

WHAT NEXT? THE GERMAN STRATEGY CRISIS
DURING THE SUMMER OF 1940

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by
Leonard S. Cooley, Jr.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 GREAT BRITAIN REFUSES TO SURRENDER.....	7
3 OPERATION SEA LION: THE DIRECT APPROACH.....	16
4 GIBRALTAR: THE INDIRECT APPROACH.....	29
5 SEA LION POSTPONED.....	40
6 GIBRALTAR AND OPERATION FELIX.....	53
7 CONCLUSION.....	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77
VITA.....	83

ABSTRACT

The German blitzkrieg across France during May 1940 was the culmination of three years of daring political and military moves that had brought most of Europe under German control. It was the German dictator Adolf Hitler who had outguessed his advisors. Yet, Hitler's bold moves in Western Europe ended with his army's dash across France, and the failure to strike Great Britain that summer when the British were at one of the weakest points in their entire history.

After Germany defeated France, Hitler began a fruitless period of waiting for Great Britain to sue for peace. Unlike Hitler, some in the German High Command believed that Great Britain would fight and that a coherent strategy was needed to defeat that island nation. During late June 1940, two strategies emerged for defeating Great Britain. The first, code-named Operation SEA LION, called for an invasion of southern England. This plan was the surest way to bring about a decisive outcome, but also the riskiest. Hitler nonetheless ordered that planning and training for the operation go forward, a process halted by the Luftwaffe's inability to defeat the RAF as the necessary prelude to the invasion.

The strategic option less risky than an invasion of the British Isles called for an attack on the important colony of Gibraltar. German planners believed that seizure of "the Rock" would place immense stress on the British Empire and possibly force a negotiated peace. In November, German military units were task-organized and trained

for the operation, now code-named Operation FELIX. Hitler understood the importance of Gibraltar, but wanted the approval of Francisco Franco, the Spanish dictator, before ordering an attack. Hitler waited.

By the spring of 1941, Hitler had failed to act and had lost his opportunity to strike Great Britain when it was most vulnerable. He did not have the will to make the difficult decision and implement either strategy. After December 1940, Great Britain would never again be in danger of an invasion of either the island home or of its valuable colony.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1945 as Allied troops pushed toward Berlin, the German dictator Adolf Hitler could well ask himself what had gone wrong. He could recall his successes in the late 1930s and early 1940s, remembering with pride his rapid rearmament of the Germany military, bloodless remilitarization of the Rhineland, his stunning *Anschluss* with Austria, and his even more spectacular conquest of Czechoslovakia. It was he who had outguessed his advisors on the likely reactions of the Allies; it was he whose decisions and tactics had resulted in easy victories for Germany. But somehow the tide had turned, and German defeat was now inevitable.

Hitler began World War II in Europe on September 1, 1939, by sending the Wehrmacht into Poland. As in his previous operations, he hoped to limit the conflict and avoid an all-out war. On September 3, however, the British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson, delivered an ultimatum to the Wilhelmstrasse demanding the cessation of offensive operations and the withdrawal of German forces from Poland. Dr. Paul Schmidt, chief interpreter for German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, was present when the British ultimatum was handed to Hitler and described the moment:

Hitler sat immobile, staring into space. He was not stunned, as was later asserted, nor did he rant, as others claimed. He sat absolutely silent and unmoving. After an interval, which seemed an eternity to me, he turned to Ribbentrop, who had remained standing frozen by the window. "What now?" Hitler asked his Foreign Minister with a furious glare, as if to say that Ribbentrop had misinformed him about the probable reaction of the British.¹

Years later Schmidt recalled that everywhere in the room he had seen looks of grave concern. Hitler had miscalculated the British will to fight. In the coming months and years, he would be unable or unwilling to devise a viable strategy to defeat Great Britain. This failure would prove to be a fatal error.

Hitler did not want war with Great Britain. Since the early 1920s, he had dreamed of an alliance with that sea power. In June 1935, he had achieved a major coup with the signing of the London Naval Treaty. The treaty limited the size of the German surface navy to 35 percent of the British Royal Navy, and later agreements allowed the Germans to expand their U-boat fleet to 100 percent of that of the British.² Anglo-German relations deteriorated after 1935, however, and in November 1937, Hitler advised his generals to add Great Britain to the list of possible enemies. As the Fuehrer put it,

German policy had to reckon with two hate-inspired antagonists, Britain and France, to whom a German colossus in the center of Europe was a thorn in the flesh, and both countries were opposed to any further strengthening of Germany's position either in Europe or overseas. Both countries saw in the establishment of German military bases overseas a threat to their own communications and, as a consequence, a strengthening of Germany's position in Europe.³

Nevertheless, Hitler still held to the hope that a peaceful arrangement could be worked out between Germany and Great Britain. Horrified by the prospect of the Kriegsmarine's having to face the Royal Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, the commander of the German navy, approached Hitler to clarify the navy's ability to confront the British. Hitler told the admiral not to worry and promised that there would be no war with England until 1944 or 1945.⁴

By mid-May 1939, Hitler was forced to recognize that he might have to contend with Great Britain's belligerency and he began to formulate a strategy. On May 10, he

issued Annex VI to the directive for war preparations that he had drawn up a month earlier.⁵ The annex, entitled “Directives for War against the Enemy Economy (Economic Warfare) and Protective Measures for the German Economy,” was an attempt to summarize his war strategy primarily against Great Britain. The Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe (air force), he wrote, would be the “*most important instruments* for attacking the enemy economy.”⁶ He directed the navy to prepare for economic warfare against Britain and France. The principal element in that campaign would be a blockade that the German navy was unable to carry out, against an enemy it was not supposed to face for at least another four years. His hope, nonetheless, was that he could avoid a clash with Britain. As he commented two months later to Admiral Karl Doenitz,⁷ his U-boat commander, on no account must a war with Great Britain be allowed to develop. Such a conflict, he pondered, would mean nothing less than “*finis Germaniae*.”⁸

After the defeat of Poland, Hitler’s attentions shifted to planning for invasion of his neighbors to the west. With regard to Great Britain, he remained fixated on the idea of blockade, but his naval and military high command began to see the need for contingency planning for a possible invasion of that country. On November 15, Admiral Raeder ordered that “the possibility of invading Great Britain be examined, a possibility arising if certain conditions are fulfilled by the further course of the war.”⁹ Raeder realized that planning and preparation would take time, and he did not want to be surprised by a hastily issued invasion order from Hitler. The naval high command—Oberkommando des Kriegsmarine (OKM)—coordinated its planning with the army and air force staffs throughout November and December.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, General Walther von Brauchitsch, head of the army high command (Oberkommando des Heeres

OKH), directed it to compile an invasion study and coordinate it with the other services. As a result of the planning,¹¹ all three staffs grew skeptical about the feasibility of an invasion of Great Britain and planning for operations in Scandinavia and Western Europe soon diverted their attention.

By late May 1940, German troops had achieved a decisive victory over the Allies and had arrived on the Atlantic coast of France. At this point, Great Britain was at its weakest and Germany at its strongest. While Britain still had a robust navy and airforce, its army recently had suffered defeats in Norway and France. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had been forced to abandon most of its heavy equipment on the beaches of those two countries. Britain had gambled its army on the defense of France and had lost. If Germany could “bridge” the English Channel, it would thus face a dramatically weakened British defense. It was at this point that high-level German officers again began to discuss the possibility of invading England despite the many difficulties.

While invasion was the most direct approach for defeating Great Britain, it was not the only option. Britain was stretched thin around the world, and its military forces had to contend with aggressive Japanese activity in the Far East and with Italian moves in the Mediterranean area. In the summer of 1940, the Italians threatened Britain’s colonies and Mediterranean supply lines. In North Africa, Italian military forces were preparing to attack a much smaller British force in Egypt. The Italian navy also seemed to present a strong threat to Britain’s vital Mediterranean supply line, which connected it to India, Malaysia, and Australia.

With Italy positioned to strike Egypt and the Suez Canal from its colonies in North Africa, a German operation against Gibraltar could result in strategic benefits for

the Axis. Since the Peace of Utrecht (1713), the Rock had held enormous significance for the British Empire.¹² Although Gibraltar is only three miles long and three quarters of a mile wide, its rugged terrain gave the British control of the fourteen-mile-wide strait connecting the Mediterranean with the Atlantic Ocean. From Gibraltar, British coastal artillery, aircraft, and warships were able to protect vital convoys to the eastern colonies, block German surface ships from entering the Mediterranean, keep Italian battleships inside, and constantly remind Spain of Britain's military might. If Germany were able to seize Gibraltar, the Mediterranean would be closed to British shipping, the British forces in North Africa and the Middle East would be in peril, and the Italians would be in a much stronger strategic position throughout the region. More importantly, the shock of losing Gibraltar might bring the British to the bargaining table—an outcome that Hitler hoped for.

The six-month period from June to December 1940 loomed, therefore, as perhaps the most critical time in the entire war. Either an invasion of England or the capture of Gibraltar might have secured Germany's western flank. But Hitler's decisions, or his indecision, in 1940 led to the abandonment of invasion plans and of an attack on the strategic British colony. Hitler's inability to carry out a campaign gave the British a desperately needed respite and, after his decision to launch the invasion of the Soviet Union, led to a dreaded two-front war and eventually to Germany's total defeat.

End Notes

¹ Paul Schmidt, quoted in Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, p. 601; William L. Shirer, *The Nightmare Years*, p. 453.

² Anthony Martiensen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, pp. 10-11. In 1935, Admiral Erich Raeder, the commander of the German navy, asked Hitler to list potential enemies so that he could fashion the German navy to meet the threat. Hitler informed Raeder that he intended to maintain peace with England, Italy, and Japan and that potential Reich enemies were France and Russia.

³ Louis L. Snyder, *Hitler's Third Reich*, p. 267.

⁴ Admiral Erich Raeder, *My Life*, pp. 266-280; Martienssen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, pp. 10-14.

⁵ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 21-24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21. Italics in original.

⁷ Admiral Karl Doenitz was the commander-in-chief of Germany's U-boat fleet. He developed the "wolf pack" tactics that almost brought England to its knees. He eventually succeeded Raeder as commander of the navy and was the last leader of the Third Reich. For more see Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days*.

⁸ Fest, *Hitler*, p. 603.

⁹ Ronald Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 4; Walter Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 42-43; Martienssen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, p. 67; Raeder, *My Life*, pp. 319-320. Raeder does not reference a specific date, just the month of November. This was the first time in modern history a German staff had conducted any serious review of the concept.

¹⁰ For more on this early invasion planning see Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 1-13; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 39-50; Telford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave*, pp. 200-204.

¹¹ Both the navy and army assigned their most junior planning officer to the invasion project suggesting the low priority they placed on it. The Luftwaffe informed the other two services that it did not have time to address preposterous conjectures.

¹² Edward Fox, *The Emergence of the Modern European World*, p. 11.

CHAPTER 2

GREAT BRITAIN REFUSES TO SURRENDER

In late May 1940 Hitler still believed that once Germany defeated France, Great Britain would sue for peace, which would end the war in the West, securing Germany's western flank. Hitler expected them to turn his attention eastward to the USSR, the country he considered his main enemy. Despite his optimistic expectation of British capitulation, some in the Armed Forces High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or OKW) believed that the defeat of Britain would require much more, beginning with innovative strategic planning. Nevertheless, Hitler continued to believe that the British were on the verge of collapse and that any plans for invasion were premature.

Admiral Raeder, one of Germany's most gifted strategic thinkers, realized that any seaborne attack on Great Britain would require a great deal of preparation and would be risky in terms of troops, material, and national prestige. On May 21, the day after German armored columns reached the Atlantic coast of northern France, he approached Hitler to discuss the possibility of an invasion.¹ That meeting was the first documented occasion on which Hitler gave serious thought to an amphibious operation against the British Isles.² Raeder briefed him on previous planning by the naval planning staff and stated his strong opinion that an invasion would require complicated and lengthy preparation. Hitler absorbed Raeder's remarks and subsequently issued an order stating that for the time being no preparations for a landing were to be made. Raeder also asked

Hitler if he wanted to use U-boats currently in training for operational missions in order that the war might be ended quickly. Hitler did not respond with regard to the length of the war, but did state that Germany's long-term program for submarine training and construction should continue. His actions indicate that at the time he had not yet considered invasion as a necessary option and remained committed to carrying out a blockade.³

Following the meeting with Hitler, Raeder directed Rear-Admiral Kurt Fricke, the Chief of the Operations Division at OKM, to make a more detailed plan of war against Great Britain. On May 27 Fricke circulated a memorandum entitled "Study England," which he moved the proposed landing area to the southeast shores of England, instead of the north central area. The navy, sailing from French ports, would thus face a shorter Channel crossing.⁴ If the Luftwaffe could first neutralize the Royal Air Force (RAF), Fricke pondered, it could then force the Royal Navy out of the Channel area and more freely lay barrier mine fields there, which would permit the concentration of German invasion forces in French ports. He opposed any plan that would require a lengthy time period for concentrating men and materials in the area, as this would rule out any possibility of a surprise attack. Fricke conceded that the German fleet was small and relatively weak compared to that of the British and French, but he believed that an invasion was possible if undertaken quickly and with as large a force as possible while England was still recovering from its recent defeats.⁵

Meanwhile, Hitler continued to plan for a naval and air blockade of Britain. In directives issued on May 24 and 26, he stated that a German victory in Belgium and northern France was near and that the complete defeat of France would follow.⁶ With

these outcomes in mind, he directed the Kriegsmarine to focus on blockading Great Britain, while the Luftwaffe began preparations for operations against the British aircraft industry, which he believed would weaken the RAF, the last powerful weapon that England, in his opinion, had to use against Germany. For the time being, however, the Luftwaffe was still engaged in the Battle of France and would need time to adjust to that new mission, one that would require replacement of recent losses and re-deployment to newly-acquired bases. Hitler also realized that the Kriegsmarine had suffered irreplaceable losses to its surface fleet during the Norwegian campaign, which severely limited Germany's ability to carry out a successful invasion of England or even impose a blockade.⁷

In early June, German efforts were still focused primarily on France. The Low Countries and Northern France had fallen and the German army was poised to attack the remnants of the French army in central France. While the English were still a viable and tenacious foe, Hitler believed optimistically that a German victory was almost within arm's reach, and that as soon as Britain awoke to the fact that it was defeated, it would sue for peace. He occasionally spoke of a coming blockade of Britain, but gave no indication that he was giving serious thought to invasion. Hitler believed that the primary task of the army had been achieved, and that once the defeat of France was complete the navy and air force would wage the war against Britain.⁸ All indication was that the OKW did not consider invasion to be a possibility. During all of this, the British were working feverishly to rebuild their army and to construct invasion defenses.⁹

On June 5, German armored units breached France's hastily constructed defenses dubbed the "Weygand Line,"¹⁰ dashing any hope that France would be able to stop

Germany.¹¹ Italy until now had been reluctant to enter the conflict, but on June 10, realizing that France was defeated and hoping to easily gain territory and influence, Benito Mussolini declared war on France and Great Britain. A week later, the newly formed French government of Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain requested an armistice.¹²

This request prompted Winston Churchill to deliver his “finest hour” speech:

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned against us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. Let us therefore brace ourselves so that if the British Commonwealth and Empire last for a thousand years men will still say, ‘this was their finest hour.’¹³

Churchill knew that dark days were ahead.

