The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 440
"The Destruction of Army Group Center"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Army Group Center was always a formidable force, but by 1944 it was weaker and the Red Army stronger than anyone in the German military realized.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 440: The Destruction of Army Group Center.

Last time, I laid out a day-by-day chronology of events from June 14 to 22, the latter day marking the beginning of the Soviet 1944 offensive on the Eastern Front, codenamed Operation Bagration.

Stavka, the Soviet High Command, had specific goals in mind for Bagration, but the theory the Red Army had developed over the course of the war, known as deep operation, called for a broader offensive, at first. The idea here was to keep the enemy confused as to what were the Red Army's actual objectives, which would leave them uncertain as to where to send their reserves.

And so, taking advantage of their considerable numerical superiority, the Red Army attacked everywhere along the northern part of Army Group Center's line. The shock of the initial artillery bombardment and the large numbers of Soviet units pressuring the Germans caused their defenses to crumble everywhere, up and down the front line.

On June 24, just two days into the offensive, an entire German corps occupying Vitebsk was in danger of encirclement. Its commander requested permission to retreat. Hitler granted permission for three of the corps' four divisions to retreat; the fourth was to remain behind and defend Vitebsk as one of those *Feste Plätze* that were the key to Hitler's defensive strategy. By the time the corps received notice of Hitler's orders, Vitebsk was already surrounded. The corps commander decided to disregard Hitler's instructions and ordered all four divisions to fight their way westward, out of the encirclement. They could not.

June 24 also marked the beginning of the second part of Bagration, a Soviet offensive at the southern end of Army Group Center's line. After another huge artillery bombardment, the Soviet First Byelorussian Front advanced in two prongs, one to the north and the other to the south of the German Ninth Army.

On June 25, the commander of the German Fourth Army, the easternmost of any of the armies in Army Group Center, requested permission to withdraw about 50 kilometers to positions behind the Dnieper River. By this time, Soviet armored units had penetrated their front line and were advancing into the German rear. This was the second part of Soviet deep operations doctrine: once the enemy front was breached, reserve armored units would quickly advance through the breach to create havoc behind the enemy front.

Even so, Adolf Hitler refused to permit Forth Army to retreat. Its commander ordered a retreat anyway. When Ernst Busch, the overall commander of Army Group Center, learned of the Fourth Army's retreat, he countermanded the order and instructed Fourth Army to return to their original defensive line. But this was impossible, as the Red Army had already advanced past their original line. Busch met with Hitler at the Berghof on June 26, and secured permission for a withdrawal, but by that time, the Red Army had advanced so far the withdrawal had to be to the Berezina River, an additional 100 kilometers farther west. Afterward, some German commanders on the Eastern Front began falsifying their reports, because it was the only way to persuade headquarters to authorize a retreat, and retreat was the only way to save their units.

South of Vitebsk, the Red Army units broke through the German defense of the city of Orsha, forcing a retreat. At one point during the withdrawal a German officer asked an engineer why he was in such a hurry to blow up a bridge across the Dnieper. The engineer handed the officer his binoculars and pointed. The officer looked across the river and saw Soviet T-34 tanks bearing down on them.

Also on June 26, D+20, General Karl-Wilhelm von Schlieben, commander of the garrison at Cherbourg, surrendered as three American divisions closed in on the city. When Adolf Hitler received the news, he went into another one of his increasingly common fits of rage. He couldn't understand why Schlieben hadn't fought to the death. He was a "dishonorable swine," in Hitler's words. Like Paulus at Stalingrad, Schlieben was an officer willing to order others to sacrifice their lives, while unwilling to sacrifice his own.

In fact, by the time of Schlieben's surrender, the German defenders had done so thorough a job of wrecking the port facilities at Cherbourg and mining the harbor, that they concluded any further effort to defend the city had become superfluous. While Hitler bitterly disagreed with their decision, he was pleased by the destruction wrought upon the port, calling it "a feat unprecedented in the annals of coastal defense."

It would take the Allies until July 1 to clear out the last pockets of German resistance in and around Cherbourg, and it took months after that to fully restore Cherbourg's port facilities.

