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The Blitz, Britain, and The People: Reassessing the “Blitz Spirit” in the Lives of British
Civilians

A Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

Undergraduate History Program of the University of Washington Tacoma

by

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Abstract

This paper covers the topic of The Blitz in Britain from September 7, 1940 to May 11, 1941 and mainly addresses the experiences of the civilians of Britain. It has been said that the civilians adopted a certain attitude known as the “Blitz Spirit,” which encouraged positivity and bravery in the face of danger, as well as evoking a sense of nationalism for the country of Britain. What the “Blitz Spirit” does not mention is the fear and the disruption that The Blitz inflicted on the lives of ordinary people. This paper will analyze this idea to see if this “spirit” was merely fact or fiction. I propose that this “Blitz Spirit” and the positive morale that it implies was mostly fiction and that morale among the people was negative, overall. My research draws on both secondary and primary sources, including online archives, as well as published primary documents. The Imperial War Museum’s website, which has a large collection of information regarding the First and Second World Wars in Britain, contains useful primary sources, such as letters, photographs, and propaganda posters from the time that The Blitz took place. For finding additional primary sources, I used memoirs from the people who lived through The Blitz. This research is significant because shedding light on the less positive aspects of The Blitz for the British people underscores the reality of living during this uncertain and fearful time in Britain's history. It may also serve as a cautionary tale for future disruptive events that will affect civilians in wartime and in times of peace.

Introduction

The Blitz was a strategic attack on Britain by the Nazis during World War II beginning September 7, 1940 until May 11, 1941. This attack involved numerous air raids in which German airplanes dropped bombs on London and other surrounding cities in Britain. This attack was carried out by the Germans in order to weaken their centers of industry, particularly those that contributed to the war effort as well as to break the spirits of the British people. As a form of retaliation, Britain came up with the saying, “The Blitz Spirit,” in which the people of Britain showed no fear in the face of these attacks and instead came together to help and support one another. This expression encapsulates a sense of pride and nationalism for Britain as it showcased their country’s strength and resistance, overall giving the appearance of positive morale among Britain's citizens.

When one thinks about The Blitz in general, these positive qualities are typically what come to mind and this is what Britain tried to display to the world. However, there is usually always more to the story than what is shown on the surface. War is never easy and The Blitz surely left a mark on the British people and most of it was not positive. I propose that this “Blitz Spirit” and the positive morale that it implies was mostly fiction and that morale among the people was negative, overall. While the front appeared united by the solidarity of the British people, there were still underlying differences in the ways that the people adapted to this siege on their country and ways of life. There was also the unspoken feeling of fear that permeated among the people, but could not be shown lest they appeared as though they were not upholding the values of the “Blitz Spirit.” The importance of shedding light on the less than positive aspects of this time for the British people is in many ways shedding light on the reality of living during this uncertain and fearful time in Britain's history.

Methodology

The main method for conducting my research was to draw on both secondary and primary sources. I accessed online archives as well as published primary documents. I also used the Imperial War Museums website, which has a large collection of information regarding the First and Second World Wars in Britain, in order to find certain primary sources, such as letters, photographs, and propaganda posters from the time that The Blitz took place. The photographs that I found depicted scenes of destroyed buildings and roads, people sleeping in the underground rail stations or in air raid shelters in order to protect themselves from the bombs, as well as homes and buildings set ablaze from the bombs. For finding additional primary sources, I used memoirs from the people who lived through The Blitz. These memoirs were generally found in scholarly books where the authors gave information about The Blitz by using the letters and diaries of the civilians of Britain. These memoirs were particularly compelling because they told of first hand experiences and the emotional reactions that the British people were experiencing during this traumatic time in their history.

For finding secondary sources, I looked at scholarly books that provided information about the daily lives of the citizens of Britain during The Blitz and after. I looked at journal articles that also pertained to the daily lives of citizens, discussing recreation, propaganda, the working class, and their responses to the air raids and bombings. Their responses give a general sense of what morale was like among the civilians of Britain and whether it was overall negative or positive. They also touch on the ideas of fear during this terrifying and uneasy time and the things that the civilians did to try to survive this harrowing time period, both physically and mentally.

Literature Review

For my research, the most helpful sources I relied on were five secondary scholarly books that provided me with information about daily life during The Blitz in Britain. Research about the lives of civilians during The Blitz has become a more recent topic of scholarly interest whereas before the focus was more broad and centered on the military aspects. *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life during the Second World War* (2002) by Norman Longmate focuses on talking about The Blitz and all of World War II as well. This book goes into extreme detail about how the civilians of Britain lived their lives during this time. His thesis focuses on the “civilian’s story largely through his own...recollections...I have throughout concentrated on the ordinary...in preference to the unusual and striking...I have deliberately avoided the dramatic experiences of a few people in favour of the more mundane recollections of the vast majority.”¹ For sources, he used interviews and unpublished contributions from individuals who lived during The Blitz, as well as books and other published materials.