Hitler did not respond as expected. He saw the French request for an armistice as a prelude to peace with Britain and still gave no indication that he was considering invasion. Four days earlier, on June 13, General Jodl’s deputy, Colonel Walter Warlimont, Chief of the Planning Section at OKW, had told Fricke that “with regard to a landing in Britain, the Fuehrer has not up to now expressed such an intention, as he fully appreciates the unusual difficulties of such an operation. Therefore, even at this time, no preparatory work of any kind has been done at OKW.”¹⁴ At this late stage, the high commands of both the German army and the Luftwaffe appeared unaware that Hitler was discussing an invasion. Valuable time for detailed planning, training, and the assembling of necessary equipment and units was passing. And as the days went by, defenses in southern England would grow stronger.

On June 20, Hitler met with his top military leaders to discuss the armistice terms to be offered to France.¹⁵ Almost as an afterthought, he mentioned future military plans. He did not broach the subject of an amphibious assault on Great Britain. It had been a

little over a month since Raeder had spoken to him about that possibility. The admiral believed that it was the right time to press Hitler regarding England and make sure that hasty invasion orders were not imminent.¹⁶ Raeder stated that “Air supremacy is necessary for an invasion” and that “the air force must be able not only to eliminate any threat by British naval forces, but also to provide bridgeheads with paratroops after the coastal defenses have been destroyed.”¹⁷ He urged that the Luftwaffe begin air attacks on British bases to destroy ships under construction and repair and also recommended attacks on British merchant shipping. The briefing seemed to have little influence on Hitler, who told the group that he did not believe an invasion would be necessary, considering the rout of the BEF at Dunkirk.¹⁸ The Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine could end any continued resistance with air attacks and a naval blockade, and, Hitler indicated, peace would follow. The next day the French government signed the armistice.¹⁹

At this critical point, Hitler decided to move his headquarters from Bruly-de-Pesche to a new location code named “Tannenburg” in the Black Forest.²⁰ He did not relocate with his staff, but instead accompanied two of his World War I comrades on visits to that war’s battlefields. Prior to his departure on June 25 he informed the Operations Staff of OKW “that in a few days he would want to examine some basic studies for an invasion of Britain.”²¹ Hitler’s request was not urgent and did not indicate a willingness to implement an invasion. He still believed peace was at hand. He reportedly told General Jodl: “The English have lost the war but they haven’t yet noticed it; one must give them time, and they will soon come around.”²² This mood continued upon his arrival at Tannenburg on June 29. Hitler and his staff appeared to be relaxed and unconcerned about the problem at hand—namely, the war. Indeed, from June 23 to

July 11, Hitler did not meet with the army or navy commanders-in-chiefs, who continued to operate under the assumption that economic warfare was the Fuehrer's war plan.²³ In mid-June, OKW had ordered the army to reduce its size from 160 divisions to 120 divisions—approximately 25 percent of its total force.²⁴ Also in mid-June, Raeder sent a memorandum to the German Naval Group West regarding the navy's future task—and did not include an amphibious assault on Great Britain among them.²⁵

Across the Channel, the stubborn British gave no sign of surrender. The need for decisiveness and planning was increasingly apparent. On June 30, Hitler's closest military advisor, General Jodl, presented to him a six-page report entitled "The Continuation of the War against England," in which he proposed two basic courses of action: attacking the English motherland or extending the war to the periphery.²⁶ Jodl suggested three possible types of campaigns to be employed in an assault on the British home islands. In the first, the three military services would impose a traditional siege in an attempt to neutralize the RAF and destroy the British aircraft industry. This siege would be supplemented by attacks on Britain's maritime commerce and port installations, along with bombing of supply depots and transportation network. The second possibility was terror bombing, coupled with a propaganda campaign directed at the population centers. This method, "allied with propaganda and periodic terror attacks, announced as reprisals," Jodl thought, would, "force the British Government to capitulate."²⁷ The third option was a combination of the first two, followed by an invasion to administer the coup de grace to a beaten enemy. Jodl described the conditions in detail:

A landing in England can only be contemplated after Germany has gained control of the air. A landing in England, therefore, should not have as its objective the military defeat of England, which is an objective that the Luftwaffe and Navy can achieve, but rather to give the coup de grace, if necessary, to a country whose war economy is already paralyzed and whose air force is

no longer capable of action. This situation will not occur before the end of August or the beginning of September. We must count on the opposition of about twenty English divisions, so at least thirty German divisions must be used. An invasion must nonetheless be prepared in all details as a last resort.²⁸

Jodl thus believed that a full-scale invasion would not be necessary if certain conditions had been met.

The general finished his briefing with a halfhearted attempt to explain a second course of action—attacking Great Britain's more vulnerable periphery. By striking at its colonial possessions, Germany could seriously limit Great Britain's ability to continue the war by denying it vital resources. The capture of important British colonies would also deliver a significant blow to British morale. The Mediterranean theater offered several attractive targets for this option. If Germany seized either the Suez Canal or Gibraltar, it could considerably reduce the flow of food, raw materials, such as oil, as well as troops, from Britain's important eastern colonies, such as Iraq, India, and Australia. Axis control of the Mediterranean's two strategic outlets would force the removal of Britain's Mediterranean Fleet. This action would enhance Italy's strategic position and would allow the Italian navy to conduct operations in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans—further tightening the blockade of the British Home Islands.²⁹

Hitler believed Jodl's suggestions were irrelevant, as he continued to think that the British would accept his peace terms—which he thought were generous.³⁰ Jodl later echoed Hitler's statements, saying it was only a matter of time until Britain surrendered to Germany.³¹ In the last days of June, peace seemed to be imminent. Hitler and others in the OKW still lived under the illusion that Great Britain would surrender when the first bombs were dropped—or sooner. Hitler considered plans for invading England or

attacking its colonies premature and unneeded. Jodl's report, nonetheless, would lay the framework for planning that took place later that summer and fall.

End Notes

¹ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing With the German Navy 1940*, I, 50-51; Admiral Erich Raeder, *My Life*, p. 321; Raeder, *Struggle For the Sea*, pp. 177-179. Raeder was skeptical of any invasion attempt and raised the question to Hitler to forestall any unreasonable request, which he feared would lead to impossible requirements levied against the navy.

² Telford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave*, p. 48.

³ Ibid.; U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 50-51; Raeder, *My Life*, p. 321.

⁴ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 57, 204-205; Ronald Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 19-21; Walter Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 97-98.

⁵ Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 20-21; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 204-205; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 96-98.

⁶ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 98-99.

⁷ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 22-23.

⁸ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 52-59; Anthony Martiensen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, p. 65.

⁹ For a detailed account of British defenses against invasion see Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, pp. 291-300 or Arthur Byant, *Turn of the Tide*, pp. 148-178.

¹⁰ This last ditch line of defenses was named after the then commander of French forces General Maxime Weygand.

¹¹ For a detail account of the fall of France see William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic*, pp. 753-850.

¹² Ibid., p. 852. It is interesting that the request for an armistice was delivered through Spain's ambassador to Paris, Jose Felix de Lequerica. For more see Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, p. 81.

¹³ Martiensen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁴ Walter Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*, pp. 102-103; Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 16; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 50.

¹⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 54-56.

¹⁶ Martiensen, *Hitler and His Admirals*, p. 65; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 100-101.

¹⁷ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 58.

¹⁸ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 102. Raeder and Goering disliked each other immensely and this dislike transferred over to each commander's respective staffs.

¹⁹ For an excellent firsthand account of the proceedings see Shirer, *The Nightmare Years*, pp. 537-543.

²⁰ Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*, p. 103.

²¹ Hitler quoted in Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 52.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁴ General Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary*, p. 206; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 49-50. This action would not have greatly affected an invasion given that the landing force would only consist of between 30-40 divisions.

²⁵ Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 26.

²⁶ Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain During World War II*, pp. 17-19; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 44-46; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 116-119; Wheatley, *Operation Sea Lion*, pp. 30-32.

²⁷ Jodl quoted in Wheatley, *Operation Sea Lion*, p. 31.

²⁸ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 207-208; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 118.

²⁹ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 116-118; Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, pp. 17-19; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 44-46; Wheatley, *Operation Sea Lion*, pp. 30-32.

³⁰ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 118. Hitler's primary condition for peace was a free hand in Europe and Russia.

³¹ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 46

CHAPTER 3

OPERATION SEA LION: THE DIRECT APPROACH

At the beginning of July 1940, Britain still showed no willingness to surrender; Hitler, however, was still confident that peace was just around the corner. Throughout the month, he slowly moved on a two-track approach to deal with Great Britain, authorizing planning for a possible invasion, but continuing to extend a thorny peace offer to what he viewed as a beaten foe. By the end of the month, Hitler had held three major strategy conferences on the invasion, in which he only confused his planners about national strategy and direction.

On July 1, General Halder met with Admiral Raeder's chief of staff, Admiral Otto Schniewind, to discuss an invasion of Great Britain. According to historian Telford Taylor, this was the first high-level army-navy discussion of the subject.¹ Later that same day, Hitler met with the Italian Ambassador to Berlin, Dino Alfieri, at Hitler's Tannenburg headquarters. Alfieri brought offers of Italian troops and aircraft for use against Great Britain. Hitler did not respond to Alfieri's offer, but he did propose joint bombing of the Suez Canal. Germany itself, he told Alfieri, was preparing a devastating air attack on Great Britain. There is no record that the two men discussed the possibility of an invasion.²

The next day, however, Hitler unexpectedly directed the OKW planning staff to initiate invasion planning in the service high commands. The order, signed by Keitel rather than Hitler, stated:

The Fuehrer and Supreme Commander has decided a landing in England is possible, provided that air superiority can be attained and certain other necessary conditions can be fulfilled. The date of commencement is therefore still undecided. All preparations are to be begun so that the operation can be carried out as soon as possible. All preparations must bear in mind that the plan to invade England has not taken any sort of definite shape as yet, and that these are only preparations for a possible invasion.³

The final sentence of the directive suggests that Hitler remained lukewarm about the idea of invasion. That Keitel signed the order and not Hitler himself perhaps further reflects the Fuehrer's lack of enthusiasm.

Although Hitler did authorize preliminary planning for an invasion, he still believed that such an operation would be unnecessary. The surprise British attack on the French fleet at Mers el-Kebir on July 3 helped to destroy that notion and confirmed what most German officers already believed: the British would fight, not negotiate.⁴ The attack also drove home to German naval planners the point that large-scale Axis cooperation in naval operations was impossible as long as Gibraltar was in British control. Hitler continued to hope that Britain would settle for a negotiated peace and on July 11 told Raeder that he planned to make a peace offer in a speech to the *Reichstag*. Raeder thought that the speech would serve to make the British public aware of Germany's gambit. He urged Hitler to authorize a declaration of blockade and air attacks on British cities to place additional pressure on the enemy population. He predicted that if the British people were made to feel the effects of the war there would be a speedy termination of it and stressed to Hitler the dangers of an invasion, which he believed should be used only as a last resort. Raeder repeated his earlier statement that Britain

could be defeated by economic warfare combined with heavy air attacks on its main population centers, such as Liverpool. Although Hitler agreed with Raeder's heavy-handed approach, he was still inclined to make a qualified peace offer.⁵

On July 12, General Jodl issued an updated plan for invasion, to which he gave the name Operation LION.⁶ He considered Britain's sea power to be Germany's greatest strategic problem, but believed that going ashore in southern England would give the Reich the best chance for success. With a more narrow Channel to cross, Germany could substitute air power for the naval power it lacked. Jodl suggested that the landing take place by way of a river crossing on a broad front, and that the Luftwaffe provide direct support to the ground troops.⁷ The first wave of landing troops would have to be especially powerful and would require a sea lane completely secure from naval attacks. Although Hitler demanded surprise, this goal would be impossible because a large transport concentration in the northern French ports could not be concealed from RAF reconnaissance, but the shorter distance seemed worth the risk.⁸

The following day, July 13, Hitler received General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief of the German army, and Halder at his mountaintop retreat, the Berghof, where they discussed plans for war with Britain.⁹ The army high command's attitude had changed and it now believed that invasion was Germany's best hope of ending the war in the West. Halder was well prepared with facts and maps and made a convincing presentation for landings in England. Hitler liked what he heard and now seemed to support the idea, but could still not understand why the "beaten" British would not accept his offers of peace. On July 14, Churchill made the British position clear:

“We shall seek no terms, we shall tolerate no parley...[L]et all strive without failing in faith or in duty, and the dark curse of Hitler will be lifted from our age.”¹⁰

On July 16, Hitler issued Fuehrer Directive Number 16, entitled “Preparations for a Landing Operation against Great Britain.” The strategic concept of the directive was captured in the opening paragraph:

Since Britain, despite its hopeless military situation, still shows no indication of a desire to come to terms with us, I have decided to prepare an invasion, and, if necessary, to carry it out. The aim of this operation is to eliminate the British homeland as a base for continuing the war against Germany and, in case of need, to occupy it completely.¹¹

Hitler’s “if necessary” indicated that he still hoped that a military confrontation might be avoided. If the landing did prove necessary, he wanted it to be a surprise river crossing on a broad front. The plan for what he called Operation SEA LION, was to be ready by the end of July and actual preparations for the landing were to be completed by mid-August. A prerequisite for an invasion, he told his military leaders, was the achievement of air superiority by the Luftwaffe.

