

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 454

“The Altar of Alliance”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“No nation ought to sacrifice itself on the altar of alliance.”

German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 454. The Altar of Alliance.

In episode 444, I told you the story of how Romania abruptly switched sides on August 23, 1944. Romania repudiated the Axis and joined the Allies, while successfully fending off the German and Hungarian armies and reclaiming the slice of territory that had been awarded to Hungary at the Second Vienna Conference in 1940.

The Romanian switch was bad news for Germany, as it meant the loss of oil from Romania's oil fields, a critical blow. Petroleum products have been in short supply in Germany since the invasion of the Soviet Union triggered a cut-off of imports from that country; now the situation had suddenly gotten much worse, especially since American bombers were now picking off Germany's synthetic fuel plants. In addition, the loss of Romania made German forces in Yugoslavia and especially Greece much more vulnerable. Likewise, Hungary suddenly found itself exposed to hostile armed forces on a new front.

But the news was bleakest for Bulgaria. Bulgaria was in a peculiar diplomatic posture during the war. Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact and thus became at least notionally a member of the Axis on March 1, 1941, but this took place only after German pressure. The failure of the Italian attempt to occupy Greece in 1940 forced Germany to intervene in the Balkans in 1941. Bulgaria and Yugoslavia both signed the Tripartite Pact in March 1941, clearing the way for a German attack on Greece, but two days after Yugoslavia signed, its government was overthrown in a coup by pro-British military officers.

The German government was able to get Bulgaria to agree to allow German military forces to pass through Bulgarian territory in order to attack Greece, in exchange for awards of Greek and Yugoslav territory to Bulgaria following the capitulations of those two countries. The Bulgarian military did not participate in the wars against either nation, apart from occupying the territories promised.

Two months later, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Bulgaria traditionally had a close relationship with Russia, which had not posed any problems when Germany and the USSR had a non-aggression pact between them, but the invasion put Bulgaria in a precarious diplomatic position. Bulgaria refused to declare war on the USSR; in fact, Bulgaria maintained diplomatic relations with Moscow even after the invasion.

This meant that Bulgaria was technically neutral; it had not declared war on any Allied nation. In spite of this, Britain cut diplomatic relations with Bulgaria and the RAF bombed the capital Sofia twice during the brief German campaign in Yugoslavia in April 1941, but once Yugoslavia fell and Germany invaded Greece, the British had bigger problems on their hands.

Germany declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941. Two days later, after German diplomatic pressure, Bulgaria declared war on both the United States and Britain as a gesture of solidarity, though the Bulgarian leadership regarded this as a symbolic act and took no military action against either Allied nation. The Americans and the British, on the other hand, regarded those declarations of war as something more than symbolic. Britain declared war on Bulgaria on December 13, 1941; the United States didn't get around to it until June 5, 1942. Both countries began bombing Sofia in October 1943.

But Bulgaria retained its neutrality *vis á vis* the Soviet Union. The Bulgarian government would not even allow the formation of units of Bulgarian volunteers to fight on the Eastern Front as had Spain and France. The only combat actions the Bulgarians took against the Western Allies was to intercept Allied bombers in Bulgarian airspace. As for the Soviets, Bulgarian naval vessels sometimes escorted Axis merchant ships in the Black Sea and occasionally exchanged fire with Soviet warships, but officially remained neutral.

In the spring of 1944, with the Red Army at the Romanian border, the Soviet Union pressed Bulgaria to cut its ties to the Axis. The Bulgarian government at first held out a slender hope that the Western Allies would invade the Balkans and Bulgaria might be able to work out a deal with them that would avoid the country's occupation by either the Germans or the Red Army. Once the Normandy invasion began, though, it became clear that the Western Allies would not be deploying troops to the Balkans anytime soon.

In August, the Bulgarians successfully negotiated an agreement with Germany for the withdrawal of most of the German Army from Bulgaria, on the argument that their presence endangered Bulgarian neutrality. Then came August 23, the day Romania switched sides. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union informed Sofia that it no longer recognized Bulgarian neutrality. In

early September, a new Bulgarian government was formed; it evicted the remaining German forces, but that still wasn't enough to satisfy Moscow. The Soviets wanted a Bulgarian declaration of war against Germany.

On September 5, Sofia broke diplomatic relations with Germany. On September 7, as the last German troops were leaving the country, Bulgaria declared war on Germany, but they were a little too late. Just hours earlier, the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria.