Wartime Britain 1939-1945 (2004) by Juliet Gardiner, talks about the events of The Blitz as well as the years that came before and after, covering the entire extent of the war in Britain. *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (2010), also by Juliet Gardiner, focused only on The Blitz and gives firsthand accounts from the different cities around Britain that were affected while also including those that were not directly hit by the bombs, but were still impacted just the same. Both of these books and their theses focus on the experiences of the people in detail rather than looking mainly at the big picture of The Blitz and the Second World War. The sources used for both books were books, published and unpublished materials, articles, essays, Mass-Observation, the Imperial War Museum, and many different archives such as the National Archive.

¹ Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life during the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 2002), xiii.

London Was Ours: Diaries and Memoirs of the London Blitz (2008) by Amy Helen Bell gives information about The Blitz on the home front by having the information revolve around the personal diaries, letters, and memoirs of the people who lived through it. Instead of focusing on Britain as a whole, the book centers itself in London which was subjected to ruthless bombings relentlessly throughout the course of The Blitz. Her thesis focuses on challenging the positive myth of the “Blitz Spirit” and reveals the truth by addressing the more negative aspects of The Blitz from the voices of the civilians of Britain. For sources, she used diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, newspapers, pamphlets and articles, as well as correspondence and other secondary sources.

The War on Our Doorstep: London’s East End And how the Blitz Changed it Forever (2012) by Harriet Salisbury centers on a particular part of London, the East End, which was known for experiencing higher levels of poverty. With this in mind, it provides a fascinating history of how The Blitz affected London’s poorer residents. Her thesis focuses on how the “Blitz Spirit” was exemplified by the residents of the East End and whether or not it was something genuinely felt by the people, or merely an ideal of propaganda or the desire to remember this time in a way that made it seem more positive than it actually was for the people who lived through it. For sources, she relied heavily on oral histories and interviews.

Two journal articles are important in addressing some of the negative impacts that The Blitz had on the people and their routines. “The School Air-Raid Shelter: Rethinking Wartime Pedagogies” (2003) by Stephen Hussey examines the air raid shelter in schools, how they fit into the classroom dynamic, and how The Blitz and these shelters disrupted school routines so that very little learning was being done. The second article, “Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London, 1939-1945” (2009), by Amy Bell argues that although 20th-century British culture emphasized

stoicism and having fortitude during war time, fear still weighed heavily on the inhabitants of Britain despite it being masked by Britain's need to appear strong and brave.

All these sources focus mainly on the civilians of Britain and what they experienced rather than concentrating on the military aspect of the war and The Blitz. These sources also touch on the idea of morale and how the people responded to their situations. When it comes to The Blitz and the idea of the "Blitz Spirit," many authors leave it up to the reader to determine whether this spirit was real and if so, was it a positive or negative thing? This can create a gap in the research due to their being no definitive answer. Did these horrible events evoke a sense of courage or fear? Did they bring people closer together or did it drive them apart? Were boundaries broken down between the social classes and the genders or were they strictly enforced? These questions are addressed within the above sources, and I will consider whether or not the Blitz spirit was something created by propaganda, or something genuinely felt by the British during this trying time in history.

The Blitz - 1940

Saturday the 7th of September in London was a beautiful day, complete with sunshine and a bright blue sky.² It would seem to be a perfect day in the beginning of fall, but that would change in the later part of the afternoon, when shortly after 4:00 p.m. the blue sky overhead became inundated with the sights and sounds of what seemed like one thousand airplanes.³ Previously, the air raids seemed to focus on attacking airfields, but the formations appeared to look different this time as they aimed straight toward downtown London. Although there had been raids in the months leading up to this day, something felt more ominous to Londoners as they had never witnessed airplanes of this magnitude filling the sky.

² Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004), 332.

³ Gardiner, *Wartime Britain*, 332-333.

The warning siren was set off in London at 4:43 p.m. and those who were out and about took shelter and waited for an All Clear announcement to be made.⁴ This anticipated announcement would not be made until approximately 6:00 p.m. and the citizens of London would emerge from the shelters to find fire and destruction on the docks. The Royal Victoria Docks in the East End were the first targets as this was the location of the Beckton gasworks which supplied central London and was a prime target along with neighboring factories and warehouses along the docks.⁵ At 8:00 that same evening, the second wave of attacks came, this time focusing on the capital, harbour, and power sources to the city.⁶ What began as a beautiful fall day, had become an unimaginable sky full of flames, black smoke, and terror. More than hundreds of people lost their lives with a thousand more wounded, and the state of London seemed surreal for Londoners who had never experienced anything like this before.

