

Why were the major  
cities of Britain  
bombed by the  
Germans in 1940-41  
essay



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Since the start of the Second World War in September 1939, Britain had been preparing for attack.

The Government had issued warnings as early as 3rd September, urging people to keep off the streets when possible, carry gas masks and build air raid shelters. Many children, disabled people and women had been evacuated from cities to the country as a precaution. But by Easter 1940 there had been no fighting to speak of, and the majority of the British public had given up expecting a battle and returned to their normal lives. Evacuees returned to the cities and most people regarded this “ Phoney War” as something of an anticlimax.

During this period from the start of the war to spring 1940, the war to some Europeans had been anything but phoney. Hitler’s “ Blitzkrieg” (lightning war) style warfare was used first on Poland. This involved the massive use of tanks, motorised infantry and the airforce in order to invade the country and beat the resistance in all areas of the military. The Polish army did not have time to prepare and were soon forced to retreat following the Soviet invasion from the East two weeks later. Warsaw had surrendered to Germany and the Soviet Union on 27th December 1939 and been split between the two countries.

Britain and France knew exactly what had happened but had been unable to intervene effectively on Poland’s behalf. The successful invasion of Poland proved to Hitler that his “ Blitzkrieg” was effective and could now be used on other targets, for example Great Britain. Hitler’s original tactic against Britain was to bomb the Royal Air Force bases around the country, thus disabling

her main military strength. The RAF was important to Britain's defences because being an island away from mainland Europe meant it was difficult to cross other borders and fight countries without a good airforce and navy. Destroying radar bases was also very important. Radar had been patented as a British invention in 1935 by Sir Robert Alexander Watson-Watt, but ironically one of the first developers of the idea was a 19th Century German.

Radar enabled people on the ground to detect enemy aircraft and give warnings to the RAF who could then prepare fighters in defence. Destruction of these bases would make it much harder to detect air raids and leave Britain unprotected. On 12th August 1940 raids by Messerschmitt Bf 110s and Stukas on radar stations along the coasts of Kent, Sussex and the Isle of Wight failed to break the system. The Luftwaffe began its main offensive on 13 August 1940. Fiercely challenged by RAF Fighter Command, it attacked airfields, radar stations, ports and aircraft factories. Between 24 August and 6 September, the Germans struck at key airfields, but the raids were not decisive.

The secret of Fighter Command's success lay in the system of air defence which had been developed before the war with the use of radar. German aircraft were picked up by the radar stations and tracked by the Observer Corps. The Luftwaffe's efforts intensified but so did its losses. On 17 September Hitler postponed Operation Sealion (codename for this series of attacks) indefinitely. Herman Goering, head of the Luftwaffe, had actually given specific orders to leave civilian targets alone, but on 24th August 1940 German bombers that had drifted off target hit the centre of London instead of their intended military targets.

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The British Government believed the attack had been intentional and Churchill ordered a bombing raid on Berlin for the next three nights.

Therefore, Britain was the first side to bomb civilian targets, not Germany.

The Germans, especially Hitler, were incensed, since they had arrogantly believed that Berlin was unreachable. Demanding revenge, Hitler ordered Goering to turn his attentions fully onto London and other major British cities. It was the obvious move and proved the most testing for Britain. The Nazis believed a continuous bombing campaign on British civilians would destroy morale and pressure Churchill into peace negotiations.

The Blitz started in full force on London on 7th September 1940. It went on for 57 consecutive nights. On the first day alone 430 citizens were killed and 1600 severely injured. The first raid comprised over 300 bombers escorted by more than 600 fighters. They started bombing the East End before they carried on to bomb the City and Central London. The bombs caused more than 1000 fires.

Damage was caused to two major power stations, homes and factories along the Thames and three major London railway stations. The German bombers returned the next day and a further 412 died. Between September 1940 and May 1941, the Luftwaffe made 127 large-scale night raids. Of these, 71 were targeted on London. The main targets outside the capital were Liverpool, Birmingham, Plymouth, Bristol, Glasgow, Southampton, Coventry, Hull, Portsmouth, Manchester, Belfast, Sheffield, Newcastle, Nottingham and Cardiff.

