

## CHAPTER 3

# Air Raids in Britain, 1940–45

### Introduction

During August 1940, as the Battle of Britain drew towards its conclusion, the Luftwaffe began sporadic attacks on London and the City of London. Following a reprisal attack on Berlin by the RAF which did little serious damage, angered that the capital of the Reich had been breached, Hitler declared that ‘If they threaten our cities, then we shall erase theirs.’<sup>60</sup> With the blessing of Winston Churchill, the RAF continued its air raids on Berlin, causing Hitler to operationalize his threat. Sporadic bombing raids on

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London and other British cities occurred through late August and early September but on 7 September the Nazis shifted tactics to the continuous heavy bombing of London.

The London Blitz continued, with only a few respites, until May 1945. It remains, for the British at least, the most significant and emotive aerial bombardment in modern history. During the longest air campaign on a major urban centre in Europe during the twentieth century, heavy explosives and incendiary devices rained down on London night after night. Yet London did not suffer alone. Most urban-industrial centres were attacked during the Blitz. Many smaller industrial cities and towns and maritime cities were also heavily bombed, and in the case of Coventry in the West Midlands, the centre was almost completely destroyed.

Although the ferocity of the Blitz faded into recent memory as the war progressed, later raids served to remind the British they were still prey to Nazi hatred. During the spring and early summer of 1942, the so-called 'Baedeker Blitz' targeted the most beautiful cities in England. In 1944 the V1 flying bomb was launched against Britain, and the V2 flying rocket attacks, mostly on London, lent a fearful new dimension to aerial warfare in 1944–5. Hence in this chapter the Blitz refers specifically to the air raids of September 1940 to May 1941, but later bombing campaigns against British towns and cities during the war are also covered.

## Nazi Intentions

In their 1940 *Invasion Plans for the British Isles*, codenamed Operation Sea Lion, Nazi Military High Command outlined the invasion strategy for Britain in general and of what Churchill had called the 'fat, valuable cow' of London in particular. They had certainly done

their research, although dependence on British materials in German libraries meant that some maps and demographic data were probably out of date. The British capital was the largest city in Europe by 1940, with a population of over 8 million (much the same as it is today). This swelled to over 10 million, however, when the hinterlands beyond suburban London were included in the German calculation:

*London*, with its suburban settlements and dependent towns: approximately 10 million (i.e. a quarter of the entire population of England and Wales).<sup>61</sup>

*The London Basin*: the London Basin is bound by the Chiltern Hills to the north, Reading to the west, and the North Downs or the High Weald to the south. Its population has everywhere, to some extent or another, merged with that of London itself. The more heavily built-up area displays a strong industrial presence in its northern, eastern and southern parts; they are generally distinct from the commercial and administrative centre of the City, and the purely residential districts of the western sector.<sup>62</sup>

The rationale for the aerial bombardment of London was quite straightforward. Having lost the Battle of Britain during the summer of 1940, and with Berlin breached, the Germans served the dish of revenge hot, attacking the British capital to disrupt its infrastructure, to reduce iconic buildings to rubble, and undermine civilian morale. This would in theory render the population unable to defend itself from the invasion forces poised to sail over from occupied France and the Low Countries.

The River Thames was a significant point of reference for the Germans, because it flowed into London from the west and snaked through the centre of the capital to the east where it widened out into the Thames Estuary in the county of Essex. Along

with the River Medway in Kent, the waterways were convenient guides to the capital for in-flying enemy pilots, who were also well aware of the residential and industrial zones that sat alongside the riverbanks. A moonlit night was a strong navigation aid, as the rivers were silver far below.<sup>63</sup> When the moon was low or little more than a nail paring, the *knickebein*, a beam transmitted from a ground station in occupied Europe, guided the bombers to their destinations. As Max Hastings shows, however, Winston Churchill was contemptuous of the *knickebein* in 1940, and later Sir Arthur Harris dismissed the beam as of little assistance to the Germans in their raids on Britain.<sup>64</sup>

A little over a year after war was declared, the Anti-Aircraft and Civil Defence apparatuses would be subjected to a prolonged and severe testing. An official wartime publication entitled *Front Line: 1940–1941* assessed how the Home Front in Britain weathered the Blitz. It divided the air raids into ‘the onslaught on London’ and ‘the ordeal of the provinces.’<sup>65</sup> Published in 1942, *Front Line* provided the first historical summary of the Blitz, and while by no means uncritical of the anti-aircraft measures and civil defence machinery, it pictured the wardens, fire fighters, medical service personnel and others in uniform as the heroes and heroines in a dramatic battle.

### ‘The Onslaught on London’

During the late afternoon of the 7 September 1940 a young man, cycling through suburban south-east London, was among the first to see the awe-inspiring sight of the German bombers massing over London. His oral testimony is a good example of how memory and words can evoke the atmosphere and sense of trepidation on that first day of the Blitz:

It was the most amazing, impressive, riveting sight. Directly above me were literally hundreds of planes, Germans! The sky was full of them. Bombers hemmed in with fighters, like bees around their queen, like destroyers round the battleship. So came Jerry.<sup>66</sup>

The first area of London to come under sustained attack was the East End, a historic mostly working-class district of the capital city, only a few miles from the wealthy and powerful West End yet many miles from it, figuratively, in social and economic conditions. Just as they had been in the First World War, the docks were an obvious initial target because of their importance to the import and export trade. On 'Black Saturday' the Woolwich Arsenal and the Silvertown Docks were hit, and as they went up in flames, millions of pounds of foodstuffs and other goods were destroyed.<sup>67</sup> On the first night of the Blitz 1,800 lost their lives or were seriously injured.<sup>68</sup>

One of the many tragedies of war from the air is that poorest people suffer the most, and the bombing of one of the poorest districts of London which initiated the eight-month Blitz is a stark reminder of that fact. The working-class districts around the extensive docklands were crammed with high-density, often poor-quality, housing. Wharves and warehouses populated the muddy waterside of the River Thames from Tower Bridge via Wapping to Canary Wharf on the North Bank, and from Tower Bridge via Rotherhithe to Greenwich along the South Bank. This urban warren was a legacy of unplanned urbanisation during the Victorian years.

