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Kiev 1941

Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East

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1 THE BULLDOG, THE EAGLE AND THE BEAR

Working for the Soviet theatre - Britain and America's supporting roles

The danger of assessing any one aspect of Germany's wars between 1939 and 1945 is that the process necessitates a certain degree of neglect. Without an appreciation of the bigger picture the vital tools for contextualization are absent. The proliferation of histories focused exclusively on the exploits of the Anglo-American war experience has tended to leave readers attributing an overblown significance to the contribution of the Western Allies. While the role of the west in the defeat of Nazi Germany is certainly an essential one, no other nation suffered or sacrificed more than the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945. In order to appreciate the scale and importance of the fighting at Kiev, as well as to weigh correctly the vital role played by the Western Allies until September 1941, a certain overview is in order.

On 8 July 1940 the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wrote to Lord Beaverbrook, his minister for aircraft production, about the difficulty of Britain's position in the war. In the wake of Hitler's swift conquest of France, Churchill was desperate for any means to strike back, and confided in Beaverbrook that his ministry provided the only means. As Churchill explained:

[W]hen I look around to see how we can win the war I see that there is only one sure path. We have no continental army which can defeat the German military power. The blockade is broken and Hitler has Asia and probably Africa

to draw from. Should he be repulsed here or not try invasion, he will recoil eastward, and we have nothing to stop him. But there is one thing that will bring him back and bring him down, and that is an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland. We must be able to overwhelm him by this means, without which I do not see a way through.¹

Churchill was correct. Hitler did not attempt invasion and did indeed recoil back towards the east. Yet the extent to which Churchill in July 1940 might have foreseen a future confrontation between Germany and the Soviet Union was at least as much a product of fervent hope as of any hard evidence. Churchill correctly understood that in any ensuing German–Soviet confrontation Britain’s war would become a peripheral one without the means to strike at Hitler decisively. Where Churchill was wrong was in his ardent enthusiasm for the effects of strategic bombing. In spite of the optimism expressed by Bomber Command, the ‘absolutely devastating, exterminating’ attacks in which Churchill placed his faith were still years away. Early in the war British bombers had no radio navigation aids, no radar and only substandard bomb-sights. Crews flew into Germany navigating by the stars and located their target areas by moonlight. Such methods required good flying conditions and clear skies, which also favoured German countermeasures. Ultimately the early bombing campaign was so inaccurate that German intelligence had trouble understanding what goals the British were attempting to pursue.²

By 1941 Britain could still only manage to make about 400 bombers serviceable on any one night, which was well below the Luftwaffe’s capacity as evidenced by the 712 German bombers that raided London on 19 April.³ In spite of their meagre results, the British establishment maintained a strident faith in the decisive contribution of strategic bombing. One might think the British should have known better. After enduring, in the Blitz, the heaviest bombing of the war so far, they had seen only minor disruption to production, while morale, far from being broken, dramatically improved. It is not surprising, therefore, that British bombing had next to no effect on German morale or their armaments industry. Indeed, between 1940 and 1941 the

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Germans more than doubled production of tanks from 2,200 to 5,200 and submarine output jumped from 40 to 196.⁴

By the summer of 1941, as Hitler's armies launched their devastating invasion of the Soviet Union, Britain could no longer deny the ineffectiveness of its bombing campaign. A statistical analysis completed in August 1941 by D. M. B Butt of the War Cabinet Secretariat revealed that a staggering 80 per cent of bombers did not reach their designated target area, which was broadly defined as seventy-five square miles around the target. The bombers were therefore dropping their loads on farmers' fields or forests, and of the small percentage of bombers that did reach the oversized target area, the margin for error was still exceedingly large.⁵ Nevertheless, with the Soviet Union now bearing almost the full brunt of Germany's military might, bombing was Britain's only viable method of hitting back. The results, however, hardly justified the effort. In the ten raids Bomber Command launched against Berlin between June and November 1941, 133 Germans were killed compared with casualties in British aircrews of about three times that figure.⁶ At the same time British aircraft losses in 1941 were more than double those in 1940 (1,034 versus 492).⁷ Even Churchill, who had been a keen supporter of strategic bombing, began to tone down his enthusiasm and view with reservation the stoutly ambitious plans of Bomber Command for a force of 4,000 machines by the spring of 1943.⁸

