

Failure at the battle of britain history essay



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In the summer of 1940, the Battle of Britain was fought between the Royal Air Force of Great Britain and the Luftwaffe of Nazi Germany. The assault was Hitler's attempt at decimating Britain's air force and morale, enabling a full-scale seaborne invasion of Britain. The failure of such an ambitious undertaking marked Germany's first significant defeat and became a turning point in World War Two. More than seventy years later, historians continue to debate over the reasons for the failure of the Luftwaffe, prompting an investigation to answer: To what extent was the Luftwaffe responsible for their failure at the Battle of Britain?

This essay analyses both sides of the debate; either that the RAF's successes were the most important cause of Germany's failure, or that it was the errors of the Luftwaffe that proved decisive in Britain's victory. Utilizing the views of historians such as Stephen Bungay, RJ Overy and JP Ray, this essay also employs some primary sources to consolidate both arguments, and forms a conclusion to the investigation.

Although the Luftwaffe were not perfectly suited to the task of singlehandedly eliminating Britain's key defences, being a support force rather than a strategic one, the sheer number of pilots and planes that they had at their disposal, combined with the fact that they did not have to defend anything themselves, should have guaranteed a German victory. Instead, the constantly shifting strategy and bad leadership combined with flawed intelligence complicated the operation. Additionally, Britain benefited from the leadership of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Air Marshal Hugh Dowding, while being aided by their radar early warning system and the advantage of fighting within friendly territory. In conclusion, however, the

Luftwaffe was still the clear favourite and it was only through their mistakes that the RAF was able to survive.

Introduction

The Battle of Britain, part of the Second World War, began in the summer of 1940, on the 10th of July. An entirely aerial battle, Hitler initiated the assault as a preliminary phase of his invasion of Britain, codenamed Operation Sea Lion. The Luftwaffe was meant to neutralize the RAF and Britain's other key defences, enabling the German Navy to land and discharge troops. Not only was this failure a psychological blow to the Nazi war effort, but also more significantly it thwarted Hitler's planning for the German invasion of the USSR, for which timing was crucial. The Luftwaffe was overconfident as a result of its successes across the rest of Europe, but it failed to anticipate the conditions of a battle fought exclusively in the air; understandably, since the Battle of Britain was the first entirely aerial conflict. Hermann Goering, the commander in chief of the Luftwaffe, assured Hitler that he could guarantee control of the skies above the channel, protecting the German invasion force from the RAF. Not only did the Battle last far longer than intended, but also the Luftwaffe failed their objective, forcing Hitler to postpone Operation Sea Lion indefinitely[1].

Both during the Battle and in the years following it, the British cleverly capitalised on the propaganda value of their success. This gave rise to the initial popular view that it was the courage and resilience of the RAF that had repelled the Luftwaffe through sheer determination, overcoming the numerical odds. Indeed, Churchill would often mention in his speeches and later his memoirs the importance of "the Few"[2]. However, orthodox

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historical investigations adopted a more analytical and less sensationalist view that Britain's inherent advantages of radar and friendly territory tipped the scales in their favour, combined with the heroism of the pilots and Britain's impressive fighter production and sound leadership[3]. An alternative revisionist view emerged later as records out of Germany came to light, stating that despite all of this Britain would still have lost if the Luftwaffe had not conducted their campaign so poorly[4]. After all, it is undisputed that the Germans had greater numbers of planes[5] and more importantly, capable, experienced pilots. The fact that such a key event continues to be a subject of intense debate merits an investigation into what actually was the more decisive factor. Therefore the following research question is still very relevant today: To what extent was the Luftwaffe responsible for their failure at the Battle of Britain? While both sides of the debate provide compelling evidence, ultimately, for all of the RAF's courage and advantages, the Luftwaffe should have been able to overwhelm them with sheer brute force and elementary tactics, but the extent to which the Luftwaffe's mistakes altered the course of the Battle led to Britain's victory.

The RAF's responsibility for the result

There can be no doubt that the RAF showed an unprecedented level of resilience and intelligence in dealing with the German threat, and despite all of the propaganda associated with it, there is a great deal of evidence that supports this orthodox view. One of the major contributors to this success was the system implemented by Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, aptly named the Dowding system of defence. Dowding organized a structured system of command and networked intelligence, with several scattered

Sectors reporting to four groups, and each group then filtering and passing on the necessary information to the central Fighter Command Headquarters[6].