Despite the massive destruction and loss of life, the firemen and dock workers worked around the clock to put out the fires and clear up the debris. The dock workers returned to work.⁷ Unbeknownst to them, this incident was only the beginning. On Sunday night, the airplanes and bombs returned to once again bomb the docks which reignited and started more fires as well as more destruction. This time, however, the 200 airplanes also bombed the city, including the railway lines, factories, and homes.⁸ On this night, over 400 were killed and over 700 were injured. “‘They call it crater London now,’ read the trenchant journalist Hannen Swaffer’s column in the *Daily Herald*.”⁹ These two days, as well as that Monday night’s attack in London

⁴ Ibid., 333.

⁵ Ibid., 334.

⁶ Ibid., 335-336.

⁷ Harriet Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep: London's East End and How the Blitz Changed It Forever* (London: Ebury Press: 2012), 271.

⁸ Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 30.

⁹ Quoted in Gardiner, *The British Under Attack*, 33.

which left many dead and injured, marked the beginning of the first phase of The Blitz which would last from September to December of 1940 and would consist of constant air raids and attacks in London and around Britain daily. This would all become a part of the daily lives of British citizens for many months to come.

With the beginning of The Blitz, Londoners started to take actions in order to defend and protect themselves. After the first evacuation in 1939, which had mostly been for naught due to the British expecting there to be air raids that wouldn't come until the next year, the threat was now more dangerously real and prompted a second evacuation in September 1940 of children, the elderly, and others who were at risk, such as pregnant women and the homeless. Julia Lewis, who was around 11 years old near the start of The Blitz, recounts her experience being evacuated with her siblings. "We were evacuated as I say, to Barford. We all ended up in the village hall and people came and chose us like we were cattle on a stand - we all had our names on our coats...Eventually, a young woman...decided she would take all three of us...We were down there about two years - from about 1941-1943."¹⁰ The experiences of the evacuated children with foster parents varied from pleasant to harsh treatment. One of the evacuated children, Edward Dorking said, "Later in the war I had other foster parents whom I came to love...whereas many evacuees led very unhappy lives with foster parents who were spiteful and mean...Nobody asked the children what they wanted or how they felt and a great deal of distress was caused by many unthinking and uncaring adults."¹¹

For those who either could not evacuate or chose to remain in their homes, there was a need to develop shelters for the air raids. During this first phase, London was being subjected

¹⁰ Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep*, 300-301.

¹¹ Amy Helen Bell, *London Was Ours: Diaries and Memoirs of the London Blitz* (New York: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008), 123

daily to bombing throughout the daytime and nighttime hours, which would continue on for 76 nights. Some residents acquired Anderson shelters in their back gardens. These shelters were issued by the government and were made from corrugated metal to withstand the bombs. They were free to those who made under 250 pounds a year and charged others 7 pounds for them - however, only 12,500,000 people had these shelters, merely a quarter of the nation's population.¹² These shelters were mostly used in or near cities as they were prime targets to be bombed. Due to the lack of shelters, some citizens had to make do with the London Underground Tube stations. "The government had initially tried to keep people from using London Tube stations as shelters during the nighttime bombings, but it was quickly forced to relent."¹³ In these shelters, people came together to form small communities and even assembled their own unofficial governments. There was a decrease in the number of people who utilized the Underground from 175,000 people using it in September to 75,000 people using it in December and there were many who chose not to use the Underground, preferring to stay in their homes due to the frequency of the bombings and the gradual desensitization to them.¹⁴ There were also those who did not shelter to show the Nazis and each other that they were not cowed by their attacks and tried to live their lives in the manner they had before. In a letter to her friend in Canada on November 24, 1940, Isabelle Granger wrote, "It is impossible to live in a constant state of emergency. One of the things Nazism is up against is a normal way of living; I intend to cling to it. It is possible to disregard the raids up to a point, we have learned to do it, to lead a normally happy life and see a lot of our friends."¹⁵

¹² Bell, *London Was Ours*, 58.

¹³ Livia Gershon, "What Life Was Like During the London Blitz," JSTOR Daily, last modified August 20, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/what-life-was-like-during-the-london-blitz/>

¹⁴ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 59.

¹⁵ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 60.

In diary entries and in memoirs from The Blitz, it seems like one rarely read about the fears and despair of the writers. Perhaps this was because they were encouraged by the government and by their peers to show that they were not intimidated and were attempting to promote strong British nationalism, but that sense of danger never went away. The fear and the stress of potential bombings caused many physical maladies such as hair loss, stomach pains, and a horrible stench from sweating.¹⁶ “As Miss Viola Bawtree wrote on 10 November 1940, ‘I’ve not heard a warning for weeks, but today I heard almost every one and each time it gave me that horrible heave inside. I don’t know how to describe it, like you might get if you heard a sudden wail of someone in distress, or a shriek of pain.’”¹⁷ Products such as laxatives were heavily advertised as they were in high demand.¹⁸ Despite the havoc that fear wreaked in their bodies, it is a testament to the British people that for many this was the only sign of fear that they displayed outwardly as they tried to appear brave.

