

The Blitz



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Bombs over



May 1941.
A postman attempts
to deliver a letter in
Watling Street.

London

A 40

• Talk in class about what you know about World War II.

B 41

U ntil the end of August 1940, the Germans as well as the Allied Forces avoided bombing civilian targets in the war. The RAF did bomb industrial areas such as the Ruhr in Germany, in May and June of 1940, but the first RAF bombs did not fall on Berlin until the night of 24-25 August 1940. Hitler was so outraged by this raid that he immediately ordered Goering, the commander of the Luftwaffe, to begin reprisal raids on London. The first of these was on 7 September 1940 and it began what became known as 'the Blitz' – the heavy German air-raids over Britain's cities. This lasted until May 1941.

To begin with, London was the only target. It was bombed for 76 nights in a row from 7 September. But in November the Germans added Coventry and other cities, such as Liverpool, Plymouth and Birmingham, to their list of targets. Coventry was a particular target because of the aircraft factories there.

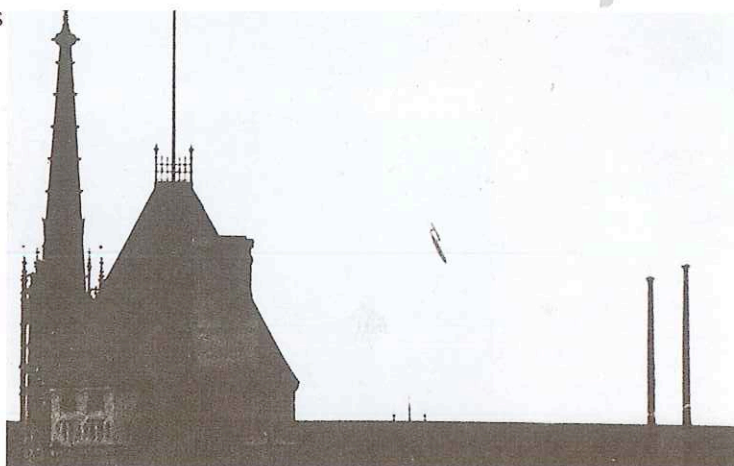
At first there was little London's air defences could do against the raids. Searchlights at this time were not effective at altitudes above 3,600 metres and so the German bombers simply flew above this height.

The Baedeker raids

There were few raids after May 1941 until April 1942 when German planes bombed historic cities such as Exeter, York and Bath. These attacks were in revenge for RAF raids over German historic cities in March. One German spokesman described the attacks on these old English cities as 'Baedeker raids'. Baedeker was the name of a tourist guide to famous cities of cultural interest. The phrase was a propaganda disaster for the Germans because it implied they really were barbarians with no respect for culture.

The second Blitz

In the middle of 1944 Hitler launched the first of his secret 'Vengeance' weapons – the V-1. Hitler was determined to pay back the Allies for their 'terror' bombing of German cities. The V-1 was a rocket-powered flying bomb which had no pilot. After flying a fixed number of kilometres, the engine cut out and the rocket crashed to the ground.



The V-1 was difficult but not impossible to shoot down. The sound of its droning engine and then the terrible silence as it cut out brought terror to Londoners for the last nine months of the war. Just over 10,000 were launched against England but only 3,500 of these found a target, killing 6,200 people. The rest were shot down or crashed before reaching the coast.

V-1 flying bomb crashing towards a street off Drury Lane in 1944.

The next terror weapon was the V-2. It carried only a slightly bigger explosive load (1,000 kilograms) than the V-1. But, unlike the V-1, the V-2 could not be stopped since it was a rocket which reached a speed of 4,000 kilometres per hour before impact. It exploded without warning. From September 1944 until the end of March 1945 an average of five a day fell on England, killing nearly 3,000 civilians. These were powerful weapons but it's worth pointing out that RAF bombers were able to drop bombs with 5,400 kilograms of explosives over Germany from June 1944.

British Poster from World War II.



"Hurricanes" of the Royal Air Force co-operating with the Russian Air Force.

BACK THEM UP!

C 41

The Blitz cost the Luftwaffe very few aircraft. In a raid by 200 aircraft the Germans would lose only three planes on average. German defences against the RAF were more effective and the British could expect to lose 15 planes for every 200 sent.

40,000 British civilians were killed and two million made homeless but it did not destroy the morale of the civilian population. Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda chief, decided that the British were showing such toughness because they were a 'Germanic race'.