

## Introduction

*“Blitz spirit” is an instantly recognisable commodity today, but it has become divorced from historic reality.’*

Richard Overy in an extract from an article in *The Guardian* (Overy 2020b).

### 1.1. Prologue

On the 7th July 2020, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and the then Metropolitan Police Commissioner Dame Cressida Dick placed wreaths in Hyde Park at the 7/7 monument in memory of the 52 victims of domestic terrorism. Fifteen years earlier radicalised British suicide bombers had struck at Aldgate, Edgware Road and Russell Square underground stations and on a bus in Tavistock Square. In a city no stranger to terrorism, these were nevertheless shocking events causing in addition to the fatalities serious injury to over 700 people on routine Thursday morning journeys in the capital.

Public reaction, widely represented in broadcast, press and digital media, was revealing and perhaps less than measured in skirting the social and political divisions from which the atrocity grew. Amid the gratitude to those who responded to the needs of the dead and injured were strident assertions of ‘Britishness’, a sense of national identity, externalising the complexities of the attacks to ‘an enemy without’ (Kelsey 2013). These sentiments were shared within a broad media consensus which drew parallels with the national mood and behaviour during the Blitz, the sustained aerial bombardments of WWII (Massie 2005, 30). Emerging from the appalling scenes a striking image has endured; thousands of Londoners obediently making their way home after work on foot in the absence of public transport, for want of a better expression, keeping calm and carrying-on (Crown 2012; Hatherley 2016; Jack 2011, 89–91). This demonstration of quiet purpose caught the popular imagination and within a few hours the spirit of the Blitz had been appropriated (Parsons 2005, 16–17) to alleviate the sense of shock and defiantly assert that the nation could ‘take it’, paraphrasing a wartime propaganda film initially made for American audiences (*London can take it!* 1940). Neither of the uncredited directors, Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, both celebrated documentary film makers, could have imagined their nine-minute film, a well-crafted treatment of civilian resilience under fire, would one day 65 years later be popularly re-appropriated.

### 1.2. Background

This study examines the civilian experience of six years of conflict and the recall of its history within a

post-war context of war memory and commemoration. It acknowledges the heroism, fears and anxieties of the British people under prolonged enemy attack and how that affected their behaviour. Inevitably, it also features the destructiveness of bombing and the deaths of thousands of British civilians. The bombardment of British cities and the civilian experience of it together form an important part of the national life story, a well-intentioned narrative as these remarks suggest of positive human characteristics, invested with pride and recalled in challenging times. Nonetheless, the dominance of this script is contested through examinations of the people, processes and practices of civilian commemoration.

The bombing of Britain in WWII, widely known as the Blitz, and the institutional, civic and public response to it are well documented, starting in the early years of the war (Ministry of Information 1942) and then meticulously recorded in the HMSO Civil Series histories of social policy (Titmuss 1950) and civil defence (O’Brien 1955). The air war in its distinct phases impacted the whole country; although about half of the country’s population were never bombed, all were under constant threat and at various levels of defensive readiness (Overy 2013, 141). The impact was directly through attack and indirectly through necessary counter-measures (O’Brien 1955, 1). There was ‘seldom a day in five years when enemy aeroplanes or flying-bombs or rockets were not over some part of Britain’ (Titmuss 1950, 323). London suffered the most prolonged exposure to aerial attack with ‘the alert sounding 1124 times during which it endured 101 daylight and 253 night attacks’ (1950, 323). Air war impacted Britain significantly through widespread destruction and displacement. Many thousands were killed and injured; almost 70,000 deaths are recorded on the Roll of Honour of Civilian War Dead (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2021a), over 10% of all British and Commonwealth WWII fatalities.

