Lost Prison Interview with Hermann Göring: The Reichsmarschall’s Revelations

January 8, 2021 renegade 28 Comments

On May 8, 1945, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring surrendered to the Americans in full military regalia.

Expecting to be treated as the emissary of a defeated people, the Reichsmarschall was shocked when his medals and marshal’s baton were taken away and he was confined in Prisoner of War Camp No. 32, known to its inmates as the ‘Ashcan.

It was from his cell in the Ashcan that on July 25, 1945, Adolf Hitler’s former heir was interviewed by Major Kenneth W. Hechler of the U.S. Army Europe’s Historical Division, with Captain Herbert R. Sensenig serving as translator. The interview-overlooked for more than 60 years-provides insight on some of the strategic options considered by the NS leadership early in the war, their views of the threat posed by the United States and the Soviet Union, and how those attitudes influenced the actual strategy implemented.

Hechler: What was the German estimate of American war potential? Did Germany hope to complete its European campaigns before the United States would be strong enough to intervene?

Göring: As a break neared and it seemed that the matter had to be decided by war, I told Hitler, I consider it a duty to prevent America going to war with us. I believed the economic and technical potential of the United States to be unusually great, particularly the air force. Although at the time not too many new inventions had been developed to the extent we might have anticipated, and airplane production was significant but not outstandingly large. I always answered Hitler that it would be comparatively easy to convert factories to war production. In particular, the mighty automobile industry could be resorted to. Hitler was of the opinion that America would not intervene because of its unpleasant experiences in World War I.

Hechler: What unpleasant experiences? Loss of life?

Göring: The United States helped everybody and got nothing for it the last time, Hitler felt. Things had not been carried out the way the United States had planned. [President Woodrow] Wilson’s 14 Points had not been observed. Hitler was also thinking of the difficulties of shipping an army to Europe and keeping it supplied.

Hechler: What did you feel personally about our war potential?

Göring: While I, personally, was of the opinion that the United States could build an air force quicker than an army, I constantly warned of the possibilities of the U.S. with its great technical advances and economic resources.

Hechler: If you thought the United States would become so powerful, how did this relate to your own plans for waging war?

Göring: The decisive factor in 1938 was the consideration that it would take the United States several years to prepare. Its shipping tonnage at the time was not too large. I wanted Hitler to conclude the war in Europe as rapidly as possible and not get involved in Russia. Yet, on the question of whether America could build up an army on a big scale, opinions were divided.

Hechler: What were the divided opinions? What did other people think?

Göring: I don’t know the views of other influential people. I cannot say that other people had given different advice.

Hechler: What opinion was held by OKW [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or German Armed Forces High Command] and OKH [Oberkommando des Heeres, or German Army High Command]?

Göring: I don’t know the opinion of OKW or OKH. I used to tell Hitler that everything depended on our not bringing the U.S. over to Europe again. I said during the Polish campaign that we must not let the United States get involved. In 1941 the issue became real, and the general opinion was that it was better to bear unpleasant incidents with the U.S. and strive to keep it out of the struggle than allow a deterioration of relations between the United States and Germany. This was our unrelenting effort.

Hechler: What specifically indicated to you that [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt was preparing for war?

Göring: A mass of details. It was all published in a White Book [intelligence assessment]. I don’t know if the entire text was published or only extracts. It made a deep impression.

Hechler: Did Germany expect to bring its campaign in Europe to a successful conclusion before we could build up our war potential sufficiently to intervene there?

Göring: Hitler believed that he could bring matters to such a point that it would be very difficult for you to invade or intervene.

Hechler: In December 1941, what was Germany’s estimate of our shipbuilding capability, which could influence the European campaign?

Göring: It was our opinion that it was on a very large scale. Roosevelt spoke of bridges of ships across the Atlantic and a constant stream of planes. We fully believed him and were convinced that it was true. We also had this opinion from reports by observers in the United States. We understood your potential. On the other hand, the tempo of your shipbuilding, for example, Henry Kaiser’s program, surprised and upset us. We had rather minimized the apparently exaggerated claims in this field. One spoke of these floating coffins, Kaisersärge, that would be finished by a single torpedo. We believed most of your published production figures, but not all of them, as some seem inflated. However, since the United States had all the necessary raw materials except rubber, and many technical experts, our engineers could estimate United States production quite accurately.

