The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 328
“The Battle of Britain”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

With the UK remaining as the only European country still at war with Germany, and with the prospect of a peace agreement remote, Germany began history’s first campaign of purely aerial warfare. Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave this campaign its name three weeks earlier in a speech to the House of Commons on June 18, 1940, when he declared, “The Battle of Britain is about to begin.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 328. The Battle of Britain.

The situation facing the British following the fall of France was dire. The British military had been driven off the Continent, and there was no prospect of it returning any time in the foreseeable future.

There was a moment when the British government was almost ready to open peace talks with Germany, but Churchill persuaded the Cabinet to hold fast. His speeches to the Commons and over the wireless stiffened the national resolve. His speech of June 18, the one that included the line about “their finest hour,” was one for the history books. The Soviet ambassador in London reported to Moscow: “The initial shock and confusion have dissipated. Now a storm front of cold, persistent, truly British fury is brewing.”

Cold, persistent British fury is all well and good, but what is it supposed to accomplish? In Churchill’s mind, the key to winning the war was to persuade the United States to join in, and the key to accomplishing that was for Britain to face the Nazis with bravery and pluck, eventually winning America’s sympathy.

Adolf Hitler was well aware of this danger. So should Hitler and Germany offer the British a carrot or a stick? Should Germany make a peace offer, or should it take the war to Britain itself?

As was his custom when faced with a major decision, Hitler went to the Berghof, his mountain retreat. On July 11, he invited Erich Raeder, commander of the Kriegsmarine, the German Navy, to discuss a possible invasion of Great Britain. Raeder was leery of the idea. The invasion of Norway had cost the Kriegsmarine half of its surface fleet. What few ships remained were not likely to last long under the guns of the Royal Navy. Raeder advocated blockading Britain until the nation's economy was crippled and its people starving, at which time even Churchill would have to sue for peace. An invasion should be contemplated only as a last resort, he advised, and no earlier than spring of 1941, when Germany's new *Bismarck*-class battleships would be ready.

The next day, Hitler met with Alfred Jodl, chief of staff of the OKW, the German Armed Forces High Command. Jodl had submitted a memorandum on June 30 that also recommended that an invasion of Britain be considered only as a last resort, the very same language as Raeder. Jodl recommended air attacks to destroy the RAF and cut off British overseas trade.

On July 16, Hitler issued *Führer* Directive Number 16 to the Wehrmacht. It began: "Since England, despite its hopeless military situation, still shows no signs of being willing to reach an agreement, I have decided to prepare and, if necessary, carry out a landing operation against England. The purpose of this operation is to disable the English motherland as a base for continuing war against Germany and, should it prove necessary, to completely occupy it." The prospective invasion was code-named "Operation Sea Lion," and Hitler decreed it should be ready for execution by mid-August, allowing just a month for preparation.

You can tell from the caveats in the passage I just read that Hitler was at this moment still hopeful that some kind of peace agreement with Britain could be struck. On July 19, he gave a major speech before the Reichstag. He recited Germany's victories of the past ten months and fulsomely praised the German armed forces. He announced no fewer than twelve promotions to the rank of field marshal. For the sake of comparison, only five German commanders were appointed field marshals in all of the First World War. Hermann Göring, whom Hitler had already made a field marshal in 1938, was promoted to the newly created rank of *Reichsmarschall.* Göring would be the only person ever to hold this rank.

Hitler went on to praise Italy and to boast of secure relations with the Soviet Union—despite the fact that he was already privately discussing an invasion of the Soviet Union with his military commanders.

At last, at the tail end of the two-hour speech, Hitler turned to the subject of peace with Britain. He told the Reichstag, "I can see no reason why this war must go on. I am grieved to think of the sacrifices it will claim. I should like to avert them." He acknowledged that Winston Churchill might well spurn his talk of peace, adding darkly that in that case, "I shall have relieved my conscience in regard to the things to come."

Hitler did not make an explicit peace offer, or even suggest opening negotiations, but he did intend this as his final offer to the British government. In Britain, it was received as something

more akin to an ultimatum. Three days later, in a radio address, British foreign secretary Lord Halifax ruled out peace talks with Germany.