The history of the aerial attacks is an important component of the nation’s post-war cultural history (Calder, A. 1991; Connelly 2004; Noakes and Pattinson 2014; Noakes 2020) taking its place alongside the legendary, nation-defining stories of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. Indeed, it has been argued, that it says more about the post-war nation’s view of itself than those military deeds (Baxendale 2003; Calder, A. 1991; Morgan, K.O. 2001). This argument



Figure 1.1. Shadows of 7/7 Stelae over Memorial Plaque, Hyde Park, London (photograph © John Sharrock).

rests in part on dismal pre-war predictions that fragile civilian morale would undermine the conduct of the war (Harrison 1976, 23; Morison 1939; Overy 2013, 23–26; Titmuss 1950, 12). More importantly it springs from a civilian temperament amid the all-encompassing experience of war that confounded expectations, a narrative of which was persistently deployed to stiffen resolve at home and convince potential allies of the country's ability to fight on.

In 2005, when 'civilians' were again subject to the fatal consequences of bombs the Blitz narrative, rooted in 1940, was enabled to calm a feverish national mood. Its readily recognised message centred on positive behaviour deemed uniquely British, a natural poise and calmness under fire (Jack 2011, 89–91; Kelsey 2013). The power of the narrative was unifying and simple: the experience, indeed, the spirit of 1940 could be safely invoked; the nation realising that having negotiated the perils of the Blitz it could get through 7/7.

However, as intimated in these early comments, the way significant events in a tragic past are remembered and repurposed demands scrutiny. Nowhere in evidence in 2005 were legitimate recollections of homelessness, displacement, fear, destruction and death, all significant outcomes of the original Blitz. Their exclusion, regrettable yet understandable, was no match for the simple recall

of more positive aspects of a complex past and hence an uneven remembrance of the British civilian experience. This unevenness is also in evidence in commemorative materialisation. Britain and its overseas battlefields abound with monuments to warfare and warriors as attested by more than 90,000 records held on the Imperial War Museum's War Memorial Register; later analysis will show that dedicated civilian memorials account for less than 1% of this record.

In London the Bomber Command Memorial of 2012 close to Hyde Park Corner highlights the uncertain revelation of civilian experience. Much criticized, aesthetically and morally (Moore, R. 2012), the monument marks the loss of 55000 aircrew in the controversial air offensive on Germany. In honouring the undoubted bravery of the crews, a minimal acknowledgement of civilian consequences is offered in a generalised inscription on the frieze which pays lip-service to immeasurable carnage:

This memorial also commemorates the people of all nations who also lost their lives in the bombing of 1939–1945

The words may be seen behind the larger-than-life effigies of a bomber crew scanning the skies above in the following image.



Figure 1.2. The Bomber Command Memorial, Piccadilly, London W1 (photograph © John Sharrock).

### 1.3. Popular Myths

The Blitz narrative paraded in 2005 at a time of shocking tragedy appropriated particular aspects of the wartime experience so that resolution and defiance acted as a metaphor for a display of national togetherness. Contemporary histories of the Blitz similarly lauded civilian fortitude but not to the exclusion of evacuation, rationing, black-out, gas masks, civil defence, sheltering, damage, dislocation, death and injury (Calder, P.R. 1941b; Farson 1941; Hodson 1941; Jameson 1942; Lewey 1944; Marchant 1941; Mass-Observation 1940a; Muir 1942; Nixon 1980 [1943]; Underdown 1942; Woon 1941). It was in this immersive war experience that the notions of the Blitz and its spirit took early root. Inez Holden, a writer working in a factory, later lost to the bombs with many fatalities, spoke of co-workers' dignified waiting, working-on under prolonged threat and exhibiting impatience 'with easy heroic talk and pat-off patriotism' (2019 [1941], 74).

The term Blitz, whose development and meaning is covered later, emerged during 1940 to represent devastating air attack, taking its place alongside 'total war', 'home front' and 'The People's War' as wartime expressions of the all-encompassing experience endured by British civilians conjured extensively in books and newspapers throughout

the post-war period. All are still in use but it is Blitz that arguably captures best all that civilians had to contend with under bombardment, the frightening, dispiriting and intensely tragic events that gave rise to the casualty toll. Blitz also represents something less tangible and more contentious. Inherent in the expression, as intimated above, are human characteristics emerging in the earliest days of the bombardment of resilience, togetherness and bravery (Ministry of Information 1942; Ziegler 1995), a spirit of the times promoted by government agencies and popular media then and still.