The same day Schlieben surrendered, British and Canadian forces on the other end of the Normandy front began an offensive to capture Caen. The battle began inauspiciously, with bad weather that negated the Allied advantage in the air. The offensive failed after six days of heavy fighting, although it did force the Germans to commit all their reserves to the front line in Normandy.

June 26, a Monday, also marked the opening of the 1944 Republican National Convention in Chicago. You will recall, if you can remember that far back, that in 1940 corporate lawyer Wendell Willkie surprised many by winning the Republican nomination for President over the Party's better known, higher profile political leaders such as Robert Taft, Senator from Ohio and son of former President William Howard Taft, and Thomas Dewey, a young up-and-comer, then the Manhattan District Attorney. Willkie went on to wage a surprisingly successful campaign against Franklin Roosevelt.

After that impressive 1940 effort, Willkie was widely viewed as the front runner for the 1944 Republican nomination, with Taft and Dewey both likely to challenge him once again.

The 1942 midterms had gone pretty well for the Republicans. Among other victories, District Attorney Thomas Dewey beat the Democrats to become the first Republican governor of New York since Al Smith first won the office twenty years earlier.

Willkie had done well in 1940 because of his internationalist leanings. The fall of France that year served as a wake-up call for many Americans and discredited the isolationist wing of his party. But since his defeat, Willkie, in the eyes of many Republicans, had taken the internationalist thing way too far. He'd traveled the world and met foreign leaders as personal representative of the man he'd run against. In 1943, he published a book titled *One World*, which laid out his view of international affairs, a view that was not very Republican, to put it mildly. He'd defended Roosevelt, defended Wilsonian-style internationalism; he'd even defended Joseph Stalin and the Soviet government.

Party leaders felt betrayed. Among them was the now ex-governor of Minnesota, Harold Stassen, who had been an important Willkie booster in 1940. In 1944, he chose to seek the nomination himself. Robert Taft, on the other hand, surprised everyone by declining to seek the nomination this time around. Instead, he endorsed John Bricker, the governor of Ohio, described by one journalist as another Warren G. Harding, only honest. A group of conservative Republicans pushed for Douglas MacArthur as the nominee, but MacArthur was busy directing the Allied campaign in the Southwest Pacific and was in no position to run for President. The governor of California, Earl Warren, who, like Dewey, had won his office in the 1942 mid-terms, took the California primary that year as a favorite son candidate. Willkie was forced to drop out of the race after a poor showing in the primaries.

The polling results showed Dewey as the most popular candidate among the Republicans. By June, the only other serious contender was Bricker, but as the Convention opened, he withdrew

from the race and endorsed Dewey, who went on to take the nomination on the first ballot. The vote was unanimous, save for one lone holdout who voted for MacArthur. Bricker was rewarded with the Vice-Presidential nomination.

On June 27, Soviet forces encircled and liberated the city of Mogilev. That's the town that stood along the crucial road to Minsk.

By June 28, the Red Army had reached the Berezina River. The German Fourth Army had not yet completed crossing the river, due to delays caused by Soviet air and ground attacks, fuel shortages, and the difficult marshy terrain. Farther south, the entire German Ninth Army was encircled by the First Byelorussian Front. Adolf Hitler relieved Ernst Busch of command of Army Group Center and replaced him with Walter Model, his go-to guy when a strong defense was called for. Model was already commander of Army Group North Ukraine. Now he had two army groups to worry about.

On June 29, Adolf Hitler ordered his top commanders in the West, Gerd von Rundstedt and Erwin Rommel, to the Berghof for another meeting. Even Hitler tacitly acknowledged that clearing out the Allied beachhead in Normandy was no longer feasible. He ordered that German units in Normandy adopt a strategy of wearing down the Western Allies with numerous small-scale attacks. With the German position in the East collapsing, Rommel again raised the matter of peace negotiations with the Western Allies, so that Germany could concentrate on the Soviet threat. An infuriated Hitler ordered Rommel out of the room.

In the East, at the northern part of the line, Vitebsk fell, and with it an entire German Army corps was killed or captured, a loss of nearly 30,000 soldiers. At the southern end of the line, the encircled Ninth Army collapsed, a loss of 70,000 soldiers, and the Red Army liberated the city of Bobruysk.

