The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 443
"Shoot the Works"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

So let us do real fighting,
Boring in and gouging, biting.
Let's take a chance now that we have the ball.
Let's forget those fine firm bases in the dreary shell-raked spaces,
Let's shoot the works and win! Yes, win it all!

US General George Patton.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 443. Shoot the Works.

On July 17, 1944, the Soviet government celebrated the success of Operation Bagration with a spectacle, marching some 57,000 tired, unshaven, and bedraggled German prisoners of war through the streets of Moscow. This event was later dubbed "The Parade of the Vanquished."

These prisoners had been captured two weeks earlier and brought to Moscow to demonstrate the magnitude of the Soviet victory. When they first arrived at the Soviet capital, some of these German POWs expressed surprise that the city was mostly intact. They'd been told the Luftwaffe had reduced Moscow to rubble. The German prisoners also had opportunity to witness what was becoming a regular ritual in Moscow—yet another artillery salute celebrating the liberation of yet another Soviet city. These salutes had grown increasingly elaborate and now included the nighttime firing of multicolored star shells in red, green, white, and blue. Most averted their eyes from the Soviet celebrations, though a few shouts of *"Hitler kaputt!"* could be heard.

Spectators lined Moscow's sidewalks on the day the prisoners passed, including some foreign diplomats. United States Ambassador W. Averell Harriman was there, as were some Japanese diplomats. One wonders what passed through *their* minds as they watched the parade of defeated Germans. *Pravda* had warned Muscovites to watch the parade in silence and not to make any

demonstrations, although many jeered and cursed the prisoners. A *New York Times* reporter present observed one woman shouting at the passing POWs, “Give me back my daughter! Give me back my daughter!” Apparently her daughter had been killed by the Germans.

After the throng of prisoners passed, the authorities sent in a squadron of street-cleaning trucks to wash the pavements where German boots had trodden.

The liberation that Moscow celebrated on the evening of July 16, the night before the Parade of the Vanquished, was that of the city of Grodno. Grodno stood in territory controlled by Poland before the war, but in the eastern part of Poland, the part occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, and the Soviet government still considered it a Soviet city.

Farther south on the Eastern Front, Rokossovsky’s First Byelorussian Front reached the Bug River on July 21. In our time, this stretch of the river forms the border between Poland and Ukraine. On July 24, Rokossovsky captured the city of Lublin, which not only had been part of pre-war Poland, but lay west of the German-Soviet partition line and thus had been controlled by Germany since 1939.

During the German occupation, Lublin suffered the treatment the Nazis typically doled out to Polish cities; its Jewish citizens were ghettoized and later murdered, some at the Majdanek death camp, which the SS established on the outskirts of the city. Educated Polish citizens such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, university students, engineers, police officers, and government officials were killed or sent to labor camps. Some of the ethnic Poles expelled from the portions of Poland the Reich annexed were relocated here and assigned forced labor in support of the German war effort. In 1943, the city suffered an epidemic of typhus due to the crowding and poor sanitation.

After the Red Army came, Lublin suffered the treatment the Soviets typically doled out to Polish cities. Polish Home Army fighters and local officials claiming authority in the name of the government-in-exile were arrested or interned.

Lublin was the first major Polish city not claimed by the Soviet Union to be liberated, so just two days afterward, it was designated the temporary capital of the Polish Committee of National Liberation, a Polish provisional government established by Soviet authorities. Its membership consisted of Polish Communists and other leftists acceptable to Stalin. It was created as a Soviet alternative to the Polish government-in-exile in London. Although that government was recognized by the Western Allies and by the Polish Home Army, the Polish resistance, the Polish Committee of National Liberation, or the Lublin Committee, as it was informally known, had the support of the Soviet government and the Red Army, and that counted for more.