The Dowding system ensured that Fighter Command was able to receive a clear and updated picture of the Battle at all times. This was in no small part due to the implementation of Radio Direction Finding (RDF) also known as radar, which was instrumental in ensuring that Fighter Command knew exactly when and where the Germans were attacking. Since its inception in 1935, Dowding had personally championed the radar system. Furthermore, the use of radar was cleverly organised; Fighter Command controlled the radar, but each sector was able to control its airfields and observers, enabling local control that avoided the potential delay of waiting for Fighter Command's directions. Additionally, as Fighter Command directly received radar, if the Luftwaffe succeeded in bombing a station, Fighter Command would continue to function unimpaired. On the 7th of September 1940, the Luftwaffe attacked London with 400 bombers escorted by fighters. This attack tested the efficiency of the system; once the Germans were detected by the radar and confirmed as three waves of aircraft, the commander of 11 Group, Keith Park, sent six of his squadrons to combat the first wave while holding the remainder of the group for the other two, saving fuel. Meanwhile, 12 Group and 10 Group were deployed to protect 11 Group's vulnerable airfields from German bombers[7]. Dowding's system was able to eliminate the Luftwaffe's advantage of surprise[8], allowing the British to send out the precise number of aircraft exactly where they were needed to thwart the

Germans; and this became a vital component of Britain's victory, especially since the Germans refused to recognize the threat of it.

Another factor in the result of the Battle was the ability of the British factories to replace lost and damaged aircraft. Britain's fighter production was far better than Germany's, approximately 500 per month against just over 150 per month by the Germans[9]. In addition, these aircraft were Hurricanes and Spitfires, high quality planes that were more than a match for Germany's own Bf 109s and 110s[10]. The rapid rate of production ensured that the RAF never had a shortage of operational aircraft, although the same could not be said of their pilot reserves.[11]. This impressive level of production was primarily due to Lord Beaverbrook's ability to deregulate the processes used for aircraft production, in his capacity as Minister of Aircraft Production. With Churchill's help, Beaverbrook managed to persuade British citizens to donate pots, pans and even fences and railings to be used in factories in a scheme dubbed " Saucepans to Spitfires"[12]. Churchill often lauded Beaverbrook's success, " during these weeks of intense struggle and ceaseless anxiety", claiming that " his personal buoyancy and vigour were a tonic"[13], and on the 2nd of August 1940 he appointed Beaverbrook to the War Cabinet. The results of Beaverbrook's efforts were directly reflected in the number of operational airplanes, which rose from 560 to 730 between June and November[14].

The orthodox view gives great importance to Dowding's excellent tactical deployment of his aircraft in determining the RAF's victory. Dowding was aware from the beginning that the number of trained pilots available was always dangerously scarce; a notion supported by accounts from fighter

pilots that emerged after the war, claiming that they were often scrambled three or four times a day[15]. Despite strong suggestions from 12 Group Commander Trafford Leigh-Mallory and the leader of 242 Squadron Douglas Bader to attack the Germans head on in a massive fire fight, Dowding held firm with his strategy of utilizing his early warning system to send out a small number of planes to intercept the Germans where they were most needed. Furthermore, during the last days of the Battle of France, Dowding refused to send out any more squadrons to the aid of the French, recognizing that France's defeat was inevitable[16].

During the Battle of Britain, 11 Group, which often bore the brunt of the German attack, frequently requested Fighter Command for support from the other Groups. Indeed, some of the pilots in 11 Group who later recounted their experiences have criticized Dowding for putting too much strain on Air Vice Marshal Park[17], although it is unlikely that these pilots would have sympathized with the general strategy after the ordeals they were put through. Dowding also understood that the RAF had an essential advantage in fighting over friendly territory; firstly, an RAF pilot who ejected from his plane could easily be rescued and returned to the front-line, whereas German pilots would become prisoners of war, or drown in the Channel. Considering that out of the more than 800 planes shot down, only 507 RAF pilots were killed, this was extremely valuable given the RAF's lack of reserve pilots[18]. Secondly, the Luftwaffe was operating out of France, which meant they had to waste precious fuel crossing the English Channel, whereas the RAF planes took off much nearer to the points of interception. [19]