The day before Hitler issued Directive No. 16, he had responded to Mussolini’s repeated offers to send Italian troops to attack Great Britain.¹² In a long letter, Hitler outlined the difficulties involved in an invasion operation, such as specialized training and long preparation time. He suggested that an Italian invasion of Egypt would be an excellent alternative, but stated that with so many possibilities for action in the Mediterranean it did not matter where Italy attacked.¹³ The letter shows Hitler’s failings as a diplomat and strategist. Italy’s actions in the Mediterranean area did matter greatly, and Hitler’s failure to coordinate their plans and operations eventually led to Mussolini’s disastrous campaigns in North Africa and the Balkans.

Hitler's decision to prepare for invasion produced different reactions among his generals. At OKH, Halder and von Brauchitsch were optimistic about the invasion, and planning there rapidly gained momentum.¹⁴ In accordance with Hitler's directive, the OKH general staff decided to start planning for a wide front instead of a narrow front, which the navy advocated, and issued orders allocating forces for the landing.¹⁵ In the initial assault, approximately 90,000 troops would be landed with the total number rising to 260,000 by the third day.¹⁶ After the breakout from the beachheads, the German army could quickly surround London and occupy the rest of the country within a month. The reaction was different at OKM, where planners continued to stress SEA LION's weaknesses. On July 17, Raeder warned von Brauchitsch that a landing would be risky and that Germany could possibly lose the entire invading force. Raeder's warnings, however, did not dampen the army's growing enthusiasm for invasion.¹⁷

On July 19, Hitler appeared before the Reichstag and offered peace to Britain:

In this hour I believe I am conscience bound to make a renewed appeal to England. I believe I can do this because I am not the vanquished seeking favors, but the victor speaking in the name of reason. Mr. Churchill may well turn aside my declaration with the cry that this appeal represents only my fear and my doubts about final victory. All I can say is that I have lightened my conscience in view of what is coming.¹⁸

The speech was one of his best, but, as the American reporter William Shirer noted, although it was clever and eloquent, it was, as usual, full of deceit. About an hour after Hitler's speech, a BBC announcer responded with a resounding "No!" Hitler chose to believe that the BBC announcer was acting as a mouthpiece of the British Government. The enemy leader's speech, Churchill later declared, had needed no official reply.¹⁹

The British had recovered from the shock of their defeat at Dunkirk and were now determined to offer fierce resistance. On the day of Hitler's speech, the OKM Staff

completed a report that was highly skeptical of Germany's ability to execute an invasion.²⁰ Raeder stated that the task allotted to the navy was out of all proportion to its strength and that it bore no relation to the tasks given to the army and Luftwaffe.²¹ Some in the German army believed that the Kriegsmarine was getting "cold feet," as it had prior to Norway.²²

Hitler convened three additional planning conferences for SEA LION—July 21, 25, and 31.²³ At the first one, held in Berlin, he again expressed hope that Britain would surrender, but assured his subordinates that an invasion would end the war in the West if Britain resisted.²⁴ Landing in England, he knew, would be "an exceptionally daring undertaking, because even though the passage is short, it is not merely a question of crossing a river, but of crossing a sea which is controlled by the enemy." The operation would require forty divisions, he said, and they would face a serious logistical challenge. "We cannot count on obtaining supplies of any kind in Britain," he commented.²⁵ He noted that the time of year and weather were important considerations making it necessary that the Luftwaffe establish its dominance by early September. Hitler ended the conference by asking Raeder and the navy some pointed questions. He wanted Raeder to provide him with a full report on the navy's ability to protect the crossing, the date that the naval artillery would be ready, and the length of time needed for the navy's technical preparations.²⁶ Hitler did not question the Luftwaffe, as he incorrectly believed that the operation depended upon the Kriegsmarine. In reality, the entire operation and its timing depended on the success of the Luftwaffe, whose commander-in-chief, Hermann Goering, did not even bother to attend the meeting but instead sent his chief of staff, General Hans Jeschonnek.²⁷

On July 25, Raeder expressed a somewhat more optimistic outlook. He advised Hitler that if the RAF was defeated the Kriegsmarine could overcome many of the previously mentioned obstacles. Only then, he cautioned, would it be possible to carry out the necessary preliminary measures such as clearing and laying of mine fields and converting barges for amphibious operations. Nevertheless, the admiral remained wary of the Kriegsmarine's ability to carry out SEA LION and pointed out the negative effect that an invasion would have on the German economy and war production. In a memorandum on the navy's transportation capability, Raeder pointed to dire consequences of the operation for inland shipping, armament production, the food economy, private industry, and trade.²⁸

Three days later, on July 28, General Halder received a forewarning about a gloomy report that OKM was going to present at the upcoming conference. The Kriegsmarine's planners now asserted that invasion loading could only be completed in designated ports and not on open beaches, while the first assault wave would require ten days to land. Now, it was OKH's turn to express reservations. "If that is true," Halder wrote, "all previous statements of the navy were so much rubbish and we can throw away the whole plan of an invasion."²⁹ The next day he dispatched the chief of the OKH operations branch, Colonel Hans von Greiffenberg, to confer with the naval staff in order to understand better the navy's problems. This was the first direct contact between top-level army and navy planners regarding this operation although it loomed as the most ambitious amphibious undertaking in German history and intensive planning had been underway for over a month.³⁰ The colonel noted the four main hurdles:

1. The army's demand for a dawn landing and the navy's need for a half moon for maneuvering. This limited execution of SEA LION to three or four days of any month.

2. Thus S Day fell into the last days of September, a notably bad weather period, so that, though the first wave might by good luck succeed in landing, the same could not be counted on for subsequent waves.
3. Neither mine barriers nor air superiority could prevent the incursion of enemy fleet units into a crossing zone stretching from the Thames to Lyme Bay.
4. The paucity of landing craft demanded that the second wave could not start landing until forty-eight hours after the first, and eight to ten days would be required to get the second wave over completely, once it started.³¹

The navy concluded by advocating the abandonment of SEA LION and refocusing on siege warfare. If siege warfare did not produce the desired outcome, the Kriegsmarine planners believed SEA LION might then be reconsidered in May 1941. Raeder was in full agreement and also recommended postponement.³²

It was now OKH's turn to express hesitation and look to the Mediterranean for more attractive options. On July 30, von Greiffenberg returned to OKH and briefed OKM's military position. Von Brauchitsch and Halder agreed that SEA LION was not practical given the navy's situation. Halder noted the following in his diary: "The navy in all probability will not provide us this fall with the means for a successful invasion of Britain. Wait until spring '41 (May)." He and von Brauchitsch realized that the delay would only strengthen Britain, and they expressed interest in opening a major front in the Mediterranean area. They saw five options, but Gibraltar topped their list:

1. Attack on Gibraltar (from the land side, through Spain).
2. Support Italians with armor in North Africa (Egypt).
3. Attack British in Haifa.
4. Attack Suez Canal.
5. Incite Russians to a Drive on Persian Gulf.³³

Going into the planning conference on July 31, it appeared that the high commands of both the Kriegsmarine and army were opposed to an invasion of England at that time. It also appeared that they viewed an operation against Gibraltar as an option.

The final major planning conference for SEA LION was held at the Berghof on July 31.³⁴ Raeder opened the session by informing Hitler that the invasion would have to take place between September 19 and 26, before weather conditions precluded it. The Channel had to be relatively calm for the barges of the first wave to load in France, complete the channel crossing, and safely beach and disembark their cargo in England. That late start, nevertheless, would involve weather difficulties for the follow-on and support phases of the operation. Raeder also advised Hitler that the army's request for a broad front landing would be "unjustifiable" given the limited assets of the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe and asked the Fuehrer to limit the invasion to the Dover Straits in order to reduce vulnerability. The admiral then closed his briefing with an appeal to delay the entire operation until the following spring.³⁵

After hearing Raeder's report, Hitler issued clearer orders regarding SEA LION, but ended his response by identifying Gibraltar as an attractive option. With regard to the invasion:

An attempt must be made to prepare the operation for 15 September 1940. The army should be ready for action by then. The decision as to whether the operation is to take place in September or is to be delayed until May 1941 will be made after the air force has made concentrated attacks on southern England for one week. The air force is to report at once when these attacks will commence. If the effect of the air attacks is such that the enemy air force, harbors, and naval forces, etc., are heavily damaged, Operation SEA LION will be carried out in 1940. Otherwise it is to be postponed until May 1941.³⁶

Hitler argued for decisive action in the fall by saying that German forces would need to reckon only with a small poorly equipped British Army. Noting the instability of the Italians, especially in Africa, he suggested bringing Spain into the war and seizing Gibraltar. Hitler seemed to recognize the value of the Rock, as he continually passed over various other concepts. But while he agreed that diversionary maneuvers, such as

seizing Gibraltar, should be studied, he made clear that only an invasion of Britain would produce decisive results.

At this point in the conference Hitler turned his attention to the Soviet Union. He said that if an invasion of England did not take place, Germany's actions "must be directed to eliminate all factors that let England hope for a change in the situation."

Hitler named those factors as the USSR and America and stated:

Britain's hope lies in Russia and the United States. If Russia drops out of the picture, America, too, is lost for Britain, because elimination of Russia would tremendously increase Japan's power in the Far East. Russia is the Far Eastern Sword of Britain and the United States pointed at Japan. Here an unpleasant wind is blowing for Britain. Japan, like Russia, has its program, which it wants to carry through before the end of the war. Russia is the factor on which Britain is relying the most. All that Russia has to do is to hint that it does not care to have a strong Germany, and the British will take hope, like one about to go under, that the situation will undergo a radical change within six or eight months. With Russia smashed, Britain's last hope would be shattered. Germany then will be master of Europe and the Balkans. Decision: Russia's destruction must therefore be made a part of this struggle. Spring 1941. The sooner Russia is crushed the better.³⁷

This logic fit perfectly with Hitler's long-held goals of conquering *Lebensraum* (living space) in the Soviet Union. If it had been possible, Hitler would have immediately turned to the East and destroyed Russia, which was much more in line with his Weltanschauung as expressed in *Mein Kampf*.³⁸ The East was where Hitler believed Germany's true enemy lay and, he felt, a victory there would force Britain to make peace. He decided that the planning staff at OKW and OKH must begin work immediately on the Russia campaign.³⁹

With victory in the West uncertain, it is odd that Hitler ordered vital planning resources redirected away from Great Britain, his only remaining enemy at that time. This brings to question SEA LION's viability—was it only a secondary operation to Hitler? Perhaps he was only killing time while awaiting the realization of his ambitions in the East, which had long been the foundation of his grand plan. The debate over SEA

LION revealed how indecisive and impulsive Hitler was when it came to issues of basic strategy. “Instead of observing Clausewitz’ dictum that war required a concentration of effort against the enemy,” Charles Burdick has noted, “Hitler diffused his energies and interests.”⁴⁰ By the end of July, he had confused his high command on matters of national strategy, timing, and goals. If SEA LION was to go forward, the German military needed to plan, prepare, and execute quickly a successful air campaign over southern England.

End Notes

¹ Telford Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 57.

² Count Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, p. 272.

³ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 105-106.

⁴ Walter Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 122; Charles B. Burdick, *Germany’s Military Strategy and Spain in World War II*, p. 19. The question of what to do with the French Fleet is one of the most interesting examples of preemptive attack in history. For more on the incident see Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, pp. 232-238 and Arthur Byant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 153.

⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing With the German Navy 1940*, I, 67-69, 71-72; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 128-129.

⁶ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 131-135; Ronald Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 34-35; Jodl gave the invasion the code name “LION” because it would involve twisting the lion’s tail. The symbol of the British Royal Family is the lion.

⁷ *Ibid.* The German army throughout history has been the dominant service in the German military. Many of its senior officers had an army background and thought in terms of land operations. Therefore, it would make sense that OKW would relate an amphibious attack—something it had almost no experience with—to a river crossing operations—something it was very familiar with.

⁸ Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 34-35.

⁹ General Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary*, pp. 226-227.

¹⁰ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 143, 152.

¹¹ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 107-110.

¹² Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, p. 276.

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- ¹³ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 65-66.
- ¹⁴ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, pp. 226-227.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 107.
- ¹⁶ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 221; Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 40.
- ¹⁷ Admiral Erich Raeder, *My Life*, pp. 323-324.
- ¹⁸ Louis L. Snyder, *Hitler's Third Reich*, p. 405.
- ¹⁹ William L. Shirer, *Nightmare Years*, p. 554; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 163.
- ²⁰ Wheatley, *Operation Sea Lion*, p. 41.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 67.
- ²² Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 160-161.
- ²³ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 81-82; Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 162-167.
- ²⁴ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 163.
- ²⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, I, 81.
- ²⁶ Germany deployed heavy artillery guns and built concrete encasements on the French coast to defend the invasion fleet from British naval threats.
- ²⁷ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, pp. 164-165. Goering was a World War I ace and rose to the top echelons of the Nazi hierarchy. In 1940, he was both the commander of the Luftwaffe and also the Minister of Aviation.
- ²⁸ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 1-4.
- ²⁹ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, p. 235.
- ³⁰ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 168; Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 222.
- ³¹ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 169.
- ³² Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 69.
- ³³ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, pp. 238-240.
- ³⁴ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 9-12; Halder, *Halder War Diary*, pp. 241-246.
- ³⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 11.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
- ³⁷ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, p. 244; Italics in the original.
- ³⁸ For a detailed explanation of Hitler's *Weltanschauung*, see Eberhard Jackel, *Hitler's World View*, pp. 27-46.

³⁹ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 32.

