

## 'Bomb back, and bomb hard': debating reprisals during the Blitz\*

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Abstract: In Britain, popular memory of the Blitz celebrates civilian resistance to the German bombing of London and other cities, emphasizing positive values such as stoicism, humour and mutual aid. But the memory of such passive and defensive traits obscures the degree to which British civilian morale in 1940 depended on the belief that if Britain had to "take it", then Germany was taking it as hard or harder. Contrary to the received historical account, opinion polls, Home Intelligence reports and newspaper letter columns show that a majority of the British supported the reprisal bombing of German civilians by Bomber Command. The wartime reprisals debate was the logical legacy of prewar assumptions about the overwhelming power of bombing; but it has been forgotten because it contradicts the myth of the Blitz.

When Coventry was blitzed by the Luftwaffe on the night of 14 November 1940, the *Daily Express* quickly sent Hilde Marchant, one of its most experienced war correspondents, to the scene. "The shopping centre of Coventry", she reported, "is one choking mass of ruins, fire, and people who, by some miracle, have emerged alive". After praising the resilience of the survivors and the bravery of the rescue workers, Marchant concluded that **"It is time now for our deepest, most inspired anger. The whole of Coventry cries: 'BOMB BACK, AND BOMB HARD.'"**<sup>1</sup>

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\* Mass-Observation material is quoted by permission of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

1. *Daily Express*, 16 November 1940, pp. 1, 6; emphasis in original. A later account by Marchant of her experiences in Coventry makes no mention of reprisals: Hilde Marchant, *Women and Children Last: A Woman Reporter's Account of the Battle of Britain* (London, 1941), pp. 128-42.

A competing narrative was available, however, one in which the people of Coventry did not desire reprisals on Germany in revenge for their own suffering. Anthropologist Tom Harrisson had also been in Coventry after the raid, where he and a small team of Mass-Observation investigators studied morale for the Ministry of Information. Speaking on the BBC's Home Service two days later, he reported that morale there was quite good, considering: people "felt pretty helpless, but no longer hopeless". However, he also noted that "some reporters" had claimed that "Coventry is clamouring for reprisals. That wasn't borne [sic] out by my own observations". The Germans, Harrisson explained, had declared that the raid on Coventry was itself a reprisal for Royal Air Force (RAF) attacks on German cities, which "only makes Coventry realise that this sort of thing doesn't end the war and only makes it more bitter".<sup>2</sup>

These very different views about reprisals were just two of many which appeared in the British media during the Blitz, between late summer 1940 and the spring of 1941. An extensive debate was carried out in opinion and correspondence columns on the question of whether the RAF should bomb German cities in reprisal for the Luftwaffe's attacks on London, Coventry and elsewhere. However, it is Harrisson's viewpoint – that the British people as a whole did not want reprisals and those who did were not those who had been bombed – which has come to dominate the historiographical consensus on the actual extent of public support for reprisals.<sup>3</sup>

As will be shown, the problem with the present consensus on the reprisal debate is two-fold. Firstly, the heavy emphasis on the opinions of the minority of people who had been bombed marginalises the opinions of the majority of the population who had not. Secondly, the ambiguous language used by Harrisson and others obscures the fact that support for reprisals was strong even in blitzed areas, and across Britain was probably in a slight majority. Of recent writers, only Mark Connelly has come close to recognising this.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Mass-Observation Archive [MOA], FR 497, transcript of BBC Home Service broadcast, 16 November 1940, p. 2.

3. See, for example, Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London, 1992 [1969]), p. 229; John Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London, 2006), pp. 116-7; Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (London, 2010), pp. 372-3. See also Tom Harrisson, *Living Through the Blitz* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 314-6, 369.

4. Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A New History of Bomber Command in World War II* (London and New York, 2001), p. 49; Mark Connelly, "The British people, the press, and the strategic air campaign against Germany", *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 16 (2002), pp. 39-68.

The wartime debate about reprisals can only be understood within the context of the public understanding of the nature of airpower during the Blitz, when ideas about the apocalyptic effects of aerial bombardment inherited from the interwar years were modified by the less spectacular reality of total air war. The initial fears that Britain would suffer a knock-out blow from the air were replaced by hopes that the RAF could instead deliver its own against Germany. But there were also competing anxieties over whether in so doing Britain should discard its declared ethical restraints against bombing civilians. The reprisals debate reveals a public conflicted by, yet ultimately willing to accept, the need to wage total war. It also reveals how easily this wartime pragmatism was forgotten when peace returned.<sup>5</sup>

During the Blitz the word "reprisals" was most commonly used in the British press to refer to the deliberate and indiscriminate bombing of German civilians in retaliation for the Luftwaffe's bombing of British ones.<sup>6</sup> This understanding was roughly in accord with its definition in international law. According to A. L. Goodhart, professor of jurisprudence at Oxford University, in a pamphlet published at the end of 1940:

The essence of reprisals is that if one belligerent deliberately violates the accepted rules of warfare then the other belligerent, for the sake of protecting himself, may resort by way of retaliation to measures which, in ordinary circumstances, would be illegal.<sup>7</sup>

Bombing urban areas was not specifically prohibited under international law during the Second World War; however, reprisals apart it was legal only if they also contained military objectives.<sup>8</sup> Attacking civilians for strategic gain or for mere revenge, by contrast, would not be legitimate. These fine distinctions were apt to be lost in popular discourse.

