

Much is made of the heroism of the Mediterranean resistance campaigns of World War II. The fierce defence of Malta, the defiance of the Greeks in the face of a triple occupation - and the curious case of Gibraltar, which avoided invasion altogether, writes Laurent Rathborn. But was this because of one man, or were greater historical forces at play?

Germany could not pass up taking control of the Strait of Gibraltar, cutting off the British from Suez and their eastern empire, and smoothing resupply of raw materials from North African Vichy client regimes. Yet Gibraltar was not invaded, and the vast preparations for its defence (including mass evacuations and frantic tunnel-digging) ensured that Axis bombing raids were shrugged off with relatively little damage.

Gibraltar has occupied a particular spot in the lore surrounding World War II Nazi resistance figures, mostly due to the fact that one of the most senior was the man tasked with planning the invasion of the Rock and that on the surface at least, it was saved by that same German internal resistance and interference, rather than any opposing action by the Allies.

Great War U-boat commander and Iron Cross holder, Wilhelm Canaris was head of the Abwehr, the German intelligence service - as well as a senior figure in the internal German resistance to Nazi rule, believing ultimately that Germany could not, in the long run, win the war. He is widely credited for delaying and ultimately stymieing Franco's threatened invasion of Gibraltar through deflection, the sowing of doubt, and the stressing of economic and military realities given Spain's recent civil war. All of this culminated in Franco making unacceptable economic and military demands of the Nazis in order for Spain to join the war on their side, and Hitler settling for the signature of a lesser accord which was ultimately meaningless. The meeting at Hendaye, a small town in France close to the Spanish border, in October 1940 ended in frustration for Hitler and, arguably, domestic breathing room for Franco.

History but rarely turns on the actions of one person, and although it makes for a good story, Canaris' subtle sowing of frustration and doubt is not the whole picture. Huge external pressure was building that would torpedo Axis plans in the Iberian peninsula, and this merits attention. Canaris' delaying tactics and deliberate muddying of the waters with regards to his assessment of the war's long term success in his preparatory talks with Franco preyed upon both the latter's fears of destabilising a fragile, factional peace only recently won, and the near impossibility of throwing his exhausted and bleeding nation back into the meatgrinder of war. Spain's economy would take decades to recover, and there was the very real risk of inviting Allied invasion via Portugal and the Spanish coast, as well as the vulnerability of Spain's overseas possessions to capture.

The opening of the Eastern Front was only eight months away, but the fact that planning for an invasion of the Soviet Union had begun in July 1940 under the name of Operation Otto shows that Germany was almost certainly counting on Spanish help to take Gibraltar. Franco's decision to heed Canaris' assessments that Germany could not win the war and hammer the final nail into the coffin of Spain's involvement at Hendaye therefore switched the planning and execution of the invasion to a wholly German affair at a time when demands on future troop

movements were at a premium.

There is therefore reason to believe that the planning requirements for the invasion of the Soviet Union simply overtook the planned German-only invasion of Gibraltar under Operation Felix. Indeed, Felix was downgraded to Felix-Heinrich in March 1941, with inter-service communication stressing in February that Felix could not proceed as planned due to troop demands elsewhere. Operation Isabella was conceived in May 1941 as a general invasion of Spain, and included the capture of Gibraltar, but relied on passive Spanish support for the operation itself, which was being positioned more as a counter to a possible Allied invasion of the Iberian peninsula (shades of the Duke of Wellington). At this point, Barbarossa was imminent, and any future work on Felix-Heinrich and Isabella was delayed pending the realities on the ground in the East.

The gradual degradation of the battle plans for Gibraltar points towards the shifting of priorities within German high command, and sometimes battle plans do not survive contact with top brass, never mind the enemy. Pressures from the deteriorating situation in Russia ultimately killed off any plans for Gibraltar as Germany found itself unexpectedly and disastrously on the back foot.

What, then, to make of Canaris' spycraft? If planning for Barbarossa had been delayed, or the invasion had never happened in the first place, would Nazi pressure on Franco have ultimately changed his mind and tempted him to enter the war? Had Barbarossa resulted in some form of sustainable Nazi victory, would attention have swung back to the Mediterranean and, inevitably, Gibraltar? Certainly the Rock could not have held out against a combined Spanish/German assault, or even a German assault with forces not decimated by Russia.

Or did Canaris do just enough, by planning, or luck, or both, to buy time for Barbarossa to bite into first Felix, then Felix-Heinrich, and finally choke the life out of the hypothetical Isabella? Even though his personal fortunes within Nazi high command were mercurial and eventually fatal, Canaris would naturally have been aware of plans to invade the Soviet Union – so should we be viewing Canaris through the same lens as Chamberlain, who also arguably bought time for an unfavourable situation to change? Was his intent to get Franco to flatly reject Hitler no matter what, or was he counting on the merciless algebra of logistics to deliver the final, anonymous, structural blow, having prepared fertile ground?

Ultimately, Canaris' diaries were discovered, and he was interned then shot as a traitor. The diaries were presented to Hitler ten days before his suicide. They are presumed destroyed, lost, or permanently archived by a victor nation, but would perhaps settle the question of what Canaris ultimately intended with regards to Spain and Franco.

The null hypothesis in the case of Gibraltar is also of interest. Simply put – what if no Canaris?

We are now firmly in the realm of speculation, but some broadly accurate strokes of the "what-if" brush are still possible.

Firstly, it is unlikely that Franco would have known concretely of the details and scope of German plans to invade Russia at the time he was making these decisions (the integration of some volunteer Spanish "Blue Division" units into the German Eastern Front took place almost seven months after Hendaye). His options would have been bounded by his domestic constraints regardless of Canaris.

Secondly, Germany would have been taking a large resource risk to divert food and materiel to a reluctant ally given the planning timeline for Barbarossa.

Thirdly, the failure of operation Sealion in the planning stages in September 1940 barely a

month before Hendaye was part of a sea change in German internal policy towards Britain and her holdings. Putting forwards Felix as a replacement would have done nothing for the highest ranks of the German command, who, having lost Sealion to the realities of the Battle of Britain, preferred to look elsewhere for the next fight. Spain, therefore, was not worth the effort. The short answer was that the same internal pressures would still have been present on Franco. Spain was all but exhausted. Hundreds of thousands were dead, atrocities had been committed on both sides, the armed forces had been decimated and the economy was in state of almost total ruin. Franco would have had to make the same assessment: Spain was in no shape to fight, and had to look inwards. But without Canaris influencing Franco towards extravagant demands from potential German allies, would Franco still have turned down German "help"? His reasons for doing so in reality were sound – a broken economy, food shortages, and crippled infrastructure. Without German support to rectify these problems, entry into the war was not on the cards – and given that Hitler's olive branch may have come with a side dish of Allied invasion, it was not big enough to overcome them.

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