As the Red Army advanced westward past the partition line, the Polish territory it liberated would be placed under the authority of the Lublin Committee, which would begin to legislate, implement land reform, and organize and lead the Polish People’s Army, which would fight

alongside the Red Army against Germany. Most of the officers of the Polish People's Army were actually Soviet Red Army officers, as Poland was short on Army officers and educated people who could serve as officers, owing to the massacres committed by the Germans during the occupation, and also, it must be said, because of the Soviet massacres of Polish Army officers following the USSR's occupation of Eastern Poland in 1939.

The Soviet response to any Western complaints about the USSR unilaterally installing a government of its own choice in Poland without any consultation with its allies was to point out that the Western Allies had unilaterally installed a government of their own choice in Italy without any consultation with the Soviet Union and therefore had few grounds for complaint.

I told you about the plot to assassinate Hitler two episodes ago. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion that was meant to kill him, Adolf Hitler was described as oddly cheerful. There are physical and psychological reasons for that, I am sure, but by that evening, his peculiar euphoria had worn off, to be replaced by his more characteristic reaction of white-hot rage.

Hitler's anger was matched by that of the German public, who were every bit as outraged by the assassination attempt as the most pessimistic of the conspirators had feared. Most Germans realized their country was in a difficult military situation, but also believed Germany's best hope was Adolf Hitler, and killing him would surely lead the nation to chaos and disaster.

When Hitler made his radio address to the nation the night after the assassination attempt, he had compared it to the Nazi *Dolchstoßlegende,* the stab-in-the-back myth, which was their explanation for why Germany had been cheated of victory in the previous war. Now the *Dolchstoßlegende* had returned, only this time the villains of the story were not socialists and Jews; this time, they were the senior leadership of the German military.

Hitler had always resented the military leadership for their aristocratic backgrounds and their years of military experience and felt they looked down on him, a mere commoner who had risen no farther than corporal during his own time in the Army. The assassination conspiracy composed of Army officers, many of whom had *von* in their names, served in Hitler's view as clear proof he'd been right about them all along, as well as confirmation of his suspicions that the military setbacks Germany had experienced since 1942 were due to the insubordination of the senior military leadership, who were twisting or outright disobeying his orders and sabotaging the German war effort, for the sole purpose of making Adolf Hitler look bad.

Now it was payback time. He unleashed Heinrich Himmler and the SS, who had their own resentments against the military, to track down and punish the conspirators, and not only the conspirators, but their families, at the suggestion of Himmler, who advocated reinstating the ancient German principle of *Sippenhaft,* that is, of holding the perpetrator's family members equally culpable for their crimes, regardless of whether they were involved in their relative's crime, or even knew of it.

The Nazis had occasionally applied *Sippenhaft* before, most often in cases of military desertion. Recall that Stalin also punished the families of deserters. But after the July 20 assassination attempt, *Sippenhaft* became much more frequently applied, beginning with the families of the conspirators. Take for example, the family of Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. Stauffenberg himself had been executed the night of the assassination attempt, but the Gestapo went after his brother Berthold, a civilian lawyer who had also participated in the conspiracy. He was executed by hanging, after a torture session that consisted of being repeatedly strangled to the point of unconsciousness, then revived and strangled again. The third Stauffenberg brother, Alexander, was an Army lieutenant serving in Greece at the time of the assassination attempt. He had known nothing about his brothers' conspiracy, but was sent to a concentration camp anyway. He did survive the war.

Claus's wife Nina, who was pregnant at the time, was also sent to a concentration camp. Their four children, plus the baby Nina bore in January 1945, were placed in an orphanage under a different surname. Stauffenberg's corpse, which had initially been buried in a cemetery, was exhumed by the SS, cremated, and the ashes scattered in a garbage dump.

Henning von Tresckow, who had been a key figure in organizing the plot, killed himself on July 21, the day after. He was on the Eastern Front at the time, near the city of Białystok. He staged his suicide to make it look as if he had been ambushed and killed by the Polish Home Army, but after the Gestapo learned of his involvement in the plot, his body was also exhumed from the cemetery where he'd been buried, then cremated and disposed of at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. His wife was arrested and placed in a concentration camp, and their two younger children in an orphanage. Their two older children, both sons serving in the Army, were spared.

