

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 459

“Autumn Mist”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As the Allies pushed their way to the borders of the Reich itself, Adolf Hitler prepared a counteroffensive that he hoped would change the course of the war.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 459. Autumn Mist.

Back in episode 456, after finishing the story of Operation Market Garden, I described to you Hitler’s proposal for an offensive in the West, the goal of which would be to drive German panzers into the gap between US and British forces and advance them all the way to Antwerp, retaking that valuable port and isolating the British in Holland. Hitler began talking about this offensive in September 1944, and the planning became serious in October 1944.

Hitler was mistrustful of his generals, as the July 20 assassination attempt was still fresh in his mind, so security around the development of this plan was extraordinarily tight. Few were told about it at first, and since the front line was now at the German border, communications with the front were conducted by land lines, not by radio. This in turn meant that Allied commanders, who were accustomed to regular briefings on Enigma decrypts that told them everything the Germans were up to, were left in the dark concerning this plan. This fact, and perhaps a certain overconfidence among the Western Allies that stemmed from their deep penetration of German communications, would have serious consequences.

The operation was first codenamed *Wacht am Rhein*, after the song, and with the thought that the name, which means “Watch on the Rhine,” strongly implied the operation was defensive in nature, which was a neat trick of misdirection. Later the codename was changed to *Herbstnebel*, or *Autumn Mist*.

Meanwhile, the Western Allies’ dramatic advance across France and Belgium and up to the German border in August and early September had ground to a halt due to the supply problems

that were plaguing them. They were still getting supplies through Normandy, trucked east across France by the Red Ball Express. Hitler's strategy of garrisoning French port cities, making the Allies pay a dear price in blood for taking them, then destroying the port facilities was successful in denying the Allies the use of any port closer to the front and forcing them to stretch their supply lines farther and farther.

Recall that the British had taken Antwerp in early September, but the Germans still controlled the Scheldt Estuary, downriver from Antwerp, which links it to the open sea, making the port useless. You could make a case that the resources devoted to Operation Market Garden would have been better spent on clearing the Germans out of the estuary. As it was, the delay caused when Market Garden was given priority gave the German Army time to reinforce its defensive positions along the Scheldt. Ultimately, it would be the Canadian Army stuck with the costly job of securing the waterway, which they would not complete until early November.

Field Marshal Walter Model, commander of the German Army Group B, had taken a shattered German army group and rebuilt it into a formidable defensive force along Westwall, the defensive line Germany had built before the war, the German answer to the Maginot Line. As he had already done on the Eastern Front, Model saved the German Army from what seemed a catastrophic collapse. Defenses were rebuilt, new units and equipment sent to the front, taking full advantage of the slowed advance of the Western Allies and of course of the fact that they were now taking up positions in Germany itself, which meant a populace who supported the German Army and saw them as their protectors, rather than loathing the German Army as their occupiers. The new defensive line along Germany's western border also meant shorter supply lines. For example, the Germans only had about 100 tanks left on the entire Western Front in early September. By the end of September, they'd built that number back up to 500.

US General Omar Bradley later summed it up by saying that Model "miraculously grafted a new backbone on the German Army."

Allied commanders gambled on Market Garden as a clever way to bypass the German defenses and advance past them into Germany, but the gamble failed. Now what?

Hitler believed that Patton was the biggest threat, and sent most of his new panzer units to oppose Patton in the Saarland. But Gerd von Rundstedt, the overall commander of German forces in the West, believed the Americans were most likely to make their first attempt to advance onto German soil farther north, at the city of Aachen.

Aachen is a charming little city that stands near the point where the borders of Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands meet. It began as a Celtic settlement. The Romans occupied it and built baths there and called the place *Aquae Granni*, which the Franks Germanized to *Aachen*. Its French name is *Aix*.