The ARP and the emergency services were overwhelmed. Fire crews were brought in from Nottingham in the East Midlands and elsewhere to help fight the raging infernos.<sup>69</sup> Transport access to fires and victims was impeded by the amount of rubble lying

across roads and streets. During the first weeks of the Blitz the physical destruction and the accumulation of debris was so extensive that about 1,800 roads were blocked, while over 3 million tons of rubble and detritus had built up, requiring an extensive clearing-up and repair operation to the infrastructure of the capital city.<sup>70</sup> Barrage balloons had done little to stem the tide of German attacks, and the air raid warning siren was no longer sounding for practice or to indicate a few lone bombers. To make matters worse, during the first two nights the anti-aircraft guns were largely impotent, unable to bring down large numbers of German aircraft, and even failing to fire properly in some installations. As Winston Churchill noted in his history of the Second World War, first published in 1959, when the anti-aircraft artillery finally launched its salvoes into the London night, many hud-



**Figure 3:** Bomb damage to Hallam Street, London. Photograph by kind permission of the City of Westminster Archives, London.

dling in their shelters or on voluntary duties felt a sense of relief.<sup>71</sup> Yet few were convinced the AA guns offered a robust and reliable defence to the Luftwaffe, whether along the coast or at fixed points in the major urban centres. The American reporter Ed Murrow was living in Hallam Street in London during the Blitz, and his compelling live broadcasts of the Blitz with the sound of bombs in the distance were relayed back to an American audience. His broadcasts showed that civil defence was under strain.<sup>72</sup>

Three weeks into the raids the cover story of the *Picture Post* was ‘The East End at War.’ Captioned ‘two of Hitler’s enemies’ a mother was pictured comforting her crying little boy: ‘In a street in Stepney, the crowded heart of East London,’ began the report:

there stood a small boy, just old enough to write. He had a piece of chalk and with it, very carefully, almost painfully, he wrote in huge capital letters on the wall of a bomb-shattered warehouse. Gradually he formed his sentence, and with it he summed up the feeling of London about the aerial hell into which it had been pitched. The message was – HITLER IS MAD.<sup>73</sup>

The derangement of the enemy was secondary to the narrative that, despite the war coming to the East End, the bravery of Londoners was winning through against Nazi barbarism. In a cartoon for the *Evening News* David Low depicted the so-called ‘Cockney Heart’ as battered but unbowed by German bombs while the leering face of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, looked down from on high.<sup>74</sup> The ‘cockney’ was the historic personification of the East End, a cheerful yet defiant working-class character despite the deprivations and poverty of living in East London.<sup>75</sup>

That the *Picture Post* article was published three weeks into the Blitz possibly reflected an official awareness that morale had not

collapsed, so the piece could be allowed through the filters of the Ministry of Information. By late September, the nightly bombing had also transitioned far beyond East London to include Central and West London, large tracts of inner South London, and incursions into the further-flung suburbs of the capital city. Containing some of the most iconic buildings in Britain, Central London offered invaluable targets for the Nazis. Politically the Houses of Parliament and Whitehall represented not only democracy and stability, but imperial might. London was the capital not only of Britain, but of the British Empire, and the Nazis knew the propaganda value of destroying iconic buildings and institutions. Few of these were spared. On 8 September, the night following the beginning of the Blitz, the grounds of Buckingham Palace were struck by a 50kg delayed-action HE bomb, doing little damage. The Palace was hit sixteen times however, causing the much-related story of how Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and King George VI could feel on equal terms with those poor East Enders who had been bombed out of their home.<sup>76</sup> There was no equivalence, of course, but the narrative of shared suffering irrespective of class, status and income was seen as essential to national unity during the Blitz. Cinematic propaganda such as the Movietone newsreel *The Realm Remains Resolute* (1940) is one of many war-time broadcasts keen to show the monarchy moving among the people.

The Palace of Westminster, the historic heart of British government, and a powerful symbolic site of democracy confronting the fascist onslaught against Britain, was bombed fourteen times during the Blitz of 1940–1. The House of Commons and the House of Lords were removed to nearby Church House in Westminster to avoid casualties, but on 26 September the Old Palace Yard was



hit, while on the 8 December the cloisters of St Stephens were badly damaged. Worse was to come on 10 and 11 May 1941 when incendiary bombs caused fires in the Commons Chamber, and the roof of the Palace of Westminster. This was a particularly heavy raid, a final spiteful flourish over London before the Nazis turned their attention to invading the Soviet Union. Other important parts of the complex were damaged, and outside, facing Parliament Square, the statue of Richard the Lionheart was hit, his sword bent but still gripped firmly in hand. Symbolically, parliamentary sovereignty was buckled but unbroken.<sup>77</sup>

Disruption to everyday life was another key intention of the Luftwaffe. The most famous shopping district in West London – comprised of Oxford Street, Regent Street and Bond Street – sustained considerable destruction during the Blitz. The John Lewis Department Store, for example, an iconic Victorian department store was one of a number of large retail outlets badly damaged or totally destroyed between Marble Arch and Oxford Circus. There was less to buy in the shops anyway, due to rationing, but familiar outlets on the British high street were changed forever. The visitor to Oxford Street today, walking westwards from Oxford Circus, will notice how the north side of Oxford Street was almost completely rebuilt after the war.<sup>78</sup>

Between the wars radio had emerged as the new modern means of mass communication. The BBC enjoyed a near monopoly over broadcasting in Britain, so destroying the BBC would have been a massive propaganda victory for the Nazis. On 15 October 1940 BBC Broadcasting House on Langham Place was hit by a 277kg delayed action HE bomb which damaged a number of offices and floors of this famous Art Deco building. A number of staff tried to remove the bomb by hand but it went off, killing seven BBC

employees. A parachute mine struck Broadcasting House on the 8 December 1940, killing a police constable, wounding several passers-by, and creating a deep crater in Portland Place which was filled with water due to damage to the sewers. During the same raid, the beautiful All Souls Church on Langham Place, a masterpiece of Georgian religious architecture, was also badly damaged. Across the capital well-known buildings were damaged or destroyed leading to great satisfaction for the Nazis. Yet one of the worst air raids of 1940, the so-called 'Christmas Blitz' in late December, caused a significant if nuanced propaganda victory for Britain.

It is difficult to grasp now how dark those nights of the December Blitz were. Britain stood alone in 1940 as the sole surviving non-neutral democracy in Western Europe. London had been battered almost every night since early September, and many well-known and much-loved buildings and neighbourhoods lay in ruins. Then on the 28–9 December 1940 the capital city endured a particularly brutal raid which hit the City of London, and the area of East-Central London around St. Paul's Cathedral, particularly hard. Yet the cathedral itself, with its distinctive and beautiful dome, survived with almost miraculous endurance while much of the vicinity around it was incinerated. It was also protected by the St Paul's Watch.

In Sarah Waters' novel *The Night Watch* (2006), the experiences of three women are interwoven with the air raids on London. A particularly evocative scene around St Paul's Cathedral creates the atmosphere in the streets of the darkest nights in the Blitz, but also provides the context for reflection on the nature and purpose of the war. As one woman questions whether St Paul's should have been bombed in lieu of poor homes in Bethnal Green, another



**Figure 4:** Memorial to the people of wartime London at St Paul's Cathedral (photograph by author, 2017).

counters that the survival of the cathedral means something, despite the desolation all around it:

while we've still got this and all it stands for, I mean, elegance, and reason, and – and great beauty – then the war is still worth fighting. Isn't it?<sup>79</sup>

In London, along with other local authorities required by the government to undertake a 'bomb census' of damage and destruction, the London County Council (LCC) commissioned bomb damage

maps. These itemized and spatially represented destruction according to a colour scale from black meaning 'total destruction' through to yellow, namely 'blast damage; minor in nature.' The maps also represented the exact spots hit by the V1 and V2 reprisal weapons in 1944–5.<sup>80</sup> They were also a useful tool for assessing the type and level of rebuilding required for a particular bombsite. The bomb map depicting the extensive damage around St. Paul's cathedral suggests something of a miracle of survival.

