

75 Years Ago: Hitler Plans Operation Spring Awakening as Auschwitz Is Liberated

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Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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It is often thought that the Third Reich's final major offensive of World War II comprised the Battle of the Bulge, which was launched in mid-December 1944 against the western Allies through Belgium, France and Luxembourg, with much of the fighting occurring along the Ardennes Forest.

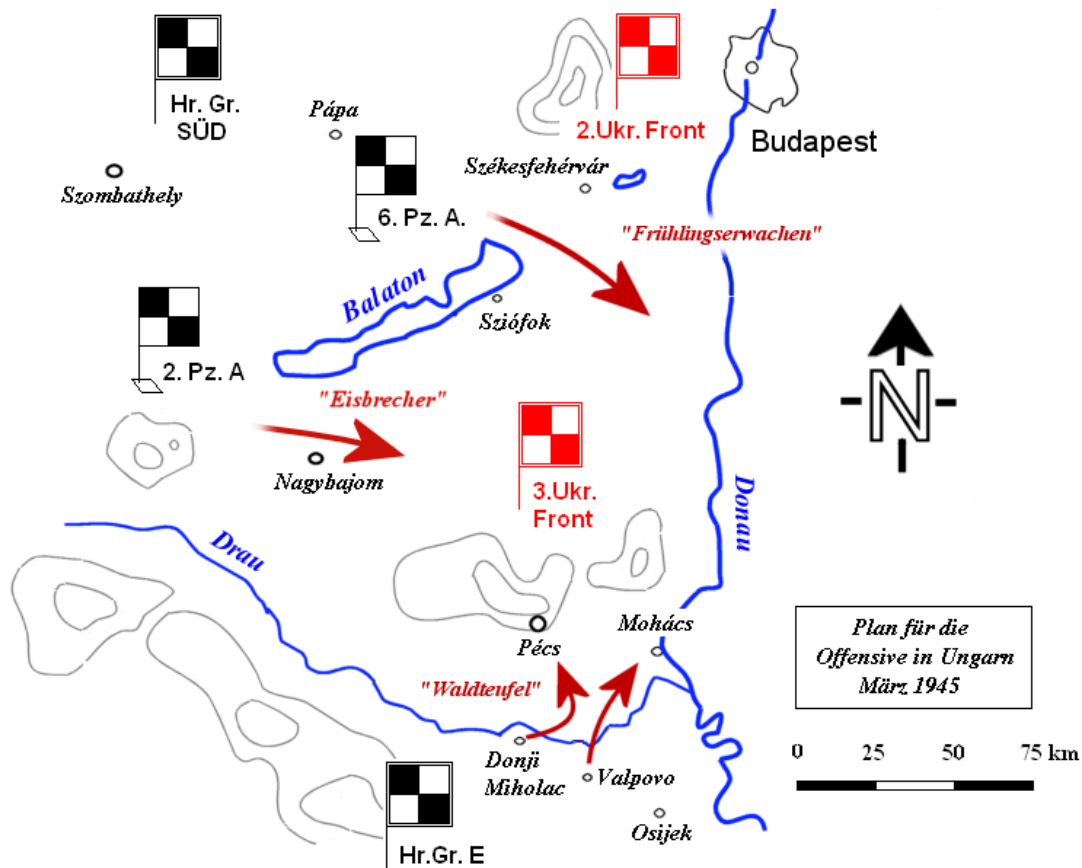
This attack, known on the German side as the Ardennes Offensive, was formulated entirely within the mind of Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler; it began with swift and decisive German advances, news that was forwarded immediately to Hitler at his Adlerhorst (Eagle's Eyrie) mountain headquarters located not far from the city of Frankfurt, in western Germany. Yet with the fog lifting after a few days and skies clearing, the superiority in numbers of Allied aircraft and tanks beat the Germans back by the Christmas of 1944.

However, Hitler countered with another sizable attack from 31 December 1944, called Operation Nordwind (Unternehmen Nordwind). This was in fact the final major German offensive of the war on the Western front, and not the Battle of the Bulge.

