

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 462

“Nuts!”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Allied commanders scrambled to respond to the surprise German offensive on the Western Front. They frantically sought ways first, to stop it, and second, to push the Germans back.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 462. Nuts!

I'm picking up today where I left off last time. In the previous episode, I described the opening days of the German December 1944 offensive in the Ardennes. The element of surprise was crucial to the German plan, and yes, they definitely succeeded at surprising the Western Allies. Poor weather, including snowstorms, high winds, and low cloud cover neutralized the Western Allies' airpower, their most formidable weapon, which was also good news for the Germans.

So the German offensive began in the best of circumstances. On the other hand, the key units in the attack were two German panzer armies, the Sixth SS and the Fifth. These were armored and motorized units, which meant that in the rugged Ardennes, especially in wintertime and with snow on the ground, they were restricted to the limited road network in the region. Organizing an advance in these conditions was a challenge; German units got stuck in slow and lengthy traffic jams, burning up their reserves of fuel, which was already in short supply. These panzer armies began the offensive with less than half the fuel they'd need to reach their goals, Brussels and Antwerp. They would have to move rapidly and capture American fuel dumps to have any hope of making it all the way.

The German offensive punched through the American line at its thinnest point, the Ardennes. In the north, the Sixth SS Panzer Army crushed one green American infantry division, but the other, the 99th, with reinforcements from units to the north, were able to hold veteran Waffen-SS units to a crawl, so good for them. Farther south, the Fifth Panzer Army punched through the already weakened US 28th Infantry Division and was able to advance more rapidly.

So the Germans held a salient in the Ardennes that was expanding westward, but US units on their flanks were able to hold the line. Thus, the German advance to the west was lengthy, but narrow.

The first two days of the offensive were confusion and chaos on the Allied side. By the third day, Eisenhower was beginning to get a handle on the situation. He ordered that the Germans not be permitted to cross the River Meuse and the bridges wired for demolition.

The only reserves at his disposal were the two US airborne divisions, the 82nd and the 101st; Eisenhower ordered them to take control of key crossroads to hinder the German advance. In particular, he ordered the 101st to occupy and hold the Belgian town of Bastogne. More about that in a moment.

George Patton already promised a counteroffensive with three divisions into the Germans' southern flank on December 22. To the north, Bernard Montgomery, commander of the British 21st Army Group, was well aware of the threat the German offensive posed to his southern flank. He ordered the British XXX Corps to turn south and take up positions along the Meuse, which was in line with Eisenhower's defensive plan.

Eisenhower also ordered the two US armies closest to the British, the First and Ninth Armies, be transferred to Montgomery's command. Montgomery had wanted exactly this for weeks, while Eisenhower and other US commanders were strongly opposed. But the situation was different now. The First Army was getting the brunt of the German attack; the Ninth Army was between the First and the British forces to their north. The German advance had cut communications between these two American armies and Omar Bradley, the American army group commander, so temporarily assigning them to Montgomery, who had clearer communication with them, made sense.

And speaking of communication, no one had heard from the First Army commander, General Courtney Hodges, for days. Hodges fell ill, according to some accounts. Other accounts suggest that the German offensive triggered some kind of emotional breakdown that left Hodges unable to function.

Omar Bradley was furious when Eisenhower called to tell him that he was taking two of Bradley's armies and transferring them to Montgomery's command. He interpreted the order as an expression of lack of confidence in his leadership. Despite their close friendship, Bradley told Eisenhower that he had a duty to the American people and if Eisenhower diminished his command, he would have no choice but to resign. Eisenhower replied that he, not Bradley, was the one who had a duty to the American people, and the order stood. Eisenhower then ended the call.

Bradley did not resign.

If any American commander could be said to have been happy about the German offensive, it was George Patton. He was looking forward to what he called his "chestnut pulling expedition," and dreamed of cutting off and isolating some of the Wehrmacht's best. He wrote to his wife, "Destiny sent for me...Perhaps God saved me for this effort."

Meanwhile, as soon as Montgomery got the word that he was now in command of the US First Army, he went to the Belgian town of Spa, where the First's headquarters were located. He was appalled to find that Hodges appeared to be in a state of shock and had not communicated with Omar Bradley, his superior, in days.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the problems, the American front lines were firming up and the German advance was slowing down.