So much has been written about St Paul's it can be difficult to say anything original, but the episode does reveal in relief many key themes of this book. The cathedral, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, represented the rebirth of London after the Great Fire of 1666, a symbolism that was not lost on many commentators at the time, nor since. A famous photograph by Herbert Mason for the *Daily Mail*, showing the dome standing tall and undamaged despite the smoking ruins around it, introduced a motif that was to be found in many other media, notably newsreels, documentary and fiction feature films, about the Blitz.<sup>81</sup> The photograph, however, was also presented to the German public on 23 January 1941, in the magazine *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. Under the headline 'Die City von London brennt' ('The City of London on Fire') it depicted how the Luftwaffe were destroying London. Yet few in Britain would have seen that interpretation.

St. Paul's had also been portrayed a few months earlier in the documentary film *London Can Take It* (1940). Directed by Humphrey Jennings, an eminent British documentary filmmaker, and narrated by the American journalist Quentin Reynolds, *London Can Take It* was made just a few weeks into the London Blitz. Directed primarily at American audiences to demonstrate the bravery of the British under fire, the Germans inadvertently offered propaganda opportunities to the government, a theme

repeated in later bombing campaigns during the twentieth century. The heaviness of the Christmas Blitz also exposed the limitations of saturation bombing. Over an image of the cathedral, the calmly spoken words of Quentin Reynolds were reassuring:

A bomb has its limitations. It can only destroy buildings and kill people. It cannot kill the unconquerable spirit and courage of the people of London. *London* can take it.<sup>82</sup>

And London continued to take it until May 1941. As one middle-class woman noted ‘In the badly bombed places, mostly working-class districts’:

the courage of these people has been marvellous. These same people in my opinion have always shown courage, courage to face unemployment, courage to face bad conditions, sickness, and all the other evils it has been their lot to bear.<sup>83</sup>

She was writing in November 1940, the month the air raids transitioned across the British Isles as the Nazis sought to degrade and destroy the entire industrial and military capacity of their enemy. Poor people in the provincial cities would also bear the brunt of the bombing most heavily.

### ‘The Ordeal of the Provinces’

The German *Invasion Plans* for the British Isles gave brief but mostly accurate descriptions of the major industrial cities and port cities in Britain and of their location. As the plans also stated, however, ‘mining operations’ were also sewn into the landscape of the major industrial conurbations, extending in coal belts out over nearby countryside, into valleys and nearby hills.

Coal mining was one of the staple industries of the industrial revolution, and creating, like the great industrial cities, tightly-knit working-class communities often packed into poor quality, high-density terraced homes. The Nazi planners of the air raids on British cities were fully versed in these realities, terming the slums and poorest housing areas 'homes of misery'.<sup>84</sup> The Nazis were impressed by the generally 'excellent road system, however, arguing that troop movements would be 'helped by the density of the road network, but partly hindered by the many factory buildings and settlements'.<sup>85</sup>

The civil defence apparatus was far from uniform across the country, however. Many local authorities had done their best to instigate the provisions of the ARP and Civil Defence legislation, while others had been more dilatory. Levels of expenditure on public and household air raid shelters varied widely between different towns and cities. In the poorest areas where many terraced houses had at best a backyard or no outside space at all, it proved impossible to erect air-raid shelters, leaving many feeling defenceless. Londoners had been able to use some of the Underground tube stations as deep public shelters, but no other major city in Britain was possessed of an underground system so almost all shelters were built on the surface or just below it. Across Britain, the Luftwaffe often found it easy to fly above barrage balloons, anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, and many bombs often fell onto flimsy Anderson shelters, both communal and private.<sup>86</sup>

Local authorities were forced to re-learn the lessons of the London Blitz. Yet the government appeared to some contemporary critics as remote from the operational difficulties facing local councils. Using the weekly Home Intelligence reports compiled for the Home Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Information,

Malcolm Smith shows how many people worried about the shortcomings in air raid preparations. There was often too much reliance on charities in the immediate aftermath of the raids, particularly the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) and complaints about overcrowded rest centres and food supplies. The Blitz had contradictory effects, for example exposing comparative strengths and weaknesses in local authority preparations for bombings, while strengthening a sense of both local and nationwide defiance. Despite that, civic pride was often ramped up by the strong belief that, despite the death and destruction, and the inadequacies in ARP and emergency provision, a particular town or city had 'taken it' and triumphed over adversity. Overall, Smith concludes that a sense of collective confidence during the provincial Blitz remained mostly intact but was sometimes unduly undermined by inadequate coordination and provision of resources.<sup>87</sup>

A common misconception of the Blitz in the United Kingdom is that London was the only city under attack from September 1940 until the Nazis also turned their fire on other cities and towns in mid-November. Yet even before the Blitz on London began, other urban areas in the UK had been attacked from the air. As the Battle of Britain drew towards a defeat for Germany, the first significant raid on a major British city took place in Cardiff and Newport on 10 July when over seventy German planes attacked the South Wales docks. In July and August, Birmingham, Coventry, Hastings, Liverpool, Newcastle and Southampton were all subject to air raids, signifying that when the main Blitz on the provinces began, industrial and coastal towns and cities were going to be key targets for the Luftwaffe. From the middle of November, the bombing of the major cities intensified as the Nazi campaign grew heavier and more frequent spreading beyond the

capital city.<sup>88</sup> Initial success during the early extension of the Luftwaffe campaign to the provinces was brutally encapsulated in the heavy air raid on the West Midlands city of Coventry.

### **The Bombing of Coventry**

Of all the provincial cities bombed by the Nazis, Coventry was the first to suffer the almost complete annihilation of its city centre. As Tony Mason shows, the first raid on Coventry had been on 18 August 1940, when both industry and housing were bombed. There were twenty-four further raids on the West Midlands city, but by far the heaviest attack on Coventry came on the night of 14–15 November. About 450 bombers attacked the West Midlands city for over eleven hours. In the wake of that terrible raid, over two-thirds of the historic city centre was smashed to pieces, over 560 people lay dead, and at least 860 people were seriously injured.<sup>89</sup> Further death and destruction followed. The city's beautiful mediaeval cathedral lay in ruins, and remains so today, an iconic reminder of the sacrilegious destruction of places of worship during air raids.

