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SEALION POSTPONED:
Hitler and the Invasion of Britain

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Sealion Postponed: Hitler and the Invasion of Britain.

By the middle of June 1940, Germany reigned supreme throughout Western Europe, the result of a string of unprecedented political and military successes. On 17 June, the Germans signed an armistice with France at Compiègne, in the same railway car that they had signed the armistice that ended the First World War. Considering the war all but won, a jubilant Hitler expectantly turned his attention to England, sure that under such circumstances he could reach an agreement that would conclude hostilities with Britain and allow him to turn his attention to the East.

Hitler had every reason to be confident. The rapidity of the German advance into France had left the armies opposing them in disarray. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had been forced to conduct an emergency evacuation of the continent at Dunkirk, leaving most of its material behind. The Royal Air Force (RAF) had suffered heavy casualties in the defense of France before withdrawing, leaving the barest minimum number of squadrons believed necessary for the protection of the Home Islands. Only the Royal Navy remained relatively unscathed, albeit in a defensive posture, as a ready counter-force to German ambition. It is in these circumstances that Hitler, expecting them to concede German dominance on the European continent, waited for the British to come to their senses with a growing impatience.

By the beginning of July, several incidents made Hitler realize that England had no intention of coming to terms. On June 18, Churchill had made a speech in the House of Commons, in a tone that was anything but conciliatory. On the diplomatic front, several attempts to use Sweden to sound out British willingness to discuss the situation proved fruitless. Similar attempts to use the Pope to mediate an agreement met with the same results. On July 3rd, the British fleet opened fire on the remnants of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir, in effect destroying the navy of a former ally

rather than see it used against them by the Germans. Convinced by these events, and other information supplied to him by German intelligence agencies, on 16 July Hitler issued Führer Directive no. 16, ordering preparation for the invasion of England. The directive called for a surprise crossing of the Channel on a wide front, with each branch of the armed forces responsible for a different aspect of the invasion. The Navy and Luftwaffe were ordered to submit plans "...to establish the necessary conditions for crossing the channel" to Hitler as soon as possible.¹

Some historians question Hitler's motives for ordering the operation. A debate continues on what Hitler's intentions actually were, most notably that he never intended to invade in the first place. Historians such as David Irving² and Christopher Ray³ have suggested that Hitler had only one goal in mind, the invasion of the Soviet Union, and followed this direction with a singularity of purpose irrespective of his actions vis-a-vis England. In effect, this interpretation relegates Operation Sealion⁴ to nothing more than a sideshow.

An undertaking of this size was hardly a sideshow. The postponement and then cancellation of Sealion was not a foregone conclusion, nor undertaken as an elaborate ruse. Invasion, while not Hitler's preferred solution, remained a viable option, that was actively considered, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, right up until postponement on 17 September 1940. This paper, by

¹H.R. Trevor-Roper. Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945, pgs.. 35-7. Sidgwick and Jackson, London: 1964.

²Hitler's War. Viking Press, New York: 1977.

³"1940-1941: Britain's finest hour or Hitler's greatest hoax?" *History Review*, March 1997, n27, p33(5).

⁴The popular name for the proposed Invasion of England by the Germans is usually given in English as "Operation Sea Lion" or "Operation Sealion". For the purpose of this paper, one term, "Sealion", will be used- author.

reviewing the planning for the invasion, the Luftwaffe's failed campaign against the RAF, and selected historiography interpreting Hitler's intent in postponing the operation, will suggest that the decisions that dictated the end of Sealion were not predetermined solely by Hitler's preoccupation with the Soviet Union, nor by concerns that the invasion might fail, but rather by a combination of factors, that, in Hitler's mind, made the scuttling of Sealion the best decision at the time.

Section I: Planning, Perception, and Acrimony

One reason that the invasion was probably never executed was that the Germans were unprepared to undertake such an operation⁵, and once the decision was made to do so, the planning was flawed. A combination of a lack of foresight, perceptual differences as to objectives, and personal acrimony between individuals representing the different branches of the German military all served to exacerbate the process. Although both the Army and Navy had undertaken feasibility studies of an invasion as early as November of 1939, no men or material had been prepared for an attack across the Channel. As late as 4 June, considering the war won, the OKW (Wehrmacht High Command, or High Command of the German Armed Forces) was planning to reduce the size of the Army, and suggested that the industrial resources of Germany be converted to the production of bombers for the Luftwaffe and submarines for the Navy. However, the