By the end of 1940, the attacks on London had started to diminish and bombers focused on other British cities like Hull and Manchester which were home to factories, docks, and other important targets that could weaken Britain.¹⁹ The year would conclude with another large air raid attack targeting London on December 29. “In just three hours 120 tons of high explosives and 22,000 incendiaries were dropped on the city,”²⁰ which caused so many fires that it has been called ‘The Second Great Fire of London’ after the first ‘Great Fire of London’, which took place in 1666. The fires mainly burned around St. Paul’s Cathedral and so a watch was formed in order to protect the cathedral from catching fire. Throughout the night, men used sandbags,

¹⁶ Amy Helen Bell, “Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London, 1939-1945,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no.1 (2009): 160, [Http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/25482966](http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/25482966).

¹⁷ Bell, “Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London,” 160.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 160.

¹⁹ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 56.

²⁰ Gardiner, *Wartime Britain*, 360.

water pumps, and buckets in order to keep the fire at bay, but it could not prevent the dome of the cathedral from being pierced by a bomb.²¹ Despite this, St. Paul's held firm and made it through the attack. When Londoners emerged the next morning to find their places of business destroyed and fires still burning, they could make out through the smoke the top of the cathedral. One of those people who came to work that morning, Dorothy Barton, said that she "felt a lump in my throat because, like so many people, I felt that while St. Paul's survived, so would we."²²

The Blitz - 1941

By the beginning of 1941, air raids and bombings had occurred all over Britain. From Sheffield to Coventry to Birmingham and Liverpool, the goal of bombing these cities was to weaken Britain's war industries, such as steel, aircraft, armament production, and ports, as well as to negatively affect morale among Britain's civilians. After having gone through months of bombing, civilians were settling into routines. Although the threat of air raids was ever present, the people had no choice but to soldier on and continue on with life despite the fear that they no doubt were feeling. Even though children went to school and adults went to work like they had done before, there were still changes that could not be avoided with school children sheltering in case of bombs and most work centered around the war effort. The citizens of Britain were also dealing with rationing and growing their own food as well as saving money and contributing to the war effort which was supported through the use of propaganda.

Before the beginning of The Blitz, school air raid shelters had been built and no school was to be reopened without one.²³ However, these shelters mainly consisted of basements or shelters and trenches constructed on the playground which were shoddy at best. Teachers

²¹ Gardiner, *Wartime Britain*, 361.

²² *Ibid.*, 364.

²³ Stephen Hussey, "The School Air-Raid Shelter: Rethinking Wartime Pedagogies," *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no.4 (2003): 518, <http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/3217998>.

practiced getting their students to the shelters in a short amount of time as the school days consisted of many air raid alarms “that some schools passed between a quarter and a half of each day in shelters, suggesting that the raids exerted a significant impact on the daily routine.”²⁴ However, propaganda displayed the school routine as having been changed very little with a teaching journal called *Teachers World*, explaining how teachers and children have adapted wonderfully with schooling having not been disrupted and that teachers and children continue to do their tasks as they would during a normal school day. The text that accompanies each image confirms this impression. “One reads ‘Lessons must go on’ is the rule in a school in the north-west London area, where the numerous air raids are allowed to interfere as little as possible with the work of the school”²⁵ In reality, school life had changed dramatically with very little learning actually happening and much of their time was spent in their air raid shelters. When a woman was asked, “who had spent many hours as a child in a Birmingham school shelter ‘Did they teach you in the shelter?’” She answered, “No, no, we sang. Used to sing. So you couldn't hear the bombs.”²⁶ Throughout The Blitz, schools were destroyed and classes were often held in public halls or chapels. There were also many children who were homeschooled in their own homes or who went to private homes which consisted of small groups. Many did not have any schooling at all due to the stress of The Blitz and had to help out at home or had to go to work to help support their family.²⁷ “Education, it was often said, was the first casualty of the war... ,” and many children suffered from a lack of a real education.²⁸

²⁴ Hussey, “The School Air-Raid Shelter,” 521.

²⁵ Hussey, “The School Air-Raid Shelter,” 523.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 524.