At first, however, we could not believe the speed with which your Merchant Marine was growing. Claims of eight to 10 days to launch a ship seemed fantastic. Even when we realized it referred to the assembly of prefabricated parts, a mere 10 days to put it together was still unthinkable. Our shipbuilding industry was very thorough and painstaking, but very slow, disturbingly slow, in comparison. It took nine months to build a Danube vessel.

Hechler: Why did Germany declare war on the United States?

Göring: I was astonished when Germany declared war on the United States. We should rather have accepted a certain amount of unpleasant incidents. It was clear to us that if Roosevelt were reelected, the U.S. would inevitably make war against us. This conviction was strongly held, especially with Hitler. After Pearl Harbor, although we were not bound under our treaty with Japan to come to its aid since Japan had been the aggressor, Hitler said we were in effect at war already, with ships having been sunk or fired upon, and must soothe the Japanese. For this reason, a step was taken which we always regretted. It was unnecessary for us to accept responsibility for striking the first blow. For the same reason, we had been the butt of propaganda in 1914, when we started to fight, although we knew that within 48 hours Russia would have attacked us. I believe Hitler was convinced that as a result of the Japanese attack, the main brunt of the United States force would be brought to bear on the Far East and would not constitute such a danger for Germany. Although he never expressed it in words, it was perhaps inexpressibly bitter to him that the main force of the United States was in fact turned against Europe.

Hechler: What comments were made by Hitler during 1939-41 on the strength of the antiwar campaign in the U.S.?

Göring: Hitler spoke a great deal on the subject. These people [isolationists], he thought, had great influence, but he got this [impression] from the U.S. press and some observers in the U.S., for example, labeling Roosevelt a warmonger. After the election of 1940, we realized that these isolationist forces were inadequate to hinder the United States’ entry into the war.

Hechler: But [Wendell] Willkie was not an isolationist!

Göring: When we read Willkie’s speeches just before the election, it was also clear that even had Willkie been elected the course of events would have been the same. After the election, we attributed little importance to the isolationists in the United States. Hitler said that they were not strong enough. Roosevelt declared before the election that U.S. troops would not leave the country and were only to be used to repel a possible invasion. We realized that this was a sop to antiwar sentiment rather than any decisive change of attitude. When Sumner Welles visited Europe in 1940, we believed the United States still wanted to stay out of the war, and that on Welles’ return there might be an attempt to preserve peace. We had previously found in Poland the diary of Count Potofsky, which indicated that Roosevelt was preparing for war. Welles’ visit might have been, we thought, a possible sign that the U.S. was inclined to try to settle matters peaceably.

Editor’s note: American industrialist Wendell Willkie was an influential figure in American politics during the war. He ran for president in 1940, opposing Roosevelt’s New Deal but supporting his foreign policy, and won 22 million popular votes to Roosevelt’s 27 million.

Sumner Welles was an American diplomat. In the spring of 1940, during the Phony War period prior to Germany’s invasion of France, Roosevelt sent him to visit European leaders about preserving the peace. Jacob Potofsky was the Polish ambassador to the United States and had a number of interviews with Roosevelt, Cordell Hull and other senior American statesmen. He apparently knew of Roosevelt’s letters to Winston Churchill before the latter became prime minister.

Hechler: Despite correct estimates of our potential, what made you think that you could emerge victorious in a war against us?

Göring: We had assessed the capacity of your air force especially well. The best engines were produced in the United States. We used to work on your engines and bought up every kind we could. Since the end of the last war, Germany had fallen behind in the air, while U.S. commercial aviation was far ahead of us. But in the beginning, we had not fully assessed the possibility of daylight bombers. Our fighters could not cope with them. When we were able to do so, there was a pause and then you sent them out with fighter escort. The Flying Fortress, for example, had more than we had anticipated. Our estimate was incorrect.

Hechler: That being so, I still don’t understand why you wanted war with us.

Göring: The war was, in fact, already going on. It was only a question of form. Our declaration of war was made solely from the propaganda point of view. We would have been willing to make the most far-reaching concessions to avoid war with the United States, as such a conflict would and did prove the heaviest imaginable burden for us. But we were convinced that there was no chance to avoid war. Even if you had transported mountains of material to England, we should not have declared war, since England alone could not have carried out an invasion of Europe without your active participation.

Hechler: With regard to our propaganda about a second front in 1943, did the German high command really expect that we would invade Europe in 1942-43?