Addressing his commanders at the Adlerhorst compound on 28 December 1944, Hitler issued an order of annihilation to be directed against American and Free French soldiers during Operation Nordwind, when he [said that it](#) "has a very clear objective, namely the destruction of the enemy forces. There is not a matter of prestige involved here. The point is to gain space. It is a matter of destroying and exterminating the enemy forces wherever we find them". (1)

Among those very likely present to hear the above was SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, who would command Army Group Upper Rhine in Operation Nordwind, after his appointment to a military leadership role by Hitler on 10 December 1944.

The ensuing failure of these latest offensives constituted further setbacks for the Wehrmacht, but Hitler was not primarily concerned with enemy positions in the West, mainly due to his utter contempt for the fighting abilities of British and American troops. Winston Churchill also noted in [his memoirs](#) that German soldiers were indeed of appreciably superior quality to Allied troops. (2)



Schematic of Germany's planned offensive operation in Hungary in March 1945, based on descriptions by Christian Hungváry (Publisher: Karl-Heinz Frieser) in "Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Wk., Bnd. 8" and Josef Puntigam in "Vom Plattensee bis zur Mur" (CC BY-SA 3.0)

As 1945 approached over the horizon – perhaps the most fateful year in history that heralded too the development of nuclear weapons – the Nazi hierarchy looked out upon a world that was literally closing in on them.

Hitler nevertheless prepared yet another large-scale offensive, switching focus to the east against his prime nemesis the USSR, with a planned assault through Hungary, the Balkans, and it was hoped beyond that further eastwards. It was the fifth year in succession that German and Soviet troops would be fighting brutally against each other. Plans for a fresh attack were hastened by news, on 12 January 1945, that the Soviets had commenced their winter offensive more than a week earlier than expected, firstly targeting the German front in southern Poland.

Hitler departed his Adlerhorst complex for the final time on 15 January 1945 and, the following day, he relocated to the Führerbunker amid the ruins of Berlin. The Führerbunker, positioned beside the Reich Chancellery, was initially intended as a safe house for Hitler from early British air raids; it was to prove the final calling card of Nazi Germany.

Now in the late winter of 1945, preparations for a new military engagement on the Eastern front had been titled, Operation Spring Awakening (Unternehmen Frühlingserwachen).

Albert Speer, German war minister from February 1942, and one of the most powerful figures in the Reich, was repeatedly present at discussions with Hitler at the Führerbunker from mid-January 1945 onwards.

