The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 463
"The Ostrich Strategy"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

"[F]or whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

Galatians 6:7, King James Version.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 463. The Ostrich Strategy.

Christmas 1944 was not a happy time in Berlin.

The first three Christmases of the war, in 1939, 1940, and 1941, had been celebrated in a manner not terribly different from earlier years. The Nazi government did its best to shield the German public from any kind of wartime hardship or deprivation. They remembered the Revolution of 1918, which had been prompted by harsh austerity measures imposed by the Imperial government in response to Germany's deteriorating military situation.

And in those early years, the Nazis got away with it. In this war, Germany went from one swift and relatively bloodless victory to another. The costs of the war were low and the German public relatively untroubled by them. Germany had a rationing system, but the rations were pretty generous, apart from those foods which were only available through imports from other countries. But even before the war began, the Nazi government had spent years encouraging the public to consume foods produced in Germany and reject imported foods, toward the goal of making Germany into a food autarky.

After the war began, the government maintained a good standard of living for its people by looting occupied countries, especially France, home to some of the most productive farmland in Europe. This was legal looting, in that France was forced by the terms of the armistice to pay reparations to Germany, and Germany set the value of the French franc unrealistically low against the German mark, which meant that German purchasers could easily outbid the French

for the products of their own country. Germany also forced occupied nations to loan large sums of money and resources, and in some instances there was outright theft.

One of the economic problems brought by modern total war, in which nations conscript young men by the millions, was a shortage of farm labor, which often leads to food shortages. This problem bedeviled most nations in the First World War, especially Germany. The Nazi solution was forced labor: prisoners of war and workers conscripted from occupied countries. In truth, it was a twentieth-century form of slavery.

During these early years of the war, while the Nazis were attentive to maintaining food supplies for the German public, they were also waging submarine warfare intended to cut off food imports to Britain. As a result, the British government was forced to impose a far stricter and more austere rationing program on the British public, while the German public was enjoying meals any Briton would have envied.

The first months of the war against the Soviet Union brought confiscated food and large numbers of slave laborers, but by 1942, German civilians were beginning to feel the pinch. Christmas 1942 was a bad time for the German Sixth Army, surrounded in Stalingrad. The Nazis weren't yet ready to admit they were beyond hope of rescue, but propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels declared a "German Christmas," which meant the traditional Christmas goose was out, as were trees and wreaths and candles and carols. In their place would be austere dinners and Nazi ideology.

Nowhere in Germany was there less enthusiasm for the Nazis than Berlin, at least if the pre-1933 election results tell us anything. Berlin tended to vote for leftist parties; for Nazis, not so much. It had been years since the last time anyone in Berlin could remember being greeted with the once-ubiquitous *"Heil Hitler!"* In November 1943, RAF Bomber Command began a series of 16 mass raids on Berlin, using their new long-range bombers, the Avro Lancaster and the de Havilland Mosquito. These raids lasted until March 1944, when the RAF discontinued them because their bomber losses were unacceptably high, and because it was time to begin the Transportation Plan in France, in preparation for the Normandy landings.

But though the RAF judged the bombing raids on Berlin a failure, they still caused 4,000 civilian deaths, 10,000 civilian injuries, and destroyed the homes of half a million Berliners, and a number of important public buildings, notably the Kaiser Wilhelm Church, built between 1891 and 1895 by you-know-who.

These bombing raids made Christmas 1943 pretty miserable in Berlin. People joked that in a Berlin Christmas, the British provide the Christmas lights, a reference to their multicolored targeting flares, the German flak guns provided the Christmas balls, since the German word for ball also means bullet, Goebbels provided the fairy tales, and Berliners themselves sat in candle-lit basements, awaiting the arrival of their gifts from above.

In the cold winter streets, pedestrians walked past apartment houses where one of the walls had collapsed, almost indecently exposing what had been the private spaces of the families that had lived in them. One might see a living room with family pictures hanging on a wallpapered wall, an overstuffed chair still sitting on what remained of the floor, or a bathtub jutting precariously from the broken edge of a tiled bathroom floor. Notices posted on these buildings advised those seeking friends and relatives who had lived here where they could now be found, alongside notices from the Nazi Party warning that looters would be subject to execution.