These, being the main cities in Britain, were vital to Britain's industry and played major parts in the war effort. They were also chosen tactically: Portsmouth and Southampton were easily reached southern ports used by the navy and RAF radar systems, and Liverpool was Britain's most used port throughout the 19th Century because of its excellent trading centre. Cutting off trade routes was a largely employed tactic by all sides during the war, as international commerce was growing rapidly and being an island, Britain relied heavily on sea imports. Although slightly out of range for German bombers, Sheffield was a major target because of the large steel industry there.

Many aeroplane factories were established in the North as it was less heavily bombed, mainly because it was too far away for the Luftwaffe to get there and back to Germany in a night. The East End of London was also a prime target, as this is where the majority of factories were in the city. It also housed London's docks, important for supplies and naval use. The heaviest bombing occurred here throughout the Blitz and beyond. A popular tactic employed by the Luftwaffe was to bomb oil stores in and around cities during day raids or early evening sorties; this would start large, uncontrollable fires that would burn for several hours, lighting the way for night bombers. This negated the effects of the blackout enforced every night.

Hitler's attempt to lower the morale of the British people failed from the start. It was hoped by the Germans that after a few weeks of concentrated bombing, the people of London would fully support Churchill to appease Hitler and give in to his demands. In fact, it only made them more defiant and want to stand up to their attackers. Kingsley Martin, wartime editor of <https://assignbuster.com/why-were-the-major-cities-of-britain-bombed-by-the-germans-in-1940-41-essay/>

the New Statesman, summed up the nation's feelings writing in his 1968 autobiography, " We might not have been able to carry on, but bombs do not induce surrender.

Many believe Churchill was a great leader but not one of great intelligence, so it seemed he would do what the people wanted. He relied purely on being a patriotic figurehead at a time the public wanted one, as he had been out of Government for a decade already after a series of political ' wrongdoings' but was re-elected in the hysteric patriotism that followed the start of the war. Therefore persuading the public that it was better to give in to Hitler would ensure their Government would do the same. There are many stories of the strength of character of the British public from the war, which proves they believed they would not be beaten.

On 18th September a broadcast on Nazi-controlled French radio claimed that " all reports from London are agreed that the population is seized by fear... the Londoners have completely lost their self control. " However just a week earlier Churchill had addressed the nation, saying, " Hitler expects to terrorise and cow the people of this mighty city.

.. little does he know the spirit of the British nation, or the tough fibre of the Londoners. It seemed the more Hitler attacked the country, the less Britain would do to cooperate which is why in 1942 Britain was seen as Hitler's only real enemy. Describe the effects of the Blitz on everyday life in Britain From the start of the war on 3rd September 1939, Government warnings were issued in Britain, expecting attacks or even invasion at any time.

Children were evacuated, gas masks issued and carried, and air raid shelters were built. The “ Phoney War” months that followed were enough to prompt parents to bring evacuated children back into the cities and carry on life as normal, as nothing had happened to speak of. Although it was now law to “ black out” lights visible from outside and stay off the streets unless necessary, most people did not believe Britain was to see any attacks after all. On 7th September 1940 London was bombed with full force by the Germans. This was something of a “ wake-up call” to Britons, many of whom had relaxed and were not expecting any such attack. The nightly raids, which came on 57 consecutive evenings in London alone, became known as The Blitz, from the German word for lightning.

On the first night 430 people were killed and 1600 injured. Many were killed instantly, others by falling rubble and many in the fires that followed as a result of the bombing. Houses were damaged, sometimes completely destroyed, and school or work was often interrupted by the air raid siren. The bombers came in wave after wave, scarcely giving the cities time to “ catch their breath. ” Particularly badly affected areas were industrial cities such as Coventry and Liverpool. Coventry was the centre of Britain’s war production and Liverpool was the country’s main northern port.

The air raid on Coventry on the night of 14th November 1940 was the single most concentrated attack on a British city in World War II. More than 43, 000 homes, just over half the city’s housing stock, were damaged or destroyed in the raid. Liverpool was Hitler’s second main target after London, as

Submarine warfare had not closed traffic to it as expected. May 3rd 1941 was Liverpool’s worst night of the Blitz.

