

The dangers of the Blitz spirit

The stoicism of the British people in response to the Luftwaffe raids of 1940–41 is seen as heroic, but their defiance resulted in needless deaths, says Richard Overy



In November 1940 novelist Vera Brittain and a friend took a taxi through the ruined areas of the East End of London. On the way an air-raid alarm sounded, and a policeman stopped the taxi and warned the driver and passengers to take shelter. The taxi-man glared at the policeman with “unutterable contempt” and carried on towards Bethnal Green, with the approval of his two charges.

He told them that he slept every night on the top floor of a block of flats, that had no shelter, listening to the bombs falling around him. “Unless it has me name on it, it won’t git me,” was his conclusion. Brittain thought this was typical of the fatalism expressed by Londoners in [the Blitz](#), firm in the belief that “destiny remains unaffected by caution”. She too on occasion, at the end of a tiring day, chose to sleep in her bed oblivious to the thudding noise of the bombs and guns around her. Brittain survived, but thousands of Londoners who defied the rational impulse to shelter did not.

Bombing deaths in Britain during the nine-month German aerial Blitz on Britain were remarkably high compared with the casualties imposed by most bombing during the [Second World War](#). Between September 1940 and May 1941, 41,480 people were killed, 16,755 of them women and 5,184 of them children. The peak month was September

1940, when 6,968 were killed; the lowest number of deaths occurred in February 1941, with 859 dead, thanks to the poor flying weather.

German bombers dropped 58,000 tonnes of bombs in 1940 and 1941. British bombing of Germany in 1940 cost just 950 deaths and in 1941 a further 4,000, inflicted by 50,000 tonnes of bombs dropped by the RAF on European, principally German, targets. It took 10 tonnes of bombs to kill one German but only 1.3 tonnes to kill a Briton.

The popular explanation for this disparity relies on two surviving myths of the bombing war. First, that German bombing was deliberately terroristic, targeted at civilian populations to force British surrender; second, that RAF bombers only hit military targets, including factories, and spared the civil population as far as possible. Neither of these arguments stands up to scrutiny.

The German air force targets were the docks with their associated storehouses and transport facilities, the aircraft engineering industry in the Midlands, and the administrative and financial centre of London. [Adolf Hitler](#) explicitly rejected the idea of terror-bombing for its own sake, partly from fear of retaliation on German cities, partly from the fact that it made greater strategic sense to bomb Britain's ports and food stocks in order to force Britain to negotiate rather than suffer the damaging effects of blockade.

The RAF, on the other hand, gave up bombing only military-economic targets in 1940 and by July 1941 was formally directed to target working-class residential areas. British bombing, however, was so inaccurate that a high proportion of bombs fell on the countryside, not always harmlessly, but in districts that were sparsely populated.

Why did German bombing lead to such a heavy toll?

Why then did German bombing exact such a heavy toll? Part of the answer lies in simple facts of geography. German bombers on the coast of north-west Europe were close to British targets, most of which were at or near the coast and as a result much easier to find and hit because of the coastal or estuary outline. The main ports, including London, had easily identifiable dock areas where a high concentration of bombs was dropped.

Around the docks clustered poorly constructed working-class housing, crowded with the families of dockworkers and labourers, which were regularly hit because of their proximity to the chief targets. In the raids on Birmingham and Coventry, heavy damage was sustained by the engineering industries, but here too low-cost, crowded housing abutted the factories and suffered extensive damage, chiefly from fire. Bombing at night, even for the German air force, assisted by electronic navigation aids and high levels of training, inevitably hit the areas around the docks or factories. German airmen were not shy about killing workers and their families, but it was not their principal aim.

Yet geography is only part of the explanation. The high level of casualty was a product of British circumstances more than German 'frightfulness'. The only way to protect the vulnerable populations was to ensure that they had adequate shelter, and to insist on a high standard of shelter discipline. Neither was the case in Britain.