Aachen holds the distinction of being the westernmost city in Germany, and therefore an obvious goal for the advancing Allies. Aachen had no military significance, but it did have historical significance as Charlemagne chose it as his capital, more or less, and Charlemagne is often viewed romantically as the founder of the Holy Roman Empire, which is debatable, but important to the Nazi worldview. The Nazis saw Charlemagne as founder of the First Reich, and thus a forerunner or ancestor in spirit to Adolf Hitler, founder of the Third Reich. The capture of Aachen would therefore mark not only the first German city to fall to the Allies, but a propaganda coup as well. And beyond Aachen lay the plains of North Germany, where the Allies could put their armored units to good use.

The Allied force facing Aachen was the US First Army, including the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions, which had landed on Omaha Beach back on D-Day. In mid-September they began their advance, north and south of the city, intending to encircle it. The approach of the Americans spread panic among the Nazi Party of Aachen. Most of its leaders fled the city. When Hitler learned of this, he ordered them all drafted and sent to the Eastern Front.

The Americans then paused their attack, so that supplies and resources could be directed to Operation Market Garden. First Army used the delay to receive replacements and integrate them into their units. These replacement soldiers had little or no understanding of combat, and they got a crash course from the veterans while the First Army waited to restart the offensive.

The quality of the replacement German soldiers wasn't much better, although they had the advantage of carefully prepared defenses. The Americans had the advantage of their overwhelming air superiority. The fighting was costly, but Aachen surrendered on October 21.

The American military administration sought a German with no Nazi background to serve as mayor of occupied Aachen. They consulted with the city's Catholic bishop, who led them to a 42-year-old lawyer named Franz Oppenhoff, who had previously represented the bishop in some legal matters. Oppenhoff was sworn in on October 31.

Costly as the Battle for Aachen was, the First Army suffered worse in the Battle of Hürtgen Forest. The American assault at Hürtgen Forest began as a diversionary attack meant to keep the German units there engaged so they wouldn't be able to move north and assist in the defense of Aachen. As the fighting went on, the Americans began to consider the River Rur, which lies behind the forest. There were dams on the Rur, and as long as the German Army controlled the dams, there was a risk that they would be able to open the dams and flood the river at a key moment and perhaps isolate Allied units that crossed the river downstream. This made it crucial to capture those dams before the Americans attempted to cross the Rur.

The Americans met stiff German resistance in Hürtgen Forest. German defenses were overseen personally by the German commander, Walter Model, Germany's most skilled defensive general. The Americans anticipated that German defenders in the forest would not yet have recovered from the collapse of the German line in France. They would be understrength and have terrible

morale. What the Americans didn't know at the time was that the Germans were preparing for Hitler's winter offensive and some of those preparations were taking place in this area. So there were more and better German Army units available than the Americans expected, and they were highly motivated to hold the line at Hürtgen Forest to prevent the American advance from disrupting their own plans.

The American assault into Hürtgen Forest lasted just shy of three months, and cost the Americans around 50,000 killed and wounded. German losses were about half that number. Why General Hodges, the First Army commander, kept the attack going for so long through such a dense forest despite wintry weather and the high casualties and lack of progress remains unclear, but the attack didn't end until the Germans forced an end to it when they began their own offensive on December 16.

The Americans suffered a serious defeat at the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest, but the battle is not well remembered in our time, as it tends to get overshadowed by the coming German offensive.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before we leave Hürtgen Forest, though, I have one more name I'd like to mention, that of 23-year-old German Army Lieutenant Friedrich Lengfeld of the German 275th Infantry Division. Little is known of his life prior to the day he died, which was November 12, 1944. That morning, soldiers in Lieutenant Lengfeld's company heard screams of pain and cries for help, which they identified as coming from an American soldier of the US 4th Infantry Division who had been wounded by a German land mine. Lengfeld ordered his troops not to fire on any other Americans who might come to treat or rescue the wounded soldier.

But hours passed, with the wounded soldier still screaming and no American assistance in sight. Lengfeld then led a group of medics from his own unit out into the minefield to rescue the American. Alas, Lengfeld tripped a German anti-personnel mine. Shrapnel tore through his body. The German medics took him back to the German line and he was sent on to a field hospital, where he died.

