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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION NO. VII/29

A COMPARATIVE REVIEW  
OF THE GERMAN AND ALLIED AIR FORCES  
IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Prepared by the German Air Historical Branch,  
(8th Abteilung) and dated 1st July, 1944.

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14. 6. 1947.

## I. Appreciation of the enemy.

In the West, Germany had to reckon with two principal enemies, England and France. It was however known to the German Government that in the event of war, the Western powers intended to bring in other countries on their side. Holland and Belgium, in particular, were to support the direct attack on Germany. Although the two latter countries preserved an apparent neutrality, they favoured so much the interests of England and France that there could be no doubt as to what their attitude would be in the coming war. In these circumstances, it was necessary for the German High Command to subject the war potential of these four countries to the most careful scrutiny.

England stood in the forefront as the most important sea power in Europe. The realisation that the mastery of the seas could only be maintained as long as the skies were kept free, had led the British Government to build up a strong Air Force and to construct a series of air bases throughout the world, thus permitting the greatest mobility of action. Nevertheless, in view of the very limited industrial potential, there was no question of British air supremacy and few reserves were available.

British air operations were therefore concentrated mainly on defence. Fighter units were known to be strong and technically equal to our own. In all, we counted on the operation of some 400 first line and some 500 second line fighter aircraft. As far as could be ascertained only about 250 bombers were available. The total strength of the British Air Force was estimated at about 1150 aircraft.

Strong points of air defence were suspected to be near London, near Southampton, in the Midland industrial belt and in the Tyne coal-mining area. British A.A. defences were inferior both in quality and in quantity to our own. Only about 480 light and 772 heavy guns and some 3544 mainly obsolete searchlights were available.

In the event of war, the British bomber squadrons were to be transferred to Northern France, (Calais, Le Havre, Paris, Mezieres area). Operations would presumably be directed against German industrial centres and against the operational zones of the German Army and Air Force. The British had no parachute or airborne troops.

France, on the other hand, would have to wage offensive warfare against Germany if a decisive result was to be achieved. As long as the neutrality of Belgium was respected, the main area of deployment would be between the Vosges and Luxembourg. In this area were concentrated the bulk of the French Army Air units and fighter formations. Bomber units were based further Westwards.

After the re-organisation effected in the Autumn of 1938, the French Air Force consisted of five Flieger-Divisions equipped partly with modern and partly with obsolete aircraft. On the assumption that the flying units based in North Africa would remain at their peacetime stations and that at least one Flieger-Division would be held in reserve for possible operations against Italy, it was to be anticipated that the French Air Force would be operating with a strength of some 1150 aircraft. Of these approximately 20% of the bombers and 35% of the fighters consisted in the Summer of 1939 of modern types. Of the others, many were of very limited use for war operations.

Personnel reserves were considerable and training was of a very high level. On the other hand, only a portion of the crews had received adequate instruction in Blind-flying technique.

The Champagne region seemed the most likely principal base area for bomber formations, but numerous other bases were available in Eastern France for attacks on the Ruhr and Southern Germany. The main weight of French air attack was expected to be directed

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against the movements of the German Army and against the German Air Force. In view of the limited capacity of French industrial production any systematic plan of attack against German War economy seemed unlikely.

As strongpoints of the French aerial defences in which a concentration of fighters and A.A. was to be expected, were the deployment areas of the Army and Air Force, the industrial areas of Northern France, certain individual industrial towns such as Dijon, Le Creusot, Lyons and St. Etienne, and communication key points in the East. It was known that the entire area East of a line Rouen - Orleans - Lyons would be defended by scattered fighter units. No effective belts of defences had however apparently been prepared.

As regards A.A. defences, the French were believed to have at their disposal some 3688 heavy and 1512 light guns, partly obsolete in design. Modern weapons were however being introduced. About 500 A.A. searchlights were available.

In numbers the French and German flying units and air defence forces were about equal. Numerous air bases in various areas of deployment permitted a flexible conduct of operations.

(Translators' Note: 2 pages of text dealing with the Belgian and Netherlands Air Forces missing.)

When after the occupation of Paris in 1940 documents relating to the pre-war preparations of the British and French General Staffs were captured, it was discovered that the above appreciation of the German High Command as to probable enemy intention had been substantially correct; even the estimates of aircraft strengths had been very nearly accurate. Certain differences between the two sets of figures were however discovered; In Europe, the British had 1290 and the French 1450 aircraft of all types at their disposal, while the German strength had been estimated at 3700 aircraft, and the Italian at 1393 aircraft.

The minutes of the General Staffs of the Western Powers concerning the conduct of strategic air warfare showed clearly the Allied intention of bombarding all targets whose destruction could further the war effort, regardless of losses among the German civilian population.