These remarks signal a tendency, not limited to civilian experience, for wartime exploits, the lived experience of protagonists, to be modified by time and telling to attain a mythical quality. Myth is a concept given to confusion and misunderstanding, not least in dictionary definitions embracing it as a widely-held but false belief, deeply rooted in folklore and the supernatural. It is often presented as a popular conception which exaggerates or idealizes the truth. Myths have been described, in a conscientious objector's memoir of a 'cack-handed' war, as 'an orgy of over-simplification that shape attitudes that would last a lifetime' (Blishen 1972, 123). More positively, myths can represent popular narratives, life stories of a group or even a nation, which are crucial to a sense of identity and need

not be taken as ‘untruth, still less lies’ (Calder, A. 1991, xiii). As a ‘particular explanation’ of events, a myth is a fabrication, selective and embellished, to form a version of history, a sense of where a group stands in the world (Connelly 2004, 1).

A wry observation on the nature of myth suggests that it brings no harm as long as it is not believed (Jack 2011, 89). Allowing for journalistic tongue-in-cheek, Jack (2011), with A. Calder (1969; 1991), Connelly (2004) and Morgan, K.O. (2001), explores popular myths adopted to come to terms with Britain’s diminished status in a post-colonial world, one in which Britain’s proud wartime narratives are presented, paraphrasing Churchill, as ‘our finest hour’ (Jenkins, R. 2001, 621). It is not a single narrative but a compound of momentous events in sequence, from evacuation to demobilisation, from Dunkirk to D-Day, which resonate with each other to define the heroic role of service personnel and civilians throughout the war. The brief descriptions of the Blitz in these early paragraphs point to its mythic quality and its place within an overall wartime myth that is not novel. A process of mythologisation, with roots in wartime government communications, gained traction during the post-war period with particular prominence and critique after the late 1960s (Calder, A. 1969; Calder, A. 1991; Connelly 2004) wherein resilience and unity prevail in popular imaginings over tragedy. This process is examined in Chapter 4.

Harking back to a ‘heightened imagined past’ appears to increase during periods of crisis; Ian Hislop (2005 xi-xiii) speaks of ‘plundering the olden days’ to make more sense of a difficult present (Oliver 2005; *Not Forgotten* 2005). It was therefore to be expected that the Blitz should be recalled after 7/7 with a powerful message that British unity and determination can overcome enemies wherever they are from. The 7/7 narrative appropriated as a nation-defining legend the wartime spirited response invoked by politicians, press and public in difficult times. Extraordinarily the Blitz had been similarly deployed in New York by then-Mayor, Rudi Giuliani in the aftermath of 9/11 (Field 2002). In episodes the capturing of specific elements of the Blitz has continued since the early 2000s appearing for example as a subtext to the stand-alone position adopted by the ‘Leave’ persuasion in the Brexit debate (Toynbee 2019). The visceral response by broadcaster, Andrew Neil to the 2017 terrorist atrocity on Westminster Bridge asked of the perpetrator’s supporters whether they knew who they were taking on; the British had stood up alone ‘to the might of the Luftwaffe, air force of the greatest evil mankind has ever known’ (Warren 2017).

Further examples are evident in the context of the Covid pandemic and the fighting talk that accompanied the early Government response. This reached its apotheosis in an extraordinary statement by then Health Secretary, Matt Hancock (Dejevsky 2020; Freedland 2021; Harris 2020; Hyde, M. 2020; Reuters 2020) which exhorted the current generation to show the fight of its grandparents:

‘...withstanding the nightly pounding [...], the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort. Today our generation is facing its own test, fighting [...] new disease [...] to protect life.’

There are surely few times when applying such rhetoric is uncontroversial or universally acceptable. The pernicious deployment of a Blitz spirit as a ‘patriotic device’ is questionable at any time but at its worst during a pandemic or when an atrocity had come from within as it did in 2005 (The Economist 2020). This book decries the political deployment of wartime clichés and argues that the selective weaponizing of the Blitz discredits what is excluded. The lazy link of rationing and loss of life in Hancock’s speech is at best insensitive. It is emblematic of the issue recognized here that remembrance of the tragic outcome for thousands is obscured in a popular narrative which replaces harsh reality with the balm of Britain, alone, meeting terror, Brexit and disease with the equanimity of our 1940 ancestors.

