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## The Genesis of a Plan

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From the moment France was overrun by the German Army in June 1940, it was clear that Germany could only be driven out of its western European conquests by a cross-Channel assault. It was also clear that British soil, which at its closest point was visible from the coast of German-occupied France, would have to be the launching ground. Following the Dunkirk evacuation, when 338,226 British, French, and other Allied troops had been evacuated, Hitler's military strength offered him the prospect of the mastery of Europe. To challenge that mastery a much larger army would be needed to cross back over the Channel.

Britain's military resources by themselves could never be sufficient for such a return in the strength needed to offer any prospect of success. Only if the United States, with its potential air, land, and naval strength—including landing craft—were to enter the war, would a return to Europe be possible. But even while substantially assisting Britain's war effort, America remained neutral throughout 1940 and until early December 1941.

Determined to find a means of launching a cross-Channel attack, Churchill—who had told the British people after Dunkirk, “Wars are not won by evacuations”—ordered the design and construction of landing craft. On 6 June 1940, only four days after the final evacuations from Dunkirk, he asked his defense staff to put forward “Proposals for transporting and landing tanks on the beach, observing that we are supposed to have command of the sea, while the enemy have not.” On June 22, his mind still on a return to Europe, he wrote again to his defense staff: “We ought to have a corps of at least 5,000 parachute troops. I hear something is being done already to form such a corps, but only, I believe, on a small scale.”

That day the British War Cabinet approved Churchill’s proposal to establish the Special Operations Executive, known as SOE. Its purpose was sabotage, subversion, brief cross-Channel raids, and the creation of a secret force of agents behind the lines. Churchill set out the aim of this new body in three words: “Set Europe Ablaze!” Clandestine guerrilla operations would harass an occupying power and, when the moment came, assist an invading force.

On the day after the War Cabinet gave its approval to SOE, Churchill outlined its tasks. “It is of course urgent and indispensable,” he wrote to a member of the War Cabinet, “that every effort should be made to obtain secretly the best possible information about the German forces in the various countries overrun, and to establish intimate contacts with local people, and to plant agents. This, I hope, is being done on the largest scale, as opportunity serves. . . .”

What Churchill had in mind was a series of raids of “not less than five nor more than ten thousand men,” two or three of which raids he thought could be carried out against

the French coast during the coming winter. "After these medium raids have had their chance, there will be no objection to stirring up the French coast by minor forays." These were to be followed during the spring and summer of 1941 by "large armoured irruptions."

To plan for future amphibious operations, on 15 October 1940, the Combined Operations Training Centre was established at Inveraray in Scotland, to provide training for embarkation, disembarkation, and landing under fire. A second component of the cross-Channel invasion was airborne attack by paratroopers. The first British paratroop operation, Operation Colossus, took place inside Italy on 14 February 1941, when thirty-five men were dropped on a sabotage mission to blow up a railway viaduct in the Apennines. The sabotage was successful, but the commandos were captured. Their colleagues continued to perfect their skills. On March 4, two commando units, each of 250 men, supported by two Royal Engineer demolition detachments, landed on the Lofoten Islands, off the northwestern coast of Norway, as part of an operation to seize an Enigma machine and codebook. The Enigma machine was the top-secret method of radio communication between the German High Command and the commanders-in-chief on land, at sea, and in the air.

The Lofoten Islands operation was successful, its secrecy maintained by the deception of a raid to destroy the local fish-oil factories and all available German shipping.

The first substantial SOE operation on mainland Europe was launched in March 1941, when its agents were parachuted into France, near Vannes, on the Bay of Biscay, to ambush two buses carrying German aircrews on their nightly journey to a German air base used for bombing raids

against Britain. Unfortunately for the plan, between its preparation and execution the Germans tightened their security arrangements for the transfer of men to the airfield, and the mission had to be abandoned. It did, however, bring back to London valuable information about the situation in France.

Other operations followed: acts of sabotage, the establishing of SOE circuits inside France, contact with the French Resistance, and help for the Resistance in its own sabotage activities. It was clear, however, that the main task of these Resistance networks and their SOE helpers would come when the Allies were ready to make a major amphibious landing. In all, SOE established eighty-three circuits—groups of agents operating with the French Resistance—in France between the summer of 1941 and the Normandy landings three years later. Of these eighty-three circuits, thirty-three were destroyed by the Germans, some as a result of betrayal, others as a result of mischance. But fifty circuits were still functioning on the day of the cross-Channel landings. Of the 393 agents who worked in France, 119 were executed by the Gestapo or killed while carrying out their duties. Several thousand French men and women were also executed for their part in helping these circuits.