Tony Mason was writing in 1986, some four years before the fiftieth anniversary of the Blitz. He was ahead of the many academic histories of the Blitz and of wartime Britain written since. Although much of Coventry was devastated, he showed that the factories and workplaces were soon repaired and producing essential munitions and other supplies. He also emphasised that the saturation bombing of Coventry gave rise to popular and media myths that disintegrated under scrutiny, from the alleged collapse of civilian morale to the notion, shared by many citizens of the city, that Coventry was deliberately sacrificed by Churchill to



fool the Germans into thinking British air defences were weak.<sup>90</sup> As Frederick Taylor notes, the BBC and the print media, under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Information, usually referred obliquely to the air raids on ‘a southern town’ or ‘a Midlands town’ in order to play down the damage and as far as possible deny the Nazis any attempt to audit the true extent of destruction. After the air raids on Coventry, however, the city was named so that the British government and media could demonstrate the heinous depths to which the Germans sank when gloating about the destruction of Coventry. This may have encouraged many in people to feel their city was a sacrificial lamb, but that was untrue.<sup>91</sup>

The government was almost always reading the thermometer of morale and when the phenomenon of ‘trekking’ occurred, alarm bells rang. Trekking was the voluntary flight of people from the city to the relative safety of the countryside prior to nightfall. Viewed officially as potentially symptomatic of a mass adverse reaction to air raids, the Labour Home Secretary Herbert Morrison was fearful that ostensible manifestations of mass demoralisation might be exploited by the enemy. Along with Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister of Aircraft Production, he visited Coventry to inspect munitions and aircraft parts manufacture. King George VI visited Coventry to express solidarity and reassure the local population they were in his thoughts.<sup>92</sup> Yet a recent study of the Blitz has argued that trekking was less a symptom of declining morale and mostly a rational response to the bombings.<sup>93</sup> People were removing themselves and their families away from danger, and also relieving the pressure on the ARP and emergency service workers.

After all that, Coventry remained resilient. During the raids and in their immediate aftermath, the city lived on throughout the

war, only to be rebuilt to a comprehensive and ultimately unsuccessful modernist city plan that replaced bombsites with cold precincts and uninspiring public buildings. This is discussed further in chapter seven.

Coventry was one of the smaller urban-industrial centres in Britain, but the almost complete destruction of its city centre led to its special place in the history of air raids in the Second World War. It was also one of the so-called 'arms towns', along with Birmingham, Bristol (and Avonmouth) and Sheffield producing munitions in the factories. During the course of the Blitz from November 1940 to May 1941 citizens in the industrial heartlands of the United Kingdom endured the Nazi onslaught.

*Front Line* also focused on the experience of the port cities of Cardiff and Swansea in South Wales, Liverpool in the North West of England, Portsmouth, Plymouth and Southampton on the South Coast, Hull in North East England, Glasgow (Clydeside) in Central Scotland and Belfast in Northern Ireland. All were subject to heavy bombardment, at different times. Liverpool and Merseyside on the north-west coast of England was the second most-bombed conurbation after London. The city had taken small air raids during August 1940 but on the night of 28–9 November over 350 tons of HE bombs smashed into the city. In common with East London the docks were a primary target, and the warren of small, often dilapidated terraced streets was heavily bombed. Liverpool was attacked for three nights at the end of August 1940, and many other raids followed. During December 1940 and May 1941 further raids took a terrible toll on Liverpool. The May raids alone killed 1,900 people and injured or seriously wounded 1,450 others.<sup>94</sup> Extensive damage to the housing stock resulted in widespread homelessness in a city that already possessed large tracts of impoverished housing and some of the worst slums in Britain.

Literary memoirs provide vivid information on living through the air raids. The writer Helen Forrester, a young woman in war-time Liverpool, recalled how as London was blitzed ‘we became more and more apprehensive that our turn would be next.’ Forrester describes in vivid detail her experiences of running home through the centre of Liverpool during the days of violence targeted on the Merseyside city. She dipped in and out of air raid shelters where some people were simply taking cover, others were singing, and others praying as they worked their rosary beads. ARP wardens would order her to stay put but like so many people she had other ideas as she headed for home. Forrester experienced feelings of rage as she witnessed German planes, spiteful and murderous in the night sky, and saw and heard explosions and flares as the bombs fell near to where she was running:

The city was in turmoil, with service vehicles zipping recklessly through the battered streets. There seemed to be a very big fire at the beginning of Dale Street, and behind the buildings past which I ran up to the far end of Lime Street, there was obviously another very heavy conflagration, which I afterwards was told was St. John’s market burning. Roasted in it were most of the turkeys which Liverpudlians had dreamed of eating on Christmas day, and to hear the talk in the shopping queues after the holiday, one would imagine that the loss of the turkeys was more deeply mourned than the loss of three hundred and sixty five men, women and children who died during the three days of the Blitz.<sup>95</sup>

Forrester experienced the full gamut of emotions during air raids, from hatred toward the enemy, relief at respites from the bombing, fatigue from the efforts of running and walking through the dangers of an attack, sorrow at the loss of much-loved and familiar buildings and landmarks, to the dark sense of humour

reflected in her wry observations on the loss of a turkey dinner as opposed to living people.

England's 'second city' Birmingham was near to Coventry in the West Midlands. Larger than its neighbour, it shared a modern industrial manufacturing base, much of it given over to munitions production. Birmingham was bombed in August and suffered many raids between August of 1940 and April 1941. The world famous Birmingham Small Arms factory was badly damaged, along with many other industrial premises. Thousands of homes were destroyed, but as Adams and Larkham note, while extensive, the damage was spread across the second city, rather than being heavily concentrated in a few areas.<sup>96</sup>

In Scotland, Glasgow and Clydebank were historically associated with traditional manufacturing industries, alongside the docks and military installations along the River Clyde, providing an extensive strategic target for the Luftwaffe. Clydebank, to the west of Glasgow, 'was hit by two nights of devastating raids' on 13–14 March 1941. The destruction and mortality rates were horribly high, due to the extensive domestic architectural form of the high-density and often overcrowded tenement blocks in the Glasgow region. In common with London and other cities during their first air raids, ARP services found it very difficult to cope. About 35,000 out of a population of 50,000 in Clydebank were made homeless. The Scottish Regional Commissioner 'described the Clydebank Blitz as a "major disaster"'.<sup>97</sup>

Bristol in south-west England had been bombed since August 1940 but suffered its heaviest raids on 24 November, when attacks on the docks and on the aircraft factories, obvious strategic targets for the Nazis, killed 207 people and left over 180 seriously injured. Heavy explosives and incendiaries laid waste to large tracts of the city. Further west in South Wales, another important port city, Swansea, suffered a ferocious 100-bomber raid in mid-January

1941. In addition to severely damaging the Prince Albert Dry Dock, thousands of incendiaries fell upon the city. And the following February Swansea suffered heavy bombardment on three successive nights.<sup>98</sup> As John Ray notes, Swansea developed its own heroic story of ‘blood, sweat and tears’ during that bitter winter, and the January raid enabled the ARP and fire services to learn and perform more effectively in the subsequent attacks.<sup>99</sup>

