EAGLE DAYS

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Eagle Days is her first non-fiction book.

EAGLE DAYS

LIFE AND DEATH *for the* LUFTWAFFE *in the* BATTLE OF BRITAIN

VICTORIA TAYLOR



An Apollo Book

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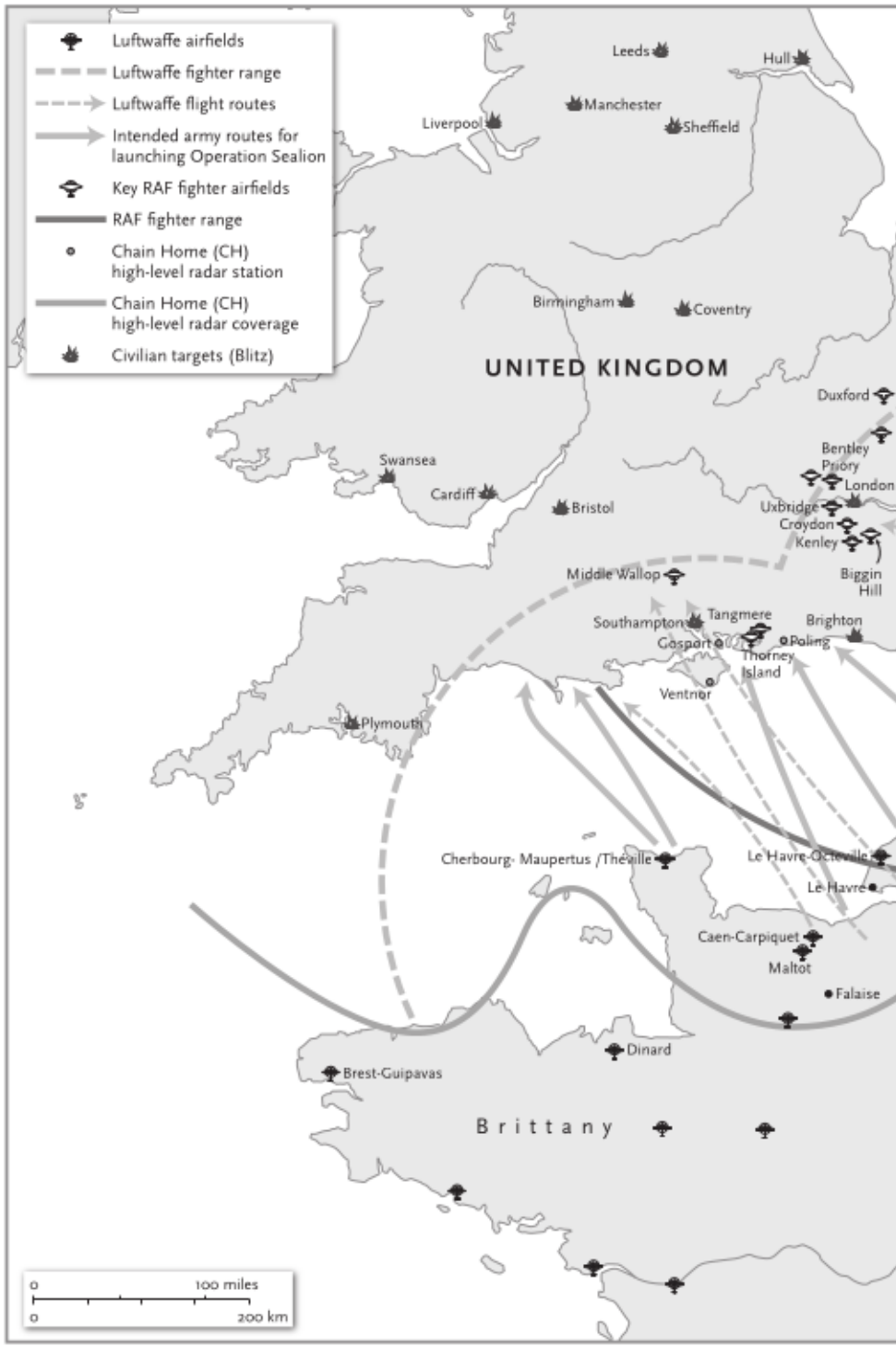
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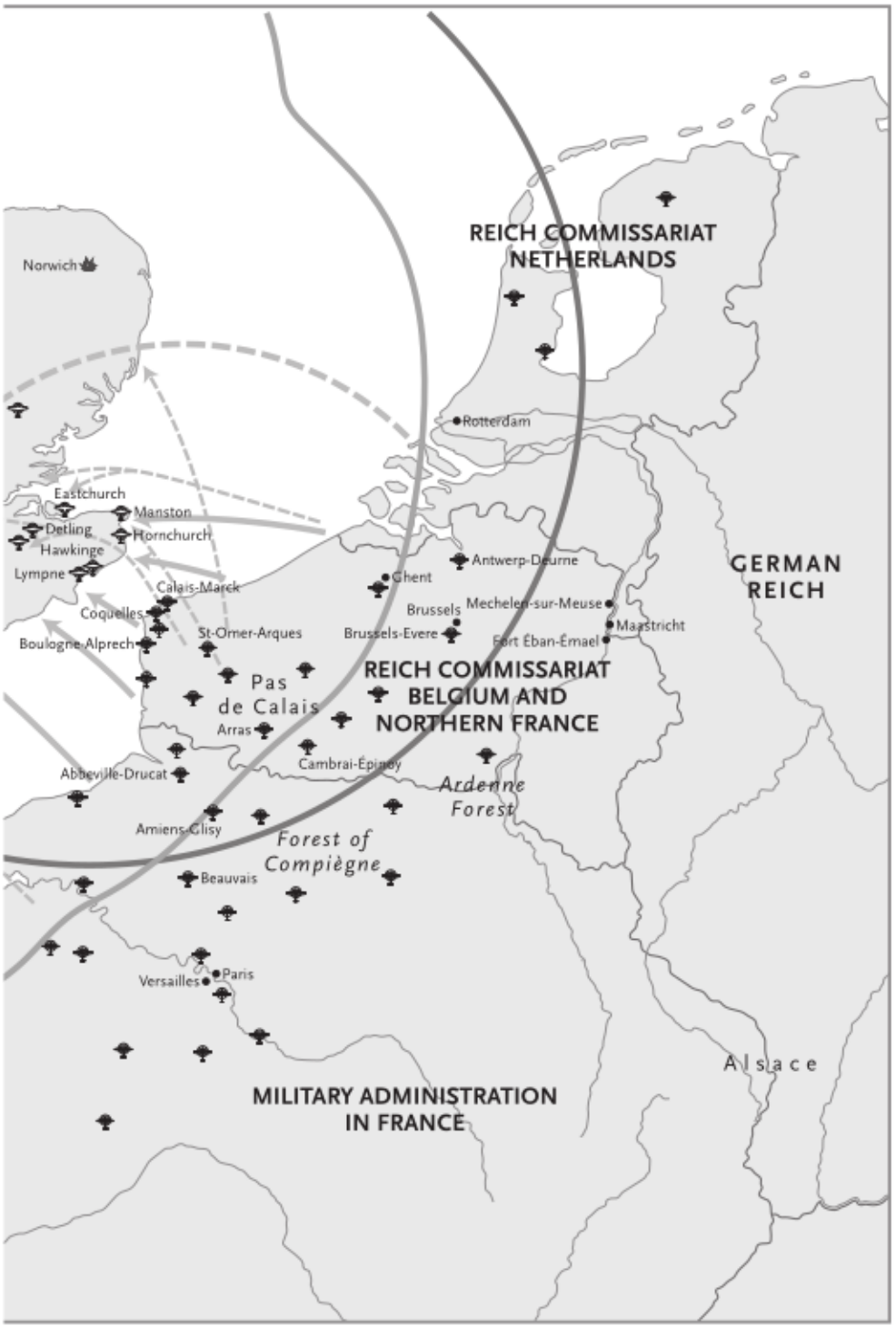
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REICH COMMISSARIAT
NETHERLANDS
Norwich
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NORTHERN FRANCE
Cambrai-Épinoy
Ardenne
Forest
GERMAN
REICH
Alsace
MILITARY ADMINISTRATION
IN FRANCE