General Friedrich Fromm, the commander of the Replacement Army, who you'll recall had been aware that his chief of staff, Colonel Stauffenberg, was planning an assassination and coup and had quietly agreed to go along with the plot, had Stauffenberg and some other plotters executed immediately after the plot failed. He likely did this to protect himself by eliminating witnesses who could testify to his own involvement. The trouble for Fromm was that it *looked* like he was protecting himself by eliminating witnesses who could testify to his own involvement. The Gestapo investigation uncovered evidence that Fromm at least knew about the plot and did not report it, and so he was convicted of cowardice before the enemy. He was spared the torture and the painful and protracted executions inflicted upon the other conspirators; instead they sentenced him to a conventional military execution by firing squad.

To replace Fromm as commander of the Replacement Army, Hitler took no chances on the loyalty of the military command; he appointed SS chief Heinrich Himmler, about as safe a choice as you could imagine.

All in all, the Gestapo arrested some 7,000 people and executed 5,000 of them. These arrests went far beyond the coup plotters and their families. Any Army officer or civilian even suspected of disloyalty to the Nazi government was swept up in the arrests.

There was a legal tradition in Germany at the time that required all military personnel be tried in military courts for any crime, and never in a civilian court. In order to get around this restriction, officers accused of participating in the assassination plot were first subjected to courts martial that rubber-stamped the Gestapo's conclusions and expelled them from the military.

They were then eligible to be tried in the Volksgerichthof, or People's Court, which Hitler had established by decree in 1934, pursuant to his special powers under the Enabling Act. The People's Court assumed jurisdiction over cases of treason, sabotage, and assassination of government officials, and its creation justified at the time as a temporary expedient to expedite justice. Ten years later, the People's Court was still in place, the only noticeable change being the sentences it handed down, which became increasingly severe.

In 1944, the President of the People's Court was Roland Freisler, an Old Nazi who had been a Party member since 1923. Freisler assigned to himself cases related to the assassination plot. He was a zealous Nazi who had studied the show trials conducted during the purges in the Soviet Union for pointers. Freisler freely heaped abuse upon the people who appeared before his court, his favorite insult being the classic *Schweinehund,* a favorite word of the SS and of Hollywood screenwriters scripting war pictures, which Freisler freely used to address defendants. Defendants were not allowed to consult their lawyers, offer evidence, or address the court. Every single person brought before the People's Court on charges of involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler was found guilty.

Schweinehund, by the way, literally means *pig dog,* that is, a dog that assists a swineherd in managing a herd of pigs, and at the time was considered a serious insult, although it is difficult to translate into other languages. The closest English equivalent might be *son of a bitch*. Fun fact: in 1932, Kurt Schumacher, a Reichstag deputy and member of the SPD, described Nazism as "a continuous appeal to the inner *Schweinehund* in human beings." Ha! Well put.

In our time, Germans rarely use the word except in Schumacher's formulation of the "inner *Schweinehund,"* usually as a bit of self-criticism, as in blaming your own rude or careless behavior on your "inner *Schweinehund."*

A few days after the assassination attempt, and as a consequence of Hitler's suspicions of disloyalty in the military, he ordered that the German military abandon the traditional military salute and replace it with the Nazi salute; that is, arm extended forward in the so-called Roman salute, accompanied by the words *"Heil Hitler!"*

[music: Liszt, *Transcendental Etudes*.]

At the same time as these dramatic events were taking place on the Eastern Front and in Germany, on the Western Front, the bloody combat continued. Bernard Montgomery was still pushing unsuccessfully to break through the German lines at Caen, while farther west, the Americans, once they'd secured Cherbourg and the Cotentin Peninsula, began their own push southward. Recall that Montgomery explained away his own failure to advance by suggestging he was keeping busy most of Germany's best units in France, including those SS panzer divisions. This would make it easier for the Americans farther west.

This sounds like an after-the-fact rationalization, and it probably was. But that doesn't mean he was wrong.