At this particular moment in time, Bulgaria had the unique distinction of being in a state of war with the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union, all at the same time.

The following day, September 8, the Red Army crossed the border into Bulgaria. In Sofia that same day, the Bulgarian Army overthrew the government and installed a new one supported by a coalition of parties that had opposed Bulgaria's alignment with Germany, including the Bulgarian Communist Party. Bulgaria signed an armistice agreement with Allied representatives in Moscow on October 28; the terms of the armistice required Bulgaria to withdraw from the Yugoslav and Greek territories awarded to it by Germany. For the remainder of the war, the Bulgarian Army would be fighting Axis forces alongside the Red Army.

The Finnish government in Helsinki likewise viewed the defection of Romania with alarm. Finland had been trying to get out of this war for some time; since the German defeat at Stalingrad, and especially since the Red Army broke the siege of Leningrad in January 1944. There were attempts at negotiations, but these got nowhere, principally because Soviet demands were greater than what Finland was willing to concede.

In April 1944, after the Germans got wind of Finnish efforts to make peace with the Soviets, Germany cut off food and military aid to Finland.

In early June 1944, the Red Army began an offensive against the Finns, which recaptured the city of Viipuri and pushed the Finnish Army back to roughly the Soviet-Finnish border that the two nations had agreed to in 1940, at the end of the Winter War.

By this time, however, Operation Bagration had begun and the Soviet offensive against Finland stopped. Maybe I should say "paused." Germany was of course the bigger threat and it appears that Stalin and the Soviet leadership had chosen to put everything they had into the fight against the Germans. Finland could wait.

On the Finnish side of the line, Finnish military leaders believed they could no longer hold out against the Red Army. Helsinki appealed to Germany for six to eight German infantry divisions plus military equipment, as the Finns calculated this was the level of assistance they needed to stay in the war. Otherwise, they would have no choice but surrender.

With Army Group Center collapsing, Germany could not afford to divert six divisions, but Hitler did order one infantry division and some naval units sent to Finland. German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop traveled to Helsinki on June 22, the same day Bagration began, to discuss the situation with the Finns. He told them Germany was prepared to send another infantry division, plus shipments of artillery, antitank guns, a Luftwaffe squadron, and thousands of Panzerschrecks, the German shoulder-mounted anti-tank rocket launcher that was their answer to the American bazooka. But Germany wanted something in return; it wanted the Finnish government to dispense with the claim that their war against the USSR, the “Continuation War” was a separate conflict. Instead, Finland must clearly and publicly embrace an alliance with Germany and acknowledge they were fighting side-by-side against a common enemy. Ribbentrop was leaving on June 25; the Finnish government had until then to agree to Germany’s request.

While the Finnish government was mulling this over, it received a communication from the USSR, inquiring about beginning another round of peace negotiations. This left them with a difficult decision to make. The Finns offered Ribbentrop a watered-down draft declaration, which he rejected. Ribbentrop then gave the Finns a draft letter to be signed by Finnish President Risto Ryti. Ryti signed a somewhat revised version of this letter. Crucially, it did include a pledge that Finland would not seek a separate peace. Also crucially, it was only signed by the President, not ratified by the Finnish parliament, which meant the pledge was perhaps morally binding on Ryti, but not legally binding on Finland.

After Ryti signed the letter, Germany resumed military aid to Finland, but the agreement was controversial, both within Finland and abroad. The United States responded to the news by cutting diplomatic relations with Finland. On July 17, Moscow sent another message inquiring about peace negotiations, but stipulating they would not negotiate with the current Finnish government.

Fair enough. On August 1, Finnish President Ryti resigned. Three days later, the Finnish parliament gave the presidency to Finland’s national hero, Carl Gustav Mannerheim, who had been serving as commander-in-chief of the Finnish military since the Winter War began in 1939. Mannerheim was by this time 77 years old and in poor health, but he was the one Finn who had the credibility to negotiate a peace agreement with the Allies, as well as the credibility to sell the deal to the Finnish public.

Finland and the USSR agreed to an armistice on September 2, and after further negotiations, the two sides came to an agreement, which was surprisingly generous toward the Finns, given the circumstances. Don’t get me wrong; it was still pretty tough. It reinstated the terms imposed on Finland after the Winter War, along with some new ones. Finland had to cede the Petsamo region to the Soviet Union. This is territory in the far north, on the shore of the Barents Sea, that contains valuable nickel deposits. Finland was selling this nickel to Germany during the war. The

cession of Petsamo meant that Finland no longer had a northern coast; instead, the USSR now bordered on Norway.