Signs everywhere pointed the way to air raid shelters, or *Luftschutzräume*, as they were called in German. This was often abbreviated to LSR, which Berliners joked stood for *Lernt schnell Russisch*, that is, *Learn Russian quickly*. The Nazis had constructed huge air raid bunkers for civilians, but the city's population of over three million was more than even these bunkers could handle. One of the ways the regime dealt with this was to deny the use of air raid shelters to the slave labor population, which by 1944 amounted to 10% of the city.

Despite Berliners' skepticism, or perhaps I should say weariness, regarding the Nazis, most Berliners reacted to the bombings with honest shock and anger. Many were persuaded by the argument that Hitler's seemingly miraculous survival of the July 20 assassination plot demonstrated how destiny had spared him for a higher purpose.

The Ardennes Offensive raised hopes for most Germans, and thoroughly excited the minority who were still true believers in Nazism. A wild rumor spread that the entire US First Army had been taken prisoner, thanks to a new wonder weapon: a knockout gas capable of incapacitating enemy soldiers by the tens of thousands.

But the rumor was just a rumor, and by the beginning of 1945, German government propaganda wasn't even talking about the Ardennes anymore, which sent a clear message to those with ears to hear it. The Ardennes Offensive was in truth this war's *Kaiserschlacht*, the final German offensive in the West that came just before the final collapse.

Heinz Guderian spent the first week of the new year touring the Eastern Front. On January 9, he made his third visit to the Eagle's Nest in three weeks so he could plead with the *Führer* one more time to reinforce the Eastern Front before the coming Soviet offensive. Besides the earlier report of a huge buildup of Soviet ground forces in preparation for an offensive, he now had a second intelligence report, this one from the Luftwaffe. Their reconnaissance planes reported some 8,000 Soviet Air Force planes concentrated along the East Prussian and Vistula front lines.

Guderian had a personal stake in this. Hitler had gifted him with an estate on lands Germany had annexed from Poland. His wife lived there. The coming Soviet offensive threatened her as well as hundreds of thousands of other Germans, but the Nazis would never permit her to leave until the Red Army was at their gate.

When Guderian described the latest Luftwaffe intelligence assessment to the staff at the Eagle's Nest, Hermann Göring wouldn't even allow him to finish before interrupting him to tell Hitler, "Don't believe it." Those were decoy planes, not real planes. They had to be. Wilhelm Keitel vehemently agreed.

Hitler told Guderian that this intelligence report was "completely idiotic," his words, and that the person responsible for it should be placed in an asylum. Guderian replied that he was in full agreement with the report, so he might as well be committed alongside its author.

Hitler denied requests to allow some units on the Eastern Front to pull back from exposed positions and shorten the front line. He denied Guderian's request that the 200,000 soldiers bottled up in Courland be withdrawn by sea and redeployed to protect the Reich.

Guderian would later describe Hitler's decisions as the "ostrich strategy," that is, that Hitler was simply refusing to acknowledge the danger, metaphorically burying his head in the sand, like an ostrich. To be fair, that's a myth. It's fascist dictators who bury their heads in the sand. Ostriches are smarter than that.

When it was time for Guderian to leave, Hitler attempted to smooth things over by telling him that the Eastern Front now had a strong reserve force, that this was due to Guderian's leadership, for which Hitler thanked him.

Guderian shot back that the Eastern Front was a house of cards, unconsciously echoing the kind of language Hitler had used to describe the Soviet Union prior to the invasion.

Guderian returned to his headquarters outside Berlin. The following day, January 10, was Stalin's birthday, and there had been some speculation that he would begin the offensive on that day. Stalin didn't, but Guderian's staff warned him that the time remaining should now be measured not in days, but in hours.

They were right. On January 12, at 6:00 AM, the Red Army began a massive artillery bombardment on the Vistula front, with hundreds of artillery guns per kilometer of front, a concentrated attack meant to breach the German line at a specific point.

From behind the German lines, it looked as if the eastern horizon was on fire. The poor infantry on the front line, battered and terrified, climbed out of their broken bunkers and surrendered. Reportedly when the bombardment began, the commander of the 16th Panzer Division jumped into his staff car and fled west.

In the afternoon, the Soviet tanks began advancing through a snowstorm. "Russian weather," the German soldiers called it. The Russians seemed to *like* fighting in the worst of winter weather. Their advancing tanks, encrusted with snow and ice, were virtually invisible in the blinding storm.