Other port and naval cities also suffered extensive bombing, notably Plymouth, Portsmouth and Southampton on the south coast, and the larger urban areas of Hull, and the Newcastle-Upon-Tyne conurbation in north-east England. Their fate was finally visited upon Belfast, on the banks of the River Lagan in Northern Ireland. The Lagan in East Belfast was home to the great Harland and Wolff shipyards, and other shipyards, docks and factories. In what was the penultimate month of the Blitz, Belfast was attacked on 7–8 April and again a week later. The pattern of death and destruction was strongly similar to other port cities: the docks and nearby factories were badly hit, while the surrounding streets of terraced houses suffered extensive bomb and fire damage. Both Catholic and Protestant districts came under attack. The fire services of both Britain and the Irish Republic were required to supplement the city’s auxiliary and official fire brigades.<sup>100</sup> Initial official estimates of casualties were ‘too low’:

and possibly 800 to 900 people were killed, and a further 1,500 injured. About 1,600 houses were destroyed, 28,000 were damaged, and some 20,000 civilians were rendered homeless.<sup>101</sup>

Many lodged with friends and relatives; some took refuge in rest centres; others did what so many others had done before them and voluntarily evacuated the city as ‘ditchers’, known on the British mainland as ‘trekkers’.<sup>102</sup>



**Figure 5:** V2 Memorial, Chiswick, West London (photograph by author, 2017).

### **Morale: Impact and Aftermath**

Morale refers to the confidence and discipline of an individual or group. Any major collapse of civilian morale was held by the

government and local authority officials to potentially undermine the social life of cities, possibly cause anarchy and chaos, threaten industrial production, and destroy the ability to fight the enemy. How did the people of London and the great provincial cities of Britain respond to the air raids in 1940–1? The answer lies in the experience of the working-class East End of London as the first district to be heavily bombed from 7 September. Mass Observation (MO), the eyes and ears of the government was on the scene, because the East End was a testing ground, in a sense, for all of those pessimistic predictions about civilian behaviour and morale discussed in the previous chapter. As head of MO, Tom Harrisson, was also a member of the Morale Committee of the Ministry of Information. A social anthropological organisation, MO consisted of volunteers, mostly middle class, who moved among the people, writing down what they saw and heard, in notebooks. Conscripted by government, MO and its volunteers contributed to the intelligence received by the Ministry of Information.

In *Living Through the Blitz* (1976) Harrisson was clear that propaganda about national unity ignored continuing class divisions and snobberies. He was critical of inadequate provision of air raid shelters and other weaknesses of civil defence, and his reports on Birmingham and Coventry, among other cities, never shied from highlighting panic, and the despair and anger of many caught up in the raids.<sup>103</sup> Using one of many excerpts from MO materials, Harrisson vividly described the shock of people huddled together in an air raid shelter in East London following the end of heavy bombing:

When the all-clear goes, about 4.30 a.m., there is a groan of relief. But as soon as the first people get outside the shelter, there are screams of horror at the sight of the damage...smashed windows and roofs everywhere...

smoke streaming across the sky from the direction of the docks. People rush and scramble out of the shelter doorway, and there is a wild clamour of shouting, weeping and calling for absent relatives.

Harrison went on to describe the general loss of everyday order, the 'turmoil of comings and goings', the fearful evening rush out to the relative safety of the suburbs and the nearby countryside.<sup>104</sup>

Across Britain, Mass Observation materials and other contemporary reports provide historians with a mixed picture. Drawing extensively on MO materials, Beavan and Griffiths focused upon the working-class communities most heavily affected by air raids. MO was the intellectual and methodological creation of left-leaning wing middle-class academics who often resorted to regional and class-based stereotypes in their readings of the popular mood. So East London cockneys and 'northerners' in the heartlands of the industrial revolution would endure the raids with cheerful fortitude, born of their lifelong experience of a community of poverty. Similarly, sailors' wives in the port cities were used to enduring loneliness and hardship. In Coventry, by contrast, where new industries such as engineering and motor car manufacturing lay alongside new suburban housing estates, locals lacked the fortitude of the older industrial working class.<sup>105</sup>

There was certainly evidence that many people were traumatised by the violent interruption into their lives and their homes. Historical trauma studies is a growing field, and in relation to air raids, historians have made some important points about the hidden history of psychological damage caused to civilians, which sits uneasily with triumphalist tropes about the 'Blitz spirit'. Furthermore, as Hazel Croft argues, unlike military personnel returning from the battle front, whose claims to psychiatric disorders could



be verified, it was more difficult for civilians on the Home Front to make a special case for themselves as suffering from what would now be incorporated within the umbrella term of ‘post-traumatic stress disorders.’<sup>106</sup> It is possible to infer from Croft’s that work untold numbers of people carried psychiatric disorders into their post-war lives. As Noakes has argued, in a similar vein, the social taboo on expressing fear during wartime has tended to marginalise narratives of fear in post-war testimonies of the Blitz and other air raids.<sup>107</sup>

Nonetheless, by May 1941 the collective will had held. Harrison summed it all up thus: ‘the predicted crack in nerves did not send a large slice of Londoners gibbering in 1940. The hospital beds and poised psychiatrists waited, unemployed.’<sup>108</sup> In broad terms, and with local variations, this pattern was replicated nationwide, leading to a mostly heroic official interpretation of the Blitz and of the Home Front more widely. Wartime propaganda insisting upon national unity and shared resistance to the enemy was the origin of this heroic interpretation. Put another way, a narrative of brave popular resistance to aerial bombardment was at the heart of the ‘Peoples War’. Wartime social unity, the argument goes, created a new national mood for a better society: from the ‘People’s War’ to the New Jerusalem. The reality was very different, as Selina Todd argues, but many looked beyond sectional, regional and class divisions in the hope of a more egalitarian future.<sup>109</sup>

### The Blitz and Social Change

One of the earliest interpretations of the Blitz as a catalyst for social change was by Richard Titmuss, a social scientist and civil servant. His *Problems of Social Policy*, published in 1950, amounts

to the first notable history of the Home Front.<sup>110</sup> The mass participation of civilians in wartime employment, higher levels of voluntarism than in peacetime, shared suffering and the contribution of ostensibly all classes and groups in society engendered an atmosphere of heightened egalitarianism that encouraged the transition from the warfare state to the welfare state. The widespread support for the Beveridge Report in 1942, with its call for greater levels of social policy, appears to support this perspective. Politically, the Labour Party had the most to gain from an alleged new sense of egalitarianism forged between people of different classes who huddled together in air raid shelters, served alongside each other fighting fires or tending to the wounded, or ostensibly brought closer together by the experience of evacuation. For the first time, provincial middle-class households were up close and personal with the poverty and illiteracy of the poor urban children billeted within their home. The Labour Party Manifesto for the general election of 1945 explicitly linked its post-war agenda to the collective efforts initiated by the events of 1940:

The problems and pressures of the post-war world threaten our security and progress as surely as - though less dramatically than - the Germans threatened them in 1940. We need the spirit of Dunkirk and of the Blitz sustained over a period of years.

