

“All In A Community Now?” South London During the  
Blitz, September-November 1940

A thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements of  
Bachelor of Arts, with Honors, in History

University of Michigan Department of History

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April 1, 2015

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, William Baker, whose own love of history and unending support of this project have been absolutely critical to its success. Dad, I still remember when you used to put eight-year-old me in your bed and let me look at the photographs in the middle of your US Civil War books. I still haven't forgotten how incredible I thought those pictures were.

## Acknowledgements

This has been, by far, the largest project of my academic career, but also the most rewarding. It has demonstrated to me how serious my interest in history is but also the scope and scale of a project that I can accomplish. I certainly didn't do it alone. A wealth of individuals contributed to this final product, and I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to each of them.

A sincere thanks is first due to the University of Michigan History Department, whose funding assisted me in traveling to the United Kingdom to undertake the research for this thesis.

I must also thank Professors Susan Juster and Brian Porter-Szucs, whose running of the junior/ senior honors process could not have been better. Both of these fantastic people went far out of their way to read my work, offer substantive feedback on it, serve as sounding boards for ideas I had yet to try, and give general advice on life far beyond the scope of this thesis. Both deserve nothing but my highest praise. Professor Joshua Cole also deserves my appreciation for serving on the evaluation committee for this thesis, as does Professor Anne Berg for providing me with secondary material early in the research process.

I'm not sure if I would have ever been able to complete this thesis without the support of my fantastic (and very international) family. My parents, William and Ruth Baker, both deserve only the utmost appreciation. Beyond their financial support (travel to the UK is expensive!), both reassured me at moments of fear reminding me to just keep working and that it would come together in the end. Throughout my education, these two

individuals have believed in me as no one else has, and this thesis was no exception. They have served as therapists, cheerleaders, and sources of wisdom in ways that I could not have known starting this project. I am also grateful to my great aunt and uncle, affectionately referred to as “Uncle Chris” and “Auntie Jackie,” for their incredible hospitality during my month of archival research in May 2014. When I came home from researching in London, Uncle Chris’s dinners always impressed (especially his lemon sole, the likes of which I shall never be able to recreate), and his stories of growing up as an eleven year old boy in south England during the Second World War gave me a whole different—and intensely human—perspective on the conflict. Though their stories are not included in this thesis, they are forever imprinted within me.

This thesis has also benefitted from the unending support of my close friends over the past year and a half. With no exceptions, all of them encouraged me, supported me, and served tirelessly as sounding boards for ideas that I wanted to try. I owe a special thank you to my closest friend, Garrett Pierman (Ph.D student, Florida International University), whose own experiences with academic research allowed me to vent my frustrations when necessary. Garrett, your friendship, intelligence, expertise, wisdom, and of course your sense of fun and humor have improved this thesis dramatically and made me a far better person than I would have been.

My final, and most important, thank you goes out to my amazing advisor, Professor Kali Israel. I first met Prof. Israel over the summer before my junior year of college in need of help getting started on my proposed thesis topic, and ever since then, she has been nothing but brilliant. Her keen advice on my thesis has been the single biggest factor in this

final outcome. Beyond her work with me on this thesis, Prof. Israel has worked tirelessly to assist me with life beyond the honors thesis. She is an outstanding teacher, researcher, mentor, and individual. Professor, your support of not only this thesis but of me as a person has truly changed my life. I truly cannot thank you enough.

Ian Baker

Ann Arbor, MI

March 10, 2015

## Introduction

Ask just about any historian to associate a word with “strategic bombing,” and the Blitz of the Second World War almost always comes first. So prominent is the Blitz that London historian Jerry White opened his book on the city during the First World War by saying “For most of us the very thought of ‘London at war’ means just one thing—the Blitz.”<sup>1</sup> And White is right. The event has engendered countless books, films, paintings, and memorials, living on in the collective memory of society long after its days have ended. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the most heavily researched stories in a heavily researched war. The Blitz still litters both history textbooks and popular mythology as Britain’s great stand against the Nazis, as a time when Britain remained the last bastion of democracy in an ever-spreading totalitarian sea. These myths impact British culture to this day. Perhaps Angus Calder put it best when he named his famous book on the topic: there is a powerful nationalist “myth of the Blitz,” and it is a myth that societies continue to live today, both inside and outside Britain.<sup>2</sup>

At 4:14pm on Saturday, September 7, 1940, over three hundred German bombers accompanied by six hundred fighters swept over London, dropped their bombs, and began one of the longest sustained periods of aerial bombardment in military history. Named the Blitz after the German military tactic that carried a similar name, this period in British history lasted, strictly speaking, from early September until May 10, 1941, though these

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Random House, 2014), preface. Jerry White’s book does an outstanding job illuminating life in the metropolis during the First World War.

<sup>2</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Publishing, 1994). One of the most famous books about the Blitz, Calder debunks postwar mythologies of grand societal unity.

dates are somewhat fluid.<sup>3</sup> German bombing raids had been taking place with increasing intensity since August, and London would occasionally be subject to aerial bombardment well after the 'official' end of the Blitz, most notably late in the war with the introduction of the V1 "flying bomb" and V2 ballistic missile.