Luftwaffe Ranks and RAF Equivalents

(In Ascending Order)

Flieger; Soldat; Kanonier	Aircraftman 2nd Class; Soldier (normally flak, technical & admin); Gunner (flak)
Gefreiter	Aircraftman 1st Class
Obergefreiter	Leading Aircraftman
Hauptgefreiter	Senior Aircraftman
Stabsgefreiter	Senior Aircraftman
Unteroffizier	Corporal
Fahnenjunker-Unteroffizier	Officer Cadet
Unterfeldwebel; Wachtmeister	Sergeant; Sergeant in flak units
Fahnenjunker-Unterfeldwebel	Officer Cadet
Feldwebel	Sergeant/Flight Sergeant

Fahnenjunker-Feldwebel	N/A
Oberfeldwebel	Flight Sergeant
Fahnenjunker-Oberfeldwebel	Acting Pilot Officer
Fahnenjunker-Stabsfeldwebel	Between Flight Sergeant and Warrant Officer
Stabsfeldwebel	Warrant Officer
Leutnant	Pilot Officer
Oberleutnant	Flying Officer
Hauptmann	Flight Lieutenant
Major	Squadron Leader
Oberstleutnant	Wing Commander
Oberst	Group Captain
Generalmajor	Air Commodore
Generalleutnant	Air Vice-Marshal
General der Fallschirmtruppe; Flakartillerie; Flieger; Luftnachrichtentruppe; Luftwaffe	Air Marshal (of the Paratroopers; Flak; Aviators; Air Signals Troops; Luftwaffe)

Generaloberst	Air Chief Marshal
Generalfeldmarschall *Reichsmarschall*	Hanfred Schliephake stated that *Generalfeldmarschall* was the equivalent to an Air Chief Marshal – see H. Schliephake, *The Birth of the Luftwaffe* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1971), 80. However, as *Reichsmarschall* was an unprecedented rank created for Hermann Göring, *Generalfeldmarschall* is sometimes listed as equivalent to Marshal of the RAF.

Introduction

It was 26 August 1940: *Flieger* Franz Dahm was restless and enervated. Casting a worried eye to the skies, he searched fiercely for the reassuring glints of grey that would signal the homecoming of his comrades. Next to him, the groundcrew of his Luftwaffe bomber *Staffel* ('squadron')* paced back and forth like expectant fathers. 'Where are they?' they kept asking nervously. 'They should have actually been back by now!'[1] 'The industrious guard of our ground staff, whose silent heroic deeds are not spoken of, and on whose tireless work so much depends, are waiting in agony for "their" aircraft,' Dahm mused tensely. 'The *Staffel* is visiting England, but all the hearts and thoughts of the flight mechanics who stayed here flew with them.'

Yet, it was not just news of their safe return that he was eager to obtain: Dahm was a journalist from a Luftwaffe war

* This book uses the German term *Staffel* instead of 'squadron', as a Luftwaffe *Staffel* (nine to twelve aircraft) was a slightly different size to an RAF squadron during the Battle of Britain, which had a theoretical strength of sixteen aircraft – twelve of which were required to be operational. *Gruppe* ('group') is also used instead of 'Group' because a *Gruppe* was much smaller than an RAF Group. See J. Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five Months Which Changed History* (Transworld, 2010) [Kindle Edition], loc. 520–534.

correspondence company. Pencil firmly in hand, and paper clenched in his white-knuckled fist, he had started writing a crowing battle report for the Nazi press. The reporter inside was poised to sniff out stories of heroism, stoicism and – perhaps most desirable of all – progress. Crushing the British Royal Air Force in this new *Luftschlacht um England* ('Air Battle for England') ahead of *Unternehmen 'Seelöwe'* ('Operation Sealion'), a proposed amphibious invasion of Great Britain, was proving to be an irksome anomaly in the Wehrmacht's triumphant track record.

Finally, Dahm spotted the surviving German bombers emerging in the distance. Washed over with relief, the jittering journalist strode across the airfield to get an inside scoop on this intense Luftwaffe raid over RAF Biggin Hill. 'I catch hold of a pilot *Unteroffizier*, who flew with us on the left wing of our formation in this major attack on the pirate island,' Dahm reported breathlessly. The *Unteroffizier* subsequently informed him that 'Tommy has had enough… today, the boys didn't even dare approach us anymore. We completed our combat mission of smashing Biggin Hill airfield as safely and reliably as a practice flight at the home airbase.'