The peace agreement also required that Finland pay US\$300,000,000 to the Soviet Union in reparations, a hefty sum for a small country.

Nevertheless, I called the deal generous because Finland was at Stalin's mercy by September 1944; he could have demanded anything up to and including the conversion of Finland into the Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic. When you consider the Soviet Union's actions after signing the non-aggression agreement with Germany in 1939, there was the annexation of Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, and Bessarabia, as well as the Winter War. It sure looked as if Stalin had decided to restore the 1914 borders of the old Russian Empire, just as Hitler was vying to restore the 1914 borders of the old German Empire, only the Finns proved too difficult to defeat in 1940.

Here in 1944 was an opportunity to finish the job, so why didn't Stalin take it? Finland had garnered a lot of sympathy in the West and an annexation of the plucky little country would have alienated the Western Allies. And by this time, the Red Army was making its final push into Germany, while the Western Allies were in France and pressing Germany from the other direction. Germany was far and away the more important enemy, and Stalin may have judged that commanding the first army to reach Berlin would be worth more than commanding the first army to reach Helsinki.

To sum it up, in a period of less than three weeks, Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland all abandoned Germany. The list of German allies, as Elrond might have put it, was growing thin. Who was left?

There was France, and when I say France here I mean the French government seated at Vichy since 1940. Unoccupied France was occupied by the Germans and Italians following the Allied invasion of North Africa, episode 379, but the government at Vichy continued. On August 17, 1944, two days after the Allied invasion of southern France, Pierre Laval, prime minister in Vichy, met with his government to discuss recalling the old National Assembly, the one that last met in 1940, and reconstituting it as the French national legislature. That National Assembly, having been elected, had a plausible claim to legitimacy, arguably a stronger claim than de Gaulle's government had.

The German ambassador in Vichy approved the idea, but Berlin did not. Instead, Laval and his ministers were transferred to Sigmaringen Castle in southwest Germany, where they were to be the supposed French government-in-exile. The Germans also requested the Head of the French State, Philippe Pétain, to move to Sigmaringen with his government, but Pétain, now 88 years old, refused. Two days later, German representatives returned and showed Pétain a written order from the German government instructing them to move him to Sigmaringen Castle, even if it were against his will. Pétain gave in and allowed himself to be moved to Sigmaringen, though he

refused to cooperate with the Germans or with what was officially still his government. What did he do? What do former generals and heads of state do in their twilight years? Brood, I suppose.

Then there was the Italian Social Republic, the RSI, which you might think of as “Vichy Italy,” still led by Benito Mussolini. Remember him? I imagine he was also brooding a lot by this time. The Italian Social Republic celebrated its first anniversary in September 1944. For what it was worth, the RSI was still loyal to Germany, though it would be more accurate to say it was dependent on Germany for its existence. It controlled Italy, but only as far south as the Italian Front, and even then some portions of Italy north of that line were under German military administration.

Back in January 1944, RSI officials had prosecuted 19 members of the former Grand Council of Fascism. You’ll recall that Mussolini’s fall began with a vote of the Grand Council of Fascism to remove him in July 1943, episode 390. The vote went 19-8 against Mussolini; now the rump Fascist Italian state tried Mussolini’s 19 opponents, convicted them all of treason, and sentenced most of them to death.

Only six of the 19 had been physically present in territory controlled by the RSI; the other 13 were convicted *in absentia*. Five of the six defendants in RSI custody were sentenced to execution; the executions were carried out immediately after the trial ended, on January 11, 1944. Among the five executed are two names we’ve encountered before. The first is Emilio de Bono, Marshal of Italy and war hero. (Also war criminal.) De Bono was 78 years old at the time of his conviction; referencing his advanced age, he told the court, “You barely got me.”

The other familiar name is Galeazzo Ciano, former Italian foreign minister and Mussolini’s son-in-law. He was once regarded as Mussolini’s likely successor, but it was not to be.

You might see this trial as Mussolini’s revenge, but in fact it was largely a German project. Adolf Hitler was, if anything, more eager to avenge Mussolini than *il Duce* was. It’s not clear Mussolini had anything at all to do with the prosecution.

And so it was that Germany had only one ally left in Europe, after the loss of Romania, Finland, and Bulgaria and considering the irrelevance of the French State and the RSI. I am speaking of Hungary.

[music: Liszt, *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 8*.]

