

The First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940

Peter Stansky

Reviewed by Dr John McCarthy

On the afternoon of Saturday 07 September 1940, 348 German bombers escorted by over 600 fighters crossed the coast of southern England. Their objective was to attack London's East-End dockland area. Huge fires were started and these guided a second wave of some 300 bombers to the same target in the early evening. It was the beginning of the Blitz. With one exception, London was bombed for the next 76 nights. On that first day 430 people were killed and over 1500 seriously hurt. By the end of the Blitz, nearly 20,000 Londoners had been killed.

Despite its title and the author's claim that he intended to concentrate on this one day, this book is only partially concerned with the events of that day. Its scope ranges from an examination of pre-war air defence policies and measures concerning air raid precautions and civil defence, through to an examination of 'The People's War' and the myth and reality of the Blitz itself.

It has all, however, been done before. A volume of the British official history, *Problems of Social Policy*, written by sociologist Richard Titmuss and published in 1950 set an early high standard. Clive Pointing's *1940: Myth and Reality* (London, 1990) is as readable as Stansky but is more penetrating. Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991) is indispensable. Perhaps the best study available though is Philip Ziegler, *London at War 1939-1945* (London, 1995). Ziegler covers all that Stansky does, in more detail, and with more understanding and verve.

Stansky's intended main themes are to show how well people acted under the strain of air attack and to try and understand the 'reality' of the Blitz. He also wishes to examine the view that the 07 September 1940 and the shifting of the German air attack to London, and away from the airfields and the chain radar stations, represented a 'crucial day' in the history of World War II.

Possibly no other event as the Blitz in British history has left such an archival record. Apart from official documents and the findings of Mass Observation, possibly thousands of Londoners kept diaries or unpublished accounts, many of which have been deposited in the Imperial War Museum.

Stansky has made full use of them, as others have before him. A difficulty with relying on such a source is that diaries and memories will overwhelmingly reflect the attitudes of an educated, literate, middle-class. The voice of the lower socio-economic class manual worker is seldom, if ever, heard. Yet it was exactly this class which took the initial fury of the air assault on 07 September 1940. From the elevated London suburbs of Highgate or Hampstead the diarist could look down and see the flames, and perhaps smell the smoke

some 9 miles away, but was far removed from the human and material destruction.

There is another difficulty. Reliance on this kind of 'oral history' can lead an historian into reproducing some most doubtful statements. For example one source recalled some fifty years later: 'The aircraft moved slowly on...I could see black crosses on the wings'. As the aircraft were flying at heights between 15,000 and 26,000 feet (4500-8000 metres) the possibility of seeing aircraft markings from the ground must have been remote. Another recalled seeing the German aircraft firstly at a great height and then seeing them swooping 'down and down'. The balloon barrage over London would have prevented that. An 18-year old recorded that his ears were deafened by bombs, machine gun fire, and the colossal inferno of machine after machine zooming in the blue sky....'. Yet he was in the suburbs and the air battles were fought high enough generally for only contrails of condensation to be seen and the remote sound of engines working at full throttle, heard.

It is true the shift of strategy by the Luftwaffe in attacking London was a turning point in the German air assault on Britain. It allowed Fighter Command time to re-group and to meet the bombing threat with greater strength. The absence of a bibliography does not help but it seems Stansky has not made the best use of Richard ('Paul' in Stansky's footnote) Overy, *The Battle of Britain-The Myth and Reality* (London, 2000) or any reference to the best book written on the "Battle": Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain* (London, 2001). Stansky, oddly enough, gives a figure of 165 German aircraft, destroyed during the great day air battles of 15 September 1940, still celebrated as Battle of Britain Day. At the time Fighter Command claimed 185. What has been known since 1945 is that Luftwaffe documents show 53 German aircraft were destroyed on that day.

Basil Liddell-Hart in his first book *Paris, or the Future of War* published in 1923 argued 'slum dwellers' would panic and 'maraud' under air attack and thus place great pressure on governments to surrender. Stansky makes it plain that although at times sections of the population did come close to panic it never was of sufficient magnitude to be a really dangerous threat to continuing the war. But then what is today called 'Punishment Strategy' in the employment of strategic air power has never been successful. Neither the German nor the Japanese civilian population broke even under a much greater weight of attack. Nor did the population of Hanoi or more lately New York.

Stansky's book might do for a brief introduction to the subject of London and the Blitz. But there are better accounts available. ♦

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