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What If: Hitler's Invasion of Ireland

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Operation Green

Seventy years ago this summer, Hitler's general staff drew up detailed plans to invade Ireland. In June of 1940, Germany's 1st Panzer Division had just driven the British Expeditionary Force into the sea at Dunkirk. Churchill labeled Britain's rout and the evacuation of approximately 330,000 British and allied troops a 'miracle of deliverance'. The Nazis intoxicated with their victory in France considered themselves unstoppable and were determined to press their advance into Britain and Ireland. Germany's invasion plans for Britain were codenamed 'Operation Sealion'. Their invasion plans for Ireland were codenamed 'Unternehmen Grun' or 'Operation Green'.

Like Operation Sealion, Operation Green was never executed. The Nazis failed to achieve air superiority over the English Channel that summer. By the autumn of 1940 the 'Battle of Britain' had been won by the RAF and Hitler postponed his British and Irish invasion plans. Some military historians also believe that the plans for Operation Green, drawn up in minute detail, may have been a feint - part of a wider Wehrmacht deception plan to divert British resources away from Germany's invasion of southern England. However, had the RAF been overwhelmed by the Luftwaffe that summer – Operation Green gives a sobering insight into what fate neutral Ireland would have suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

Operation Green was conceived under the scrutiny of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. Bock had a fearsome reputation as an aggressive campaign officer - well versed in the concept of Blitzkrieg. Bock had been commander of Germany's Army Group North during the invasion of Poland in 1939 and Army Group B during the invasion of France in May of 1940. Nicknamed 'Der Sterber' or 'Death-Wish' by his fellow officers, von Bock was ultimately given responsibility for Germany's planned assault on Moscow - 'Operation Typhoon' - during Germany's subsequent invasion of Russia.

In the summer of 1940 - before Hitler had turned his attentions towards Russia - Von Bock was preoccupied with invasion plans for neutral Ireland and assigned responsibility for it to the German 4th and 7th Army Corps, Army Group B under the command of Generalleutnant Leonhard Kaupitsch. If these German Army units in particular had reached Ireland's shores in 1940, the consequences for Ireland would have been tragic and would have profoundly altered the course of history for the Irish Republic and its citizens.

The German 4th Army Corps in particular had a brutal reputation in battle and inflicted many civilian casualties as they secured the 'Polish Corridor' to Warsaw during the invasion of Poland in 1939. Later in 1941, the 4th Army Corps – equipped with its own motorized infantry and Panzer Divisions – would play a crucial role during 'Operation Barbarossa', Hitler's invasion of Russia. The 4th Army Corps - earmarked for service in Ireland in the summer of 1940 - conducted brutal operations the following summer as they took Minsk and Smolensk on their advance to Moscow in June and July 1941. Significantly – as amply demonstrated in the invasions of Poland, France and Russia - the 4th and 7th Army Corps were noted for their aggressive, offensive ethos and for their rapid rate of advance as armoured formations engaged in Blitzkrieg tactics. Had the 4th and 7th been deployed to Ireland in 1940, their tactics would have been brutal, their advance rapid – up to 100km per day.

The Nazis allocated 50,000 German troops for the invasion of Ireland. An initial force of around 4000 crack troops – including engineers, motorized infantry, commando and Panzer units – was to depart France from the ports of Lorient, Saint-Nazaire and Nantes in the initial phase of the invasion. According to Operation Green, their destination was the Waterford and Wexford coastline where beach-heads were to be established between Dungarvan and Wexford town. Once beachheads and air-strips had been established – negligible armed resistance was expected - waves of Dornier and Stuka bomber aircraft would have commenced assaults on military and communications targets throughout the Republic and Northern Ireland.

In the second phase of the invasion – to commence within 24 hours of the initial landings - ground troops of the 4th and 7th Army Corps would have commenced rapid probing attacks on the Irish Army based in Cork and Clonmel initially, followed by a thrust through Laois-Offaly towards the Curragh Camp area. Their rate of advance would have been rapid, with some units reaching the outskirts of Dublin within 48 hours of the German landings. Dublin was identified by the Nazis as one of six regional administrative centres for the 'British Isles' (sic) – had the occupation taken place. Dublin's Gauleiter was to have sweeping executive powers and would have had instructions to dismantle – and if necessary, liquidate – any of Ireland's remaining indigenous political apparatus, her intellectual leadership and any non-Aryan social institutions such as the trade union movement or the GAA for example. Irish Jews would also have been murdered en masse.

Hitler's generals were aware that their operations in Ireland would have to be 'self-sustaining' given that their troops would be operating far from the continental mainland in Europe's most western region. Admiral Raeder described the German force in Ireland as one which of necessity 'would be left to its own devices' in order to execute its mission of conquest. Therefore, Operation Green envisaged that German troops here would administer martial law and curfews - commandeering shelter, food, fuel and water from the civilian population. The plans even contained an annex with the names and addresses of all garage and petrol station owners throughout Munster and the Midlands. This policy of predation on the civilian population would have inevitably led the Germans into direct conflict with the civilian population as they confiscated livestock, horses, food, fuel and forced labour to support their advance northwards. As was the case in continental Europe, Irish civilians would have borne the brunt of the casualties in an invasion of Ireland, either in punitive actions by the Germans, or as 'collateral damage' to German military operations and Britain's inevitable counterattack.

In strictly military terms the Irish Army would have been spectacularly ill-equipped to challenge a German invasion in the summer of 1940. In 1939, there were approximately 7,600 regulars in the Irish Army with a further 11,000 volunteers and reserves. By May 1940, this number had actually dropped by 6,000 due to financial constraints. The Irish government's recruitment campaign only began to bear fruit by the autumn of 1940. Had the Germans come ashore in the summer of 1940, they would have been met with an army with no experience of combined arms combat and capable only of company sized manoeuvres, involving a maximum of around 100 men. In addition, the Irish army was very poorly equipped at the time, possessing only a dozen or so serviceable armoured cars and tanks. In terms of small-arms, the Irish Army at the time did have plenty of Lee Enfield rifles – of World War 1 vintage – but had only 82 machine guns in total for the defence of the entire country. Many of the Irish units also

moved on bicycles - referred to at the time as 'peddling' or 'piddling Panzers'. Had they been engaged by the Wermacht, the Irish would have been slaughtered.

Ironically, the Germans were not the only foreign power making plans for the invasion of Ireland in the summer of 1940. In June of that year, General Montgomery drew up plans for the seizure of Cork and Cobh along with the remainder of the Treaty Ports. When Churchill became aware of Operation Green, the British military set out detailed military plans to counter-attack the Germans from Northern Ireland. This plan, codenamed 'Plan W' envisaged Irish Army units re-grouping in the border areas of Cavan-Monaghan and being reinforced by British troops moving south from the six counties. In the scenario envisaged within Plan W, the Irish and British Armies would have fought alongside one another to repel the German invasion. Had this happened, hundreds of thousands of Irish men, women and children would have died in the ensuing conflict?

Operation Green never took place and neutral Ireland survived the war almost entirely untouched by the Second World War. Our neutrality certainly played a role in protecting us from the horrors of the war. Most Irish people are willing to accept this. Far fewer are willing to accept the crucial role that the British, Polish and French pilots of the RAF played in protecting us from invasion during the summer of 1940. Were it not for their sacrifices, who knows what flag would now fly over Leinster House.

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