Decisions in the Darkest Days of 1941

Or: “The law of unintended consequences is always at work”

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The danger of ex post facto thinking

- Looking back, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that, because events after a significant decision took a certain course, it was predestined
- And conversely, it's easy to look at a decision which had adverse short-run impacts, and think the decision can be characterized as good or bad
- Such qualitative judgments don't advance our knowledge
- Think about your own life – have you ever made a decision that seemed "good" or "bad, but had unpredicted long-range effects?
- "The law of unintended consequences" is almost always at work

Some rules of thumb

- Some general rules for consideration in evaluating a decision

  What were the stakes?

  What factors figured in the decision?

  What was the short-range impact?

  What was the long-term impact?

  What unanticipated consequences resulted from the decision?

A cauldron overturned

- John Keegan says "Twentieth-century European civilization was . . . A world . . . pregnant with war"
- The forces of industrialization, urbanization, and imperialism created a seething pot of potential furies
- In the aftermath of World War I, Austria and Turkey were the remnants of vanished empires, but adapted to their reduced stature
- Whereas Germany, ascendant before the war, was unable to digest the bitter pill of defeat
- Hitler, only a German by adoption, took the disaster personally

New alliances for old

- The rearrangement of the European map after 1918 meant that traditional diplomatic arrangements fell apart
- The French Popular Front government tried to re-create the former French-Russian alliance in March 1936 by a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union
- The hollowness of this deal was revealed with the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by March 1939
- So Britain and France tried to retrieve the situation by announcing guarantees of the independence of Poland, Romania, and Greece
- But there were other forces at work . . .

On the verge of war – Summer of 1939

- What were the stakes?
  - For Germany, reversing the verdict of 1918
  - For Britain and France, avoiding another war like 1914-1918
- What factors figured in the decisions?
  - The reconfiguration of the European map after WW1
- What were the short-run impacts?
  - Mostly visible by mid-1940
- What were the long-run impacts?
  - Short-run victories that led to defeat in the long run

A stunning reversal

- The Soviet Union was friendly to Czechoslovakia, but Polish hostility thwarted any effort it could make to stop Hitler from grabbing it
- With the rumbles of war in the summer of 1939, Hitler dispatched his Foreign Minister, von Ribbentrop, to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviets
- The British and French, by contrast, sent a delegation headed by a retired admiral, by a "slow boat"
- The result: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which gave Hitler a free hand to attack Poland . . .
- And led to more troubling developments

The first shots – but not the last



Unlike Czechoslovakia, Poland was defenseless against a modern mechanized onslaught

Stalin's price for giving Hitler a free hand was both economic aid from Germany and a healthy slice of Poland

So the decision by Britain and France not to defend Czechoslovakia was a blunder with three major effects

First, it unsettled the whole post-Versailles organization of Europe and

Second, it led to Stalin's seizure of the Baltic states and

Third, it ignited an out-of-the way war

The first of two Winter Wars



Finland had regained its independence from Russia in 1918

But the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact gave Stalin a free hand to put pressure on its neighbor

Failed negotiations led to an outbreak of war in November 1939; the war lasted until the following spring, at which time the Finns had to cede the territory shown in yellow to the Soviets

The territorial gains probably saved Leningrad in World War II and facilitated the later supply route to Murmansk but . . .

Feeding a delusion

- To jump ahead: the most fateful decision in 1941 was for Hitler to order "Operation Barbarossa" (the invasion of the Soviet Union)
- Given that the USSR had a much greater population and natural resources than Germany (even after gobbling up Czechoslovakia and Poland), why did Hitler take such a gamble? Three reasons:
- First, Germany had defeated Russia in World War I, while fighting on two fronts;
- Second, German intelligence had fed misinformation to Stalin which led to the notorious "Moscow Trials" (1937-38);
- Third, the fumbling performance of the Soviets against the Finns led Hitler to believe that a blitzkrieg could led to a quick victory

War in the far north



Norway was a vital supplier of minerals (particularly iron ore) to both the Allies and Germany

Going through Norway was also the only way the Allies could get aid to Finland

The Germans got wind of a proposed Allied operation and decided to strike first

On April 9, 1940, the Germans seized Denmark (almost impossible to defend against a mechanized onslaught) and landed at several places on the Norwegian coast

Two months of bitter fighting ensued before the British and French had to withdraw their troops

What lessons so far?

