

# 76 Years Ago: Nazi Germany Launches Its “Final Great Offensive” of World War II

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*Seventy-five years ago, on 6 March 1945, the Third Reich launched what was to be its final great offensive of World War II, called Operation Spring Awakening (Unternehmen Frühlingserwachen). This attack, not well known today, was directed eastwards through the heart of Europe against the Red Army.*

It was envisaged by Nazi Germany’s dictator Adolf Hitler, as he expounded on his plans in the Berlin Führerbunker, that the assault would prove to be a turning point in the war – akin to Russia’s victories at Stalingrad and in the Caucasus, which had proven critical in the Soviets’ recovery. (1)

As the year 1945 continued beyond its first weeks, among those whom the Nazi hierarchy could place their trust in were figures like Joachim Peiper, a panzer commander and SS Lieutenant-Colonel (Obersturmbannführer), someone whose legacy in the following decades has been romanticised by sections of the US Army and the Pentagon. Peiper, aged 30 in 1945 and with distinctive Nordic features, was someone with a highly aggressive reputation in combat.

Peiper was designated a considerable role in Operation Spring Awakening. He had long established himself as a war criminal, whose forces committed a number of atrocities on eastern and western fronts. It is often the case that ruthless men with few scruples make such formidable and dangerous soldiers.

From 1939 until 1941, Peiper served as SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler’s main adjutant. Peiper was standing adjacent to Himmler when, on 20 September 1939, they witnessed the murder of 20 Polish intellectuals by ethnic German paramilitaries working for the Nazis. On 13 December 1939, Peiper was present again with Himmler to see the gassing of residents at a psychiatric facility, near the city of Poznan in Poland. (2)

He was furthermore familiar with the apparatus of Nazi concentrations camps from early on; during the winter of 1940-1941, Peiper had accompanied Himmler on a visit to at least one concentration camp (3). In February 1941, Himmler confided in Peiper of the impending designs to invade the USSR; and, during the first half of June 1941, he was in attendance when Himmler outlined plans for the murder of 30 million people of Slavic birth in the East.

Peiper was acquainted with Reinhard Heydrich, perhaps the most sinister Nazi of all, and who was considered a possible successor to Hitler. The wives of Heydrich and Peiper were also friends.

In the post-1945 years, Peiper became something of a folk hero in some right-wing German circles, and also in the top echelons of power in America. As recently as mid-December 2019 Peiper, in Waffen-SS uniform, was being publicly glorified by the US military and its government branches in “commemorating the 75th anniversary of one of the most critical battles in history [Battle of the Bulge]”. (4)

The American XVIII Airborne Corps wrote of Peiper that, “The fate of his beloved nation rested on his ability to lead his men”. Peiper’s photograph was then relayed on official Facebook pages of the US Department of Defense and the US Army’s 10th Mountain Division. Unsurprisingly, the Pentagon subsequently came under heavy criticism, and the images of Peiper were deleted.

Peiper had received some of the highest decorations in Nazi Germany, and he was known personally to Hitler since at least the autumn of 1939. Peiper was in attendance when Hitler met the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco at Hendaye, south-western France, on 23 October 1940.

Also familiar to the Nazi top brass was Peiper’s adjutant, Werner Wolff, who would likewise participate heavily in Operation Spring Awakening. In 1945, Wolff was 22-years-old and an SS First Lieutenant (Obersturmführer), who like Peiper became the embodiment of Nazi racial stereotype, with his blonde hair, square jaw and athletic features.

Both Wolff and Peiper had participated in a number of major conflicts together, including the Third Battle of Kharkov in the spring of 1943, when the outnumbered Germans drove Soviet armies from what was the USSR’s third largest city. Wolff was one of the Nazis’ most acclaimed young soldiers. He distinguished himself repeatedly in their eyes against both the Soviets and western Allies; Wolff, for example, destroyed a number of Soviet tanks single-handed in fierce fighting during the Battle of Kursk, in the summer of 1943. (5)

At the beginning of the Ardennes Offensive, on 17 December 1944 Peiper and his unit wiped out American battalions in their path, before advancing a remarkable 16 miles in just 12 hours of fighting, moving comfortably into eastern Belgium (6). They had now reached the outskirts of the town of Stavelot, in Liege province.