⁵The British were not ready to defend against an invasion either. Two months would elapse between the fall of France and the target date for the execution of Sealion, time the British would use to resupply and prepare defensive fortifications in the prospective invasion areas. For more information on the consequences of the German lack of preparedness to attack, see Peter Fleming's Invasion 1940: An account of the German preparations and the British counter-measures, Rupert Hart-Davis, London: 1957.

successful evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk⁶ under extraordinary circumstances seems to have fired the imagination of the planning sections of the OKW. As General von Lossberg, then a Colonel on Jodl's staff wrote:

As our troops stood around Calais after the victory...they saw before them the chalk cliffs of Dover on the other side of the Channel. In the exaltation of the past success these German soldiers and their leaders, came to believe themselves capable of things that no one even dared to think of before the West Offensive. Thus, more out of the mood at the front than from the sober evaluation of the Armed Forces Leadership, the thought was born to land in England.⁷

The Navy had a far more sober view of such an undertaking. The German Admiralty had "...a hearty respect for the British Fleet and understood fully the difficulties of so extensive an amphibious operation."⁸ In a report to the Fuhrer dated 11 July 1940, Admiral Raeder, Commander in Chief of the Navy, considered "that an invasion should be used as a last resort to force Britain to sue for peace", suggesting instead that England be dealt with by a combination of Naval blockade and air attacks.⁹

Raeder's reluctance was due in no small part to his realization that in order to get an invasion

⁶For an excellent source on the evacuation, see Richard Collier's The Sands of Dunkirk. E.P. Dutton, New York: 1966.

⁷Walter Ansel, Hitler Confronts England, pg 115. Duke University Press, Durham: 1960.

⁸Hanson Baldwin, Battles Won and Lost: Great Campaigns of World War II, pg 35. Harper & Row, New York: 1966.

⁹Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, pg 114. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis: 1990. Includes minutes of the conferences as well as directives issued by Hitler. Fuhrer Directive no. 16 and the Navy's reaction can be found starting on page 116.

force across the Channel and deployed on the beach, he would have to rely on the ability of the Luftwaffe to maintain air superiority during the operation. His relationship with Goring, head of the Luftwaffe, was never warm, and deteriorated rapidly after Goring's criticisms of the Navy's shortcomings during operations at Norway. Raeder knew all too well Goring's penchant for promising what the Luftwaffe could not deliver. Most recently, Goring had convinced Hitler to let the Luftwaffe finish off the British and French troops in the Dunkirk pocket, only to see over 200,000 troops escape. Taking into account the scope of the operation, strength of the opposition, and Goring's mercurial nature, Raeder's frank assessment was that the Luftwaffe would be unable to provide the protection necessary to cross the Channel.¹⁰

The importance of the Luftwaffe creating the necessary conditions for a successful invasion were spelled out in Fuhrer Directive no. 16: "The British Air Force must be eliminated to such an extent that it will be incapable of putting up any substantial opposition to the invading troops."¹¹ Goring and his Luftwaffe, despite having numerical superiority, were ill-prepared in June of 1940 for such a role. The Air Force had been developed in a manner suited to the offensive support of ground troops, not for air combat or support of landings by sea. Although the Luftwaffe had done

¹⁰Walter Ansel, in particular, postulates that this acrimony between Raeder and Goring pushed Raeder into insisting upon the destruction of the R.A.F., not just the maintaining of air superiority over the invasion force, knowing that Goring would fail, in an attempt to discredit him. Whatever the motive, by feigning support for such an undertaking, Raeder was successful in contributing to the escalation of the Luftwaffe's role, a decision that need not have been made, and possibly contributed to the decision to eventually cancel the Invasion.

¹¹Richard Collier, Eagle Day-The Battle Of Britain, pg. 10. E.P. Dutton, New York: 1966. Collier provides some insight into Goring's nature- his overconfidence, vanity, and inattention to detail, that will manifest themselves throughout the war, leading him to continually promise to Hitler that the Luftwaffe will deliver when it cannot. The Battle of Britain and subsequent bombing campaign against London are prime examples of this tendency.

a superlative job over Norway, an operation of this scope had never been attempted by a modern air force.¹² The medium-ranged bombers would not be able to reach potential invasion sites in England in force without redeployment to captured airfields in France. Fighter effectiveness over the Channel would be similarly hampered by range, allowing limited time for combat before having to return to base. Despite these obstacles, a credible plan of action was created by Goring's staff.¹³ Unfortunately, the plan would be changed by Goring once underway, and would compromise the chances for the success of the invasion as a result.