The following day, January 13, with the Soviet offensive just beginning and its full scope not yet clear, Armaments Minister Albert Speer met with senior military commanders in Berlin to discuss military production. Speer, unlike most Nazi ministers, was candid with his audience. In the past year, the Wehrmacht had suffered catastrophic losses, he acknowledged, but grounds for hope remained. In spite of the Allied bombing campaign, Germany had produced over 200,000 rifles in the previous month, which was double the figure from 1941. Production of armored vehicles was five times greater. But he was not candid enough to mention the role slave labor played in boosting these numbers.

He advised the assembled commanders that the "trickiest problem," his words, was the severe shortage of fuel.

The following day, Red Army forces farther north began their offensive along the border of East Prussia. One of the fronts launching the attack was commanded by Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky. You may remember that Rokossovsky had led the offensive toward Warsaw six months earlier, but he had since been transferred to a new command farther north. "Why this disgrace?" Rokossovsky asked when he received the transfer order.

Recall that Rokossovsky had been purged in 1937 and spent time in an NKVD prison. He was later released when the Red Army required more capable commanders, but was still under suspicion. Also, he was an ethnic Pole. Stalin was never going to give a politically suspect Pole the honor of taking Berlin. Or even Warsaw. When he transferred his old command on the Vistula to his friend, Marshal Georgy Zhukov, he warned Zhukov to be careful. "I know very well what Beria is capable of. I have been in his prisons."

The offensive on the north end of the front, facing East Prussia, made little progress at first, as German units defending the Reich itself resisted bitterly.

Zhukov's front began its offensive the same day, directed toward the encirclement and capture of what was left of Warsaw.

For three days, Guderian sent Hitler frantic messages requesting he return to Berlin and take charge of the situation. At first, Hitler blandly replied that the situation on the Eastern Front would have to sort itself out. But on the third day, he agreed. Hardly anything was left of the "bulge" the Germans had created on the Western Front, and what German units were still in there were pulling back. On January 15, he boarded a train for Berlin.

Along the way, he issued an order for a panzer corps to be redeployed from East Prussia to the Vistula front to help hold the line. He issued this order without consulting with Guderian or either army group commander involved. The redeployment would take one of the Germans' best units off the front line for a week.

That same day, Air Chief Marshal Tedder, commander of Allied air forces in the West, arrived in Moscow for a meeting with Stalin. The *Vozhd* was attentive to his guest. He opined that the German offensive in the West had been "very stupid." He expressed glee that the Germans had chosen to sideline those 200,000 soldiers in Courland, where they would be unable to aid in the defense of Berlin. And he claimed credit for beginning his own offensive earlier than planned, for the sake of assisting his allies during a difficult time.

After all, another conference of the Big Three, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, had been scheduled to begin in a couple of weeks, and Stalin wanted to make sure his allies knew they owed him one.

Stalin also emphasized to Tedder the problem the Soviets faced with the large numbers of German agents planted by the Nazis among the populations of Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States, who spied on Red Army movements and committed acts of sabotage. They made the Red Army's struggle more difficult, but the USSR would root them out, he promised.

This was of course Stalin's way of laying the groundwork for the elimination of any anti-Soviet elements in those countries by labeling them Nazi spies.

On January 16, the small German garrison in Warsaw signaled they would not be able to hold what was left of the city against the approaching onslaught. Guderian gave permission for them to withdraw. Hitler learned the withdrawal action that night and exploded with rage. Warsaw was supposed to be a fortress city. He demanded the order be rescinded and Warsaw held at all costs. But it was too late. Warsaw was already in enemy hands.

As far as Hitler was concerned, this was yet another example of the military officers undermining his strategy.

The ill feelings between Guderian and Hitler only got worse. Guderian was still angry about Hitler redeploying that panzer corps without consulting him. Even worse, Hitler had agreed to pull the Sixth SS Panzer Army off the Western Front, but ordered it be sent to shore up the front line in Hungary and break the siege of Budapest. Guderian argued for it to be sent to the Vistula front instead, but Hitler refused to discuss it, choosing instead to chew out Guderian in front of the other senior commanders.

The following evening, staff officers of the OKH, German Army command, were gathered in the map room to celebrate the birthday of one of their own, Colonel Bogislaw von Bonin. It had been Bonin who had issued the actual withdrawal order to the Warsaw garrison. As they stood around sipping champagne, three Army officers showed up, armed with machine pistols. On Hitler's orders, they arrested Bonin at his birthday party along with two other officers and handed them over to the Gestapo for interrogation.

