



Why is There a Myth of the Blitz ?

Trevor Harris

► To cite this version:

Trevor Harris. Why is There a Myth of the Blitz ?. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1997, CAPES 97, Celebrations and other essays, 13, pp.45-58. hal-02348348

HAL Id: hal-02348348

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348348>

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Why is There a Myth of the Blitz?

Ever since the closing stages of the First World War, the English public had been aware that the Channel would no longer be enough to keep an enemy at bay: a century of *pax britannica* had ended and, more disturbingly, so had any pretence at "splendid isolation." Hostile aircraft were now able to ignore the masts of England's naval palisade and, for the first time, strike straight at her through an element Britannia did not rule. Stanley Baldwin, in 1931, had underlined the point: "the bomber will always get through." The destruction of Guernica, on 26 April 1937, had given it a stark, clinical clarity. Indeed, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Britain's declaration of war on Germany was accompanied by the expectation, both in government and among the civilian population, of almost immediate attack from the air. Even so, there was much fear, if not surprise, when the air raid warning sounded less than half an hour after Chamberlain's solemn broadcast on the morning of Sunday, 3 September 1939. It was perhaps appropriate that the cacophony which was to be the Blitz, should begin with what was only a parody of overture: the all-clear sounded almost immediately.

Such moments of threatening danger followed by anti-climax were to become a feature of the Blitz: so were anecdotes juxtaposing high drama and farce. The rapid succession of fear and euphoric relief — a familiar occurrence for those on the ground during the Blitz — spawned innumerable cosy tales of the “my brush with death” variety. Many were sincere and accurate; some were almost certainly exaggerated; others may well have been pure fabrication. Whatever the precise proportions of veracity and fabrication may be, however, the doubtful provenance of many personal narratives, as well as some of the collective ones, was more than enough to generate what we now refer to as the “myth” of the Blitz.

A number of stock characters, indeed, emerged from the Blitz: the gallant Home Guard old-timer; the officious air raid warden; the resourceful backstreet, scruffy urchin; the defiant Cockney, his cheeky grin a badge of passive courage: or again, Churchill himself, picking his way through bombed-out houses, the emblematic cigar prodding forwards, the victory-V fingers prodding upwards, the walking stick downwards: another urchin, a sea urchin, a prickly customer indeed. And from such mythical characters developed more elaborate myths, of community and solidarity. As the “terrible rain”¹ spattered down, the English population, huddled together in their “Anderson” or crouched under their “Morrison Sandwich,” were united, we are invited to believe, in the democracy of death. The strictly ordered English class paradigm was miraculously transformed by collective experience into a blissfully concordant social syntagm: a part of the myth propagated, as Philip Ziegler points out, by American journalists stationed in London during the Blitz (Ziegler 164). Other press comments underline the solidarity and develop certain aspects of it. The great English public was patient, disciplined, plucky: “Ed Murrow, on the steps of St Martin’s as the alert sounded, held his microphone to the pavement so that Americans could hear Londoners on their way to the shelter. They were impressed by noticing that nobody ran” (Ziegler 163-64). English improvisation and eccentricity were getting the better of German organisation and raw, military might. Peddlers of the juxtaposition, to

¹ Title of an anthology of Second World War poetry (Methuen, 1964).

be sure, adopted many different tones to promote their vision of things. It might, for example, be conceived of as the epitome of muddling through — an important aspect of how Londoners reinvented themselves during the Blitz — a confrontation between quintessential British barminess and unflappability, on the one hand, and calculating, Teutonic ruthlessness on the other: Heath Robinson plays Bismarck (and wins). Or, as in the famous cartoon drawn for the *Evening Standard* by David Low, the ridiculous disproportion of English resistance to Nazi panzer power could be conveyed through the sleek, taut lines of the arched back and raised fist of a lone English soldier, rewriting the myth of Canute, as the tide of the German advance swept inexorably on.²

