His daughter Anna became concerned and discussed her father's health with his doctor, Admiral Ross McIntire, the President's personal physician and also the US Navy surgeon general. She asked what was wrong with him. McIntire replied that it was simply influenza and he would recover.

Anna was not satisfied with his answer. She was asking about more than the flu. "Do you ever take his blood pressure?" she asked.

The question offended McIntire. "When I think it's necessary."

Apparently, McIntire hadn't thought it was necessary for three years. The last time anyone checked Roosevelt's blood pressure was in February, 1941. At that time, the then 59-year-old's blood pressure had measured 188 over 105.

Do those numbers horrify you? They certainly horrify me. In our time, these numbers would amount to a flashing red light and a loud siren going off. They would trigger immediate and serious medical intervention.

But this was not our time. In the 1940s, high blood pressure was thought to be a natural part of the aging process. Arteriosclerosis was also thought to be a natural part of aging. It narrowed the arteries, forcing the heart to pump harder to insure the patient's organs and extremities got the blood supply they needed. In the 1940s, taking action to lower the blood pressure of an older patient was thought to be dangerous.

Anna was unsatisfied, so she arranged for her father to get an examination at Bethesda Naval Hospital on March 27. The doctor conducting the exam was another naval officer, Lt. Commander Howard Bruenn, a cardiologist from Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New

York City. Prior to the exam, McIntire instructed Bruenn to report his findings directly to him and say nothing to the President.

As soon as Roosevelt appeared, Bruenn could tell that something was very wrong. Roosevelt's face was pale. His lips and fingertips had a bluish tint. The President appeared to be having difficulty breathing. His blood pressure was 186 over 108. When Bruenn listened to his heart through a stethoscope, he heard the distinctive sound of mitral valve failure. An X-ray confirmed that the President's heart was seriously enlarged.

It was a case of congestive heart failure; to Bruenn this was obvious, so obvious he could not understand why McIntire had not already diagnosed it. He followed his instructions and said nothing to Roosevelt, but sent his diagnosis to McIntire along with a prescribed treatment: digitalis for his heart, codeine for his cough, lots of rest, and sleeping pills to insure he got a good night's sleep every night.

McIntire told him, "You can't simply say to him, 'Do this or that.' This is the President of the United States."

Bruenn would not back down, so McIntire agreed to another exam with two civilian doctors, to get a third opinion. These two doctors fully agreed with Bruenn, and in light of the seriousness of Roosevelt's condition, advised that he be given the full facts concerning his health.

McIntire would not agree to that. They settled on a watered-down set of recommendations. They would recommend digitalis, a reduced work load, and more sleep. They further advised Roosevelt, who was a heavy smoker and drinker, to cut back on both habits.

McIntire told the press on April 3 that, apart from a case of influenza, the President's health was fine. Bruenn was reassigned from Bethesda to the White House, where he examined Roosevelt regularly. After two weeks of treatment, the President's heart was smaller and its rhythm more steady, although his blood pressure remained very high.

Over the course of spring 1944, the two most important issues Roosevelt wrestled with were the genocide of Jewish Hungarians and his ongoing resistance to acknowledging Charles de Gaulle and the French Committee of National Liberation as the rightful government of France. His position remained that the Allies should recognize no French government until the French people had expressed their will in an election. While this sounded noble in principle, in practice de Gaulle had won over all of the various French resistance groups. It was therefore de Gaulle and the Free French, or the Pétain government and its dwindling number of supporters, and that would have been completely unacceptable to any Allied government. Churchill understood this. Stalin understood this. Eisenhower understood this. And yet Roosevelt stubbornly resisted the obvious.

On June 14, D+8, Eisenhower agreed to transport de Gaulle and the self-proclaimed French provisional government to Normandy. There de Gaulle was greeted by French civilians with universal acclaim. Even local officials appointed by the Vichy government agreed to accept de Gaulle and his followers as the legitimate government of France.

Eisenhower justified his action as one of military necessity. Allied forces in France needed the cooperation and support of liberated French civilians in their rear areas, which only de Gaulle could assure. As soon as de Gaulle set foot on French soil, he became the *de facto* President of France, and even Roosevelt finally bowed to the inevitable, at least to the point of inviting de Gaulle to meet with him in Washington, although still he withheld official US recognition of de Gaulle's government.