The public debate about reprisals fluctuated in intensity but was most heated in September and October 1940, the first two months of the Blitz. While newspaper editors and columnists played their part, ordinary members of the public made up their own minds and, sometimes at least, spoke for themselves. Participants tended to concern themselves with one of two questions: *would reprisals be ethical?* or *would reprisals be effective?* The framing of

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5. Cf. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, chapter 7.

6. On the Blitz, see generally John Ray, *The Night Blitz, 1940-1941* (London, 1998); Gardiner, *The Blitz*.

7. A. L. Goodhart, *What Acts of War are Justifiable?* (Oxford, 1941), p. 25.

8. J. M. Spaight, "Air bombardment", *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 144 (September 1938), pp. 304-11; Amanda Alexander, "The genesis of the civilian", *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Vol. 20 (2007), pp. 359-76.

the debate in this way shows that the letter writing public disagreed over the question of whether the British way in war was compatible with the pursuit of victory at all costs.

On the whole, the debate hinged on the question of effectiveness: naturally enough, for if reprisals did not have some practical effect then the whole discussion was pointless. Many hoped that bombing German cities would directly deter the bombing of British ones. As one reader wrote to the *Daily Mail* from the Isle of Ely after London had endured more than two weeks of heavy air raids: "there is no doubt that reprisals are at present the only method of stopping the ruthless bombing of our civilians".<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a writer from Scarborough feared that the Blitz might create "a state of disorganisation beyond the power even of our heroic Defence Services to cope with". He suggested that the RAF scatter bombs "all over Berlin, irrespective of military objectives [...] until these attacks on London cease".<sup>10</sup>

An extension of this argument suggested that reprisal bombing could actually win the war for Britain. This was based largely on beliefs about German national character.<sup>11</sup> For Denis Lyell, a noted big-game hunter, "British sportsmanship" was holding the RAF back from a rational strategy. As the German people "idolise power", he wrote, they needed to be shown Britain's: bombing them as they had bombed Warsaw and Rotterdam would likely lead to "red revolution in Germany".<sup>12</sup> Conversely, another common argument for reprisals rested on perceptions of British morale. One resident of Edinburgh wondered whether Londoners could "go on taking it indefinitely without a blow being struck in kind?"<sup>13</sup>

Not everyone accepted that reprisals would be beneficial for the British war effort. Many held that bombs dropped on non-military objectives were wasted. One Finsbury Park man wrote to the *Daily Mail* to ask those in favour of "indiscriminate bombing of Berlin" whether it made more sense to drop a bomb on a house, destroying it and killing its occupants, or "on an aerodrome with the prospect of demolishing a dozen Nazi 'planes which would otherwise be used to invade London?"<sup>14</sup> For Gavin Henderson of Glasgow it was simple: "Indiscriminate bombing is bad bombing [...] Why should we bomb badly when we can bomb well?"<sup>15</sup>

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9. *Daily Mail*, 24 September 1940, p. 3.

10. *Yorkshire Post*, 20 September 1940, p. 2.

11. Cf. Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War*, chapter 5.

12. *Scotsman*, 5 September 1940, p. 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 24 September 1940, p. 7.

14. *Daily Mail*, 26 September 1940, p. 3.

15. *Glasgow Herald*, 26 October 1940, p. 2.

Assumptions about the nature of German society were also used to argue against reprisals. It was said that political terror made aerial terror impossible, if not redundant: "A civilian revolt in Germany would have little effect, thanks to the Gestapo".<sup>16</sup> Others suggested that bombing German civilians would simply alienate the "millions of anti-Nazis, at present held down by the Gestapo, who are waiting for the opportune moment to rise against their oppressors".<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly few seem to have thought, as Robert Allen of Llandudno did, that since the British were evidently standing up to aerial bombardment their enemies probably could too.<sup>18</sup>

The effect of bombing civilians on international opinion was also canvassed: one Finchley man worried that reprisals would "do much to check the sympathy and admiration" growing in Britain's favour "in occupied and neutral countries, and especially in the United States".<sup>19</sup> Finally, writers sometimes expressed fears that the Luftwaffe had not yet used its full strength, and that reprisals would therefore only lead to worse suffering. An Edinburgh correspondent pointed out that Germany already claimed that it was bombing London as a reprisal for the RAF's own attacks: "That being so [...] the Germans would welcome the excuse for worse things, if possible", perhaps even poison gas.<sup>20</sup>

As might be expected, the ethical question provoked the most heated commentary. Many of those who urged that no reprisals be carried out did so from an explicitly Christian point of view. A Methodist minister from Leeds, for example, lamented the attitude of those who acted like "we can we put on or put off our religion like an old coat":

Either the Christian way of life is valid for all circumstances and in face of every evil, or it is a delusion. If we put mercy, justice, decency, humanity and chivalry aside for the duration, they will not so easily be practised when the war is over.<sup>21</sup>

Less explicitly religious arguments against reprisals were also aired. F. W. Stokoe, a specialist in German literature, claimed that "If we deliberately set ourselves the task of slaughtering the greatest possible number of civilians we reduce ourselves to the moral level of Nazi Germany [...] It would poison our minds with shame, and the minds of our enemies

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16. *Scotsman*, 25 September 1940, p. 9.

17. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1940, p. 7.

18. *Manchester Guardian*, 18 October 1940, p. 10. "Moral" was an alternative, somewhat archaic spelling of "morale".

19. *Manchester Guardian*, 31 October 1940, p. 10.