CHAPTER 4

GIBRALTAR: THE INDIRECT APPROACH

From early July 1940 on, Admiral Raeder and the OKM were well aware of one immediate option (short of a full-scale invasion of the British Home Islands) for dealing with Great Britain—the seizure of the British strategic colony of Gibraltar. By the end of July, two German reconnaissance groups had reconnoitered the Rock. Hitler had been informed of their findings and initiated diplomatic meetings with the Spanish government on the issue. In early August, the high command, having noted Hitler's interest, began to discuss Gibraltar. By the end of the month, the OKW planners had prepared and presented to Hitler a general attack concept for Gibraltar. He approved this plan, but still remained committed to an invasion of Great Britain.

After Jodl's suggestion of attacking key British colonies, Gibraltar rapidly became the top target. On July 5, German naval planners advocated immediately striking and occupying the Rock.¹ The capture of Gibraltar would be valuable for future German operations and would shore up the Italians. Others in the German High Command also viewed Gibraltar as an attractive target. In late June, General Heinz Guderian, the armored warfare theorist who had been a key figure in the revision of plans for the Blitzkrieg against Western Europe, "requested that the French armistice be deferred so that he could rush with a couple of Panzer divisions across Spain, seize the Straits and cross into French North Africa."² Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the chief of Abwehr,

Germany's military intelligence service, was also convinced that Spain could be an important military ally for both Germany and Italy. The next day Canaris conferred with General Halder about possibly deploying his Abwehr group to Spain.³

The growing German interest in Spain and Gibraltar was probably the result of widespread public support in Spain and moves by its dictator, General Francisco Franco, in June 1940. Following Italy's entry into the war, Spain, on June 13, changed its status from neutral to "non-belligerency," suggesting pro-Axis neutrality.⁴ The next day, when Franco ordered Spanish troops to seize the international zone of Tangier, the streets of Spain exploded with crowds chanting a slogan which probably caught some German military leaders by surprise: "*Gibraltar para España!*"—Gibraltar for Spain.⁵ During this time, Franco sent his chief of staff, General Juan Vigon, to deliver a personal letter to Hitler glorifying the achievements of Germany.⁶ In his letter, Franco made clear that he had no interest in entering the war, but would consider the possibility for the right price, which included military and economic aid along with the return of Gibraltar, and the acquisition of Tangier, French Morocco, and a redrawing of the border of Spanish Guinea.⁷ Hitler appeared disinterested and brushed Franco's emissary aside after a short meeting.⁸

In mid-July, the OKW seized the initiative by ordering a reconnaissance mission to Spain for the purpose of surveying Gibraltar.⁹ The group, led by Canaris and including intelligence and army operations specialists, departed quickly for Madrid, where it met with General Vigon on July 23. Canaris advised Vigon that Germany wanted to discuss a possible operation against Gibraltar. He requested Spanish assistance in mapping the British defenses, estimating military needs for the assault, and establishing a joint

intelligence center. The Spaniard seemed surprised by this suggestion. Canaris later met with Franco to inform him personally of the German proposals. The Spanish dictator acknowledged the benefits of a successful attack on Gibraltar, but expressed concern over Spain's possible fate. A large British reinforcement had recently arrived on Gibraltar and he feared British reprisal. The British Royal Navy might move against the Canary Islands or establish an economic blockade of Spain. Franco's lack of enthusiasm for an attack on Gibraltar was obvious, but he diplomatically gave his blessing for a German reconnaissance mission—and nothing more.¹⁰

Unknown to OKW, Canaris had dispatched to Spain a second special mission with an entirely different concept for an attack on Gibraltar.¹¹ Canaris handpicked Captain Hans-Jochen Rudloff, an experienced commando, to lead the group, which also visited Spain late in July. Rudloff was to study the possibility of using a small highly trained force to overwhelm the British garrison in a few hours with speed and surprise. At most, he wanted to limit the attacking force to an Abwehr battalion and a combat engineer battalion with limited artillery support. These units would move stealthily by road and by sea to Gibraltar for the attack. After his reconnaissance mission, Rudloff concluded that the idea of a surprise commando attack was foolhardy and did not warrant further study.¹²

Hitler kept his eye on the discussions in Madrid and on July 24 summoned General Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, commander of the Luftwaffe's VIII Air Corps, to advise him of possible joint operations with Spain against Gibraltar. Hitler outlined a broad concept of operations and suggested that the Spanish would have a participating role only if they demanded one. Strong German forces, the Fuehrer

indicated, would be ready to counterattack any British troops sent to the Iberian Peninsula. After this short discussion, Hitler ordered von Richthofen to meet with his Spanish friend Vigon, whom the latter had met during his days in Spain with the German Condor Legion, and state the German position.¹³

Meanwhile, the OKW reconnaissance group in Spain spent two days reconnoitering the area around Gibraltar and immediately ruled out the possibility of using parachute or glider troops because of Gibraltar's steep terrain, irregular winds, and lack of landing sites.¹⁴ The German specialists also noted that Gibraltar was connected to Spain by a narrow neck, which had been mined and was covered by multiple artillery and machine guns. Any attack would thus be costly and difficult. Spanish road and rail networks, furthermore, were deplorable and there was no possibility of secrecy.¹⁵ The group members told Canaris all this on July 27.¹⁶ One suggestion was that the Spanish be pressed to provide more information on Gibraltar. After their meeting, most of the participants returned to Berlin, while Canaris, Colonel Hans Piekenbrock, and Colonel Hans Mikosch prepared a general operational plan.¹⁷

General von Richtofen, meanwhile, had left Berlin to meet with General Vigon at Biarritz, Spain. Vigon already knew from Canaris about German designs on Gibraltar and told Richtofen that Franco was interested, but that the Caudillo was reluctant to become involved because of Spain's economic and political situation. He surprised Richtofen by informing him that Franco had already sent a message to Hitler requesting that Richtofen be assigned as commander of the German troops allotted to the Gibraltar project. Franco obviously did not want to enter the war, but found it prudent to placate Berlin.¹⁸

When Canaris completed his reconnaissance mission of Gibraltar in late July, he compiled a lengthy report highlighting the findings of both teams and presented it to Keitel and Warlimont on August 2.¹⁹ Five days later, Warlimont held a conference with members of his planning staff and instructed them to prepare new operational studies of Gibraltar and Africa.²⁰ At the beginning of August the overworked planners thus had to undertake another major project. They nonetheless quickly came up with general proposals for Gibraltar and for broader operations in the Mediterranean based on the assumption that SEA LION would be delayed until at least the spring of 1941. The planners pointed out that campaigns waged in Africa and Gibraltar could each benefit the other. Germany's main requirement in Africa would be an armored force of sufficient strength to support an Italian drive for the Suez Canal. The Axis capture of this strategic waterway would close it to British shipping and would threaten British possessions in the oil-rich Middle East. To execute either operation, Germany would have to overcome the reluctance of its Axis partner because Mussolini, like Franco, was not receptive to German troops' meddling in what he viewed as his area of influence.

As Hermann Goering's *Eagle Day*—the start of the air battle over Britain—unfolded on August 13, Jodl, who was somewhat concerned with the uncertainty surrounding the strategic direction of the war, drew up a memorandum on SEA LION in which he revealed his misgivings.²¹ “Under no circumstances must the landing operation fail,” he declared. “The political consequences of a fiasco might be much more far reaching than the military.”²² Unless all military prerequisites were fulfilled, he continued, the landing would be a desperate venture, one that should be undertaken only if the Reich were in a perilous situation, which it was not in at that time. He pondered

that there were other less risky ways to defeat England. He acknowledged that the current effort with Italy against Great Britain was unprofitable and should be redirected. For example, if the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe were to impose a blockade—which had been the plan before the invasion of the West—and simultaneous campaigns were launched against Egypt and Gibraltar, a great deal of strain could be placed upon the British Empire without much hazard. Jodl saw much more opportunity, with much less risk, in pursuing this indirect course of action. He sent his memo to Keitel, who in turn presented it to Hitler.²³

On August 14, Hitler approved the general attack concept for Gibraltar, but emphasized that its capture was absolutely necessary and that anything less, such as bombing the harbor and airfield, was unacceptable. And any plan for the operation, he insisted, must be part of a military agreement with Spain, bringing that country into the war. Hitler decided that he would wait until he completed his negotiations with the Spanish dictator before assigning a commander to the operation. Warlimont described the attitudes of Hitler and Jodl's staff toward the various plans:

In so far [sic] as they appeared to lend support to a landing in England, Jodl's staff did their best to take over these ideas and push them forward. Hitler, however, received all these proposals with equal lack of enthusiasm and in cases where they had anything to do with the Mediterranean, only considered them after considerable delay and then let them drift into the background just as he was doing with the landing in England.²⁴

Warlimont and his staff on August 20 presented a more detailed plan to Jodl in which they addressed some of the difficulties concerning the attack and also addressed Spanish participation.²⁵ Most of the staff work had already been completed for the attack and required little modifications from Warlimont, but the question of Spanish participation needed some clarification. Franco suggested that he was willing to enter the

war, but only under an unusual set of circumstances. He wanted first to issue a formal protest to a German air attack on the Rock and then participate in a joint ground attack with the Germans. Warlimont did not approve of this unorthodox approach and thought Franco should declare war on Great Britain at the beginning of the operation. Four days later, Jodl informed Warlimont that Hitler had approved the general attack plan and agreed with the need for a Spanish formal statement of war.²⁶ In addition, Hitler had said that Franco was willing to join the conflict if Germany agreed to give Spain great quantities of food, fuel, and military equipment. Hitler did not believe this request would hinder the Gibraltar operation or that it would be difficult to accomplish once a German victory had been secured. The new plan was forwarded to General Halder and the OKH staff—at a time when they were deeply involved in preparing for SEA LION.

Meanwhile, at OKH tactical planning went forward. On August 22, Captain Anton Staubwasser, an officer on the OKH intelligence staff, provided Halder with the latest information on Gibraltar.²⁷ The British garrison, numbering approximately 10,000 troops, apparently had constructed elaborate defenses connected by numerous underground tunnels and galleries. The enemy was believed to have stockpiled enough food to last eighteen months, thereby eliminating the possibility of a siege. Staubwasser estimated that the RAF contingent at Gibraltar included at least nineteen bombers, thirteen reconnaissance and thirty-four fighter aircraft, and a considerable number of anti-aircraft artillery pieces. Any attack, Staubwasser reasoned, would therefore be difficult and costly.

On the other hand, there were weaknesses that Germany could exploit. For example, the main British defensive line ran along the foot of a steep mountain face and

some of the positions had fallen into neglect over the years. Furthermore, the heavy weapons deployed in the defensive belt were not mutually supporting and could not depress sufficiently to offer fierce resistance against a determined attack. Once the narrow isthmus had been crossed, Staubwasser predicted, not more than twenty heavy guns could be directed against the attackers. Therefore, once the troops crossed “no man’s land,” the odds of success increased dramatically. As far as Spanish participation was concerned, Staubwasser could see no role for Spain’s ill-trained and poorly armed army beyond collecting intelligence and constructing facilities for German troops and equipment. At the end of his briefing, Staubwasser again expressed pessimism about the operation.²⁸

With the intelligence officer’s pessimistic briefing in mind, Halder’s frustration over Hitler’s indecisiveness deepened. Now the Fuehrer appeared to support major operations in the Mediterranean theater. Halder noted:

Pipe dreams: Spain is to be brought into war, but the economic consequences for that country are ignored. North Africa is viewed as a theater of operations against Britain (Egypt, Asia Minor; pushing British away from Cyprus and Haifa?!). The army is supposed to have everything nice and ready without ever getting any straightforward instructions.²⁹

A coherent and workable German strategy obviously was lacking. On August 27, Admiral Canaris, just returned from a week in Spain, brought Halder further negative news.³⁰ Canaris briefed Halder on his meeting on August 19 with General Vigon in Madrid. At that meeting, Canaris had requested that the Spanish improve roads around Gibraltar, make certain that key airfields were serviceable, and step up their own intelligence collection. Vigon had agreed to this, but requested that Germany accelerate its preparations because Spain’s food and fuel situation was growing more critical by the

day. Canaris commented to Halder on the gloomy internal situation in Spain. There were shortages of food and fuel, he said, and support for Franco was slipping. “The consequences of having this unpredictable nation as a partner cannot be calculated,” he offered. “We shall get an ally who will cost us dearly.”³¹ According to Canaris, Franco was an unreliable ally who would not actively join the conflict until Great Britain was defeated.

Canaris was right, although Franco still sought to persuade Berlin otherwise. Just four days later, Mussolini told Hitler that he recently had received a letter from Franco in which the Spanish leader spoke of entering the war soon.³² Hitler now believed that Spain was on the verge of committing to the Gibraltar operation and of joining the war against Great Britain. At a planning conference on September 6 to set concrete dates for SEA LION, Hitler issued orders to OKW to accelerate planning for Gibraltar.³³ Warlimont informed the OKW planners of Hitler’s interest and ordered that the Gibraltar operation be given a higher priority.³⁴ On September 9, under orders from both Hitler and Goering, General von Richthofen traveled to Franco’s summer headquarters at San Sebastian to confer with him.³⁵ Franco praised the German air campaign against Great Britain, but reiterated his concern regarding Spanish participation in any conflict. He reminded the German emissary that if the British Navy imposed a blockade, Spain’s limited stocks of grain, fuel, and other materials would dry up. Richthofen assured him that a grateful Germany would cover any of Spain’s supply problems. He also stated that Germany would provide the specialized troops and equipment needed for the capture of Gibraltar, thus leaving Spain’s involvement in the conflict up to Franco. The Caudillo remained uncommitted.

Hitler still could not totally abandon SEA LION, however, and he could not make the decision to begin the Gibraltar operation. The entire German strategy regarding Great Britain depended on the defeat of the RAF by the Luftwaffe. As long as Hitler considered SEA LION to be a viable operation, a German operation against Gibraltar or Africa appeared to be a secondary operation. The hastily arranged meeting with Franco, and Hitler's willingness to offer so much, underlined a growing movement toward Gibraltar. It was imperative that Hitler determine and initiate the most effective strategic plan and carry it through to conclusion.

End Notes

¹ Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain During World War II*, pp. 19-20.

² Ronald Lewin, *Hitler's Mistakes*, p. 112.

³ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 20.

⁴ Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, p. 81.