In the United States, President Roosevelt made the unprecedented decision to run for a third term. Of course, I will want to go into American politics of this moment in more detail; we'll do that in a few episodes. Just hours after Hitler addressed the Reichstag, Roosevelt addressed the Democratic National Convention, meeting in Chicago, and told the delegates:

In times like these—in times of great tension, of great crisis—the compass of the world narrows to a single fact. The fact which dominates our world is the fact of armed aggression, the fact of successful armed aggression, aimed at the form of Government, the kind of society that we in the United States have chosen and established for ourselves. It is a fact which no one longer doubts, which no one is longer able to ignore. It is not an ordinary war. It is a revolution imposed by force of arms, which threatens all men everywhere. It is a revolution which proposes not to set men free but to reduce them to slavery—to reduce them to slavery in the interest of a dictatorship which has already shown the nature and the extent of the advantage which it hopes to obtain.

In the German Foreign Office, their resident America expert gave his interpretation of the speech. He said Roosevelt had made a "clear declaration of hostility toward Germany."

Hitler was under no illusions concerning Germany's circumstances. If the stalemate between Germany and the UK were allowed to continue, it was only a matter of time before the United States would intervene on Britain's behalf. The British had to be defeated, and sooner rather than later.

The United States was not his only worry. Winston Churchill had just appointed Stafford Cripps as British ambassador to the Soviet Union. Cripps was a Marxist, an MP from Bristol who had been expelled from the Labour Party just over a year earlier for advocating the formation of an anti-fascist Popular Front movement in Britain that would have included the Communist Party. Now he was seen as the ideal person to build bridges between London and Moscow.

Hitler and his government saw the danger. The Soviets had recently taken advantage of the war in the West to move against Romania and the Baltic States. Nothing would please Stalin more, in their view, than to drag out the conflict between Germany and Britain as long as possible, leaving Moscow free to indulge in its own adventurism. Hitler asked the Army to draw up plans for an invasion of the Soviet Union, to begin no later than this coming autumn.

Jodl told Hitler than an attack on the USSR would require 80-100 divisions and could not be organized in so short a time frame. The earliest possible date would be May 1941.

July was also the time for the annual Wagner Festival in Bayreuth. Hitler was not originally planning to attend, but he made a surprise visit on July 23 to take in a performance of *Götterdämmerung, Twilight of the Gods.*

No one knew it at the time, but this would be Hitler's last Wagner Festival.

[music: Wagner, *Parsifal*]

Germany's Luftwaffe had racked up impressive performances in Poland and during the Western offensive, contributing significantly to the German Army's rapid advances. This is exactly what the Luftwaffe was created to do. From the beginning, the Luftwaffe was conceived as a tactical force that would support the Army on the ground.

Now, in the coming Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe would for the first time be operating alone. What was its assignment? Well, clearly job one was to defeat the RAF. Germany had to establish air superiority over Britain, or at least over southern England, before any other military operation became possible. This was an essential prerequisite to an invasion or a blockade, and there was always the hope that once the recalcitrant Mr. Churchill discovered that he no longer had an air force and that England was open to bombing and invasion, that would be sufficient to get him to open armistice talks.

Germany's senior military commanders certainly hoped that would be the case, and none more than *Reichsmarschall* Göring himself, the commander of the Luftwaffe. Remember what I said two weeks ago about air force commanders, and their shared ambition to prove their air forces could win a battle, even a war, all on their own. Göring felt confident the Luftwaffe would carry the day.

This confidence was widely shared among the Luftwaffe's air crews. I mean, look what they had accomplished over Poland, Norway, the Low Countries, and France. Their planes were qualitatively better and their air crews more experienced than their British opponents.

The Luftwaffe had taken serious losses in France, but even so, it boasted 650 Me-109 and 160 Me-110 fighter planes, 300 Stuka dive bombers, and nearly 800 level bombers in July 1940. The RAF, by contrast, had barely 500 fighters available to defend their homeland.

But the German side sorely lacked intelligence information. Attempts to infiltrate spies into Britain were clumsy and easily detected. The Germans flew a few reconnaissance missions over England to get the lay of the land, but that was risky.

In fact, German intelligence underestimated both the size of the RAF and Britain's capacity to manufacture new airplanes to replace losses and expand its air force. It also seems the Germans seriously underestimated the British RDF, which is what they called their radar network at that time. It stands for range and direction finding.

Radar eliminated the need for the RAF to fly reconnaissance over the English Channel or to keep planes in the air for quick response. Planes and pilots could stay ready on the ground and launch and intercept incoming German attacks only as needed. This allowed the RAF to use the fighters

they had much more effectively than would otherwise have been the case. To the Germans, it looked as if the British had a lot more planes than they actually had.