This distance from Carentan to St. Lô was less than twenty miles, but it was a slow and agonizing slog for the Americans, who had to pick their way through marshes and bocage while remaining ever alert for the Germans' latest creative ambush. The American commander, Omar Bradley, became disheartened and warned Eisenhower that the front line in Normandy might devolve into an immobile, First World War-type standoff.

On July 15, one battalion of the US 29th Infantry Division advanced too far and found itself within a mile of St. Lô, but surrounded and isolated by German forces. Two days later, another battalion came to their rescue, though the commander of this second battalion, Major Thomas Howie, was killed in the fighting.

US armored units made their way to the advanced position held by these two battalions. The Germans withdrew, and on July 18, the Americans entered St. Lô. The body of Major Howie, draped by a US flag, was placed on the hood of the lead jeep, making him the first American soldier to enter St. Lô, at least symbolically. Howie's body was then placed on the rubble of St. Croix Cathedral in St. Lô. Soldiers picked flowers and laid them alongside the body. A reporter for the US military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* named Andy Rooney described it as a heartwarming scene in the middle of a gruesome war.

During the battle for St. Lô, an American soldier in the 2nd Armored Division came up with an idea for dealing with the endless, tedious, dangerous hedgerows. His idea was this: attach steel prongs to the front of a Sherman tank, which could then slice through the hedgerow. The idea was tested, it worked, and after it was demonstrated to Omar Bradley on July 14, he ordered that a number of Sherman tanks be fitted with these prongs. Steel for the prongs was sourced from the anti-tank obstacles the Germans had left on the Normandy beaches as part of their "Atlantic Wall." American soldiers referred to these modified tanks as "Rhinos." Soon the British Army picked up on the idea and began modifying their own tanks.

After the liberation of St. Lô, or what was left of it, the Americans began planning their next offensive. By this time, substantial numbers of American armored units had been deployed to Normandy, and the idea was to beat the Germans at their own game, so to speak, by breaking

through a narrow portion of the front, then sending US armored forces through the gap in a rapid advance that would disrupt the German rear. This plan was called Operation Cobra.

Operation Cobra was set to begin on July 24, with a bomber attack at dawn on the German position, but unfortunately the American bombers mistakenly bombed the American front line, causing over 100 casualties and forcing a postponement of the attack. It was the many incidents like this one that inspired a joke that circulated among German soldiers on the Western Front, to wit: When the RAF flies overhead, the Germans duck. When the Luftwaffe flies overhead, nobody ducks, and when the Americans fly overhead, everyone ducks.

By the way, a variation of this joke went like this: If you see a white plane, it's American. If you see a black plane, it's the RAF. If you see no plane, it's the Luftwaffe. Who says Germans don't have a sense of humor?

This heavy bombing attack not followed up by any sort of ground attack had the fringe benefit of persuading Günther von Kluge, now the German commander-in-chief in the West, that the whole thing was a diversion meant to distract the Germans from a pending British offensive at the other end of the line.

The Americans tried again the next day, July 25. This time, although their bombers caused some 600 more American casualties, most of the bombs hit where they were meant to: on a narrow section of the German front, heavily damaging the unit stationed there.

The unit stationed there happened to be the 130th Panzer Division, better known by its nickname, the *Panzer-Lehr-Division*, which roughly translates as the "armor training division." That's because this division was created in early 1944 out of armored training and demonstration units. Members of these units were some of the most skilled armored combat soldiers in the entire German Army, mostly veterans of the Eastern Front or the campaign in North Africa. The Division was created to shore up German defenses in France and was one of the best units in the German Army.

The *Panzer-Lehr-Division* had originally been one of the armored divisions the Germans sent to the eastern part of the Normandy front to frustrate Montgomery's attempts to advance. It had already taken heavy losses when it was transferred west to the American part of the front, the easier part of the front, or so German commanders reckoned.

Panzer-Lehr-Division was already in bad shape; the American bombing and subsequent assault annihilated it. Operation Cobra had begun.