²⁷ Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 192.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

While unemployment was prominent in the 1930's because of the global depression, The Blitz and the war brought about the need for more workers and "centered around civil defense, the civil service and light industry rather than heavy industrial production."²⁹ Wartime propaganda, such as posters and films, tried to bring about a sense of patriotism in its civilians that by working long hours in taxing conditions, they were contributing to the war effort through their hard work. In actuality, many did not have a choice as they either needed the pay or they were actually conscripted into working and could not leave because their work was important for the war effort.³⁰ Due to their need of workers in factories, there was a call from the government for women to join the workforce in March 1941. This made Britain "the first nation in the modern world to conscript women,"³¹ and so many women were willing to give up their jobs that they were encouraged to keep their previous jobs until a spot working in the factories opened up for them. Every woman between the ages of 18 to 60 was called up to serve and women ages 20 to 30 were conscripted to work with unmarried women and women with children being exempt. At times, many British citizens were forced to work for as much as 24 hours a day in horrible conditions, all in the name of doing one's duty for their country in order to boost morale. If there was any positive morale to be found, it was in the women who were now able to do similar work as the men, as opposed to predominantly performing clerical work. Even though these women were unused to doing physical work in factories for long amounts of time and they were usually exhausted by the days end, most still "discovered a toughness and resilience that surprised even themselves..."³²

²⁹ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 81.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

³¹ Gardiner, *The British Under Attack*, 268.

³² Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 342.

The year 1941 also brought about food rations which were the lowest they had ever been and would remain that way for the rest of the war.³³ This encouraged the government to promote the growing of one's own food and to keep the wasting of food products to a minimum through propaganda posters that stated "A clear plate means a clear conscience."³⁴ Even so, there still was not enough food to satisfy a person's hunger and caused a decrease in energy even for those who received extra rations like manual laborers. The lack of food and certain types of it would lead to the development of a black market where certain scarce goods such as dairy products, meat, and sugar could be found.³⁵ Those who could not access the black market had to make do with what they had, which consisted of very bland food and a very boring diet and was constantly promoted by the Ministry of Food's propaganda. A widow who volunteered at a canteen wrote on February 18, 1941:

I find it hard to tolerate this incessant nagging,... those pompous official lectures from Lord Woolton - whose utterances, far from encouraging us to endure our monotonous and restricted diets with good grace, infuriate us and are anything but conducive to the maintenance of good morale. If carrots and potatoes are the only things we can get to eat, all right we'll eat them; but it really is *too much* to be lectured all the time about the excellence of carrots and potatoes, and scolded for not having eaten more of them before...³⁶

Other forms of propaganda came from trying to urge people to help the war effort in any way they could. One way to have children participate was through the creation of the "Cogs," where kids would collect scrap like metal and paper in order to recycle them. Children were rewarded for their efforts by earning badges and were even on the posters promoting the "Cogs,"

³³ Gardiner, *The British Under Attack*, 268.

³⁴ James Fitton, *A clear plate means A clear conscience Don't take more than you can eat*, ca. Second World War, paper on lithograph, 741 mm x 489 mm., Imperial War Museums, London, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/9300>, accessed 22 Jan. 2020.

³⁵ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

stating that “Boys and Girls can play their part in the great salvage drive. Join the ‘Cogs’ and earn this badge.”³⁷ This campaign also tied in to Britain’s effort to recycle so that certain materials could be used again and to encourage self-sufficiency among the people due to a shortage of new materials. There was even a poster that promoted the recycling of animal bones stating that “Bones are still needed to make glue for housing and fertiliser for food, also for other purposes including soap.”³⁸ The most popular piece of propaganda was part of the cause of saving money and raising funds for the war effort. A cartoon bug called the Squander Bug urged people to “waste money rather than buy war savings certificates.”³⁹ The National Savings Committee formed this campaign and employed reverse psychology to get the public to do the opposite of what the Squander Bug told them to, portraying him as a villain in league with Hitler.

There would be six major raids on London between the months of March and May and a number of lesser raids as well.⁴⁰ The last major air raid and the worst attack that would signify the end of The Blitz occurred on May 11, 1941 due to the Nazis beginning to focus their attention on invading Russia. Many important buildings were bombed and set ablaze such as the Houses of Parliament, St. James Palace, the British Museum and Westminster Abbey. When the attack had reached its end, “5,000 houses were destroyed, meaning that some 12,000 people lost their homes, while nearly 1,500 lost their lives and nearly 2,000 were seriously injured.”⁴¹ That next morning, people gathered in the street to look at the damage; having become desensitized to the damage that the air raids wrought. A newspaper, the *Daily Express*, said “But the day being

³⁷ *LOOK WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR SALVAGE - JOIN THE 'COGS'*, ca. Second World War, paper on lithograph, 380 mm. x 251mm., Imperial War Museums, London, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/32242>, accessed 22 Jan, 2020.

³⁸ Dorrit Dekk, *Bones Are Still Needed*, ca. Second World War, paper on lithograph, 762 mm. x 508 mm., Imperial War Museums, London, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/7370>, accessed 22 Jan 2020.

³⁹ “Meet The Squander Bug,” Imperial War Museums, accessed November 16, 2019, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/meet-the-squander-bug>

⁴⁰ Gardiner, *Wartime Britain*, 428.

⁴¹ Gardiner, *Wartime Britain* 434.

Sunday and a day of rest, thousands of people had nothing to do. So they came in droves to look at the seared ruins, to block the streets,...to gawk at the weary, blistered firemen, to fill the roads with their cars, to hamper the police, to stare at the grimy, half-clad homeless. It was a day out.”⁴² In its entirety, The Blitz caused over 43,000 deaths around Britain and it is estimated that 71,000 were severely injured.