The Blitz myth in its simplicity and ready acknowledgement represents notions of national pride, encoding bravery, stoicism, humour, team spirit and standing tall under fire. There is a substantial body of work that reinforces the display of these characteristics by the public during the war (Addison 1990; Addison 2013; Calder, A. 1969; Calder, A. 1991; Harrison 1976; Levine 2015; Mackay 2002; Smith, M. 2000). This work also acknowledges that the Blitz had a less wholesome side, that ‘not all of the nation’s grandparents were model citizens’ (The Economist 2020).

Recourse to the BBC’s People’s War archive yields many eye-witness accounts of mean-spirited behaviour and relentless looting (BBC 2020) but there is a consensus that on balance the behaviour of civilians under fire was commendable. Ziegler points out bad behaviour such as greed, panic and cowardice yet avers that the population ‘endured the blitz with dignity, courage, resolution and astonishing good humour’ (1995, 163). Ziegler’s point is valid but the preference for a limited Blitz narration tunes out not just the seamier side of existence and the grim needs of survival but the even nastier realities of death and destruction. They are forgotten in a preferred mythology whose persistence and deployment renders the civilian experience under enemy bombardment as elusive, historically misunderstood and its remembrance marginalised.

#### **1.4. Analytical Framework**

Widely-held narratives of the bombing of Britain’s cities in WWII have prospered and persisted through their re-telling over the post-war period. This has created a present-day understanding distanced from a harsher reality, a separation of ‘fear and loss from episodes of bravery, resolution and humour’ (Connelly 2004, 5). More recently in an online presentation for the Commonwealth

War Graves Commission, Professor Noakes suggested that while civilian death mattered in wartime, notions of ‘Blitz spirit’ fail to describe that past in a meaningful way today (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2020b; Noakes 2020). In a critique on managing the pandemic, Overy contends that Blitz reality is the victim of a ‘cruel’ myth which has been improperly publicised for its publicly-accepted sentiments, not its truths (Overy 2020b).

In essence, Britain’s civilian war experience is remembered for fine personal qualities rather than death and injury. Recently this divergence is found in selective and simplistic political re-imaginings of historical events, pitting in opposition, experience and myth. This opposition presents a contentious remembrance subsumed within a myth which in its post-war embellishment overwhelms appalling experiences and tragic consequences.

The events in review are almost within reach, a surviving, lived memory for some, albeit few now over 75 years after World War II. For the vast majority memories of that time are not experienced but are received, inherited and absorbed during a ‘contemporary past’ that links past events and their narrative in the present (Buchli and Lucas 2001). The contemporary past under review in this context dates from pre-WWII fears of civilian death and disorder until the present day. *En route*, it passes distinct phases of air war and post-war years of remembrance and narrative formation. Thus, it is a past that links lived experience of the Blitz with a present-day dominant narrative, a badge of exceptionalism (Major 2020), paraded in an ‘age of discontent’ (Malik 2020, Title) as a national story (Von Tunzelmann 2021).

This research undertaking is thus identifying and addressing the problem, emphasised and endorsed by Overy (2020b) and Noakes (2020), that:

Understanding of the civilian bombing experience is impaired, overlooked and misconstrued in the construction of the modern narrative.

The remembrance of the civilian war experience in today’s narrative and material forms is the product of a complex weaving of actors and activism, government and civil society, indifference and forgetting. In a clamour to be heard and seen, history through its stories and narratives evolves through competition; some stories subside and others predominate in a process of *contestation*. Understanding that contestation is crucial to a better understanding of the Blitz. The construction and evolution of the modern narrative, during a shared contemporary past, has eclipsed important aspects of the civilian experience summarised in the following research proposition:

There is a limited place for the civilian dead in the remembrance of the Blitz which can be revealed through analysis of and engagement with the people, processes and practices of civilian commemoration.