The German defenders had put into place a very effective system for defending bocage, one that had cost the Americans dearly. It took only a few German soldiers and a couple of machine guns hidden behind the hedgerow that separated the fields to make any American advance into the open terrain deadly.

The rural roads in this region of France are typically sunken, meaning the road bed is a meter or two or a yard or two lower than the fields on either side. These are known as sunken roads or sunken lanes. The English call them *holloways*, or hollow ways, see? The Germans would fortify these holloways at the crossroads with barbed wire and an anti-tank gun, to guard against the Americans using the roads to advance tanks or other vehicles, while the hedgerows ruled out a rapid advance cross country.

It took relatively few soldiers to set up defenses such as these, which allowed the Germans to make their defensive lines miles deep, so that a breakthrough at any one point would allow the Americans to make no more than a modest advance at great cost.

This is why there was so little movement on this front in the first seven weeks of the campaign, but then came Operation Cobra and everything changed. After *Panzer-Lehr-Division* was neutralized, the Americans' modified tanks began advancing across the bocage, ignoring machine gun fire as they ripped gaping holes in the hedgerows and forced the German defenders to withdraw.

The results of the first day's fighting disappointed American commanders, but the offensive continued. On the second day, four more American divisions entered the fight, attacking the German line farther east. By the third day, the Germans were in retreat. By the fourth day, July 28, American tanks were probing deep into German-held territory, disrupting communications. German commanders were not getting information fast enough to track American advances. Retreating German forces were strafed by American fighter planes, while US P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers patrolled overhead, following the American armored columns as they advanced, providing reconnaissance and attacking anything that looked like an ambush.

Now the German commander, Günther von Kluge, at last realized that the threat was not Montgomery at Caen; it was the Americans at St. Lô. He ordered two panzer divisions to disengage the British and Canadians and move west to reinforce the sector where the Americans were advancing, but it was already too late. The German defensive line had collapsed; the Americans successfully employed blitzkrieg against the army that had invented it.

On July 30, Montgomery began another offensive on the eastern end of the front to prevent the Germans from sending any more units west to oppose the Americans.

New US divisions were entering the fight every day, while German resistance had vanished. On July 31, American armored units advancing along the west coast of Normandy reached the town of Avranches, which sits where the coastline of Normandy meets the coast of Brittany. The Americans were out of the bocage, out of Normandy, and still virtually unopposed.

The following day, August 1, the American force in Normandy, the First Army, was joined by the newly organized Third Army, which would fight on the right flank of the First Army. First Army commander Omar Bradley was promoted to command the newly created Twelfth Army

Group, which would oversee both armies. General Courtney Hodges took over command of the First Army. Commander of the Third Army was George Patton.

Patton had been away from the front lines for almost a year. His previous command, the Seventh Army, had sat in Sicily while Mark Clark led the American campaign in mainland Italy, this in the aftermath of those two incidents when he'd slapped his own soldiers.

Eisenhower had quietly taken Patton out of combat and tried to keep the stories of the slappings out of the press, but in November 1943, journalist Drew Pearson revealed the incidents on his radio program and told his audience Patton would never again be given a combat command. In response to Pearson's report, Eisenhower's command released a statement confirming that Patton had slapped a soldier but denying he'd received any reprimand.

The news created an uproar in the United States. Letters poured into the War Department, some calling for Patton to be dismissed, others defending him. Members of Congress joined the debate. The father of one of the soldiers who had been slapped publicly declared that he forgave Patton and asked that he not be punished. Mrs. Patton defended him in an interview with the *Washington Post,* while Patton's former commander, General John Pershing, criticized Patton's conduct.

Although he was out of combat, Eisenhower kept Patton in his command, as he believed Patton to be "indispensible," that's his word, and hoped to bring him back to the front lines during Operation Overlord. In the United States, War Secretary Henry Stimson defended Eisenhower's decision in public, while privately observing that keeping Patton was a sound military decision, but it was terrible for public relations.

And so the commander of the US First Army, the American force that landed at Normandy, was commanded by Omar Bradley, not George Patton, even though Bradley was junior to Patton in rank. Eisenhower judged that the complex operation to invade Normandy required a steady, reliable commander, not someone as mercurial as Patton.