It is no exaggeration to note that much of the success of the entire Ardennes Offensive rested on Peiper and his adjutant, Wolff, operating at his side (7). Otto Skorzeny, a top SS commando and one of the very few to have access to Hitler, had himself placed high hopes on Peiper’s role in this attack.

Peiper was unable, however, to advance much further beyond Stavelot – as, while waiting for German forces to catch up from behind, he realised that their fuel supplies were running dangerously low. A shortage of oil was a growing issue for the Germans as the war dragged on, with their access to raw materials in the East limited due to Soviet advances into Reich-occupied territory. Peiper was dependent upon the Tiger II heavy tank, which consumed petrol at half a mile a gallon.

By Christmas Day 1944 the Ardennes Offensive was in serious trouble, as the skies and

atmosphere cleared of cloud and fog, with pale winter sunshine breaking through. Now the much larger number of Allied aircraft, with a clear view of the ground below, could wreak havoc on the German war machine by destroying hundreds of panzers and other Wehrmacht armoured vehicles.

Hitler responded on New Year's Eve 1944 by launching what would be the final major German offensive of World War II on the Western front. It was dubbed Operation Nordwind, with the advance commencing through north-eastern France and around the famous Alsace-Lorraine region.

On 28 December 1944 Hitler, speaking to his divisional commanders in preparation for Operation Nordwind, issued an "exterminating" order to be directed against Allied troops; but specifically with the Americans in mind, who Hitler wished to exact retribution on for their indiscriminate air raids over German cities.

At the Adlerhorst mountain headquarters in western Germany, Hitler outlined of his plans that,

"It is a matter of destroying and exterminating the enemy forces wherever we find them... I hope that we will succeed especially to push the right wing ahead fast, to open the roads to Saverne. Then push at once into the Rhine plains to liquidate the American divisions. The goal must be the annihilation of these American divisions... I don't have to explain to you a second time what depends on it". (8)

In spite of initial gains, as with the Ardennes Offensive this next German assault ran out of steam, due to a combination of fuel shortages along with the greater numbers of Allied aircraft and tanks.

Regardless, it had taken the Allied troops more than six months to advance from the beaches of Normandy to the forests of the Ardennes, a little over 300 miles in total. During the Battle of France in mid-1940, the Germans covered a similar distance in three weeks. As they marched into French territory from 10 May 1940, Heinz Guderian's 2nd Panzer Division advanced 200 miles in just 10 days, brushing aside French and British divisions, before reaching the English Channel at Abbeville on 19 May 1940. (9)

Almost five years later, Hitler now put his hopes on another large-scale offensive to the east, Operation Spring Awakening, which he started planning by himself from mid-January 1945. All of the generals were opposed to it, apart from Hitler's old loyalist Sepp Dietrich, who would lead the attack with his 6th SS Panzer Army.

Spring Awakening's execution was made possible after a little known German victory against Soviet forces in northern Hungary, called Operation Southwind (Unternehmen Südwind), which concluded on 24 February 1945 and was "a brilliant success" (10). Over 400 square kilometres of ground had been recaptured from the Soviets in Operation Southwind. With the Red Army bridgehead over the River Garam destroyed, this laid the basis for Spring Awakening to begin less than two weeks later.

In the Führerbunker conference room Hitler said of Spring Awakening that, "All we have to do is show the enemy once more, by a smashing success, that he cannot win the war.

Without Stalin's fanatical determination, Russia would have collapsed in the autumn of 1941. Frederick the Great, too, in a hopeless situation fought on with indomitable energy.