And that brings me back to June 18, 1944, the day the US 9th Infantry Division reached the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula and cut off the German-occupied port city of Cherbourg, which I told you about at the very end of episode 435. Adolf Hitler ordered the commander in Cherbourg, General Karl-Wilhelm von Schlieben, to hold the city at all costs and vowed it would be defended "to the last bullet." (His words.)

It's worth noting that American forces were at the same moment fighting the Japanese for control of Saipan, episode 436. Also, in London on June 18, which was a Sunday, a German V-1 "buzz bomb" found its way to the British Army's Wellington Barracks, not far from Buckingham Palace. The bomb struck the barracks chapel during the Sunday service and killed 121 people.

A lot is going on in the world at this moment in history, so once again, I'm going to adopt a day-by-day narrative so that you can see how much is happening in the world and how events line up.

The next day, June 19, was the first day of the Battle of the Philippine Sea. On that first day, two different American submarines sank two Japanese aircraft carriers, *Taiho* and *Shokaku*. The latter was one of the six carriers involved in the Pearl Harbor attack. Four of the other five were sunk at the Battle of Midway, leaving at this point only *Zuikaku* still in service. *Zuikaku* was also involved in the Battle of the Philippine Sea.

In China, the city of Changsha fell to the Japanese. Changsha had held out against Japanese attacks for three years; it was the first major city to fall during the second part of Japan's 1944 offensive against China, which drove south from Wuchang toward Indochina.

June 19 was also the day of that storm in the English Channel that destroyed the American Mulberry harbor and damaged the British one.

June 20, 1944 was the second and final day of the Battle of the Philippine Sea, in which Japan lost a third aircraft carrier, *Hiyo*.

There is no clear-cut line that marks the top of the Earth's atmosphere or the beginning of "outer space," though in our time, the World Air Sports Federation, known by its French initials FAI, defines the boundary between Earth's atmosphere and space at 100 kilometers above sea level. This distance was chosen because it marks roughly the highest altitude a winged aircraft can reach. Beyond this point, you would need rocket propulsion. The FAI uses this definition to establish world records in aeronautics and astronautics.

Aviation authorities in the United States use a different definition: 50 miles, or about 80 kilometers, so somewhat lower than the IAF boundary.

Neither of these boundaries had been established in 1944, but the first human-made vehicle to achieve an altitude higher than either of them was a German A-4 rocket, test launched on June 20, 1944, from the German rocketry research center at Peenemünde. The rocket reached an altitude of 176 kilometers, or 109 miles, on that occasion.

Finland had begun looking for a way out of the war ever since the German surrender at Stalingrad in February 1943. The Anglo-American invasion of Sicily in July 1943 and the German defeat at the Battle of Kursk in August 1943 underscored the need for Finland to exit the war expeditiously.

The Finns and the Soviets conducted negotiations on and off throughout 1943 and into 1944, but made little progress. Soviet demands were too much for the Finns and Finnish offers were too meager to satisfy the Soviets. In spring of 1944, the Soviets began a bombing campaign which they hoped would force Finnish capitulation, but the bombing was, as usual, less effective than hoped.

The Red Army broke the siege of Leningrad in January 1944. The offensive drove the German Army Group North back as far as the border of Estonia. Helsinki warned the German government that if it abandoned Estonia, Finland would become isolated and would be forced to accept Soviet peace terms.

On June 9, 1944, D+3, the Red Army began an offensive north along the Karelian Isthmus that included the intense artillery bombardments that were becoming a standard part of Soviet offensives. The Finnish defensive line broke the very next day. On June 20, the Red Army marched into Viipuri. Once the second-largest city in Finland, Viipuri was ceded to the Soviet Union following the Winter War. When the Finns entered this war, or began the Continuation War, which is what the Finns would say, the recaptured and annexed Viipuri. Now the city was lost for the second time, and Finland's military position was dire.

This offensive, against Finland, was the first Red Army offensive since the one that began back in January that broke the siege of Leningrad. With the Western Allies landing in Normandy and building their forces, it puzzled the German military leadership that the Eastern Front had remained so quiet.

Most German military leaders, up to and including Hitler, expected a Soviet offensive, but they expected it along the southern part of the front, where the Red Army had advanced farthest. Red Army units in this sector of the Front had already crossed into pre-war Poland and Romania and stood along the borders of Hungary and Slovakia.

