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Britain’s Struggle Against Nazi Germany

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Global Research, October 14, 2024

Region: Europe
Theme: History

The author discusses the challenges and strategies of Nazi Germany’s planned invasion of Britain in 1940, highlighting the logistical difficulties, military preparations, and the potential impact of the campaign amid Britain’s defensive efforts.

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Britain’s future as a state was in plenty of doubt following the fall of France in June 1940 to the Wehrmacht’s troops. That June on the whole island of Britain, there were only 2 British divisions fully equipped and ready for fighting. The Royal Air Force was outnumbered by the Luftwaffe and, while the Royal Navy was close to full strength, the British admiralty was not confident their warships could prevent the Germans from landing military forces on British soil.

In mid-1940 Italy had somewhat tentatively entered the war on the Germans’ side while, in the Far East, Japan was on the rise and not friendly to the British. Though it would soon change there was no immediate prospect of substantial American aid arriving in Britain. The United States was not prepared to directly enter the conflict in 1940, and its politicians like Joseph Kennedy, the US ambassador to Britain since 1938, believed the Germans had gained an impregnable position by 1940. Kennedy was overlooking the inevitable future conflict between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, of which there was no guarantee the Nazis would win.

By overcoming the French in the middle of 1940 the Germans could establish air and naval bases in northern and western France, a close distance from England. This provided more options for striking at the British, in the waters surrounding Britain, while enabling the Germans when they pleased to enter the nearby Atlantic with U-boats (submarines) and warships.

British Preparations and Diplomatic Efforts

From July 1940, the British hurriedly fortified their country against a Nazi amphibious invasion. They put in place gun batteries, mines, obstacles, and barriers on their coastlines, particularly in southern and eastern England. From mid-June to mid-August 1940, talks took place between British and German representatives with the apparent hope of attaining peace. The Germans thought it possible that politicians like Lloyd George and Lord Halifax would recognize the futility of continuing the war; that they could topple Winston Churchill and form a government prepared to negotiate a peace deal with Nazi Germany.

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Photographs of King Edward VIII giving a Nazi salute go up at auction on Anglesey (Image: Morgan Evans Antiques Auctions)

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There were persistent rumors in mid-1940 that the Duke of Windsor, a Nazi sympathizer who had been the British king in 1936 (as Edward VIII), was to be reinstalled as the monarch of Britain, with his American wife at his side, Wallis Simpson, who was likewise sympathetic to the Nazis. She for example had a relationship with Joachim von Ribbentrop in 1936 when he was German ambassador to Britain. The Duke of Windsor visited Nazi Germany with his wife in October 1937, and the Duke was seen giving the Nazi salute on more than one occasion during his trip there while he also met the country's leader, Adolf Hitler.

The previously mentioned peace discussions went nowhere between British and German officials. There is the possibility the British used those talks in order to distract the Germans, and so stall an invasion of Britain while they strengthened their coastal defenses and built up their forces. Time was ticking for the Germans if they were to conquer Britain. Had the Nazi hierarchy made prior preparations, amphibious landings in England could have been launched in July 1940 when the British were badly prepared to meet the threat.

German Strategic Challenges

The English Channel, a body of water that separates southern England from northern France, was always a daunting challenge for the Germans to overcome if they were to ship ground forces to England. Had the English Channel not existed, with land between France and Britain, the Wehrmacht would have defeated the British Army as the recent fighting in France had shown.

German naval commanders viewed with pessimism and dread the launching of an amphibious attack against Britain. They were aware the English Channel's tides are variable, its waters choppy and unpredictable. Much more serious than this was that the German Navy had suffered heavy losses in the first months of the war, especially in the Wehrmacht's otherwise successful campaign in Norway during the spring of 1940.

When the offensive in Norway was reaching its end, all that remained of the German warship fleet was 1 heavy cruiser, 2 light cruisers, and 4 destroyers. Nor could a Nazi landing in Britain receive much assistance from their U-boats. In March 1940 there were 43 U-boats in operation, whereas in September 1939 there had been 50 U-boats. At the time, the Germans were losing U-boats to enemy attack at a rate greater than they were building them.

German admirals like Karl Dönitz were despondent about this. Dönitz believed that a fleet of 300 U-boats in 1939 would have been enough on its own to defeat Britain by 1941, a resource-poor island nation reliant on imports from sea. Years after the war Dönitz, an inmate in Spandau Prison, was still complaining about the German Navy's inadequate U-boat fleet in 1939, as the former Nazi henchman Albert Speer wrote, himself also a prisoner at Spandau.

Alternative Strategies and Final Preparations

In the early 1940s there was, at least on paper, another option open for the Nazis to finish off Britain. The Wehrmacht could have advanced south through France into the territory of

its ally Spain, from there take Gibraltar, then enter North Africa to capture Egypt and the Suez Canal, cut off India, and wipe out all British interests in the Middle East. General Franco of Spain was unwilling to be involved in such a grandiose scheme, which in any event would have stretched German resources to breaking point.