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There were over 800 incidents in the city reported; both cathedrals were hit, public libraries and other buildings were destroyed, including the city's oldest building, Bluecoat Chambers. However the largest explosion of the night was the blowing up of the S. S. Malakand, a steamer belonging to the Brocklebank line. She was carrying over 1000 tons of shells and bombs destined for the Middle East. Nearly 100 Liverpoolians and sailors were killed on this night.

The London Blitz, perhaps the most famous for its mass destruction and highest death tolls, was the worst because the city held Parliament, many old buildings, factories and ships. The East End in particular was badly hit, because of the docks and factories. The effect on the people was dramatic, but civilians soon pulled together and joined in on the war effort, be it collecting shrapnel for munitions or helping clear wrecked houses. In homes, bomb shelters were hastily assembled.

Although the Home Secretary had called for bomb sheltering precautions to be taken as early as 1937, the start of the Blitz changed the opinions of cynics and shelters appeared in many homes. The Anderson shelter was introduced by the Government for family use and supplied for free to the inhabitants of poorer danger areas or for a fee to anyone else, depending on size. They needed a back garden and the standard shelter could take 4 – 6 people. By mid-1940 2.5 million Andersons had been supplied. Morrison shelters were intended for inner city dwellers, primarily for those with no back garden.



The shelters were double bed sized and covered with sheets of steel and wire mesh. When not in use, the mesh sides could be folded in and the Morrison would double up as a table. As the Blitz continued, people began to customise their air raid shelters. Outdoor shelters were often partly underground, so people put gnomes or grew flowers on the roof. The Government advised the growth of vegetables on top of Anderson shelters, to make use of space and overcome ration shortages.

Public shelters were set up in local areas, these would be existing bunkers or large Anderson shelters. In London, many people found the safest place to shelter was the Underground network. They would buy a platform ticket and sit in a station in the event of a raid, sometimes all night. As word spread, Tube stations became more and more popular with those who did or did not have their own shelters and got very busy. When the live rails were switched off and no trains were running, people would sleep between the rails. Public shelters did pose problems in that often it would take too long to find and enter a large communal shelter, meaning many people would be left outside or killed in the rush.

This actually happened in March 1943, when 173 people were killed in the rush to enter an underground air raid shelter in Bethnal Green. But generally people would be successful in their use of shelters. Morale remained high, and it seemed the more Hitler sent in the way of bombers, the higher spirits became. Community singing was common in public shelters, and many people found they made new friends and broadened their social circle during air raids. “ Business as usual” was very much the theme, people did not

dwell on the fact that their food was being heavily rationed and they could not have any lights showing after dark.

It did mean that people spent more time at home in the evenings, as much public entertainment had been cancelled. Towards the end of the Blitz people had got used to the raids and often would remain in the cinema or pub after the siren, reluctant to miss the fun. But most stayed in during the evenings and as a result of the night raids people were forced to get to know each other more by sharing shelters and helping each other. While some families claim the Blitz brought them together, for others it was a different picture.

A few days into the Blitz, women, children and disabled people were evacuated into the countryside to protect them. Most men between the ages of 19 and 41 had been conscripted into the armed forces by the start of the war. During the Christmas of 1939 a popular phrase was that the father of a family was “ somewhere in France. ” Other men had been called up for civil defence or Home Guard duties, and many had become ARP (Air Raid Precautions) Wardens. At first this was a voluntary job, often disliked by many during the Phoney War because of their seemingly pointless interference but respected as the Blitz started. But by the beginning of 1941 the Ministry of Home Security was forced to issue the first Civil Defence Compulsory Enrolment Order, stating that all males aged 16 – 60 who were not already helping the war effort must do up to 48 hours fire watching a month.

Women that previously did not work were recruited to help reunite families after nights in different shelters, became unofficial nurses for casualties and grouped to collect shrapnel and make home products. The effect of the Blitz on these families was that they would often not see each other for long periods of time, sometimes never again.