Toward the end of 1943, Eisenhower sent Patton on a tour of the Mediterranean as a red herring to distract the Germans, who regarded Patton as the Americans' most effective commander and refused to believe the Americans would push him aside over those silly little slapping incidents. That's why in 1944, when the British and Americans were running Operation Fortitude, the deception campaign to trick the Germans into expecting an invasion at Calais, they put George Patton in command of the nonexistent army group that was supposed to conduct the invasion.

In reality, Patton had been assigned to train a new Third Army in England, which was then transferred to Normandy in July and entered combat on August 1. On that same day, Patton composed the poem I read to you at the top of the episode.

Patton's orders were to take the Third Army west and secure Brittany for the Allies. But if you recall Patton's actions in Sicily the previous year, you know that George Patton regarded his assigned objective as just the first step. He sent most of his Third Army units south and east, where there were no German defenders to stop them.

Patton assigned one corps to attack west and capture Brittany, to protect the American right flank. German troops in Brittany withdrew to the port cities of Brest, on the tip of the peninsula, and Lorient, on the southern coast of the peninsula. By now you should be able to guess before I even say it that Hitler had designated these two most important ports in Brittany to be *Feste Plätze*, fortified positions. German Army units were ordered to hole up in the two cities and prevent their capture for as long as possible.

The Brest garrison was commanded by General Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke and his 2nd Parachute Division, plus an assortment of other units amounting to about 40,000 in all. Opposing them were 75,000 American soldiers of VIII Corps. The battle for Brest was bitter house-to-house urban combat that lasted until Ramcke surrendered on September 19. In a famous incident, when an American officer appeared at Ramcke's headquarters to accept his surrender, Ramcke was miffed that he wasn't the commander of VIII Corps. He wasn't even a division commander. He was the deputy commander of the 8th Division, General Charles Canham. Did he even have the authority to accept a surrender? Ramcke asked to see his credentials. Canham waved his arm to indicate the troop of American soldiers that had accompanied him and said, "These are my credentials."

The words, *These are my credentials*, were later adopted as the motto of the 8th Division.

Brest was leveled by the intense combat, and once again the Germans had carefully and thoroughly wrecked its port facilities before surrendering them, and by the time the port was repaired and became available, it was no longer needed. The experience of the Battle for Brest persuaded the Western Allies to forego any more assaults on German garrisons in fortified port cities. Instead, when dealing with most other French ports, such as Lorient, the Allies would merely surround and besiege the German garrison.

Taking Brittany was all well and good, but you don't have to be George Patton to see a much more attractive possibility. The Americans had punched through the German line just at the point where it reached the sea. This meant that beyond the bridge over the River Sélune, which the Americans had captured intact, lay the wide open spaces of the French interior. No more bocage, and more important, no more Germans.

The road was open all the way to Rennes and beyond. Patton's armored units could race south, then turn east and cut across behind the German front, all the while wreaking havoc on German supply, communication, and reinforcement.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Robert for his kind donation, and thank you to James for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Robert and James 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*; as we look east as the Polish Home Army makes a risky attempt to seize Warsaw from the Germans before the Red Army arrives. Tempest, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. On February 3, 1945, the People's Court was in session, Roland Freisler presiding over the case of one of the Army officers involved in the assassination plot against Hitler, when the air raid sirens went off. American B-17 bombers were attacking Berlin, targeting buildings used by the German government and the Nazi Party. Freisler adjourned the trial and ordered everyone to the air raid shelters, but he himself stayed behind to gather the case files, presumably to avoid their destruction.

An American bomb fell on the court building, triggering a partial collapse which happened to come down right on Freisler, killing him instantly. His body was later recovered, still holding the case files he'd collected.

When the body was delivered to a local hospital, one member of the staff remarked that Freisler's death was "God's verdict." A Swedish reporter covering these events wrote, "Apparently nobody regretted his death."

[music: Closing War Theme]