He deserved the name 'the Great' not because he won in the end, but because he remained intrepid in misfortune". (11)

For Spring Awakening, the Germans managed to amass 400,000 men who were to be directed at first into oil rich western Hungary, so as to reach the great Danube river, before pushing on to retake the Hungarian capital Budapest.

Spring Awakening comprised of 10 panzer divisions, five infantry divisions, two SS Cavalry divisions, with 900 Luftwaffe aircraft in support overhead (12). German forces were equipped with 900 panzers and Sturmgeschütz (Stugs), the latter consisting of armoured fighting vehicles which were in effect miniature panzers.

The attack began at dawn on 6 March 1945, with the weather at that point favourable with low cloud cover, thick fog, and snow actually falling. It was similar to conditions at the commencement of the Ardennes Offensive almost three months before.

On the opening day of Spring Awakening, the Germans advanced only a few kilometres, before success arrived in the immediate time following, as the 6th SS Panzer Army advanced 20 miles. By the 9th of March, a degree of panic was setting in among the Soviet leadership, as notable German advances continued up to the 11th of March.

It was on that day, 11 March 1945, that Hitler visited the Eastern front for what would be the last time. He travelled by motor car from the Führerbunker in Berlin north-eastwards to the city of Stettin, near the Baltic Sea, and today in Poland. Since early 1940, Stettin was a base of operations for the German 2nd Motorised Infantry Division, and later the 12th Panzer Division.

Heinz Linge, Hitler's servant and chief valet, was present in the vehicle as they drove through idyllic, unspoilt countryside, with the sound of Wehrmacht and Soviet artillery fire heard on occasion rumbling in the background.

In his memoirs originally published in 1980, Linge highlights the direct role of Hitler in the Holocaust, and he dismisses claims from Nazi apologists that the dictator was not privy to crimes against humanity committed in the concentration camps.

"That is pure nonsense" Linge wrote, when reflecting on assertions that Hitler was in practical ignorance of the extermination of Jewish populations. Linge continued, "I was often on hand when, with sparkling eyes and trembling voice, he [Hitler] would say that he would rid himself ruthlessly of anybody who opposed him". (13)

Since his appointment on 24 January 1935 to that of the Führer's valet, Linge spent almost every waking hour in his master's presence, attending to his requirements. In later years as the fighting wore on, Linge's position became prominent and Hitler relied even more heavily on him, notwithstanding that he was also an SS officer. Hitler sometimes asked Linge to back him up in key arguments during military conferences - whenever German generals, or officers, had the gall to intimate that the Nazi leader was contradicting himself, or that his comments were inconsistent.

On such instances, which became more commonplace after 1942, Linge was invariably standing at the back of the conference room and Hitler would demand, "Linge, what did I say then and what did the general suggest?" With all eyes turned towards Linge, he then swiftly analysed the dictates of stenographers, with the valet confirming that Hitler indeed made the exact point in question, and had not since changed his argument; while now it was the military men who were contradicting themselves, seemingly undermining their positions.

In the meantime, Linge recalled of their final journey to the Eastern front in March 1945,

"Our car drove over ploughed fields, pasture and meadows to Stettin, which was still held by German forces. It needed all his [Hitler's] physical energy to endure, but he would not give in. Crossing ploughed land one morning to reach a Luftwaffe command post, suddenly the farmers were around us with their wives. They seemed to have forgotten the close thunder of the Russian artillery. They had apparently not expected to see him, Hitler, right at the front, and one felt at once the effect that Hitler had on them even though he was now old, grey, bent and degenerating. He did not speak to them, but gave a jovial wave". (14)

Four days later, by the 15th of March 1945, Operation Spring Awakening literally ground to a halt in the mud, with the temperature having risen and rain fallen. In the following hours, the Soviets counter-attacked with overwhelming force, and after a few days they had forced the Germans back to their original positions at the start of Spring Awakening. The final nail in the Nazi coffin was being hammered home.

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## Notes

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