The Blitz came at a unique historical moment, a chapter in the Second World War between the fall of France and Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany's June 22, 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. When the war began on September 1, 1939, many Brits, both in government and in the private sector, expected bombs to fall on the country almost immediately. To prepare for what many assumed to be forthcoming poison gas attacks on large civilian population centers, the British government distributed gas masks to its citizens and began mass evacuations to the rural countryside. Yet as German forces overran Poland, to everyone's surprise, bombs did not fall. After the partition of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (an arrangement organized in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), the Germans spent the winter securing their position in the east before turning to France. This included the winter conquests of Denmark and Norway. The Soviet Union, then Germany's ally, spent its winter in a bloody six-week war to conquer Finland, a war which only added to Nazi racial stereotyping of the "weak" Bolsheviks to the east. By the spring, with its eastern and northern fronts secure, the German military was ready to engage the combined armies of Britain and France.

On May 10, 1940, the relative quiet in France ended. That morning, the German military began its drive westward. German forces stormed through the Ardennes Forest,

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Stansky, *The First Day of the Blitz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1. I highly recommend Stansky's book for those interested in understanding the relative suddenness with which the Blitz began and progressed.



swept into Belgium and the Low Countries, and drove for the English Channel, trying to split British and French forces. Within weeks, the Wehrmacht, with help from the Luftwaffe (air force) and SS, had split British and French forces. On June 22, 1940, France capitulated. British forces, surrounded and alone, were evacuated at Dunkirk by a motley assortment of British channel vessels as German dive-bombers harassed from above. For the next year until the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Britain (though not to be forgotten is the substantial assistance provided by Britain's significant empire) would stand alone.

Hitler's grand plan following the defeat of France involved first taking Britain out of the war. Though Hitler had an invasion planned for mid-September 1940 (Operation Sealion), Hitler and his generals understood that such an operation required air supremacy. Hitler tasked his deputy and chief of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring, with immobilizing the Royal Air Force, thus enabling his military to take control of the English Channel to facilitate an invasion. To accomplish the mission, early German air attacks focused on Royal Air Force facilities, not cities. The goal was to destroy the critical infrastructure that the RAF required to carry on the war. Airfields and fighter production facilities became the primary target—and by all reports, it was working. But just as the German strategy was making serious progress and hampering the British air defense system, RAF Bomber Command launched a raid on Berlin. Though relatively small, the raid had a profound and immediate impact. An enraged Hitler, who had vowed that German cities would never fall victim to hostile bombing raids, ordered terror attacks against London. Rather than try to knock the Royal Air Force out of the war, Hitler gambled that he could bomb the British population sufficiently to force them to sue for peace. He largely gave up the idea of invading Britain (though Operation Sealion, the codename for the

proposed invasion, remained on the table in Berlin, it does not seem to have ever garnered serious attention again) in favor of a campaign of aerial attrition. Perhaps, reasoned Hitler, the British could be brought to their knees through the air. For the next eight months until aircraft had to be moved east to Poland in preparation for Hitler's summer 1941 offensive against the USSR, that was what Hitler tried to do.

Before discussing the Blitz itself and south London's role within it, it is helpful to give a brief sketch of the overall damage to the city. It should first be said that the results of the German bombing raids, while terrifying, by no means reached the scale of destruction found elsewhere during the war. Readers with images of burned-out cities or post-atomic bomb Japan should be advised to put such images to rest while reading this thesis. Much of London suffered bomb damage, but only a relatively small percentage of the city's area, particularly that around the River Thames, suffered any form of complete destruction close to the scale that cities like Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or even the fellow English city of Coventry suffered during the war. Much of the damage was confined to blast damage, including most notably shattered windows and bombed-out streets. Homes, trains, buses, shelters, and places of employment all faced periodic destruction, but it was never on the scale of much of the European continent. If judging merely by tons of ordinance dropped, London got off light. But just because the Blitz was a "lighter" version of aerial bombardment does not mean that it was any less scary. In fact, its prolonged nature and the impossibility of knowing when the ordeal would end made the Blitz particularly troublesome for its survivors.

The Blitz must have been a terrifying time to live in the United Kingdom, and it is that sense of standing alone—but also the sense of community spirit which previous scholars of the Blitz have only recently examined—that this thesis will address. To keep the topic narrow and fit it into existing historiography (see below), I will examine only on southern London, focusing on the early part of the Blitz from September to November. The region covered includes most of the southeast London postal codes (with the deliberate exclusion of Greenwich, since it is an island of considerable wealth among an otherwise lower middle class area) as well as a few of the southwest postal codes. This thesis will examine how people in these areas lived during the Blitz, how they acted, and how their lives changed when German bombers came overhead every single night without respite. Did Londoners resent having to shelter every single night, or did they see sheltering as a heroic activity in a valiant stand against Hitler? How did people deal with damage, and how did they cope with the psychologically disturbing fact that one's home could be suddenly destroyed one day, destroying all of one's possessions in the process? How did transportation and work experiences change? How much and in what ways was social life altered? And through it all, how did Londoners interact with their friends, families, and neighbors in a city still built on close emotional bonds? Did these bonds grow stronger or break down under the pressure of the Blitz?

Out of the everyday lives of Londoners emerge questions more fundamental—and more often debated—about the Blitz. Did south Londoners resent the hardships of the Blitz, or did they feel that everyone had a share in the sacrifice and that they were just doing their parts? Did Londoners resent the changes brought about by the Blitz, or were they willing to embrace them as part of the “Peoples’ War”? All these questions point to

whom and what exactly constituted “unity” and “community” in south London during the Blitz. It is these questions of unity, loyalty, and community around which this thesis will ultimately focus.