20. *Scotsman*, 25 September 1940, p. 9. Cf. Harrison's BBC broadcast quoted above.

21. *Yorkshire Post*, 9 October 1940, p. 2.

with inextinguishable hatred".<sup>22</sup> For C. S. R. of Bradford, "nothing ever justifies crime, and to use military weapons against women and children (whether British or German) remains in all circumstances a crime of the first magnitude".<sup>23</sup>

But ethical arguments could also be made in favour of reprisals. The Old Testament principle of "an eye for an eye" was often invoked, implicitly or explicitly.<sup>24</sup> A writer from York asked the editor of the *Daily Mail* "If Saul was God's instrument for reprisals and vengeance [against the Amalekites], is it not presumable that this country is His instrument for the infinitely greater wickedness of Hitler and Mussolini?"<sup>25</sup> C. H. Burden, also from Yorkshire, believed that if "the German people are ardently supporting Hitler [...] then it is quite fair for them to receive what they are giving us".<sup>26</sup> It was also common to argue that too much was at stake to let ethical considerations stand in the way of winning the war: "If ever there was a case of the end justifying the means, surely it is now, when the freedom of mankind is threatened. We must win this war by any means in our power".<sup>27</sup> Similarly, notions of total war were deployed in support of reprisals. For H. A. Wilson of Staffordshire, "German tactics and strategy are fully up to date", and hence Britain should have no compunction about emulating them even if this meant adopting indiscriminate bombing.<sup>28</sup> Rosa Keoghoe of Wood Green in north London asked "Why all this tender feeling for German children? [...] This is war, and we are all in it".<sup>29</sup>

Why was there a debate about reprisals at all? To answer this question we must examine the bomber war as it was fought in the early years of the Second World War and, more importantly, how the British public believed it was fought. At first there was very little strategic bombing carried out by either side. Although it engaged in shattering attacks on Warsaw and Rotterdam in support of the Wehrmacht ground offensives, the Luftwaffe's own independent attacks on Britain were initially hesitant, with only scattered raids before the middle of 1940, none of them of any magnitude.<sup>30</sup> It was only in August 1940, during what Winston Churchill had dubbed the "Battle of Britain", that the British people began to

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22. *The Times*, 17 September 1940, p. 5.

23. *Yorkshire Post*, 25 September 1940, p. 3.

24. E.g., *ibid.*, 26 September 1940, p. 2.

25. *Daily Mail*, 26 September 1940, p. 3.

26. *Yorkshire Post*, 25 September 1940, p. 3.

27. *Manchester Guardian*, 5 November 1940, p. 10.

28. *The Times*, 20 September 1940, p. 5.

29. *Daily Mail*, 2 October 1940, p. 3.

30. Lee Kennett, *A History of Strategic Bombing* (New York, 1982), pp. 105-15.

experience bombing on a large scale. At first the Luftwaffe struck RAF airfields, aircraft factories and radar stations. But bombs fell increasingly closer to and then within populated areas, with London suffering occasional small raids in the latter half of August. Then on 7 September Hitler unleashed the Luftwaffe's full might on the docks and slums of the East End, an attack which killed over 400 people: the beginning of the Blitz proper.<sup>31</sup> London was bombed nightly for nearly two months; the Luftwaffe then began to raid the provinces, starting with Coventry on 14 November. A relative lull in the winter was punctured by the occasional fierce raid, such as that on the City of London on 29 December.<sup>32</sup> More regular raiding resumed in March 1941. By the time the Blitz ended in May more than 43,000 British civilians were dead, with another 71,000 seriously injured.<sup>33</sup>

The Luftwaffe's night bombing was difficult to defend against. Fighter Command's sophisticated air defence organisation, which had been so effective against massed daylight raids during the Battle of Britain, was almost useless at night thanks to difficulties in developing airborne-interception radar.<sup>34</sup> While Air Ministry spokesmen sometimes hinted that some defence against the night bomber would be found, it was above all Bomber Command's role in attacking and weakening the German war machine which both the government and the press held out as the main hope of ending the Blitz.<sup>35</sup>

In order to minimise the chance of killing civilians (and hence of provoking German reprisals), during the early months of the war the RAF had refrained from bombing targets in Germany with anything other than propaganda leaflets. The only exceptions were easily identifiable naval bases on the coast of the North Sea, beginning with a highly-publicised, but ineffectual daylight raid on Wilhelmshaven on 4 September 1939.<sup>36</sup> It was not until the German offensive in the West began in May 1940 that Churchill, newly installed as prime minister, allowed the RAF to begin raiding inside Germany.<sup>37</sup> But although Bomber

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31. Peter Stansky, *The First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940* (New Haven and London, 2007).

32. M. J. Gaskin, *Blitz: The Story of 29th December 1940* (London, 2005).

33. Gardiner, *The Blitz*, pp. 359-60.

34. Ray, *The Night Blitz*, pp. 112-9; David Zimmerman, *Britain's Shield: Radar and the Defeat of the Luftwaffe* (Stroud, 2001), pp. 211-24.

35. E.g., *Daily Express*, 1 October 1940, p. 1.

36. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp. 16-7; Robin Neillands, *The Bomber War: Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-1945* (London, 2001), pp. 35-7.

37. John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War, 1939-1945* (Ware, 1997 [1985]), pp. 137-47; H. W. Koch, "The strategic air offensive against Germany: the early phase, May-September 1940", *Historical Journal*, Vol. 34 (1991), pp. 117-34.