Another aspect of the RAF's ingenuity that worked in their favour was their quick adaptation of aerial combat tactics. The nature of the Battle of Britain was such that both the RAF and the Luftwaffe were initially unprepared for the scale and pace of the fighting that was conducted. As per the training manual, RAF pilots initially used a conventional formation with two wingmen flying behind the leader at a fixed distance, which limited their ability to defend the leader[20]. By contrast, the Luftwaffe sent fighters operating in a two pair formation around their bombers, and towards the end of July the RAF had already adopted this strategy. Wing Commander H. R. Allen of 11 Group believed that if the RAF had used this method from the beginning, they would have been "several times more efficient" at destroying German aircraft[21]. Since Allen was a pilot who actually fought in the Battle, it is reasonable to assume that he would have been able to evaluate this effectively. Also, the RAF modified their standard squadron formation, using "part of the squadron flying in three lines, while the rest flew above and to the rear, offering better defence and ready replacements for any losses in the front"[22]. Another important tactic employed by the RAF was to send their faster, more agile Spitfires against the German Messerschmitt 109s, while allowing their Hurricanes to eliminate the slower and more vulnerable German bombers. Britain's adaptability helped to conserve their limited resources and efficiently engage the enemy, offering crucial tactical gains.

While the RAF were busy fighting the Germans in the skies, Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill was equally active in rallying Great Britain behind their courageous Royal Air Force. Churchill's skills as an orator and motivator undoubtedly played a part in Britain's victory. Although Hitler could be

equally charismatic, he showed very little interest in the Battle, deferring responsibilities to Goering while he focused on Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR[23]. Churchill wrote in his memoirs 'Their Finest Hour' how he "cannot speak too highly of the loyalty of Mr Chamberlain, or of the resolution and efficiency of all of my Cabinet colleagues", and yet Churchill himself was constantly visiting various Group stations and Fighter Command, asking for updates and estimates of progress[24]. A notable example of this was Churchill's arrival at 11 Group's Headquarters in Uxbridge on the 15th of September, and remained in the Group Operations room with Air Vice-Marshal Park for most of the battle's duration[25]. In addition to this, Churchill's address to the House of Commons on the 18th of June famously spoke of Britain's "finest hour" and of how "never has so much in the field of conflict been owed by so many to so few". These speeches helped to boost the morale not only of the public, but more importantly that of the overworked RAF pilots[26].

Moreover, Britain also benefited from the intelligence it received. During the Battle, both sides overestimated the enemy's losses while underestimating their own, partly to increase morale, but also due to the chaotic circumstances that made it extremely difficult to gather reliable intelligence. According to Stephen Bungay, Britain also overestimated the overall strength of the enemy force, judging Luftwaffe front line strength to exceed 5000 when in reality there were around 3000 German aircraft with 900 reserves. This discouraged an all out "Big Wing" assault, which would have negated Britain's advantages and caused careless losses[27]. Furthermore, by the time of the Battle the British were able to decode German messages

using their Enigma machine; although some historians argue that Fighter Command was unaware of the Enigma breakthrough until as late as October[28]. The RAF were also aided by a branch of the observer corps known as “Y Service”, which yielded unprecedented results simply by listening in to various German radio frequencies[29]. These aspects of the RAF’s intelligence network compounded by the Dowding early warning system ensured that the RAF were alerted of the Luftwaffe’s moves as much as possible.

The many advantages that the RAF both inherently began with and later cultivated enabled them to put up a strong defence, resulting in the Luftwaffe coming off worse in nearly every exchange. In a stark contrast to the Luftwaffe, the RAF prospered under an efficient system of intelligence, tactical adaptability and reliable leadership. There can be no doubt that these were important contributors to their victory, to a limited extent.

The Luftwaffe’s responsibility for the result

Hitler commanded his Luftwaffe to “maintain air superiority over the Channel and Island.”[30] While the Luftwaffe outnumbered the RAF, an important point to note is that of the 3000 aircraft sent to Britain, only 1200 of those were fighters, while the 1800 bombers were far more vulnerable against the Hurricanes and Spitfires[31].