The commander of the First Byelorussian Front, Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovsky, an ethnic Pole, had been purged and imprisoned in 1937, only to be released during the Winter War when Stalin decided the Red Army needed new leadership. He had planned and executed the capture of Bobruysk and the encirclement of the Ninth Army. Stalin rewarded his one-time prisoner with the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, the same rank as Zhukov, Vasilevsky, Konev, and of course Stalin himself.

Now another phase of Operation Bagration was beginning. Having neutralized the German Ninth Army, the First Byelorussian Front advanced west and northwest, while farther north, the Third Byelorussian Front crossed the Berezina River north of the German Fourth Army, which was still struggling to get across the river themselves. Armored units from the two fronts drove toward the city of Minsk, where the headquarters of Army Group Center was stationed. Headquarters and the other rear-area support units in the city disintegrated into panic. Army hospital staffs abandoned their wounded patients to the Red Army and fled west.

On June 30, Army Chief of Staff Kurt Zeizler presented Adolf Hitler with a plan intended to save Army Group Center. The Red Army had pushed the Eastern Front some 200 kilometers farther west, which dangerously exposed Army Group North, which was still holding the line in Estonia. Zeizler proposed that Army Group North withdraw westward a comparable distance, to a position somewhere near the city of Riga. Besides securing Army Group North against a flank attack, this maneuver would greatly shorten its front line, which would free up units from Army Group North to move south and assist Army Group Center.

Zeizler pleaded for Hitler to implement his plan, but when it became clear that Hitler could not be moved, Zeizler asked to be relieved from his position, telling Hitler that "you have forced me to act against my convictions twice—once at Stalingrad and again with regard to Crimea. I am not going to allow myself to be forced a third time." The stress had gotten to be too much for him. Hitler agreed, and in a few weeks would appoint Heinz Guderian to replace him.

On July 1, a German counterattack at Caen failed to force the British back. When Gerd von Rundstedt, commander in chief in the West, telephoned Wilhelm Keitel, overall commander of the Wehrmacht, to report the defeat, Keitel asked him, "What shall we do?" Rundstedt told him, "Make peace, you fools! What else can you do?"

Also on July 1, at Bretton Woods in northern New Hampshire, representatives of 44 members of the United Nations met to discuss international finance and trade in the postwar world in what was officially called the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, but became universally known as the Bretton Woods Conference. Over the following three weeks, the conference would hash out a postwar system of international trade, meant to forestall the calamitous economic effects that developed after the end of the last war: trade wars and runs on gold that had led to the Great Depression, just as John Maynard Keynes had warned in his 1919 book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Keynes was one of the leading figures advocating for such a conference.

Conference members agreed on the principle of free international trade and an end to protectionist tariffs. They also agreed to the establishment of what became the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and to an exchange rate system in which all member states would establish a fixed price in gold for their currency and allow free conversion of member currencies at fixed exchange rates. Members could vary the value of their currency up and down by 10%, but pledged to move no further than that except in financial emergencies, though the International Monetary Fund was designed to step in and aid any nation experiencing the kinds of emergencies we saw in Germany, Austria, and the United States, among other countries, during the Great Depression.

The economic order designed at this conference became known as the Bretton Woods System, and would remain in place until 1971.

[music: Strauss, *A Thousand and One Nights*.]

Minsk, the last major city within the pre-war borders of the Soviet Union, was liberated on July 3. This also completed the encirclement of the stranded Fourth Army to the east. Over the next week, the encircled German forces, the Fourth Army and some units from the Ninth Army that had escaped the previous encirclement, were gradually worn down until killed or captured by the Soviet infantry units left behind, while Soviet armor continued to advance, not allowing the retreating Germans to halt, rest, or organize a defense.

Hitler ordered Gerd von Rundstedt dismissed from his post as commander-in-chief in the West, replacing him with Günther von Kluge. Kluge had previously served as commander of Army Group Center until October 1943, when he was seriously injured in an automobile accident. Now he was on his feet and again fit for duty.