The Germans had an inkling of what those RDF towers were for, and they could pick up the radio signals for themselves, but after a few early attempts to bomb the stations, they gave up. The towers were hard to hit and the stations easily repaired. The Germans had little understanding of Hugh Dowding's system for rapid collection and dissemination of information from the RDF stations—otherwise they might have tried bombing the communication centers and the telephone links.

Only about 80% of the RAF flight crews were British. Also represented were New Zealanders, Canadians, Czechs, Australians, Belgians, South Africans, and French pilots, as well as some volunteers from Ireland and the United States, both of which were neutral, and a handful of other nationalities. But the largest foreign contingent—145—was made up of Polish flyers who had escaped the occupation of their homeland. The Poles were experienced and they were bitter. They felt poorly led and let down once by their senior officers in Poland, and again by commanders in the French air force. In Britain, the RAF at first insisted Polish air crews had to wear RAF uniforms, take an oath of allegiance to King George, and even then they would have to begin at the lowest ranks and work their way up.

The Poles chafed under these restrictions, while the Polish government in exile negotiated for something better. The British gave in and allowed separate Polish squadrons, although some Poles continued to fly in RAF units. The Polish pilots were generally more experienced than their RAF colleagues. They also had it in for the Germans, going so far as to fire their machine guns at German pilots after they had bailed out of their planes and were descending on parachutes, conduct of which their British commanders emphatically did not approve. The British saw the Polish flyers as reckless, taking too many risks. Even so, Polish pilots averaged more kills and a higher survival rate than did British pilots. They came to be seen as dashing, romantic figures, and they had their pick of the girls on any British dance floor.

After the German raid on Rotterdam, the British set aside whatever qualms they had about strategic bombing and began night air raids targeting factories in Germany's industrial regions. Back in September 1939, when the war had just begun and German civilians expressed fears about bombing raids, an intemperate Hermann Göring attempted to reassure the German public, telling them that if an enemy bomber reached the Ruhr Valley, "my name is not Göring. You may call me Meier." What exactly he meant by that is not clear to me. Meier is a common surname in Germany, so he may have meant something like, "then I'm a nobody." It's hard not to wonder if anti-Semitism plays a role here, since Meier or Meir is also a common Jewish men's first name. Whatever he meant, once British bombs started falling on the Ruhr, *Reichsmarschall* Meier quickly became the butt of a thousand jokes.

These British raids were officially targeting factories, but the reality was that these were night raids, with bombs dropped from high altitudes. Accuracy was terrible, and in those days when most factory workers commuted on foot, workers were housed in dense housing close to the plant. Thus, many British bombs fell on civilian housing, leading Germans to dismiss British claims that these were attacks on factories as a mere cover story for their real purpose: terror bombing of civilians, just as Giulio Douhet had predicted.

Recall that from the beginning, the Luftwaffe had rejected terror bombing on the grounds that it was likely to be ineffective and provoke terror bombing in retaliation. The goal of the German air war against Britain was to destroy the RAF. Attacks on civilians were prohibited, and air crews that violated that prohibition subject to discipline.

But when was this air war supposed to begin? The Luftwaffe had already begun experimental raids on southern England, which were intended mostly for practice. In July, German planes began attacking the Royal Navy and civilian shipping in the English Channel and occasionally RAF bases and aircraft factories.

But the full fury of the Luftwaffe had yet to be unleashed. Hitler dithered, hoping for that peace deal and distracted by thoughts of attacking the USSR, which was the war he really wanted to fight. The German military and public began the month of July confident the war was all but won. But as the days ticked by and nothing much seemed to happen, Germans grew worried. Victories had come so quickly until now; was the final victory at hand, or would this war and its accompanying hardships drag on through winter and into 1941?

The delay was good news for the British. It meant time to build new aircraft. British industry was putting out as many as 100 new fighters every week, so every day of delay helped even the odds. Airfields were improved, training programs ramped up, and new RDF stations put on line. Meanwhile, on the German side, everyone waited for the *Führer's* decision.