With the fall of France in June 1940 Britain not only suffered the loss of its one major European ally, but also found itself at war with Italy. This essentially opened a second front against British interests in Africa and the Mediterranean – one that Britain was initially ill prepared to meet. In Italy's East African colonies of Eritrea, Somaliland and the recently conquered Ethiopian empire, Mussolini maintained a force of some 92,000 Italians and a quarter of a million locally raised troops, backed by 323 aircraft. The total British and local forces in Kenya, British Somaliland and Sudan numbered just 40,000 men with 100 aircraft. Likewise, the Italian army in Libya outnumbered British forces in Egypt by more than three to one (200,000 to 63,000).⁹ The British position was further compromised by the loss of vast amounts of war materiel at Dunkirk, the priority of fighting off German aerial attacks in the battle of Britain and the need to build up home defences for a feared invasion.

The danger to British holdings in Africa was largely eased by the influx of Dominion forces. In East Africa reinforcements from South Africa, India and African colonies allowed General Alan Cunningham to contemplate an offensive aimed at expelling the Italians. The Italians, by contrast, suffered from the intractable problem of isolation from both resupply and reinforcement. Cunningham's advance drove into Italian-occupied Ethiopia and by the early spring of 1941 had largely pacified the region. This freed three divisions of South African and Indian troops for urgent redeployment to General Archibald Wavell's embattled army in the western desert.¹⁰

In the winter of 1940/1941 Wavell had also achieved remarkable success, largely as a result of Italian ineptitude, routing the much larger army of Marshal Rodolfo Graziani. Yet after a pursuit of some 600 kilometres ending in early February 1941 at Beda Fomm, British fortunes hit a turning point. Churchill had decided to aid Greece's stout resistance to Italian invasion and therefore Wavell lost the British 1st Armoured Brigade, the New Zealand 2nd Division and the Australian 6th Division. It was a fateful decision, provoking Hitler's intervention in Greece, but not providing anywhere near enough troops to counter it.¹¹ The result was a fiasco. German forces overwhelmed the Greek and Allied armies and forced the hasty evacuation of Commonwealth forces to the island of Crete. The British Expeditionary Force lost 9,000 men captured, 3,000 casualties and virtually all its heavy equipment. The battle continued on Crete, which by the end of May was also lost after fierce fighting. Commonwealth forces suffered a further 12,000 men captured and nearly 2,000 killed.¹²

Not only did the British expedition to Greece deny Wavell the ability to press his advantage, but decisions had already been taken for a German force to be sent to North Africa to aid the Italians. The first German troops landed in February 1941 as British forces were still consolidating their gains. Wavell calculated that no combined Italian/German attack would be possible before May and Ultra intelligence appeared to support this conclusion. Yet the new German commander, Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel, had already earned a reputation for confounding his opponents (and superiors) and only forty days after landing he went on the offensive with the advanced guard of his new *Afrikakorps*. Wavell was caught off-guard with weakened forces and the result was a striking reversal. In only three weeks Wavell lost almost all the ground gained from the Italians since early December.¹³

With this coming amid the unfolding disaster in Greece, Churchill was desperate for a victory and expedited the shipment of more than three hundred tanks to Wavell's depleted army with the expectation that he move quickly to attack. Wavell complained he needed more time, but Churchill was adamant. Operation Battleaxe was launched in mid-June 1941, a week before Hitler began his invasion of the Soviet Union. It was to prove another costly defeat, with Britain's best tanks (Matildas and Crusaders) too slow and too poorly armed to cope with the German Mark IIIs and Mark IVs. Tactical employment was also dreadful as inexperienced commanders drove their tanks forward into prepared German positions without aerial or artillery support. In three days the British lost almost a hundred tanks and the offensive was called off for no gain.¹⁴

In the aftermath General Wavell was replaced by General Claude Auchinleck who likewise soon came under sustained pressure from Churchill for renewed action. Auchinleck was wary of being coerced into a similar mistake and resisted any premature action, preferring in fact Rommel to make the next move. Rommel might well have obliged had supply difficulties and shortages of equipment not been so acute. The consequence was stalemate, which became intolerable for Churchill as the titanic struggle on the eastern front raged. Attempting to explain this fact to Auchinleck, Churchill wrote: 'It is impossible to explain to Parliament and the nation how it is our Middle East armies had to stand for four and a half months without engaging the enemy while all the time Russia is being battered to pieces.'¹⁵ It was not only that the British army in Africa was seen to be dragging its feet; it was also the fact that Auchinleck was facing only a small fraction of the German army at a time when the Red Army was fighting against more than 3 million German troops in a life and death struggle. In the event, Auchinleck's offensive, codenamed 'Crusader', did not commence until 18 November, almost five months after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. Rommel was pushed back, but in spite of a commanding British superiority in tanks and aircraft, Auchinleck could not eliminate his army or even forestall a renewed Italian/German offensive in 1942.