Göring: In general, no one believed it. On the contrary, we hoped that the Russians would become disgusted with you first and come to a compromise peace with us. The Russians had complained bitterly that no second front had been opened. We knew precisely what forces were in England. We knew of every American unit in England and could estimate exactly what you had there and that it was insufficient for an invasion.

Hechler: What was your appraisal of the significance of [the August 1942 British landing at] Dieppe?

Göring: We never found out if Dieppe was just a test landing, an attempt to secure a beachhead by surprise or a gesture to the Russians that something, at least, was being done.

Hechler: Were there any changes in the defense ordered by you or anyone else as a result of Dieppe?

Göring: Only minor changes. We did order that the MLR [main line of resistance] should be right along the water. This was learned from the experience of Dieppe.

Hechler: Were you informed by any information or intelligence of our impending invasion of North Africa in November 1942?

Göring: No. We had discussed the possibility of your attacking the west coast of Africa, but we did not think you would enter the Mediterranean. When the big convoy was reported near Gibraltar, we knew some operation was imminent, but the objective might have been any part of Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica or Malta.

Hechler: Why were so few planes used against us in North Africa?

Göring: We did send a couple of squadrons as reinforcements in November 1942 and bombed successfully, near the Tunis side-for example, Bône and Algiers-and we bombed and sank ships at sea. The planes were based in Italy and had insufficient range to strike at landings around Oran, for instance. We did not have too many long-range bombers. As your forces moved east, they came within range. The Heinkel 177 had more than enough range and was supposed to be ready in 1941, but it took too long to perfect and was not ready until early in 1944. It seemed terrible to me that there was such a delay, since such models became obsolete so quickly.

Hechler: Why did you not first seize Dakar?

Göring: In 1940 we had a plan to seize all North Africa from Dakar to Alexandria, and with it the Atlantic islands for U-boat bases. This would have cut off many of Britain’s shipping lanes. At the same time, any resistance movement in North Africa could be crushed. Then, taking Gibraltar and Suez would merely be a question of time, and nobody could have interfered in the Mediterranean. But Hitler would not make concessions to Spain in Morocco, on account of France. Spain had no objections to the campaign; in fact, the Spaniards were ready for it.

Hechler: Who made this plan? Where and when was the conference on it?

Göring: Hitler and [Joachim von] Ribbentrop met [Francisco] Franco and [Ramón Serrano] Suñer [Franco’s chief negotiator] at Hendaye [France] in September or October 1940. Unfortunately, I was not along. [Benito] Mussolini was jealous and feared having the Germans in the Mediterranean. By that time, it was 1941 and the Russian danger in Hitler’s mind excluded all other considerations. Lack of shipping had prevented us from invading England, but, before the difficulties with Russia, we could have carried out the Gibraltar Plan, with 20 divisions in West Africa, 10 in North Africa and 20 against the Suez Canal, still leaving 100 divisions in France. The entire Italian army, which was unfit for a major war, could have been used for occupation forces. The loss of Gibraltar might have induced England to sue for peace. Failure to carry out the plan was one of the major mistakes of the war.

The plan was originally mine. Hitler had similar ideas and everyone was enthusiastic about it. The navy was in favor of the plans, as it would have given the navy better bases. Instead of being cooped up in Biscay and Bordeaux, it could have had U-boat bases much farther out in Spain and the Atlantic islands. If the campaign succeeded, I personally wanted to attack the Azores to secure U-boat bases there, which would have crippled British sea lanes. The main task in taking Gibraltar would have fallen to the Luftwaffe. Paratroopers would have had to be dropped. So I was chiefly concerned, and I would have very eagerly carried out the operation. The Luftwaffe had many officers who had participated in the war in Spain a year and a half before and knew the people and the country.

Even if Gibraltar had not been taken, we could have Algeciras [as a base of operations], and with 800mm siege mortars could have smashed the soft stone of Gibraltar and taken the base. There was only one unprotected airfield on the Rock. In 24 hours the Royal Air Force would have been forced off the Rock, and we could have battered it to pieces. This was a real task and we were eager to accomplish it. Ships would have been sunk by mines and no mine sweepers could have operated.

Hechler: Can you trace the defeat of the Gibraltar plan directly to Hitler’s fear and distrust of Russia?

Göring: By the beginning of 1941, the Russian threat had begun to loom as a very real danger. Russia was bringing up large forces and making preparations on the frontier. If an agreement had been reached with [Commissar of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav] Molotov in February 1941, and the Russian danger had not been so real, we should certainly have carried out my plan in the spring of 1941.