You’ll recall that Hungary’s regent, Miklos Horthy, and his government had begun diplomatic efforts to negotiate an armistice with the Western Allies in the fall of 1943. The German government got wind of these discussions and Hitler ordered the German Army to occupy Hungary in March 1944. An SS officer named Edmund Veessenmayer was appointed Reich plenipotentiary in Hungary, essentially the military governor of occupied Hungary, though once

Horthy appointed a pro-German prime minister, Veessenmayer and the Germans were content to govern Hungary in cooperation with the Hungarian government.

Hungary was home to the largest surviving Jewish community in Axis-occupied Europe; Veessenmayer oversaw the removal of over 400,000 of them to the Auschwitz death camp between May and July 1944, before Horthy asserted himself and ordered an end to the deportations.

In August, Horthy appointed a new prime minister, one who supported Horthy's ban on the deportations. Berlin was not happy with these developments, but by this time the Germans had their hands full with the Normandy landings and the Red Army's Operation Bagration. In September, Red Army troops crossed the border into Hungary for the first time. Horthy chose to make another attempt at negotiating an armistice, this time with the Soviet Union. His own son, also named Miklos, began clandestine meetings with Soviet representatives. The Hungarian side offered to surrender to the USSR in exchange for guarantees that the Soviets would respect Hungary's independence and autonomy. Soviet representatives agreed.

Horthy informed the Germans of this plan to seek an armistice. Hitler called upon the SS's celebrated commando Otto Skorzeny, leader of the operation to rescue Mussolini, and sent him to Budapest to prevent it. The Germans sent a false message to Miklos Jr., inviting him to meet with a representative of the Yugoslav Communist resistance leader, Tito. The meeting was a ruse. When Horthy arrived, the morning of October 15, 1944, Skorzeny and a unit of SS soldiers beat him and wrapped him in a carpet. Miklos Jr. and the carpet were then whisked away to the airport and flown to Vienna. The younger Horthy was ultimately placed in a German concentration camp.

At 2:00 that afternoon, the elder Horthy, as yet unaware of his son's kidnapping, gave a national radio broadcast in which he announced that Hungary and the USSR had agreed to an armistice. Shortly after the broadcast ended and Horthy returned to Buda Castle, where he lived and from which he ruled Hungary, the fascist Arrow Cross Party seized control of the radio station and announced that Horthy had been deposed and the armistice rescinded. Skorzeny led a unit of German soldiers accompanied by four King Tiger tanks, Germany's biggest, latest, and most fearsome yet, to the gates of Horthy's palace. Horthy took one look and surrendered.

The SS took Horthy into custody. The next day, Horthy's prime minister arrived with a prepared statement for him to sign. It said that Horthy was renouncing the armistice and abdicating his position as regent in favor of Ferenc Szalasi, leader of the Arrow Cross Party. The statement was presented to Horthy along with the news that his son was in German custody and would be killed unless Horthy signed.

Horthy signed the statement. Afterward, he was also taken to Germany and held under house arrest. Szalasi became Leader and prime minister of Hungary, head of what was in essence a fascist government modeled on Nazi Germany. Under Szalasi, Hungary remained a staunch ally

of Germany. Large numbers of Hungarian men were drafted to fight the Red Army, which by this time held a significant piece of Hungarian territory. Hungary's economic resources were placed at Germany's disposal, and the Szalasi government restarted the deportations of Jewish Hungarians to Auschwitz. It was during this period, when the Szalasi government was in power, that Raoul Wallenberg and many other foreign diplomats did the bulk of their work in issuing foreign passports to exempt some of these Jewish Hungarians from the deportations, as I described in episode 426.

Following the German occupation of Greece in April 1941, the Greek government fled the country and operated as a government-in-exile, based at first in South Africa, then Britain, before relocating a second time to Cairo in 1943. By September of 1944, it was clear that the German position in the Balkans was collapsing. The German occupation force in Greece was preparing to withdraw from the country.

That month, in Caserta, Italy, not far from Naples, representatives of the Greek government-in-exile and the two resistance forces in Greece, the right-wing National Republican Greek League and the Communist-led National Liberation Front, signed an agreement under which all parties agreed to the formation of a national unity government for liberated Greece.