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London’s historiographical role has been prominent in Second World War history since its occurrence, but its position within that historiography has undergone a series of transformations. It did not take long after the end of the war for scholarship to begin to emerge, a scholarship which seldom addressed divisions within London or the country as a whole. From the end of the war until the 1970s, scholars typically portrayed London as a city unified in its stand against Hitler and emphasized unity as the key to understanding London during the Blitz. Books common during this era, such as Richard Titmuss’s *Problems of Social Policy*, focused on how unity during the Blitz led to major postwar changes British society, changes (such as the formation of the National Health Service) which came about ostensibly as a sort of “reward” to the people for their valiance during the event itself. Scholars such as Titmuss asserted, usually quite explicitly, that the Blitz generated an unusually high level of social cohesion and solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, it was clear to most scholars, however, that unity was not the only story of the Blitz. In 1969, Angus Calder published what would become one of the most famous studies of the Blitz, *The People’s War*, a book which deconstructed many of the unity myths that were put forward in the postwar years to explain London’s unwillingness to surrender. Calder believed that it was important to focus not just on the unity of the city

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1950).

and country but also on the disunity; conscientious objectors, complainers, and dissatisfied Londoners all suggested to Calder that there was another, yet unexplored, history of the Blitz to be told, a theme which he returned to in his later work.<sup>5</sup> In *The Myth of the Blitz*, Calder took his ideas farther and put forward the idea that class played a much bigger role than previous scholars had asserted. Wealth had its power and influence, and Calder argued that those at the top of the social hierarchy deliberately promulgated and reinforced notions of unity and national identity to ensure that the underlying social structures of British society would remain unharmed by the war.<sup>6</sup>

In 1976, Tom Harrisson published *Living Through the Blitz*, the first major study to uproot the view of a unified London by addressing the stories of individuals. In his book, Harrisson became the first scholar to successfully incorporate the voices of the individual into a larger narrative of collective experience as he deconstructed what Calder termed “the myth of the Blitz” and its ability to smooth over tensions in British society. Though imperfect, Tom Harrisson’s work began a long and ongoing line of scholarship which uses individual responses to position the Blitz outside of the historical myth of strictly unity. Harrisson agreed with previous scholars that the Blitz did little to “destroy ‘mass morale,’”<sup>7</sup> but he also believed that it was essential to “recapture the atmosphere of those remote nights”<sup>8</sup> when the end of the war seemed a distant—and often bleak—prospect. He wanted to know how the common man experienced the war and how such experiences shaped the collective experiences of London during the war, not how observers looking back viewed the Blitz. Harrisson believed that hindsight had led many scholars astray, distorting their

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<sup>5</sup> Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969)

<sup>6</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Publishing, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Tom Harrisson, *Living Through the Blitz* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1976), 277.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Harrisson, *Living Through the Blitz*, 16.

perceptions of events with their own knowledge that Britain would ultimately end up victorious. Harrison concluded that while there was a high degree of unity within London during the Blitz, individual actors nonetheless held their own prejudices and seldom bought into the government propaganda in its entirety. The Blitz thus failed to “smooth over” tensions in British society that existed before the war. For example, London’s working poor still resented the privilege of the rich, especially when the latter could afford to dine in expensive underground restaurants to escape the noise of the bombings. To be sure, Harrison believed that overall unity had been maintained to a much stronger degree than many of his successors do, but it was a unity based on “erratic resilience” rather than never-ceasing happiness to suffer for King and Country.<sup>9</sup>

In the nearly forty years between *Living Through the Blitz* and today, two new lines of scholarship—both coming out of the 1970s movement away from notions of pure unity—have emerged; foremost among these is a newfound desire by scholars to read and interpret the diaries of the bombed. In addition to illuminating the feelings of individuals, studying diaries has an added methodological benefit in that it removes cross-racial, class, and gender biases by reading the words written by individuals about themselves rather than by outside observers, often with vastly different backgrounds, commenting on the lives of others. Amy Helen Bell’s *London Was Ours* tells the story of the London Blitz by “[restoring] the voices of individuals[,] revealing variations, heterogeneity, and the existence of dissenting points of view.”<sup>10</sup> Bell spends her two hundred page book examining various aspects of life in wartime London, from the challenges that the rationing

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 279.

<sup>10</sup> Amy Helen Bell, *London Was Ours: Diaries and Memories of the London Blitz* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2008), 3.

system imposed and the inadequacy of civil defense preparations to experiences of love and sexual intimacy during the war, arguing along the way for a much more nuanced picture of London. She presents London as a city of both strained relations as well as impossible-to-miss symbols of national unity. Though she does engage with the public sphere, Bell largely confines her work to private spaces; after all, she is reading documents almost exclusively written by individuals in private places. Bell agrees with the likes of Calder and Harrison that any scholar portraying London as a unified mass of humanity is oversimplifying London's immense complexities but goes even farther, believing that national unity was far more tenuous than even Harrison claimed.

While Amy Helen Bell largely removes documents from the public sphere from consideration in her telling of London's story, other historians have not done so—the second strand of recent historical scholarship. Instead, these historians have told the story of the Blitz by examining official propaganda to make arguments about wartime constructions of national identity. In her now famous book *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945*, University of Michigan professor emeritus Sonya Rose argues that public officials “portrayed the nation as composed of self-sacrificing, relentlessly cheerful, and inherently tolerant people” but that even in a time of war, constructions of “the nation” remained largely in the sphere of personal identification.<sup>11</sup> While the government wanted to portray Britain—and in particular London—as signs of the great English unity, in particular conflicts of class, gender, and race kept Englishmen from seeing themselves as one people perfectly united against Hitler. Each

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<sup>11</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

individual constructed “the nation” as he or she saw fit, and these individual definitions “contributed to a reconfigured, emotionally charged political culture” which failed to bring the kind of unity sought by the government.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Rose’s work bridges the divide between scholars like Harrison who, while not in agreement with the “myth of the Blitz,” nonetheless focus largely on the communal presentation and those like Bell who work with the inner emotions of the war’s participants.