Neither the identity nor the fate of the American soldier Lengfeld and his medics attempted to rescue is known. Lengfeld was buried in a German military cemetery at Hürtgen Forest, and his grave is notable because fifty years later, veterans of the US 4th Infantry Division placed a memorial stone for Lieutenant Lengfeld in the cemetery. In the course of this long and terrible war, he is one among the very few fallen soldiers to be honored by their enemies.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3 in B♭ Major "Eroica."*]

It's been a while since we looked at the Eastern Front. You know about Operation Bagration and you know about the Warsaw Uprising, which ended on October 2. The month of October saw Soviet offensives across the Eastern Front, virtually everywhere except Poland. Let me discuss a couple of them now.

You'll remember that Army Group North had been temporarily cut off from the rest of the German Army when the Red Army briefly took the city of Riga, the capital of Latvia. A German counteroffensive retook Riga, but German commanders judged it unlikely they could hold Riga for long. Army Group North therefore withdrew through the corridor at Riga into western Latvia.

The Red Army did indeed retake Riga on October 13. Army Group North was now west of Riga, but still not out of the woods. A Soviet offensive farther south advanced all the way to the port city of Memel. You may recall that Memel had been Klaipeda, Lithuania's most important port, until 1939, when Hitler demanded its "return," as it had been part of the German Empire until the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to give it up in 1919.

This Red Army advance did not capture Memel, but it did reach the sea at points both north and south of Memel, isolating the city. The Soviets besieged Memel, which eventually fell in January 1945. More serious than the loss of Memel was that Army Group North was once again isolated, this time in western Latvia, a region also known as Courland. It's that short, fat peninsula that separates the Baltic Sea from the Gulf of Riga.

The German military command up to and including Heinz Guderian, Chief of the Army General Staff, urged Hitler to order the evacuation by sea of the roughly 200,000 soldiers in Army Group North so they could be redeployed to help stabilize the Eastern Front. Hitler rejected Guderian's advice. He argued that German submarine bases in Courland were too valuable to give up and that Army Group North would tie down large numbers of Soviet soldiers, making them unavailable for use elsewhere on the Eastern Front.

In fact, Army Group North was able to hold Courland until the end of the war, despite multiple Red Army offensives intended to capture it.

The isolation of Army Group North encouraged Stavka, the Soviet high command, to take advantage of the opportunity to push west into German East Prussia. On October 18, the Red Army crossed the border into East Prussia, entering the territory of the pre-1939 Reich for the first time. They advanced 60 kilometers by October 21, bringing Soviet forces within 100 kilometers of Hitler's headquarters at the Wolf's Lair.

But Soviet casualties and equipment losses had been heavy. The Germans launched a counterattack a few days later, spearheaded by Germany's latest tank, the Tiger II, known colloquially as the King Tiger tank, the heaviest and best armored tank in the German arsenal. The German counterattack successfully pushed the Red Army back across the German border.

This incident is notable because this was the moment when German civilians got their first glimpse of what was to come. When German troops retook the towns had had briefly been occupied by the Red Army, they found devastation, evidence of looting, and hundreds of corpses of German civilians lying in the streets. Rumors flew, including that old chestnut about finding corpses nailed to barn doors, which has been going around since the last war, though there

doesn't seem to be any occasion in either war in which such a thing was actually found and documented.

But the reality was bad enough. In fairness, I have to point out that these Red Army soldiers had advanced across hundreds of kilometers of Soviet territory and encountered death, destruction, and pillage every step of the way. We should not be too surprised if when they set foot on German soil and found peaceful, pleasant farms and villages, their first thought was "a tooth for a tooth," nor should we be surprised if their officers couldn't (or wouldn't) hold them back.

Just two days after advancing German soldiers discovered these atrocities, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels was already planning the "educational campaign" (his words) he would create from this news. Images of dead bodies lying in the streets were distributed to German newspapers and offered to German newsreels. The accompanying message warned civilians that this was what would happen should the Bolsheviks take control over Germany. A headline in the *Völkischer Beobachter* dubbed the killings THE RAVING OF THE SOVIET BEAST.