⁵ Heinz Hohne, *Canaris*, pp. 427-428.

⁶ Franco's letter was written on June 3.

⁷ Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 81-82.

⁸ General Vigon, one of the most important men in Spain, was insulted by his treatment in Germany. Instead of immediately receiving him, Hitler made the Spaniard wait six days and then only met with him for forty-five minutes. This trip would sour Vigon's future relations with Ribbentrop and Hitler and hurt Germany's attempt at wooing Spain into the war. For more see Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 77-102.

⁹ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26; Hohne, *Canaris*, pp. 423-426, 431.

¹¹ Hohne, *Canaris*, pp. 428-429.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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- ¹⁵ The German planners had hoped to deploy opposite Gibraltar without alerting the British garrison.
- ¹⁶ Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 431; Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 26.
- ¹⁷ Piekenbrock was a key member of Canaris's staff and often traveled with the admiral. Mikosch was an accomplished soldier that had lead the dramatic seizure of the key forts at Eben Emael during the invasion of France and the Low Countries.
- ¹⁸ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 30.
- ¹⁹ Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 431.
- ²⁰ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 36.
- ²¹ Telford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave*, p. 229; Walter Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*, p. 110.
- ²² Jodl quoted in Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*, p. 110.
- ²³ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, pp. 38.
- ²⁴ Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*, p. 110.
- ²⁵ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 38.
- ²⁶ Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 432.
- ²⁷ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 39.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ General Franz Halder, *The Halder War Dairy*, pp. 251-252.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 252.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Count Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, p. 286.
- ³³ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1940*, II, 19.
- ³⁴ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 42.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

CHAPTER 5

SEA LION ABANDONED

The first week of September 1940 marked the beginning of a critical period for Germany in its war against Great Britain. In the air, the RAF had to be eliminated in order for SEA LION to go forward. Although the Luftwaffe was optimistic about its prospects for victory, it had little time to complete the required tasks. The target date for invasion remained mid-September to allow for necessary preliminary measures. As this time rapidly approached, Hitler had not yet set dates for completion of planning and the initiation of preparations. When the Luftwaffe failed to defeat the RAF, Hitler sent mixed signals to his military on the viability of SEA LION. By late-September, he had not called off the invasion, but his three service commands had reduced their readiness for one. A decision was needed from the Fuehrer.

Hitler issued a directive outlining a timetable for SEA LION on September 3. The directive stated that the earliest possible date for departure of the invasion fleet was September 20 with the landing to take place the following day.¹ To give the navy time to prepare, Hitler stipulated that he would issue the order for the start of the operation ten days before the actual day of departure from France, in other words probably on September 11.² Hitler also made it clear that “all preparations must be made in such a manner that the operation may be stopped as late as 24 hours” before the invasion fleet’s

sailing from France.³ With the date for the decision on SEA LION set, the Luftwaffe was now on a timetable to defeat or at least cripple the RAF.

On September 6, Raeder reported to Hitler regarding the state of invasion preparations.⁴ He said that if “air supremacy is increasingly established it will be possible to meet the new deadline. The crossing itself will be very difficult.”⁵ Raeder went on to state that “the execution of Operation SEA LION appears possible, if attended by favorable circumstances regarding air supremacy, weather, etc.”⁶ He emphasized the importance of the air war in harassing the British and in preventing enemy air and naval interference in the Channel ports, stating that “owing to weather conditions and the situation in air warfare, the planned operations of the mine-sweeping forces were delayed until now and are still greatly hampered.”⁷ If the Luftwaffe did not defeat the RAF, then the RAF would hinder the concentration of German shipping at the invasion ports and the minelaying and minesweeping necessary before the invasion.

The admiral asked Hitler what his political and military directives were in the event that SEA LION did not take place. Raeder believed that Germany should continue to give the appearance of invasion but resources should be redirected to German industry through the release of personnel and shipping engaged in preparing for SEA LION.

Hitler agreed with this line of reasoning. Raeder then offered alternatives to SEA LION:

The Naval Staff's deliberations on further possibilities for warfare against Britain in addition to, or in place of, Operation SEA LION are as follows: Gibraltar and the Suez Canal have decisive strategic significance for German-Italian warfare in the Mediterranean area. Britain should be excluded from the Mediterranean. Control of the Mediterranean area is of vital importance to the position of the Central Powers in southeastern Europe, Asia Minor, Arabia, Egypt, and the African area. Unlimited sources for raw materials would be guaranteed. New and strategically favorable bases for further operations against the British Empire would be won. The loss of Gibraltar would mean crucial difficulties for British import traffic from the South Atlantic. Preparations for this operation must be begun at once so that they are completed before the U.S.A. steps in. It should not be considered of secondary importance, but as one of the main blows against Great Britain.⁸

Raeder again informed Hitler of the critical importance of Gibraltar to the British Empire and of the benefits Germany would gain by its capture. This time the information seemed to interest him. Hitler issued orders that preparations for an attack on Gibraltar should speedily move forward, but still placed his hopes in SEA LION. Raeder conveyed Hitler's orders to his staff: "A landing is however, now as before, regarded by the Fuehrer as the means by which, according to every prospect, an immediate, crashing end can be made of the war. Yet the Fuehrer has no thought of executing the landing if the *risk* of the operation is too high."⁹

By September 10, the time for making a decision regarding SEA LION was near. The war in the air had not progressed sufficiently to risk an invasion. The Naval Staff war diary summarized the situation as follows:

The indispensable prerequisite for the undertaking (SEA LION) has not been achieved, namely clear air command over the Channel. The shooting up of Boulogne of yesterday and today by destroyers shows the enemy is testing our defensive powers. Planned preparations for SEA LION would require the Luftwaffe now to concentrate less on London but more on Portsmouth and Dover and the (British) fleet forces. The Luftwaffe High Command does not hold it proper to come forward with such requirement to the Luftwaffe or to the Fuehrer now since he regards the great assault on London as possibly decisive for the war and [feels] that the systematic and prolonged bombing of London can provoke an enemy attitude which might make SEA LION altogether unnecessary.¹⁰

Hitler chose not to use the earliest date—September 11—to issue the warning order for the operation. He decided to postpone the decision until the last possible date—September 14—and utilize a more favorable day for a landing, September 24, in lieu of the earlier one on September 21. In announcing his decision, Hitler acknowledged that the results of the air war were not clear. He still hoped the Luftwaffe's strategic bombing campaign would force the British to surrender and make invasion unnecessary. This was

evident when on the next day he expressed his satisfaction with the progress of the air war and stated that he had no thought of yet risking an invasion.¹¹

Hitler advised Jodl of his decision to postpone SEA LION, and in turn Jodl informed his assistant, Warlimount, on September 10. Sensing that SEA LION was now doubtful, Warlimount presented Jodl with a final draft of Fuehrer Directive No. 18 which authorized its execution. Warlimount's staff, in coordination with the High Commands of each of the services, had carefully drafted the invasion directive. Jodl, annoyed at being cornered on the issue, quickly took steps to stop debate at the staff level.¹² The drafting of an execute order for SEA LION by the OKH planning staff and its final submission by Warlimount suggests that there was a drive by the army to build momentum for the operation.¹³ However, the day of decision, September 11, came and went with no activity concerning SEA LION. The Naval Staff, for its part, blamed the Luftwaffe for SEA LION's delay, noting that "the air war is being conducted independently of requirements of the war at sea, as 'absolute air war' and the fact is that execution of the landing operation has up to now been unaffected by the development of the intensified air war and therefore for operational military reasons [landing] does not yet come into question."¹⁴ The Kriegsmarine, along with some in the OKH and OKW, was concerned that a "bolt from the blue"—an order by Hitler to execute SEA LION—might come in two days. But on September 13, the last day before the critical decision, Hitler hinted that SEA LION was dead.¹⁵

At a promotion ceremony for new colonel generals on September 13, Hitler met with his military leaders. He was in a dilemma. The next day he had to make a decision on SEA LION. Goering, who understood Hitler's quandary, took advantage of the

situation to promote himself and the Luftwaffe.¹⁶ He gave Hitler a glowing report on the progress of the air war, and advised him that over the next few days the Luftwaffe could annihilate the RAF and bring the war to an end. According to Goering, the air war would soon make SEA LION irrelevant. Hitler, who now had an opening, became cheerful and “expressed himself most optimistically, and explained that in the current favorable [air] situation he had no thought of accepting so great a risk as posed by a landing in England.”¹⁷ This statement caused Jodl to believe that Hitler had decided to abandon SEA LION completely.¹⁸

The important conference took place on the afternoon of September 14.¹⁹ Hitler spoke concerning the possible invasion of Great Britain, acknowledging that it would bring about the swift defeat of the enemy. He commended the Kriegsmarine for its preparations and was especially laudatory toward the Luftwaffe. “Four or five more days of good weather, and a decisive result will be achieved. . .,” he announced. “We have a good chance to force Britain to its knees.”²⁰ As Hitler lavished praise, he also pointed to the obvious: the RAF had not been neutralized, which meant that a landing in England remained problematic. He did not, however, intend to cancel the operation just yet. He drew the following conclusions:

Attacks to date have had enormous effects, though perhaps chiefly upon nerves. Part of that psychological effect is the fear of invasion. That anticipation of its imminence must not be removed. Even though victory in the air should not be achieved before another ten or twelve days, Britain might yet be seized by mass hysteria. If, within the coming ten or twelve days, we achieve mastery of the air over a certain area, we could, by a landing operation, compel the enemy to come out with his destroyers against our landing fleet. We could then inflict upon the enemy such losses that he would no longer be able to protect his convoys. Cancellation of our plans would not remain a secret. It would ease the strain on the enemy’s nerves, and consequently must not be ordered now.²¹

The on-again, off-again invasion was thus still an option.

Raeder then once again expressed skepticism about SEA LION, reiterating that “the risk is very great.”²² He also pointed out that the air situation would not change before the September 24-27 timeframe, and suggested that Hitler postpone the invasion until at least October 8 or 24, which were the next favorable dates.²³ Hitler, in response, authorized postponement only until September 17, the last suitable date for a landing that month.²⁴ He hoped that a more favorable situation for the Germans would develop after three more days of air attacks by the Luftwaffe.

The Fuehrer briefly mentioned the Mediterranean option, noting Franco’s reluctance about Gibraltar and the danger of the Allies’ establishing an airbase in northwest Africa. He also ordered planning for the dispatch of an armored corps to Libya to assist Mussolini, who had launched his long-delayed attack on the British in Egypt the day before.²⁵ Mussolini wanted to secure his share of glory before Hitler invaded Britain. The Italian commander in Libya, General Rodolfo Graziani, had delayed the attack several times since August 19, when Mussolini sent a telegram ordering him to march on Egypt as soon as a German patrol landed in England.²⁶ The Italians hoped to reach the Egyptian port of Alexandria quickly, but came to a permanent stop after fifty miles, halfway to the British lines, near the Egyptian frontier town of Marsa Matruk.²⁷

The day for the fateful decision on SEA LION arrived on September 17. The Luftwaffe had not yet defeated the RAF and British air and naval attacks on the French Channel ports were interfering with invasion shipping assembly. The German weather forecast for the Channel over next few days, furthermore, was not favorable. The combination of heavy losses due to British air and naval action in the invasion ports, along with the weather, prompted Hitler to postpone SEA LION.²⁸

The Luftwaffe itself by now had reached the conclusion that SEA LION was not feasible.²⁹ Goering, who had never thought much of the operation, told his commanders that SEA LION should not be allowed to interfere with Luftwaffe operations.³⁰ His commanders were pleased with the decision. The German navy also wanted SEA LION canceled altogether and shipping released and relocated from the invasion ports. Losses in the Channel ports caused by RAF bomber raids and Royal Navy shelling had begun to mount, causing considerable anxiety at OKM. The navy halted invasion shipping en route to the French ports and made plans to disperse the vessels already concentrated at the ports so that they would not be such easy targets for the British bombs and guns.³¹ Fricke notified Jodl at OKW of the cancellation, and on September 19, OKW issued a directive in line with OKM's decisions:

Concentration of the transport fleet is to be stopped, insofar as it has not already been completed. The ships assembled in the ports of departure are to be dispersed in such a way that losses from enemy air attacks will be reduced to a minimum. However, it should remain possible to reassemble the ships at the ports of departure on ten days notice under favorable weather conditions.³²

The directive ordered the Luftwaffe to increase air defense assets in the invasion port areas. Although Hitler believed that the military was capable of carrying out SEA LION within a ten-day alert period, many in the Kriegsmarine believed that OKW's directive signified that SEA LION was no longer a viable plan.

Meanwhile, German diplomatic pressure to bring Spain into the war had intensified. On September 16, the day before Hitler was to make his decision on SEA LION, Franco, on his own initiative, sent Ramon Serrano Suñer, his foreign minister, to Berlin to express Spain's desire for a closer relationship with Germany.³³ Suñer met with his German counterpart, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and discussed with him the economic

and military difficulties arising from Spain's costly civil war. Von Ribbentrop avoided the subject of Gibraltar, but did point out the two countries' ideological similarities, and Germany's assistance in Spain's civil war. He assured Suñer that once Spain entered the war, Germany would provide it with economic aid. His suggestion that Spain turn over one of its islands in the Canary chain for a German military base brought a sharp reaction from Suñer, and von Ribbentrop quickly dropped the subject. The meeting ended without progress.

Suñer met the next day with the Fuehrer himself.³⁴ He told Hitler that Franco remained true to his German friends, but could enter the war only after Spain had overcome its economic difficulties. Franco feared a British landing on the Cantabrian coast as well as British forays from Gibraltar, he explained, and therefore could not risk war while Spain was in a weakened state. Hitler responded that Franco's fears were unfounded given Germany's position on the continent. He said that, as in the Norwegian campaign, German bombers could force the Royal Navy to remain outside of the Luftwaffe's range. The Gibraltar garrison, Hitler argued, could be overwhelmed with aerial bombing, and its capture would not be difficult. Suñer immediately changed the subject to trivial matters. Hitler realized that nothing would come of the meeting and suggested that he and Franco discuss these matters directly, to which Suñer agreed.