In opposition to this canonical version, the grotesque angelism of which must surely have been apparent to many even at the time of the Blitz itself, a very large proportion of recent research on the subject has started to stress the less attractive side of civilian behaviour during the relevant period: 7 September 1940 to mid-May 1941. Indeed, reading more recent sources on the subject, one is struck by the almost systematic emphasis on the bleak at the expense of the blithe. And there is much evidence to support a less flattering interpretation. Recorded instances of contemptible individual behaviour are legion. No sooner had the war started, for example, than certain resourceful individuals, “spivs,” emerged to fill the supply vacuum and profit from instability, to both encourage and manipulate the black market. Other, less elaborate forms of profiteering were apparently rife: Ziegler reports the story of a Spitalfields grocer attempting to sell canned fish at grossly inflated prices (see Ziegler). Many Londoners hoarded scarce supplies. Or again, some of the anecdotes about looting reveal an unscrupulous, terrifying cupidity: it is claimed that wedding rings and other jewellery were often removed from the fingers, wrists and necks of the dead, even of the dying. The blackout, too, offered endless possibilities to numerous categories of mischief-makers, petty pilferers, muggers and, in general, all manner of budding, latent malefactors, to say nothing of the better organised underworld.

² The caption read: “Very well then, alone!”

Honesty, however, was not the only virtue to evaporate in the heat of the moment. The altruism which typifies the “all-in-it-together” version of the Blitz, was decidedly short-lived in many cases. Looking after number one was the order of the day, from high-ranking Whitehall officials ensuring that they had the best available type of air-raid shelter for their own use (a “Haldane”), down to humbler private individuals queuing for hours to make certain of a safe place in one of the public shelters. Life in the latter only serves to further underline the fragility of such notions as “solidarity.” Apart from the physical conditions - especially during the early months of the Blitz, shelters were chaotic and very dirty - the atmosphere was not always charged with frank bonhomie: instances of racial abuse, for example, were not unknown (Ziegler 176). The pressures on the “laborious” classes, indeed, were such that Clement Attlee was driven to suggest at one point that East End rebelliousness, magnified by resentment at being (or so it seemed) the *Luftwaffe*’s sole target, would develop into revolution. Attlee has, sometimes unfairly, been portrayed as an unprepossessing figure: “Chips” Channon, for example, described him as a “little gad-fly . . . insignificant” (*Channon Diary*, quoted in Kevin Jefferys 43). Though exaggerated, Attlee’s habitual disposition was indeed to reserve, rather than histrionics. His remark concerning the apparently anarchic Cockneys is all the more revealing of the governing classes’ anxiety: there had been genuine, widespread fears about the likely reactions of the civilian population to mass bombardments. In a similar way, George Orwell’s dramatic vision of class enmities, in the first part of the *Story by Five Authors*, emphasises the artistic and intellectual energy released by the Blitz, amplifying those resonances set up in the middle-class “*imaginaire*” by *working-class* energies: or, at least, by middle (and upper)-class *assumptions* about the virulence of working-class reactions (see Orwell 97-98).

The weight of evidence gleaned from more recent research in this area tips the scales overwhelmingly towards a reading of the Blitz in which London was awash with egotism, as the capital — no political pun intended — fomented a slow revolt. The gloating rich continued to visit the lavish restaurants and clubs of the West End, virtually bathing in champagne if “Chips” Channon is to be believed (Jefferys 58-59;

Ziegler 90), while the have-nots of dockland wallowed in their sodden, low-lying shelters. London, it would seem, struggled against the constant threat of disintegration into internecine strife: whether in the shape of class warfare, the search for ethnic scapegoats — “Chinkies,” “Spics” and “Yids” — or the hidden threat from fifth columnists. “Careless talk costs lives,” as the saying went, and was consequently sanctioned, officially or officiously — sometimes even viciously. If only one looks hard enough, there is evidence to suggest that Londoners’ morale was always low, at least in some part of the city. The resistance of the civilian population to the trials of constant bombing was only ever a fragile construction, it would seem, lashed together by the various strands of Government propaganda, neighbourhood-based myths or pure chance: had the *Luftwaffe* succeeded in bombing certain parts of London with more regularity and intensity, there would have been a widespread collapse of civilian morale.