'With that,' as Dahm's report concluded, 'angry at such a shabby opponent, [the *Unteroffizier*] takes off his fur boots, throws the flight suit over his shoulder, and trudges off to the accommodation.' Dahm's account was written for propaganda purposes, and therefore must be taken with a grain of salt, but it certainly encapsulates the Luftwaffe's growing belief that Britain was facing its swan song. As the decorated Luftwaffe fighter ace Hans-Ekkehard Bob confirmed, 'We, the German fighter pilots, really had the impression that the British fighters might have been decimated considerably, since during the late summer of 1940, we had little contact with the enemy, although we flew up to London daily.'[2]

Propaganda reports like Dahm's were hungrily devoured back home: thousands of Third Reich citizens were pinning their hopes on the '*Führer*'s Hammer', as the Nazi press dubbed

the Luftwaffe, to end the war against the last official bastion of Allied resistance in Europe. Then, fate – or, more precisely, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring – intervened. Within just two weeks of Dahm's report, Adolf Hitler was forced to postpone indefinitely the amphibious invasion of Britain. Göring, the Luftwaffe's bumptious commander-in-chief, had unexpectedly changed his tactics. Instead of his German air force focusing solely on the RAF, it was now going to pound British cities, industries and civilians – starting the 'Blitz'. Allowing the groggy RAF to recuperate and revitalize itself enough to render Operation Sealion impossible by mid-September 1940, the Luftwaffe's momentum was irretrievably squandered.

The rest, as they say, is history – but it is a history with which Britain remains unshakeably enraptured eighty-five years later.

The Battle of Britain is the most famous aerial campaign in British history, so it is tempting to think we already know the Luftwaffe's role in the story well. We are hardly short of literature that details German aircraft and technology; elite units and fighter aces; tactics, strategy and its fractious leadership during the battle. Nevertheless, this chronic hyperfocus on the campaign's operational minutiae means that the Luftwaffe's story is often relegated to one of three oversimplified narratives within British historiography. The first, and perhaps the most pervasive, is that of the menacing Goliath to the RAF's plucky David.

To Britain, the air campaign was a defining 'backs-against-the-wall' moment where the island proved that it may have been isolated, but it was not down and out. German awareness of this national narrative can be seen with the editor of *Militär & Geschichte* magazine writing in March 2020: 'It is no coincidence that the British, in the Brexit discussions, like to draw parallels to a broad turning point in their more recent national history: to the Second World War, particularly to the years 1940/41, when the "Battle of Britain" had to be fought against the Third Reich and they were largely left to their own devices.'[3]

For the Germans, however, the *Luftschlacht um England* – which, unlike the British timeline of the campaign, also

encompassed the Blitz – is from 'a time which cannot be exemplary for us',[4] in the words of former defence minister Ursula von der Leyen. This is not to say that the battle is unknown in Germany, with the subject garnering attention from news media such as *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* in the last few years.[5] Yet, despite a handful of commendable forensic studies from historians like Peter Cronauer, Jens Wehner, Falko Bell, Hans Peter Eisenbach and Carolus Dauselt, the Germans understandably lack the appetite to document the Luftwaffe's experiences in the campaign with the same ardour that characterizes much of the British literature on the subject.[6]

The majority of writing on the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain, then, falls to the British. But a second trope that British writers are frequently guilty of regurgitating is representing the Luftwaffe's esteemed 'knights of the sky' – its famed *Jagdflieger* (fighter pilots) – as being in an honourable joust with their equals in the RAF's Fighter Command. There are three main issues to this approach. The first is that it excludes parts of the narrative that do not fit in with the swashbuckling dogfights, from long stretches of monotony to the strafing of parachuting airmen and air-sea rescue vessels.

The second issue is that it encourages a hyperfocus on the Luftwaffe's elite – such as decorated generals and illustrious fighter aces – which neglects the experiences of more 'regular' servicemen across all ranks and roles during the *Luftschlacht um England*. The most troubling concern, however, is that the 'knights of the sky' trope often drives the narrative in Britain that Luftwaffe airmen were 'just like us', as Flight Sergeant Ian Walker once wrote of two captured German airmen in his diary on 24 August 1940.[7] This premise often had benign and even benevolent origins, where British airmen forged a mutual understanding with their German counterparts over the sacrifices that both sides were making for their respective nations.

But what do we mean by 'just like us'? We likely mean courageous, scared, honourable, skilful, flighty – *human*. And,

in many cases, the Luftwaffe's men showcased some or all of those attributes. They had similar motivations of family and friends; of comrades and duty; of longing to be back at home, no longer sullied by the horrors of war. Many of them wanted to believe, as the famous Luftwaffe fighter ace Johannes Steinhoff once insisted after the war, that 'We came after having conquered Europe, as young men, fighting sportsmanlike.'[8]

Indeed, we should not entirely invalidate the shared experiences between the British and German fighter pilots, with their wartime acts of chivalry and open-minded attitudes towards one another doing much to form the basis of enduring post-war reconciliation in Europe. But to say that they were 'just like us' is to underplay the significant culpability that the Luftwaffe wielded in enabling a genocidal political regime to realize its rapacious territorial ambitions; it also covers up the atrocities committed by a small but significant minority of the Luftwaffe within the Nazi-occupied territories before the Battle of Britain.

Certainly, serving one's country and wanting to fly was a universal motivator among aviators. Yet, the Luftwaffe fighter ace Günther Rall readily admitted that 'We accepted the activities of the National Socialists as ugly side effects of a policy that had so far kept all its lofty promises.'[9] In other words, as a Luftwaffe flight instructor put it after the war, 'They served the devil to conquer heaven.'[10] Willingly becoming Göring's 'corps of vengeance',[11] as the commander-in-chief christened the organization to a group of junior Luftwaffe officers in 1936, meant that the Luftwaffe gained its strength because of political spite, defiance and, eventually, the desire for retribution.

After the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles had completely stripped Germany of its military and naval air forces. This ensured that the *Schwarze Luftwaffe* ('Shadow Luftwaffe'), which secretly emerged shortly afterwards in the Weimar Republic, had an enduring chip on its shoulder that the RAF – forged from the Royal Flying Corps as it edged towards victory in the First World War – did not. Then, under the Nazis, a blazing

lex talionis, or 'eye for an eye' principle, was imbued within their newly consolidated Luftwaffe that may have occasionally softened upon personal contact with their respected British foes, but nevertheless fuelled every sortie the German air force flew against the island in the Second World War.

To claim its airmen were 'just like us', then, is to misunderstand what Luftwaffe personnel were willing to fly and die for in the Battle of Britain – or at least, what they were expected to do.