- The Soviets thought that, because they cooperated with the Nazis to dismember Poland, they could enjoy profitable relations with Germany
- And Stalin was positive that the British and French intended to drag him into a war with Germany, where he would be expected to do most of the fighting
- The Allies thought that, even after seeing how effective the German panzer divisions were, they could hold off a German attack
- Which they expected to unfold in the pattern of the early months of World War I
- But Hitler had other plans . . .

Hitler's decision options

- Seize the maximum land
- This would point to an offensive against the USSR
- Hitler had advocated this in *Mein Kampf*
- But which the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact seemed to foreclose
- Revenge against France and Britain for 1918 was also on the agenda
- France was vulnerable to a land offensive whereas overpowering Britain pointed to a naval war
- But Hitler thought Britain could be persuaded to make peace if France was overcome

Case Yellow

The Allies thought they could stop another German invasion based on what had happened in 1914

But whereas the Schlieffen Plan of 1914 vintage envisioned a massive drive aimed at destroying the French before they could cover Paris, the Manstein Plan aimed to use Germany's Panzer divisions to drive a wedge between the British and French forces

Which is what happened

The result: France was forced to sign an armistice on June 22 1940

Leaving Britain isolated, with its army stripped of heavy weaponry



France divided





France was divided into an Occupied Zone (northern and western France) and an unoccupied zone governed from Vichy. Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain was the head of the "French State", while his former subordinate Charles de Gaulle escaped to Britain and became head of the "Free French."

Political consequences

- Pétain's distrust of Britain and admiration of Franco put him under Hitler's sway
- While Britain refused all accommodation with Pétain's government, FDR maneuvered to keep relations with the "French State" (until later events forced his hand)
- And Churchill, while welcoming de Gaulle's support, didn't fully trust him
- This opened a raging political split that continued throughout the war and reverberated in French postwar politics until 1958
- After the war, Pétain was tried for treason and condemned to death; de Gaulle commuted his sentence to life imprisonment

A new political order in Europe

- Hitler's reach now stretched from the Barents Sea to the Spanish border, from Brittany to present-day Belarus
- Hitler wanted to add Spain (under Franco's rule since the Spanish Civil War) to Germany's alliance with Mussolini
- When Franco demurred, Hitler had to focus on the key question: What to do about Britain?
- Hitler admired the British and thought that, if he promised to leave them in possession of their empire, they would acquiesce in letting him achieve mastery across Europe
- He didn't count on either Mussolini's grandiose ambitions or Churchill's adamant opposition – which pushed him into looking to the east

Heading into 1941

- Failure of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain precluded the possibility of a successful invasion (Operation Sealion) of Britain
- So Germany had to rely on naval warfare to force Britain into negotiating for peace
- Two components: Surface vessels and U-boats
- Germany had already started planning to invade the USSR (Case White, later renamed Operation Barbarossa)
- But Raeder (commander of the navy) and Göring (head of the air force) counseled against a land invasion
- And there were other forces at work
- Such as Mussolini's territorial ambitions

What changed by the start of 1941?

- For Britain, the stakes were now just a matter of survival
- For France, the stakes were ending the humiliation of defeat
- The most important decision factor was: would Germany accept victory or were Hitler's ambitions grander?
- For the USSR, was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact a durable one?
- The short-range impact was: could Germany force Britain into a negotiated peace?
- The long-range impacts weren't visible
- But the unanticipated consequences were to be massive

North African face-off



Mussolini had stayed out of the war until France was near defeat

When he got into the war, he decided to make a bid to add Egypt to Italy's Libyan and Ethiopian territories

But his army's ineptitude led to a swift thrashing at the hands of the British forces in Egypt

Which forced Hitler to dispatch the Afrika Korps under Rommel in January 1941

What about the Balkans?