Hitler saw the Soviet offensive against Finland as confirmation that an offensive in the south was coming. To him it was clear that Stalin's strategy was to force the capitulation of Germany's allies, beginning with Finland in the north. Soon an offensive in the south would attempt to force Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria to seek peace and leave Germany isolated, without allies, and deprived of the oil and other vital resources it was getting from the Balkans.

The Red Army might possibly be interested in a northern offensive. An offensive in the north might gain the Soviets some of the territories of the Baltic States, which had some industry, and also help isolate Finland and perhaps precipitate its surrender.

The Belarusian lands behind Army Group Center's front line, by contrast, were nothing but a couple hundred kilometers of forest, marsh, and rivers, traversed by poor quality roads. It wasn't very promising terrain for a rapid advance either, and its capture would gain the Soviet Union far less than would an advance of comparable distance either to the north or especially to the south. So there were several solid reasons to dismiss this region as a possible site for a Red Army offensive.

On June 21, Adolf Hitler predicted the Soviet offensive would begin the next day, June 22, because of its symbolic significance as the third anniversary of the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. Hitler was absolutely correct about the date of the offensive, but very wrong about its location.

[music: Liszt, *Mazeppa*.]

Stavka, the Red Army's general staff, had been planning its 1944 summer offensive since March. They called it Operation Bagration. The name comes from Prince Pyotr Ivanovich Bagration, one of the Russian generals who opposed the French invasion of Russia in 1812 and was mortally wounded at the Battle of Borodino. Bagration had also been a Georgian, like Stalin, which probably had something to do with the choice of name.

The Red Army spent two months preparing its forces for Bagration, while resorting to *maskirovka* techniques to obscure the location of the buildup. As the war progressed, the Red Army became increasingly skilled at *maskirovka,* while the Soviet Air Force grew strong enough to drive away Luftwaffe reconnaissance missions, meaning German intelligence on what was going on behind the Red Army's front line was getting increasingly vague.

I'm going to post a map summarizing Operation Bagration on the website for those of you who are interested. You should take particular note of where the front line was when the operation

began. The Germans still controlled the Baltic States and Belarus, but farther south, the Red Army had liberated virtually all of Ukraine and were pressing into the territories of Germany's Balkan allies.

This left a front line shaped something like a backward letter "S." Red Army units on the southern part of the front were due south and even a little west of where Army Group Center was holding the line in Belarus, creating an overhang that has been called the "Belarus Balcony," because it does look something like the profile of a balcony.

You might think that overhang was so obvious a target for the Soviets that the Germans should have anticipated it. You'd be right, but also consider that the bottom of the Belarus Balcony, where the front line runs east to west instead of north to south as it was supposed to, that portion of the front ran through the huge expanse of the Pripyet Marshes, hundreds of kilometers of swamp the Germans regarded as too hostile to tanks and vehicles to serve as the starting point for an armored offensive.

Throughout the war in the East, Army Group Center had always proved the toughest nut for the Red Army to crack. It was Army Group Center that threatened Moscow in 1941. The front line here remained relatively static in 1942 as Hitler focused his forces on objectives farther south. When the Soviets began Operation Uranus, which led to the fall of German-occupied Stalingrad, they'd also begun Operation Mars against Army Group Center. Historians still argue over whether Operation Mars was merely a diversionary attack, or an attempt to begin a second offensive that failed and was retroactively labeled a diversion to cover up its failure. If Operation Mars was a serious offensive, it utterly failed to dislodge Army Group Center.

In 1943, the Kursk Offensive pushed Army Group Center out of a salient and back 150 kilometers or so, but for nearly a year afterward, Army Group Center's front line had remained essentially static, and the Germans used the time to build trenches and fortifications and lay minefields in order to strengthen their position, while on their right flank, the former Army Group South was pushed back in an offensive that began with Operation Uranus and had, by early 1944, forced it out of Ukraine altogether. The Red Army learned to harry the Germans during retreats, so their enemy would not have the time to stop and prepare defenses.

So when we get to the summer of 1944, Army Group Center is behind a strong defensive line, of the sort that the German army groups to its south had not had time to prepare. Here's another reason why the Germans expected the Soviet offensive to strike in the south.

The Germans did not know what Army Group Center was up against. Army Group Center consisted of 34 divisions, with a total of 850,000 soldiers, a figure that includes both combat and support personnel. Against them, the Red Army had gathered 1.7 million, double that amount, organized into four fronts, the Russian term for what we would call an army group. These were commanded by some of the Red Army's ablest generals.