And that brings us back to the US 101st Airborne Division.

It took the 101st until the afternoon of the 18th to move out; that was almost a day after receiving their orders. The 101st needed time to organize and secure transportation, since paratroopers are normally moved by air, not by truck. Their advance had barely gotten started by nightfall, and the combination of darkness and sleet persuaded them to use the trucks' headlights, despite the risk of drawing enemy attack, especially from the air, as it was essential to move forward as quickly as possible, before the Germans reached Bastogne. Their truck convoy stretched some seventy miles from front to back.

The first units of the 101st reached Bastogne around midnight and began to organize. The last units would not arrive until after dawn that morning.

Eisenhower chose the town of Bastogne because it is a junction for eight or more roads, depending on how you define a road. And it is located just inside the Belgian border with Luxembourg, on a ridge in the Ardennes. The advancing German Fifth Panzer Army was a largely motorized force that was restricted to the existing road network in the region, so denying the Germans entry into Bastogne would seriously complicate their already complicated offensive plans, and a position on top of a ridge would be easier to defend.

One obvious drawback to the American plan is one that should be familiar to you by now. Airborne units are by their nature light infantry, and the approaching German force that the 101st was supposed to block was the German Fifth Panzer Army, composed of armored and motorized divisions that have heavier equipment and more firepower than had the 101st. Fortunately, someone in the US command realized this and sent a tank destroyer battalion to help support the paratroops.

By the way, a tank destroyer is, as the name implies, a vehicle designed specifically as an anti-tank weapon. These particular tank destroyers were US M18s. They looked much like Sherman tanks, but they were designed to be lighter and more mobile. They had a top speed of 55 miles per hour, faster than any tank, and they were designed this way with the idea that they would be able to outrun enemy tanks and take up a defensive position in front of them before those enemy tanks arrived. The Americans were about to find out if their design approach would pay off.

Sunrise over Bastogne on the morning of the 19th revealed other American units already struggling to hold back German panzers with their bazookas. As the 101st took up their positions, the battered American forces already present withdrew. In many cases, they turned over their ammunition to the 101st.

And the tank destroyer design did pay off. The M18s were able to reach the Bastogne region in time and help the paratroops hold the line. In fighting on December 20, the American tank destroyers knocked out more than 30 German tanks. The losses led the Germans to conclude that a much larger force was defending Bastogne than was actually the case. They decided not to attempt any direct assault on the Americans holding the town.

The 101st set up a perimeter around Bastogne. Inside the perimeter with them was that tank destroyer battalion and an African-American artillery battalion that had also been sent to bolster the 101st. Alas, they were short on ammunition and limited to firing just ten shells per day per gun. Borrowing a leaf from the German playbook, the 101st positioned its anti-aircraft guns on the front line and used them as anti-tank guns.

Farther north, along the right flank of the German advance, an ad hoc group of American infantry, engineers, artillery, and antitank units were holding the line along the Elsenborn Ridge. They stymied the SS *Hitler Jugend* Division and prevented the Germans from widening their salient to the north.

Farther west, the British were also responding. Bernard Montgomery ordered his XXX Corps to turn south and take up a position on the German flank west of the American line. Montgomery, was also taking command of American forces north of the German advance and preparing a counterattack. But if there's one thing we know about Bernard Montgomery, it is that he will not begin an attack until he's good and ready. And the British and Americans along the German right flank were not ready.

At Bastogne, the Americans were heavily outnumbered and short on everything. They were short on food, short on ammunition, short on medical supplies and short on commanders. The commander of the 101st, General Maxwell Taylor, was in the United States for a conference, along with some of his staff, when the German offensive began. In his absence, command of the 101st fell to General Anthony McAuliffe, who was normally commander of the 101st's artillery units.

Perhaps most serious shortfall was that they had not been issued winter uniforms. Since the breakout from Normandy, Allied supply problems had been serious and Allied commanders prioritized fuel and ammunition. They hadn't gotten around to supplying winter uniforms yet. During the German offensive, there was snow on the ground, snow and sleet falling, and the weather was unseasonably cold. Nighttime was particularly brutal. The American soldiers did not dare light fires, as that would certainly draw German artillery attacks. The ground was slushy in the daytime and soldiers seldom had the opportunity to wash or shave or change their wet

socks, which meant the return of trench foot, a disease that had plagued soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front during the last war.