Thus, the planning for the invasion was hampered in several important ways. There existed no viable contingency plan for a rapid invasion across the Channel in June of 1940. The three branches of the German military lacked the proper resources for such an undertaking. The industrial base of Germany was not producing the right kind of materials for an invasion, and it was in fact preparing to gear down the production to primarily defensive weapons. All three branches had a different perception of the invasion. The Army meant to invade at all costs. The Navy preferred siege rather than invasion, and entered into preparations with great reluctance. The key to creating the conditions that presented the best chance for success was that the Luftwaffe be able to control the skies over both the Channel and the invasion areas, an undertaking that, in order to be successful, would have to be executed exactly to plan. The result was that an operation, ambitious in scope and created in all due haste, would have its only chance for success if one branch of the military, the Luftwaffe, was able to carry out their role in the

¹²For more information on the Luftwaffe's role in Norway, see Denis Richards' Royal Air Force 1939-1945. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London: 1953.

¹³*Adlerangriff*, or 'Attack of the Eagles'.

undertaking flawlessly.

Section II: From *Alderangriff* to 'The Blitz'

Whatever Hitler's intent, most historians agree that any chance for executing the invasion as planned was contingent on the Luftwaffe fulfilling its proscribed mission. Goring had to defeat the RAF for the invasion to proceed. Goring's overconfidence in how quickly his operational plan could be carried out led, in part, to his decision to abandon the plan altogether at a crucial moment. In fact, the objective was within reach when Goring set aside the plan for an alternative approach that, if successful, would make invasion unnecessary.

Fuhrer Directive no. 16 had decreed that the primary responsibility of the Luftwaffe was the elimination of any air threat to the invasion. The Luftwaffe plan, *Alderangriff* (The Attack of the Eagles), met this requirement. The attack plan had two components. *Alder Tag* (Eagle Day), was designed to destroy airfields, ports, and factories crucial to aircraft construction across the invasion zone. The follow up operation, *Lichtmeer* (Sea of Light), a series of mass raids, would destroy any operational RAF bases remaining after the first attack. In addition, particular emphasis would be given to key targets such as the radio direction-finding stations on the coast, and major RAF airfields lying inland from the invasion zone. As final preparations were made to implement the plan, Goring was adamant that the operation would take no more than 4 days, an extremely ambitious and unrealistic assessment.¹⁴

It became immediately apparent that the operation was going to take more than 4 days. The campaign encountered problems from the very beginning. The weather, always unpredictable over the Channel and England even in summer, refused to cooperate. The first attack, scheduled for

¹⁴Ibid, pgs.. 11-12

August 13th, was canceled, only some units did not get the order and attacked anyway. August 14th went better, but some key targets were missed. Sorties scheduled for the 15th were canceled, while Goring conferred with his staff, only to be rescheduled at the last moment when the weather suddenly cleared. As the operation fell further behind, German losses remained high, but the Luftwaffe was accomplishing their primary objective- by August 21st, the RAF had lost so many pilots that it slashed flight training for new recruits, from one month down to two weeks. By the 27th, pilot losses were exceeding replacements by a ratio of almost 2:1.¹⁵ As August turned to September, RAF Air Marshall Dowding estimated that he had only 746 serviceable aircraft left, and predicted his forces would be able to last for perhaps three more weeks.¹⁶

Goring did not realize how close he was to victory. It was at this crucial moment, some ten days before the final decision to invade was to be made, that he deviated from the Luftwaffe's operational plan. In reprisal for a series of RAF raids on Berlin, an angry Hitler ordered on 4 September that London was to be attacked. Goring and Hitler became seized by the idea that England could be bombed into quitting¹⁷. After conferring with his officers, Goring changed the mission of the Luftwaffe. Instead of diverting some units to the bombing of London while continuing to carry out the plan to destroy the RAF, the Luftwaffe would make this new mission its primary purpose. The bombers would be removed from their mission of attacking invasion targets, and would instead be used for massive attacks against the English capitol. Perhaps most

¹⁵Ibid, pg. 147

¹⁶Ibid pgs.. 166-168

¹⁷Anthony Martienssen. Hitler And His Admirals, pg. 86. E.P. Dutton, New York: 1949. Martinson states that Hitler and Goring became convinced that a large scale attack on London would possibly be decisive, and make the invasion unnecessary.

importantly, the fighters were diverted from shooting down the British fighters to protecting the bombers. Although Sealion would be postponed, it was effectively dead from this moment on.¹⁸