Finally, the third reductive presentation of the Luftwaffe is when British historians examine it from a highly clinical perspective. In certain studies of the campaign, the German air force is seen as pieces on a chessboard – a type of aircraft here, a *Staffel* there – where the core of the players' mindset remains largely unconsidered. Each individual move is often mechanically analysed without pausing to consider what the Luftwaffe was truly playing *for*, or without giving them much definition beyond the popular comic book image of a ruthless Nazi *Übermensch*.[12]

Historical attention has frequently been paid to *Reichsmarschall* Göring and his exasperated commanders, but what about the non-commissioned officers and the other ranks, who made up the German air force in far greater numbers? Did *they* regard pressuring the British war cabinet to sue for peace as the overarching goal – or was paving the way for the Sealion invasion at the forefront of their minds? *General der Flieger* Paul Deichmann dismissively claimed after the war that 'The famous Sealion was only an idea.'[13] But, as British air raids intensified over Nazi Germany on 30 August 1940, a low-ranking Luftwaffe signalman of the Air Signals Regiment 35 ruthlessly promised his wife that 'if our house is hit, every house in England that I can lay my hands on will burn'.[14]

Indeed, how did perceptions of the campaign – and the prospect of an invasion – differ for these oft-forgotten Luftwaffe branches: the air signals units, the anti-aircraft units, the paratroopers that the flying arms left behind collecting dust? Then, when flying multiple daily sorties for months on end, what

spurred on the Luftwaffe's airmen of all ranks and designations to keep venturing over the 'pirate island': *Führer* or Fatherland, revenge or desperation? As the final victory over Britain became ever more elusive, how did they view the inconclusive campaign? Above all, what did the Battle of Britain mean for the entire Luftwaffe and Nazi Germany at large – and how seriously did they think they were going to win?

For as long as these questions are unanswered, our understanding of how the Battle of Britain unfolded will remain lopsided. The true objectives, operational culture and battle cohesion of the Luftwaffe in the campaign cannot be fully comprehended on a military level if its combat mentality, experiences and morale on a more personal level are not also understood. Eighty-five years after the Battle of Britain, a comprehensive history on everyday life and death for the entire Luftwaffe during its ten-month *Luftschlacht um England* is yet to be penned. Thus, *Eagle Days: Life and Death for the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain* rectifies this by providing a typical operational history of the German air force during the iconic campaign, but adopting a holistic approach that encompasses the rank and file of the infamous organization.

Eagle Days traces the historical, societal and political conditioning that the men of the Luftwaffe were exposed to regarding the British – as well as determining how its recruitment process, military training and previous campaigns affected their mindset heading into the battle. This panoptic view of the Luftwaffe should also be extended to the aerial campaign as a whole. The Battle of Britain was far more than sun-soaked tussles over Kent: it was a bitter transnational struggle in which both sides were fighting for *their* view of European security and freedom, though with vastly different intentions. The offensive action taken by its fighter pilots and *Kampfflieger* ('bomber crews') in the skies above Britain had a direct bearing on the morale of not just the Luftwaffe personnel who concurrently protected the Reich from British air raids, but also of the German public.

Furthermore, the campaign also inspired the German and Austrian airmen of the future, who watched the Luftwaffe's sorties in the *Luftschlacht um England* with amazement – whether they had already signed up for the German air force, or were young schoolboys desperate to emulate their flying heroes once they became of age. Drawing upon everything from wartime Luftwaffe field letters, diaries, combat reports, operational memoranda and post-war memoirs, to Nazi speeches, newspapers, magazines and newsreels, this book goes deeper than the dogfights to explore the fears, ambitions and convictions that gripped the men who rained death on Britain amid its 'Finest Hour'.

Eagle Days achieves this because it never loses focus on the complex human condition. We fly alongside the queasy young Luftwaffe recruits on their first perilous raids over Britain; we witness the agitation of German paratroopers anxious to be dropped over the country. Equally, we hear from the family men who ache to be in the arms of their wives once more; we examine the abhorrent Nazi ideology spurring on some German flying personnel to strike at Britain's 'Jewish plutocrats'. Thus, the Luftwaffe is observed as a sum of its parts – from the courageous aviators who wanted to fly, to the vengeful Nazi combatants who saw the subjugation of others as their birthright, and to those who fell somewhere in between.

This, in turn, transforms the Luftwaffe's historical role during the RAF's 'Finest Hour' from a cartoonish antagonist to a multidimensional, flawed yet formidable opponent – making it even more remarkable and crucial that Fighter Command managed to prevail against it. Taking off from Anglo–German relations in the inter-war period, roaring full throttle towards the *Luftschlacht um England*, before landing in German post-war memory of the momentous campaign, *Eagle Days* tells the Luftwaffe's story in the Battle of Britain through a far more unique lens than its bombsights and gunsights alone.

PART I

AGITATION

1

Corps of Vengeance

As his icy blue eyes flashed maliciously within his porcine face, it was evident that Hermann Göring's tripwire had been triggered; Marshal of the RAF Sir John Salmond knew he could do nothing but exasperatedly watch the explosion. A representative of Imperial Airways, he had merely hoped to discuss the working relationship between the German airline Lufthansa and British airline pilots, whom the former had been training in blind flying.[1] Accordingly, Salmond had been personally received in Berlin during the early spring of 1935 – now, though, he looked towards the accompanying Reich Air Ministry* interpreter, *Oberstleutnant* Ulrich Kessler, to make sense of the portly windbag in front of him. Kessler's staid face wavered slightly as he confirmed the redirection of the conversation to a far more uncomfortable subject: the Treaty of Versailles' enduring ban on German military aviation.

Salmond quickly interjected that Germany had already been theoretically granted equity back in December 1932. The affronted Bavarian replied that the Germans did not require other nations to bestow them with aeronautical parity. With a

* *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* (RLM) in German.

supervillain's aside, however, he added that the 'little air force' of his own that he had been constructing was the real equity that he had hankered after for the past fifteen years. Kessler froze upon hearing Göring's confession, initially hesitant to convert it from the German swirling in his brain to the incriminating English – but the future commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe was adamant that Kessler should pass on his exact words. 'A little one?' Salmond enquired, raising one suspicious eyebrow. Göring shrugged. 'Well, I would call it little.'

Defeated by his bone-deep proclivity for gloating, he sheepishly admitted to Hitler straight afterwards that the game was up: the British knew about the Luftwaffe. Yet, a month before Salmond's visit, Göring had promised his young airmen that 'The whole Luftwaffe would soon be brought out into the open.'[2] Already, his 'little air force' boasted 900 flying officers and 300 anti-aircraft officers, who commanded around 17,000 men.[3] As the Luftwaffe fighter ace Adolf Galland testified, 'In February 1935, Göring put in an appearance at Schleissheim and to everyone's delight showed off the first Luftwaffe uniform.'[4] Johannes Steinhoff reminisced of the period that 'We were proud. We were pampered. We were the "guarantors of the future". Göring's air bases were conceived in typical Third Reich style – very modern and comfortable, almost luxurious.'[5]

Such was the success of the commander-in-chief's blandishments that, when Göring privately claimed to a group of Luftwaffe junior officers in 1936 that 'You will one day be my corps of vengeance,' Herbert Rieckhoff – later the *Geschwaderkommodore** – of the *Kampfgeschwader* ('bomber wing') KG 30 confirmed there 'probably wasn't a single person in attendance who wasn't totally motivated to give his utmost in support of this regime'.[6]

That same year, their brimming enthusiasm would be truly put to the test when Göring deployed his new air force in the Spanish

* Like a *Staffelkapitän* ('Squadron Captain'), *Geschwaderkommodore* ('Wing Commodore') was a command position rather than a rank.