Also, most soldiers on the Western Front had gotten inured to the sight of corpses lying on the ground, but in the Ardennes, these soldiers now had to cope with the sight of wild boar feasting on the bodies of their comrades. You can imagine what must have gone through the minds of those soldiers who had been hunting and eating boar just a few days ago.

By December 21st, the German Fifth Panzer Army had completely surrounded Bastogne. On the 22nd, its commander decided the Americans had held up his advance quite long enough. He ordered his Army to continue the advance, leaving some units behind to maintain the siege of the town.

That same day, the commander of the German siege force sent a truce party to deliver a surrender demand to the Americans. It read, in part:

To the U.S.A. Commander of the encircled town of Bastogne.

The fortune of war is changing. This time the U.S.A. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units...There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town. In order to think it over a term of two hours will be granted beginning with the presentation of this note.

If this proposal should be rejected one German Artillery Corps and six heavy [anti-aircraft] Battalions are ready to annihilate the U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing will be given immediately after this two hours term.

All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity.

[Signed,] The German Commander.

The German truce party waited while the note was delivered to General McAuliffe. McAuliffe was very busy at the time; he hardly glanced at the note before muttering, "Aw, nuts!" and tossing it into a wastebasket. This left his staff with the task of drafting a reply to the Germans. After some discussion, they chose to deliver McAuliffe's response verbatim. They typed up a reply note that read:

To the German Commander.

NUTS!

The American Commander.

The note was duly delivered to the German truce party. The senior German officer in the party spoke English, but he did not understand the colloquialism and asked the senior American officer present to explain the reply. The American told him, "In plain English? [It means,] Go to hell."

[music: Sousa, "The Army Song."]

In the absence of communication, the US First and Ninth Armies had resisted the German offensive tenaciously, but in a piecemeal, *ad hoc* way. Montgomery undertook to help coordinate the Americans, adding in some British units where he judged they were needed.

On December 23, the eighth day of the offensive, the German Fifth Panzer Army was still grinding slowly westward, past Bastogne but not yet to the River Meuse. The view from Hitler's headquarters was optimistic. The plan appeared to be working. News of the offensive was announced in Germany. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, again worried about raising expectations too high, cautioned German newspapers to describe the advance in measured terms. Even so, the German public celebrated the first good news coming from the front lines in quite some time.

But the Fifth was the only German army still advancing. The salient was getting narrower and narrower as the Fifth advanced, and American resistance along its flanks was drawing off more and more German units. After that one early success I mentioned last time, the offensive was not capturing American fuel stocks in the quantities the Germans needed to keep moving.

Even worse, from the German point of view, was how after a week in which the weather was keeping Allied air units grounded, the 23rd saw the skies begin to clear. American P-47 Thunderbolts began strafing German units strung out along the narrow roads. Tactical bombers struck German supply lines. The improved weather allowed the Americans to begin air-dropping supplies to the beleaguered soldiers at Bastogne. South of the German salient, Patton's counterattack began advancing toward the besieged town.

On the 24th, Christmas Eve, with the German advance stalled and Allied planes once again roving the skies and striking Germans on the ground at will, German Army Chief of Staff Heinz Guderian traveled to the Eagle's Nest to meet with Hitler in person. Also present at the meeting were SS chief Heinrich Himmler, now also commander of the Replacement Army, Wehrmacht commander in chief Wilhelm Keitel, and Wehrmacht chief of staff Alfred Jodl.

Guderian had brought along a briefcase containing an intelligence report prepared by the head of military intelligence for the Eastern Front, which he now delivered to Hitler and his staff. The report predicted that the Soviet Red Army was preparing another offensive along the Vistula River, where lay the rubble that was once Warsaw. The report estimated that Red Army forces along this portion of the front outnumbered the German forces opposing them by eleven to one in

infantry, seven to one in tanks, and twenty to one in aircraft. The offensive was estimated to begin within three weeks.

Guderian concluded with a recommendation. Since the offensive in the Ardennes had sputtered out anyway, as many units as possible should be withdrawn and transferred to the Vistula front as soon as it was feasible.