The Labour Party's programme is a practical expression of that spirit applied to the tasks of peace. It calls for hard work, energy and sound sense.<sup>111</sup>

This neat relationship between the Blitz and subsequent social policy was challenged by the Scottish Marxist historian Angus Calder. His *The Myth of the Blitz* is highly-regarded as revisionist history by many. His position is summed up on its back cover:

The Myth of the Blitz was nurtured at every level of society. It rested upon the assumed invincibility of an island race distinguished by good humour, understatement, and the ability to pluck victory from the jaws of defeat by team work, improvisation and muddling through.

In fact, in many ways, the Blitz was not like that. Sixty thousand people were conscientious objectors; a quarter of London's population fled to the country; Churchill and the Royal Family were booed while touring the aftermath of air raids. Britain was not bombed into classless democracy.

Calder has been hugely influential in bursting the myth bubble, but his own approach was not without problems. He mostly ignored *Front Line, 1940-41: The Official Story of Civil Defence in Britain* which was by no means an upbeat whitewash of the official preparations for and responses to the German air raids. Conceding that that the strategy of air attacks on civilians was neither new nor unforeseen, the government admitted that 'Some things were not anticipated; some guesses were wrong.'<sup>112</sup> British military and political planners also initially underestimated the extent of the damage that would be caused, and therefore the consequent level of homelessness and reparations required.<sup>113</sup> Calder underestimated this measure of official self-criticism in his discussion of *Front Line*, merely pointing out that some people who had lived through the Blitz in Bristol and Croydon felt their story had been under-represented.<sup>114</sup>

It would be unfair to criticise Calder for ignoring the heroism of the emergency services, or the stoicism of the British under the bomb. He gives some recognition to both while creating a more nuanced picture of the Home Front which focuses upon division and discordance. Throughout the war, Calder argues, Britain

remained a society cleaved by class inequalities and status divisions. Within the sphere of politics he highlights fear and loathing in Whitehall of the strength of communism and pro-Soviet sentiment during the Nazi-Soviet Pact. He fastens upon the propensity of some trades unionists to go on strike despite the need to meet essential production targets, a responsibility which most trades unionists and almost all Labour leaders agreed with throughout the war. Calder also exaggerates the appeal of pacifism in Wales and Scotland to question the myth of national unity.<sup>115</sup>

The relationship of the Blitz to the qualities of 'Englishness' and the predominance of English national identity is also explored by Calder. He anticipates later revisionist work by historians such as Susan Grayzel, Lucy Noakes, Sonya O. Rose, and H.L. Smith whose gendered analysis reflected upon the very different and unequal experiences of women as opposed to men on the Home Front.<sup>116</sup> Rose and Smith also explore the problematic relationship of the language of unity and of 'national identity' across different ethnic groups in wartime Britain. For Rose, 'identity politics' was a commonplace in 1940s Britain, hence no single or universally accepted promotion of 'Britishness' was possible.<sup>117</sup>

Certain views that Calder espoused, however, allow us to ask questions about the overall integrity of his position, and thus to reclaim a more positive version of mass behaviour during the Blitz that by no means denies a complex understanding of civilian morale. Calder claims he was angered by the way the Labour Party promulgated the myth of the Blitz for its political agenda. At the very beginning of the *Myth of the Blitz* he notes that the book was commissioned 'in the early eighties soon after the war for the Malvinas'.<sup>118</sup> He railed against Margaret Thatcher's evocation of 'Churchillism' in 1981, while his use of the Argentinian name for the Falklands suggested support for the highly contestable

claim that the islands were historically Argentinian territory.<sup>119</sup> That Argentina was ruled by a neo-fascist dictatorship which invaded British sovereign territory goes ignored. Yet both Argentina and Nazi Germany were aggressive right-wing dictatorships exploiting foreign policy to stir-up domestic support through the intended oppression of foreign populations.

Calder's interpretation of the film *Hope and Glory* (1987) furthermore, an autobiographical movie written and directed by John Boorman about the Blitz in suburbia, draws a dubious distinction between the experience of air raids over outer London compared with the suffering in the more heavily-bombed inner-city areas. Boorman was raised in Carshalton in Surrey, and *Hope and Glory* depicts family life in the classic suburban semi-detached home during the Blitz. He hated the suburbia of his childhood, and later decried it as the birthplace of Thatcherism, a reactionary lower-middle-class culture of limited horizons and petty privatisation thriving among the tidy houses and trim lawns.<sup>120</sup> A socialist, Calder was also offended by the perceived politics of suburbia. He admired Boorman and made the perfectly ridiculous statement that like Boorman he was 'ashamed of his suburban origins'. He goes on to provide a reductionist view of suburbia during the war and afterwards, dismissing the notion of suburban voluntarism and linking forward to the era of reconstruction discussed in chapter six:

'Suburban values' and the suburban lifestyle, created in the new housing estates of the inter-war period, did have in 1940 a flourishing future ahead of them. Ravaged by the Luftwaffe or not, the working-class areas of British cities were due to be devastated by town planners; while in the Sixties, poor people were shifted from 'communities' into tower blocks, the suburbanites who despised

them continued to mow the lawn every Saturday, make tea in trim little kitchens, and keep up with the ever-more-affluent Joneses.<sup>121</sup>

Such stereotypical and static images of suburbia jar with the often nuanced approach in *The Myth of the Blitz*. Worse, his anti-suburbanism marks Calder out as an elite historian surveying 'the masses' with a particularly critical eye on the lower middle classes who populated suburbia. In fact, thousands of suburban clerks, uniformed workers, self-employed business people and 'housewives' who were living in semi-detached homes joined up to become ARP wardens, fire fighters, emergency medical service volunteers, and munitions workers. Social capital in the suburbs, both in peace and wartime, has been proven to be just as high if not higher than in other areas of the city or in rural villages. And that was true for working-class suburban council estates, too.<sup>122</sup>

Overall, Calder does not give due attention to the suburban Home Front. As two eminent historians of London have argued, however, by the end of the war the impact of air raids on the capital city was as wide as the metropolis itself. During the Blitz bombs and incendiaries by no means spared the suburbs, while later air raids and V-weapons attacks hit outer London hard. As White argues, the bombs respected no notion of the 'two Londons', inner and outer.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, despite attacking suburbs more than a few times in *The Myth of the Blitz*, Calder ignores them in his index.