Civil War (1936–9). Before we advance towards detailing the Luftwaffe's story in the Battle of Britain, we must neither undersell the immense operational advantage and experience it accumulated in the immediate years leading up to the campaign, nor lose sight of how German perceptions of their British rivals were shaped on the long, arduous road to 1940.

After Hitler formally recognized General Francisco Franco's far-right Spanish Nationalist government in late September 1936, a dedicated expeditionary force consisting of Luftwaffe and German *Heer* ('army') personnel – the *Legion Condor* (Condor Legion) – was mobilized on 29 October 1936 to assist Franco's forces against the Second Spanish Republic. The Germans tried to keep the existence of their Condor Legion a fiercely guarded secret, although Britain was already aware of their collusion with Franco by September 1936.[7] As Rieckhoff noted, only the crème de la crème of the Luftwaffe were selected for the intervention in Spain, known as *Übung Rügen* ('Rügen Exercise')*:

> They had to report to General [Helmuth] Wilberg's liaison office in Berlin. There, they were given an ID card stating that they had been released from the German Wehrmacht, and were given behavioural measures – they were not allowed to carry out any correspondence, not to inform their wives or parents about their command, nor to talk about Spain after their return – and were then shipped to the Iberian Peninsula without being told their destination.[8]

The depth of this deception could be seen in how the German airmen making their way to Spain donned civilian clothes and were given elaborate false backstories to explain their journey. Galland later testified that his own group of Luftwaffe pilots

* The intervention had initially started with *Unternehmen Feuerzauber* ('Operation Magic Fire'), a *Deutsche Lufthansa* airlift to assist the Nationalists on 29 July 1936. *Winterübung Rügen* ('Winter Rügen Exercise') referred to a large maritime transfer of German volunteers to Spain – but the entire intervention became known as *Übung Rügen*.

were to say that 'they were all on a "Strength Through Joy"* leisure trip to Genoa'[9] if their ship was stopped and searched. Upon arrival in Spain, the Legionnaires were kitted out with Spanish uniforms and Luftwaffe aircraft were repainted with the Spanish saltire (*crux decussata*) to maintain the façade.

The Legion started clocking up combat flying hours on the aircraft that would later form the backbone of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Three hundred Heinkel He 111 B-1 bombers had been ordered by the Reich Air Ministry, with the first batch entering Luftwaffe service in January 1937; the aircraft's first operational deployment took place two months later during the Battle of Guadalajara.[10] Walter Lehweß-Litzmann – who later became the *Kommodore* of a Luftwaffe bomber wing – enviously devoured letters from his brother Peter, who had been transferred from the bomber wing KG 55 in Ansbach to the Condor Legion. Peter reported that:

> A lot of [He] 111s have already fallen on their faces, not due to enemy action, but due to some kind of engine malfunction coupled with stupidity. I have already developed an unusual level of bad luck, as something always happens to me when I have a new machine, i.e. one that has just been partially overhauled. Once, when I got one from Seville, I landed quite peacefully in Burgos, rolled out, then the landing gear broke on the right. Then, as a result of the ground loop, the left one, the spur, the pot, also broke. Everything is a wonderful mess.[11]

Nevertheless, flying such aircraft enabled Luftwaffe mechanics to fine-tune some of the shortcomings that could only be revealed under the strain of operating within a warzone. The Dornier Do 17 bomber had also entered frontline Luftwaffe service in early 1937, though it was not as numerous as the He 111.

* *'Kraft durch Freude'* ('Strength Through Joy', KdF) was a Nazi leisure organization which coordinated recreational trips and tourist activities for German workers and their families.

Largely carrying out bombing and reconnaissance missions in Spain, it was favourably received by its aircrews. Do 17 pilots were especially taken with its excellent handling qualities at low altitudes, where its radial engines thrived best.[12] The raid in which German bombers would be most infamously deployed in Spain, however, was the bombing of the Basque city of Guernica on 26 April 1937.

The Luftwaffe's failure to properly assess the cultural significance of the city beforehand – and, thus, their inability to anticipate the international outrage that the raid would provoke – demonstrated its early propensity towards a reckless and cavalier bombing policy.[13] The raid killed between 200 and 250 people, although the highly inflated figure of 1,700 dead was quickly circulated.[14] Then, when rumours propagated that the Germans had been involved in the city's mutilation, it afforded the British the perfect opportunity to lambast their rival's morality. On 29 April 1937, an article in the *Dundee Courier* newspaper seethed about 'The Guernica Massacre':

> Throughout history [the Germans] have as a people gloried in aggressive war carried on by highly trained armies beyond their own frontiers. To-day they know that war will come home to the cities and towns of Germany, and that it will be precisely of the kind that Guernica and Eibar have experienced… Germany does not fear either the Red Army or the army of France. But its fear of the air forces of every surrounding country is real. Experimenting in Spain will not be entirely one-sided in its lessons.[15]

The article concluded that the bombing of Guernica 'marks a step further in the steep descent of modern scientific civilization to daemonic savagery' and 'will rank as the most completely a-moral action yet recorded in connexion with modern war'.[16] Indeed, even some Luftwaffe personnel had grown uncomfortable with their actions. *Major* Diethelm von Eichel-Streiber recalled that 'I had hated to bomb villages in Spain and asked to be transferred to a fighter unit. I was refused. So, I returned to Germany and

reported to General [Erhard] Milch, who 'told me to let him know when I had my pilot's B2.'[17]

In light of the heightened Anglo–German tensions as the Condor Legion spread its deadly wings over Spain, it became of even greater importance for the Luftwaffe to maintain an air of international cooperation with the RAF. In June 1937, a German delegation travelled to the British city of York in order to participate in the International Air Meeting that was held there. Wolfgang Falck, then the adjutant of the *Jagdgeschwader* ('fighter wing') JG 132 based at Döberitz in Brandenburg, reported on the event to the Reich Air Ministry. He made particular note of the genuine warmth that the Luftwaffe had felt from their British counterparts:

> We Germans were treated with extraordinarily warm hospitality and courtesy and were lavishly entertained, so that a very friendly relationship quickly developed between the English and the Germans; at first, it was almost more cordial than between the individual groups of Germans who had previously been strangers to each other. The hospitality of the English is admirable. We were invited to everything imaginable – even the newspaper with reports on the meeting was delivered to us free of charge.[18]

Falck spoke especially fondly of the fact that 'With the officers of the RAF, with whom we met over the course of the days, we were immediately united by a bond of the warmest camaraderie and, in addition to the recognition that was always paid to German aviation, there was a warm and loud wish from all sides for closer and common cooperation and friendship between English and German aircraft pilots.'[19] Capitalizing on this diplomatic momentum, Göring received Marshal of the RAF Hugh Trenchard, 1st Viscount Trenchard, a month later in Berlin. At Döberitz, Falck recalled the continued geniality between the two sides:

> As part of a large reception, Sir Hugh first presented us with a photograph of the Richthofen *Staffel*, which had been taken by

> an agent during the First World War. Then followed the photo collage of an air battle between the old Richthofen *Staffel* and an Allied unit, which Trenchard had provided with very comradely, handwritten comments that showed his respect for the German fighter pilots. Both gifts hung in the officers' mess in Döberitz for years until everything fell to pieces towards the end of the Second World War.[20]

Thus, by the summer of 1937, it appeared as if the flyers on both sides had forged a firm mutual understanding that defied the turbulence of the wider geopolitical situation. But, as always, the clamorous Göring had to go and put his foot in it. Initially, he had gone on the charm offensive towards Trenchard: 'You are well known in Germany,' he informed him warmly, 'and I have a high regard for the air force you have created.'[21] Then, during the banquet held in Trenchard's honour at Schloss Charlottenburg, Göring allegedly remarked to him that 'It will be a pity if our two nations ever have to fight.'

What he said next, however, made Trenchard's lip curl with distaste. 'Your airmen are very good,' Göring sighed to the Marshal. 'It's a pity they haven't the machines we have', before he concluded that Germany could 'make the whole world tremble'. A furious Trenchard allegedly replied: 'You must be off your head. You said you hoped we wouldn't have to fight each other. I hope so too, for your sake. I warn you, Göring – don't underestimate the RAF.'[22] Trenchard dropped his serviette, walked straight out of the banquet and never conversed with Göring again. Despite the frosty exchange, the planned visit of the Reich Air Ministry's State Secretary Erhard Milch and his delegation to Britain in the autumn of 1937 still went ahead.

Yet, the fraught diplomatic relations were hardly eased by the British press making constant references to 'General Milch and his technical henchmen.'[23] Ahead of the autumn Luftwaffe visit to various RAF airbases and aircraft factories, the air correspondent of a British newspaper even had to reassure its readers in October 1937 that 'The [Royal] Air Force can be trusted to hide what

it doesn't want people to see.'[24] It was just as well, too, given that Milch went on to make a number of RAF personnel uncomfortable with a single goading question: 'Now, gentlemen, let us all be frank. How are you getting on with your experiments in the detection by radio of aircraft approaching your shores?'[25] Thankfully for humanity, the affronted RAF officers kept *schtum* on the precious radar technology that would later assist Fighter Command against the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain.

Following this string of faux pas, Göring attempted to smooth over the damage. While attending an opera for the Berlin Hunting Exhibition in November 1937, the Luftwaffe's commander-in-chief leant over to catch the ear of Sir Nevile Henderson, then the British ambassador to Germany. Göring exclaimed to Henderson that it was 'Inconceivable even to imagine that there should ever be war between men who got on so well and respected each other so much as the British and German airmen.'[26] For as long as politics was kept out of the picture, this was perhaps true. But, with National Socialism exponentially rotting both the core and conscience of the Luftwaffe, the chances of a peaceable resolution were slimming dramatically.

Moreover, if the RAF had found out just how aggressively the Condor Legion was testing out its military capabilities in the concurrent Spanish Civil War, that possibility would have dwindled to zero. In 1938, the Luftwaffe debuted a new aircraft in Spain that would later epitomize *Blitzkrieg* ('lightning war') in the Second World War: the Junkers Ju 87, a *Sturzkampfflugzeug* ('dive-bomber') or 'Stuka' for short. Tipping over into a white-knuckle dive of over 300 mph, this harbinger of death enjoyed great success during the Spanish Civil War. By swooping down at an angle of 60–90°, the Ju 87's near-vertical approach meant that the trajectory of the released bomb could be placed far more accurately than in traditional horizontal bombing. Its suitability for conducting tactical precision strikes against enemy infrastructure and communication hubs quickly became evident.

A number of urban Spanish targets, from ports such as Valencia to major cities like Madrid, became the victims of Ju 87s testing their accuracy. One of the most infamous examples came in May 1938, when four Spanish villages and towns – Albocàsser, Ares del Maestre, Benassal and Vilar de Canes – were indiscriminately bombed by Ju 87 pilots during the springtime advance in Aragon. Within Benassal, a large church was entirely gutted by 500 kg bombs; the Luftwaffe then snapped photographs of the smouldering ruins on the ground and from the air, hoping to establish the bomb patterns and extent of the damage.[27] The final major German aircraft that received its baptism of fire in Spain – albeit to a lesser degree – was the inimitable Messerschmitt Bf 109. Equipped with all the modern fighter entrails of a retractable undercarriage, trailing edge flaps, and an enclosed cockpit, it was trialled using cannon fire to pack a harder punch.

The Bf 109, Ju 87, He 111 and Do 17 would later be deployed to tremendous effect by the Luftwaffe during the opening years of the Second World War; the former, of course, would rise to become Fighter Command's foremost rival in the Battle of Britain. In addition to testing out its aircraft and armament, it gained important air–land integration experience in Spain through the collaboration of the Luftwaffe fighter and bomber crews, anti-aircraft units, *Heer* and Nationalist infantrymen, signals units and intelligence corps. Attacking both tactical and strategic targets, too, was added to the Luftwaffe's deadly résumé, while another crucial takeaway for the fighter pilots that later proved exceptionally important during the Battle of Britain was the adoption of a new flying formation.