Aftermath

Although The Blitz had come to an end, its effects still lingered in the rubble and debris of the air raids and in the people of Britain. Some were now left homeless with all of their valuables gone, while others bore physical and mental scars from having lived with the constant fear of planes, bombs, fires, and the possibility of death and loss. These people had to rebuild their lives and essentially start over again, relearning how to behave and act without the threat of bombs falling from the sky. This adjustment would be harder than one might think due to the fact that they were still in the middle of a war and would be for four more years. There was always a possibility that the bombers could come back and that this was merely a respite before the next hit. All in all, The Blitz had altered Britain and its people with its consequences remaining for years to come.

Many houses were damaged or destroyed during The Blitz; those who were of the lower classes had nowhere to go and very few, if any, belongings to speak of. Others, whose homes had remained intact, were now living among the wreckage of their neighborhoods, which had been laid to waste by the Germans. The newly homeless took up shelter in abandoned houses that were still standing, despite the fact that these buildings were considered dangerous and were condemned.⁴³ Joanna Roberts, a resident of the East End, recalls how her family lived after their

⁴² Bell, *London Was Ours*, 35.

⁴³ Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep*, 389.

home had been destroyed; “We found another home in Cordelia Street, which had a very posh name, it was a street that hadn’t...well, it had been knocked about a bit. One side of it had gone, but the other side wasn’t too bad. So we moved in one of them. And we stayed there until we got a notice from the borough that they was all going to be demolished.”⁴⁴ No matter the damage, if a house was still standing then a family without a home would move into it; usually having no other option when it came to living elsewhere.

Stories of people who lived through The Blitz. often tell of courage and unity in the face of danger. We hear more about their bravery, but less about their fear. As was mentioned previously, fear was not something that was spoken about, but was still present as it manifested in physical symptoms on Britons’ bodies and took a toll on them mentally. When it came to the people’s mental health, there was little in the way of psychiatric help. Author Amy Helen Bell states in her article “Landscapes of Fear:”

Once the bombing raids began in 1940, applications to psychoanalytic clinics increased, but there were not enough resources for the rise in demand. There were few or no trained mental health personnel at hospitals or at first aid and shelter posts, and any psychological casualties soon drifted unobserved back into the general population. For clinical purposes, beyond the data from individual case notes, the effects of wartime fears on Londoners went unobserved by professional psychologists.⁴⁵

Due to the lack of help during the war, it could be said that there was also very little help after the war. This issue was confirmed by a woman named Violet Kentsbeer who worked in nursing. In an interview, she recalled, “Nearly every family was affected in some way or other. If they didn’t have someone in the forces, they had people being injured and killed at home - there was hardly any families that weren’t involved in some way or another. There was no counselling

⁴⁴ Ibid, 389.

⁴⁵ Bell, “Landscapes of Fear,” 166-67.

- you just had to get on with it.”⁴⁶ People would try to keep themselves from crying or expressing other signs of fear so as not to appear weak in front of others - therefore they would put on a brave face even though on the inside they were wracked with anxiety or depression.⁴⁷ The people would continue to put on a brave face throughout the remainder of the war and it is this image of neutrality in the face of danger that lives on in the history of The Blitz as well as in the minds of generations to come.

Rationing at the time was still in full effect with people continuing to be given smaller amounts of food as well as having to grow their own. On the “Second World War Posters” page of the Imperial War Museums website, it states that “By 1943, there were over 1.4 million allotments, producing over a million tons of vegetables that year.”⁴⁸ Not only was food still being rationed out, but clothes were as well. In June 1941, the government introduced clothes rationing to make sure that all materials were not going to waste, encouraging the population to mend and repair the clothes that they already owned and to simply make do with what they had. Propaganda posters were still popular tools to use in order to make people contribute to the war effort and as a way to try and boost morale. One such poster read, “Go through your wardrobe, make-do and mend,” with the image of a woman holding tattered clothing and going through her wardrobe.⁴⁹ Like food rations, people were given coupons with everyone throughout Britain being given 66 coupons per year to use with every article of clothing given a points value according to how much it cost to produce it.⁵⁰ They were also encouraged to continue to recycle.

⁴⁶ Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep*, 341.

⁴⁷ Bell, “Landscapes of Fear,” 164-65.

⁴⁸ “Second World War Posters,” Imperial War Museums, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/second-world-war-posters>

⁴⁹ Donia Nachshen, *Go Through Your Wardrobe - Make-do and Mend*, ca. Second World War, Imperial War Museums, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/19999>

⁵⁰ Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 247.