It was above all the German Navy's weakness which made it unlikely that an invasion of Britain itself could succeed. In an attempt to reinforce their understrength navy, the Germans from July 1940 gathered together vessels of various types in the ports under their control for an attack on Britain. Among them were steamers, barges, motorboats, tugboats, and fishing trawlers. It was hardly a sight to encourage the German soldiers who, if the invasion went ahead, would step foot in these craft, some of which had different speeds and levels of safety.

The Royal Air Force tried to bomb the above vessels but their warplanes suffered losses and failed to inflict enough damage. The Germans managed to accumulate enough vessels, however much a mixed bag they were, for landings in Britain to be attempted. The German Army, specifically some of its high command, was confident that a successful invasion of Britain could be achieved. The victory over France had created a sense of infallibility within the German Army, leading to a reckless overconfidence.

The Invasion Plan

The Germans expected to land 100,000 of their troops in the opening phase of the invasion between Dover, on the south-eastern English coast, and Lyme Bay, about 200 miles westward from Dover along the south coast of England. Ominously from a British viewpoint, the town of Dover is just 70 miles from London, and the enemy forces were to be strengthened with another 160,000 soldiers to eventually arrive in the following landings.

The opening wave of German troops sent across the English Channel was to consist of 9 divisions, supported by airborne units. It would have entailed an initial Nazi force entering England which was nearly twice the size of the force which the Western Allies landed initially in Normandy, France, in June 1944.

The next German units to be sent over, on the biggest boats available, were to include 4 heavily equipped panzer divisions. These formations once they had secured their positions on the beaches were expected to advance into England, provide support to the German infantry who had demined the beaches, and inflict severe losses on the British troops.

After a period of 6 weeks following the first landing, the entire German force in England was to amount to 23 divisions. They would be assisted by the Luftwaffe which was expected to gain aerial superiority over the English Channel and coastal areas, crucial for the German invasion to proceed.

Overall Objectives and Potential Outcomes

The 23 divisions earmarked to conquer Britain were to be part of 3 armies, under the overall command of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, one of the Wehrmacht's most experienced officers. The German 16th Army would set sail from ports located between Rotterdam, in the southern Netherlands, and Boulogne, in northern France, and was to arrive between the towns of Hythe and Eastbourne in south-eastern England.

The German 9th Army was to depart from ports located between Boulogne and Le Havre,

both in northern France, and was to land between the towns of Brighton and Worthing in southern England.

The German 6th Army, often considered the Wehrmacht's strongest fighting force, was to set sail from the Cherbourg peninsula in northern France and would enter an area between Portsmouth and Weymouth, the latter town in south-western England. The 6th Army might have been used partly also to bolster the positions held by the German 16th and 9th armies in southern England.

Conclusion: The Feasibility of the Invasion

In the first week of the invasion, the Germans were to establish a line about 80 miles wide between the towns of Canterbury and Arundel. The next objective was to advance further inland, and create another line stretching around 90 miles south-westward from Gravesend to Reigate to Portsmouth; with Gravesend and Reigate situated only 20 miles from London to the east and south.

The ultimate goal of the Nazi war plan was to advance on London, a vast city containing millions of people, resulting in the expected fall of England's capital to the invaders. The Germans were not to assail London in a frontal attack with their soldiers penetrating into the city center; but instead they were to encircle and cut off London, which is located close to the sea, from the remainder of England.

If they felt it necessary the Germans would launch air raids and artillery strikes against London, particularly in light of how British warplanes had very recently started bombing German cities including the capital Berlin. The German armies may have attempted an advance deeper into London's outskirts and suburban areas, possibly with the panzer divisions at the forefront, in an effort to tighten the ring on the English capital.

Despite the British Army being understrength, it would still have ranked as a significant achievement on the part of the German forces to have reached London's outskirts, as it is for any army that makes it to the edges of a great city wherever it may be. Whether the German forces in southern England, even with the involvement of the 6th Army, were of sufficient strength to compel London to capitulate is doubtful. A siege against a city of London's size would entail risks and could have taken many months to successfully accomplish. It might have weakened the Wehrmacht to a major extent.

The prolonged absence of the 6th Army in mainland Europe would have been felt by Nazi divisions there. If Britain was defeated it would be necessary to garrison large numbers of German troops on British terrain, when they could have been needed elsewhere. The German admiralty outlined that England's south coast was the only feasible area to attempt an amphibious landing. The British high command, not aware of how weakened the German Navy was, believed in July 1940 that the east coast of England was the most likely landing point for the Nazis, which would have meant a longer and harder journey for German vessels carrying the troops.

Britain's chiefs of staff did not rule out the possibility the Germans would land in the West Country, an area of south-western England, departing from the Nazi-controlled Bay of Biscay off western France. They also felt it possible that the Germans could sail from Norway, across the North Sea, and land in Scotland.

On 10 July 1940, the Germans recommenced U-boat and air attacks on British merchant

convoys in the English Channel. The plan for the Nazi invasion of Britain, titled Operation Sea Lion, was formally issued on 16 July 1940, and it stated that all preparations for the landings were to be completed by the next month, in mid-August. Due to further delays in preparations, at the end of July 1940 the invasion date was pushed back to 15 September. A further postponement resulted in a new invasion date of 21 September, because of requests made by the German Navy on 30 August. With the navy not satisfied on 11 September the invasion was postponed again to 24 September.