Raeder understood the need to end the impasse in strategic decision-making and on September 26, he requested an urgent conference with Hitler to present the case for a Mediterranean option.³⁵ At their meeting, Raeder told Hitler that the British had always considered the Mediterranean to be the pivot of their world empire. He pointed out that the Admiralty maintained eight of Britain's thirteen battleships in the region and that

many of its vital war supplies shipped through the area. London now was preparing to focus on Italy, its weaker foe. It was therefore vital that Germany seize Gibraltar, the Canary Islands, the Suez Canal, and Northwest Africa. In Raeder's opinion, it was foolish to rely on the Italians to defeat Britain in the Mediterranean. He described Italy as unreliable and hated throughout the Mediterranean area and said that it should not be trusted with a lead role in this critical region. Hitler agreed with Raeder's comments and told him that he would confer immediately with Mussolini and possibly with Franco as soon as the Tripartite Pact was concluded.³⁶ Raeder also brought up lingering questions concerning Hitler's September 17 "indefinite postponement" order of SEA LION, advising him that the navy would be unable to maintain readiness after mid-October. The admiral pointed out that the reorganization of the entire Kriegsmarine for the SEA LION had hampered the operation of battleships and the submarine training program. When he requested a decision from Hitler on SEA LION by October 15, the Fuehrer did not reply.³⁷

The next day, as the Tripartite Pact between the Axis and Japan was being signed, Hitler met twice with Italy's foreign minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano.³⁸ He broached the question of Spain's participation in the war and the high price Franco demanded in return, indicating that he was reluctant to pay that cost considering Spain's record of unreliability. When he proposed a meeting with Mussolini at the Brenner Pass to discuss the matter, the count immediately accepted the idea.³⁹

By the end of September, the German army had begun to feel the strain of the preparing for SEA LION. The OKH staff sent a memorandum to the OKW strongly advocating abandonment of the ten-day alert policy for SEA LION, which was

hampering the army's training program. While Hitler would not give up on SEA LION's implementation, the German military was now actively pushing for other options. Most of these options focused on the Mediterranean area, and Gibraltar was the primary target.⁴⁰ All of the choices—Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, Northwest Africa—would require substantially fewer men and less equipment than SEA LION. Also, unlike with SEA LION, Germany seemed capable of overwhelming any of the possible targets. The main thing lacking was a decision at the highest level.

Uncertain on strategy, Hitler met with Mussolini at the Brenner Pass on October 4. He told the Duce that the “war is won, [and the] rest is a mere question of time.”⁴¹ Hitler explained why he had not yet launched an invasion of England, but assured his Axis partner that he intended to attack the British, and that his chief target was Gibraltar. The operation should be relatively easy, he pondered, but Franco was stubbornly refusing to support for the project. Germany had aided Franco during the Spanish Civil War and enabled him to gain power, he groused, but Franco was demanding an excessive amount of territory and aid, while declining to assist Germany. Hitler's complaints aside, what impressed Ciano, who was present at the meeting, was the fact that the German leader seemed to be focusing more on the Mediterranean theater, “which is good for us,” wrote Ciano.⁴² Mussolini, for his part, talked about his separate territorial ambitions and there was no systematic discussion of a coordinated joint effort to drive the British out of the Mediterranean. The meeting ended with Hitler telling Mussolini that he would write a letter to Franco and also meet with him. Mussolini stated that he, too, would meet with Franco.

A week after his meeting with Mussolini, Hitler informed his military leaders that he had decided to cancel SEA LION for the fall 1940. The order that Keitel issued in the Fuehrer's name started:

The Fuehrer has decided that preparations for the landing in Britain are to be kept up from now until spring, merely as a means of exerting political and military pressure. Should a landing in Britain be decided on again in the spring or early summer of 1941, the required degree of readiness will be ordered at the proper time. Until then the military dispositions for a later landing are to be further improved. All measures connected with relaxing readiness for combat are to be ordered by the High Commands according to the following principles:

- a. The British are to be left under the impression that we are still preparing a landing on a wide front.
- b. At the same time the strain on the German economy is to be eased.⁴³

Hitler set spring 1941 as new target date for the SEA LION. He had missed his best chance to defeat Great Britain by a direct invasion that summer 1940 and now turned his attention more to the Mediterranean and Gibraltar, where he hoped Germany could deal a setback to Great Britain.

End Notes

¹ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 113-114.

² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴ U.S. Dept. of Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing With the German Navy 1940*, II, 17-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19. Emphasis in the original.

⁹ Raeder quoted in Walther Ansel, *Hitler Confront England*, p. 286.

¹⁰ Naval war diary quoted in Ronald Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 79; Telford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave*, p. 270.

¹¹ Ansel, *Hitler confronts England*, p. 288; Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, p. 80.

¹² Ansel, *Hitler confronts England*, p. 288.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288. On September 10, Brauchitsch and Halder inspected the invasion army and found the troops making last-minute checks.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 292; Wheatley, *Operation SEA LION*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁶ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 291.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Raeder also believed Hitler had decided to call off SEA LION on September 13, see U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 22.

¹⁹ General Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary*, pp. 256-259; U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 22-23; U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 114; All three accounts are almost identical in content.

²⁰ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, p. 257. Hitler's glowing remarks reflected the optimistic intelligence reports given to him by Goering and the Luftwaffe.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

²² U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*; Ansel, *Hitler confronts England*, p. 297.

²⁴ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 114.

²⁵ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, pp. 258-259; Count Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, p. 292; Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, p. 334.

²⁶ Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, pp. 285-286.

²⁷ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, p. 334.

²⁸ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, p. 259.

²⁹ Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp. 166-168.

³⁰ In late June, Baron Sigismund von Falkenstein, the Luftwaffe liaison to OKW, was told by Goering's chief of staff Jeschonnek "There isn't going to be a SEA LION and I haven't got time to bother about it...[S]ince in his opinion the Fuehrer has not the slightest intention of crossing the Channel." For more see, David Irving, *Goering: A Biography*, pp. 292-294.

³¹ Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 299.

³² U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 115.

³³ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, pp. 335-337; Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 88-91.

³⁴ Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 89-90; Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 45.

³⁵ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 24-26.

³⁶ The Tripartite Pact was a ten-year economic, political, and military agreement signed on September 27. It identified Germany's sphere of influence in Europe, Italy's in the Mediterranean, and Japan's in the Orient. Japan and the Axis pledged mutual support if the United States entered either the war in Asia or in Europe.

³⁷ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 25.

³⁸ Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, pp. 331-332.

³⁹ Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, p. 296.

⁴⁰ The USSR had also been identified by Hitler as an option in defeating Great Britain. According to his logic, London was waiting for war to develop between Germany and the USSR. Therefore, if the USSR was removed from the equation, Britain would seek peace.

⁴¹ Halder, *Halder War Dairies*, p. 261-262.

⁴² Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, pp. 298-299.

⁴³ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 117-118.

CHAPTER 6

GIBRALTAR AND OPERATION FELIX

Hitler failed to realize that he had to provide a strategic focus for Germany's war effort. Although he had delayed SEA LION until the next spring, he still believed this operation was possible and was reluctant to accept any other proposal. This reluctance was adversely affecting the German economy, war production, and other operations. Many German general officers, on the other hand, considered SEA LION a dead issue and were focusing on the Mediterranean and Gibraltar.¹ The Axis situation in the Mediterranean area had deteriorated considerably by November as a result primarily of sudden and unexpected Italian military disasters in Greece and Egypt. Some in the German high command saw control of Gibraltar as the key to controlling the Mediterranean and planning went forward. However, without Franco's approval, Germany would be forced to invade Spain in order to take Gibraltar.

On October 11, the day before Hitler delivered his order to halt SEA LION, von Brauchitsch and Halder held a meeting on the status of the war. The most important topic of discussion was Spain's and Italy's military positions in the Mediterranean area. They both considered Gibraltar an important target for enhancing the Axis strategic position, but agreed Spain could not be counted on for participation in any military action. The entire Gibraltar operation—excluding intelligence and minimal support roles—would have to be carried out entirely as an independent German undertaking.

“Spain’s domestic situation is so rotten as to make it useless as a political partner,” Halder wrote. “We shall have to achieve the objectives essential to us (Gibraltar) without its active participation.”² Regarding Italy, the two generals belittled its military leadership. “Evidently the Italian command is lacking both ability and the means to achieve any conclusive success,” Halder wrote. “Now the Italians show interest again in getting aid from us. They want one armored division; transfer would take ten weeks, and it would be the New Year before the division could go into action.”³ Although von Brauchitsch considered the Mediterranean an attractive strategic alternative, Halder still thought the best approach was to continue to apply direct pressure on Great Britain. The meeting concluded with both generals’ agreeing to prepare for operations against Gibraltar and in Libya.

The next morning, October 12, Halder selected General Ludwig Kuebler to lead the assault on Gibraltar. Kuebler was an excellent mountain soldier with experience going back to the arduous fighting in northern Italy during World War I. He was a harsh taskmaster who constantly drove his troops to do more, but they loved him. With his selection and with Hitler’s support, the preparations for an assault on Gibraltar now could rapidly move forward.⁴ The Abwehr mission to Spain weeks earlier had concluded that the Rock could be seized by one infantry regiment and one and one-half pioneer battalions, plus the artillery and support troops. Halder believed that the attacking force would have to be larger, especially since the British defenders would have a very limited capability for withdrawal, i.e., they really would have only two choices: fight or surrender. One point that Halder and the Abwehr did agree on was that the element of

surprise was unattainable and that the entire battle plan should be arranged as a set-piece engagement.⁵

The next day Halder presented a concept of operation against Gibraltar to Kuebler, telling him to prepare for action in mid-December. On that same day, Halder requested that specific troops be allocated for the proposed undertaking. He wanted the 1st Mountain Division's elite 98th Mountain Regiment, the famous "*Grossdeutschland*" regiment, 26 medium and heavy artillery battalions, three observation battalions, three pioneer battalions, two smoke battalions, and the required support units. In addition, he needed one or two motorized infantry divisions and nine medium artillery batteries in reserve to counter any British landing on the Iberian Peninsula. The operation, he estimated, would take six to eight weeks to complete.⁶

Preparations for a Gibraltar operation began gaining momentum. Army and Luftwaffe representatives held a conference on October 20 about the proposed attack. Halder's chief planner, Colonel Adolph Heusinger, requested that the Luftwaffe accept a variety of missions including aerial reconnaissance, fighter cover for the assembly areas, and close air support. In addition, the army wanted the Luftwaffe to deploy anti-aircraft units for protection against air attack and to provide direct fire support against point targets on Gibraltar. The Luftwaffe's operations chief, Colonel Otto Hoffmann von Waldau, agreed to the army's request and assigned a Luftwaffe liaison officer to Kuebler's headquarters to ensure coordination.⁷

Because he knew that Spanish support was vital to a Gibraltar operation, Hitler swallowed his pride and on October 24 traveled to Hendaye for a conference with Franco.⁸ Hitler immediately pressed Franco for an alliance and Spain's entry into the war

in January 1941, coupling this event with an attack on Gibraltar. The Spanish dictator agreed to an alliance “in principle,” but would not commit to any participation in an operation against Gibraltar. Hitler subsequently expressed his anger about Franco’s attitude and he contemplated breaking off talks immediately. He later grumbled to the Duce that he would rather have three or four teeth pulled than to sit through another conference with Franco.⁹

When General von Brauchitsch returned from the Spanish border, he informed Halder of the discussion. “Franco wants to come out into hostility only after military operations have actually started,” he said. The Spanish leader had indicated a willingness to “join the Axis,” but had made no formal commitment. “It is quite evident,” von Brauchitsch commented, “that Spain is still very much afraid of Britain.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, on October 25, Halder sent out orders for the preliminary supply operation. He also ordered the combat units—the 98th Mountain Regiment “*Grossdeutschland*,” the 106th Artillery Command, and various support units—to re-deploy to the new training site at Bescançon at once. Those troops began arriving at the training site on October 28.¹¹

As the OKW and Hitler were contemplating moves in the Mediterranean, Mussolini completely changed the strategic picture by launching on October 28 an ill-advised and ill-prepared campaign against Greece that caught Hitler and his military leaders off guard.¹² Meeting with the Duce later that day in Florence, Hitler found it hard to contain his rage. “In any event,” Halder noted in his diary, “the immediate effect is a completely new picture of the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans.”¹³ This surprise move by Italy highlighted a significant trait of the Axis powers—their failure to devise a coherent joint strategy.