Guderian protested the move, telling Hitler that he should be interrogated along with them, as he was the senior officer and the responsibility for the decision was his alone. Hitler took him up on the offer and Guderian spent an unpleasant day getting grilled by the Gestapo while the Eastern Front he was supposed to be in command over was collapsing.

Guderian and the two other staff officers were released after their interrogations, but Colonel Bonin was held in a concentration camp until the end of the war.

[music: Wagner, Overture to *Tannhäuser*.]

Warsaw fell to the Red Army on January 17. The city was little more than piles of rubble frosted with ice and snow. Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman toured the city, which he described as "an undulating red sea of broken bricks." He wondered how many thousands of bodies lay under the debris. The ruined city was still home to around 160,000 people, barely 10% of Warsaw's pre-war population. Remarkably, one Polish resident still in the city led Grossman to four Jewish survivors who somehow managed to keep themselves alive and hidden from the Germans throughout the five and a half years of Warsaw's agonies.

Try to imagine the feelings of the Red Army soldiers who marched through Warsaw, especially the members of the Polish People's Army. Soviet soldiers were already receiving a steady diet of anti-German propaganda, including through the Red Army's newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, which means *Red Star*, and most notably in the columns of the Jewish Russian author and poet Ilya Ehrenburg. Shortly after the German invasion began, Ehrenburg was invited to contribute a regular column to *Krasnaya Zvezda*. His essays appeared in *Pravda* and other civilian publications as well.

In his writings, Ehrenburg bitterly condemned the Germans. His columns became hugely popular. He collaborated with Grossman in 1944 to produce *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, a compilation of evidence documenting the Holocaust in Soviet territory, but the Soviet government would not permit the book to be published, as it contradicted the government's position that emphasized the suffering of all Soviet citizens during the German occupation and resisted acknowledging how the Nazis singled out Jews in particular for persecution and extermination.

Ehrenburg's writings became sufficiently notable by 1945 to draw criticism from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels themselves, who accused Ehrenburg of advocating the rape of German women and the extermination of the German people. Ehrenburg always denied this, and while it appears to be true that he never encouraged such things in so many words, he did tell Red Army soldiers things like, "The Germans are not humans…If during a day you have not killed a single German, you have wasted the day…If you let the German live, he will kill a Russian man and rape a Russian woman…" He frequently referred to Germany as "the Blonde Witch," and you can imagine how some soldiers interpreted that.

I mentioned earlier the beginning of the offensive against East Prussia on January 14. That evening, the commander of Army Group Center telephoned Hitler to request permission to pull back to a more defensible line and warned that if Hitler refused, it could mean the loss of all East Prussia. Hitler refused anyway. He loathed the idea of surrendering a single meter of the territory of the Reich.

A few hours later, in the middle of the night, came that order transferring that panzer corps from East Prussia to the Vistula front. It was the only reserve force Army Group Center had in East Prussia, and its redeployment sealed East Prussia's fate.

But before I get into that, I need to say a few words about Erich Koch. This guy was a real piece of work. He was born in 1896, served in the German Army during the last war, then joined the paramilitary Freikorps and fought against the German Revolution in 1918.

He joined the NSDAP, the Nazi Party, in 1922, becoming one of its earliest members; earlier than Adolf Hitler, in fact. He rose through the party ranks and in 1928 became *Gauleiter* of East Prussia, in other words the Party chief in that province. In 1930, he was elected to a seat in the Reichstag. He held both of those positions until the end of the war in 1945.

After the defeat of Poland, Koch's authority was extended into Polish territory. Two months into the invasion of the Soviet Union, Koch was appointed *Reichskommissar* of Ukraine. In keeping with Nazi policy, he shut down all schools in Ukraine, saying "Ukraine children need no schools. What they'll have to learn will be taught them by their German masters." He was in charge of providing slave laborers to send to Germany and of the persecution and murder of Jewish people in the territories he ran. The vicious Nazi persecutions of Jews and Slavs in the occupied territories prompted the Ukrainians to give him the nickname "the second Stalin," as well as inciting a substantial partisan movement in Ukraine. In that regard, allow me to remind you that the German military had proposed granting Ukraine independence, expecting that a liberated Ukraine would gladly join with Germany in opposing the Soviet Union, just as the Finns had done, but this went against Nazi ideology, which held that Slavs were racial inferiors and should not be permitted to do anything more than manual labor for Germans.