With strategic bombing still in its infancy and land warfare proving such a disappointment, the British might well have hoped that the Royal Navy – the mainstay of their military might – would prove to be the decisive weapon. In World War I the Allied naval blockade not only impaired Germany's industrial output, but by the end of the war

had led to widespread malnutrition, which helped produce the conditions that sparked the downfall of the Kaiser. A year into World War II the supposedly formidable Allied naval power was proving considerably less effective. The British blockade was being circumvented by means of Germany's alliance with the Soviet Union and France's naval assets were either eliminated or neutralized, while the addition of the Italian fleet bolstered the Axis position in the Mediterranean. More worrying still, the Royal Naval was finding it difficult to protect Britain from the choking grasp of Germany's own blockade.

The conquest of France, the Low Countries and Norway had provided German U-boats with new bases offering easy access to the Atlantic, while German aircraft operated at much greater depth forcing the closure of Britain's eastern ports. Congestion resulted at the remaining ports, while merchant ships were forced to undertake greatly extended journeys around Africa, owing to the extremely hazardous passage through the Mediterranean. Britain was forced to adopt a convoy system to protect shipping from U-boat attacks, but this reduced speeds to that of the slowest ship and further cut the net tonnage of imports. Above all U-boats were inflicting major damage, accounting for 70 per cent of losses to British shipping, with aircraft, mines and surface raiders making up the rest.¹⁶ During 1940 the British lost more than a thousand ships, equivalent to some 4 million tons of merchant shipping or a quarter of British capacity. Hopes were high in the German navy that Britain could be brought to its knees by U-boats alone and on the surface this seemed a reasonable conclusion. In the first four months of 1941 a further 2 million tons of shipping were sunk and German submariners began referring to these as 'the fortunate times' (*die glückliche Zeiten*). The effects were all the more startling because the German submarine fleet was never able to send more than ten to fifteen submarines at a time to hunt in the vital North Atlantic shipping lanes. With the German navy looking to increase U-boat production significantly, the implications for Britain appeared ominous. In 1938 Britain imported 68 million tons of goods. By 1941 that figure had shrunk to 26 million tons, and in February of that year Churchill was sufficiently disturbed to declare anti-submarine warfare to be Britain's top priority.¹⁷

For all the danger that Germany's U-boats appeared to present, there was another side to the coin, which made the reality of Britain's defeat by U-boat alone an unlikely one. In 1941 merchant-shipping

losses amounted to 3.6 million tons. In that same year new production replaced 1.2 million tons, while austere management of shipping imports and improved port management saved an estimated 3 million tons. Thus, in spite of losses the United Kingdom ended 1941 with a moderate surplus in shipping tonnage.¹⁸ To this must be added the vast potential of American shipbuilding yards which, even in the absence of capital reserves, were becoming increasingly open to the British through Roosevelt's Lend-Lease programme. By contrast Hitler's failure to end his new war in the east by the autumn of 1941 placed enormous additional strain on the German economy and ensured renewed priority for the army. The summer of 1941 produced another boon for the British when cryptographers broke the U-boat cipher system and gained invaluable intelligence on German movements and strengths. It has been estimated that this development alone saved some 300 British ships in the second half of 1941.¹⁹

After shouldering the weight of the war alone for twelve months since the defeat of France, it was clear that Britain's war effort was struggling to cope with the demands placed upon it. Nevertheless, one might also conclude that Britain's success lay in Germany's failure, in both the battle of Britain and its abortive blockade. Having survived intact as a major power, Britain was freed by the advent of Hitler's colossal war in the east to concentrate its resources on offensive operations. This, however, still posed formidable challenges. Strategic bombing was an entirely new development in modern warfare without an established operational doctrine or the technology to support it fully. The British army suffered similar obstacles as it made the difficult transition from a small professional force to a mass army. Since the failure of Hitler's Barbarossa blitzkrieg gave the British time to build up and improve both, one cannot therefore underestimate the importance of the summer of 1941 in contributing to Britain's longer-term effectiveness in the war. At the same time, the battle of Kiev and the evident tenacity of the German Wehrmacht warned Britain against complacency and told of the trials yet to come.