Perhaps driven by the rise of social and cultural history within the academy, recent scholarship has worked to fuse these two divergent strands of historical research. Because research such as Rose’s relies heavily on official presentations of nation and citizenship, scholars frequently struggle to make effective use of their primary sources because they cannot balance the stories of individuals with the official propaganda coming from the government to create convincing narratives. To solve this problem, researchers like Rose who study official propaganda and government-led representations of “the nation” are increasingly augmenting their work in official sources with private documents such as those used by Amy Helen Bell. As of the last ten years or so, there seems to be a general consensus within the scholarly community that reading the stories of individuals sheds more light on the wartime *experience* of London than do official documents but that official documents tell more about nationalism than do private letters and correspondences. Combining these two types of primary sources to create narratives which explore the nuances of London’s experience seems to be the “new” way to approach London. This development has led to narratives of a city in some ways unified and in other ways deeply divided.

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<sup>12</sup> Sonya O. Rose, Which People’s War?, 9.



It is safe to say that the scholarship which has emerged over the last forty years has tried to deconstruct portrayals of London as a city of great “togetherness” in the face of the Nazi onslaught. However, scholars still disagree how much unity Londoners actually exhibited, and much of the contemporary scholarship still works to challenge notions of London as a unified city standing valiantly against Hitler. These historiographical debates tie into the most fundamental question of the Blitz: how did the nightly aerial bombardment of civilians in the crown of the British Empire impact what it meant to be British, and who or what got to (re)define this notion? It is a question that troubles historians of wars in virtually all nation-states. While Angus Calder and Tom Harrisson moved the scholarship towards placing the individual civilian as the most important historical actor and away from large myths of mass unity and “togetherness,” this is an ongoing process, both within and external from British history. Other historians, like Sonya Rose, have focused on government attempts to define and represent “the nation,” approaching the same topic as the diary-focused Bell but in a different way.

My scholarship will follow closer along the lines of Amy Helen Bell’s, working through the words of Londoners themselves as I attempt to make sense of the complex landscape. However, even scholarship such as Bell’s faces a key issue: it focuses on the entire city. To this day, London is a city composed of many individual boroughs and geographic regions, each with a distinctive sense of itself that exists in conversation with, but undeniably separate from, those same senses in other boroughs. Londoners in the 1940s were well aware of these distinctions; accordingly, this distinction comes front and center in this thesis. I will focus just on southern London, excluding all of the other parts of the city. My research will explore a geographically limited area; by doing so, my research

examines how ideas of unity, nation, and community work in one part of one particularly segmented, factionalized city, London.

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This thesis will explore wartime London through a variety of different social spaces, loosely taking the reader through a day in the life of a Londoner at war. Structured so as to take the reader through a 24-hour period, it begins in the shelters (night), then moves to transportation (the space between home and work) before finally ending on places of employment (daytime). It argues that while there were senses of a national identity in wartime south London, a strong sense of unity also came from much closer to home; that the Blitz made people care at least as much about what I term “local communities” as about the health and status of the nation. South London’s population was far more likely to worry about the fate of their friends, families, and neighbors than they were the fate of other Brits living hundreds (or even just tens) of miles away, though to be sure, both played a role. This thesis restores the voices of the individuals and their own lives to a historiography very much focused on the fate of “the nation,” reminding the reader that it is not ALL about being “British.” For many in south London, life was just about what it meant to live on a certain road; in a certain neighborhood; and to share this wartime experience with a certain, definable group of people. All this is not to suggest that notions of “Britishness” did not play into peoples’ thinking at all, but rather to suggest that this identification coexisted alongside identity with one’s local community.

The first chapter, entitled “London in Shelter,” explores sheltering both as an isolating and unifying experience, arguing that intense variety was south London’s status

quo in this area. It explores the various kinds of shelters used throughout southern London during the Blitz and examines which types dominated the experience there and which types were less common. It then turns to social experiences within shelters, showing readers how people lived in shelter conditions. Was conversation common? If so, what was it about? What other pastimes did Londoners pick up to endure the war? How did Londoners, particularly youth, deal with the loss of regular social activities? The chapter will conclude by discussing how and why Londoners came to see their shelters as their “homes.” The notion of “home” comes through strongly in the archival materials, and it is the sense of community built around the home that created strong ties among and between Londoners. That is not to say, however, that Londoners loved going into the shelters every night. They didn’t. Sheltering was a boring, socially isolating experience that few Londoners enjoyed. But they did make do and did see the purpose in it; as the Blitz wore on, sheltering became more normal, and Londoners found ways to create a smaller, more limited sense of community in the boring, isolating shelter spaces. The existence of these home-like spaces, too often overlooked in historiography of both the Blitz and the social history of wars more generally, underscores the nature of communal loyalties in London.