There is, then, a huge discrepancy between, on the one hand, the canonical version of the Blitz and, on the other, the revisionist version. Angelism gives way to demonism: in one reading London triumphs gloriously against the odds, functioning as a microcosm of the national war effort; in the other, London survives the Blitz thanks to a mixture of ministerial flagellation and strategic flukes.

The habitual reflex at this point is to seek a *via media*. The “truth” can only emerge if one exercises a degree of tolerance, of common sense, and admits that both interpretations contain elements of accuracy, the overall picture of the Blitz depending on a judicious conflation, or dove-tailing, of the two. This version begins by underlining that there *were* many difficulties during the Blitz, even a number of decidedly unsavoury moments. And yet, the reaction of London’s population, though not as mythically valiant as some sources would have us believe — not least many of the contemporary ones — was none the less meritorious. There clearly *was*, it is argued — by Philip Ziegler, for example — an enhanced feeling of community for many Londoners, much of the time. Angus Calder, writing in 1992, underscored the apparent solidarity, though he is careful to hint at what he takes to be the temporary nature of the phenomenon: “Life, briefly, seemed more

important than money” (Calder 178). There was much courage displayed by individuals: by the AFS, for example, or by those charged with defusing unexploded bombs.³ There were many other equally hazardous tasks to be performed: the repair of bomb-damaged buildings, for example. Even the daily business of getting to and from one’s place of work involved decisions requiring a certain boldness. And no doubt there were many thousands of unrecorded acts of bravery. This third reading of the Blitz, which one might describe as classical in its commitment to balance, also focuses attention on the “passive” courage of many of the inhabitants of London. People *did* adapt to the new conditions. Many were driven by an understandable, but none the less laudable, sense of duty: to their families, to their friends, to themselves! Some, almost certainly, took refuge in fatalism in order to be able to face the daily dangers: if your number was up, the argument went, it was up.⁴

In medio veritas? Perhaps. And yet, there is a dissatisfying sense of the unresolved here. Clearly, historians cannot remain silent. But the necessity for existing assessments to be modified in the light of evidence which has only recently become available is, on occasions, difficult to distinguish from a more rhetorical itch to revise: what, indeed, if the revision of the myth of the Blitz contained elements which were themselves largely a construct: a myth of revision, as it were?

It is not being suggested for one moment that revisionist readings are a deliberate obfuscation; yet nor are they understandable merely as a set of accidental accretions — the once elegant canonical edifice, as it were, newly enriched by the addition of frightening revisionist

³ According to Ziegler, there was already a backlog of more than 3000 UXBs by the end of October (125).

⁴ Though precisely *how many* numbers came up is not clear. Hélène Fréchet gives a figure of 23,000 civilians killed during the London Blitz (25); François Bédarida has 30,000 killed in London for the whole of the War (24), while Andrew Thorpe has 41,758 dead in Britain for the period 1940-41 and 60,284 fatalities for the whole of the War (50). Ziegler has a round figure of 80,000 casualties for the whole of the War in London (337). H. L. Smith provides the most lavish estimate with 130,000 dead or injured in the War (4).

gargoyles! A cynical interpretation of the drive to modification or moderation, might consist of saying that revisionist, even "classical" readings of the Blitz, are little more than new stalls set out in the historiographical market-place: "*universitaires*," after all, have to make a crust... No doubt, this is an over-reaction. Rather, it may be that the "myth of the Blitz" itself and the various revisions of it, can best be seen as mutually defining: the excesses of watery-eyed, wartime sentimentalism have, in due course, given rise to a series of dispassionate assessments. There has been an equal and opposite corrective reaction to demystify the action of the earlier mythologisers. That is, the scientific rigour applied in order to uncover less appealing aspects of life during the Blitz, can perhaps be held to stand in the same relation to the historical facts as the subjective licence which typified earlier accounts. This is not the same as saying that the "truth" is a sort of average of the two antagonistic interpretations, that the truth is neither blue or yellow, but green. It is rather a question of saying that both versions take up positions which shade towards caricature, and that superimposing the two caricatures does not give us an accurate portrait, but merely a distorted caricature. In each case, the role of the significant detail is a similar one, whether it is used to canonise or condemn. In other words, both approaches rely more or less explicitly on the application of an ethical scale to the evidence available.