The rugged, mountainous terrain of Greece is ideal for guerilla warfare, and by 1944 Greek resistance fighters controlled most of the country outside of the major cities. The Greek resistance was divided into mutually hostile right-wing and left-wing groups, as I described in episode 403. By 1944, the Communist-led leftists were far more numerous than their rightist opponents and they seemed in a position to seize control of the country following the inevitable German withdrawal. But the Soviet government in Moscow pressed the Communists in Greece to take a more conciliatory stance, as the Soviets feared a conflict between Communists and anti-Communists in Greece would endanger the larger alliance between the USSR and the Western Allies.

When the German withdrawal began, the Germans were harried by the Communist resistance fighters, but the British opted not to interfere, even as German air and naval units withdrew German forces from Crete and the Aegean Islands under the noses of the RAF and the Royal Navy. British paratroopers, along with Greek soldiers in exile landed in Greece as the Germans were leaving and took control of Athens on October 17, just after the German departure. More British and Greek troops were then transported to Athens by sea, as was the government-in-exile.

Communist resistance fighters in the countryside were unhappy with their orders to stand aside and allow the British occupation to proceed. Some of these resistance fighters worked in cooperation with Tito's Communist partisans in Yugoslavia, who advised them not to sit still for a British occupation.

On December 1, the new Greek government of national unity directed most of the Communist resistance fighters to disarm. This order led to the Communists resigning from the national unity

government on December 2 and calling for a general strike on December 3. That day, some 200,000 protestors marched on the Royal Palace in Athens. Although there is no evidence the protestors were armed, as they approached, Athenian police opened fire, killing 28 demonstrators and wounding 148. The following evening on December 4, an unarmed Communist-led funeral procession was attacked. More than 100 more were killed.

There followed a month of combat in Athens between Communist partisans and the forces of the Greek government, the latter backed by the British Army. In January, the two sides reached a cease-fire agreement that called for the Communist forces to withdraw from Athens.

In February 1945, after prompting from the British and the Soviets, the two sides in the Greek conflict signed a peace agreement, under which the Communist fighters agreed to disarm, in exchange for an agreement from the government to legalize the Communist Party and to hold a referendum on whether to restore the Greek monarchy. This referendum had been a longstanding demand of the Communist resistance.

It was also a longstanding concern of Winston Churchill's. Churchill well understood that after the war, the Soviet Union would be stronger than it had been before the war and Britain weaker. He was particularly concerned about the Eastern Mediterranean. The Suez Canal was a vital British interest, which meant that maintaining control over the Eastern Mediterranean was a vital British interest. He could easily imagine a Communist Greece welcoming Soviet air and naval bases on its territory, which would imperil Britain's access to the all-important canal.

It is a sad but indisputable truth that in most of occupied Europe, the Communists were the strongest faction of the resistance. This was particularly true in Yugoslavia and Greece. Britain had taken in the monarchs of both countries, Kings Peter II and George II, respectively, and Churchill felt Britain was morally obligated to restore them to their thrones after the defeat of Germany. More pragmatically, Churchill believed the restoration of these two kings the best hope of keeping their countries from going Communist.

Churchill attempted to get the United States to support his vision for post-war Eastern Europe, but the Roosevelt Administration was wary. The US State Department pointed to the Atlantic Charter, which endorsed the principle of self-determination. In the US view, attempts to predetermine the post-war governments of the occupied nations violated the Charter.

In October 1944, Churchill traveled to Moscow to discuss with Stalin the disposition of Eastern Europe after the war. Churchill felt that Stalin had proved himself amenable to negotiation and experience had shown that when Stalin agreed to something, he kept his word. Churchill hoped Britain and the Soviet Union could work out an amicable agreement on Eastern Europe now, which might very well avoid competition, even conflict, between the two countries after the war.

Stalin and Churchill essentially agreed to disagree over Poland. Churchill pointed out that Britain had gone to war in the first place to protect Poland and her people. He pointed out that Poland

was a Catholic country, and their Catholic heritage was very dear to the Poles. When he suggested that the Allies were risking a confrontation with the Vatican, Stalin famously asked Churchill, “And how many divisions does the Pope have?”

Clearly, Stalin had decided that possession was nine-tenths of the law, as they say, and was not interested in discussing the matter further. Churchill next presented what he called his “naughty document.” It was a list of Eastern European countries with associated percentages meant to represent an allocation of post-war spheres of influence.

Churchill largely conceded Romania to the Soviet Union. He felt that Romania had been an eager ally of Germany and fascism during the war on the Eastern Front, so the USSR should have most of the say over Romania’s postwar government. Likewise he conceded most of the control of Bulgaria, after some haggling. In exchange, he asked that Britain have most of the say over Greece. Stalin, who never showed much enthusiasm for the Greek Communists, agreed.