From shelter, the thesis then moves to explore what many Londoners saw as the darkest depth of the Blitz. The second chapter, “Transport for London,” examines London’s complex and disrupted transportation structures in a time of total war. Bombing could destroy portions of roads, holding up buses, and could damage railroad tracks, causing massive service delays in London’s most common form of transportation. How did Londoners get to work when their regular commutes underwent disruptions? How did Londoners use different transportation systems to navigate a damaged city? What did

Londoners do when their normal means of transportation home after a day at work or out shopping was not functioning? Commonly ignored but also included in this chapter will be walking. When walking the streets, Londoners could suddenly encounter an air raid; what happened when this occurred? Did walking engender fear, or was it treated the same as it was before the Blitz? Transportation demonstrates that life during wartime was often about very little sense of community or nation at all!

The final chapter of the thesis, titled "A Day at the Office," investigates the lives of Londoners at work. What was a "typical" day like during the Blitz? How much did air raids disrupt normal work operations, with the understanding that different Londoners worked in vastly different jobs? As they are places of employment, I will also include shops, various kinds of stores, and places of social relaxation such as cinemas and pubs in this chapter. I investigate the usage and consumption within shops and stores during the Blitz, examining not only the availability of goods but also the notorious Blitz-era queues and store closures during air raids. This completes the thesis's attempt to study the lives of Londoners as they actually lived them, from their night-times in their shelters to their travels about their city and ending at their places of work and shopping. This chapter argues that the actions and activities of both workers and patrons had complicated intersections with both local, regional, and national loyalties.

The thesis will then conclude with a brief discussion of the Blitz's position in world history. Though it is difficult to discuss the Blitz within a larger context of the Second World War or aerial bombardment outside of Europe or the 1940s, I offer a few implications for such discussions. I examine how the timing, scale, and nature of the Blitz have the power to

inform our understanding of London, the United Kingdom, the Second World War, and aerial bombardment in ways that national histories alone cannot do. In it, I make the claim that the Blitz has substantial power to inform our understanding of a diverse array of historical phenomena, including some that seem initially to hold little relation to the Blitz, contributing to a more dynamic understanding of what is termed “world history.”

## CHAPTER 1

## London in Shelter

In the early afternoon hours of September 7, 1940, a wave of German bombers swooped over London. Arranged in a vast aerial armada twenty miles wide, the raids that evening marked the beginning of the eight-month period of intense aerial bombardment of London known as the Blitz.<sup>1</sup> Uninterrupted until November, Londoners had to take extreme precautions to protect themselves from the bombings. None too surprisingly, this often meant that Londoners had to spend the nights away from their own beds, either in a large public shelter, in a personal shelter, or in a safe area of the home. Because of the air assaults, perhaps as much as half of London's population was spending the night in various kinds of shelters by mid-September 1940. Most of the others not utilizing conventional shelters slept in safer areas of their homes, such as living rooms or basements. Few Londoners remained in their beds with no changes when the Blitz hit.<sup>2</sup>

Through the exploration of shelter spaces, activities within them, and attitudes towards them, this chapter argues that the experience of sheltering was, even in a limited geographic area, one of intense variety. While relationships with one's local community—family, friends, neighbors, coworkers—became salient, they were by no means the only ones. True senses of national community and a sense of shared experience with those sheltering elsewhere also came through. The spaces in which these relationships existed shared just as much diversity, too. While some shelters were dirty and cramped, others were reasonably comfortable. Where some were inhabited with annoying strangers, others

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stansky, *The First Day of the Blitz* (New London: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> File Report 408, September 18, 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

were filled with close friends and families. Some shelters were boring, and some were not. And while some shelters shared local ties, others had few.

This chapter will explore the varying ways in which Londoners took shelter and how they reacted to it. It will begin by exploring the material, such as the physical conditions within shelters, and transition to the immaterial—what Londoners did in shelters, how they felt about them, and how shelters shaped the wartime experiences of the city's population. What emerges is a complex picture of a city forced to live underground but also a city which often enjoyed the time spent with loved ones. One such example makes this point immediately evident; across all types of shelters in different parts of southern London, lack of sleep and complaints about excessive noise come through in a variety of diaries. People genuinely resented going to work exhausted, and they blamed the war and the shelters that they had to sleep in for this. Yet those exact same individuals, often just a line or two after complaining about problems sleeping, went on to discuss how the time spent with family was a wonderful thing, something that the hustle and bustle of prewar life had made all but impossible. These citizens were angry that aerial bombardment had brought issues with sleep, yet some almost thanked it for bringing a familial intimacy that for many had been sadly lost in the years preceding the war. These two seemingly oppositional notions actually fit together well in the context of total war.

As with virtually all experiences during the Blitz, the physical characteristics of shelters varied widely, a theme that will receive ample attention in the coming pages. Relatively common north of the Thames but infrequent in southern London were large public shelters—Tube stations, deep bunkers, and the like. These spaces, while generally

safer and relatively guarded against the noise of air raids, brought with them their own problems, including overcrowding and long lines just to enter. Other forms of shelter were in the home, such as basements and living rooms. Providing a level of intimacy impossible in large public shelters, sleeping in the home was very common throughout south London during the Blitz, particularly among those located away from the Thames River. For those with a small garden (or a friend or relative with one), Anderson shelters, a prewar invention made popular during the Blitz and memorialized in memories of it, became a common destination among south London's residents as well. However, in contrast to shelters built around homes, Andersons were more common in areas of south London farther from the River. This is for a simple geographical reason: individuals sheltering in an Anderson had to have enough garden space to house one, space that was seldom available near the city center. As just these brief examples show, the picture that emerges from south London's shelter spaces is a picture not of similarity but of great variance, typically across geographic and physical space. It is precisely because of the diffuse nature of experiences that local communities complemented regional or national ones in the lives of south London's population.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of this chapter will describe general patterns across a variety of sheltering circumstances. Across all forms of shelter, critical (and too often forgotten) were the others with whom a Londoner shared the shelter space; loud or obnoxious people could