Shelter was most inadequate in precisely those areas where the bombing was at its heaviest. Shelter discipline, despite years of publicity on effective civil defence precautions and sensible air-raid behaviour, was surprisingly lax. Every night of the bombing thousands of people chose to defy the threat by remaining out in the open, or in bed, or in their front parlours, and every night a fraction of them were killed.

What were British air raid shelters like?

The shelter programme began well before the onset of the Blitz but it was a patchy achievement, made worse by the wide differences dictated by the British class system. Middle-class householders were much more likely to have a house with a cellar or basement to convert into a makeshift bunker, or a garden where one of the metal Anderson shelters, made available in their millions during 1940, could be dug into the earth. Better-off residents found it easier to move to the country, staying in hotels or lodgings or with friends, and in many cases already lived in the suburban outskirts rather than the crowded city centres. In poorer districts the local residents who had no access to a secure public shelter, and no cellar, crowded where they could – under bridges, in tunnels, warehouse basements or caves. In London, thousands of them sheltered in the Underground system, though even at the peak the stations housed only a tiny fraction of the Londoners threatened each night by the bombs.

The local authorities responded to the prospect of bombing by building a large number of the cheapest and most easily constructed shelters. These consisted of trenches and pavement shelters made of brick and concrete. The trenches were often waterlogged and in many cases without the internal construction necessary to prevent the sides from collapsing or to avoid the effects of bomb blast, which in simple trenches could kill all the occupants huddled inside. The pavement shelters, jerry-built in their thousands all over Britain, gave no protection from a direct hit or from a bomb falling nearby or from the collapse of a nearby building. Some had thick concrete roofs which collapsed and crushed the occupants when the weaker brick walls gave way. In some boroughs there was no proper cement for low-priority building and poor-quality mortar had to be used. The result was the collapse of some of the shelters after just a heavy shower of rain.

The trench and brick shelters soon had a reputation for tragedy and the local population avoided them. By spring 1941 a survey found that during raids only seven per cent of the places in trenches and eight per cent in brick shelters were actually occupied. In a survey carried out by the government scientist Solly Zuckerman it was found that 51 per cent of families that stayed in cities during the Blitz either did not or could not take shelter.

Were there enough shelters?

Both the national and local authorities knew they should try to protect the population, and millions were assisted through formal evacuation schemes, though millions chose not to leave, since it was not compulsory. There were public shelter spaces for just one tenth of the vulnerable populations, domestic shelters (which could be anything from a broom cupboard under the stairs to a well-proportioned basement) for another 40 per cent. In the districts where shelter was most likely to be needed, however, the effort to get the population to comply with basic protection was often difficult. In Hull, for example, officials found a poor response to the offer of Anderson or brick surface shelters. In one street of 26 properties, five agreed to have a shelter, nine refused, seven failed to respond, three had nowhere to put one and two were shops. Following the city-wide survey of Hull, 1,279 households cancelled their request for a shelter. This was regarded as a free choice, but those who refused found it difficult to get a shelter when they changed their mind.

Citizens were not always free to choose whether to have a shelter or not, nor were they always free to choose to shelter if there was nowhere safe for them to go. The shelter system was rough-and-ready, though it improved substantially in the year following the Blitz. There were nevertheless many people who actively chose not to shelter since it was not compulsory (as it was in Germany). To a modern audience this seems a crazy decision to make. People could also fluctuate in their sheltering habits, choosing to shelter for a few days or a week and then deciding to run the risk of sleeping in their own beds. Solly Zuckerman was so puzzled by this phenomenon that he set up an investigation in 1941 based on interviews with civil defence personnel to discover whether the bombed population was unnaturally fatalistic or else “apathetic or careless of life”, but he could find no answer that satisfied him.

How did people adapt to the bombings?