Command was now attacking German cities, it was still only targeting strictly military objectives within them. Any resulting civilian casualties were therefore incidental. Indeed, on several occasions during the Blitz the air minister, Sir Archibald Sinclair, stated publicly that the RAF would not engage in bombing civilians. His reasoning was that the only way to offset the bigger German bomber force was "by clever fighting -- by landing our blows where they hurt and weaken him most", that is by concentrating on targets of military and industrial importance such as power stations, munitions factories, and railway stations: "Supposing we spilt our bombs out indiscriminately on the houses of the German civilians – how would that protect our own? That slogging match might go on for months, merely spreading misery in both countries".<sup>38</sup>

Senior RAF officers backed Sinclair's viewpoint in newspaper interviews and BBC broadcasts.<sup>39</sup> While Churchill also supported this strategy, he was sometimes wont to blur the distinction between bombing civilians and bombing factories: in one speech in the House of Commons he even suggested that Bomber Command's attacks were already "very like" reprisals.<sup>40</sup> In practice, however, only two RAF raids in the Blitz period can be described as reprisals per Goodhart's definition: that on Berlin on 25 August, which was ordered by Churchill in retaliation for the (unintentional) German bombing of London the previous night; and that on Mannheim on 16 December, which was ordered by Cabinet as "retaliation in kind".<sup>41</sup> These were very much exceptions to the rule, and even in these cases the government did not publicly describe them as reprisals, holding to the line that German civilians and cities were not targets in and of themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Air Ministry communiqués strongly conveyed the message that Bomber Command's objectives were military only. They just as strongly suggested that British raids were doing very heavy damage to Germany's war-making capacity, and this impression was amplified by the press. A map provided by the Ministry of Information a month into the Blitz, for example, was published widely in the press: using bomb-shaped symbols, it showed the many and

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38. *Manchester Guardian*, 19 September 1940, p. 2.

39. E.g. *Listener*, 10 October 1940, pp. 522-3; *Scotsman*, 22 October 1940, p. 5.

40. Winston Churchill, MP, (House of Commons Debates, 8 October 1940), Vol. 365, Col. 292; *The Times*, 9 October 1940, p. 2.

41. The National Archives [TNA], CAB 65/16/12, "Air policy – Operation Abigail", 12 December 1940, p. 1; Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp. 32, 35.

42. TNA, CAB 65/16/12, p. 5; Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, Boston and Sydney, 1979), pp. 159-66; Connelly, "The British people, the press, and the strategic air campaign against Germany", pp. 52-3.

varied targets which had so far been attacked in Germany.<sup>43</sup> According to the *Daily Mail* the map proved "that the web of destruction woven night after night by our bombers is clogging Hitler's great industrial and war machine"; the *Scotsman* was so impressed that it asked why the bomber offensive hadn't been started earlier.<sup>44</sup> British attacks on Germany were also believed to be accurate: "Our bombers find their military objectives in German in the dark with precision", as H. A. Brittain of Norwich put it.<sup>45</sup> Time and again, newspaper editors and letter writers alike assumed, even if only implicitly, that what Bomber Command chose to attack, it hit.<sup>46</sup>

This image of powerful air raids disrupting Germany's ability to wage to war was almost universally accepted in Britain. But it was completely false. Despite courageous efforts and considerable losses by its aircrew, Bomber Command's capabilities at this point in the war were quite feeble, as was the damage it inflicted on Germany. Throughout the period June-October 1940 it was able to drop only 6000 tons of bombs on enemy targets, not all of which were in Germany; this figure nearly doubled in March-July 1941. By contrast, during the eight months of the Blitz the Luftwaffe dropped around 41,000 tons of bombs on Britain, a rate Bomber Command was unable to match until early 1943.<sup>47</sup>

Much more important than the sheer weight of bombs dropped, however, was where they were dropped. Despite intensive pre-war training, the dead-reckoning and celestial navigational techniques used by British aircrew proved inaccurate, and the methods used for identifying and marking targets were largely ineffective. Intelligence on the effects of raids was also lacking.<sup>48</sup> The consequence, as revealed to the War Cabinet by the Butt Report in July 1941, was that even of those bombers whose crews claimed they had reached and bombed their objective, only one in three dropped their bombs within five miles of the target. In other words, most bombs were probably falling in open countryside. This was not

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43. E.g. *Daily Mail*, 7 October 1940, p. 6. This map was also reproduced as a propaganda poster, though its distribution in this form appears to have been poor: MOA, TC London Survey, 5/E, West End, 15 October 1940.

44. *Daily Mail*, 7 October 1940, p. 6; *Scotsman*, 7 October 1940, p. 4.

45. *The Times*, 4 October 1940, p. 5.

46. E.g. *Daily Express*, 25 September 1940, p. 2.

47. Richard M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950), pp. 555-6; Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book, 1939-1945* (Hersham, 2011 [1996]), pp. 91, 173, 361.

48. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp. 44-6.

precision bombing. The Butt Report forced a rethinking of strategic bombing doctrine, leading in February 1942 to the decision to begin area bombing German cities.<sup>49</sup>

That the supposedly heavy weight of Bomber Command's attacks was almost imperceptible in Germany was unsuspected in Britain.<sup>50</sup> This explains both the existence of the reprisals debate itself and the government's refusal to be diverted by it from precision bombing. To demand, as one Yorkshireman did, that Churchill "order some of the German cities to be wiped out" made sense only if it was believed that the RAF actually had this capability.<sup>51</sup>

The widespread belief that the bomber was a uniquely powerful weapon had its roots in the First World War: German airships and aeroplanes raided London and other cities on more than a hundred separate occasions between 1914 and 1918.<sup>52</sup> The Zeppelins were, eventually, decisively defeated by British air defences; the Gotha bombers, late in the war, were harder to defend against and caused considerable shock and anxiety. Some of the public and press reactions anticipated those of 1940, including demands for the reprisal bombing of German cities.<sup>53</sup> Airpower was however generally seen as ancillary in purpose; retribution or deterrence were the main motivations for reprisals, rather than victory itself.

By the end of the First World War, however, a theory of independent airpower had coalesced from a number of different elements: the astonishing advances in aviation technology during the war; the new importance of mass production and hence a stable home front in sustaining the war effort; and the enormous difficulties armies faced in breaking the

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49. Ibid., pp. 46-7; Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Strategic Air Warfare: The Evolution and Reality of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), pp. 195-7.

50. There is some evidence of damage to German civilian morale from Bomber Command's early attacks, but even so it was not nearly commensurate with the effects reported in the British press. See Roger Moorhouse, *Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital, 1939-45* (London, 2010), pp. 140-6; Koch, "The strategic air offensive against Germany", pp. 138-9.

51. *Daily Mail*, 20 September 1940, p. 3.

52. Joseph Morris, *The German Air Raids on Britain, 1914-1918* (Dallington, 1993 [1925]).

53. Brett Holman, "The Next War in the Air: Civilian Fears of Aerial Bombardment in Britain, 1908-1941" (2009), PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, pp. 278-80; Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (New York, 2012), pp. 50-4; Barry Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule: British Air Strategy 1914-1939* (London, 1976), pp. 81-5.

stalemates induced by trench warfare.<sup>54</sup> Many military experts in Britain and the other great powers began to predict that in the next great war bomber fleets would attack enemy cities at the outbreak of hostilities, possibly using poison gas, but in any event causing enormous destruction. The next war might only last days or weeks, far shorter than the last one; but civilian suffering would be enormous, with casualties in the hundreds of thousands or even millions.<sup>55</sup>

This theory of the knock-out blow from the air, as it was sometimes called, began to suffuse through British culture from the early 1920s, propagated by airpower theorists, peace activists, journalists, novelists and politicians, in newspapers, books, articles, speeches, newsreels and even feature films.<sup>56</sup> Dramatic increases in the capabilities of aircraft throughout the interwar period only made the problem worse: the latest fighters were barely faster than the bombers they were supposed to intercept.<sup>57</sup> Hence the axiom that "the bomber will always get through", as the elder statesman Stanley Baldwin famously proclaimed in 1932, with its corollary that "The only defence is in offence, which means that you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves".<sup>58</sup>

In the later 1930s, horrifying stories of civilians being bombed in wars in Abyssinia, Spain and China increased anxiety in Britain. Early in 1936, the British press reported that the Italian air force was using poison gas against Ethiopian civilians, just as was predicted to happen in Europe in the next war.<sup>59</sup> A 1937 Gaumont newsreel about the bombing of

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54. John H. Morrow, *The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921* (Washington, D.C. and London, 1993); Jon Lawrence, "Public space, political space", in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War* (Cambridge and New York, 2007), Vol. II, pp. 280-312.

55. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, pp. 3-22; Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London, 1980); Holman, "The Next War in the Air".

56. Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule*, chapter 5; Holman, "The Next War in the Air"; Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*; Uri Bialer, "Elite opinion and defence policy: air power advocacy and British rearmament during the 1930s", *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 6 (1980), pp. 32-51; Martin Ceadel, "Popular fiction and the next war, 1918-1939", in Frank Glover, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton, 1980), pp. 161-84.

57. L. E. O. Charlton, G. T. Garrett and R. Fletcher, *The Air Defence of Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1938), p. 44.

58. Stanley Baldwin, MP, (House of Commons Debates, 10 November 1932), Vol. 270, Col. 632.

59. Daniel Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War, 1935-6* (London, 1975), pp. 73-6.

Guernica informed its viewers "This was a city and these were homes, like yours".<sup>60</sup> The following year, a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in support of Chinese victims of Japanese aggression was told that "the air raids in Canton and in Spain are only dress rehearsals for air raids we may expect on London".<sup>61</sup> By the late 1930s the knock-out blow formed part of the consensus view of what the next war was likely to be like: short but devastating, with hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties within days of the outbreak of hostilities. That the British public had learned to fear the bomber was shown by the Sudeten crisis in September 1938, when 150,000 people fled London in anticipation of a German knock-out blow.<sup>62</sup> Official fears were hardly less acute: in 1939, the Health Ministry estimated hospital bed requirements for air-raid casualties at between 1 and 2.8 million.<sup>63</sup>

The RAF was committed to a diluted and reactive form of the knock-out blow theory.<sup>64</sup> This was due to a genuine belief in the potential of bombing to win wars unaided, but also owed something to its usefulness in the early 1920s in securing the future of the RAF as an independent service.<sup>65</sup> While RAF doctrine publicly renounced the targeting of civilians, allowing only for the bombing of military objectives, to some extent this restraint was deceptive: the Air Staff assumed that Germany (from 1934 the presumed enemy) would bomb British civilians at some point, allowing reprisals to be carried out if these were thought strategically advantageous.<sup>66</sup>

In any case, due to financial restrictions the RAF was unable to develop its bomber force in any strength until the rearmament programmes of the later 1930s.<sup>67</sup> Even then, the difficulties caused by rapid expansion and the belated prioritisation of fighter production meant that Bomber Command had only 280 bombers ready for operational use in September

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60. Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1979), p. 159; Robert Stradling, *Your Children Will be Next: Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Cardiff, 2008).

