

THE MYTH OF "FORTRESS EUROPE"

BY MAJOR ALEXANDER P. DE SEVERSKY

ORTHODOX military writers assume that Nazi Germany, having lost the initiative in the war, may elect to fight it defensively. It will shorten its lines wherever possible and "dig in" for a prolonged siege. And German propaganda has accepted this assumption. The very phrase *Festung Europa* — Fortress Europe — now so prominent in Dr. Goebbels' new threats and alibis, implies a siege behind impregnable walls. According to the Nazi version, the enemy's successes in the Mediterranean and on the Russian front have not really breached the "fortress," within which the Germans can survive against the entire outside world.

The whole idea, however, is nothing more than a hangover from the past. If Goebbels expresses serious German military opinion in the talk of *Festung Europa*, then such opinion is as backward as the view — held in Germany and by some of our own commentators after the Battle of Britain — that strategic bombing is of no military value. But more likely German

propaganda is puffing up the possibilities of defensive warfare to bolster a tottering morale, without real faith in it.

Because the fact is that air power has forever ended the concept of impregnable fortifications. In the epoch of surface warfare a strong wall was enough to keep out an enemy. The Maginot Line is the last great monument to that epoch. Since the advent of air power, a wall is not enough. A roof, too, is required, otherwise destruction will rain down on the besieged area from overhead.

The question, therefore, is whether the Germans can provide their European fortress with a roof of defensive air power; whether they can establish what some refer to as a "vertical front." And the answer is that they cannot do it. Bombers will always crash through, and given an attacker with adequate air power of the proper types, an effective roof over the "fortress" is out of the question.

It has always been a sound military principle that the most ef-

fective defense is a vigorous offensive. In aerial warfare this principle amounts to a law to which there are few if any exceptions. To make its "fortress" hope come true, Germany must ward off Allied demolition from the skies — the kind of round-the-clock bombardment of which it has already had substantial samples. But this it can do, in the final analysis, only by stopping the air offensive at its source, which means *an offensive* against Allied airfields, factories, fuel concentrations and other sources of air power.

There are those who cite the Battle of Britain as proof that successful defensive action on the home grounds is possible. The Royal Air Force, they point out, succeeded in defeating the Luftwaffe in a battle fought over the British Isles. Why could not German defensive aviation in the same way defeat the Allied onslaught from above, thus adding a roof to its fortress walls?

Theoretically that is conceivable. Practically, we know that the Battle of Britain was unique. The attacking aircraft were so deficient in military characteristics that, looking back at the episode, we can only marvel at the military stupidity of Marshal Goering and his aviation associates. They sent in swarms of bombers that were vir-

tually unarmed in broad daylight, against British Spitfires and Hurricanes armed to the teeth. The qualitative gap between the invaders and the defenders was so wide that it was almost like a mob of savages with bows and arrows attacking a contingent of white men armed with guns. What is more, German strategic ideas in the Battle of Britain were all false. Instead of concentrating for a knock-out blow against the opposing air power, in the air and on the ground, Goering squandered planes and lives on blasting population centers and other morale targets.

Given a discrepancy in weapons and strategic good sense such as saved the British Isles, it is possible to throw a cover of air power over an area. But Germany today cannot hope for any such discrepancy in its favor. Both sides have learned a lot from the Battle of Britain and a score of other engagements since then. Neither side can count on mistakes of major proportions by its opponents. Today the forces are technologically more or less evenly matched, even if we give Germany credit for maximum strength. Under those conditions there can be no such thing as an impregnable defense. Bombardment aviation will penetrate, even if losses are heavy, and for all practical pur-

poses the Germans will be trapped in a fortress without a roof.

The logic of modern air power forces us to a specific conclusion: If the Germans go over to a purely defensive strategy, their doom will be sealed. Such strategy is today a myth, and those who preached it only a few years ago seem as anachronistic as if they belonged to the era of Caesar or Napoleon.

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The only plan, from the vantage point of air power, is to *ignore* this fortress. We must continue to bomb across its walls and to demolish the core of Axis strength, which is the complex of industries, communication lines and other strategic objectives in Germany proper. As in the case of any territory under artillery bombardment, the more concentrated, continuous and thorough this bombardment, the smaller will be the total effort and sacrifice needed to cause a collapse.