That left Hungary and Yugoslavia. As I mentioned earlier, Hungary was by this time attempting to negotiate an armistice with the USSR. Recall that Hungary entered the war against the Soviet Union after a Soviet bomber bombed a Hungarian town, though the Soviets always denied this. As part of the armistice discussion, Horthy sent Stalin a letter asserting that he had been misinformed about that bombing attack and now believed it had been staged by Germany with the assistance of some right-wing senior officers in the Hungarian military. Horthy hoped that making nice with Stalin now might save Hungary from a Soviet-imposed Communist government after the war.

Churchill hoped so too. In his “naughty document,” he proposed a 50/50 split of influence in Hungary. Likewise he proposed a 50/50 agreement over Yugoslavia, where Tito’s Communist Partisans had been the only effective resistance. Churchill wanted the Yugoslav provisional government proclaimed by Tito in 1943 to agree to form a national unity government with the Yugoslav government-in-exile, based in Britain. For Hungary, Churchill talked up the idea of Austria and Hungary forming a federation after the war, which he saw as a means to preserve Hungarian neutrality.

Churchill’s primary interest though, was in leaving Greece in a post-war British sphere of influence. He feared that the Red Army might occupy Yugoslavia or Greece or both, but that was not the case. After the Red Army occupied Romania, then Bulgaria, then entered Hungary, it turned its attention to the northwest; that is to Budapest, and beyond that, Germany itself. Churchill regarded it as a huge accomplishment on his part that he got Stalin to agree to leave Greece to Britain, then kept his word, even after British forces landed in Greece and began fighting the Communist resistance fighters.

I should note that most everything we know about these negotiations comes from Churchill’s own description in his series of books, *The Second World War*. It was the 1950s before Churchill published his description of these negotiations and by then the Cold War had already begun. No

doubt Churchill wanted to claim the credit for keeping Greece on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, but he also hoped to convey that negotiation with the USSR was possible, and that some old-fashioned, 19th century style division of the world into spheres of influence could be a helpful way of managing the conflict, certainly a better one than a third World War.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Thomer for his kind donation, and thank you to Rico for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Thomer and Rico 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 return to the Western Front. The Western Allies had hoped to end the war in Europe by Christmas, but the German Army was able to pull itself together and establish a new defensive line at the old Westwall. Up Against the Wall, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The peace agreement between Finland and the USSR included a provision that Finland publicly demand the withdrawal of all German forces from Finland by September 15, two weeks later. Finnish President Mannerheim wrote a personal letter to Adolf Hitler emphasizing that Finland did not regard Germany as an enemy, but circumstances required that Finland request the withdrawal of German forces.

Germany had a substantial armed force in Lapland, in northern Finland, which had already drawn up contingency plans for a quick withdrawal in the event of Finnish capitulation to the Soviet Union. The plan went into effect after German armaments minister Albert Speer concluded that Germany could get by without access to the Finnish nickel mines.

Even so, there was no way Germany could completely withdraw all its soldiers and supply stocks from Finland before the deadline. Moscow threatened a military occupation of Finland unless the Finns used their own military to force the Germans out of Finland. This despite provisions of the peace agreement compelling Finland to demobilize its army.

The Finns chose to demobilize units of veterans who had been fighting the Soviets for years and use new conscripts against the Germans. In Finnish historiography, this conflict is known as the Lapland War, although given the youth and inexperience of the Finnish soldiers who fought this campaign, it is sometimes called the "Children's Crusade."

The Germans were in fact withdrawing, but Hitler had given strict orders not to leave any supplies or equipment behind, which delayed the withdrawal. The Germans destroyed roads and bridges as they withdrew, as well as setting Finnish cities and towns in the region aflame. Red Army units in the far north joined the conflict in October.

The scorched earth withdrawal devastated Finnish Lapland and angered the Finns, but was successful in slowing their advance. Given the harsh arctic conditions and the onset of winter, the Germans were remarkably successful in withdrawing their 200,000 military personnel from Finland. The withdrawal was largely complete by November 1944, although the last German soldier did not leave Finnish soil until April 1945.

The Red Army advanced as far as the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, just over the border. The Germans took up a defensive position farther west in northern Norway to oppose any further Soviet offensive in the region. Finnish and German casualties were comparable, at about 1000 killed and 3,000 wounded on each side. The Red Army lost around 8,000 killed and wounded.

[music: Closing War Theme]