Italy had seized Albania in 1939

But its effort to invade Greece in 1940 met with a stinging defeat

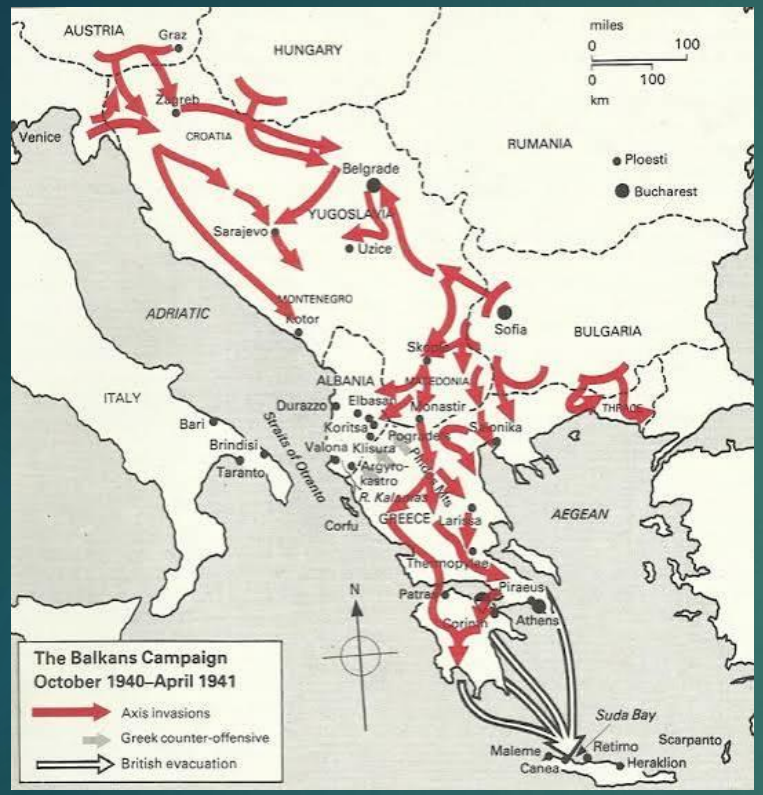
Hitler could not afford to have a pro-British government in Greece before Operation Barbarossa; if Britain was allowed a foothold in the Balkans, British air power could strike Romania, whose oil fields fueled the German war machine

And British naval power could not be allowed to dominate Greek waters

Another complicating factor

- The position of the United States was uncertain
- FDR was restrained by the Neutrality Act from following his inclinations to side with Britain
- Under constant appeals from Churchill, he started to aid Britain, first by subterfuge, later openly
- Naval assistance in 1940 (50 old destroyers)
- The Lend-Lease Act in 1941
- Hitler's contempt for American military prowess led him to disregard the threat of U.S. entry into the war . . .
- Which he maintained, even in the face of escalating provocations from the U.S. Navy

A brutal spring



Despite the rugged Balkans terrain, the invasion moved swiftly

The interests of Germany and the Soviet Union increased the probability of armed conflict

Bulgaria was pro-Russian; Romania depended on oil exports to Germany; Hungary was strongly anti-Russian

Yugoslavia's pro-German regime was overthrown by a military coup in March 1941

Which led to "Operation Punishment" (brutal air assault on Belgrade), followed by a mechanized onslaught

Bulgaria switched sides and invaded northern Greece

Crete

After conquering the Greek mainland, the Germans had to decide between two objectives: Crete or Malta?

Malta was the British bastion in the central Mediterranean and some German planners wanted to seize it

A probable knockout blow against British naval power, and the prelude to a probable strike against the Suez Canal

But there was a complicating factor

And internal Nazi politics added another consideration



The Royal Navy still ruled the Mediterranean waves

British naval power spooked Mussolini

The Italian navy had more modern ships but much less experienced leadership

The British had whipped the Italians in surface battles at Spartivento and Cape Matapan

And in November 1940, British carrier planes had sunk two Italian battleships in the harbor of Taranto

So Mussolini couldn't promise Hitler that his navy would be successful in protecting an amphibious assault against either island



HMS Warspite, 1944 off Normandy (Courtesy: Maritime Quest)

