The Battle of Britain

❶ Speech given in the House of Lords by Viscount Halifax, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, on 5 September 1940. ❷ WAAF operators plotting incoming enemy aircraft on a map at RAF operations room.

➪ Using the documents and your knowledge, explain the situation of the UK in the summer of 1940 and how the Battle of Britain was won.

The Battle of Britain was an aerial battle fought over England in the summer of 1940. It happened just after the defeat of France and was won by the Royal Air Force. Lord Halifax (doc. 1) was the Foreign Minister in the National Governement led by Winston Churchill. The Women Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF, doc.2) served in the RAF. One of their tasks was to plot on a map the attacking enemy aircraft detected by radar, so that the fighters could intercept them. Using those documents and our knowledge, we are going to describe the difficult situation of Britain at that time and to explain why it ended in a British victory.

1. A dire situation

a) A vulnerable Britain : the Germans were attacking en masse (l. 1). Their attacks were continuous (l. 1-2 ; see also "wave after wave", l. 5). The enemy was superior in numbers (l. 5-6). Conversely the British fighters were outnumbered. Hitler wanted to take the UK out of the war. He had planned an invasion of the British Isles but first needed air supremacy before landing troops in England.

b) The map (doc. 2) shows that Nazi Germany, now the master of the continent, could easily attack any part of Southern and Eastern England. Indeed, the continental coasts of the Channel and the North Sea, from France to Norway, were entirely under German control.

c) Hence, Halifax describes the situation as "critical" (l. 10), requiring "the whole effort of our people" (l. 12). At the time of this statement, he did not claim victory : he was only "confident" (l. 8 and 11) that the war could be won, but he saw no reason for "complacency" (l. 11). Britain, indeed, was alone and fighting a defensive battle against a very powerful enemy.

2. Against all odds, the British won that battle.

a) Because the UK had the most modern air defence system in the world (l. 2, doc. 2). It was based on a network of radar stations (Chain Home), so that the Hurricane and Spitfire fighters of the RAF could "intercept and engage" (l. 4-5) the German bombers and their escorting fighters. While the British were outnumbered, their superior technology and organisation enabled them to be more efficient. Moreover, they were fighting over Britain, so that a shot down British pilot could often be rescued and fight another day. The downed German airmen, however, were either killed or caught. Each German plane shot down implied the entire loss of its crew. In the early days of September, the German losses (1,200 planes, l. 7) were already dreadful, but 544 British pilots died in the Battle of Britain. The "Few" (as Churchill called the brave RAF fighter pilots) had saved England from a possible German invasion, that Hitler had planned and then decided to postpone.

b) But the war was still going on. While the British counted on essential support from the United States (l. 10), America was not at war. The USA eventually joined the war after Pearl Harbor, much later, in December 1941. As of 1940, Hitler hadn't any opponent left on the continent. War against the USSR began in June 1941. From June 1940 to June 1941, the UK was alone in the war and Germany was stronger than Britain.

c) While Halifax insisted on the Few, he also put stress on the "Home Front" (l. 13 : "the whole effort of our people"), which was "just as vital" (l. 15) as the dogfights in the skies. The war was a people's war (l. 12 : "the whole effort of our people is required", be it in the industry (l. 13 : "factory") or the agriculture ("the countryside"). That humble (l. 14 "tedious and pedestrian") war effort carried out by the many (workers, farmers) was indeed essential, "directly related" (l. 15) to the heroic fighting of the British airmen. Document 2 reminds ud that women played their part in that total war, not only as army auxiliaries like the WAAF, but also in the industry or agriculture. The war fostered the emancipation of British women.

Conclusion : Those documents provide a vivid account of the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Britain. In spite of their loneliness, the British were resilient. They did not give in. And the Battle of Britain, fought by a handful of gallant young pilots, was also the people's victory. Democracy is more resilient than Hitler and his clique could imagine.