61. *The Times*, 20 June 1938, p. 16.

62. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, p. 31.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

64. Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars* (Oxford, 1984), chapter 2; Scot Robertson, *The Development of RAF Strategic Bombing Doctrine, 1919-1939* (Westport and London, 1995).

65. Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule*; John Robert Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Foreign Policy, 1919-26* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 85.

66. Neville Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power: A History of the British Bomber Force 1923-1939* (London, 1987), p. 141; Smith, *British Air Strategy*, p. 283; Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 17-8.

67. Smith, *British Air Strategy*, pp. 180-91; Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power*, pp. 110-1.

1939; the Luftwaffe had nearly 1200.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Bomber Command's training, doctrine and aircraft were deficient in many aspects, surprisingly so considering the centrality of strategic bombing within the RAF's self-image.<sup>69</sup> These weaknesses led directly to the failure of the British bomber offensive in 1940-1.

The possibility that civilian morale would shatter in the first days of a knock-out blow was a key concern for Mass-Observation and the Ministry of Information, and demands for reprisals could be an early sign of a collapse in confidence in the government's direction of the war.<sup>70</sup> But the question of how popular reprisals really were among the general public – as distinct from people writing for and to newspapers – is difficult to answer. It is in fact impossible to answer precisely, but this does not mean the attempt should not be made.<sup>71</sup> The fragmentary evidence which does exist has been neglected or worse, misunderstood. We need to look at the question anew in order to understand the limits of public opinion on the reprisals issue.

Statistical opinion polling was still in its infancy. Its leading practitioner in Britain was the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) which began work in 1937. The Ministry of Information took an interest in its findings; they were also published by the *News Chronicle* under a pre-war arrangement.<sup>72</sup> Two of BIPO's national polls are relevant here. The first was undertaken in October 1940, asking among other questions: "In view of the indiscriminate German bombing of this country, would you approve or disapprove if the R.A.F. adopted a similar policy of bombing the civilian population of Germany?"<sup>73</sup> Among 2098 respondents, 46 per cent answered "yes" and the same share "no", with 8 per cent

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68. Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945* (London, 1961), Vol. IV, p. 428; James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* (Lawrence, 1997), p. 271.

69. Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power*, pp. 111-8, 137-9; Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Strategic Air Warfare*, pp. 122-3.

70. Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester and New York, 2002), pp. 68-87.

71. Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham and Burlington, 2011); Patrick Kyba, *Covenants Without the Sword: Public Opinion and British Defence Policy, 1931-1935* (Waterloo, 1983); Catherine Krull and B. J. C. McKercher, "The press, public opinion, arms limitation, and government policy in Britain, 1932-34: some preliminary observations", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 13 (2002), pp. 103-36.

72. Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France*, pp. 19-20.

73. Economic and Social Data Service, SN 3331, BIPO #72 (October 1940) <<http://www.esds.ac.uk/doc/3331%5Cmrdoc%5Cascii%5C4010.txt>> (accessed 22 October 2011).

undecided. Although it was not the practice at the time to publish sampling errors, this can be calculated from the sample size to be 2.1 per cent.<sup>74</sup> Attention needs to be paid to BIPO's wording of the question. It speaks of approval or disapproval; it is therefore asking whether the public would *accept* reprisals, not whether they *wanted* them. The question itself was loaded and leading, implying barbarism on the part of the Luftwaffe and inviting the respondent to answer emotionally rather than objectively. The polling methodology was also questionable. Only 46 per cent of interviewees were women, a much lower proportion than expected on demographic grounds, especially in wartime when many men would be serving in the forces and less likely to be available to pollsters.<sup>75</sup> Overall, these flaws might have exaggerated support for reprisals.

But a second poll taken six months later is more reliable. In April 1941, BIPO asked: "Would you approve or disapprove if the R.A.F. adopted a policy of bombing the civilian population of Germany?"<sup>76</sup> This time, out of 2192 interviewees 54 per cent answered "yes"; 37 per cent "no"; and 9 per cent "don't know". With a sampling error again of 2.1 per cent, a clear majority now approved of reprisal bombing. Given the more neutrally-phrased question, and the more realistic gender balance (55 per cent women) we can have greater confidence in this result than the October poll. A geographical breakdown of the April poll is also available (see Table 1).<sup>77</sup>

Region	Approve	Disapprove	Don't know
Inner London	45%	47%	8%
Outer London, south-east England	51%	37%	12%
West Riding of Yorkshire	65%	28%	7%
North Riding of Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmorland	76%	15%	9%
Glasgow, Clydeside	53%	43%	4%

74. All sampling errors have been calculated for a confidence level of 95 per cent.

75. The national census planned for 1941 was not carried out due to the war. However, in both 1931 and 1951 the proportion of females in the adult population (i.e. aged 15 and above) was approximately 53 per cent, so we can assume the figure would have been close to this in 1940 and 1941. Derived from R. C. O. Matthews, C. H. Feinstein and J. C. Odling-Smee, *British Economic Growth, 1856-1973* (Oxford, 1982), p. 562.