One of the most costly failures of the Luftwaffe was their wayward tactics and strategy. This was explicitly demonstrated in the inexplicable gap in the offensive between the British evacuations of Dunkirk on the 4th of June and the final launch Operation Eagle Attack (the codename of the assault) on the

13th of August[32]. During this period, both sides were able to replace their losses after the Battle of France, however since Britain's production was much higher than Germany's, the Luftwaffe effectively weakened their position by waiting. Moreover, the minor intermittent raids conducted by German aircraft gave Britain a chance to test and perfect the Dowding system[33]. Additionally, this delay was compounded by a lack of focus in the German plan of attack; the Luftwaffe was attempting to attack merchant convoys on the Channel, British airfields and radar stations in the South as well as fighting a war of attrition by engaging RAF airplanes. The overall result of these endeavours was that while there was some success in each of these objectives, it was very limited[34]. No targets were actually crippled beyond repair, especially since Hermann Goering considered attacking the radar stations a waste of time and resources, a clear display of ignorance that made the system all the more effective for the RAF.

Perhaps the single most detrimental decision made by the Luftwaffe was the decision to switch bombing targets from the RAF airfields to the British cities. Many historians have attributed this to an accidental German bomb dropped on London, which prompted retaliation against Berlin, thus enraging Hitler to the point of ordering the destruction of London[35]. This proved to be a turning point in the Battle for a number of reasons. Firstly, it gave the RAF much-needed breathing space to repair airfields, train new pilots and deploy them. Secondly, Fighter Command could now organize its groups around London and concentrate its forces, instead of having to stretch them across the south coast. Thirdly, in London air raid shelters had already been constructed throughout London which somewhat limited civilian casualties,

as the attacks on the countryside were abandoned[36]. A further point is that the journey to London took the German fighters and bombers, who were operating out of Normandy and Belgium, to the limit of their fuel capacity, offering them mere minutes of flight time over the city. Ironically, even Goering seemed to immediately realize this, commenting “ it’s stupid to drop bombs on cities.”[37]While the orthodox views confidently identify this as the saviour of the RAF, revisionists have argued that although it gave Fighter Command some breathing space it was an inevitable tactic given that the bombers damage to the airfields was limited[38]. Although there is disagreement over the extent to which this affected the outcome of the Battle, it was a factor that cannot be ignored; this respite was complemented by the RAF’s high fighter production that allowed them to recoup their losses quickly.

While Great Britain was able to rely on Churchill and Dowding to bolster their resolve and devise effective strategies, the Luftwaffe deteriorated under the command of Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering. Not only did Hitler overestimate the Luftwaffe’s capabilities as an attack force by expecting them to singlehandedly eliminate British defences, he made matters worse by ordering the Luftwaffe to bomb London, purely as a result of his political outrage over the raid on Berlin. Churchill publicly denounced Hitler’s inability to grasp aerial warfare, “ Herr Hitler is using up his fighter force”[39].

Goering on the other hand did not actively coordinate his forces as his British counterpart Dowding did, nor did he make any effort to motivate his pilots; as German ace Adolf Galland claims, “ he went about it the wrong way”[40]. However, being a contemporary German source, it is important to note that

a pilot like Galland would prefer to blame the strategy of his officers for the defeat rather than the performance of pilots such as himself. As the tide of the Battle began to turn, the leadership flaws were exposed and this made the Luftwaffe even more impotent, which proved to be a necessary component of the RAF's success.

Another aspect of the Luftwaffe's failure was their unsuitability as a force for the task that was put to them. This view is supported by many revisionists, who investigated German records after the war and came to the conclusion that the Luftwaffe was a support force, designed to aid the Wehrmacht (Army) by bombing key targets ahead of the armoured advance on the ground[41]. The only Air Force the Luftwaffe had to contend with prior to the Battle of France was the Polish Air Force, who fought valiantly but ultimately had too few planes, all of which were also obsolete[42]. Furthermore, despite Goering's confidence that he could destroy the RAF, the Luftwaffe's planes were unsuited to the task. While the Bf 109 could outmanoeuvre a Spitfire at high altitudes, it was limited both by a low fuel capacity, and the fact that it had to protect the low flying Ju 87 dive-bombers[43]. By 1940 Germany had not yet developed long-range heavy bombers, since Goering believed that dive-bombers were sufficient for any assault. While the Ju 87s and 88s were accurate, they were unable to defend themselves against Hurricanes and Spitfires, which allowed the RAF to pick them off with ease once their fighter escorts had been dealt with. This became a huge problem when the Luftwaffe began bombing London, which was even further north, as the Bf 109s only had an effective range of 125 miles[44]. This problem was highlighted on August 15th 1940, when 30 German bombers were shot down