Fatalism was certainly one of the explanations. The popular slogan that the bomb that killed you ‘had your name on it’ is not just a Blitz myth, but is recorded in wartime diaries and eyewitness accounts. After a flurry of sheltering in the first weeks of the Blitz in September 1940, Londoners developed a growing insouciance. A government survey found that by the end of the month the number claiming to get no sleep had fallen from 31 per cent to just three per cent, suggesting that many now chose to spend their nights in bed rather than propped up in shelters where there were still no proper bunks. Among civil defence recollections published during the Blitz, or shortly after, there are numerous stories of bodies dug out of the rubble of their bedrooms, or of pedestrians out on the streets after the sirens had sounded, or onlookers watching a distant raid until suddenly caught out by a random bomb.

The popular slogan that the bomb that killed you ‘had your name on it’ is not just a Blitz myth

One journalist returning to her block of flats during a raid found the caretaker and his wife sitting calmly eating their supper as bombs fell outside. When she asked them why they were not afraid, the wife replied: "If we were, what good would it do us?" They carried on eating and the journalist went upstairs to bed, determined to risk the bombs as well, if the caretaker's wife could do it.

But alongside the fatalism could be found examples of exhilaration, bravado and deliberate risk-taking. The writer Vera Brittain observed London's wealthy bright young things "Playing No Man's Land", dodging the bombs during a raid to go from party to party. Others confessed that they were fascinated by the spectacle, and stood and watched from unsafe roofs and balconies rather than seek shelter. There was even a patriotic refusal to shelter, on the (certainly questionable) grounds that Hitler would have won if everyone were forced underground when the bombs started falling. One woman near Coventry decorated her home with Union Jacks and sat under them during a raid, defiantly British. Many stories of the Blitz have highlighted the bloody-mindedness of the population, so much so that British stoicism and defiance have become embedded in popular memory of the bombing. This was not a myth. British civilians died not just because of poor housing and shelter, but because they took the risk of defying the bombs rather than kowtow to Hitler.

There was no single or simple explanation, either material or psychological, for why so many chose not to shelter automatically when the sirens sounded. An illuminating example of the variety of responses can be found in the story of another London-based journalist, the New York Times reporter Raymond Daniell. After the first raids in September 1940, he found that the office boys gave up sheltering after a night or so because they lost too much money playing cards with others escaping the bombing. Daniell and his colleagues stayed above ground during raids, impervious to the request of the local air-raid warden to go down to the shelter. "Go home you German pig!" could be heard every now and again shouted out by one of the office staff.

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Daniell stayed in his apartment during air raids, reading and drinking. He had a driver and car at his disposal, but during raids the driver refused to shelter and instead slept in the car in case someone should try to steal the tyres. After a few weeks of sleeping uncomfortably, Daniell had made the decision to abandon safety altogether: "It occurred to me that instead of being marked for destruction I enjoyed a special immunity from bombs. From that time on I gambled on my luck and never darkened the door of a shelter again."

Daniell's account, written in 1941 as the bombing was going on, reveals a variety of motives for running risks, not least the widespread distrust of the clearly inadequate shelter provision. The risks were considerable, though statistically supportable. In the end only 0.23 per cent of the London population was killed. Ordinary people, of course, did not

make this arithmetical calculation but they nevertheless had a sense that the gamble was not entirely irrational. Raymond Daniell recalled that “the odds on a miss were strongly in our favour”. In areas with smaller populations and limited urban amenities, the damage was proportionally greater, and the response in places such as Plymouth, Hull or Southampton was a mass exodus into the surrounding countryside that continued in some cases for months after the bombing was ended. Here the chance of death was higher.

The high number of dead and seriously injured during the Blitz resulted from a combination of factors – the accuracy and high concentration of German bombing, the poor level of shelter provision in the dense residential areas around docks and factories, and the poor level of shelter discipline. Choosing not to shelter had many possible causes, whether from defiance, or fatalism, or ignorance, or daring.

One of the costs of the stubborn and phlegmatic British character at the heart of the Blitz story, even if it is now considered to be exaggerated or romanticised, was a higher register of death than there would have been if the state had been more alive to the social realities facing the threatened population by providing a better shelter system or insisting on evacuation, and if the people themselves had been more willing to do what they were told.

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