A 1943 poster persuades people to donate any old rags or fabric material they have so that they might be used to help the British soldiers by serving as blankets and uniforms. The poster depicts a man with a person who is made out of rags and says “Still more rags wanted for salvage.”⁵¹

The civilians of Britain kept up their duty of recycling most, if not all, of the materials they had whether they wanted to or not and also began to see shortages of certain things, from alarm clocks to bedding, furniture and kitchen supplies. “By early 1942 even the Board of Trade was admitting that ‘shortages of commodities of a practical and non-luxury type were likely to be causing the public considerable inconvenience and difficulty,’ This was an understatement.”⁵²

As long as the war continued, the chance of being attacked remained no matter how much people had already experienced and survived.. This proved to be true when Britain was once again hit by the Germans in 1944. Instead of seeing planes and bombs falling from the sky, London was hit by Hitler’s new weapons: the V-1 and V-2 rockets which were not deployed by an airplane, but rather a ramp. These rockets were referred to as ‘doodlebugs.’⁵³ The bombings began in January and would continue sporadically up to the end of the war in 1945. These rockets were seen as more dangerous as they could not be seen; only the explosion and the damage that was caused provided evidence of the V-1 and V-2 rockets. By this time, the people of Britain had become so used to the possibility of being attacked that Jean Cunningham, who resided in Whitechapel, London, said:

When the rockets used to come over, they just went bang; nobody knew what was happening - it was just a large explosion and you’d think, Where’s that gone?, that type of thing. You got to a stage where you thought, Oh well, if it’s going to happen, it’s going to happen, and you didn’t really think about it. You got on with your life. You went to girl guides, saw a few friends, you just carried on with your life.⁵⁴

⁵¹ John M. Gilroy, *Still More Rags Wanted For Salvage*, ca. Second World War, Imperial War Museums, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/10755>

⁵² Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 260.

⁵³ Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep*, 356.

⁵⁴ Salisbury, *The War on Our Doorstep*, 360.

Some could interpret this reaction as showing spirit and defiance, when in actuality, the people have just become numb to these attacks and to the ever-present anxiety in their lives.

Analysis

The overall morale of the people is usually shown through the reactions and signs that the civilians of Britain have demonstrated. We have seen that the people did in fact feel fear and anxiety due to the air raids and the threat of losing their homes or their lives, but this fear was kept in check by displaying a brave face in public so as not to appear weak in front of others. Certain situations during The Blitz, such as evacuations or needing to shelter from the bombs, also determined morale based on what their experiences were like, as some children were placed with loving families while others were placed in more abusive homes. However, there are two factors that should not be overlooked when exploring morale during The Blitz: social class and gender. Depending on what class you were a part of, where you resided, and whether you were a man or a woman, these people each had a different experience of The Blitz and this contributed to their morale positively or negatively.

In the 1940's there was a clear distinction between the social classes, including the elite upper class, the middle class, and the lower working class. The social classes played a large role in how people managed to cope during The Blitz. When the air raids began in September 1940, one would think that everyone was going through the same ordeal when it came to destruction of property and having to shelter from bombs, when in actuality it all depended on where people lived and what their social standing was. The primary goal of the air raids was to target and destroy industrial sites, like factories and dockyards, which is where the working class resided. Not only did they receive the brunt of the damage, they were also often rendered homeless and

had no choice but to stay put due to lack of resources to relocate. Or, they were left with staying in a shelter in the Underground or the public shelter as their only option.⁵⁵ The middle class usually had their own Anderson shelters or sturdy homes to stay in, but if they did lose their homes, they usually found themselves in a similar situation as the working class.⁵⁶ The difference in treatment really becomes apparent for the upper class. If someone of the upper class were to lose their home or they had to shelter, they were sent to stay in luxury hotels, clubs, and restaurants due to their ability to afford it.⁵⁷ These places offered a better quality of food, no rations, no blackouts, and better protection from raids. The division of the social classes had never been more clear and the resentment of the lower classes towards the upper classes was obvious. One such example is seen in the interaction between a man named Charles Graves and his wife, Jane Gorden, who were dining at the Grosvenor Hotel and a waiter as recounted in Bell's book *London Was Ours*:

Graves saw Lady Eleanor Smith, and asked the waiter to take over a note to her: As the man looked rather vacant he added, 'Do you know what she looks like?' 'No,' said the waiter, 'and I don't give a damn...' 'Are you usually so outspoken with the guests?' asked Charles with great interest. 'No, but my house was bombed last night and I have lost everything.' Charles said: 'I am very sorry - it must be awful for you; now if you can bring yourself to it, I would still like you to take that note for me.'⁵⁸

While morale and support was spread within the boundaries of the social classes, it usually did not spread out of those boundaries to other classes. Although the social classes were able to see each other more clearly because of The Blitz due to everyone being affected by the damage of the bombs, it did nothing to alter or bring down those social boundaries.

⁵⁵ Gardiner, *The British Under Attack*, 368.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁵⁷ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 63.