Hitler raised his hand to cut Guderian off. He told Guderian the Soviets were bluffing, that it was inconceivable that the Soviet Union could amass a force of that size. As Hitler spoke, he became agitated. He worked himself up into one of his typical rages. He shouted, "Who is responsible for producing all this rubbish?"

Guderian calmly defended the work of his intelligence officers, but to his surprise and disappointment, General Jodl argued that the Ardennes offensive was not yet lost and urged that attacks in the West should continue. Since Jodl was telling Hitler exactly what the *Führer* wanted to hear, Guderian knew he had lost the argument. Himmler, who was never a military officer but now fancied himself one, chimed in, agreeing with Hitler that the supposed Soviet preparations for an offensive were some sort of bluff.

On the front lines, Patton's relatively quick reaction to the German offensive caught them by surprise, but with only three divisions attacking, progress was slow. December 25th dawned as, in Patton's words, "a clear, cold Christmas, lovely weather for killing Germans." Allied air units picked up the tempo of their attacks.

On Christmas, Omar Bradley went to see Bernard Montgomery to urge him to begin a counterattack from the north, to match Patton's. But Montgomery was never one to rush into things. He took the opportunity to subject Bradley to a harangue in which he argued that everything that had gone wrong in this campaign since D-Day was a result of the Americans not taking his advice. Bradley left the meeting seething.

The day following Christmas, lead elements of Patton's counterattacking force reached Bastogne at dusk, breaking the German siege. Unfortunately, Eisenhower's doubt about whether a three-division counterattack would be sufficient proved justified. Patton had opened a corridor to Bastogne, but struggled to hold it against German counterattacks. Once it became clear they would not be advancing to Antwerp, or Brussels, or even the Meuse, the Germans concentrated instead on taking Bastogne, but they never could, despite their best efforts.

Also that day, the US 30th Infantry Division, attacking the base of the German salient from the north, was mistakenly struck by the US Ninth Tactical Air Command. For those keeping score, and some of the soldiers in that unit were keeping score, this was the 13th time since D-Day that

the Ninth Tactical had accidentally attacked them. Soldiers began to refer to the Ninth as “the American Luftwaffe.”

Just after midnight on January 1, 1945, Adolf Hitler gave in to his propaganda minister and gave his customary New Year’s address over the radio. This was the first time Hitler spoke to the German people since the July 20 assassination and coup attempts.

The content of the speech was nothing Germans hadn’t heard before. It included the usual rant about the “global Jewish-international conspiracy” and a vow that this war would never see a repeat of November 9, 1918. He affirmed his conviction that Germany would ultimately win the war. He did not mention the Ardennes Offensive, nor did he make any promises about new miracle weapons. Still, the speech helped restore some of the German public’s morale. It wasn’t so much what he said; it was the reassurance of hearing the familiar voice over the radio, which laid to rest those rumors that the *Führer* was dead or incapacitated or had suffered some kind of mental breakdown.

Goebbels followed up on this speech with an editorial in the Nazi Party newspaper, *Das Reich*, in which he laid it on pretty thick, presenting Hitler as a sacrificial martyr, a man who had set aside his own interests and his own comforts for the sake of lifting up the German people and reshaping Europe. Goebbels wrote, “You only need to be in his presence for a while to physically sense his power and appreciate how strong he is.”

After the speech, Hitler hosted a party at the Eagle’s Nest, where he and his staff rang in the new year with copious quantities of French champagne looted during the German retreat. Hitler spoke at length about Germany’s bright prospects in the new year, and everyone around him was drunk enough to believe it.

Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe was mustering its planes for a surprise air attack intended to restart the stalled German ground offensive. On the morning of January 1, 1945, the Luftwaffe threw everything it had at the Western Allies, about 800 fighter planes, in an all-out effort to catch Allied air forces by surprise and breathe new life into the failing German offensive. This offensive was prepared in strict secrecy, and once again the Bletchley Park code breakers had picked up no sign of it.

The Allies were caught by surprise. German pilots flew their planes at treetop level to evade Allied radar. In attacks on Allied air bases, the Germans destroyed hundreds of British and American planes. Unfortunately for the Germans, their own losses were also high. Due to the need for secrecy, German pilots were only briefed on their missions at the last minute. German flak units were not informed of the operation at all and many fired on the Luftwaffe, costing dozens of German planes. And many of these pilots were new and poorly trained.