Drawing upon MO reports and other official readings of morale, however, the fluctuations in popular mood and sentiments during and after air raids are cleverly portrayed, as are the petty tensions and class-based resentments engendered by evacuation. Overall, however, Calder accentuated the negative while acknowledging

the positive. His analysis may be compared with that of Juliet Gardiner, who places voluntarism and humanitarian impulses at the centre of her approach, while accepting that pre-war social divisions continued during and after the conflict. Unlike Calder, however, and in common with Titmuss, Gardiner emphasises the glue of morale, the huge contribution of voluntarism despite differences and division, the ‘unity of resolution and purpose’ during the Blitz and the socio-political dividend:

A social contract, no matter how informal and unspoken, had been forged during those months of attack. People who ‘took it’ should be entitled to ‘get it’, if ‘it’ meant better housing, a fairer education system, more job opportunities. It was partly for this reason that when the Beveridge Report was published in December 1942, a year and a half after the Blitz, what was essentially a tidying-up operation of welfare provision assumed iconic status, appearing to offer a new beginning, a safety net from the cradle to the grave, an attack on the five ‘giant evils’ in society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease.<sup>124</sup>

Robert MacKay and Andrew Thorpe come to similar conclusions. During the early days of the Blitz, while people were evacuating or grubbing around in the ruins to salvage what they could, a sense of despair was mostly absent. MacKay’s emphasis upon ‘the enhanced sense of being part of a group’ did not rule out difference and even division, but as he argued such cohesion was strengthened by government propaganda on posters, newspapers, radio and film. It was also boosted by participation in such hands-on organisations as the ARP, AFS (Auxiliary Fire Service), the Home Guard and the WVS.<sup>125</sup> The events of 1940, namely the evacuation of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz from

September, instilled in the British people a sense of ‘moral authority’ and of national community. With the first and arguably worst phase of the Blitz over, due to the terrible novelty of the experience, the British were able to bear the later months with resignation or fortitude, or both.<sup>126</sup> And for Malcolm Smith, that spirit and sense of unity lasted long into the post-war years.<sup>127</sup>

### Targeting Heritage: The Baedeker Blitz

On 28 March 1942 over 230 RAF planes attacked the medieval city of Lubeck in Germany, using the ‘double blow’ technique by following the first bombing raid with a second equally destructive one. Although Lubeck was of negligible military value due to its peripherally located industries, much of its manufacturing remained untouched or only partly damaged. But its wooden-beamed housing and chocolate-box architecture was razed to the ground. Over 300 local residents were killed, while 16,000 were rendered homeless.<sup>128</sup> The assault on Lubeck prompted the so-called Baedeker Raids on beautiful English cities. And when planning their raids, and seeking to maximise destruction to English heritage sites, the Germans had an easy-to-use guidebook at hand.<sup>129</sup>

The Karl Baedeker Company of Leipzig had begun publishing their travel guides during the 1830s, but few budding tourists could have grasped the irony that aids to cultural tourism would become tools to assist in the destruction of much-loved and much-visited centres of heritage. By the beginning of the Second World War, the Baedeker *Great Britain* was in its ninth edition, having been updated and republished in 1937, the year that Germany, Italy and Japan completed their pact, Guernica was



bombed by German airplanes, and France extended its defensive Maginot Line to the German border.

*Baedeker's Handbook for Great Britain* was written by H.A. Piehler, a British-born travel writer who motored extensively around the country recording his impressions. 'Bath', wrote Piehler, 'is a handsome city'. Its beautiful location in the Avon Valley was noted alongside its 'unrivalled' status 'among English provincial towns for its combination of archaeological, historic, scenic and social interest.' Its Georgian streets and town houses were praised while Bath Abbey was awarded an asterisk, the Baedeker 'mark of commendation'.<sup>130</sup> Exeter, the county town of Devon, was described as an attractive ancient city on the banks of the River Exe. Its quaint public buildings, attractive streets, city walls and beautiful cathedral were foremost among its considerable range of attractions.<sup>131</sup> Further East, Canterbury in Kent was given extensive treatment. Described as nothing less than 'the ecclesiastical metropolis' of England and 'an ancient city, with numerous quaint old houses', it was historically significant as the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The cathedral was awarded two asterisks. Other ancient religious buildings and notable features in Canterbury were also starred with an asterisk.<sup>132</sup>

Norwich in Norfolk was noteworthy for its irregular building, and its beautiful cathedral was awarded a number of single asterisks for some of its most significant features. Norwich was also home to thirty old East Anglian churches which nestled alongside many other ancient and interesting buildings defined by unique architectural 'flushwork'.<sup>133</sup> And in the heart of the North, the picturesque ancient city of York was praised for the conservation of its city walls (one asterisk) and its network of quaint mediaeval streets and variety of old buildings. York Minster, standing proud

above the surrounding streets, earned two asterisks, signifying high levels of approval from the Baedeker guide.<sup>134</sup>

In his introduction, the editor of the 1937 *Baedeker Handbook to Great Britain* thanked the Deans of the Cathedrals visited, and the officials of the cities and towns for the information they had offered to the author. He noted the importance of 'fair dealing and courtesy' from the traveller to England.<sup>135</sup> From April to June 1942, over 1,000 people were killed by the Baedeker Raids, and hundreds were seriously injured. Significant losses were sustained to the country's heritage. Exeter was bombed in April and May. The shopping centre was destroyed by high explosives, incendiaries and parachute mines. At Bath over two nights in late April the railway station was demolished, and many historic buildings including churches were burned down or smashed by HE bombs. Norwich was bombed on 12 April and at the end of June, losing the historic St. Julian's Church and many attractive old buildings. At York, raids on 28–9 of April destroyed the mediaeval Guild Hall, and damaged many houses and buildings in the city centre. And in the final raids on Canterbury on 31 May and 1 June, although the loss of life was mercifully small, the 'ecclesiastical metropolis' lost a number of churches, two schools, the Corn Exchange, the City Market and many houses and shops.<sup>136</sup>

Architecture embodies memories, and familiar buildings shape and reinforce how people feel about their built environment. When something as ostensibly permanent as a church, cathedral, town hall or any ancient public building is obliterated, not only the environment but the memory of the environment is disrupted.<sup>137</sup> Beyond the bereavement of those who had lost loved ones, and the pain and suffering endured by injured people living in these beautiful cities, many survivors grieved for the buildings

they had known and loved, and the streets they had grown up in. As Michael Hebbert argues, the street is a locus of collective memory, a hub of social life, where personal identity and urban identity fused. Hebbert points to other contexts of destruction such as slum clearance, urban renewal and highway building, where residents attempted to defend their communities from the developer or the local authority.<sup>138</sup> But citizens under the bomb were powerless. Beautiful streets and buildings had lain at the heart of the historical identity of the cities, and now they lay in ruins. These had also been spaces of sociability where people worked, enjoyed leisure, or worshipped. So the legacy of destruction went deep: loss was felt immediately and brought about feelings akin to grief for something that could not be brought back.