July 4, 1944 was American Independence Day. To mark the occasion, US General Omar Bradley, commander of American forces in Normandy, ordered all American artillery units to open fire on German positions at noon. Some fired red, white, or blue smoke shells. Farther east, the Canadians began an offensive against the SS *Hitlerjugend* Division to take the town of Carpiquet and the airfield they had almost reached on D-Day.

The Canadians captured the town of Carpiquet and held it against a German counterattack the following day, July 5, though they still had not quite taken the airfield. In the East, the Red Army was making armored breakthroughs and pushing the Germans hundreds of kilometers west, but in Normandy, progress was measured in hundreds of yards.

And speaking of the East, Operation Bagration had shattered the German Army Group Center, but now wasn't the time for the Red Army to slow down. They pushed forward in their T-34 tanks and American trucks, while the retreating Germans left behind hundreds of vehicles because of damage or want of fuel. German Army trucks that had fuel fled westward in panic, their drivers passing each other on the road and jockeying for favorable positions as if it were some kind of cross-country road race.

The Soviet goals for this phase of Operation Bagration were to push forward through the region north of the Pripyet Marshes, past the pre-war Soviet border, and into Latvia, Lithuania, and pre-war Eastern Poland. Stavka specifically targeted the cities of Riga in Latvia, Kaunas in Lithuania and Vilnius and Bialystok, which had been part of pre-war Poland. Soviet forces south of the marshes were to take the city of Lwów, also part of pre-war Poland. That's the Polish name for the city, which in our time lies in western Ukraine and is known by its Ukrainian name, Lviv.

We saw at the end of the last war how fluid borders in Eastern Europe could become, and there are going to be more changes, as you can perhaps already tell.

Anyway, this third phase began on July 5. The following day, July 6, outside Hartford, Connecticut, in the United States, the traveling Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, the biggest circus company in the nation, had set up their huge tent, known in circus parlance as

the “big top,” and were putting on an afternoon performance for an audience of about 7,000 people. As the famous high wire troupe, The Flying Wallendas, were performing, a fire started on one of the tent walls. Efforts to douse the fire or to take down the burning portion of the tent wall failed. The evacuation devolved into panic, complicated by the fact that two of the exits were blocked.

While most of the audience escaped unharmed, 168 people died in the fire and an additional 700 or so were injured. It was one of the deadliest fires in US history. I mention this just to underscore that regular peacetime tragedies don’t stop just because there’s a world war going on.

Also on July 6, the Polish Home Army, the Polish resistance, began its own offensive, which they called *Akcja Burza*, which literally translates as “Operation Storm,” although it is usually rendered in English as the more poetic “Operation Tempest.”

You’ll recall that the Soviet Union broke diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile in London after the Germans discovered and publicized the mass grave of Polish Army officers executed by the Soviet NKVD in 1940, and the government-in-exile persisted in asking Moscow uncomfortable questions about the discovery. Since then, the Polish government and the Home Army foresaw that if the rift between them and the Soviets was not resolved by the time the Germans were defeated, the Red Army might come to Poland not as liberators but as occupiers.

The government-in-exile issued orders to the Home Army that, if indeed the Red Army entered Poland before diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR were restored, the Home Army should remain underground and await further orders.

The Home Army commanders on the ground in Poland, however, had their own view. For them, it was crucial to assert Polish sovereignty over the territory of pre-war Poland before the Red Army got there. And that meant all of pre-war Poland, including the territory in Eastern Poland that the USSR had occupied and claimed in 1939. The advancing Red Army would enter Eastern Poland first, therefore the Home Army had to be there and be ready.

They began with Vilnius on July 7. Their plan was not to oppose the Red Army; that would have been suicidal. It was to attack the Germans in tandem with the Soviets, preferably to liberate Vilnius before Soviet forces arrived, or at least to be able to share the credit for liberating the city. After the Germans were gone, the Home Army would quickly place Polish civilian officials into local government offices and assert administrative control over the city before Soviet officials could.