The success of this campaign is in doubt. A surviving report from the Stuttgart office of SS domestic intelligence suggested that the leadership in Berlin "should ask itself whether every thinking person who sees these bloody pictures of victims would not immediately think of the atrocities we have committed abroad and even in Germany. Did we not ourselves butcher Jews by the thousands? Do soldiers not repeatedly tell of Jews in Poland having to dig their own graves?"

With that kind of attitude, it's no wonder that guy got posted to Stuttgart. But it only took another week for Goebbels himself to decide to drop the campaign. But if there was one German who reacted to the news in the way Goebbels was hoping, it was unsurprisingly the *Führer* himself, who told his staff, "These are not human beings; they are beasts from the Asiatic steppes, and the battle I am leading against them is the battle for the dignity of the people of Europe."

Because when we do these very same things and worse to the Russians, it's different because we're fighting for our dignity, apparently.

Goebbels had better luck in converting a proposal by the American Secretary of the Treasury into propaganda fodder. Henry Morgenthau produced a memorandum suggesting that after the war, Germany be partitioned into multiple states and its industry destroyed. The new German states would be primarily agricultural.

Roosevelt discussed Morgenthau's proposal at the Second Quebec Conference and pressed the British to endorse it. The British refused. They were quite firmly opposed to it. For that matter, even Roosevelt's own Secretaries of War and State were opposed to it. Secretary of State Cordell Hull resented the intrusion of the Treasury Secretary into foreign affairs.

News of the Morgenthau plan became public in late September, and the reaction, both within the United States and internationally, was sharply negative, with the most common complaint in the US being that publicizing this plan would only encourage the Germans to fight harder and lead to the losses of thousands of additional American lives.

And Joseph Goebbels did indeed make the most of it. The headline in the *Völkischer Beobachter* read ROOSEVELT AND CHURCHILL AGREE TO JEWISH MURDER PLAN! Many suggested that the stiffening of German defenses in the West in September was the result of Morgenthau's plan. If the Germans believed that defeat meant the destruction of their country, they would fight that much harder. Or, as Republican Presidential candidate Thomas Dewey put it, "Now they are fighting with the frenzy of despair."

Speaking of the election, Roosevelt campaigned vigorously in the final weeks. In Chicago, he spoke to a full house of 125,000 at Soldier Field. Reportedly, an even larger number of people listened to the speech from outside. Roosevelt's final campaign event was held at Fenway Park in Boston, where up-and-coming singer Frank Sinatra opened the event with his rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Roosevelt told the crowd:

Religious intolerance, social intolerance, and political intolerance have no place in American life...[A]ll our people, except the pure-blooded Indians, are immigrants or descendants of immigrants, including even those who came over here on the Mayflower...It is our duty to make sure that, big as our country is, there is no room in it for racial or religious intolerance...

The US Presidential election was held on November 7. Roosevelt spent that evening at Hyde Park, as usual, watching the news tickers and keeping the phone line open to Democratic Party National Headquarters, while scribbling vote tallies on notepads. Shortly after 10:00 that night, he put down his pencil and declared, "It's all over."

Roosevelt won 25.6 million votes to Dewey's 22 million. The President carried 36 states with 432 electoral votes. Dewey carried 12 states, with 99 electoral votes. Dewey had managed to carry the states of Wisconsin, Wyoming, and Ohio, which Willkie had not been able to do four years earlier, although Dewey lost one state that Willkie had won: Michigan. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats picked up 24 seats, gaining a majority of 242-190. In the Senate, the Democrats lost two seats, though they retained a majority of 56-38.

Roosevelt's margin of victory in the popular vote was about 7.5%, the narrowest of his four Presidential races. If he were any other candidate, this would be considered a solid win; for Roosevelt, it practically qualified as a squeaker.