Attack from the sky

Göring's Luftwaffe hadn't had much success in the second half of 1940

But it had something new – paratroopers

These offered the chance to vault over the Royal Navy's warships

Student, creator of the German airborne forces, strongly pushed the case for letting his troops lead the way into Crete

And Hitler, with his perennial obsession with protecting the Romanian oil fields against aerial bombing, agreed that taking Crete was the better solution



A costly victory

The British knew the Germans were coming; Ultra, the Allied success at breaking the German Enigma code, tipped them off

The German launched airborne assaults on three airfields on May 20 1941

The British defenders included large contingents of tough Maori from New Zealand; they inflicted dreadful casualties on the Germans

But the British were handicapped by the need to defend all three airfields; they lacked adequate mobile resources to shift troops

The result was that, at great cost, the Germans seized a strategic target without landing large forces from the sea



The uses of victory

- The fall of Crete not only threatened to undercut the British position in the eastern Mediterranean
- German airpower had severely punished the Royal Navy
- This came at a moment of supreme crisis in the naval war (which we will look at next); it also
- Seemed to threaten Britain itself with succumbing to an assault from the skies
- What was not known was that the German airborne forces had suffered such losses in Crete that they lacked the ability to launch offensive operations
- And the Allies learned the lesson: unsupported air assaults ran the risk of catastrophe

The one threat that undermined Churchill's confidence

- Churchill once confessed that the one threat that worried him was that Britain might be starved of food and raw materials by German naval warfare
- In World War I, German warships in both the Atlantic and Pacific had wreaked (temporary) havoc with British shipping
- That threat was curtailed but the U-boat campaign came close to succeeding
- The institution of convoys in 1917 proved to be what tipped the balance
- While Germany had a strong surface fleet, the Royal Navy kept it in harbor for all but a few occasions (notably Jutland)

Organizing for a new war

- Gerrmany had two naval leaders: Raeder (who commanded the surface fleet) and Dönitz (who commanded the U-boats)
- Most of the Imperial German Navy scuttled itself at Scapa Flow in 1918
- And the Versailles Treaty stripped Germany of all its other modern warships and U-boats
- When Germany began to re-arm (surreptitiously at first, later openly)Raeder was able to get Hitler's approval to build a modern surface fleet, but Dönitz was more persuasive
- So Germany relied on its submarine fleet

Early encounters

The so-called "pocket battleships" were built in the 1920s

Their diesel engines gave them superior cruising range, while their main battery of 11" guns packed a Sunday punch to anything smaller than a battleship

The Graf Spee broke loose at the start of the war and inflicted significant losses on merchant shipping

But a group of 3 smaller British cruisers cornered her off the South American coast in December 1939, drove her into harbor

And her captain decided to scuttle her



A mixed verdict in Norway

The Battle of Norway involved the first real face-off between the Royal Navy and the Germans

The battle for Narvik (Norway's main ore shipping port) was disastrous for the Germans, as shown at lower right

A duel in the North Atlantic between the German battle cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and the British battle cruiser Renown was inconclusive (bad weather brought about an end to the battle)

But German air power inflicted cruel damage on the British fleet

The impact of the battle made Raeder an unenthusiastic backer of Operation Sea Lion

Which added to Dönitz's influence with Hitler

This had a profound long-range impact





Decisions, decisions

- Prior to Norway, the German *Kriegsmarine* had enjoyed some success using its surface fleet against British commerce
- But hit-and-run tactics against merchant ships were very different from what might happen in the kind of surface action expected in case of an invasion of the British Isles
- And the successes Germany enjoyed on land from April through June 1940 offered a different prospect
- In World War I, German warships had to operate from bases on the North Sea
- Hitler's Spring conquests opened Norwegian and French ports to German ships; possibility of outflanking the Royal Navy