At the end of October, Hitler still had not made a firm commitment to attacking Gibraltar and had not yet ordered the deployment of German troops to the Mediterranean area. Recognizing a need for clarification of intentions, Halder on November 2 drafted a report for Hitler in which he declared that a Gibraltar operation could be ready to begin by the proposed target date of January 1, 1941. Regarding a possible operation in the eastern Mediterranean, Halder was much less optimistic. To assist the Italian effort in Libya, he estimated that Germany would need a panzer corps consisting of two armor divisions and one motorized infantry division, along with a large number of special support units. A lengthy time period would be required to transport this force, unless there were unexpected improvements in Axis sealift capability. He noted that supplying a German corps in Africa would be a huge operation and would complicate German operations in Europe. He believed that a Gibraltar assault was, tactically and logistically, the soundest plan of those being discussed and that a victory at Gibraltar could be more easily attained than one in the eastern Mediterranean. He was aware of the difficulties of a Gibraltar assault, but was optimistic about the outcome.¹⁴

Later that day, Halder attended a conference with Canaris, Heusinger, Major Fritz Kautschke,¹⁵ and Colonel Otto Elfeld of his OKH staff in order to exchange intelligence and to iron out operational details for the Gibraltar attack. Kautschke, the Abwehr station chief in Algeciras, had worked closely with several Spanish officers and their staffs to map with fine detail Gibraltar's defenses. His lengthy report included photographs, maps, and sketches. Impressed by the information Kautschke presented, Halder directed him to turn over the briefing material to his staff for further study and to brief General Kuebler's assault force.¹⁶

As German military leaders made plans for a Gibraltar campaign, the combat elements began conducting realistic training for assaulting a prepared enemy in mountainous terrain and working out operational details, such as close air and artillery coordination. The command staff also had to develop an intricate logistics support plan. On November 2, an advance staff element left the Munich area for the Bescançon area in France. Within two days, most of the assault corps had moved into various camps in the Bescançon-Orleans-Angers-Cholt-Niort-Poitiers region. Realistic training began almost immediately after their arrival, and focused on artillery skills such as hitting pinpoint targets. Training also included solving problems related to an assault by combined arms teams of engineers, riflemen, direct fire artillery, and signal groups on a strongly entrenched enemy across a narrow strip of land with little or no surprise and cover. During this training, officers enforced strict discipline over the participating units to ensure realism.¹⁷

Separately from these preparations, and unknown to the assault force, the Abwehr began making plans of its own. Colonel Erwin Lahousen, Chief of the Sabotage branch of the Abwehr, anticipated the need for special missions, and the “*Brandenburg*” Regiment was the Abwehr’s choice for this task. These elite troops would be assigned to remove the heavy iron fence separating Gibraltar and Spain and to keep the road there open for the main assault force. Lahousen also envisioned Abwehr troops attacking and destroying Gibraltar’s fuel supplies, airfield, power station, gas works, and plant for distilling seawater. Canaris passed these special operations concepts to OKH for acceptance.¹⁸

On November 4, Halder met with von Bauchitsch to update him regarding Spain and Gibraltar.¹⁹ Halder informed his boss that Franco's reluctance to enter the conflict had not changed.²⁰ Later that day, Hitler met with his top military leaders regarding the general strategic picture. He agreed with his military chiefs that a battle in Libya was too difficult and a German armor offensive could not be launched until at least the fall of 1942. Expressing little confidence in Italy's generals and armies, he was pessimistic about operating across an "ocean"—the Mediterranean—that Germany did not control. Concerning Spain and Gibraltar, he mentioned Franco's promise in a recent letter to enter the war on Germany's side. Nevertheless, Hitler wanted to expedite Spain's entry into the war and begin an operation against Gibraltar as soon as possible. He ordered the assault force to deploy to the Franco-Spanish border. Hitler recognized that the British would be alerted to the German plans by the movement of troops to the Spanish border, so he ordered the Luftwaffe to be prepared to attack the British Royal Navy anchored at Gibraltar as soon as the German army crossed into Spain. He also directed the OKH to make plans for the defense of Spain's Canary Islands and Portugal's Cape Verde Islands and to determine the most strategically feasible way to close the Gibraltar Strait after the capture of the Rock.²¹

By mid-November, it appeared that the Mediterranean was Germany's main focus. On November 12, Hitler issued Directive Number 18, which emphasized the current importance of that area. The bulk of the text concerned Spain and the operation against Gibraltar, now code-named Operation FELIX. The directive stated that the purpose of the German assault on the Iberian Peninsula would be to drive the British out of that region by seizing Gibraltar and closing the narrow Strait. It went on to state that

FELIX would involve mostly army and Luftwaffe participation and would consist of four logical periods. The Kriegsmarine would play a smaller role by providing a wide picket of submarines in the Atlantic. In the first phase, reconnaissance squads—military officers dressed in civilian clothing—would conduct last-minute intelligence collection against Gibraltar and the airfields nearby. The second phase would open with the first direct attack on Gibraltar. Luftwaffe fighter and bomber units would stage a massive surprise raid from newly acquired French airfields. The objective would be to clear British ships from the harbor and to eliminate aircraft from the RAF airfield on Gibraltar. Simultaneously, the German army assault group under Kuebler would cross the Franco-Spanish border and proceed to its assembly areas near Gibraltar. Shortly after the assault force arrived opposite the Rock, the third phase—the ground assault on Gibraltar—could go forward. In the final phase of the plan, German forces would establish themselves on the Rock and close the strait. If necessary, they would occupy Spanish Morocco, too. To execute FELIX, Hitler made clear that he was counting on the support of Spain.²²

Two days later, Hitler conferred with Raeder regarding the direction of the war. They discussed mine warfare, the war in the Atlantic, advancements in landing craft for possible use in SEA LION in 1941, a future attack on Russia, and the war in the Mediterranean area. Raeder stressed the importance of Germany's securing both the eastern and western Mediterranean, and he emphasized the importance of taking action to resolve the situation, linking the its outcome of this operation to the outcome of the war. He was extremely critical of the Italian leadership and believed disaster was ahead. According to his estimates, the recent Italian thrust into Greece had resulted in the consolidation of Britain's strategic naval position in the eastern Mediterranean, causing

Britain to gain valuable prestige while Italy's prestige plummeted. Raeder's planners concluded that the conditions for the Italian offensive against Egypt had deteriorated and that Italy would never carry it out.²³

With all this in mind, Kriegsmarine planners feared that the situation in the eastern Mediterranean would not develop favorably for the Axis and that the initiative would pass to the enemy. They now believed that the position of the British in the eastern Mediterranean would become so strong it would be impossible for the Germans to expel them. On the other hand, if Germany gained control of Gibraltar, Spain's ties with the Reich would be strengthened, and the French colonies in North Africa would be less inclined to desert the Vichy government to join the Allies. The naval staff reasoned that it would also have the important effect of driving the British Fleet from the western Mediterranean area. In addition, control of North Africa and the Middle East would provide Germany with vital raw materials such as cotton, copper, and oil along with much needed foodstuffs. The additional food supplies would become important in supplying Spain, which was almost wholly dependent on the Allies for vital deliveries.²⁴

Raeder pointed out that Italy's strategic position would benefit from Gibraltar's capture. "The Italian armed forces have neither the leadership nor the military efficiency to carry the required operations in the Mediterranean area to a successful conclusion with the necessary speed and decision," he said. He then passed on to Hitler the following three conclusions reached by his staff:

- (1) The German leaders responsible for the conduct of the war must in future plans take into account the fact that no special operational activity, or substantial relief or support, can be expected from the Italian armed forces.
- (2) The entire Greek peninsula, including the Peloponnesos, must be cleared of the enemy, and all bases occupied. If the Italians have in mind only a restricted operational purpose in Greece, an appropriate change in policy should be suggested to them immediately. The occupation of

southern Greece and western Egypt (Marsa Matruh) would considerably reduce the value of Crete for the enemy.

- (3) The enemy should be forced out of the Mediterranean by utilizing every conceivable possibility. In this connection the demand that Italy carry out the Egyptian offensive must be maintained and should be supported by Germany in every way.

Hitler remarked that he expected good results from the Gibraltar operation and the subsequent closing of the Strait and that he believed future operations against northwest Africa and Greece should be planned. He thought that the Italians should be pressured to seize Marsa Matruh and to concentrate on destroying the British Fleet anchored in Egypt.²⁵

With the issuance of Directive 18, Hitler pushed hard for Spain to enter the war. He invited Serrano Suñer, the Spanish foreign minister, to the Berghof on November 18 for the stated reason of continuing the exchange of views begun earlier at Hendaye.²⁶ Count Ciano, who attended the meeting, recorded in his diary that the Germans were in a gloomy mood upon Suñer's arrival.²⁷ Suñer wanted immediate assistance for Spain and asked Hitler to understand the difficult position Spain faced. Hitler responded that the solution was for Spain to join the war and to grant German troops passage to Gibraltar. Suñer ignored Hitler's comments and moved on to a discussion of Spain's territorial demands, a subject which Hitler refused to discuss. Hitler assured him that Spain would be rewarded for joining the winning side and pressed for Spain's cooperation, but Suñer continued to evade the question. The next day, Suñer met in Berchtesgaden with his German counterpart, von Ribbentrop, who was also unable to gain any concessions from the coy Spaniard.²⁸

Although Hitler had been unable to gain Spanish approval, Halder issued orders for FELIX on November 20. The orders closely followed instructions laid out in Directive 18 and in earlier planning. Halder placed Field Marshal Walther von

Reichenau in general command of the entire ground operation. Subordinate to him were the two corps commanders. Corps XLIX (assault) was under General Kuebler, while Corps XXXIX (flank protection) would be under General Rudolf Schmidt. Hitler insisted on operational surprise for the attack and added that troops might be needed immediately after FELIX for employment in North Africa. This new information forced Jodl to convene a major joint-service conference a week later to review coordination of the attack. At that meeting there were surprisingly few disagreements among the different services.²⁹

Berlin received encouraging signals from Madrid on November 28. Franco told the German ambassador that he had decided to intensify collaboration with Germany and to expedite Spain's participation in the war.³⁰ The next day, the German envoy submitted an extensive evaluation of his conversation with Franco. Although the Caudillo feared British military reprisal and the loss of grain shipments, he had indicated his desire to set an early date for Spain's entry into the war, receive German military experts for the assault on Gibraltar, and accept a liaison officer to iron out disagreements between the two countries. With these new developments, the Germans felt that FELIX could go forward. The combat elements had completed their rigorous training programs and were ready for the operation. The supplies and support troops were in place and set to move. Only the final word from Franco and then the order from Hitler were holding up the operation. On December 2, Hitler informed the OKW staff that Franco had agreed to allow FELIX to take place in February 1941, with the exact date to be left to the Germans.

On the following morning, December 3, Raeder met with Hitler, Keitel, and Jodl. “Gibraltar must be seized, which would mean a very heavy loss in prestige for Britain,” the admiral insisted, “This would result in control of the western Mediterranean. Later, if it were still necessary, action could be taken in the eastern Mediterranean.”³¹ Raeder advised Hitler that the navy was prepared for the operation and that fortification of the Canary Islands was under negotiation. The following day, Hitler dispatched Canaris to Spain to pressure Franco into accepting the German attack plan.³²

On December 5, Hitler held a conference on FELIX attended by Halder, von Brauchitsch, Keitel, and Jodl, which lasted for more than four hours. Von Brauchitsch advised Hitler that the initial reconnaissance group would depart for the Iberian Peninsula the following day. For various reasons, January 10, 1941 was set as the last possible date for the initial air attack with the ground attack commencing on February 4 or 5. If FELIX was going to take place, the order to execute needed Hitler’s authorization within the next ten days. The planning staff believed that the entire campaign would take only about four weeks, the end of which would quickly free troops for a campaign in the Balkans and later in Russia.³³

Following von Brauchitsch’s report, Halder pointed out that it would be at least twenty-five days from the time German troops crossed the Franco-Spanish border before they could be ready to launch an attack. At the time of the initial Luftwaffe attack, the troops at the Spanish border would immediately proceed toward Gibraltar. In order to accomplish this, the assault force, support troops, and supply trains would need to move from their current locations and assemble at the border without alerting the British—an almost impossible task. When the conference ended, Hitler seemed to be firmly in

support of FELIX. In his diary, Halder summarized his impression of Hitler's thoughts on the subject:

Seizure of Gibraltar: The psychological impact of the Italian defeats makes the capture necessary. It is not required that England fall through combat but through a number of blows (air force, submarines), to include a cordon of international combinations. In that context the fall of Gibraltar—a symbol of British power—is a decisive element.³⁴

With the military in its final stages of preparation, it was up to Hitler to obtain Franco's formal consent and to give the order for attack.

On December 7, Hitler held his final conference on FELIX. The meeting, attended by the commanders of OKH and OKW, focused on the ground attack portion of the operation. Kuebler used a detailed terrain model of Gibraltar to outline each step of the planned attack. Von Richthofen discussed the role of the Luftwaffe and talked about possible targets. The meeting concluded with all agreeing that the assault plan looked militarily sound and should be effective. Warlimont then gave Jodl a draft of Directive 19 authorizing FELIX. The deadline for issuance of the formal directive was set for December 16, but more importantly, Hitler authorized a reconnaissance staff to leave for Spain that day, December 7, initiating the first phase of the operation.³⁵

Hitler appeared ready to implement FELIX. All he needed was Franco's authorization—which was the main obstacle. Hitler waited anxiously to hear from Canaris, who had been dispatched to Madrid on December 4 to obtain Franco's authorization. The Abwehr Chief informed Franco of the details of FELIX and assured him that Germany would give economic assistance to Spain when German troops crossed the border. Franco, however, still would not agree to the operation. He pointed to Spain's deplorable economic state, the British control of the high seas, the American threat to Spain's outer islands, and the poor state of the Spanish military as reasons why

Spain could not support the German proposal. Canaris asked Franco for an approximate date when Spain might be ready to participate. Franco refused to answer this question also, and the meeting ended.³⁶

After the meeting, Canaris immediately drove to the German embassy to cable a summary of the discussion to Berlin. Keitel at once passed the cable to Jodl, who brought it to the immediate attention of Hitler. The Fuehrer was shocked at the news. He had invested too much time and political prestige in the venture to be stopped by a stubborn and ungrateful Franco. He ordered Canaris to renew his attempts to gain approval for the attack. On December 10, the admiral sent a second cable to Berlin stating that he was still unable to get Franco's consent. He stated that the reasons for this failure were Spain's economic and civil problems along with Germany's lack of progress in the war against Britain. It now appeared certain that Franco would withhold his commitment until Germany decisively defeated Great Britain.³⁷

Time had run out for the Germans. If the operation were going to take place in February 1941, Hitler would have to issue immediate orders to the various army, Luftwaffe, and Kriegsmarine units. Because Hitler was unable to obtain the political support of Franco, on December 11 he ordered the immediate termination of all preparations for FELIX.³⁸ He authorized the reconnaissance teams already in Spain to continue their mission, but ordered that all other efforts should stop. The reluctance of the Spanish dictator had accomplished what most other European countries had failed to do: stop the German military.

