

If Hitler had landed...

Can you imagine what it was like to be living in England in August 1940? France had been overwhelmed nearly as quickly as Poland had been just eight months earlier. The Germans were assembling invasion barges in Amsterdam and dropping leaflets saying this was our last chance to make peace. Most people thought an invasion was inevitable – they only wanted to know if it would be this year or next.

Nick Marshall came from the Leicestershire Museum Service to the Local History Group to talk about the plans that the German High Command had prepared. They were for a quick invasion on the south coast followed by a limited occupation, leaving the north of England, Wales and Scotland self-governing in the same way as Vichy France.

After a successful campaign in France the German army were eager to go. But the navy and air force both wanted more time to re-equip, whilst Hitler himself was nursing the hope that after the humiliation of Dunkirk the British people would want peace. Nevertheless, in July he issued a directive ordering the High Command to prepare plans for Operation Sealion, an invasion in three stages over four days in September.

- Firstly, hundreds of barges and small motor vessels would land thirteen infantry divisions on the coast of Sussex and Kent.
- After port facilities had been secured larger vessels would bring across tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery.
- Next convoys of larger vessels would bring support vehicles and supplies, including 10,000 horses to pull the artillery!



Operation Sealion would attack on a broad front across the South of England.

Meanwhile the British had been laying mines and tank traps, building pill boxes along the Royal Military Canal, and reinforcing the Martello towers that were built 150 years earlier to stop Napoleon. Plans were also made to move the seat of government to Worcester if necessary.

Churchill's top priority was to save the RAF from being annihilated by the Luftwaffe, and key here was his decision to bomb Berlin. This infuriated Hitler, who promptly ordered the Luftwaffe to destroy London, giving the RAF precious time to rebuild their damaged airfields.

By now 1.5 million men had volunteered to join the Home Guard and were issued with instructions for making Molotov cocktails. Some were formed into highly secret Auxiliary Units and trained in guerrilla warfare to inflict mayhem and make the country ungovernable. But for the rest of the civilian population, the government's advice was simple – stay at home!

Plans for government

Hitler asked the Army commander Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch to prepare plans for governing the occupied part of England. They make chilling reading:

- All able-bodied males between the ages of 17 and 45 would be sent to the continent and made to work for the German war effort.
- The death penalty would be imposed immediately for any civilian act of resistance, however trivial, and hostages may be taken and shot.
- All weapons, ammunition and wireless transmitters must be handed in immediately: any person failing to do so would be executed.
- All parts of the country under German control would be plundered for anything of industrial, military, or cultural value.

Most of these regulations were in fact applied when the Germans invaded the Channel Islands. Marshall told the story of Louis Berrier, who was shot in August 1941 for sending a message to England by carrier pigeon.

Professor Franz Six was scheduled to be in charge of the Sicherheitsdienst or Gestapo in London, and his first task would be the internment of some 6,000 politicians, trade union leaders, Freemasons and Scout leaders. After that he would have had to decide what to do with the 300,000 Jews living in Britain: we would very likely have had our own holocaust.

Would the invasion have succeeded?

In 1974, senior German and English military teams met at Sandhurst to war-game Operation Sealion. After sixteen hours of play they found that:

- With the Royal Navy too far away the first stage landings would have been largely successful. Troops would have penetrated up to twelve miles inland and probably captured Folkstone and Newhaven.
- The Royal Navy would have arrived in time to disable many of the larger ships of the second stage, while Folkstone harbour would have been put out of action before it was captured.
- With the heavy armour unable to land the third stage would have had to have been aborted, and the invaders obliged to start evacuation after just four days.

So, in the 1974 war-game, Operation Sealion was a failure. In 1940 it was postponed, first to 1941, then dropped completely in favour of Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of Russia), and that changed everything.

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