Army Group Center was short on tanks and mobile formations, many of which had been redeployed to the south to firm up the front line there in anticipation of a Soviet attack. Army Group Center had fewer than 500 fully operational tanks, while against them stood eleven times as many Soviet tanks. The Soviet Air Force had committed nearly 8,000 aircraft to this operation; Army Group Center could call on no more than 600.

In summary, Stavka was preparing an offensive on a scale hardly ever seen in the history of warfare, one that would dwarf every other battle fought on the Eastern Front since 1941 and was of a magnitude the Germans didn't expect the USSR was capable of.

The battle plan was simple in concept, audacious in scale. The Red Army would strike at the northern and southern ends of Army Group Center's front line and attempt nothing less than the encirclement of the entire army group, or if not that, at least force Army Group Center into a retreat of hundreds of kilometers, perhaps forcing it out of Belarus altogether and back across the pre-war Polish border.

Adolf Hitler guessed the correct date for the beginning of the offensive, but his reasoning was wrong. It did not begin on June 22 because it was the anniversary of Barbarossa. Bagration was originally planned to begin on June 15, but last minute transportation snarls forced a week's delay.

By the time of the Normandy landings, the OKH, German Army headquarters, had detected a sizeable buildup of forces arrayed against Army Group Center, but still believed the 1944 Soviet summer offensive would strike farther south. The intelligence and staff officers of Army Group Center were themselves less certain. On June 14, they sent headquarters a report suggesting the Soviets might attack at both ends of their front line. On June 19, Army Group Center increased its estimates of the numbers of Red Army units facing it, though the OKH remained skeptical.

Also on June 19, Stavka communicated orders to Soviet partisans in Belarus to begin sabotage attacks on rail and communication lines used by the Germans. In the three years since the Germans first occupied Belarus, partisan activity there grew from small numbers of poorly armed fighters, many of whom became partisans either to escape the *Einsatzgruppen*, the German death squads, or because they were Red Army soldiers left isolated by the rapid German advance who had fled into the region's vast wilderness of forests and marshes to avoid capture.

Over the following three years, the Soviets developed techniques to arm and supply these partisans. Crucially, in 1943 Stalin offered an amnesty to any surviving Red Army soldiers behind German lines. You may recall that back in 1941, Stalin ordered that every Soviet soldier must fight to the death. Those who allowed themselves to be captured or fled from the Germans would be treated as deserters, meaning they would be shot on sight. But in 1943, Stalin offered those soldiers an opportunity to redeem themselves, by rejoining the war as partisan fighters.

Per Stavka's orders, partisans in Belarus began planting explosives on railways and cutting telephone lines, in order create chaos in the German rear ahead of the pending Operation Bagration.

The Red Army released the full fury of Bagration on the unsuspecting Germans on June 22, beginning once again with a massive artillery bombardment. Up and down the line, bunkers were blown apart, ammunition stores destroyed, and the Germans' carefully constructed defenses pulverized.

At the northern end of their line, Army Group Center held the city of Vitebsk, which formed a small salient in the Soviet line and which Hitler had designated one of his *Feste Plätze*, fortified points, because of course he did. The Soviet First Baltic Front attacked the German line north of Vitebsk. German units in that sector were quickly forced to retreat.

A whole other front, the Third Byelorussian, easily broke through the German line south of Vitebsk. Their orders were to penetrate to the German rear, where some forces would turn right and assist the First Baltic Front in encircling Vitebsk. The rest would turn left and assist in the encirclement of the city of Orsha. Orsha was another *Feste Platz*, naturally, but it was also particularly important because it lay on the highway between Moscow and Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

Farther south still, the Second Byelorussian Front began an offensive against German defenders in the city of Mogilev, another *Feste Platz* meant to anchor the southern end of Army Group Center's front line. Here the Germans held the line initially, inflicting heavy casualties on the Red Army. But when you outnumber your foe two to one, you can take some casualties and keep on fighting.

On the night of June 22, a Japanese submarine, *I-52*, rendezvoused with a German submarine, *U-530* in the Atlantic Ocean at a point some 850 nautical miles west of the Cape Verde Islands.