The bottom line is that although the Allies were taken by surprise and lost hundreds of planes on the ground, they lost very few pilots, and the lost planes were replaced in a few days. The Luftwaffe lost almost as many planes, and lost more than 200 pilots, killed or taken prisoner. These losses were in addition to the Luftwaffe's losses during the offensive in December, estimated at 600 planes lost and 350 pilots killed or captured. The January 1 offensive marks the end of the Luftwaffe as an effective air force; for the rest of the war, Allied mastery of the skies would be absolute.

That same day, New Year's Day, Guderian returned to the Eagle's Nest to make another attempt to persuade Hitler to act on the pending threat at the Vistula. The Ardennes offensive had gone on another week since his previous visit, with no further victories to show for it, and Guderian had discovered that Hitler, without consulting with him, had ordered SS panzer units transferred from the Vistula portion of the front to Hungary, weakening the Eastern Front just where it needed to be reinforced.

Hitler gave this order because the Red Army had encircled Budapest, the Hungarian capital, and Hitler intended to break the siege around the capital of Germany's only remaining ally and secure Hungary's oil fields. With the loss of Romania, these Hungarian oil fields were now the only source of petroleum still under German control.

On the other side of the front, Eisenhower asked Montgomery to begin an offensive against the German salient in Belgium, while Montgomery delivered to Eisenhower the same lecture that he'd given Bradley. So much had gone wrong since Eisenhower had assumed command of Allied ground forces, and it all could have been avoided had Eisenhower simply listened to his advice.

Eisenhower listened politely and didn't push back, which encouraged Montgomery. The next day, he sent Eisenhower a letter all but demanding a change of strategy and again asking that he be given command over Bradley and his army group.

This was the final straw as far as Eisenhower was concerned. He drafted a letter to the Allied joint chiefs in Washington, threatening to resign if Montgomery was not replaced. News of the draft letter was leaked from Eisenhower's staff to Montgomery's. Montgomery's chief of staff contacted Eisenhower and asked Ike to hold off sending his letter for 24 hours. After securing Eisenhower's agreement, he went to his boss, Montgomery, with a draft letter of apology already in hand for Montgomery to sign. The letter said, among other things, that Montgomery deeply regretted his previous letter and asked Eisenhower to tear it up and forget it had ever been sent.

Montgomery signed the apology letter.

Besides the Luftwaffe offensive, Hitler ordered the German Army Group G, which held the southern part of the German Western Front, in Alsace and Lorraine, to begin an offensive on New Year's Day against the Allied Sixth Army Group, which, as you know, consisted of the US

Seventh Army and the French First Army, the forces that had invaded the Mediterranean coast of France in August. With a portion of his Third Army turning north to attack the German salient in the Ardennes and relieve the Siege of Bastogne, Patton was forced to take units off his front line. Eisenhower had ordered Patton's section of the front reduced, with the US Seventh Army, on Patton's right flank, to widen its share of the front. This left the Seventh pretty thin, and this is where the new German offensive struck.

Eisenhower's first reaction to this offensive, which the Germans called Operation Northwind, was to order the French and US units to withdraw. They would give up the angle where the French border juts into Germany and fall back to a straighter line that would also be shorter and easier to defend.

Charles de Gaulle had not been consulted on this move and objected vigorously when he heard of it, because Eisenhower's withdrawal would mean abandoning the city of Strasbourg to the Germans, less than a month after it had been liberated.

On January 3, Eisenhower, de Gaulle, and Imperial chief of staff Sir Alan Brooke met at Versailles to discuss the situation. De Gaulle told Eisenhower that, in purely military terms, he agreed the withdrawal made good sense, but Eisenhower was overlooking the political dimension. The loss of Strasbourg would shock all of France and might lead to the fall of de Gaulle's government. Eisenhower considered that, in light of the Allies' supply difficulties and how much worse they'd get if French civilians behind the lines became hostile, and decided de Gaulle was right. The Allies would fight to defend Strasbourg.

In the end, Northwind put a scare into the Allied command, but it amounted to very little. The US Seventh Army was able to contain the Germans, aided by the use of French fortifications that had been part of the Maginot Line. Remember the Maginot Line? Turns out it was good for something after all.