## II German preparations

As Germany succeeded to an ever-growing extent in freeing herself from the conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, more and more voices among the Western Powers were raised to demand the stemming of Germany's ever growing military might. The Fuehrer therefore determined to set up in the West a system of defence in depth, which was to be known as the 'West Wall'.

Parallel with this line ran an air defence belt some 60 - 70 km. in depth. This was known as the 'Air Defence Zone West', and in it were contained all weapons of defence against air attack. Its significance can best be understood by quoting the report of General Kitzinger, G.O.C. the Zone, in the 1939 Year Book of the German Air Force:

"The policy of obstructing the passage of the enemy at the very frontiers of the Reich has been followed in our defence system. Enemy bomber formations will be annihilated or forced to turn back long before they reach their objectives. Years of meteorological studies have enabled us to adopt the most formable methods in the Western Defence zone. Flak and

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searchlight batteries with overlapping cover have been established in deep echelon formation".

On the basis of peacetime dispositions of forces, Luftflotte 2 and Luftflotte 3 bore the responsibility for the air defence of the Reich in the West. The allocation of the forces controlled by these two Luftflotten had been carried out in such a way that only very limited movements would be necessary on the outbreak of war.

Luftflotte 2 (peace-time H.Q. at Brunswick), in North Western Germany had to reckon with England, Holland and Belgium as possible adversaries. To Luftflotte 2 were subordinated Flieger Division 3, (peace-time H.Q. Muenster) and Flieger Division 4, (peace-time H.Q. Brunswick)

For the initial operations, the bomber and reconnaissance units of these Divisions were to take off from their peace-time bases with intermediate landing at advanced airfields for fuelling and bombing up, all other preparations being made at the peace-time base. On returning from their initial operations, aircraft were to land at specially designated airfields in the deployment area, from which subsequent operations would take place.

In the event of an attack from Holland or Belgium, Luftflotte 2 could also count on the support of the Luftwaffen Lehr Division, Fighter units were ordered to hold themselves in readiness to attack enemy bomber formations from their peace-time bases.

In South Western Germany, Luftflotte 3 (peace-time H.Q. Munich) could count on having France as its principal opponent. Subordinated to it were Flieger Division 5, (peace-time H.Q. Munich) and Flieger Division 6 (peace-time H.Q. Frankfurt Am Main). Instructions for the initial operations of these forces were similar to those issued to Luftflotte 2

As the employment of the Luftwaffe was to a considerable extent dependent on weather conditions, preparatory measures regarding a meteorological service were also necessary. Particular difficulties especially in the event of a war with England, were to be expected if Meteorological stations in Western Europe ceased to function and no more reports could be received from ships in the Atlantic.

As a substitute, Luftflotte 2 was to receive weather reports from a long-range weather reporting Staffel and from submarines in the Atlantic. Luftflotte 3 was also to have a weather reporting Staffel at its disposal.

For the purposes of co-operation with the Army, only very small Air Force effectives were available, 11 reconnaissance Staffeln, 4 Courier Staffeln, 11 Flak detachments and a small number of Signals units. The cause of this lay in the development of the Air Force into an independent weapon of attack and defence. Whereas, in the first World War, the Air Force did not progress very far towards independent activity. The new Air Weapon was to serve the needs of the Army more through well co-ordinated and massed strategic operations than by a dispersal of effort in minor tactical missions.

At the beginning of the present War, the operations of those Air Force units which were attached to the land forces were directed by the Army, to which they were directly subordinated. To advise the Army Commanders on operational questions, an Air Force General, (Gen. Bogatsch) was attached to Army Supreme Headquarters, (Ob.d.H.) and Air Force Officers were also attached to Army Commands at all levels.

It later proved that in order to avoid too wide a dispersal of effort, it was necessary that even the above mentioned Army - Co-operation units should be subjected to a unified Command; at the present time, their activities are directed by the C.in C. of the Luftwaffe or by a Staff under his orders.

The preparations of the Navy were aimed primarily at waging mobile sea-warfare, with particular emphasis on attacks on enemy, and protection of our own, merchant shipping and on mine-laying operations. For the support of the Navy, certain Air Force Coastal units were subordinated to Marine Gruppe West at Wilhelmshaven. Their tasks included not only reconnaissance over the sea areas, but also anti-submarine operations. To advise the Navy on Air operations, the post of 'Fuehrer der Luftstreitkrafte West', (F.d. Luft West) was created, with General Coeler as first holder.

The aim of the German Naval staff was, by the laying of mine-belts and by the use as far as possible of neutral waters to preserve, at any rate for the first phase of the War, the freedom of passage of the seas for German and friendly neutral merchant shipping.

The scope of this survey has only permitted the mention of the most important aspects of the pre-war preparations of the Wehrmacht. It is however clear that in a very short time, everything was done to enable any enemy attack against Germany to be victoriously repulsed.

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