Without elimination of any possibility of threat to Sealion from the air, the chances for a successful invasion diminished to an unacceptable level. The failure of the Luftwaffe to complete the task of destroying the RAF meant that the conditions set down by Hitler for invasion were not met. Goring's overconfidence in the Luftwaffe's ability to quickly win the air battle, and growing impatience with the increasing delay caused him to meddle with tactics, change wing commanders, and make increasingly unreasonable demands, as his 4 day operation stretched into weeks. Frustrated, Goring would seize upon Hitler's order that London be bombed as an alternative method of bringing the war against Britain to a quick solution, and turn away from the destruction of the RAF, when success was still well within his reach. With this last minute respite, the RAF gained valuable time to bring pilot strength back up to acceptable levels and rebuild its squadrons. Although postponed, not canceled, Sealion was no longer a viable option without major changes in its operational parameters. With the RAF having time to rebuild, and the onset of Fall and inclement weather, the opportunity for the best chance of success had passed.¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid, pgs. 86-90. Martinson offers more details of this "bombing fever" that overtook Hitler and Goring at this crucial juncture, as well as the Navy's opinions of events. The Admiralty was more than willing to support this change of tactics, particularly since it might preclude the necessity of putting their ships at risk.

¹⁹For a detailed account of the Battle of Britain and bombing campaign against London from the British perspective, see Denis Richards' Royal Air Force 1939-1945. Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London: 1953. For an in-depth look at the decisions relating to the change in tactics and ultimate postponement of Sealion from the perspective of Hitler's Chief of the General Staff, see The Halder Diaries. Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen editors. Presidio Press, Novato, CA: 1988.

Section III: Alternate Explanations and Consequences

Historical debate about Sealion usually focuses on the issue of Hitler's intent, primarily whether Hitler ever intended to invade. It is clear he did not wish to, but the British were not being cooperative. By the end of May of 1940, Hitler was in the grip of a "victory psychosis"²⁰, carried away with triumph and relief, wholly expectant that he would be able to dictate terms to England as well as France. When England did not respond as he expected, Hitler ordered that preparations for an invasion be made, despite the fact that he had been "...fundamentally reluctant to carry out such an operation".²¹

The issue of Hitler's intent was unclear even among his senior officers. Hitler "...roundly rejected invasion" as an alternative on May 20th. On June 3rd, he tells his Intelligence Chief Canaris and Admiral Raeder that the war is "...already won". Later, General Jodl is under the impression that the invasion will be carried out as "...a last resort", only if Britain refuses to negotiate.²² Historians are quick to point out that Hitler was, by nature, a continentalist; tending to see the war from a European point of view. Hitler's arch-enemies were France and Russia, not England.²³ War Directives after the summer of 1940 make little or no mention of reanimating

²⁰David Irving, Hitler's War, pg. 118. Viking Press, New York: 1977.

²¹Siegfried Westphal, 'The War Spreads', pg. 29. The Fatal Decisions. Friedin, Sidney and William Richardson, editors. William Sloane Associates, New York: 1956. Westphal served with the Luftwaffe during the air campaign against Britain. He observes that despite a preference to avoid amphibious warfare, Hitler would have given the order to proceed with the invasion, if the Luftwaffe had not failed in their mission to destroy the RAF.

²²David Irving, pgs. 118, 125, 133, 134.

²³Egbert Kieser, Hitler On The Doorstep. Operation 'Sea Lion'. The German Plan to Invade Britain 1940, pgs.. 266-267. Translated by Helmut Bogler. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis: 1987.

Sealion, instead showing that Hitler had turned his attention to furthering German ambitions on the continent.²⁴ Chief among these ambitions at the moment was getting Spain into the war on the Axis side.²⁵

Still, these explanations do not take into account Hitler's adaptability, or the fact that, like all Germans of his generation, Hitler remembered all too well the consequences for Germany in World War I, when it found itself fighting a two-front war.²⁶ It can be postulated that Hitler did intend to invade. He ordered Sealion as an option, with the intention of carrying it out, if the circumstances were right. When Britain would not negotiate after the fall of France, Hitler "...seriously meant to embark on an invasion", and only turned away when the Luftwaffe did not achieve the results necessary within the time frame necessary for the operation to be successful.²⁷ A continuance of the bombing of British cities, and a blockade by the U-Boats of the Navy would bring Britain to bargain for peace. Meanwhile, Hitler would pursue Operation Felix, the seizure of Gibraltar, to bring the threat of loss of Empire into the equation. As was his wont to do, Hitler

²⁴H.R. Trevor-Roper, Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945. Sidgwick and Jackson, London: 1964. Directives 17-19 shows this progression. Directive no. 17, dated 1 August 1940, still exclusively deal with invasion plans. By Directive no. 18, Hitler's attention has turned to other matters.