In the early years of the Second World War, the British flew in a stiff 'Vic' formation of three: one fighter, the section leader, flew out in front like an arrowhead, with two wingmen flanking him from behind on the left and right. Yet the '*Schwarm*' – literally 'swarm', but later known as the 'Finger Four' to the RAF – was already being developed by the Luftwaffe during

the Spanish Civil War. Four staggered fighters were split into pairs ('*Rotten*'),*[28] a system which was found to be more flexible and made it easier for all four pilots to keep an eye on the horizon for enemy fighters.[29] This was quickly adopted, with Bob recalling how 'I was transferred to Königsberg in East Prussia in 1939 in order to form the I. *Gruppe* ['Group'] of the fighter wing JG 21. The *Gruppe* was equipped with Me 109 Cs and Ds. At that time, we were already flying in squads with two planes each and in swarms with four planes each, whereby three swarms always formed a *Staffel* of twelve planes.'[30]

By the time that the Spanish Civil War ended on 1 April 1939, the operational experience garnered by the Condor Legion was substantial. The Luftwaffe's fighter pilots had claimed 386 aerial victories; its flak units chalked up a further fifty-nine aircraft shot down.[31] All-in-all, roughly 20,000 Luftwaffe personnel had seen combat in Spain, with tours lasting between six and twelve months on average.[32] Most favourable of all, they had sustained relatively light fatalities: in total, between 300–400 Germans had been killed, although 50 per cent of these deaths were attributed to 'careless driving on the torturous winding roads in the mountains of Spain'![33] Having successfully installed Franco as Spain's new leader, the returning Condor Legion received a hero's welcome in Germany.

On 6 June 1939, Göring declared amid his speech in their honour that 'The young and newly resurrected Luftwaffe tried to show and prove that it could fight and win again, and that is the great tradition that it has inherited from the World War.'[34] The international significance of what they had achieved could be seen in Göring's conclusion that 'Our opponents have seen

* As part of the swarm – known officially to the Luftwaffe as the *Schwarmgefechtslinie* ('swarm battle line') or *Schwarmwinkel* ('swarm angle') – the *Schwarmführer* ('swarm leader') was positioned slightly out in front, supported by a *Rottenflieger* ('wingman') on one side. On his other side was the *Rottenführer* ('pair leader'), who had his own wingman flying on his other flank, located slightly behind the main three.

the impressive strength of our proud Luftwaffe.' Hitler chimed in with his own sincere praise, expressing his delight that 'I can finally greet you boys myself. I am so happy to see you here before me. And, above all, I'm very proud of you.'[35] The intervention demonstrated the lengths that the Luftwaffe – and, more broadly, the Nazi leadership – was willing to go in order to gain the operational edge over their international rivals.

Despite the controversy and criticism that the Condor Legion garnered, the German air force considered the lessons of the Spanish Civil War to be well worth learning. It appeared to confirm that, whatever might happen in the future, its Nazi masters now appeared to truly realize the full potential of the young Luftwaffe. This had been further reinforced by the fact that in addition to the Rügen Exercise in Spain, the Luftwaffe had also been accruing operational experience through serving as the aerial muscle for Hitler's rapacious policy of *Lebensraum** ('living space'). This parasitic expansionism intended to secure the lifeblood of the German *Volk* by supplying the Third Reich with vital resources, manpower and materiel from external territories.

The expansion of Nazi Germany's borders had initially started with legally recovering the Saarland from British and French occupation in a League of Nations-observed plebiscite from January 1935, with over 90 per cent of Saarlanders electing to be united with Germany.[36] The emboldened *Führer* then publicly announced that the Wehrmacht would swell beyond 500,000 men through reintroducing military service; it was followed by the Third Reich's remilitarization of the Rhineland on 7 March 1936.[37] Only a handful of flying *Staffeln* ('squadrons') and anti-aircraft batteries supported the operation in the Rhineland, largely ferrying aircraft to repaint their frames in the Reich

* Though the concept was rooted in late nineteenth-century ideals of imperial expansionism, it became most infamously associated with the Nazi intention to seize *Lebensraum im Osten* ('Living Space in the East' – namely Poland and the Soviet Union).

colours and replace their registration numbers.[38] Nevertheless, the Luftwaffe was poised to be one of Hitler's more persuasive deterrents in providing the necessary hovering menace to enable his geopolitical ambitions.

By 1938, the Luftwaffe declared that its purpose was to 'Protect the German Reich and Fatherland, the people united under National Socialism, and their *Lebensraum*.'[39] This was very much reflected in its heightened presence over Austria during the *Anschluss* ('annexation') on 12 March 1938. Group Captain John Lyne Vachell, the British air attaché to Berlin from 1937 to 1939, despatched a report on 29 March 1938 in which he commented that 'Some 300 to 400 aircraft must have taken part'[40] in the *Anschluss*, even if it did not yet seem to him that the Luftwaffe was fully ready for war:

> Aircraft played a very prominent part in the entry of German armed forces into Austria. The first aircraft to land was that of *Herr* [Heinrich] Himmler, head of the SS, who, with fourteen of his men armed with submachine guns, was prepared to take the Vienna airport at Aspern by force if necessary – but it had, in fact, already been taken over by the Austrian Nazis. The first aircraft of the German air force arrived shortly afterwards, at 5 a.m. on 12 March, and carried a staff which took control of the airport. This aircraft was followed at short intervals by formations of fighters, bombers, reconnaissance aircraft, which dropped pamphlets over Vienna, and aircraft conveying troops.[41]

After the successful *Anschluss* in his homeland, Hitler now used the excuse of three million ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia to move towards the Sudetenland region of that country.[42] This decision, however, catapulted the Germans right into diplomatic strife with the British and the French, leading to crunch peace talks. The Munich crisis of September 1938 – in which the British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, the French prime minister Édouard Daladier, and fascist Italy's leader Benito Mussolini

later conceded the Sudetenland to Hitler – particularly stoked intense fear of war in Luftwaffe circles.

One Luftwaffe airman based at the Aviation Technical School in south-east Berlin captured the tension on 27 September 1938: 'It's do or die. We are facing a difficult time. But we have our *Führer*. We have a godlike trust in our *Führer*.'[43] After meeting with Luftwaffe and Reich Air Ministry personnel, such as general engineer Wolfram Eisenlohr, *Hauptmann* Huhneber and *Oberst* Wendland in October 1938, the British aeronautical engineer Sir Roy Fedden commented that 'The rank and file [were] profoundly grateful to Mr Chamberlain for his courage and pertinacity on behalf of peace.'[44] Göring, meanwhile, continued to bury his head in the sand regarding the possibility of provoking war with Britain.