By autumn of 1944, most of the territories assigned to Koch had been retaken by the Red Army. As *Gauleiter*, Koch was in charge of civil defense in East Prussia. As Soviet forces approached, he forced tens of thousands of civilians in East Prussia to dig trenches and defensive positions for the German Army. Unfortunately, he did not consult with the German Army's commanders before beginning, and the defensive works produced were useless. He was made head of the Volkssturm in East Prussia, and in that capacity forced large numbers of old men and teenage boys into its service.

But his cruelest works, in East Prussia anyway, was to bar the population from fleeing the region. This in spite of the looting, rapes, and murders Red Army units had committed in East

Prussia last fall during their brief incursion into the province. German civilian refugees flooding westward into the Reich would be bad for morale, you see.

Then when the offensive came in January 1945, and the Red Army advanced into East Prussia for a second time, this time to stay, the Nazis did grant special permission to flee the region to Margarethe Guderian, the general's wife. Mrs. Guderian later recalled how the staff at the Guderian estate had tears in their eyes as they watched her depart. She took that as a sign of their devotion to her and her husband. It does not seem to have occurred to her that they might have been crying because she was leaving them behind to face rape and murder.

On January 18, the Red Army reached Krakow, Poland's second-largest city and capital of the General Government. Hans Frank, the Governor-General of the General Government, fled west. The Red Army took the city without opposition.

On January 20, the Nazis at last granted permission for civilians in East Prussia and other threatened lands in the Reich to evacuate. Koch and other Party leaders had already fled. Civilians fleeing in terror soon followed. These were people who remembered the Nazi propaganda pieces highlighting the rapes and killings of a few months ago. But it was winter now, and fleeing civilians had to contend with deep snow and temperatures as low as minus twenty Celsius, which is about zero Fahrenheit.

Whether holding off on the evacuation of civilians until it was too late reflects Nazi disregard for the value of human life or Nazi incompetence is hard to say. Sometimes you can't tell where the one ends and the other begins.

There were civilians who stayed. Perhaps they doubted the propaganda or simply didn't believe such things would happen. They were very wrong about that.

The main assault into East Prussia was conducted by the Soviet Third Byelorussian Front. That attack bogged down until farther south, Rokossovsky's Second Byelorussian Front advanced roughly along the southern border of East Prussia, then turned north and reached the Baltic Sea west of Danzig on January 23. This meant that the two largest cities in the region, Danzig and Königsberg, both on the Baltic coast, were cut off from the Reich, while most of the rest of East Prussia was under Soviet occupation.

Hundreds of thousands of German civilians died, some from hunger and exposure as they fled, some killed accidentally during Soviet combat operations, and some killed deliberately by Red Army soldiers. Most were shot, some were run over by Red Army vehicles, and some were strafed as they fled by Soviet Air Force planes overhead. Red Army soldiers looted everything of value they could carry; what they couldn't was often set on fire. In their frenzy of rage, soldiers even burned down German homes they could have used themselves as shelter from the winter cold.

And there were the rapes. No one has a reliable number, but the figure must be in the hundreds of thousands. There are reports of girls young as eight and women as old as eighty raped by Red Army soldiers. These rapes were often gang rapes; there are numerous reports of German women raped by a dozen or more soldiers at a time. And Polish women. The Red Army soldiers didn't worry much about the victim's ethnicity.

Not every Red Army soldier committed war crimes. Some gave aid to civilians and handed out candy to German children. Many more maintained military discipline and were appalled by the behavior of their comrades. Still, acts of kindness and discipline were far outweighed by atrocity.

Why did this happen? Because the Soviet Union was a totalitarian society, it is easy to conclude that there must have been some signal, overt or covert, to the rank and file soldiers by their commanders of permission to assault and kill Germans as a form of revenge. During the Cold War, Western sources often made this accusation.

But think about it. Yes, the Soviet Union was a totalitarian society that exerted a serious degree of control over every citizen, but control and discipline are not like a light fixture that you can switch on and off at will. And you don't get discipline by being strict some of the time and letting your soldiers wreak havoc at other times. Discipline has to be maintained at all times, because once it is lost, it is very hard to regain.

There are records of higher-ranking officers, Rokossovsky among them, issuing orders calling for decent treatment of German civilians and threatening prosecution for crimes committed against them.

