

## The Impact of the Battle of Britain The Nazis Tried to Break England's Spirit, but Instead Sacrificed Their Own Aura of Invincibility

BY JEFF WELGE

From 10 July to 31 October 1940, a battle raged in the skies over England that had a profound impact on the outcome of the Second World War. The Battle of Britain probably represented the closest the Allied Powers ever came to defeat, and it happened relatively early in the war. Historians have speculated how the outcome of the war might have been different had the British resistance collapsed. To reach such conclusions, it is necessary to reconsider modern perceptions of the battle's significance with regard to the attitudes of contemporary people. Because the Battle of Britain was so important to the story of the whole European theater, reactions of the Americans and Germans are as relevant as those of the British. The confusion resulting from misinformation and propaganda during war-time can be of greater importance than the actual fact.

After the First World War, the British allowed their air strength to diminish. Prime Minister David Lloyd George had dismantled much of the Royal Air Force following the Armistice. Senior military officials who felt that air power was the wave of the future and should be given as much attention as the maintenance of sea power cautioned against this loss of air supremacy. Nevertheless, Britain reduced the RAF from an operational strength of 188 squadrons to 25 in a mere eighteen months. During the 1920s, the RAF systematically scaled back in an attempt to reduce costs.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for the British, they recognized the German threat in the 1930s in time to fortify the air force or the Battle of Britain most certainly would have been a short and disastrous episode.

Although it is difficult to ascertain precisely when the reconstruction of the German Air Force began, surely Hitler initiated the process shortly after taking power in 1933. In March 1935, Germany revealed the existence of its air force, the *Luftwaffe*. By the next year, Great Britain had begun to suspect Hitler and his *Luftwaffe* to be a threat. The rebuilding of the RAF began.<sup>2</sup>

The Battle of Britain was not only significant for the sheer military importance of possessing the British Isles. Of course, this is its primary significance, and at the time of the battle, it was the only factor that really

mattered. From a historical perspective, though, several precedents were set which would reoccur throughout the war. This was the first attack against civilians during the Second World War. Despite the claim by the German High Command that the bombings in and around London were retaliatory and directed at "war-essential objectives,"<sup>3</sup> Hitler believed indiscriminate bombings would weaken British morale. This represented a new direction in war and redefined the concept of total war. The objective now went beyond defeating the enemy in combat, to the point of attempting to break his spirit.

The Battle of Britain demonstrated the effectiveness of science over brute strength, a theme repeated throughout the war. Despite the *Luftwaffe's* overwhelming power as compared to the Royal Air Force, the British drastically reduced this advantage by its use of a new technology, radar. The *Luftwaffe*, however, had a great deal of information about their targets. Therefore, the Nazis knew that the radar stations existed. But, they underestimated the efficiency of this tool.<sup>4</sup>

The winning of the Battle of Britain sent a message to other nations that Nazi Germany was not invincible. The very fact that this was Hitler's first defeat, and marked the end of the German advance, was significant. It lent support in America to Roosevelt's appeal to aid the Allies. A *New York Times* article from August 1940 stated that the American believed Germany's aggressions with regard to Great Britain were over Africa.<sup>5</sup> The American press as late as the Battle of Britain still viewed the German threat strictly as a European affair. This same article, however, contained an excerpt from a German communiqué indicating that the war could take many years and might ultimately involve the United States. Though many today believe that a German victory in the Battle of Britain would have quickly brought the war to an end, the Germans clearly intended to continue offensives regardless of the outcome. A more accurate assessment would be that the battle encouraged the formation of the Allied Powers to halt German aggressions.

The role of the press proved crucial in shaping contemporary attitudes. Despite all obstacles, the British presses would not be silenced. *The Times* of London continued to work during the bombings. Though smaller and less frequent than before, this paper reassured Londoners that it was still on the job. One member of *The Times* staff said that "what the reader gets for his two cents is something no German or Italian could buy at any price."

Because of strict military secrecy and censorship, it is difficult to determine what the German people expected or believed with regard to the battle. Statements by downed Nazi pilots, however, indicate that knowledge of what was happening in Great Britain was limited and probably grossly

<sup>3</sup>*New York Times*, 21 September 1940, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Hough and Richards, 50-1.

<sup>5</sup>*New York Times*, 19 August 1940, p. 2.

<sup>1</sup>Richard Hough and Denis Richards, *The Battle of Britain* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1969), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

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turned its attention toward Russia.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the Battle of Britain claimed the lives of 13,000 British men, women and children, and seriously injured 20,000 others. Nazi Germany never admitted to the consequences of its failure to break Great Britain. The battle was swept aside in Germany as a relatively insignificant campaign. The Nazis never offered an explanation of why the operation ceased when it did, although the British military command believed that casualties among German pilots had been outstripping the pace at which new pilots could be trained. Historians Richard Hough and Dennis Richards suggest that indeed this might have been the downfall of the assault.<sup>10</sup>

While the issue of why the attack failed is debatable, there can be no questioning the significance of this failure. The Battle of Britain solidified Allied resistance to stand up against Nazi onslaught. It also marks, to a considerable degree, the end of the war's early phase of mobility. Soon after this event, the entry of the United States and the development of numerous additional theaters of operation marked the beginning of the true world conflict. The Battle of Britain showed the entire world that Germany could be contained. It also foretold that the war would be a long and painful ordeal.

Hitler's planned invasion of Great Britain never occurred because he underestimated British technology. But more importantly, he failed to recognize British resolve. This added to the British advantage of fighting a defensive battle against an outside aggressor. *The Times* reported with pride that the RAF "is giving out as much punishment to them as they are giving to us." British squadrons often challenged Luftwaffe flyers over the English Channel.

As the battle dragged on, the ferocity exhibited by the Germans in the early weeks faded. This suggests that they had anticipated an easy victory in the air that would lead to a land invasion. On 20 September, the Air and Home Security Ministries released a statement that the German attacks had become smaller and less effective.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, *The Times* described British morale as improving, and that there were "fewer evidences of fatigue and fear than after the opening days" of the attack. Had the German High Command recognized this, the assault may have ended far sooner. In their eyes, the British were "dead but would not lie down."

Consequently, the bombardment continued at fluctuating levels of intensity until November, largely due to the unpredictable weather. It was clear to both sides that the most powerful onslaught would commence when Hitler felt the time was right for an invasion by land. Due to refusal of the British to succumb to air bombardments, a land invasion never occurred. On 29 October, the Royal Air Force dealt the *Luftwaffe* a significant defeat over the English Channel. Germany continued indiscriminate bombing for several months afterward, but for the most part the *Luftwaffe*

turned its attention toward Russia.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the Battle of Britain claimed the lives of 13,000 British men, women and children, and seriously injured 20,000 others. Nazi Germany never admitted to the consequences of its failure to break Great Britain. The battle was swept aside in Germany as a relatively insignificant campaign. The Nazis never offered an explanation of why the operation ceased when it did, although the British military command believed that casualties among German pilots had been outstripping the pace at which new pilots could be trained. Historians Richard Hough and Dennis Richards suggest that indeed this might have been the downfall of the assault.<sup>10</sup>

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*Jeff Weige, a former history major, wrote his essay on the Battle of Britain as a student enrolled in the History Department's 3005 survey course on European history from 1815 to the present.*

<sup>8</sup>*New York Times*, 22 September 1940, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>*New York Times*, various editions from August-September 1940.

<sup>10</sup>*New York Times*, 20 September 1940, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Hough and Richards, 187, 302-304.

<sup>10</sup>Hough and Richards, 302.