Finally, on August 1, Hitler released *Führer* Directive Number 17, outlining *Unternehmen Adlerangriff,* "Operation Eagle Attack," a very Nazi name. It called for the Luftwaffe to bomb factories and airfields, destroy the RAF Fighter Command, and claim supremacy over the skies of southern Britain. It was expected this would take about four weeks, allowing for Operation Sea Lion to begin by late September.

This operation was to start on August 5, codenamed *Adlertag*, "Eagle Day," though bad weather forced multiple postponements until August 13. That day, two months after the Germans entered Paris, the Battle of Britain began in earnest.

The main target that first day was the Royal Navy base at Portsmouth, plus a number of Fighter Command airfields. Some 300 German aircraft took part in these attacks, against 80 British fighters. By the end of the day, 47 German planes had been shot down and 89 German air crew killed or taken prisoner against 13 British fighters lost and three pilots killed.

It was an inauspicious beginning. Two days later, on August 15, the Luftwaffe came seeking revenge with nearly 1800 aircraft, the largest attack force the Battle of Britain would ever see. The Luftwaffe, underestimating the number of British fighters available, deduced from the August 13 numbers that Fighter Command was concentrated in southern England, leaving the north undefended, so they ordered bombers based in Denmark and Norway to attack across the North Sea. This was too great a distance for Me-109 fighters, so these attacks were escorted by the larger, less maneuverable Me-110s.

The Germans discovered that the RAF had plenty of fighters available in the North. It also turned out that while the Me-110s were fast, they were not nearly as maneuverable as British fighters. The bomber squadrons from Denmark and Norway lost 20% of their planes, and the Germans would not attempt to attack from that direction again. Luftwaffe air crews would refer to that day as "Black Thursday."

But three days later, the Luftwaffe and the RAF combined would lose more aircraft than on any other day of the campaign. August 18, 1940 would go down in the history books as "The Hardest Day." What's especially notable about this day was the Luftwaffe bringing in its Ju-87 Stuka dive bombers to attack British ground installations. The Luftwaffe learned that although the Stukas performed admirably in German campaigns on the Continent, when the Luftwaffe had total control of the skies, they were terribly vulnerable to enemy fighters. One Stuka squadron of 28 planes lost 11of them in one engagement. The lesson was that Stukas were not suited to this fight, and they would be withdrawn from the Battle of Britain.

What seemed to work best were German high-altitude bombers escorted by Me-109s, but even these planes were not ideal for the role in which they were cast. Me-109s were designed as air superiority fighters, not as escorts. Their range was so limited that a German fighter pilot could only stay in British airspace for about 30 minutes before having to turn around and head for home.

The Me-109 was an excellent fighter, superior to the Hawker Hurricane that was the backbone of Fighter Command, although it came with a steep learning curve and was a challenge for new pilots to master. The British Supermarine Spitfire was the 109's equal, but the RAF had far fewer of those. The Spitfire could make tighter turns, allowing it to outmaneuver a 109. For that matter, so could a Hurricane. But the Me-109 was faster, and it could climb and dive more quickly than any British fighter. In particular, 109s could make a steep dive, owing to their fuel-injected engines. The British fighter engines used carburetors, which meant that a steep dive might cut off fuel flow and make the engine sputter, something you most definitely do not want your engine doing when you are in a steep dive.

The Germans were using airfields in northern France that had been commandeered for the use of the Luftwaffe. Many of these fields were of poor quality and accidents were common. The Luftwaffe demanded much of its pilots, who were sent against the RAF day after day with

insufficient rest. Their commanders kept telling them that Fighter Command was short on planes, low on morale, and about to collapse, but their experience in English skies was telling them exactly the opposite.

On the British side, the RAF was much more careful about rotating its pilots between busy fronts and quieter sectors to avoid burnout. British fighter pilots were up before dawn and ready to fly at first light, awaiting the signal from Fighter Command. These waits could be nerve wracking. When the call came, they rushed to their cockpits and took off, pushing their planes to climb as fast as possible. Sector controllers would direct them toward radar sightings, until one of the squadron pilots called out, "Tally ho!" over the radio, signifying visual contact.

The initial tactic was often to storm ahead, straight into the bomber formation in the hope of disrupting it. If you could force the bombers to disperse, your job was half done. When possible, the superior Spitfires would engage the Me-109s, while the Hurricanes would attack the bombers.

Fighters and bombers were equipped with a mix of machine guns and small-caliber cannons. Planes could take dozens of machine gun bullets and still make it home, if they were lucky, but a cannon hit usually meant it was time to bail out.