76. Economic and Social Data Service, SN 3331, BIPO #77 (April 1941)

<<http://www.esds.ac.uk/doc/3331%5Cmrdoc%5Cascii%5C4104.txt>> (accessed 22 October 2011).

77. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 50.

Midlands	49%	40%	11%
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Table 1: Regional results of BIPO poll question on reprisals, April 1941.

The April 1941 opinion poll results are well-known. However, they have been used in a curious fashion. They were interpreted by the *News Chronicle* to mean that "the people of Britain are in favour of reprisal bombing of Germany", but also "that sentiment in favour of reprisals is almost in inverse ratio to the amount of bombing experienced".<sup>78</sup> Harrison agreed with this interpretation in an article published in the *Cambridge Review* shortly after the end of the Blitz, pointing out that it was in the north-west of England, which had been bombed the least, that support for reprisals was highest. But he also argued that the poll showed that "In Inner London there is a majority *against* reprisals", and his conclusion overall was that "it is clear at once that 'the whole nation' cannot by any means be said to be crying out for reprisals".<sup>79</sup> Harrison repeated these points in his own *Living Through the Blitz*, and they have been accepted by other historians.<sup>80</sup> But they are misleading, at best.

Firstly, the claim that the un-blitzed regions were most in favour of reprisal bombing is true, as far as it goes. That, however, does not mean that the blitzed regions were *against* reprisals. In fact, the BIPO data lead to the opposite conclusion. Reprisals were supported by an overall margin of 54 per cent to 37 per cent, itself a marked result in favour of reprisals. The regions all supported reprisals by margins ranging from 9 per cent to 61 per cent, except in inner London; and even there the result was a statistical dead-heat. Assuming equal sample sizes for each region, the sampling error can be calculated to be about 5.1 per cent, larger than the difference between the "approve" and "disapprove" percentages. Thus we cannot say whether more Londoners approved or disapproved of reprisals, only that opinion was equally divided in a statistical sense. Moreover, despite Harrison's claims to the contrary, several of the polled regions which were in favour of reprisals had actually received heavy blitzes. Glasgow and Clydeside were heavily bombed on the nights of 13 and 14 March 1941, the month before the poll was taken.<sup>81</sup> The Midlands includes Birmingham and Coventry: the former had been blitzed on a number of occasions by April 1941; and as we have seen

78. *News Chronicle*, 2 May 1941; quoted in Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 50.

79. Tom Harrison, "A public demand for reprisals?", *Cambridge Review* (30 May 1941), p. 455; emphasis in original.

80. Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, p. 314; Calder, *The People's War*, p. 229; Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 50; Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War*, pp. 205-6; Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p. 183.

81. John Macleod, *River of Fire: The Clydebank Blitz* (Edinburgh, 2010).

Coventry was hit very hard on the night of 14 November 1940. It suffered again on 8 April 1941, though this may have been after BIPO's polling took place. In any case, the proportions supporting reprisals can hardly be considered low, even in the blitzed towns.

Other evidence for the popular demand for reprisals, admittedly more circumstantial, can be found in the *Daily Mail*. One of Britain's most popular dailies, its readers tended to be older, middle-class, provincial, and politically right of centre.<sup>82</sup> Most letters actually published by the *Mail* on the topic of reprisals were in favour of them, but without knowing anything about the letters' selection process it is impossible to say how representative they are. However, the *Mail* also published a brief analysis of correspondence received as a whole. Reprisals featured constantly in these analyses during the first month of the Blitz proper. On 12 September it reported that "more direct 'reprisals' on Germany [...] is now the biggest subject of the daily post-bag".<sup>83</sup> Six days later, "'Raze Berlin to the ground' is still the principal topic of letters".<sup>84</sup> By 26 September, "Demands for unlimited reprisals on German cities rose to 80 per cent. of all the hundreds of letters received yesterday".<sup>85</sup> At the beginning of October, the *Mail* reported that "Letters demanding ruthless reprisals on Germany still fill three-quarters of the postbag", though there was also now increasing opposition: "30 per cent. of the total correspondence on this subject".<sup>86</sup> Demands for reprisals declined thereafter.

The other kind of evidence for attitudes towards reprisals is effectively anecdotal or localised in nature. Alongside insights gleaned from Mass-Observation, the Ministry of Information used its own resources to assess civilian morale. As early as 27 August 1940, a Home Intelligence report noted that "There is quite a strong demand for retaliation on civilians [although] there is yet no great anger against the Germans".<sup>87</sup> Home Intelligence claimed on 27 September that in Birmingham,

Those who a few weeks ago were not in favour of bombing German towns unless they contained military objectives are now wholeheartedly in favour of reprisals for the wanton attacks on London.<sup>88</sup>

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82. Circulation in 1939 was approximately 1.5 million. Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, 1984), Vol. II, p. 558; Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 505-6.

83. *Daily Mail*, 12 September 1940, p. 3.

84. *Ibid.*, 18 September 1940, p. 3.

85. *Ibid.*, 26 September 1940, p. 3.

86. *Ibid.*, 1 October 1940, p. 3.

87. Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour, May to September 1940* (London, 2010), p. 368.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 457.