Editor’s note: It is clear from Hitler’s first book, Mein Kampf (My Struggle), that as early as the 1930s the leader of the Third Reich sought to invade Russia in order to give Germany access to its living space, oil and other natural resources, grain and population. Göring was catering to his American interrogators and the United States at a point in time when U.S.–Soviet tensions were growing and Stalin and the Red Army posed the greatest ideological and military threat to Europe since the rise of Hitler’s Third Reich.

Hechler: Was the seizure of Dakar definitely part of your plan?

Göring: Yes. The plan called for securing all of North Africa, so that there would be no possible chance of any enemy penetrating to the Mediterranean. Such a possibility had to be excluded under all circumstances. Dakar was about the southwestern extremity. We would not have gone as far south as Freetown, for example. It would have taken much too long for anyone to attack across the desert with neither roads nor water supply adequate for the purpose. There was, therefore, no real danger to the Mediterranean from that far south. We would have taken Cyprus, too. I would have taken it right after we took Crete. We could also have taken Malta easily. Then the Atlantic islands would have been further protection for the coast of Africa. But fear of Russia stopped us. We had only eight divisions on the whole Russian frontier at the time.

Editor’s note: It is unlikely that the Germans could have taken Malta or Cyprus after their airborne invasion of Crete, although they had plans to invade Malta. The Wehrmacht suffered more than 6,000 casualties taking Crete, the vast bulk of them paratroopers, and the operation left both the Luftwaffe’s Fallschirmjäger and its transport arm-which lost more than 300 Junkers Ju-52 transports heavily damaged or destroyed-debilitated and unable to execute any large-scale airborne operations for some time to come. Nor could the Luftwaffesupport the Russian campaign after Crete to the extent that Hitler had anticipated. Indeed, after the debacle at Crete, Hitler turned his back on large-scale airborne operations forever.

Hechler: Were Hitler’s fears of Russia military or ideological? Did he fear communism’s spread or Russia’s military might?

Göring: Hitler feared a military attack. Molotov made the following demands in February 1941: a second war on Finland, to result in Russian occupation of the entire country; invasion of Romania and occupation of part of the country; strengthened Russian position in Bulgaria; solution of the Dardanelles question (none of us wished to see Russia there); and the question of the Skagerrak and the Kattegat. This made us fall out of our chairs, it was so incredible. This was the last straw; Molotov was not to be heard any further. Germany would not even discuss it.

We would have no objections to Russia having a sphere of influence in Finland, but Hitler felt that if Russia occupied the whole of Finland, she would reach out to Swedish iron ore mines and the port of Narvik, and we did not want the Russians as our northern neighbors, with troops in Scandinavia. The German people were also very sympathetic toward the valiant Finns. The Russian move northwest would have tended to outflank Germany. Similarly, the Russians in Romania might not necessarily go south, but might move westward to encircle Germany on that side. By denying us the nickel of Finland and the grain and oil of Romania, Russia could have exerted economic pressure against us, and in 1942 or so proceeded to direct military action. These were the main reasons that kept us from arriving at any agreement.

In November 1940, when the first alarming reports came from the east, Hitler gave his first orders to OKW regarding the steps which would have to be taken if the situation with Russia became dangerous. Provision had to be made for the eventuality of a Russian attack. In March 1941, Hitler made up his mind to launch a preventive attack on Russia as a practical matter. I had favored making more concessions to Molotov, since I believed that if Russia invaded Finland and Romania, the differences between her and Britain and the United States would have become insuperable. Hitler, however, was personally distrustful of Russia all the time and saw in her, with the mighty armaments she had been piling up for 10 years, the great future enemy of Germany. Hitler’s inward mistrust remained deep even though not expressed. He wanted to reject all of Molotov’s demands in February 1941, whereas those of my opinion felt that a second Finnish war and a Russian drive on the Dardanelles would rupture the already tense relations between Russia and the Anglo-Saxon powers. In the long run, Russia might then fight England and not against us.

What Stalin’s real intentions were, I don’t know-whether he wanted to move toward the Dardanelles, or to attack Germany. If we had granted Russia’s demands, we might have had her join with us in a four-power pact, replacing the Three-Power Pact. I did not want to attack Russia. I wanted to carry out the Gibraltar plan, and I also did not want to see my Luftwaffe split between the Eastern and Western fronts. Russia was developing a position completely and finally contradictory to the interests of the British.