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<sup>3</sup> For a well-written analysis of shelter throughout London during the Blitz, see chapter 1, "Rockets Fell Like Autumn Leaves," in Maureen Waller's *London 1945* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004). Amy Helen Bell also discusses shelter extensively in her book *London Was Ours: Diaries and Memoirs of the London Blitz* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2008). While Waller argues for a nuanced understanding of sheltering, her analysis is slightly problematic because it addresses the entire city at once. I add a local perspective to what Waller says about the metropolis as a whole, restoring the sense that Londoners had of the city as being an amalgamation of distinct, separate boroughs rather than as simply one "London."



create an aggravating shelter experience while sheltering primarily with family members could mean casual socializing, not to mention ample time with loved ones. Critical questions include: were shelters nice? Cramped? Noisy? Dirty? Who might be in a shelter, and what might one see? Where and on what would people sleep while in shelters? Such questions cut to the heart of what Londoners experienced during the Blitz and together form the starting point of this thesis.

The second part of this chapter will examine life in the shelters as Londoners experienced it. The result of years of myth-making, scholars of the Blitz have generally focused on large Tube shelters, spaces where Londoners supposedly all stood together in unity.<sup>4</sup> But as discussed above, these formed a quite small fraction of the total shelter space, and an even smaller percentage in south London. This chapter restores the voices of individual Londoners, most of whom did not ever sleep in a large public shelter. It restores their thoughts, their actions, their worries, and their hopes. It will paint a picture which is both dark and rosy; of people missing their friends and families and troubled by the excessive noise but also accepting of changing circumstances and willing to endure whatever Hitler could throw their way. It is a story of significant, rapid, and traumatizing change but also of shared concerns and similar problems across a variety of landscapes. And it is a story suggesting, perhaps most importantly, that the Blitz's record is spottier and more fluid than scholars have acknowledged.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1950) offers a good example of such a scholar. Titmuss's book focused extensively on what he saw as unity and overarching senses of nation during the war, a presentation that most scholars of the Blitz (including myself) have challenged in the last four decades.

At first, sheltering was almost universally loathed, but in some shelters, this attitude tempered as the Blitz continued, an interesting development that will be explored in detail in the third part of this chapter. Cleaning and repairing shelters became a common occupation of south London's populations as the shelter spaces took on the role of bedrooms in regular houses for the duration of the Blitz. For some Londoners, that shelter space became a "home away from home" at night, a place of refuge considered safe (or at least safer) from bombing raids. It was a space which protected those things considered most dear to each individual; typically, this meant one's family and local community along with much-valued items to pass the time. But this was again far from universal. Many shelters, particularly the large ones that dotted the Thames, lacked any sort of emotional love from their inhabitants. The emergence of homelike spaces in some shelters but not in others again underscores the diversity of the experience, a variety that, drawn together, this chapter will restore.

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Perhaps most famous in popular memories of the Blitz are large public shelters, often Tube stations, which filled with hundreds of individuals on a given night. Related to Tube stations are large shelters at the surface or just below it, capable of holding a large and motley assortment of people. Known for their safety, deep public shelters could withstand bomb hits that other protective spaces could not. But this came at a price: large shelters were fairly safe, yet many Londoners avoided them because they were characterized by a lack of personal agency and a high degree of anonymity. Anonymity meant that families or individuals slept next to complete strangers, an experience that

many did not find reassuring in a time of war and in a shelter space which precluded most forms of individual control. Thomas Winter's memory of such a shelter reflects these challenges well. He wrote that on September 7, the community shelter near his family home was filled with "over two hundred people." As the bombs began to fall, "the noise from outside began to rise to intense ferocity" as he and his fellow Londoners sheltered below in a stuffy, hot, cramped shelter. Strangers grew anxious and concerned as bombs fell around them. Once smoke filled the shelter, it had to be rapidly evacuated, pushing its inhabitants out into the danger of the city once more.<sup>5</sup> The large shelter provided no form of comfort and very little refuge, ultimately leading its inhabitants back onto the bomb-laden streets from which they came.

Fortunately for those who hated these large shelters, south London did not have very many of them. While south London did have a few large public shelters, it did not have nearly as many as the areas surrounding the West End, Westminster, and the famous "underground restaurants" which kept London's elite safe—not to mention well-fed—during the Blitz. Even today, south London's London Underground network remains comparatively limited; this was even more the case in 1940, prohibiting extensive subway sheltering. Only the few Tube stations near the River Thames served as bomb shelters during the Blitz, most notably at Elephant and Castle and Borough.<sup>6</sup> Other types of large public shelters (often simple trenches dug in parks), varying in size from twenty

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<sup>5</sup> "Thomas S. Winter, "A Shout from the Night," March 1995, Southwark Archives.