The Home Army had some difficulty getting organized, as the Red Army reached Vilnius sooner than they’d planned. The Home Army gathered a force of about 10,000 to attack the city, but approaching Polish units ran into German Army units retreating westward; only about 5,000 reached the city by July 7.

But Hitler had designated Vilnius one of his *Feste Plätze*; German units remained in the city until the bitter end in prepared defensive positions. They'd also received advance warning of the Home Army's approach. The Polish attack failed to dislodge the Germans, and by noontime, the first advance units of the Soviet Third Byelorussian Front appeared.

The assault on Vilnius would last a week and involved close and bitter combat street by street.

July 7 was also the day that the desperate Japanese defenders on Saipan made their final suicidal assault against the American line, and in Budapest, Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy finally mustered the courage to order an end to the deportations of Jewish Hungarians to the death camp at Auschwitz. I already discussed both these events in previous episodes.

The city of Kaunas, in Lithuania, had had its own Jewish ghetto since the summer of 1941, when the Germans first arrived. Between 1941 and 1943, the Germans murdered most of the ghetto inhabitants, including all of the children. In 1943 the SS assumed control of the ghetto and turned it into a concentration camp. Only those able to do work to assist the German war effort were allowed to live. On July 8, 1944, when it became clear that the Red Army was approaching and German forces would be unable to hold them back, the Germans shipped about half of the population, some 2,500 people, to camps in Germany. The Kaunas ghetto was then set on fire and demolished, with the remaining population still inside. About 500 people managed to escape the massacre; the others burned to death or were shot and killed while trying to escape.

Also on July 8, British and Canadian forces in Normandy began another offensive to take the city of Caen. By the following day, July 9, the Americans declared the island of Saipan secure, while in Normandy, the Canadians finally took Carpiquet airfield, while bloody combat in the ruins of the city forced the Germans to retreat across the River Orne to the southern part of Caen, living the city divided between the Allied-controlled north and the German-controlled south.

At the same time, US forces in western Normandy began their own drive south toward the city of St. Lô. Like Caen, St. Lô was a nexus of roads and railways which had to be taken before any further advance was feasible. It also lay along key routes into Brittany, farther west.

On July 12, the Red Army reached Vilnius, surrounded the city, and began the effort to move in and clear out the German defenders. But the German 3rd Panzer Army counterattacked, surprising the Soviets and the Polish Home Army. They were able to open a corridor to the city, which allowed about 3,000 members of the garrison to escape, though the rest of the garrison force, around 12,000 soldiers, were killed or captured when the city fell on July 13.

If the Polish Home Army was expecting gratitude for their assistance in the fight against the Vilnius garrison, they must have been disappointed. The Red Army arrested or executed the Home Army's officers and gave its soldiers the choice between serving in the Communist Polish People's Army or arrest and internment in the Soviet Union. Those interned remained prisoners until the USSR repatriated them back to Poland in 1947.

Operation Bagration has to stand as one of the most—if not *the* most—successful offensive operations of the Second World War, and arguably, of all time. Casualty figures are hard to pin down, but they're in the neighborhood of 300,000 German soldiers killed and 100,000 taken prisoner. The Germans also lost 2,400 tanks, 600 aircraft, and over 50,000 trucks and other motor vehicles. These are losses from which Germany never recovered, and the offensive left the Red Army in control of Belarus and poised at the edge of Eastern Europe. Soviet losses amount to around 180,000 killed.

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 Steven for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Steven 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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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*; with Germany losing ground in the East and in the West, a group of German Army officers makes one last desperate attempt to end the war. The Plot to Assassinate Hitler, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. The Germans lost about 26 divisions during Operation Bagration. Compare that to the 17 they lost in Stalingrad. Worse than the loss of soldiers in general was the loss of most of the German Army's most experienced soldiers and officers, who were irreplaceable. From this point forward, the quality of the German Army will decline considerably.

And you can tell how swift was the Red Army by the large number of German general officers killed or captured during the offensive. The generals, of course, are usually well behind the front line. Of the 47 generals commanding the frontline formations of Army Group Center, 22 were captured by the Red Army, ten were killed, and two killed themselves, probably to avoid capture, leaving only 13 who lived to fight another day.

[music: Closing War Theme]