Here is where RAF pilots had one big advantage. German pilots who bailed out could expect to spend the rest of the war in a POW camp in Canada, but RAF fliers would be landing on friendly soil. That is, presuming they spoke English. Polish and Czech pilots who bailed out did not always get a warm reception on the ground. One Polish pilot bailed out and got stuck in a tree when his parachute tangled. He was soon confronted with a group of English farmers armed with pitchforks. One of the farmers called out, *"Hände hoch,"* that is, "Hands up," in German. The Polish pilot didn't know a lot of English, but he had enough command of the language to tell the Englishmen to fuck off. Right, he's one of ours.

The Battle of Britain was a battle of attrition. The RAF was regularly taking down more German planes than it was suffering in losses, but the Germans had more planes, so in percentage terms their losses were smaller. In order to minimize losses, Fighter Command ordered its pilots not to pursue the Germans any farther than the coast and sometimes it chose not to intercept small groups of enemy planes at all.

British factories were turning out replacement fighter planes at an impressive rate, but pilots were harder to get. Experienced pilots were valuable, and every one lost was replaced by a green pilot, whose odds of lasting long enough to become experienced were not promising. And don't lose sight of the fact that German attacks on British airfields also killed ground personnel, including mechanics, clerks, cooks, even members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Winston Churchill, as usual, summed it up neatly in a famous speech before the House of Commons on August 20, when he declared, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

But the battle took its toll. Fighter Command pilots became exhausted. They were known to fall asleep at dinner in the mess hall and land in their mashed potatoes.

On August 18, the Luftwaffe bombed the RAF airfield at Biggin Hill, on the outskirts of London. No British fighters intercepted them and the airfield was seriously damaged. Luftwaffe command took this as a sign that the RAF was finished at last, and began switching to attacks on aircraft factories. But as the British discovered when they bombed industrial sites in Germany, accuracy was poor, and bombs were more likely to land on worker housing than on the factory. Air raids struck Bristol and Portsmouth and Birmingham, as well as suburban London: places such as Croyden, Harrow, and Wimbledon. On the night of August 24, a group of He-111 bombers dropped incendiary bombs on London’s East End, causing fire and destruction. By some accounts, this was an accident, although the evidence is unclear.

Whether or not it was an accident, Winston Churchill interpreted it as a deliberate attack on London civilians and ordered Bomber Command to strike Berlin in retaliation the very next night. That attack did little damage, but it stunned Berliners, who had not believed such a thing was possible. Adolf Hitler, who was vacationing at the Berghof at the time, rushed back to the capital to bolster morale.

Hitler had ordered the Luftwaffe not to bomb London without his express authorization. Now he gave it to them. On September 4, in a speech at Berlin’s Sportpalast, Hitler publicly announced revenge bombing. “If they tell us they are going to launch large-scale attacks on our cities, let us proclaim that we will wipe theirs off the map! We are going to put a stop to these pirates of the night…” With regard to the long-awaited invasion, Hitler taunted the British: “People in England today may be very curious and ask, ‘Why does he not come?’ Rest assured, he is coming.”

In truth, by this time Hitler was doubting whether an invasion was possible, though it was useful to maintain the fiction that one was imminent. At the end of August, Hitler conceded to his commanders that the Luftwaffe had not achieved the air supremacy that would allow for an invasion. He told them to await a final decision on September 10.

On September 7, the Luftwaffe sent more than a thousand aircraft on a massive attack aimed primarily at the London Docklands. The Germans bombed port facilities and no small number of houses and other civilian buildings in London’s East End, partly in retribution for the RAF attacks on Berlin, though for Göring and the Luftwaffe command it may also have been a last-ditch attempt to prove that the RAF had indeed been beaten. Three hundred Londoners were killed and a further 1300 injured.

But the RAF had not been beaten. When September 10 came, Hitler postponed the final decision on Operation Sea Lion once again. On September 15, the Luftwaffe attempted one more all-out attack. This time, Fighter Command had more warning and shot down 56 German planes against the loss of 29 British fighters and 12 pilots.

That was the last major daylight bombing raid. With losses mounting, the Luftwaffe would switch to nighttime bombing. Bombers were harder to find in the dark, and therefore more likely to survive; on the other hand, they were also far less likely to find their intended targets.