The following day, November 8, was the 21st anniversary of the Munich *putsch*. Quite contrary to his usual practice, Hitler first postponed the anniversary dinner until the following Sunday,

November 12, then decided not to attend at all. He did write a speech for the occasion, which was delivered by Heinrich Himmler. The speech blamed German reversals on the betrayal of their allies and the conspirators behind the July 20 assassination attempt. Hitler warned that both the Bolsheviks and the Western Allies had already shown their intention was to destroy Germany, and vowed that would never happen as long as he was alive. Hmm. Otherwise, he could only offer the vague promise that “the moment will come in which success will crown our endeavors.”

Joseph Goebbels professed disappointment with the way Himmler delivered the address. Himmler was no Hitler. So where was Hitler? Across Germany and internationally, many were asking that question. It was surprising, even suspicious, that Hitler would fail to show up for the most important holiday on the Nazi calendar. His absence fueled rumors that Hitler was actually dead or incapacitated and that Goebbels and Himmler were running the German government in his name.

Hitler had not spoken over German radio since the night of July 20, when he went on the air to announce the assassination plot and demonstrate that it had failed. Before that address, public morale was low and there were also rumors that Hitler was dead. His radio address had laid the public's worries to rest and had rallied the German nation.

But that was July. In the four months since, Germany's military position had grown increasingly dire. The Allies were now at the borders of the Reich, and Hitler had again gone silent. Morale sank and the rumors started anew. Goebbels was fully aware of this and had for weeks been pressing Hitler to make another speech over the radio. Hitler agreed to write a speech as soon as he could, but kept making excuses. On one occasion, he told Goebbels he couldn't do it just then because of the situation in Hungary, which prompted Goebbels to ask his diary the rhetorical question, what did events in Hungary have to do with the *Führer* addressing his people?

In private, Hitler continued to insist that the war could be won. When the previous wonder weapons, the V-1 buzz bomb and the V-2 rocket, failed to meaningfully affect the war, he pinned his hopes on the Messerschmitt Me 262, the world's first jet-powered warplane.

The Luftwaffe had been experimenting with jet planes since before the war began, though the project was kept at a low priority and given little funding, since most of the Luftwaffe leadership, up to and including Hermann Göring, believed jet planes unnecessary, as they expected Germany could quickly win the war with its conventional aircraft.

Hitler took an interest in jet planes in 1943 and the project was bumped to a higher priority. However, Hitler saw jet planes primarily as tactical bombers. He reasoned that since the plane could fly faster than any enemy plane, no enemy fighter could shoot it down, which made it an ideal bomber. The Luftwaffe leadership disagreed. They felt jet planes would be more useful as interceptors against Allied bombers over Germany.

This disagreement was resolved by producing two types of the Me 262, a fighter version, known as the *Schwalbe*, which is the German word for *swallow*, and a fighter-bomber version dubbed the *Sturmvogel*, or *storm bird*. Cool name. Unfortunately for Germany, the decision to develop the plane in two versions meant a critical delay in getting jet planes into service. The designers also struggled to come up with a metal alloy that could withstand the high heat generated inside the jet engines, a problem they never fully solved before the end of the war.

As a result, although the first Me 262 fighters began operating in spring 1944, their engines had an unsettling tendency to burst into flames in mid-flight, and the plane was not used in combat until autumn. The high speed of the Me 262 forced German pilots to develop new procedures for attacking enemy bombers and forced Allied fighter pilots to devise new tactics to shoot them down. Allied pilots learned that the Me 262, like the *Komet* rocket plane, was most vulnerable during takeoff and landing. Allied bombing raids were sent against German airfields identified as hosting Me 262s, and Allied fighter planes would circle the bases, waiting to attack any plane that attempted to take off or land.

The first instance of an Me 262 shot down by an Allied fighter is in dispute, but the title probably goes to a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, who got one on October 5. One of the first American pilots to shoot down a German jet plane was a US Army Air Forces lieutenant named Chuck Yeager.

It would take until 1945 before the Germans would be able to make full use of the new jet fighter plane.