²⁵Hitler wanted Spain's help in seizing the British base at Gibraltar, a plan, that if successful, would have changed the nature of the war in the Mediterranean, as well as posed a vital threat to British interests throughout the Empire. For a excellent analysis of the relationship between Hitler and Franco, as well as the potential consequences of Spain entering the war actively, see Donald S. Detwiler's "Spain and the Axis during World War II." *The Review of Politics*, vol.33, no. 1, January, 1971. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame: 1971.

²⁶With good reason, as events would show- author.

²⁷Ronald Wheatly, Operation Sea Lion: German Plans For The Invasion Of England 1939-1942. Claredon Press, Oxford: 1958.

pursued multiple objectives at once.

This does not mean that there weren't significant advantages to preparing for an invasion, and then maintaining the illusion that it would be carried out after it has been postponed. The British took the threat of invasion quite seriously, spending valuable resources to defend against it when it came.²⁸ In the summer of 1940, Hitler no doubt felt that the threat of invasion might bring the British to their senses.²⁹ By continuing the facade of invasion after postponement, the Germans might be able to lull Stalin into thinking they intended to continue honoring their pact with him.³⁰ Such thinking, that an operation had psychological ramifications as well as tactical ones, would not be uncommon for Hitler.³¹

Section IV: Conclusion

It was the operational difficulties in executing Sealion that caused Hitler to postpone the operation, not an intent to stage preparations for an invasion for psychological purposes only. Hitler had been caught by surprise several times in the summer of 1940, first by the degree of the triumph over France, and again by the resolve of the British, whom he wholly expected to come

²⁸For an overview of the possibility of invasion and defensive preparation from the British perspective, see Chapters 10 and 11 of Sir Winston Churchill's Memoirs Of The Second World War. Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Press, Cambridge: 1959.

²⁹David Irving, pg. 143.

³⁰Christopher Ray, "1940-1941: Britain's finest hour or Hitler's greatest hoax?" *History Review*, March 1997, no.27, p33-5.

³¹It is worth noting that the citations used in this paragraph, from the works of David Irving and Christopher Ray, are part of a larger works, both advocating that the primary reason for Hitler ordering Sealion was for political effect and propaganda purposes. I have chosen, in this work, to invert the priority they assign to these purposes, suggesting rather that they were bonuses in preparing for the invasion, rather than the reason for it- author.

to terms. Once convinced that the British were not going to see reason, Hitler ordered preparations for the invasion, setting the tentative date for the operation to begin in early September.

The planning for the operation was hampered by a combination of lack of preparedness, acrimony between Raeder and Goring, and differing degrees of enthusiasm between the branches of the military. Nonetheless, a viable plan was created, one whose best chance of success was predicated on the ability of the Luftwaffe to nullify any threat to the operation by the RAF.

The Luftwaffe did not achieve its objective. As Goring's 4 day operation turned into weeks, he became increasingly frustrated, and interfered with his operations staff by replacing commanders and changing tactics. Embarrassed by his failure to defeat the RAF and running the threat of upsetting the invasion timetable, Goring abandoned the campaign when Hitler ordered a reprisal raid against London for air raids against Berlin. Hitler postponed the invasion shortly thereafter.

Hitler simply ran out of time. Knowing he could not leave an enemy behind him if he was to pursue his ambitions on the continent, he had hoped that Britain would come to terms in the summer of 1940. When the British refused to negotiate, Hitler pursued the option of invasion. As the summer waned and the Luftwaffe had still not accomplished its mission, the possibility that the invasion might be executed before the onset of inclement weather diminished to the point that Hitler chose to postpone Sealion and use alternative methods to make Britain quit. The appearance of invasion preparedness would be kept up another year, to both lull the Soviet Union and bring pressure on the British to negotiate.

Hitler never understood why Britain would not come to terms. The consequences of his decision to bomb and blockade rather than invade are well known. Rather than be cowed into

quitting, British morale soared during the Blitz. The U-Boat campaign against British shipping significantly diminished Britain's ability to fight, but brought America into a more active role in support of Britain. After America joined the war on the British side, the British Isles became a major marshaling point for Overlord, the invasion of Europe by the Allies in 1944. By abandoning the invasion, an option that if successful would have eliminated Britain as a combatant, for a campaign of attrition, Hitler made a grave error, one that would have serious consequences on the outcome of the war.

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