On September 17, Hitler bowed to the inevitable and ordered Operation Sea Lion postponed indefinitely, although the pretense was to be maintained, which was useful to the Germans for a number of reasons. It was good propaganda, it forced the British to keep military assets in the British Isles that might otherwise be put to use elsewhere, and it provided cover for the Wehrmacht's preparations to invade the Soviet Union.

But this by no means meant the bombing was over. The Luftwaffe continued nighttime bombing raids on London and then the English Midlands through the winter. The British press dubbed this new bombing campaign the Blitz. Once again, theoretically the bombs were targeted against British industry, but most of them fell on civilian homes.

The King and Queen remained in London during the Blitz and throughout the war, which helped with morale. The possibility was raised of relocating the Royal Family to Canada for their own protection, but they would not consent to this, not even to sending away the Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret. The Queen explained the decision this way: "The children won't go without me. I won't leave the King, and the King will never leave," though the Princesses were sent to Windsor Castle for their safety, and the King and Queen often stayed with them overnight or on weekend visits.

Queen Elizabeth visited hospitals and communities that had been bombed. When she first visited the East End, she found herself jeered by bombing victims who resented the privileges of the Royals, though over time the public warmed to her, especially after early September, when Buckingham Palace was bombed. The Queen famously declared, "I'm glad we've been bombed. It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face."

London got the worst of it in September and October. Hitler boasted of giving nightmares to eight million people and predicted British morale would soon collapse. It did not. Gallup polls taken at the time show only a negligible fraction of the British public expected to lose the war, and the Churchill government posted approval ratings near 90%.

With air defenses in London improving every night, in November, the Luftwaffe switched to bombing industrial cities in the Midlands. On November 13, Churchill ordered the RAF into another attack on Berlin, for a very specific reason: Soviet foreign minister Molotov was in town for talks with the Germans. The Soviets were concerned about German troops in Finland and

German diplomatic initiatives in the Balkans. Molotov asked Hitler if Germany still felt bound by the 1939 agreement. Hitler told him of course they did, while Ribbentrop suggested that the USSR join the war against Britain and invade India, assuring him that the British were all but beaten.

Then the air raid sirens went off. Molotov and German government officials were led down into a bunker beneath Wilhelmstrasse. Molotov could not resist asking Ribbentrop why, if Britain was all but beaten, were they sitting here in a bomb shelter?

The following night, the Luftwaffe heavily bombed the English city of Coventry, in one of the most famous and deadly raids of the Blitz. This was not a reprisal; this attack was already in the works before the Berlin raid. Some 500 people were killed and large areas of the city destroyed, including its medieval cathedral. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels coined the verb *coventrieren,* that is, to coventrize, meaning to subject a city to a devastating aerial attack.

Overall, some 40,000 British civilians were killed and a comparable number wounded during the Blitz. The Blitz was not consistent in terms of which British industries it was trying to disrupt, and overall British industrial production fared rather well. The British did disperse some of their most critical industries, like aircraft manufacture, to make them less vulnerable, while British businesses took a perverse pride in remaining open, even when their storefront windows were shattered. One London shop put out a sign the morning after a raid that had broken its window. The sign read, "More open than usual."

American radio journalist Edward R. Murrow broadcast reports of the Blitz from London, sent to New York over shortwave radio, then rebroadcast in America on the CBS radio network. Murrow's broadcasts opened with *"This* is London," and by the end of 1940, he was signing off with a distinctive closing, "Good night, and good luck," supposedly what Londoners would say to each other in the evening, before preparing for that night's bombing raid. Murrow's radio reports brought the terrors of the Blitz into American homes, and helped tilt American sympathy toward Britain.

This was history's first test of Giulio Douhet's thesis that terror bombing of enemy civilians could by itself force capitulation, and the thesis failed. British morale did not plummet. It rose. The government was not pressed to seek terms; Churchill's policy of fighting to the bitter end was hugely popular.

It is notable how the doctrines of both the Luftwaffe and the RAF went from refusal to contemplate terror bombing of civilians as immoral or ineffective or likely to provoke retribution, or most likely all three, to full-on attacks on major cities, though disguised by the fig-leaf claim that the raids were targeting industry. The other guys ruthlessly bomb civilians; we only bomb military targets, the 80-90% of our bombs that hit civilian housing being merely unfortunate accidents, and anyway, the other guys did it first.

