

## **Kent in Flames - a look at what might have been**

*It was not unusual, it being a glorious summer day, for the historical house and famous rose gardens of Penshurst Place in Kent to be thronged with visitors. But unlike the usual tourists, this year the guests were soldiers, fighting men in uniforms, their muddied vehicles drawn up in uneven lines in the grounds of the old house. In this grim summer of 1940, Penshurst Place had become a battlefield headquarters - a command centre in the GHQ Line, the improvised fortifications thrown up by General Ironside to resist the imminent German invasion.*

*That the uniforms of the troops were field grey rather than the khaki of the British Army demonstrated how the affair had gone. The officer admiring the roses was one Erwin Rommel. It was barely three weeks since he had led the PzKpfw IV tanks of his 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division ashore just west of Hythe. Every quarter of an hour, the BBC was repeating, in familiar Home Counties English and less familiar German, the unbelievable news that London was an Open City, and that an Armistice would take effect from midnight. The date was 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1940...*

'Counterfactuals' - the history of what might have been - have undergone something of a re-appraisal amongst serious writers and historians. Studying what might have happened, in some cases what *should* have happened, reminds us that the affairs of man are frequently balanced on a knife-edge. The lucky assassin's bullet that hits - or misses - its intended target; the unforeseen storm or snowfall; the vital order lost in the fog of battle: any one of these has the power to unravel what we comfortably call reality. Even physicists have got in on the act, with their work on 'chaos theory' showing us how tiny events can generate huge and unpredictable consequences.

The most credible alternative histories involve injecting as little deviation as possible from what we know actually happened - the so-called 'first order counterfactual'. Fanciful or absurd propositions - 'what if Harold had had the Atom Bomb in 1066?' - have no place here.

So, the Armada routs Elizabeth's navy; General Lee smashes the Army of the Potomac outside Washington and Archduke Ferdinand enjoys an entirely uneventful visit to Sarajevo in the summer of 1914. But of them all, the one which most intrigues and haunts students is the possibility of a Nazi victory in World War Two.

This theme has proved fruitful ground for novelists, such as Len Deighton with *SS-GB* and Robert Harris with *Fatherland*. The genre has extended to cinema as well: The 1964 classic *It Happened Here*, by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, was actually banned in its original form because of their use of genuine British Fascists to portray wartime collaborators in a Vichy-style regime. The tourist interest in the German fortifications and other relics in the Channel Islands - even tiny Sark has its own 'Occupation Museum' - demonstrates that the prospect of defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany continues to enjoy a horrid fascination for the British.

Those of us who live in Kent occupy the towns and villages where this grim alternative history would have been decided. For a thousand years Kent has been the nation's shield against invasion. Britain's political geography, with its capital and much of its resources concentrated in the southeast, reinforces the crucial place that our county has occupied throughout our island's history. Reminders of this destiny, from the ancient Cinque Ports and the magnificent defences of that 'key to England', Dover Castle, to the coastal Martello towers and the derelict remains of the pillboxes and earthworks thrown up to create the GHQ Line, have been etched into the County's landscape

Could Kent really have resounded, in the summer of 1940, to the roar of German panzers? Could Operation Sealion - the German plan for the invasion of Britain - have succeeded? Possibly. But the later Allied disaster at Dieppe and the massive preparations necessary for the D-Day Landings demonstrate the level of planning and resources necessary for that most complex and risky of military operations - the amphibious landing. In 1940, no nation in Europe had experience in such an undertaking. Amongst the Germans, the equipment for such an attack was entirely absent. The desperate expedient of cutting off the bows of Dutch canal barges to improvise landing craft suggests that it is just as well, not least for the German seaman and soldiers, that no landing was ever attempted. Equally, the prospect of mass paratroop drops, which so fired the imagination of the British media, had never been tried, and when it was tried - on Crete - both the transports and the paratroopers themselves received a horrific mauling.

An amphibious assault also requires unprecedented inter-service co-ordination. Given the intense rivalry between the German services, and that two of them - the Navy and the Army - believed Sealion to be technically unfeasible, this condition was unlikely to be met - certainly in the absence of direct involvement by Hitler.