North of the Ardennes, Bernard Montgomery finally began his own offensive against the German salient. The weakened and exhausted Germans began to fall back.

By now, news of the offensive had been released to the publics of the Western Allies, and later the news that some American units had been placed under Montgomery's command. This triggered headlines in British and American newspapers, where the command transfer was taken as an implicit admission that American commanders had failed.

On January 7, Montgomery held a press conference to address the controversy. The press conference had been cleared by Field Marshal Brooke after Montgomery told him it would help reinforce Allied unity. But it became a disaster. At the conference, Montgomery began with praise for American soldiers and gave a nod to General Eisenhower, but then spent half an hour talking mostly about his own contributions, concluding by calling the Allied counterattack "one of the most interesting and tricky battles I have ever handled."

To the senior American commanders, who had already had quite their fill of Bernard Montgomery, thank you, it sounded very much as if Montgomery was claiming he and the British Army had rescued the Americans from a situation in which they'd lost control. In truth, 97 out of 100 of the Allied soldiers who fought in the Battle of the Bulge were Americans. German propaganda broadcasts did their best to fan the flames, reporting how Montgomery had swept in to rescue the inept Americans from what would have been a catastrophic defeat.

Winston Churchill went to Parliament a week later to try to smooth over the hard feelings. He told Parliament "the United States troops have done almost all the fighting...Care must be taken in telling our proud tale not to claim for the British Army an undue share of what is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever famous American victory."

Even Montgomery later acknowledged that "I should never have held that press conference."

The Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Ardennes Offensive, was the bloodiest battle of the war for the United States. The US Army lost around 35,000 soldiers killed, captured, or missing, 63,000 wounded, and around 800 tanks and other armored fighting vehicles destroyed. Germany suffered 42,000 killed, captured, or missing, 40,000 wounded, and lost comparable numbers of tanks.

The German offensive succeeded in surprising the Allies, inflicting serious losses, and kept the Western Allies out of Germany for at least another month or two. But the cost to Germany was also serious: some of their best armored units, the last of their manpower and fuel reserves, and the virtual annihilation of the Luftwaffe.

This battle was Dwight Eisenhower's finest hour as a military commander, and George Patton's as well. A year earlier, Eisenhower had intervened to save Patton's career after those slapping incidents, and in the Battle of the Bulge, Patton returned the favor.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to Fran for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Fran 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*, where we'll look at the Eastern Front and see about that Soviet offensive Heinz Guderian was so worried about. The Ostrich Strategy, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin had been in regular communication. On January 6, 1945, Winston Churchill sent a message to Stalin that read in part:

The battle in the West is very heavy and, at any time, large decisions may be called for from the Supreme Command. You know yourself from your own experience how very anxious the position is when a very broad front has to be defended after temporary loss of the initiative. It is General Eisenhower's great desire and need to know in outline what you plan to do, as this obviously affects all his and our major decisions...I shall be grateful if you can tell me whether we can count on a major Russian offensive on the Vistula front, or elsewhere, during January, with any other points you may care to mention.

Stalin replied in these words:

We are mounting an offensive, but at the moment the weather is unfavorable. Still, in view of our Allies' position on the Western Front, GHQ of the Supreme Command have decided to complete preparations at a rapid rate and, regardless of weather, to launch large-scale offensive operations along the entire Central Front not later than the second half of January. Rest assured we shall do all in our power to support the valiant forces of our Allies.

Churchill and Eisenhower were delighted with the news, and when the Red Army began its offensive on January 12, less than a week later, Churchill believed Stalin had ordered it early to help ease the pressure on the Western Allies. There may even be some truth in that, but the decision appears to have had more to do with the weather. Stavka originally planned the offensive to begin January 20, but forecasts predicted a thaw, which would mean mud, bad news for an armored offensive, so the offensive was moved up to the 12th. Red Army commanders likely also wanted to take advantage of the Wehrmacht's attempted offensives in the Ardennes and Alsace and Hungary. Or maybe that's just another way of saying they wanted to take some pressure off the Western Allies without giving them credit for it.

In any case, and whatever the mix of motivations, Stalin was perfectly happy to accept the Western Allies' gratitude.

[music: Closing War Theme]