As for Operation Sea Lion, OKW Chief of Operations Alfred Jodl said it best when he wrote in an August memo that Sea Lion "must under no circumstances fail. A failure could leave political consequences, which would go far beyond the military ones." In other words, it would be better not to invade at all than risk failure. This was certainly true, and everyone from Hitler on down understood it.

The Army wanted a broad invasion over a wide front. The Navy insisted it could do no more than, at best, defend a smaller, narrower landing. The Army said that such a landing would be tantamount to suicide.

So there never was agreement on whether or how the invasion would be possible, even if the Luftwaffe succeeded in defeating the RAF. Meanwhile, the British were doing everything imaginable to beef up defense of their island.

An invasion might have been successful if it had been quick and early, just after the fall of France, when the British were stunned and demoralized, and most of the British Army's equipment had been left behind on the Continent. Instead, Hitler waited until after the fall of France, then dithered for several crucial weeks, giving the British valuable time to regroup and reorganize.

But such a rapid invasion would have required advance planning, as in, it should have been part of the initial Plan Yellow along with the invasion of France. But the reality was that even the Germans weren't expecting to win the Battle of France so quickly, and greatly feared the possibility of the Western Front settling into another long war of attrition, as it had in 1914. Anyone who suggested withholding ground units from the invasion of France to prepare for an invasion of England would have been thought insane.

The threat of invasion persisted in the propaganda of both sides long after it ceased to be a realistic threat. This was for the simple reason that it was useful to both sides. Churchill found invasion talk kept the British nation united and focused on their enemy. Hitler found it useful for the same reason, and also because it distracted attention from the coming invasion of the USSR.

In Germany, enthusiasm for the war, which had peaked after the armistice with France, began to wane when it became clear the British were not ready to capitulate. Contrary to Hitler's promise at the beginning of the year, that the war would be over by December, it was now obvious the war would carry on through a second winter of rationing and other wartime hardships. The German public already knew what a long war felt like, and did not have the stomach to go through that again.

American journalist William Shirer presciently compared the failure of the Germans to force a British capitulation to the Battle of the Marne in 1914, the moment when the German juggernaut was stopped and the momentum of the war began to shift. Another American journalist compared it to the Battle of Gettysburg.

Meanwhile, the Wehrmacht began to consider other ways of bringing the British to their knees, and we will discuss those in future episodes.

We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Artur and Mike for their kind donations, and thank you to William for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Artur and Mike and William help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, 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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I'm going to be at the North American Science Fiction Convention in Winnipeg, Manitoba in July. I don't know yet if I'll be presenting, but if any of you are planning to be there, do look me up.

I don't know about you, but I've had enough of war for a while, so we're going to take a break for the next few episodes and get caught up on what's going on in the neutral USA. We'll take a look at a new form of entertainment that began in the US and spread to other countries: pulp fiction, which is pretty much at its peak in the late Thirties and early Forties. We'll also have to talk about the political situation, the American response to the war, and the 1940 Presidential election. But first, we'll talk about the 1939 New York World's Fair. Dawn of a New Day, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. Operation Sea Lion and the potential German invasion of Britain stands as one of the great "what ifs" of history.

I've already outed myself as a wargamer on this podcast, and let me tell you that over the past fifty years, I've played most of the World War II wargames published. Every one of them includes rules, sometimes very detailed, to allow for the possibility of a German invasion of Britain in 1940 or 1941, and those rules are seldom used when people actually play the game, at least in my experience. This suggests something, both about the fascination the idea of Operation Sea Lion evokes and how unlikely a successful invasion actually was.

There has been so much speculative fiction created about the possibility of the Axis winning the Second World War that it has to count as its own subgenre. Most of these tales of Axis victory begin with a successful German invasion of Britain. A few tales focus primarily on that invasion.

One notable example is the 1971 American film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks,* from Walt Disney Productions that includes a German landing in Britain foiled by a witch, played by Angela Lansbury, who successfully uses witchcraft to animate an army out of suits of armor and military uniforms displayed in a local museum, which then repels the invaders.

A more serious view of the prospect came from the pen of British author Len Deighton, who himself served in the RAF during the war and went on to write spy novels. In 1978, Deighton published *SS-GB*, a spy story set in England of 1941 after a successful German invasion. The novel paints a realistically gray and gloomy picture of daily life in London under German occupation. The BBC adapted *SS-GB* into a five-part television miniseries, first broadcast in 2017.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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