However, it should be remembered that from the point of view of the old surface strategy, Europe is still a "fortress" — and that many Allied military men still see the scene primarily from that point of view! If we accept the Goebbels fiction, and proceed to storm the European ramparts instead of ig-

norning them, then the myth will suddenly become a deadly reality. *Then we shall no longer be fighting on our terms but on Germany's terms,* and the Germans will be able to fight back.

There may be any number of valid political reasons why an invasion of Western Europe — a storming of the fortress — should be undertaken. There were other occasions in this war when political considerations were at variance with strictly military good sense. The British attempt to defend Holland and Belgium, for instance, was essentially a political obligation, without much hope of improving the military position and with a huge risk of disaster. The British defense of Greece, likewise, was largely the fulfilment of a moral and political obligation, undertaken with the knowledge that in splitting the small British forces the entire African position was endangered.

Furthermore, the top leadership of our war effort today is composed for the most part of men of an old military school, considerably "set" in its ways. They are responsible for the channelling of an overwhelming portion of our national wealth and labor power into surface weapons. Quite naturally they are itching to employ those accumulated

weapons: the great navies, the millionfold armies, the mountains of equipment. Despite the accomplishments of air power in limited doses with inadequate planes, such men are sincerely worried by an honest lack of faith in all-out aerial strategy — except as an “extra” method on an experimental basis. An unshakable faith in surface procedures, plus the desire to justify in dramatic and victorious operations their former decisions in building what is essentially a surface war machine, therefore impel them to plunge into an old-style mile-by-mile frontal attack on *Festung Europa*.

By the time these words see print, indeed, it is not impossible that the frontal attack may have been decided upon. Even if successful, it will involve a high price in Allied lives and matériel. The enemy will then retreat and contract its “fortress.” Every contraction, by shortening the lines to be defended, will tend to strengthen the walls of the “fortress.” Under the most favorable circumstances, it will be a long and costly enterprise; the experience in Tunisia, where nearly everything was stacked in our favor, is proof of how slow surface operations necessarily are. Those who are impatient with air power, which has had only

an inadequate opportunity with retarded equipment, will face a more harrowing test of their patience when a full-parade invasion gets going.

Should Germany succeed in repelling a major invasion on the Western coast of Europe, the game will not be up. The Allied cause would suffer a terrific moral blow. But “Fortress Europe” will be as accessible as ever to third-dimensional strategy aiming directly at Germany’s solar plexus. We would then have to undertake out of necessity, and after the expenditure of myriad lives, the kind of war that is now open to us as a matter of intelligent choice.

Should the German *Festung* be stormed and overwhelmed, at a hideous price in casualties, the myth of surface strategy of the pre-aviation epoch would be perpetuated. It would then be solemnly attested by old-style military leaders and writers that this war, like the previous one, was won by the man with the bayonet and the man in the tank. The victorious nations would continue to pile up surface weapons and maintain immense standing armies, despite the fact that they have been made largely superfluous, except as follow-up and auxiliary services, by the air weapon. History might then repeat

itself tragically. Because the first World War ended in the trenches, France staked its life on a super-trench, the Maginot Line. Should this war be ended by surface operations, there would be the same danger that the victors would maintain faith in two-dimensional strategy, leaving it to others to exploit air power to the full.

To airmen, judging the picture solely from the military angle and without reference to political fac-

tors, it seems entirely unnecessary to accept the fortress concept. They believe that only a small fraction of the industrial potential and manpower represented by a full-parade invasion, if translated into true air power and given full opportunity to operate in line with its own strategy, could knock out Germany from above. The surface forces would then enter *Festung Europa* as occupying forces rather than invasion forces.



V . . . — MAIL

BY EDWARD FENTON

BETWEEN us legend stretches, flung across
 The disconnected currents of the world at war.
 Across the monotonous oceans, duned with waves,
 A curlicued sea of sand surrounds my eyes
 And stretching past them, past dead other eyes,
 Suffers me in its moment.

When I rise
 The curling sand impartially will flow
 To fill the impress I have made;

Where you are now
 The green grass bends beneath you where you stand,
 Then rises when you pass beyond it. Look!

And
 Grass and the sea and desert vanish, for
 Nowhere now retains my true trace or
 My shape, excepting you: — and you now here
 Set in this treacherous and impersonal sphere
 Intaglio-cut endure, while I still move,
 As on an amulet: the one I love.