Of course, such emotions were not just confined to those who lived in the cities attacked during the Baedeker Raids, but were common to anyone who saw their little corner of the world left in ruins by bombs and fires. Prior to the war the *British Medical Journal* published an article in July 1939 on ‘demolition melancholia’. The term, coined by a Medical Officer in Sheffield, was applied to those who, mostly elderly and mostly women, had experienced profound feelings of loss on ‘the sudden dispossession of a lifelong home to which the patients have probably developed a strong emotional attachment’.<sup>139</sup> The state of mind referred to here was caused by removal from an old home to a new house in the suburbs or beyond. But the complex of feelings induced by the brutal overnight destruction of known and familiar worlds must have included displacement, mild depression, loneliness and an inability to adapt to new circumstances. Such emotions, of course, are felt by many people in similar circumstances of destruction. Hence the historical study of air raids and their consequences

possesses a powerful relevance to the growing academic fields of Disaster Studies and Trauma Studies.<sup>140</sup>

### The Revenge Weapons, 1944–5

In January 1944 German bombers returned to London for a relatively small-scale re-run of the conventional HE and fire-bombing raids they had visited upon London some four years earlier. An unwelcome reminder of the earlier campaign, the air raids of early 1944 were dubbed the ‘little Blitz’, and killed over a thousand people.<sup>141</sup> Yet during the summer of 1944 worse was to come, and it would manifest itself in a frightening new weapon. For some months rumours had been circulating in Britain about a flying bomb that had no pilot and which could be guided almost mysteriously through the air at great speed to attack the capital city.<sup>142</sup> This was the V1, the ‘V’ standing for vengeance. The Allied bombing campaign against German cities and industrial towns had intensified during 1943 and into 1944. Hitler, outraged by these damaging intrusions into the Fatherland, was keen to see the development of the flying bomb expedited to its deadliest effect.

The inventor of the vengeance weapons was the rocket scientist Wernher von Braun. His conceptual expertise was converted into deadly hardware by slave labour at the research base in Peenemünde, on the Baltic Coast of Germany.<sup>143</sup> The first V1 launched against Britain fell not on London but on Gravesend in Kent. But on the 13 June, however, a warm summer day in London was cruelly interrupted by the first V1 rockets to hit the capital city, smashing into a railway bridge in Bow, East London, cutting the railway line.<sup>144</sup>

Launched on Britain from bases in Northern France between June and September 1944, the flying bomb possessed a distinctive sonic signature, a rattling and chugging sound, a little like an intermittent moped somewhere on high. Then the noise would suddenly cease, as the fuel was cut off, and the bomb fell to the ground. This was not a highly accurate technology, and many fell harmlessly into the sea or onto open countryside. Those that did get through however brought a new phase of death and destruction. Many Londoners became weary and fearful at the incessant threat and irregular strikes of the doodlebug. Home Intelligence reports described exaggerated and fabricated stories about deaths and destruction circulating among the public, and identified a significant lowering of morale in June and July, 1944.<sup>145</sup> Increasing numbers of voluntary evacuees left London, and there were more complaints about the inadequacy of shelter provision, and symptoms of 'strain' and 'weariness'. Herbert Morrison was booed while in East London.<sup>146</sup> More Anderson shelters were produced, along with the indoor home shelters or Morrison shelters, originally introduced by the government towards the end of the Blitz in 1941.<sup>147</sup> These would prove to be of little use against the next fearsome weapon to hit London.

The V2 flying rocket was much more difficult to defend against than the doodlebug. Its faster, higher searing power made it almost impossible to deter. The final version of the flying rocket was test launched in Germany in August 1944, and on 18 September 1944 the first V2 to hit England smashed into the west London suburb of Chiswick, destroying a pair of interwar semi-detached homes in Staveley Road. Croydon and other south London boroughs were hit by many V2 attacks, but two were particularly tragic. In New Cross in Deptford, 168 people were killed while Christmas

shopping in Woolworth's department store, while soon afterwards Smithfield Meat Market in Farringdon 115 people lost their lives. V2s also hit central London; the upscale department store of Selfridge's was also damaged during the pre-Christmas rush to buy presents.<sup>148</sup> The fiction feature film *Operation Crossbow* (1965), a British spy thriller about wartime attempts to sabotage the V2 programme, contains some vivid scenes of flying rockets smashing into the streets of London, killing anyone at the point of impact. (See Fig. 5).

The V1 and V2 attacks brought the suburbs back into the war, again exposing the failure of Angus Calder to view the suburban experiences of air raids in a serious and detailed manner:

V1s alone damaged to some degree 54,000 houses in Croydon and 18,000 out of 22,000 in Sutton and Cheam. Twice as many V2s fell on outer London as on inner, and the frontline status of London's Essex suburbs later in the war was sufficient to win it the nickname 'Doodle-bug Alley'.<sup>149</sup>

By the end of the war V-weapon craters pockmarked the metropolis. The V1s killed over 5,000 people and injured 15,000, while the V2s that smashed into London from September 1944 to March 1945 caused over 2,700 fatalities.<sup>150</sup> These losses were perceived as particularly tragic and futile as the war drew towards its close. London did not suffer the V2 alone, moreover. They were fired on Paris as the Germans were defeated during August 1944. The port city of Antwerp in Belgium was liberated in September 1944, but the retreating and resentful Germans took revenge with a hail of flying rocket attacks which smashed into the city during the months of November and December 1944, killing both civilians and military personnel. After London, Antwerp was the most heavily attacked city by the V2. A tragedy reminiscent of some of

those visited upon London occurred at the Rex Cinema in central Antwerp in mid-December when a flying rocket killed 567 people, nearly 300 of them American, British and Canadian soldiers.<sup>151</sup>

## Conclusion

The Nazi Blitz on London, the Baedeker Blitz, sporadic air raids and the V-weapons only partly succeeded in their intention to destroy the built environment of British cities. More importantly, they failed to destroy the morale of the British people. Although many citizens felt fear, trepidation and sometimes panic, the overriding patterns of behaviour were defined by bravery, heroism and stoicism, with a dose of cheerful humour thrown in for good measure. A key word here is ‘resilience’, the ability of a city and its people to survive and renew after a devastating event.<sup>152</sup>

London had suffered sustained aerial bombardment first, and ‘took it’ more than most cities, but even those urban areas that suffered relatively higher levels of environmental destruction when their size is considered, notably Coventry and some of the port cities, demonstrated resistance and resilience. The Blitz on Britain revealed that those dire pre-war prognostications of anarchy and chaos, and the anticipated collapse of civil society, simply did not materialise. The British had proved the pre-war experts, both military and political, wrong. Even during the V-weapon raids from 1944–5 the increasing fragility of spirit among many Londoners refused to break down. Hence Londoners and British people more generally were establishing an important pattern that can be traced in almost all subsequent air raids. The Blitz, and the British wartime experience of air raids, were indeed paradigmatic events.