The Balance of Forces

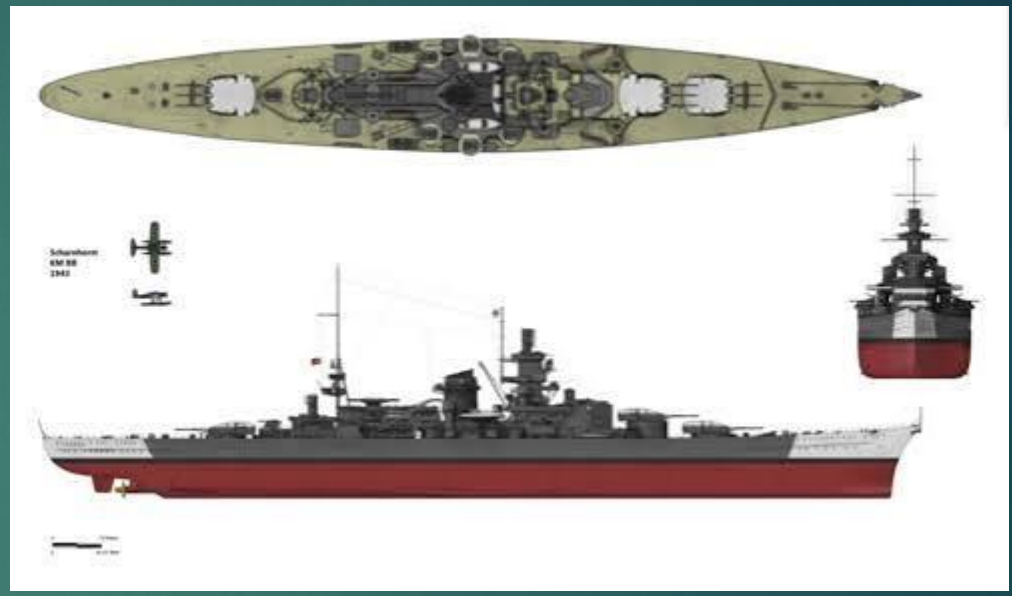
The London Naval Treaty (1930) gave Germany the chance to build larger warships, not to exceed 35,000 tons displacement

The result was the building of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, two 35,000 ton vessels designed for maximum effectiveness against merchant ships

The conquest of France opened the major French seaports of Brest and St-Nazaire to German vessels

Which materially increased the threat level against British shipping

And, on the far side of the Atlantic, decisions were being made that altered the shape of the war at sea



American policy takes the stage

- FDR knew Churchill before the outbreak of World War II
- Despite his criticism of British imperial policy, his sympathies were strongly with Great Britain
- After the fall of France, the two men made a deal: America gave Britain 50 old destroyers in exchange for American basing rights in the Western Hemisphere
- Given Britain's dire position, in January of 1941, FDR proposed the "Lend-Lease Act" by which the U.S. would lend or lease military matériel to the UK in exchange for a promise to get the military goods back after the end of the war
- A typical piece of Rooseveltian disingenuousness, but public sentiment by now was running strongly in favor of "all aid short of war" to Britain

A dire situation

In fact, many historians trace active U.S. involvement in the war to an undeclared naval war with Germany from the Spring of 1941

And even Lend-Lease could only be a partial solution

Britain still had a strong surface fleet, but many of its larger vessels were of World War I vintage

For convoy escorting (the most urgent need), while Canada could provide some support, the odds were still against British victory

American support included an unknown factor – airpower

The U.S. "leased" long-range patrol aircraft (Liberators and Catalinas) to the British

A desperately needed tool . . .



A paradoxical benefit

Possession of the French Atlantic ports wasn't a cure-all for Germany

While the French harbors had ample docking facilities for surface ships, they were vulnerable to aerial bombing . . .

Which in the long run badly degraded the effective of Germany's surface ships

But Germany's deadliest weapon, the U-boats, found the French ports to be a safe haven

Largely because they could shelter in pens that were almost invulnerable to aerial attack

And something else worked in Germany's favor



A change in tactics

- While Raeder's influence with Hitler went into decline, Dönitz had developed an effective countermeasure for convoys to Britain
- The "wolf pack" relied on massed attacks from multiple U-boats
- U-boats normally cruised on the surface when operating beyond the range of patrol planes
- When a U-boat spotted a convoy, it immediately radioed a report to a listening post on the French coast
- Identifying convoy's position, course and speed
- Powerful radio transmitters relayed the information to other U-boats within striking distance
- When several were in position, they launched an attack from different directions; greatly increased their effectiveness

A renewed threat, made worse

- As the hour of maximum crisis in the Mediterranean approached, a new peril loomed
- Cheating on the 1930 treaty, Germany built two battleships – *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* – with cruising range and armor protection superior to most British warships
- In May of 1941, a Swedish warship in the Baltic spotted *Bismarck* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*; the report was relayed to the British naval attaché in Stockholm
- With the British on alert, air reconnaissance picked up the ships in Norwegian fjords
- The following day, they were gone. But to where?