The possible origins of the glorification of the Blitz and of its subsequent shaming, would be hard to situate. There is an obvious sense in which the wartime reporting of the Blitz drew on founding myths, on Biblical narrative schemes — the story of David and Goliath, or the broader battle between good and evil. There is also a sense in which the myth was derived from a stereotype of Englishness, while the revisionist reading is keen to play down any such "national" identity. Putting the same point a different way, we could say that *neither* the myth of social cohesion, *nor* the opposing myth which argues that solidarity was a sham, address the more down-to-earth conclusions possible about the range of behaviours visible during the Blitz. It is probably true to say that claims for solidarity were exaggerated. But does this require us to correct these claims with details of vile and base individual or collective behaviour which are promoted to a role of equal

significance? Surely we should not expect a civilian population under constant stress and in a situation of very real danger to behave immaculately. But, neither need we be so dogged in our desire for more "realism" where the Blitz is concerned as to assume that acts of social solidarity were uniformly untypical, hypocritical or absent.

A similar point could be made in respect of the looting which went on at various times during the Blitz. Those who looted in a more or less systematic way, common sense tells us, would have done so in many other circumstances. Much of the looting, however, can safely be attributed to amateurs, people who happened upon various objects which, to all intents and purposes, now appeared quite useless to their original owners. This does not mean that the looters concerned were not committing a crime; clearly they were. But it should nuance our attitude towards them: how many of us can be confident that we would never have taken anything, from anywhere, at any time in the immense social upheaval brought about by the Blitz? And yet, we would surely have been mortified to discover that historians were later to project our fleeting pettiness onto the pure white screen of the myth of the Blitz and say: "Here, this is what it was *really* like!"

One could apply the same reasoning to any number of other areas. Life in the air-raid shelters, for example, is known to have been primitive in a number of ways. Sanitation was a constant problem: though this is hardly surprising. If darts, dancing and community singing probably were not the norm, it is not difficult to imagine some groups spontaneously indulging in these or other forms of entertainment. And while it is unfortunate that quarrels, fights, or racial and sexual harassment sometimes took place in the shelters, it is surely stretching faith in the man (or woman) on the Clapham omnibus to suggest that these things were unexpected: in the cramped, oppressive atmosphere and prolonged physical proximity of the average shelter something often had to give. What is truly surprising is that there is not much *more* evidence of nastiness and bigotry.

The question of civilian morale is another point on which the wartime discourse and the revisionist account are heavily at odds. But

here, too, there is perhaps less scope for meaningful disagreement than might first seem apparent. Thanks to recent research in this area, it is now very clear that the Government made a determined effort to keep bad news from the general public and thus artificially bolster morale. But what is now supported by documentary evidence, was already suspected by many ordinary people at the time. Moreover, it would be difficult to square the demands of providing "responsible" government, on the one hand, and a requirement to volunteer complete details of every civilian disaster during the Blitz, on the other. It is easy to underline that the Government was thereby engaging in a form of manipulation. But one is also drawn to ask oneself what the first priority of the Government was — and still is — in time of war: the obvious answer has to be, to win. Deliberate misinformation is one thing: reluctance to communicate to the entire population the precise details of every disaster — civilian or military — is quite another. At what point does manipulation stop being reprehensible and merge into a more understandable — if not always legitimate — form of leadership?