Following the Munich crisis, he berated Kessler for having destroyed some documents belonging to the Luftwaffe air attaché Ralph Wenninger which pertained to the Godesberg Memorandum, in which Hitler had demanded that Czechoslovakia should concede the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany.[45] A strained-looking Kessler confirmed to him that 'Yes, I burnt them; I had to, considering the way the political situation looked to us.' Göring replied with a dismissive wave of the hand:

> Never mind; you were wrong. [Nevile] Henderson left me just a few minutes ago. He tried to work my tear glands and play the sentimental tune. He tried to persuade me to use my friendship with the *Führer* to make me give in. He threatened war with England. I told him that England would be smashed in that event. Now Henderson is off to my 'friend' [Walther von] Brauchitsch* to threaten him; he knows threats don't go with me. Whatever made you think that England would go to war with us?[46]

Kessler retorted that 'there is not a man in England who believes

* Brauchitsch was commander-in-chief of the German *Heer* ('army') until Hitler took over this position himself on 19 December 1941.

that they have anything to gain by war. Perhaps that idea existed before 1914. Today they know that they would not be richer by impoverishing us. But they do have their prestige to lose.' He denied being an Anglophile when Göring described him as such, admitting that 'I have come to see that England, and not France, stands in the way of Germany's becoming a great power.' Yet he warned Göring that 'England cannot afford to be pushed around by Hitler':

> The man in the street is not interested in Czechoslovakia, nor does he hate Germany. But he is interested in fair play and in protecting Britain's prestige. I have watched the Hyde Park orators talking about the imminent war – I also experienced the relief when Hitler did not invade Czechoslovakia the day after the Heinlein ultimatum, and I saw people on the streets and in the restaurants kissing each other when Chamberlain announced that he would fly to Germany to see Hitler.

For now, though, the Anglo–French policy of appeasement papered over the gaping fissures in European diplomacy that had appeared by late 1938. Kurt Scheffel, who later served in the Battle of Britain as a Ju 87 'Stuka' pilot, recalled the first Luftwaffe propaganda flights which took place over the Sudetenland on 5 October 1938. He remembered passing through Graslitz (Kraslice) and Heinrichsgrün (Jindřichovice), noting that 'people everywhere were enthusiastic about the successful entry of the German troops.'[47] On 8 October 1938, a junior doctor with a flak regiment – who would later transfer to the bomber wing KG 2 during the Battle of Britain – wrote a letter from Eger, now Cheb in the Czech Republic:

> Then came the invasion of Eger. It was beautiful – it is indescribable how people welcomed us with jubilant hearts and literally showered us with flowers. As we stood, a woman held out her hand to me and asked if we would have to retreat from the Czechs again, and when I said firmly that the troops were marching

> in enormous numbers and that we were the Wehrmacht and not the *Freikorps* ['Free Corps'], she broke down in tears and said she would be able to bring her husband and children back from hiding in the forest. Many women cried for joy and decorated us with the most beautiful flowers – they distributed food and tobacco.[48]

For Siegfried Fischer, who would soon become a Luftwaffe dive-bomber pilot, 'This was, then as now, the greatest day of my life. It made me a German citizen.'[49] He claimed that 'Three-and-a-half million Sudeten Germans, almost as many inhabitants as Norway has today, were oppressed by a Czech majority in the so-called democratic state of Czechoslovakia.' He added that 'The German occupation in 1938 was not felt to be an occupation at all. Rather, we waited in happy anticipation for the German troops finally to liberate us.' Amid this seemingly 'peaceful' takeover, however, the scars of German-inflicted violence were evident in the Sudetenland. The junior doctor who was then stationed in Czechoslovakia observed how:

> On the border that we crossed with the first troops, you could clearly see the shot-out windows and walls of the border sentry post. A bridge had been blown up by the Czechs, but our sappers have already built a new one and we continued on. The Czech soldiers had to abandon everything because of the rapid advance, and they themselves often fell into captivity. There was a shooting in a village and members of the Wehrmacht were killed. Artillery was immediately deployed and where resistance arose it was immediately broken. The Jewish and Czech businesses are closed and the owners have taken refuge. The people breathe a sigh of relief.[50]

This demonstrates that even before the Second World War broke out, some of the future Luftwaffe personnel who would serve in the Battle of Britain had already borne witness to – and, in some cases, even approved of – German violence and antisemitic

persecution in the territories they occupied. Hans-Ekkehard Bob, on the other hand, tried to maintain that it was an entirely peaceful transfer of power: 'The occupation of the Sudetenland, which at that time belonged to Czechoslovakia, was planned, and we were told to fly fighter escort for Ju 52 transport planes. Our planes were equipped with machine-guns, but we had neither ammunition nor ammunition belts. Fortunately, there was no shooting then.'[51]

What is little known, however, is that the Luftwaffe immediately set to using the newly acquired *Lebensraum* in the Sudetenland as a testing site for its Stukas. Scheffel recalled that 'The inspection of the bunker line near Kaaden on 17 October had given rise to the desire to attack such a bunker from the air with bombs in order to determine the effect. For this purpose, a bunker was chosen that was located in an open field near Mokotil [now Mukoděly], 9 km south of Podorsam [Podbořany].'[52] Assigned as a security officer, Scheffel was tasked with ensuring 'that the area around the bunker was clear of people when the *Staffeln* attacked'. On 21 October 1938, a large crowd of *Heer* and Luftwaffe personnel gathered to watch the bombing trial:

> At the appointed time, the bunker was vacated and the first aircraft attacked. It was quite clear that only hits directly next to or on the bunker could have any effect. The bombs that had been thrown as part of the first payload were very close to the bunker, but it was still standing. *Unteroffizier* Grobe of the 1. *Staffel* scored the first effective hit. This was noticeable because there was no large mushroom of smoke shooting upwards; rather, the explosion was widespread. *Leutnant* Unbehaun's next bomb must have been laid just as closely. *Staffelkapitän** *Hauptmann* Ott was the last to throw himself into his slanted dive. There was a direct hit. When the smoke cleared, you could see that the bunker was no longer there.[53]

* *Staffelkapitän* ('Squadron Captain') was a command position rather than a military rank.

Scheffel added that 'The bunker was completely torn apart, with its remains lying about eight metres away from the original location. There was a five-metre-deep hole where the bunker had been. The *Heer* officers were very impressed by the accuracy of the Stukas.' These early '*Blumenkriege*' ('flower wars'), where Germany annexed regions with large populations of ethnic Germans and German speakers, elevated Hitler to a god-like level in Germany by the late 1930s. But, most crucially, the seeds of *Blitzkrieg* were being sown in the occupied Sudetenland nearly a full year before their terrible bloom in Poland. Thus, from its victory in the Spanish Civil War to enabling Hitler's *Lebensraum*, Göring's 'little air force' of 1935 was now all grown up – and, like any contumacious teenager, it was ready to unleash its full might and fury upon anyone who opposed it.