Similar sentiments were found in overseas mail intercepted by Britain's censors.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, what of the evidence from Mass-Observation, which Harrison claimed weighed against a popular demand for reprisals? Harrison stressed that the Mass-Observation teams he sent (and often accompanied) to investigate the aftermath of intense raids did not hear "a single person suggest reprisals or anything like them" in Coventry:

That has been our experience, too, in Bristol, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Southampton, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Clydebank, Swansea, Cardiff, at each of which we have collected many hundreds of interviews and thousands of verbatim conversations, without finding a single case of spontaneous reprisal demand from the people actually inhabiting [sic] the heavily blitzed areas.<sup>90</sup>

This is not true, as other Mass-Observation records show. For example, surveys in Stepney in the East End of London, before and after the beginning of heavy raids on 7 September, recorded a number of comments along the lines of "I hope to God Berlin is getting the same", reported on 9 September to be a frequent sentiment.<sup>91</sup> Another of Harrison's own Mass-Observation investigators reported from Clydeside on 24 March 1941 that "Bomb the bastards to Hell" was a "typical comment and typical of [the] attitude" of young men there.<sup>92</sup> Mass-Observation's own summary of support for reprisals across the nation put the levels at 46 per cent in both March and May 1941.<sup>93</sup>

We have seen that during the Blitz the British public likely did support the reprisal bombing of Germany, if only by a small margin. The overall conclusion must be that there was a significant spontaneous demand for reprisals, and an even greater latent support for them.<sup>94</sup> The geographical distribution of this support, strongest where bombing was weakest, can perhaps be seen as an expression of national solidarity, of sympathy for the bombed. Its roots lay in the widespread belief in the power and accuracy of Bomber Command's attacks on Germany. This in turn was a legacy of the prewar public understanding of the bomber as a weapon uniquely capable of winning wars quickly and decisively.

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89. TNA, CAB 66/12/37, E. E. Bridges, "Home Opinion as shown in the Mails to U.S.A. and Eire", 6 October 1940, p. 4.

90. Harrison, "A public demand for reprisals?", p. 454.

91. MOA, TC Air Raids, 9/T, Stepney, 9 September 1940, p. 1.

92. Harrison, "A public demand for reprisals?", p. 454; MOA, TC Air Raids, 8/R, Clydeside, 24 March 1941.

93. MOA, TC Air Raids, 12/A, "Reprisals", 12 March 1942.

94. Harrison himself suggested something similar in 1941: Harrison, "A public demand for reprisals?", p. 455.

Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, infamously complained in 1943 that the BBC was too timid in refusing to describe his bombers as deliberately targeting civilians; the evidence suggests he was right to argue that the public would have welcomed the truth.<sup>95</sup> The postwar repression of the British public's support for reprisals is another matter. After 1945, the importance of the bomber offensive to British morale during the Blitz was lost to popular memory: Bomber Command cannot compete with the wartime "myth of the Blitz" and Fighter Command's dominance of the memory of the air war of 1940.<sup>96</sup> In part this is simply due to peacetime distaste for the brutal acts carried out in a total war. Connelly's caustic explanation for "the British people's increasing unease at the wartime role of Bomber Command" is that

In an act of collective amnesia the British decided to forget that they had dedicated more energy to the prosecution of a bomber war than any other combatant nation. Gradually overtaken by the haunting photographs of Dresden and dozens of other German cities, the shadow of the atomic bomb and official ambivalence to the veterans of the Command and its most vociferous Commander-in-Chief, Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, the British turned their backs on the bomber boys.<sup>97</sup>

This amnesia is aided by the memory of the Blitz. David Edgerton has recently argued for the need to put "the British bomber, rather than the British fighter and the German bomber, in the centre of the picture" of Britain's war. In his view this has become difficult because, among other reasons,

The association of terror bombing with the Nazis, to which the British were to respond on a greater scale, is deep seated. After the war, especially on the left and among liberals, what was seen as the adoption of the Nazi policy of bombing civilians was regarded as a major military as well as moral error.<sup>98</sup>

The centrality of the Blitz in British memories of the war thus permits a studied ignorance of Bomber Command's own area bombing of German cities between 1942 and 1945.<sup>99</sup>

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95. McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, pp. 161-4; Connelly, *Reaching For the Stars*, pp. 115-6.

96. Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991); Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London and New York, 2000); Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004).

97. Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 257.

98. David Edgerton, "England and the Aeroplane revisited", in Katharina Hoffmann, ed., *Myths, Gender and the Military Conquest of Air and Sea* (forthcoming). See also Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 42-3.

99. But see, e.g., Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday 13 February 1945* (London, 2005);

That the support for reprisals for the Blitz has likewise been forgotten suggests another aspect to the memory of the bomber war. The bombing of German civilians was not merely acquiesced in by British civilians: it was desired and demanded. Of crucial importance is the specific form the memory of the Blitz has taken, in the celebration of the "Blitz spirit".<sup>100</sup> Angus Calder has summarised the British character as supposedly revealed (or reiterated) by its stoic endurance under bombing as a series of opposites to perceived German characteristics: for example, friendliness/brutality, patience/aggression, calm/frenzy.<sup>101</sup> But for the British people to demand reprisals for the Blitz is not "taking it": it is brutal, aggressive and frenzied, not friendly, patient and calm. This is too uncomfortable an image to remain in Britain's memory of the Second World War. The Blitz myth and the reprisals debate cannot coexist; one must make way for the other.

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Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, eds, *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945* (London, 2006); A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?* (London, 2006).

100. E.g. Tony Parsons, "We can take it", *Daily Mirror*, 8 July 2005, pp. 16-7.

101. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 196. Cf. Smith, *Britain and 1940*, p. 71.