On the more mundane, quotidian issue of whether and to what extent civilian morale was, in practice, high or low, some investigators for Mass-Observation or Home Intelligence emphasised that morale was close to breaking point in some blitzed towns at some times. But this does not constitute a surprising, or damning piece of evidence. If people living in the East End were badly shaken during the first days of the Blitz — or the population of Coventry, or Portsmouth, or Manchester, in November or December 1940 — we have no difficulty in understanding why. Again, we ask ourselves what our own reaction might have been. There are, after all, specific reasons why morale should have been affected in these, and other, cases: the fact that large numbers of bombs fell in a small area in a short time; the timing of the air raids; the high numbers of casualties and resulting disorganisation of family and community networks; the extensive devastation of the environment and support services. Once more, the surprising fact is that there was not much *more* to reveal in the way of negative images.

The myth of the Blitz, in its most concentrated form, seeks to make light of all such negative considerations: the population was never

“downhearted.” Yet the overwhelming majority of readers would instinctively reject such a caricature. It is inconceivable that we would be unaffected by such a situation: is it conceivable that East-Enders, Midlanders or Scousers of 1940-41 were unaffected by it? Mass-Observation reporters at the time often underlined the stoicism of the working-class populations of large towns and used class and/or regional stereotypes to account for apparent proletarian stubbornness in the face of aerial attack. But, while people from the East End do not speak “proper” and people from Liverpool speak through their noses and breath through their mouths, regional and class caricatures, we may suspect, have comparatively little effect on individual responses to air raids. The Mass-Observation reports — like Clement Attlee’s fears of Revolution or George Orwell’s dramatic vision of class scores being settled — are essentially middle-class reactions to *perceived* collective response. But middle-class perception of working-class responses may often prove wildly inaccurate or irrelevant. Morale is something which does not lend itself easily to measurement.⁵ The political and cultural “filters,” moreover, through which the majority of Mass-Observation and Home Intelligence reporters would have perceived the collective reactions they were trying to define, mean that much of the information they gathered has to be assimilated to impressions: impressions, moreover, necessarily affected by the reporters’ own bomb-tested nerves.

On morale, then, conclusions are difficult to reach, one way or the other. We should be wary of oral accounts gathered *in situ* at or near the time of air raids: self-conscious understatement, bravado, inaccuracy, “phatic” exchanges, self-delusion, mischief-making and, no doubt, many other parameters, would often have undermined the usefulness of such data. The correction of this facet of the myth of the Blitz is beset by considerable difficulties. But, overall, we should be less than surprised to learn that people were tired, tense and depressed, or that they sometimes panicked or behaved in a selfish manner.

⁵ “Government officials . . . found it difficult to define the precise nature, and therefore variations in the level, of public morale” (Beaven and Griffith 169).

What, in point of fact, is being revised, exactly, in our vision of the Blitz? What are the extent and tone of the "myth" itself? Providing a detailed answer to this question would require much more space than is available here. But this fact should not prevent us from setting out a few thoughts.

Let us look, briefly, at one text. *The Economist*, published an article, entitled "Rising to the Crisis," on September 14, 1940, a week after the start of the London Blitz. The text emphasises the extent to which London has become "the world's main battle-front" (dramatic, perhaps, but not wholly inaccurate), refers to the "random barbarity" of the air raids (an expression which pales into insignificance when compared with those used to describe today's terrorist attacks) and highlights the heavy "burden on individuals" (hardly an attempt to conceal the problems being encountered). The text continues:

These sufferings have been borne with courage and cheerfulness. It is common form in all such disasters to say that the morale of the people is excellent. In London this week the hackneyed phrase has had a real meaning.

Is this the myth of the Blitz in the making? Such a reading is surely an over-interpretation: this scarcely sounds like rampant propaganda, or fiendish manipulation of a naïve civilian population. Nor does the article's attitude to the Government seem steeped in deference or collusion. Having praised the civil defence services for the way they have handled the crisis, the text continues:

Whether the reaction of the central Government to the emergency has been equally prompt and far-reaching is rather more open to doubt. The hardest-hit places have been very poor areas, such as those working-class districts which cluster round the docks. This fact has, of course, increased the misery caused by sudden homelessness, since these people are often without any reserves on which they can fall back. A great deal has been done by the Ministries of Health, Food and Pensions to provide emergency shelter, rations and cash allowances. But the very poverty of the victims provided the opportunity for a demonstration of national unity in the face of danger and disaster, and nothing of this nature has been forthcoming.