I-52 was a Japanese cargo submarine, one of three of that type built during the war. The newly commissioned submarine left Japan in March 1944 on a voyage that took it to Singapore, then across the Indian Ocean, around the southern tip of Africa, and then northward in the Atlantic Ocean to the French port of L'Orient.

The submarine was carrying cargo bound for Germany: strategic materials to which Japan had better access than Germany: tin, tungsten, rubber, quinine, and opium. It also carried over two tons of gold, payment to Germany in exchange for access to German technology, in the form of 14 passengers, Japanese engineers, who would have the opportunity to study some of Germany's advanced weapons.

On June 6, 1944, the sub was between the Azores and the Canary Islands, when it received a coded radio message from the Japanese naval attaché in Berlin. The message explained that the

Western Allies had made an amphibious landing at Normandy today; since the situation in France was unsettled, *I-52* would be rerouted to Norway.

I-52 was low on fuel, so as a first step, it was ordered to turn southwest and rendezvous with a German submarine, *U-530*, on June 22.

But the Japanese didn't know the Americans had broken their naval code. The Allies were aware of the voyage of *I-52*, but the interception of this message provided a golden opportunity. The sub had reported to the attaché its position in the Atlantic, so the Americans knew where it was. Better still, they had the rendezvous order, so they knew where the sub was going to be on June 22.

The US Navy put together a task force from ships docked at Casablanca, consisting of one escort carrier and five destroyer escorts. The carrier's complement included nine American Avenger torpedo bombers.

On the evening of June 22, *I-52* made its rendezvous with *U-530*. The German submarine shared some of its fuel and transferred to the Japanese a radar detector and an Enigma machine, along with two German sailors and one officer, who would help the Japanese submarine find its way.

The following night, just before midnight, one of the American Avenger torpedo bombers on patrol picked up *I-52* on its radar. The plane dropped flares to illuminate the sea and followed these with a couple of depth charges. The attack was a near miss and the sub dove into the Atlantic.

Here the American plane employed two of the latest pieces of American naval technology. First it dropped a sonobuoy, that is, a buoy with an underwater microphone that would transmit what it heard back to the aircraft, and it heard *I-52*'s propellers loud and clear. The second innovation was a Mark 24 torpedo. This was an airdropped torpedo developed at Harvard University that employed an acoustic guidance system, meaning it would home in on the sound of a submarine's propellers.

The torpedo found the sub and destroyed it. All aboard, 95 Japanese sailors, 14 Japanese civilians, and three German sailors, were killed.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Samuel and Maggie for their kind donations—happy birthday, Maggie—and thank you to Donald for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Samuel, Maggie, and Donald 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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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up where I left off today, with the Red Army's devastating 1944 offensive. The Destruction of Army Group Center, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. You may be curious about other attempts by Japan and Germany to send submarines to each others' countries. *I-52* was the fifth and last such attempt by Japan. Two submarines were sunk, one by the British in the Indian Ocean, and of course *I-52* by the Americans in the Atlantic. The other three made it safely to Europe; of these, two were sunk on the return trip. In both of those cases, the subs were sunk after stopping off at Singapore to refuel, but before they reached Japan. One was sunk by a British mine, the other by a US submarine.

Every one of these missions was similar to that of *I-52*; the Japanese submarine was bringing raw materials to Germany, to be exchanged for German technology. The one submarine that made the round-trip successfully, *I-8*, also brought to Germany a second crew, who took over the German submarine *U-1224*, which was to be taken back to Japan for study, but the German submarine was hunted down and sunk in the Atlantic by a US Navy escort carrier. That was in 1943.

Apart from *U-1224*, the German Navy made four other attempts to send a U-boat to Japan. One was successful; *U-551* reached Japan in May 1943 and was transferred to the Japanese Navy. They studied it and used it for training. It survived the war and was seized by the United States Navy, which scuttled it in 1946. Two were sunk in the Atlantic, one by an American escort carrier, the other by a British submarine. The last of the five, *U-234*, was in the Atlantic and *en route* to Japan when Germany surrendered. The U-boat then surrendered to the US Navy.

The wreck of *I-52* has been of particular interest to salvagers due to its cargo of gold, worth more than US$350 million in today's money. The wreck was discovered in 1995, but its discoverers first had to work out an agreement with the Japanese government, as the wreck is a war grave. The salvagers and the Japanese government did reach an agreement, but as of the date I release this episode, nothing of value has yet been salvaged.

[music: Closing War Theme]