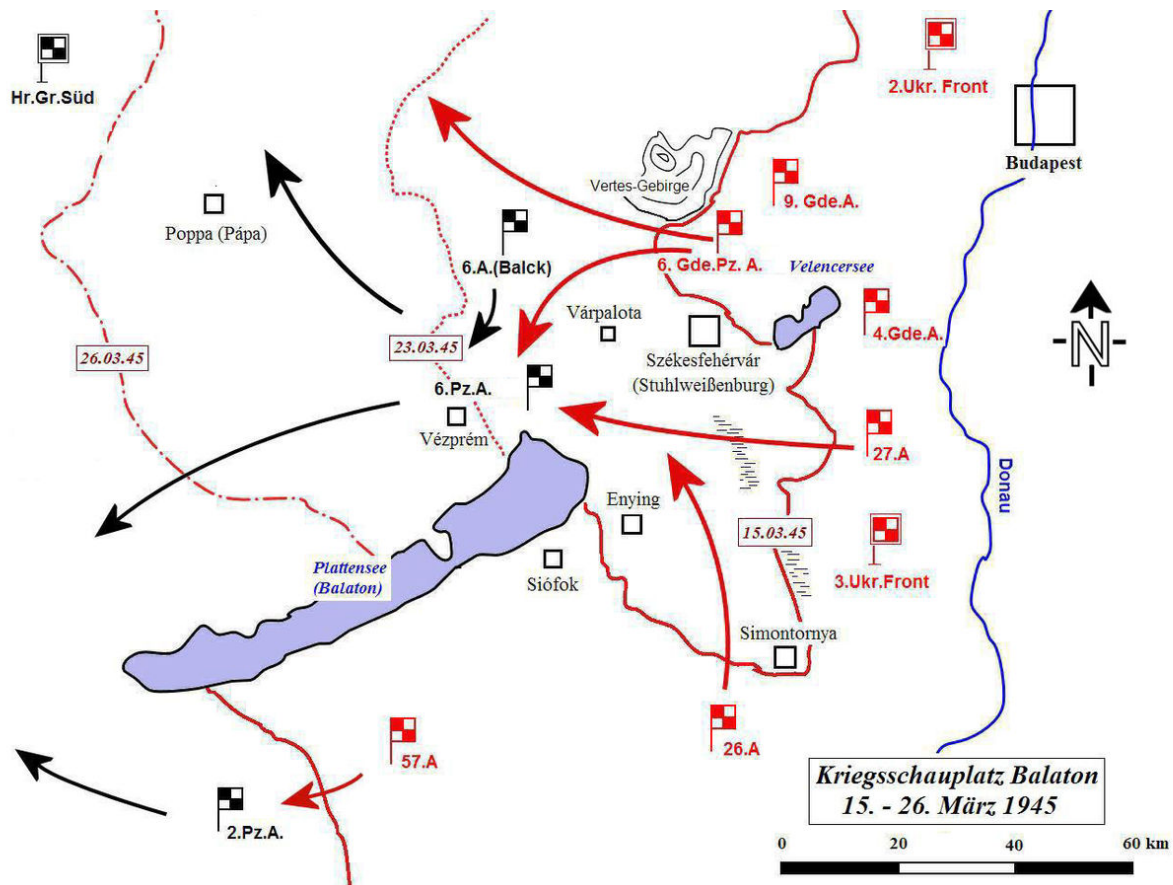
Clear in Speer's memory was Hitler's thinking behind Operation Spring Awakening. From a bleak cell in Spandau Prison, Speer wrote in his secret diary, on 8 November 1946, recalling vividly the offensive's planning and how "Hitler boldly traced its course at his big map table, to advance through Hungary to the south-east".

Speer's recollections of the remarks made by Hitler on this last attack have, over the elapsing near 75 years, hardly ever been relayed in print before. Historians have almost universally shied away from quoting Hitler at length, presumably due to his particularly notorious legacy. Infamous as his reputation no doubt remains, Hitler was one of the major figures in 20th century history, and his views should be recounted, especially relating to offensives he had himself devised.

With a semi-circle gathering of German officers present in the Führerbunker conference room, Speer recalls that Hitler said of Operation Spring Awakening,

"There is every likelihood that the population of these areas will rise as one man, and with their help we will go roaring through the entire Balkans in a life-and-death battle. For I am still determined, gentlemen, to wage the fight in the East offensively. The defensive strategy of our generals helps only the Bolsheviks! But I have never in my life been a man for the defensive. Now we shall go over from the defence to the attack once more". (3)

Hitler's ambition to forge ahead with the offensive went firmly against the wishes of nearly all of his remaining generals, who preferred a strategy based upon defence, embedding oneself in the earth and in bombed out buildings. This plan of containment was simply a case of delaying the inevitable, and Hitler was most likely correct to gamble. It is surely better to engineer a forward-thinking manoeuvre with victory in mind, no matter how unlikely, rather than a stay-put policy of restraint which can only result in certain defeat in the end.



Soviet counterattack (Source: [Greenx](#) aka Gerald Kainberger / CC BY-SA 3.0)

Furthermore, an attack-minded plan imbued Hitler and his few remaining loyalists with some semblance of hope that the war could yet be turned around. As late as the 21st of April 1945, Hitler attempted to organise a pincer movement to wipe out Soviet forces that had encircled Berlin two days before, placing his hopes mainly on units commanded by Waffen-SS General Felix Steiner. When Hitler was told that Steiner could not implement the attack, he fell into a bitter and tearful rage, realising that the war was undoubtedly lost.

Speer affirmed of Hitler that,

“It was as if he had always known that he had only the choice between the offensive and defeat, as if the loss of the initiative in itself was virtually equivalent to his downfall”.