And it is in this that a further historical objection to Sealion arises. Hitler had never contemplated an invasion of Britain and, even when on the Channel Ports, had no practical means of carrying one out. Even the directive ordering preparations for Sealion is curiously half-hearted. "I have decided to prepare a landing operation against England," Hitler wrote, as though announcing his choice for new curtains, "and, if necessary, to carry it out." This does not sound like a man on a mission.

The fact was that in an unpromising scenario, only Hermann Göring had any enthusiasm for an assault against England. Furthermore, in the Luftwaffe he possessed the only credible means of taking the war to the British homeland. Of course, he also had a point to prove: his Luftwaffe, essentially the aerial artillery for the Army (a role it performed brilliantly during the Blitzkriegs of 1939-40) could now come of age as a service by single handedly knocking the mighty British Empire out of the war. With their own severe reservations about Sealion, the leaders of the Army and the Navy were content to allow Göring to try, while continuing their own lacklustre 'preparations' for the landings. Hopefully, Luftwaffe mastery of the air would indeed induce the British to see reason,

rendering an invasion unnecessary, or at least reducing it to an unopposed landing.

This was the second roll of the dice for Göring. Hitler had stopped the panzers outside Dunkirk on Göring's insistence that the Luftwaffe alone could finish the job. The Luftwaffe failed at Dunkirk and, as the Battle of Britain proved, a full-scale military campaign could not, in 1940, be won by air power alone. Indeed, it was not until the Kosovo war of 1999 that a major conflict was settled by air strikes without the need for a significant ground assault. Even then, the attack on Yugoslavia took far longer than anticipated - NATO's assessment of it taking 'just four days' sounding eerily similar to Göring's equally exaggerated claims of half a century earlier.

In fairness to the Germans, the doctrine that 'the bomber will always get through' was firmly established in European military thinking during the 1920s and 1930s. But it was only late in World War Two, and then at tremendous cost, that something approaching the gloomy predictions of the pre-war theorists was achieved by the combined efforts of the British and the Americans. After 1945, of course, with the coupling of the atomic bomb and the ballistic missile, the 1930s doomsday scenarios returned in an only slightly altered guise to occupy the nightmares of a further generation.

However, to achieve victory in 1940, Germany did not have to invade and occupy Britain. Had the Germans, as they so nearly did, achieved air superiority over Kent, and had that been combined with a cracking of the British resolve, perhaps coupled with political reverses for Churchill and his by no means secure war-faction in Whitehall, then Britain could have been forced to the negotiating table on unfavourable terms. And had *that* happened, Hitler would have gone on to attack the USSR with the west secure - possibly even with British ships and soldiers as junior partners in the venture. Certainly, Stalin would not have benefited from the Arctic convoys, which brought badly needed equipment at a heartbreakingly high price in British blood. The United States meanwhile would have been powerless to intervene; denied the vital benefit of the British Isles in any attempt, were they so minded, to liberate Europe.

Hitler might well have subdued the Soviet Union, and brought Europe permanently under German economic and political domination. This is basically the scenario at the beginning of the novel *Fatherland*, in which the nations of western Europe have been 'corralled into a European Community' dominated by Germany - a outcome which to many appears all too realistic a representation of our actual position.

In *Fatherland*, therefore, it is Nazi Germany, not the USSR, which is the American antagonist in the Cold War. There is, however, an even more terrifying possibility. Suppose Hitler, having knocked Britain out of the war, went on to attack Russia - *and still lost*. In that case, Stalin would have overrun the whole of Europe. By the mid-1940s it might have been the Red Airforce, rather than the Luftwaffe, which confronted the RAF across the Channel. A Soviet empire from the Atlantic to the Pacific, commanding the whole Eurasian landmass and the

industrial centres of Europe, would have had the power to hold the whole world, including the Americas, in thralldom.

It is because this did not come to pass that today we honour the dwindling number - now 'the Few' indeed - of airman from Britain and around the world who fought that now distant battle over Kent. The airfields of Kent and the Home Counties, with their faintly comic English village names - Biggin Hill, Middle Wallop, West Malling and the rest - have entered the history books. But as time passes and memories fade it is increasingly left to historical and charitable bodies, such as the Friends of the Few, to remind future generations of the human cost paid in preventing 'what might have been'.