After the December 11 decision to halt preparations for FELIX, Hitler and the OKW focused on problems created by Mussolini's invasion of Greece and on the

upcoming offensive in Russia. Since the beginning of his invasion of Greece, the Italians had fared poorly. On December 4, Mussolini had instructed the Italian Ambassador to Germany, Dino Alfieri, to appeal for German help in Greece. Then on December 12 the British launched a surprise offensive in Egypt. The quick success of this action turned Hitler's attention back to the Mediterranean. News from North Africa compounded the bad news from Greece. While the Italian commander in Libya, Marshal Graziani, procrastinated in moving against the British in Egypt, the British commander launched an offensive against the static Italians. "News of the attack of Sidi Barrani came like a thunderbolt," Count Ciano wrote.³⁹ That afternoon Graziani reported that the British had destroyed five Italian divisions. Worse, he did not suggest that Italy had any plan to counter the British advance. By December 15, Graziani had decided that the only factor that could salvage the situation was the massive introduction of German aviation in Libya. Soon afterward, Mussolini realized, too, that German help would be necessary.⁴⁰

The Italian disasters forced Hitler to reevaluate German interest in the entire area. On December 27, he conferred with his top military leaders in Berlin. Although the conference centered on the deterioration of the Mediterranean, Raeder tried to dissuade Hitler from attacking Russia in the spring. He wanted to keep Britain as the main enemy and not overstrain Germany's resources. Hitler listened, but did not comment. Raeder expressed a pessimistic view of the situation. He pointed out the following:

The enemy has assumed the initiative at all points, and is everywhere conducting successful offensive actions – in Greece, Albania, Libya, and East Africa; in addition, an imminent and effective attack on the Italian Dodecanese Island may be expected, all the result of Italy's serious strategic blunder. The navy views developments in the Mediterranean area with grave misgivings. Apart from the considerable prestige gained by Britain, the military and strategic success must not be underestimated. The threat to Egypt, and thus to Britain's position in the entire Eastern Mediterranean, in the Near East, and in the North African area, has been eliminated with one stroke. British gains are: Strong consolidation of the Eastern Mediterranean position; control of the Mediterranean; the possibility of withdrawing heavy air, army, and naval forces from Egypt to

be sent to Greece. The withdrawal of air units and army formations and their transfer to the Greek zone has already been observed. The construction of air bases in Greece is in progress. The fact that naval forces, battleships, and cruisers have been transferred from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic is of great significance for naval warfare.⁴¹

The admiral asked Hitler his opinion regarding the situation in Italy, such as Mussolini's ability to retain power and the will of the Italian people to continue supporting the war. Hitler's answer reflected the obvious—that there was a complete lack of leadership in Italy. Raeder then spoke regarding the impact of these latest developments. First, Italian prestige in the region had deteriorated decisively, affecting Rome's ability to remain in the war. Secondly, it was unlikely that Italy and Germany could drive the British Fleet from the Mediterranean. "The decisive action in the Mediterranean for which we had hoped," he concluded, "is therefore no longer possible."⁴²

If Raeder was pessimistic about the current military situation in the Mediterranean, he was still convinced of Gibraltar's strategic importance and of the need for FELIX to go forward. He told Hitler:

The significance of German occupation of Gibraltar is increased by the recent developments in the Mediterranean situation. Such occupation would protect Italy; safeguard the western Mediterranean; secure the supply lines from the North African area, important for Spain, France, and Germany; eliminate an important link in the British Atlantic convoy system; close the British sea route through the Mediterranean to Malta and Alexandria; restrict the freedom of the British Mediterranean Fleet; complicate British offensive action in Cyrenaica and Greece; relieve the Italians; and make possible German penetration into the African area via Spanish Morocco. Spanish ports, i.e., Ferrol and Cadiz, are necessary for submarines and battleships, to facilitate attack on convoys. Conclusion: Occupation of Gibraltar is of great importance for the continuation of German warfare. The strategic reasons for speedy execution of Operation FELIX still hold good.⁴³

Hitler was in full agreement—the stumbling block remained Franco. Hitler told Raeder that he would try again to gain Franco's approval, but in reality, the Fuehrer did little more to try to change Franco's mind. In a letter to Mussolini on December 31, he renewed his complaints about Franco's ingratitude. If the Spanish leader had cooperated,

he said, German troops would already have closed the Strait and removed that threat to French North and West Africa. With this letter, Hitler seemed to have put to rest the nagging issue of Gibraltar and of Spain's possible inclusion as an Axis power.

End Notes

¹ Halder did not mention the operation in his diary after September 14; Goering never put much stock in it and instructed his Luftwaffe not let its objectives interfere with the air war; Raeder had already ordered the dispersal of invasion shipping.

² General Franz Halder, *The Halder War Dairies*, p. 261.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II*, pp. 49-50.

⁵ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 55; Halder, *Halder War Dairies*, pp. 266-267.

⁶ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, pp. 55-56.

⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

⁸ Walter Goerlitz, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Keitel*, pp. 124-127; Count Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, p. 304.

⁹ Heinz Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 434; Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 93-94; Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, p. 339.

¹⁰ Halder, *The Halder War Dairies*, p. 268.

¹¹ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 60. The Bescançon area of France closely resembled the terrain of Gibraltar and would provide a setting for realistic training.

¹² Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 436.

¹³ Halder, *Halder War Dairies*, pp. 271-272.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 274-276.

¹⁵ Kautschke was the Abwehr station chief in Algeciras, Spain.

¹⁶ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 90-93.

¹⁸ Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 437.

¹⁹ Halder, *Halder War Dairies*, p. 277.

²⁰ Ibid., 278-279.

²¹ Ibid.

²² United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 118-122.

²³ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing With the German Navy 1940*, II, 37-42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁶ Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 94-95.

²⁷ Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, p. 312.

²⁸ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, pp. 65-66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³¹ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 59.

³² Hohne, *Canaris*, pp. 439-440.

³³ Halder, *Halder War Diary*, pp. 292-298.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³⁵ Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, pp. 101-102.

³⁶ Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 95-96; Hohne, *Canaris*, pp. 439-440.

³⁷ Hohne, *Canaris*, p. 441.

³⁸ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives*, I, 125.

³⁹ Ciano, *Ciano Diaries*, p. 321.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

⁴¹ U.S. Dept. of the Navy, *Fuehrer Conferences*, II, 68.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

By the end of 1940, Germany had lost the best opportunity it would have to attack and defeat Great Britain. Due to considerable military and political risk, Hitler failed to confront Britain at a time when the situation was most favorable for Germany. Hitler had wasted precious time during June and July as he waited in vain for Britain to accept his peace terms. In September, as the army completed its preparations for a landing in southern England, he called off the operation after the Luftwaffe failed to defeat the RAF. Focusing on Gibraltar as an alternative from October until December, Hitler tried to secure Spain's entry into the war and support for FELIX. Franco repeatedly denied both. As December drew to a close, Hitler promised Raeder that he would renew his efforts to gain Spanish approval for an operation against Gibraltar. In reality, Hitler hardly tried and FELIX faded into history much like SEA LION. By then, he was focused on problems in the Balkans and was planning for Operation BARBAROSSA.

Until SEA LION was postponed indefinitely on October 12, 1940, Hitler repeatedly had acknowledged that direct invasion was the surest strategy to defeat the British. He realized the importance of attacking and defeating Great Britain, but he could not bring himself to begin the operation. Hitler's behavior and decisions were erratic, and he often misled his own military and civilian leaders. This lack of direction resulted in many wasted man-hours spent planning operations that never took place, re-

deploying and training troops for these operations, and most importantly it gave the British time to recover from their initial defeats. After the war, the famous German tactician General Fritz Erich von Lewinski Manstein wrote in his book *Lost Victories*:

When the head of a State or a war machine has to ask himself ‘What next?’ after his military operations have entirely fulfilled – or, as in this case, far exceeded – his expectations, leading to one enemy’s defeat and causing the other to beat a retreat to his island fastness, one cannot help wondering whether such a thing as a ‘war plan’ ever existed on the German side.¹

Von Manstein placed the blame for Germany’s failure squarely on the shoulders of Hitler, because he refused to listen to his military commanders on matters of strategy. Hitler himself made clear that his views on military planning were what mattered and “the fact that all three service staffs conducted their own internal studies of long-term policy made not a scrap of difference.”²

Hitler’s lack of knowledge and fear of naval operations may explain his failure to plan for an invasion of England immediately after the conquest of France. “I am water-shy,” he once remarked. “On land I am a lion, but on the water I don’t know where to begin.”³ Hitler’s anxiety with regard to amphibious operations was apparent early in 1940 during the Norwegian campaign. After a successful landing at the strategic Norwegian town of Narvik, German Alpine troops under the command of General Edward Dietl became trapped by a larger Allied naval task force. Hitler flew into a panic. He ordered Keitel to draft a desperate evacuation order. Keitel never sent the order and Dietl’s position improved, but the incident illustrated Hitler’s insecurities concerning naval matters.⁴

After SEA LION’s viability began to appear less and less likely, Hitler looked more closely at options in the Mediterranean area. He pondered possibilities from Libya to Gibraltar. His military leaders tried to show that capture of Gibraltar would be the

most effective way to attack Great Britain without having to place a large segment of the German military machine at risk—and this is a point to which Hitler and his generals returned again and again during late 1940. This option should have appealed to Hitler. It would be a land-based operation on the European continent—his area of expertise. By early December, he had invested a significant amount of political prestige in trying to get Franco's approval for FELIX. Hitler recognized the importance of Gibraltar, its effect on the war in the Mediterranean, and the immense benefit to be had by its capture; however, he hesitated to order his military to march through Spain and capture it. Why?

Hitler asked Franco twice for an unequivocal commitment to enter the war; both times Franco told Hitler no. Why did Hitler allow Spain to remain neutral? According to historian Wayne Bowen, Hitler was:

Distracted by the Battle of Britain and focused on acquiring territory in the East, Hitler made a strategic blunder of monumental proportions after the collapse of France. Spain could not have resisted a German invasion, nor would the population, still exhausted after the Spanish Civil War, have been able to put up much of a fight. In short, Hitler allowed Franco to say no and later blamed the Spanish dictator for his own inattention to the importance of Spain and Gibraltar.⁵

At the time, Hitler, however, feared that any forced entry into Spain would degenerate into conflict similar to Napoleon's Peninsular War.⁶ At a military conference on January 9, 1941, he ordered that all preparations for FELIX be discontinued.⁷ With this order, Hitler closed the book on what was Germany's best opportunity for successfully attacking Great Britain in 1940 and improving its strategic position, and that of its weaker Axis ally, Italy.⁸

After the end of the war there was debate in German military circles on which course would have produced the best results in 1940. Von Manstein wrote that the failure to launch an invasion of Great Britain had been the greatest strategic blunder. Although

he acknowledged the risk, he believed that the possible victory would be much more complete. He did not see action at Gibraltar and in the Mediterranean as decisive. Britain's lifeline to its Far and Middle East colonies would remain open around the Cape of Good Hope. It was only the capture of the English Isles that would remove the looming threat to Germany's western flank.

Admiral Raeder did not share von Manstein's view of the situation. He was horrified at the prospect of launching an invasion of Great Britain. In April 1940, he had lost most of his surface fleet in the Norwegian campaign. With his remaining meager resources, he foresaw little hope of defending the invasion armada and its subsequent supply lines from determined attacks by the British Royal Navy. But at Gibraltar, he saw real possibilities. If Gibraltar was in German hands, the British could be forced out of the western Mediterranean and the Reich might have been able to establish an effective blockade of Great Britain. Furthermore, the capture of Gibraltar might have led to a successful Axis drive on Cairo and the oil-rich Middle East at minimal risk to German forces. Raeder tried in vain to impress these views on Hitler.

By early 1941, Hitler had changed his focus to his ideological enemy in the East and regarded the Mediterranean as a mere sideshow.⁹ He had returned to his prewar worldview expressed in *Mein Kampf*, of expanding his control into the USSR and of eliminating the communist threat. In addition, Hitler reasoned that if Moscow were defeated London would have few options other than to end the war through a negotiated peace. Although he expressed grave concern in *Mein Kampf* about a two-front war, Hitler now brushed away these concerns, and assumed that Germany would win a rapid

victory in the East. In Hitler's opinion, Germany's best chance for victory was fighting a preventative war against Stalin.¹⁰

After the fact, Hitler must have realized his error in not seizing Gibraltar in 1940 when he had no other military commitments. According to historian Charles Burdick, Hitler believed that "Spain was the key to Germany's defeat." In early 1945, as Germany was crumbling, Hitler himself stated that "taking advantage of the enthusiasm we had aroused in Spain and the shock to which we had subjected Britain, we ought to have attacked Gibraltar in the summer of 1940, immediately after the defeat of France."¹¹ Hitler was possibly correct in this hindsight analysis. For after the summer of 1940, Great Britain was never again in danger of being invaded and defeated. The island nation eventually became a springboard for the second front, which led to Germany's defeat.

End Notes

¹ Field Marshal Erich Von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, p. 153

² Hitler quoted in *Ibid*, p. 154.

³ Hitler quoted in Walter Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England*, p. 143. It is also interesting that Hitler never learned to swim.

⁴ For more on the campaign in Normandy see Bernard Ash, *Norway*.

⁵ Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, p. 80.

⁶ Although this was a real possibility, it was also possible that a large part of the Spanish population would passively watch as German troops massed for an attack on Gibraltar. During the summer 1940 and beyond, Germany established close ties with the Spanish Falange (believers in a New Order and closely resembled the Nazis) and Spanish officers in hopes of putting pressure on Franco to enter the war. For more information see Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany*, pp. 77-102, 221-229.

⁷ United States, Department of the Navy, *Fuehrer Directives and other Top-level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1945*, I, 131.

⁸ After Operation FELIX was shelved in early 1941, Germany planned to send troops into Spain upon the landing of British forces in that country or Portugal. By late 1943, Germany abandoned any notion of sending troops into Spain and planned to defend the Pyrenees mountain passes along the Franco-Spanish border. For more see Charles B. Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II*.

⁹ German aviation began arriving in the Mediterranean in January 1941 and made their presence known by seriously damaging the British carrier *Illustrious* and several other warships. General Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Korps began arriving in February 1941. For more on Rommel and the war in North Africa see Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* and General Friedrich von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*.

¹⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of Hitler's thinking during this period see Alan Clark, *Barbarossa*, pp. 22-27.

¹¹ Hitler quoted in Burdick, *Germany's Military Strategy*, p. 2.

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VITA

Leonard S. Cooley Jr. is a native of Alexandria, Louisiana. He received his Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts degrees from Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, Louisiana in May 1997. He subsequently enrolled in Louisiana State University Graduate School that summer. In February 1998, he was hired by the Department of Defense and was assigned to the National Imagery and Mapping Agency in Washington D.C. He is a career officer with the Department of Defense and has served in a variety of positions in the US and overseas. He is married to Judith Francis. The degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Arts will be awarded in May 2004.