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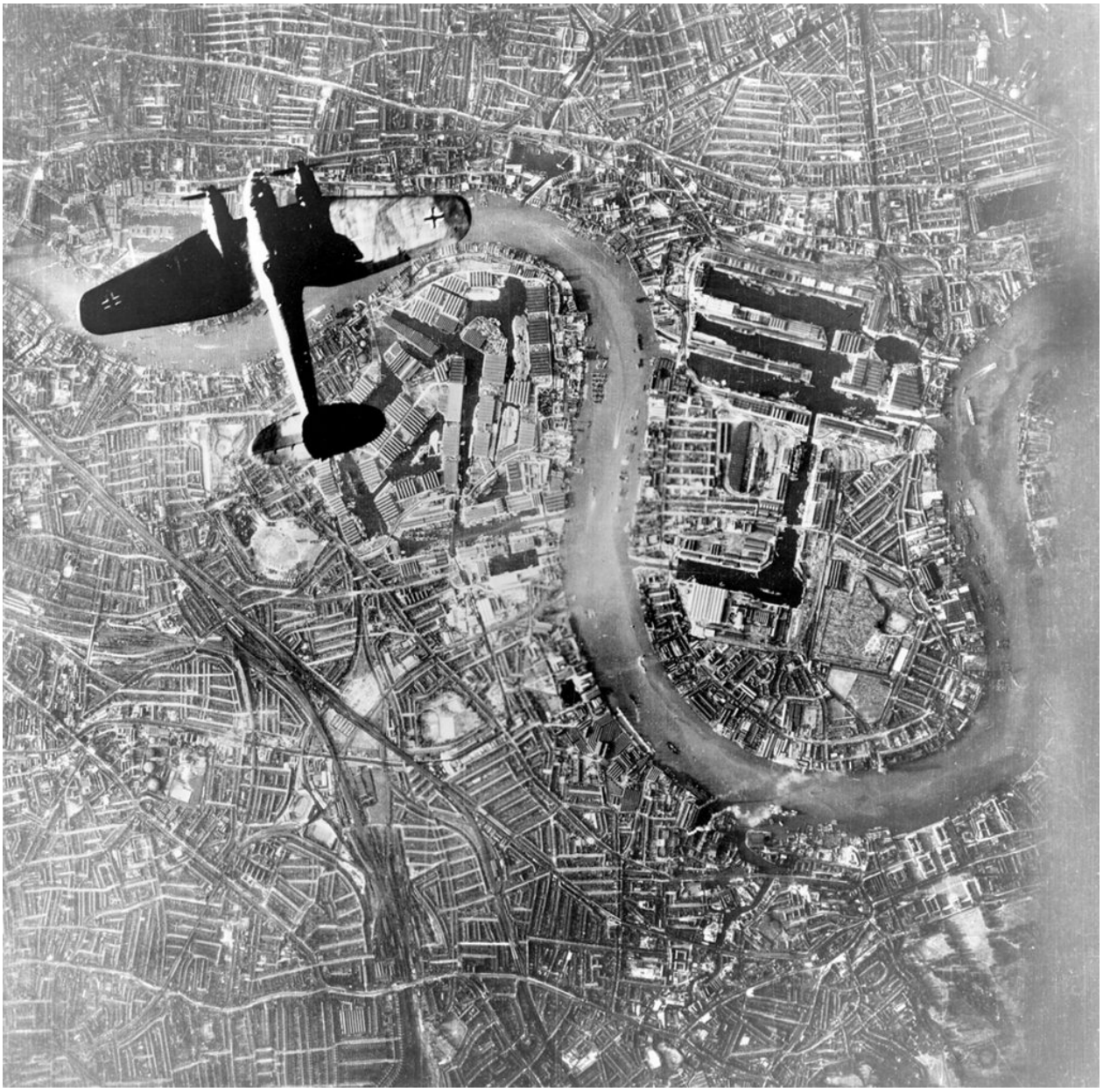

Operations: A German Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111 bomber flying over Wapping and the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London at the start of the Luftwaffe's evening raids of 7 September 1940. Copy negative of part of an aerial photograph taken from a German aircraft at 1848 hrs German time. (From the Public Domain)

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By mid-September 1940 the soldiers that were to defend England had been hastily increased and consisted of 34 British divisions, some of which were not fully equipped. Yet

16 of these divisions, among them 3 armored divisions, would be sent to the beaches in order to meet the initial German assault force of 9 divisions along with airborne personnel. Now into the autumn, the British high command had developed a better understanding of where the Nazis wished to land.

Needing time to secure their positions on the English beaches and lacking resupply, while still without aerial superiority, the German invasion in all likelihood would have failed, had it gone ahead. The plan for Operation Sea Lion was akin to the Schlieffen Plan and the Ludendorff offensives of the First World War, and the later Operation Barbarossa. Each plan was too ambitious to succeed.

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Birds Not Bombs: Let's Fight for a World of Peace, Not War

This article was originally published on Global Village Space.

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