What to cover?

The British had to cover three exits into the Atlantic

On May 23, the British cruisers *Suffolk* and *Norfolk* spotted the Germans in the Denmark Strait

The British Admiralty ordered two British warships to intercept them: the *Hood* (known affectionately as "The Mighty Hood") and the *Prince of Wales*

Along with the two cruisers, it looked like an even matchup

Through the short night, the British forces converged on the two German vessels

Shortly after dawn, the two sides spotted each other

What followed was unexpected



"The Bismarck started firing 15 miles away"

The British vessels were silhouetted against the rising sun

While the dark German ships were hard to spot

The *Bismarck*'s fifth salvo penetrated one of the *Hood*'s magazines, setting off an explosion that broke the British vessel in two

It sank so fast that only 3 members of the crew were able to escape

The Germans then inflicted serious damage on *Prince of Wales* . . .

But the British battleship hit *Bismarck*, causing a serious loss of fuel oil . . .

Which played a decisive part



Lütjens' decision

- Admiral Lütjens (the German commander) had to choose – either proceed into the Atlantic on his raiding mission or
- To head for France to repair battle damage, then start raiding
- He detached *Prinz Eugen*, then headed for France, driven by the fuel loss caused by the *Prince of Wales*' hits
- The British briefly lost track of *Bismarck*, but she was spotted – by an American-made Catalina, piloted by a U.S. Navy pilot
- British warships cornered Bismarck on the morning of May 27 and sent her to the bottom, after a fighting career of only 5 days
- This was the last major action by the *Kriegsmarine* – until December 1943, when the British located and sank *Scharnhorst* in a battle above the Arctic circle

Some thoughts on unintended consequences (1)

- The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact made Stalin distrust the Western powers even more. In the short run, his trust of Hitler proved disastrous. In the long run, it helped pave the way for the Cold War.
- The mixed verdict from the Norway campaign gave a false impression of how effective German airpower was. It contributed to their loss of the Battle of Britain.
- Göring convinced Hitler to let the Luftwaffe finish off the trapped forces at Dunkirk. This facilitated the success of the evacuation.
- The division between French who followed De Gaulle and those loyal to Pétain contributed to France's political instability after the war.

The most fateful decision

- It was apparent by the end of May 1941 that Britain, although beleaguered, was not defeated
- For that reason, Raeder advised Hitler against attacking the USSR (plans for the attack had been in the works for a year)
- Göring agreed, telling Hitler that another year of war might force the British to sue for peace
- But Hitler was determined to fulfill his destiny
- As history records, the Germans made great gains in Russia – all the way to the outskirts of Moscow
- But the final victory eluded their grasp; a counteroffensive by 100 battle-tested Siberian divisions drove the Germans back
- They never saw Moscow again

Unintended consequences (2)

- Musssolini's ambitions dragged Hitler into a North African campaign that cost Germany much and gained nothing.
- The Balkan campaign, driven by the need to protect the flank of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, delayed Operation Barbarossa just enough to permit the Russians to hold on.
- While Crete pointed out the threat from airborne invasion, it destroyed the effectiveness of German airborne forces.
- The vulnerability of French Atlantic ports to Allied air attack effectively wrecked the German surface naval forces
- Postwar world – U.S. versus Soviet Union.

To sum up . . .

- There was an inherent conflict between Hitler's desire to avenge the defeat of 1918 and his longer-range goal of making Germany the master of Europe
- Germany's short-run victories – Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, France – were in the wrong direction to conquer the territories in Eastern Europe he coveted
- And he didn't reckon on the prospect of Britain's mortal enmity
- And his contempt for American military prowess badly hurt Germany in the long run
- So he traded short-run success for long-term failure
- A fatal lack of long-term strategy for success drove faulty decision-making