One of the reasons Hitler had resisted Goebbels's pleas to deliver a speech to the nation was a serious problem with hoarseness, which plagued him for weeks. On November 18, a specialist examined him and discovered a polyp on his vocal cord, as had happened back in 1935. Hitler left the Wolf's Lair on November 20 and traveled by train to Berlin to get it treated. He would never return.

On November 22, the polyp was surgically removed; it proved to be benign. Hitler stayed in his private apartment in the Old Chancellery building in Berlin during his recovery, and worked out of the New Chancellery building. Eva Braun also moved into the Old Chancellery to be near him. Hitler's doctors ordered him not to speak after the surgery, so he had to communicate with his staff via written notes. A few days later, he had recovered sufficiently to be permitted to whisper. His entire staff followed suit and whispered back to him and among themselves, until Hitler reminded them that it was his voice that needed a rest, not his hearing.

On December 1, Hitler was well enough to meet with Goebbels. The meeting lasted some twelve hours, from early afternoon to the early morning of the following day. Two days later, Hitler paid a call on the Goebbels family for the first time in four years. He played with the children and chatted with their parents. As he left, he promised the family he would visit them again soon. But he never did.

The day after that, December 4, Hitler hosted a visit by the Hungarian Leader, Ferenc Szalasi. The propaganda ministry circulated photographs of Hitler and Szalasi, glad for the opportunity to provide evidence that the *Führer* was still alive. This would be the last time Hitler met with a foreign government official.

On December 10, Hitler left Berlin to travel to the *Adlerhorst*, or Eagle's Nest, in Hesse, in western Germany. Remember the Eagle's Nest? It had been constructed years earlier to serve as Hitler's command post during the war with France. The Eagle's Nest was a complex of seven concrete buildings, covered with stone and timber and tile to disguise them as the sort of cottages that were typical of the region. Beneath each building was a fortified air-raid shelter.

Hitler had visited the Eagle's Nest once before, in February 1940, and decided he didn't want it. He turned it over to Hermann Göring to use as his headquarters during the Battle of Britain.

Upon his arrival in at the Eagle's Nest in December 1944, Hitler summoned the 21 German generals that would be leading the coming offensive on the Western Front and subjected them to a lengthy presentation in which he discussed every major battle fought in Europe since the 17th century. He told the generals that a split between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union was already visible and was widening by the hour. And once again, he invoked the example of Frederick the Great, whose steadfastness during the Seven Years' War had made possible a miraculous reversal in his fortunes when the enemy alliance fell apart.

If any of the generals had any doubts about Hitler's claims, they prudently kept them to themselves.

And we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Scott for his kind donation, and thank you to Matthew for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Scott and Matthew 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, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*. The Battle of the Bulge looms, but first I have a question-and-answer episode I promised you. That will be next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I told you how the Americans selected Franz Oppenhoff to serve as mayor of occupied Aachen. They chose Oppenhoff because of his association with the local Catholic bishop and because Oppenhoff had avoided joining the Nazi Party. In the Americans' minds, that meant he must have been a liberal democrat. This is a mistake American leaders made often in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, Oppenhoff was more of a right-wing monarchist, who believed that keeping left-leaning Germans out of city government was a higher priority than keeping ex-Nazis out of city government.

Even before Oppenhoff had been sworn in, the SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Corps*, or *The Black Corps*, published an editorial warning that any German official who collaborated with the enemy occupation would be swiftly liquidated. When Oppenhoff was made mayor, the Americans kept his identity secret for that reason, and also out of fear of Nazi reprisals against his relatives in other parts of Germany.

Even so, the SS put together a six-person assassination team that shot and killed Oppenhoff on the evening of March 25, 1945. Four of the six assassins were eventually found and arrested. Two of them received prison sentences of 1-4 years; the other two were not punished at all. The lenient treatment may be due to Nazi sympathizers in the Aachen court system.

The leader of this assassination team, an SS officer named Herbert Wenzel, was never captured. He is believed to have fled to Southwest Africa, which today we call Namibia, where he lived under an assumed name and died in 1981.

[music: Closing War Theme]