<sup>6</sup> "A Bunker in the Borough," *South London Press*, March 31, 1981, Southwark Archives.

individuals or so to upwards of 1,000, existed in south London, but their use never rivaled that of other types of shelters.<sup>7</sup>

Those choosing the famed, though rare, large public shelters typically did so because they had few other options, not necessarily because large shelters were particularly desirable. Official government planning policy was to limit the number of large shelters as much as possible for fear that concentrating too many people in one location may lead to panic in the event of a bomb strike. The abundance of small cellars and areas to place Anderson shelters meant that the authorities got a boost in their mission, limiting the number of large shelters available. Still, a visitor to south London in 1940 would find a fair deal of public sheltering near the Thames River. In spite of their anonymity, the Tube stations near the Thames along with some large bomb shelters became attractive choices for those living along the river. Why? Because there were few suitable alternatives in a land area too small for Anderson shelters and often too cramped for everyone in a building to shelter in the basement. The forced nature of public sheltering demonstrates how aerial bombardment removed much of the agency of a chunk of south London's population. For those not near any smaller sheltering sites, the necessity of protection meant that all concerns about sheltering somewhere at least halfway desirable had to be quelled.

Far more common in southern London were various forms of shelter built around the home. Perhaps the most famous example of such a shelter is the Anderson shelter, a small, corrugated iron dwelling that could be placed in a small garden or plot in the back of one's house. Though not nearly as protective as deep underground shelters and made of

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<sup>7</sup> "Guide to Air Raid Shelters," September 1940, Lambeth Archives.

rather thin iron covered with dirt, Andersons could be procured cheaply and proved amply strong against most blast damage. Many south Londoners, particular those of middle class background or those a bit farther out from the city center whose properties were large enough to include a small garden in the backyard, utilized Anderson shelters as their primary form of protection. Easy to equip with bunks, able to sleep an entire family, and fairly simple to keep in operational condition, the Anderson shelter became a key component of the southern London shelter experience. A south London resident known as Mr. Nichols echoed such sentiments when he remarked that his Anderson shelter was sufficiently roomy for him to remain in even after the all-clear sounded each morning. He did not feel like he had to leave it as soon as possible simply to escape its suffocating tightness. Adding to the comfort was the persons inside. As Nichols did, citizens sleeping in Andersons usually sheltered with their immediate families or close friends and neighbors, creating a far more intimate atmosphere than the one found in large public shelters. Its versatility and simplicity made it a popular option.<sup>8</sup>

Like all shelters, Andersons came with their own problems, however. Bad weather meant that grime and dirt commonly overtook Anderson shelters, as a one Mr. Harpur reported in his diary. Mr. Harpur had installed an Anderson shelter in his backyard which he and his wife used as their primary shelter. During the first week of November, Mr. Harpur wrote that the fall rainwater had begun to seep into the Anderson shelter at night. By morning, he would have to bail the water out of the Anderson, a tedious task for a seventy-one year old man. Harpur's situation suggests that even seemingly more desirable shelters had a combination of pros and cons, once again complicating any picture of a

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<sup>8</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

unitary outcome of the London Blitz. Though he was able to shelter with his wife, the tradeoff for that luxury was waking up to inches of still, stagnant, mucky water.<sup>9</sup>

For those who did not have an Anderson shelter and chose not to frequent a public shelter, sleeping in different locations within the home became the most typical form of protection from air raids. In these “shelters,” conditions and spaces varied even more widely. Many of south London’s homes, particularly those farther from the River Thames, had sturdy enough basements to work as shelters, and Londoners pressed these into service immediately with the start of regular bombing raids. Basements and other cellars as well as dining rooms and even smaller closets throughout the home thus became one of the most common shelter experiences for much of south London during the Blitz. The vast range of housing options in south London makes generalizing difficult, but on the whole, shelters inside the home would usually include immediate family members and maybe close friends or neighbors, too—a similar demographic as those found in Anderson shelters. For apartment buildings or other structures with multiple tenants (often these were located in the more crowded housing areas near the river), basement sheltering became more of an amalgamation of people with anonymity reminiscent of large, public shelters, though residents would typically have at least a casual familiarity with one another.

Basement sheltering afforded Londoners enough room to sleep and familiar faces with which to pass the time, but this often came at the expense of coveted prewar personal space—yet another example of tradeoffs fundamental to the sheltering process. One

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<sup>9</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

London woman using her apartment's basement as a bomb shelter had plenty of complaints about the use of her flat's basement as a bomb shelter. Because her entire building would sleep in one room together, she was unable to read and practice piano down there, her two favorite prewar pastimes.<sup>10</sup> Her flat's dark basement, previously a space in which she could relax after a day's work as an ambulance driver, had instead become a place of public protection. What she saw as her private area had been invaded, filled with lines of other tenants trying to stay safe during the war. Not only had she lost her piano playing area but also found herself living next to the building's other residents in a cellar whose conditions were far less appealing than her own bedroom.

Basements were the most common type of home shelters, but they were not the only ones; dining rooms, living rooms, and even small closets could be pressed into service as shelters as well. Sometimes they were even reasonably nice! When asked by Mass Observation about her shelter, one south London woman named Ms. Corfe wrote that she slept in "a small [...] cloak room" located within her home.<sup>11</sup> Her sheltering accommodation had no sheets for sleeping, just a handful of pillows that had been brought down from upstairs. However, Ms. Corfe had gone to considerable effort to create a comfortable shelter for herself in the prewar period, something that many Londoners lacked either the money or the foresight to do. Before the war, her home had been "strongly reinforced by some architectural firm," making her home sufficiently safe to sleep in even at the height of the Blitz. In her prewar renovations, Ms. Corfe also had both a toilet and running water built into the area that became her sleeping quarters for the duration of the Blitz. Unlike many

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<sup>10</sup> Directive Reply 1570, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>11</sup> Directive Reply 1543, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