at the cost of two Hurricanes, which also demonstrated that in daylight, the German aircraft were even more vulnerable[45]. Furthermore, Keegan believes that because the Luftwaffe had more bombers than fighters, their fighter strength was insignificantly greater than the RAF condemning their operation from the beginning. Clearly, the Luftwaffe was completely unprepared for their operation, and in the war of attrition they came off worse as a result.

Many of the tactical errors made by Goering were based on faulty intelligence received, and this was responsible for much of the self-inflicted damage. Firstly, in the Air Intelligence Department's report, the Dowding system was labelled as rigid and inflexible, and this was partly the reason that Goering dismissed the radar stations as insignificant targets. This was undoubtedly a costly mishap; the radar eliminated the Luftwaffe's much-needed element of surprise and there were only six proper attacks against the radar stations during the course of the Battle[46]. Not only was Britain's overall fighter strength underestimated, but fighter production itself was also underestimated, with intelligence estimating 230 planes a day while the reality was well over 400[47]. The intelligence department suffered from managerial deficiencies; there were several different agencies attempting to curry favour by providing positive (and false) reports, which would even conflict with each other at times. Goering received a report that the Bf 110 could hold its own against the Hurricane, which complicated battle tactics later when the reality emerged and the Bf 110 squadrons had to be reinforced with the superior Bf 109s[48]. This was a key flaw that separated

the Luftwaffe from the RAF, and this allowed the RAF to maximise the useful implementation of their intelligence without facing effective retaliation.

In addition, while Britain may have benefited from overestimating German losses by boosting morale, the same did not apply to the Luftwaffe. The overestimation of RAF losses bred complacency, and Goering was often made to look foolish by confidently asserting that the RAF would be destroyed “ within the week” only to have the Battle continue to drag on[49]. At one point Goering was under the impression that the RAF only had 100 operational fighters, while the reality was more than 700[50]. The bad estimates of numbers, the underestimation of radar and the overestimation of German fighter capability all created an atmosphere of arrogance and complacency, which proved detrimental to the Luftwaffe.

Although the Luftwaffe should have prevailed through sheer force of numbers, it was constantly let down by unfocused strategy, distracted leadership and incorrect intelligence. Also, the overconfidence of Goering ensured that crucial problems were not rectified in time, and this created a sluggishness that was uncharacteristic of the nation that had Blitzkreiged across Western Europe, and unacceptable given the circumstances of the Battle.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of sound evidence and judgement on both sides of the argument. It would have been unfair to entirely discount the orthodox view in favour of the revisionist. After all, the RAF was fighting on friendly territory, their early warning system eliminated the German element of

surprise, they were highly motivated by their leaders and any tactics which may have initially been obsolete were quickly adapted, turning the RAF into one of the best Air Forces of World War Two and certainly one of the most experienced. Additionally, a high rate of fighter production supported by civilian initiatives enabled the RAF to maintain and expand its front-line strength over the course of the Battle. The Luftwaffe, meanwhile, benefited from superior numbers and experienced personnel.

However, the Luftwaffe were more suited to providing support for the Army, rather than engaging another air force, as indicated by their large quantities of outdated and unsuitable bombers. During the Battle, the Luftwaffe suffered a number of setbacks, as a result of their lax leadership, meandering strategy, and faulty intelligence from sycophantic and competitive agencies. The most debilitating demonstration of this was the decision to switch bombing targets from airfields and other military installations to British cities, allowing the RAF time to recover and replace their losses, while accomplishing very little instead. Although the RAF put up an excellent defence, the objective that the Luftwaffe were assigned, to pave the way for the invasion force and weaken or destroy the RAF should have been possible based on their numerical superiority; certainly prior to the Battle there was very little hope for Britain.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that rather than two separate developments of the Battle, the German mistakes and British successes