Speer, who had become particularly close to Hitler as his prized architect, attests that the dictator’s actions dating to the time of his “struggle” from the early 1920s, consisted of one aggressive move after another. These provocative, sometimes criminal policies, continued following his rise to power in January 1933, as he eradicated potential rivals, reclaimed former territories, stepped up his persecution of Germany’s Jewish population, and ran roughshod over appeasement-seeking French or British politicians.

Speer writes that,

“The unleashing of war itself had been an example of offensive policy, and he [Hitler] had waged the military conflict in an offensive spirit as long as he was able. Even after the turning point of the war, the capitulation of Stalingrad, he

had organised the offensive operation at Kursk, code-named Citadel". (4)

The Battle of Kursk has also sometimes erroneously been dubbed "the last major German offensive on the Eastern front", when it was not the case at all. (5)

Further German assaults were launched in the east during the summer of 1944, ending in disaster as the Soviets made huge advances westward with Operation Bagration. Spring Awakening itself, the following year, would consist of 10 Panzer divisions and five infantry divisions, [altogether](#) 400,000 men, considerably larger in manpower than the US-led invasion force which descended on Iraq in 2003. (6)

Meanwhile, Hitler's argument to push ahead with Spring Awakening was bolstered when the Germans enjoyed an unlikely victory against Soviet forces in late February 1945, called Operation Southwind (Unternehmen Südwind).

It was an attack directed through the heart of Europe, into northern Hungary, and that went [fully according](#) to plan (7). By 24 February 1945 the Soviet bridgehead over the River Garam, 150 miles east of Vienna, was decimated by General Hans Kreysing's 8th army, and in doing so they had removed the Soviet threat in this area, for now.

Hitler was reassured and said,

"Those who are down today can be on top tomorrow. In any case, we shall go on fighting. It is wonderful to see the fanaticism with which the youngest age groups throw themselves into the fighting. They know that there are only two possibilities left: Either we will solve this problem, or we will all be destroyed". (8)

Often claimed is that the aim of Spring Awakening, led by Sepp Dietrich's 6th SS Panzer Army, was to ensure control over the oil wells near Lake Balaton, in western Hungary, pivotal to Nazi Germany's lasting war effort; and to drive on north-eastwards so as to retake the Hungarian capital, Budapest. Hitler had actually envisaged this 1945 attack as a turning point in the war, a Stalingrad-type victory but this time in the Germans' favour – that would eventually drive the Red Army divisions back towards their own frontiers.

An animated Hitler, hammering away at his military entourage, continued that,

"The Russians have almost been bled to death by now. After the retreats of the past few months, we have the priceless advantage of no longer having to defend those enormous spaces. And we know from our own experience how exhausted the Russians must be after their headlong advance. Remember the Caucasus! This means a turning point is now possible for us, as it was for the Russians. In fact, it is absolutely probable. Consider! The Russians have had tremendous losses in materiel and men.

Their stocks of equipment are exhausted. By our estimates they have lost 15 million men. That is enormous! They cannot survive the next blow. They will not survive it". (9)

Such was Hitler's powers of persuasion that Speer remembers how his diatribes "distorted so many men's grasp of reality". Dispirited officers once convinced that defeat was a matter

of time, following discussions with Hitler went away thinking that victory was achievable after all.

Nazi intelligence calculations regarding the Red Army death toll were not far off. By early 1945 comfortably more than 10 million Soviet troops were dead, and around the same number of Soviet civilians had also been liquidated by the invaders (10). This horrendous loss of life outweighs the Holocaust, but the latter genocide is unprecedented in that it was pre-planned by the Nazi regime, organised and systematic.

Around the time that Hitler was laying out his designs for Spring Awakening, the Auschwitz extermination camp was liberated at 3pm on 27 January 1945, firstly by soldiers from the Red Army's 322nd Rifle Division. These troops, long used to fighting against fanatical German soldiers, were shocked at the horrors that lay within.

Over a million people had been killed at Auschwitz alone. For the vast majority the victims consisted of Jewish populaces from central and eastern Europe, 960,000 in total; among the dead too were minority groups like Sinti, Roma and others. (11)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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Featured image: Germans during the Operation Spring Awakening (Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1989-105-13A / Woscidlo, Wilfried / CC-BY-SA 3.0)

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