

Churchill's Dilemma

AT 4:13 A.M. ON JUNE 13, 1944, there was an explosion in a lettuce patch twenty-five miles south-east of London.

Britain had been at war for five years, but this marked the beginning of a new torment for the inhabitants of the capital, one that would last several months and cost thousands of lives. The Germans called their flying bomb *Vergeltungswaffe*—retaliation weapon. The first V1 merely destroyed edible plants, but there were nine other missiles of vengeance that night, and they had more deadly effect.

Londoners prided themselves on—and had to some extent mythologized—their fortitude during the Blitz. Yet, by the summer of '44, reservoirs of optimism and morale were running dry,—even though D-day had occurred on June 6 and the Nazis were already on the retreat on the Eastern front.

The V1s were a terrifying sight. The two tons of steel hurtled through the sky, with a flaming orange-red tail. But it was the sound that most deeply imprinted itself on witnesses. The rockets would buzz like a deranged bee and then go eerily quiet. Silence signaled that they had run out of fuel and were falling. On contact with the ground they would cause a deafening explosion that could flatten several buildings. Londoners tempered their fear by giving the bombs a name of childlike inno-

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cence: doodlebugs. (The Germans called them “hell hounds” or “fire dragons.”) Only an exceptional few citizens could be as phlegmatic as the poet Edith Sitwell, who was in the middle of a reading when a doodlebug was heard above. She “merely lifted her eyes to the ceiling for a moment and, giving her voice a little more volume to counter the racket in the sky, read on.”¹

Because the missiles were not piloted, they could be dispatched across the Channel day or night, rain or shine. That they were unmanned made them more, not less, menacing. “No enemy was risking his life up there,” wrote Evelyn Waugh, “it was as impersonal as a plague, as though the city was infested with enormous, venomous insects.”²

The doodlebugs were aimed at the heart of the capital, which was both densely populated and contained the institutions of government and power. Some doodlebugs reached the targeted zone. One smashed windows in Buckingham Palace and damaged George VI’s tennis court. More seriously, on June 18, 1944, a V1 landed on the Guards Chapel, near the Palace, in the midst of a morning service attended by both civilians and soldiers: 121 people were killed.

The skylight of nearby Number 5, Seaforth Place, would have been shaken by this explosion too. Number 5 was an attic flat overrun by mice and volumes of poetry: there were so many books that additional shelves had had to be installed in what had originally been a bread oven, set into the wall. There was a crack in the roof, through which could be heard the intermittent growl of planes, and there were cracks in the floor as well, through which could be heard the near constant roar of the underground. The flat was home to two young women, who shared shoes (they had three pairs between them) and a lover. Iris was working in the Treasury, and secretly feeding information back to the Communist Party; Philippa was researching

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how American money could revitalize European economies once the war was over. Both Iris Murdoch and Philippa Bon-sanquet would go on to become outstanding philosophers, though Iris would always be better known as a novelist.

Iris's biographer, Peter Conradi, says the women became used to walking to work in the morning to discover various buildings had disappeared during the night. Back at the flat, during intense bombing raids, they would climb into the bath-tub under the stairs for comfort and protection.

They weren't aware of it at the time, but matters could have been worse. The Nazis faced two problems. First, despite the near miss to Buckingham Palace, and the terrible toll at the Guards Chapel, most of the V1 bombs actually fell a few miles south of the center. Second, this was a fact of which the Nazis were ignorant.

An ingenious plan presented itself in Whitehall. If the Ger-mans could be deceived into believing that the doodlebugs were hitting their mark—or, better still, missing their mark by falling north—then they would not readjust the trajectory of the bombs, and perhaps even alter it so that they fell still farther south. That could save lives.

The details of this deception were intricately plotted by the secret service and involved several double agents, including two of the most colorful, ZigZag³ and Garbo.⁴ Both ZigZag and Garbo were on the Nazi payroll but working for the Allies. The Nazis requested eyewitness information about where the bombs were exploding—and for a month they swallowed up the regular and misleading information that ZigZag and Garbo provided.

The military immediately recognized the benefits of this ruse and supported the operation. But for the politicians it had been a tougher call. There was an impassioned debate between

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the minister for Home Security, Herbert Morrison, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It would be too crude to characterize it as a class conflict, but Morrison, who was the son of a policeman from south London and who represented a desperately poor constituency in east London, perhaps felt more keenly than did Churchill the burden that the operation would impose on the working-class areas south of the center. And he was uneasy at the thought of “playing God,” of politicians determining who was to live and who to die. Churchill, as usual, prevailed.

The success of the operation is contested by historians. The British intelligence agency, MI5, destroyed the false reports dispatched by Garbo and ZigZag, recognizing that, were they ever to come to light, the residents of south London might not take kindly to being used in this way. However, the Nazis never improved their aim. And a scientific adviser with a stiff upper lip, who promoted the operation even though his parents and his old school were in south London (“I knew that neither my parents nor the school would have had it otherwise”), estimated it may have saved as many as 10,000 lives.⁵

By the end of August 1944, the danger from VIs had receded. The British got better at shooting down the doodlebugs from both air and ground. More important, the V1 launching pads in Northern France were overrun by the advancing Allied forces. On September 7, 1944, the British government announced that the war against the flying bomb was over.⁶ The VIs had killed around six thousand people. Areas of south London—Croydon, Penge, Beckenham, Dulwich, Streatham, and Lewisham—had been rocked and pounded: 57,000 houses had been damaged in Croydon alone.

Nonetheless, it’s possible that without the double-agent subterfuge, many more buildings would have been destroyed—

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and many more lives lost. Churchill probably didn't lose too much sleep over the decision. He faced excruciating moral dilemmas on an almost daily basis. But this one is significant for capturing the structure of a famous philosophical puzzle.

That puzzle is the subject of this book.