Here, in a text written virtually as the bombs were falling, is what can only be described as a level-headed assessment. More than this. The text gets as close to outright condemnation of the Government as the highbrow, Establishment *Economist* was ever likely to. Indeed, given the desperate situation and the status of *The Economist*, these lines amount to very serious criticism. They emphasise in unequivocal terms the inefficiency of the Government in dealing with the crisis; they focus the reader's attention squarely on class and inequality; they underline, in very candid language, the glaring absence of any sense of national unity. In short, *The Economist*, here as elsewhere, is at pains to present its readers with the realities of the situation and not with a myth.⁶ *The Economist*, it might be objected, is so highbrow as to be marginal in the formation of popular beliefs and myths: or that the criticism levelled at the Government here is the first shot in a campaign to oust the "men of Munich." There is more than an element of truth in both points. Yet the basic fact remains: *The Economist* provides us with clear evidence that systematic indulgence in mystification or "mythification," was not the order of the day.

Indeed, as a serious historical controversy, it may be that the myth of the Blitz needs a different form of revision. Just as contemporary documents such as *The Economist*, can be seen as already demystifying the Blitz, so available bibliographies of works on the Second World War published in the principal mythologising, post-war period — *grosso modo* up to 1970? — list relatively few titles which foreground the Blitz itself. Those works which do emphasise the general jollity of the polity, are by and large works of fiction, autobiography or personal diaries. Even "serious" works of history which carry high praise for Britain during the War, do not always dwell on the Blitz: Henry Pelling's well-known *Modern Britain 1885-1955*, of 1960, hardly even mentions the Blitz.

⁶ See also, for example, the article published on 23 September 1939, entitled "After Evacuation," in which the assertion that there is a present need "to work out the special features and requirements of evacuation" is a clear, if indirect criticism of the Government scheme.

Is it possible that the myth of the Blitz is, to a considerable extent, a much more recent construct, an understandable reaction to repeated celebration of allied victories, to an ambient nostalgia. Only the longer view, perhaps, will tell us if the revisionist re-introduction of the banal, the sordid and the downright nasty into our vision of the Blitz, is an over-correction. Certainly there was a need, as François Poirier puts it, to “rendre aux Britanniques un peu de la diversité humaine” (Poirier 16) But the move towards a more “de-centred” account of the Blitz — indeed, of the Second World War generally — can have the effect of promoting the neutralisation of any form of positive sentiment. The Blitz becomes not only de-poeticised, but boring. All those categories which might generate some grand or dramatic sentiment, are anaesthetised. There is no grand narrative of the Blitz. There were no grand ideas.

At its best, revision provides an essential palliative to gullible or sinister patriotism. But on occasions, the history of the Blitz is all but silenced, smothered in a prosaic balm.

*Trevor Harris.*⁷



⁷ Université François Rabelais, 3 rue des Tanneurs, 37041 TOURS Cedex (France).

WORKS CITED

- Beaven, Brad and Griffith, John.** "Reconstructing Civilian Morale: the Blitz in England 1940-1942," *Qwerty*, October 1996.
- Bédarida, François.** *Londres 1939-1945* (Paris: Autrement, 1995).
- Calder, Angus.** *The People's War* (London: Pimlico, 1992).
- Fréchet, Hélène.** *La Société anglaise en guerre 1939-1945* (Paris: Editions du Temps).
- Jefferys, Kevin.** *War and Reform. British Politics during the Second World War* (Manchester University Press, 1994).
- Orwell, George.** *The War Broadcasts* (London: Penguin, 1987).
- Smith, H. L.** *Britain in the Second World War* (Manchester University Press, 1996).
- Thorpe, Andrew.** *The Longman Companion to Britain in the Era of the Two World Wars 1914-1945* (London: Longman, 1994).
- Ziegler, Philip.** *London at War* (London: Mandarin, 1995).