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union promised to open up radical possibilities for both sides. Britain was at last to acquire another major continental ally, while Germany stood to gain economic autarky and complete dominance of the continent (which Hitler hoped would force Britain to agree to terms). In the event, the summer of 1941, while on the surface an apparently successful period of German

conquest, expended so much of the Wehrmacht's offensive strength that a long drawn-out war in the east became inevitable. It was an outcome Hitler and his military commanders had not foreseen and had no contingency for. Instead of benefiting from a wealth of raw materials and new-found strategic freedom, the Germans found themselves even more limited in both. Moreover, as Germany's army became critically overextended in the Soviet Union, Britain's comparatively weak forces were able to take the initiative and prove an increasingly troublesome menace on numerous, albeit secondary, fronts. Britain's offensive strength was still, however, very limited. The great gusto of Churchill's rhetoric sought to play up the importance of Britain's military contribution in the second half of 1941, but in reality the British Prime Minister was under few illusions as to the limited significance of the British war effort in aiding the Soviet Union. Indeed, from the Soviet perspective, the whole Anglo-American war effort up until the Allied landings in France in June 1944 was significant only in terms of how many German resources it managed to siphon off from the eastern front. In the late summer of 1941 that figure was pitifully small and, it may be said, contributed to the Soviet disaster at Kiev.

In North Africa Britain faced three German divisions (numbering some 48,500 men) and some seven Italian divisions.²⁰ At the same time the Soviet Union engaged almost 160 German divisions with more than 3 million men,²¹ supported by an additional three-quarters of a million troops supplied by Germany's Axis allies. This grossly disproportionate concentration of Axis forces on the eastern front tipped the scales decisively in favour of Britain on all its fronts. Rommel lacked the resources adequately to counter Auchinleck's advantage in Operation Crusader. The RAF's bombing campaign proceeded with the great bulk of the Luftwaffe's resources supporting ground operations in the east and the Royal Navy continued its battle against the U-boats with a commanding superiority in both naval assets and production capacity (including Lend-Lease aid). Thus, as Britain entered its third year of the war in September 1941, events on the eastern front enabled it to start throwing off the immediate fear of invasion and take the fight to Germany, with a steadily growing offensive strength and an increasing admiration for the fighting potential of its new Soviet ally.

The summer and autumn period is also significant for the change in US policy towards Germany. Under Roosevelt's shrewd direction the United States government manoeuvred itself from strict

neutrality at the start of the war, to limited material support for Britain in 1940, and then to a full-blown commitment to arm Britain through the Lend-Lease programme, enacted in March 1941. Finally, by the summer and autumn of that year, Roosevelt brought his country to the very brink of war, entering into a quasi state of undeclared hostilities against Germany.²²

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union proved a watershed in the urgency with which Roosevelt's administration viewed the situation in Europe. Roosevelt was sufficiently concerned to advocate extending whatever aid he could to Stalin. Only two days after the German invasion, the American President stated, 'we are going to give all the aid we can to Russia'.²³ Yet Roosevelt faced a large and hostile isolationist movement with many vocal supporters in Congress and Senate. The isolationists were opposed in principle to involvement in the war and were even more reviled at the thought of supporting the Soviet Union with its communist and atheistic regime. The view was now expressed that fascists and communists should be left to battle it out alone, providing a simple and convenient solution to American security concerns. Senator Burton Wheeler, a leading isolationist, publicly expounded this position: 'Now we can just let Joe Stalin and the other dictators fight it out.'²⁴ Suspicions about aiding the Soviet Union were also held on a pragmatic level, with fears expressed at the highest levels that any military or economic aid would simply end up in German hands, following the anticipated defeat of the Red Army. Yet many of the President's military and civilian advisers clearly recognized the dire urgency of the European situation and urged Roosevelt to action. Fearing the worst, Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior, wrote to Roosevelt the day after the German invasion: 'It may be difficult to get into this war the right way, but if we do not do it now, we will be, when our turn comes, without an ally anywhere in the world.'²⁵ Likewise, the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, viewed Germany's attack as 'an almost providential occurrence', providing a vital window of opportunity for increased US naval action in the Atlantic to meet what he described as 'our most imminent danger'.²⁶ While most of Roosevelt's advisers agreed on the need for stronger action against Germany, channelling precious resources to the Soviet Union was more controversial. The most ardent supporter of aiding the Soviets was Roosevelt's old friend and former US ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph E. Davies. He alone asserted that Soviet resistance would 'amaze and surprise the