Although it may seem paradoxical, given the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union, the Red Army had the worst discipline of any army that fought in this war. One reason is the deprivations—and the poor treatment—the soldiers themselves endured. There were the horrors these soldiers witnessed, the remains of German war crimes, as they retook the territory of their homeland. There was the relentless anti-German propaganda, which often emphasized German soldiers raping women of the Soviet Union, which did indeed happen frequently. Red Army soldiers may have concluded it was payback time.

Alcohol also played a role. Russians and other Slavs tend to be heavy drinkers, and when they began ransacking German homes, bottles of schnapps were often taken as booty. And speaking of German homes, there is testimony that the neat and tidy homes of German farmers, decorated with their china plates, mirrors, vases, and clocks sometimes triggered anger and rage among Red Army soldiers, many of whom were themselves farmers, yet lived in homes far less elegant. In some cases, the Soviet soldiers assumed these must be the homes of the wealthy and powerful. Other Soviet soldiers asked themselves how it could be that a people who themselves lived in such cozy and comfortable homes felt moved to go to war with their poorer neighbors in the USSR and inflict so much deprivation and suffering on them.

Red Army soldiers were also moved to wonder why farmers living under capitalism had it so much better than they themselves, who were supposed to have been freed from capitalist oppression.

You also have to consider the Red Army's appalling number of casualties. The Red Army's best front-line officers and NCOs were killed early in the war. By 1945, Red Army platoon sergeants were often teenagers, inexperienced themselves and tasked with maintaining discipline over soldiers twice their age or more, many of whom might also be inexperienced.

Though there is no evidence that these horrors were deliberate Red Army policy, there was clearly a cover-up afterward. The Soviet government suppressed information about the Red Army's war crimes, and the USSRs Western allies also kept quiet for the sake of the alliance.

As soon as the Nazis gave the order lifting the ban on evacuations, the German Kriegsmarine began an operation to ship supplies to the large German forces still garrisoning Danzig and Königsberg and to evacuate civilians on the return trip. On January 30, the cruise ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* left the port of Gdynia, carrying civilians and wounded soldiers. The *Gustloff* had been launched in 1937 as part of the Nazi "Strength Through Joy" campaign.

Surviving records document 6,000 people aboard the *Gustloff* that day, although there were certainly many other evacuees who boarded at the last minute and whose names were not recorded. It is possible there were more than 10,000 people aboard. The *Gustloff* had minimal escort. At around 9:00 that evening, *Gustloff* was hit by three torpedoes fired by a Soviet Navy submarine. The ship sank in less than an hour; 1,252 were rescued, although thirteen of them died later. No one can say how many other people died, but estimates range as high as 9,000, which is six times the death toll from the sinking of *Titanic*. A few days later, another German passenger liner carrying refugees was also sunk, killing an additional 4,500.

The sinking of the *Gustloff* was the worst death toll in a ship sinking of the Second World War, the worst naval disaster in recorded history, eclipsing even the 7,000 or so deaths when the Luftwaffe sank the British passenger liner *Lancastria* as it was evacuating civilians and soldiers from France in June 1940.

On January 27, the Red Army captured the death camp at Auschwitz, freeing some 7,000 sick and starving prisoners left behind when their SS guards fled. By the end of January, Soviet troops had captured the German mining and industrial centers of Silesia, a worse blow to German war production than anything the Western Allied bombing campaign had accomplished in four years, and had reached the River Oder, in some places even crossing it and establishing bridgeheads on the river's west bank. The Red Army had advanced 500 kilometers in less than three weeks, and now stood less than 100 kilometers from Berlin.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Keith for his kind donation, and thank you to Matthew for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and

patrons like Keith 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*, as we continue with the Eastern Front and see how the German government reacts to the Soviet offensive. Hint: not very rationally. More like, A Blind Man Speaking about Color, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Erich Koch fled East Prussia for Berlin in January 1945, before anyone else in East Prussia had permission to leave. After meeting with Hitler, he returned, although he set himself up in a safe spot, the port of Pillau, where he directed the evacuation of civilians by radio. In April 1945, he fled Pillau by boat and ended up at Hamburg, after an unsuccessful attempt to escape to South America.

He lived in hiding in Hamburg until 1949, when he was captured by the British. Both the Soviet Union and Poland demanded his extradition; the British chose to deliver him to the Polish. He was eventually tried and convicted of war crimes and sentenced to death, though the sentence was later commuted to life in prison. He became the last surviving war criminal held in a Polish prison until his death in 1986, at the age of 90.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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