The execution of the research plan reported in this book challenged the prevailing Blitz narrative, with its limited representation of the civilian experience, through engagements with and analysis of the processes and practices of civilian commemoration and the people behind them. To present a more balanced Blitz narrative the myth in its dominant narrative form is challenged in an exposure of an ‘historic reality’ (Overy 2020b) of the Blitz, its human consequences and how they are recalled. It posed these research questions:

1. How and why did the narrative of the Blitz emerge from its foundations in 1940 to its prevailing position today?
2. How is the narrative reflected in remembrance? What is the nature and extent of civilian remembrance in its commemorative forms?
3. Who are the actors in the contested remembrance of the civilian experience and can an engagement with them reveal a more rounded history than that presented by the current narrative of the Blitz?

These questions exhibit an archaeological and anthropological motivation to challenge and contest the narrative, revealing the experience it obscures through the commemorative material behind the myth and the processes and people that inspired both.

Saunders in establishing the credentials for the study of modern conflict from WWI to the Twenty-first Century has advocated multi-disciplinary approaches to investigation of the material products of war and the people behind them (2002; 2012). Following that model guidance the research questions yielded a qualitative, composite methodology:

1. A historiography of the Blitz story and the establishment of its myths
2. Identification and analysis of civilian memorial archaeology
3. Identification of and engagement with agents of civilian remembrance

The implementation and impact of this research plan, encompassing archive and database investigation, activist interviews and study of the narrative and commemorative heritage of the Blitz, follows in Chapter 3.

Archaeology can function as a re-constructor of memories and in the analysis of commemorative artefacts demonstrate how and by whom those memories are transmitted. Moreover, in its anthropological perspectives it can reveal the people and their motives in the act of archaeological formation. Together, material culture and its creators and consumers determine the challenge to the prevalent myth.

The research questions ask what the material and its actors convey in an ‘enriching’ of the memory of the war, one that transcends ‘passive consumption of media images’ (Wilson, R.J. 2007, 227–228). In the context of Western Front mythology, Professor Wilson adds that ‘popular’

memory has been distanced by ‘popular culture’ from the horrors of [trench] warfare in a process analogous to the construction of Blitz myths. Hence, the research through its analytical framework proposed and implemented a multi-faceted approach covering the excavation of both narrative and memorial artefacts (Myers 2008, 243–4) in an archaeology of the myth of the Blitz.

### **1.5. Summary**

A problem of historical understanding has been identified with respect to the civilian experience of the Blitz, raising questions about the mutation of interpretations of the past, the materiality of remembrance and the dynamics of activists and supporters who have undertaken the challenge of civilian commemoration. The research proposition signalled the three-part analysis framework of meaning, materialisation and activism that carries the later chapters which present an archaeology of narrative, commemoration and people. An understanding of how these elements coalesce to a statement of Blitz memory, modern scripts that challenge an embedded myth, is vested in a theoretical context of *contestation* with respect to remembering, narrative formation and commemorative practice. Theoretical frameworks, yielding a better understanding of the contested meaning of the wartime Blitz narrative in today’s discourse, are developed in the next chapter and provide the building blocks of the archaeological endeavour and its analysis in Chapters 6–12 of civilian remembrance in its commemorative forms, practices and activism from across Britain with detailed case histories in London, Portsmouth and Bath.

Remembering the bombing and exploring the contesting of civilian remembrance comes at an important time. Over eighty years ago, 1,500 Londoners died during the night of 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> May 1941 (Collier, R. 1959). These were the heaviest losses of any raid on Britain during the war but are often obscured in the ‘celebration’ of VE Day. An expectation that the dates of the heaviest bombing raids would be perpetuated in post-war remembrance (Calder, P.R. 1941a) has never been fulfilled and yet these are times when such history deserves to be recalled to counter the political repetition of a limited Blitz narrative, too readily deployed in the special conditions of the pandemic.

To redress the balance, a new approach to presenting the Blitz has explored its realities through its remembrance practices and people, an exploration of personal Blitz memory. The theoretical exploration of the space between ‘Memory and Materiality’ (Myers 2008) and how that shapes the archaeology of memory is the matter of the next chapter.