⁵⁸ Bell, *London Was Ours*, 68.

In terms of gender, the war and, more specifically, The Blitz, brought big changes for women. Women were allowed to take on the work that had in the past been reserved strictly for men as many men were off serving their country in the war. This situation did not, however, change the way that women were treated in society, as well as the men who were left behind. Men were not offered the same protections as women during the air raids. They were told not to shelter in the Underground so that there would be more room for women and children. On September 30, 1940, The *Daily Express* recorded a man who remarked, “I see the underground now has notices appealing to able-bodied men to stop away from tubes...Are able-bodied men less likely to be killed if a bomb hits them?...It would have been more honest to put a notice ‘His Majesty’s Government through incompetence, inefficiency, and selfishness have been quite unable to provide shelters. Please get killed quietly.’”⁵⁹ When it came to availability of goods, the roles were reversed as women were told they had to give up things such as sugar or tobacco, so there would be more for the men. A working-class woman, May Rainer, ordered “two teas, one with sugar and one without: The man came to the table with the tray, said ‘no sugar I bet that is for the Lady.’ Obviously he had gotten used to the idea that the women were the ones who went without.”⁶⁰ During wartime, ideas of gender were taken to an extreme with women being seen as lesser so they could live off of less, while men were seen as hyper masculine and not needing the same protections as women and children. Even though the divide had been somewhat altered by letting women into the wartime workforce, the boundaries between the genders were still firmly held in place.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

Conclusion

The “Blitz Spirit” was meant to convey the positive and courageous morale of the British people as they braved the Nazi air raids and the bombs that rained down on them. It expresses how the people all came together to help and support one another during these trying times and together they evoked a sense of British pride and nationalism for their country. This paper proposes that this “Blitz Spirit” and the positive morale that it implies was mostly fiction and that morale among the people was negative, overall.

Most histories argue that the British people maintained positive morale by showing the British people not being deterred by the bombs and that they continued to go on with their lives. In actuality, these people had to suppress their fear because they were worried about criticism from others and there was really nothing else to do but to keep living their lives. Society did not stop because of the bombs; people still needed to go to work and things needed to be repaired in order to continue working. However, just because people continued to work and attend school did not mean that daily life was not disrupted. Education during The Blitz dissolved with hardly any school work being done due to the necessity of children having to hunker down in shelters, or not attend school at all because they were needed at home or they were evacuated to the countryside. Bombs destroyed homes, causing many to resort to living in shelters or to become squatters in vacant buildings.

When it came to people coming together to help one another, this mainly occurred between people in the same social classes. Helping others usually did not cross social lines and these social lines were quite evident during The Blitz. While all the social classes experienced loss or were affected by The Blitz in some way or another, they dealt with that loss differently. The upper class could shelter in hotels and clubs with less rationing of food and supplies.

Meanwhile, the lower and middle classes had to make due in the Underground Tube stations, public shelters, or in Anderson shelters in their gardens with rationing of food and supplies being quite scarce.

While we often think of history in terms of military losses or accomplishments, it is important to truly consider the impact on people who were not necessarily fighting in the war, but who were surviving the effects of it in their daily life. The impact of propaganda and the image a country wants to portray of strength is important, but propaganda and real life experiences do not often resemble one another. The idea of there being positive morale among the British people was merely a result of propaganda, which the government promoted and the people had no choice but to adopt in order to carry on with their lives. When we look back at the history of “The Blitz” from a broad perspective, we tend to hear about how the British civilians were able to pick themselves up and carry on throughout the many bombings, demonstrating to the world how they were brave and fearless people, proud to be citizens of a great country such as Britain.

Today, the events of The Blitz evoke a deep sense of nationalism and patriotism for Britain. If one were to always look at history from a general perspective and not look deeper, many events in history would be seen as being positive. This is true in the United States, as well. In the past, we were taught as young children that Columbus discovered America and this was a positive thing because he paved the way for the founding of our great country. When we look closer, however, we discover that Columbus was not a heroic figure. Instead, he enslaved and mistreated the indigenous people that already lived in the Americas. The same can be said for the events of The Blitz and the morale of the British people. One tends to overlook the negatives and instead focus on the positive because it is the positive aspects that make a country look strong. It

was in the interest of the British government to promote this myth, especially after the end of the war, when civilian life remained difficult as the nation slowly recovered from the devastating effects the war had on the British economy and society. Over time, the negative aspects became buried or forgotten, but they remain important, nonetheless, because they convey details that are essential to understanding how life really was during this time in Britain. Learning about The Blitz from the actual people who lived through it, and reading about their day-to-day experiences leaves a mix of positive and negative feelings, with the scale tipping slightly more in the negative direction. Only when we attempt to visualize the threat of air raids, and the chaos it created through the accounts of the people who lived through The Blitz, can we begin to understand what wartime was really like for the people of Britain.

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