**Section européenne**

**Terminales – 2016**

**G1 – Historians and World War II Memories**

**The Battle of Britain**

**Source 1:** **The Battle of Britain, main facts**

Another problem for Hitler was that the Blitzkrieg tactics that had worked so well in Poland and France could not work across the Channel. Blitzkrieg was built around rapid and flexible movement of many land troops. To conquer Britain would require a sea and air invasion. Hitler’s military advisers made it clear that no invasion could succeed if German forces were being attacked by the RAF and the British navy. […] the Germans did believe that if the RAF could be wiped out, then the navy's dockyards could be destroyed by bombing. Without the protection of the RAF, British ships would be vulnerable to air attack by German planes.

Operation Sealion (the Germans’ code name for the invasion of Britain) had therefore to begin with the destruction of the RAF. German bombers would bomb British air bases and cripple the RAF. On 1 July 1940 the first German aircraft crossed the Channel and the air war that became known as the Battle of Britain had begun.

[… ]The Battle of Britain was not a single battle. It was a series of air battles, day after day, that lasted throughout the summer of 1940. Waves of German bombers escorted by fighter aircraft would attack targets in Britain. British fighters were sent to intercept them.

[…]As pilots were killed, hundreds were recruited to fill the gap. As planes were destroyed, more planes were needed. Lord Beaverbrook took over aircraft production and focused on producing only fighter planes (not bombers). From July to September, Britain was making 563 planes per month — out producing the Germans.

Source: Ben Walsh (ed), *GCSE, Modern World History*, 1996 (pp. 282-283)

**Source 2: The Few, Winston Churchill, August 20, 1940, House of Commons**

The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

All hearts go out to the fighter pilots, whose brilliant actions we see with our own eyes day after day; but we must never forget that all the time, night after night, month after month, our bomber squadrons travel far into Germany, find their targets in the darkness by the highest navigational skill, aim their attacks, often under the heaviest fire, often with serious loss, with deliberate careful discrimination, and inflict shattering blows upon the whole of the technical and war-making structure of the Nazi power.

Source:http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/113-the-few

**Source 3: Brian James, « *Pie in the Sky? »*, *History Today*, September 2006**

On Sunday, September 17th, Britain will once again remember the epic struggle of Fighter Command in the Second World War at a service of thanksgiving and rededication in Westminster Abbey before a congregation of airmen past and present. Like the great flypast of three hundred airplanes last September, the event will encourage Britons everywhere to recall how a handful of heroes saved these islands from invasion. But is this true – or the perpetuation of a glorious myth?

It is not mere revisionist history that puts this question, and indeed offers the suggestion that it would be at least equally fitting if, on this Battle of Britain Day, the Royal Navy were to send its ships in procession along our coasts – for it was the navy, not the RAF, that prevented a German invasion in 1940. This is the contention of three senior military historians at the Joint Services Command Staff College. Together they run the High Command course that teaches the past to the air marshals, generals and admirals of the future. What today’s senior officers learn of Britain’s military history they learn from this trio – and some of what they may be told goes against many popular beliefs.

Source: http://www.historytoday.com/brian-james/pie-sky

**Source 4: The Royal Navy did not win the 'Battle of Britain': But we need a holistic view of Britain's defences in 1940, Christina Goulter, Andrew Gordon and Gary Sheffield**

In truth, the notion that in John Keegan's words 'some 2500 young pilots had alone been responsible for preserving Britain from invasion' has long been disputed by historians. As far back as 1958 Duncan Grinnell-Milne made the case for the principal role of the RN [Royal Navy] in preventing invasion, and two years later Captain Stephen Roskill, the British Official Historian, argued for the primacy of 'lack of adequate [German] instruments of sea power' […] Wing Commander H.R. Allen, himself a Spitfire pilot, published in 1974 a controversial book on the subject. Allen defined the Battle of Britain widely, to encompass more than just the air battle, and concluded that the importance of the air and maritime dimensions had been respectively exaggerated and underestimated.

[…]In fact, none of us argued that the Royal Navy and not Fighter Command ‘won the Battle of Britain’. All three of us recognize that defeat of the Luftwaffe by the Royal Air Force’s Fighter Command was a critical factor in preventing the German armed forces from attempting an invasion. Moreover, this victory was of enormous strategic, political, and psychological importance, for which Fighter Command deserves full credit. However, this was not the subject of our interviews. We understood that we were being interviewed about the prospects of Operation Sealion, […] before it came to be associated solely with the air battle. We are three independent scholars and do not have a ‘party line’ on the subject, but we all believe, as did Churchill, in the necessity of adopting a holistic view of Britain’s defences in 1940. This must include consideration of the role of the RAF’s Bomber and Coastal Commands, the Royal Navy, and land forces, as well as Fighter Command. This is a rather different and certainly more subtle argument from the self-evidently ridiculous notion that a fleet ‘won’ an air battle. […]Thus, far from being a novel idea, the defence of Britain in 1940 has been a live topic of debate for at least fifty years.

Source: ‘The Battle of Britain debate’, Christina Goulter, Andrew Gordon and Gary Sheffield,

*RUSI Analysis*, October 20, 2006 (Royal United Services Institute)

**Notes**

* “Pie in the sky” is whishful thinking, idealism (prendre ses désirs pour des réalités)
* “Adopting a holistic view” means taking the whole story into account, not just one element.
* John Keegan and Duncan Grinnell Milne are historians.

1. Introduce source 3 and source 4 and their respective authors.
2. In your opinion, what was Brian James’ goal when he wrote source 3?
3. Why can we say that Keegan’s view (source 4) voices the collective memory of the Battle of Britain?
4. How do historians feel about that view? Answer by explaining what the three historians mean by a holistic approach mentioned in the title (source 4).