Hitler's European conquests continued throughout 1941. Greece and Yugoslavia were overrun that April, and in June the German onslaught turned against the Soviet Union. From the first months of the German attack, which penetrated deep into Russia, Britain gave massive help to the Soviet forces in the form of weapons, tanks, aircraft, munitions, medical supplies, and Intelligence information, mak-

ing an important contribution to Russia's ability to continue to resist the German onslaught.

Britain also launched a number of commando raids in the West. On 27 July 1941 there was a small hit-and-run raid on the French coast near Ambleteuse, by an officer and sixteen men of No. 12 Commando.

On September 27 there was a further hit-and-run raid near the French seaside town of Luc-sur-Mer, which was later to be at the center of the Normandy landings. It was carried out by men of No. 1 Commando, who managed to cross the seawall, but were then met by machine gun fire and withdrew. Two commandos were taken prisoner, and one was wounded.

Within a month of this commando raid against the Normandy coast, Churchill instructed the newly appointed Commodore of Combined Operations, Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, and his Combined Operations staff, to make plans for "our great counterinvasion of Europe." Churchill told Mountbatten: "The South Coast of England is a bastion of defence against Hitler's invasion; you must turn it into a springboard to launch an attack."

A raid on the French coast at Houlgate on November 23 was carried out by eighty-eight men of No. 9 Commando. It failed in its hit-and-run objective but taught Mountbatten "that the vital lesson of establishing and maintaining communications between shore and ship had not been learned." The learning was begun in earnest.

On 7 December 1941 Japan struck at Pearl Harbor. The American government and people were suddenly embroiled in war in the Pacific. Four days later, Hitler declared war on the United States. In Europe the work of the British

commandos continued. On December 27 they carried out their largest raid thus far, when 51 officers and 525 men secured the temporary occupation of the port of South Vaagso, on the coast of central Norway, a crucial German shipping anchorage and coastal transit point. Men of No. 2, No. 3, No. 4 and No. 6 Commando took part, with considerable British naval and air forces participating, including a cruiser and four destroyers. The troops were put ashore in two lightly armored infantry assault ships (LCAs—Landing Craft, Assault), which had earlier been Belgian cross-Channel steamers.

A special unit of correspondents, photographers, and cameramen was also landed at Vaagso, to witness and report as German coastal defenses were demolished and 16,000 tons of German shipping destroyed. Before the German defenders were overrun, twenty of the raiding force were killed. Ninety-eight Germans were taken prisoner. Hitler concluded, “Norway is the zone of destiny in this war,” and ordered substantial reinforcements. This gave the Allies a clear indication of where their future deception plans could be used to good effect.

In Washington, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, recently appointed a member of the War Plans Division of the War Department, and confronted during his first weeks with the division by the Japanese onslaught in the Pacific, felt that it was in the Pacific that the power of the United States should be concentrated. “I’ve been insisting Far East is central,” he wrote on 1 January 1942, “and no other side shows should be undertaken until air and ground are in satisfactory state.” With the grave situation of the Americans, British, and Dutch in the Far East, Eisenhower opposed two recently agreed-on Anglo-American projects: Operation

Magnet, the dispatch of American troops to Britain; and Operation Gymnast, a proposed Anglo-American assault on Vichy France in North Africa.

Three weeks later, as the Japanese stood ready to defeat the British in Malaya and the Americans in the Philippines, Eisenhower came around to the view that was beginning to prevail in Washington, and that he—in due course—was so massively to enhance. “We’ve got to go to Europe and fight,” he wrote, “and we’ve got to quit wasting our resources all over the world—and still worse—wasting time.” Eisenhower added: “If we’re to keep Russia in, save the Middle East, India and Burma, we’ve got to begin slugging with air at western Europe; to be followed with a land attack as soon as possible.”

Within a month of Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States, Churchill traveled to Washington to see President Roosevelt, to secure an American commitment to the defeat of Germany in Europe before the defeat of Japan. His views fell on fertile ground. In the autumn of 1941 one of the leading American strategic thinkers, General Albert C. Wedemeyer, a staff officer in the War Department in Washington—who, as a captain, had spent three years before the war at the German staff college in Berlin—had presented a “Victory Plan” that stressed the massive mobilization of resources and manpower that would be needed to defeat Germany in the event of war. “Our principal theater of war is Central Europe,” he wrote; Africa, the Near East, Spain, Scandinavia, and the Far East would be “subsidiary theaters.”

At the Washington conference in December 1941, code-named Arcadia, Roosevelt, Churchill, and their military staffs agreed, as a basis of Anglo-American strategy, that “only the minimum forces necessary for the safeguarding of

vital interests in other theaters should be diverted from operations against Germany.” Following this guideline, and adopting the central theme of General Wedemeyer’s earlier plan, on 20 February 1942 General Eisenhower, recently appointed Director of the War Plans Division, confirmed his support for “offensive operations” in the European Theater “and concurrently defensive operations in all others.”