Londoners whose facilities could often be separate from their shelters and thus difficult to access during a bombing raid, Ms. Corfe did not have to worry about such challenges. Her home hardly seems like a space properly equipped to handle sleeping needs in a time of war, but Ms. Corfe and millions of other Londoners had few other options and had to simply make their circumstances work.<sup>12</sup>

As with other forms of shelter, use of smaller rooms on the main floor of a home could have their own problems, too. The sometimes crowded conditions of such spaces aside, the frequency of air raids exposed another key problem: such rooms were very hard to keep clean. The pillows, cushions, and rugs that Ms. Corfe dragged into her sleeping space would have to be washed and aired, a process which could happen only during daylight hours and could be plagued by frequent air raid warnings or the arrival of German bombers overhead.<sup>13</sup> Though Ms. Corfe managed to keep her shelter space fairly clear, most could not, and this could make an uncomfortable situation worse. Unable to clean shelters properly, it was not uncommon for even relatively nice accommodations to become rather nasty in time, realigning the priorities of inhabitants within them away from collaboration and socializing and towards personal necessities.

South London's shelter experience was marked primarily by intense diversity among the varying shelter spaces, so much so that overwrought generalizations without a more nuanced analysis about south London's shelters lack valuable meaning. Some could be filled with strangers; others consisted of family members or at least casual acquaintances. Some shelters grew very dirty; others remained at least livable, though far

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<sup>12</sup> Directive Reply 1543, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Directive Reply 1543, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



from ideal. Most shelters gave occupants little personal space, yet they provided ample protection against bombing raids—ultimately the most important factor for a city trying to stay safe. For scholars trying to understand the complicated effects of terror bombing not only of London but of other cities as well, the diversity seen in south London's shelter spaces during the Blitz means that the lives of individual Londoners, even those living relatively close to one another, could be very different indeed. Within these shelters came senses of community and closeness, particularly with those sharing the space but also as a sense of solidarity with those enduring the hardships of shelter elsewhere.

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The same dichotomy and series of mixed outcomes that marked the types of shelters accompanies activities within them as well. What actually occurred in shelters when German bombing raids hit? Were people able to sleep? Did people grow sick of their friends and families staying in shelters with them, or did they embrace some newfound sense of community? The experiences of Londoners while sheltering varied widely from person to person, home to home, and situation to situation. While there were real senses of community, often neglected are the voices of fear, anxiety, and complaint—about crowded conditions, boredom, and too much time spent with the same people, all indications of the tensions that underscored life in south London's shelters.

One of the great disturbances of the Blitz, particularly for young adults, was the cessation of evening social activities. The change struck the younger demographic especially fast and hard since pre-Blitz London had transformed itself into a space of great fun, a place where people of all types could relax and enjoy. Because bombing raids could

commence as early as 6pm, frequenting cinemas, dance halls, or pubs no longer occurred in the evenings. Everyone had to head to shelter instead. Common among those in her age group, one young London woman, Elizabeth Wheeler, wrote that “all my evening activities, such as attending classes, concerts, visiting friends, etc. has been cut out completely.”<sup>14</sup> Another Londoner, a 19 year old male name D.S. Bell, reported that the only visitors he saw were those who came from nearby. Due to telephone line disruptions, calling others wasn’t possible either, forcing him to spend much of his time alone.<sup>15</sup> For many of south London’s socially acclimated young adults, the end of their leisure time took a toll on their mental states. Many felt socially isolated and alone, unable to see friends and participate in the “normal” flow of London life. Heading down to the shelters to spend the night stoically awaiting the arrival of Hitler’s raiders was seldom part of the calculus of everyday individuals.

Lacking their usual social occupations to keep them busy, many found that too much time alone in shelter to think led to intense anxieties about life and the future. In response to the Germans’ preferred tactic of bombing by night, Londoners would be in shelter by 6 or 6:30pm and not emerge until the following morning—more than enough time to grow intensely bored without any kind of pastime. One J.P.H. Walton, a young man in his late 20s, liked (or perhaps was forced to, for lack of anything else to do) to think about his future during the long nights in shelter. He dreamed of going back to school, something that he never did in his younger years, and of what his future might look like after the war. Unfortunately, he quickly discovered what countless others did as well; that peace could be

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<sup>14</sup> Directive Reply 1570, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>15</sup> Directive Reply 2347, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

hard to come by through this method. As he thought about going back to school, he worried about spending his money so frivolously, adding a complex anxiety to his hopes and dreams. He did not worry about actually surviving the war—that was up to God—but had doubts that his home would escape intact. He wanted to save all of his money up to protect himself materially if the need arose.<sup>16</sup> One can clearly see that in Walton's boredom emerged a frightening, sometimes even paralyzing sense of fear. These feelings were all too common in the often quiet and sullen shelters of south London.

Those who did not want to repeat Walton's experience placed a renewed emphasis on finding ways to pass the time. This was accomplished in a variety of ways, both individually and collectively. One common way to spend the time, particularly among women, was knitting. Elizabeth Wheeler reported that she liked to knit since she could no longer play piano in the basement and could not read in the noise of the shelter either.<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth didn't adore knitting, but she found it more enjoyable than simply doing nothing at all. Boredom could become virtually maddening, and Londoners were more than willing to take up any activity to alleviate it. Another woman, J.C. Coombs, echoed Elizabeth's support for knitting; Coombs wrote that, unable to partake in her favorite pre-Blitz pastime, ice skating, she found knitting a good way to stay busy and keep her mind away from the anxieties of war. In a landscape marred with destruction and in need of distractions, many pastimes were reduced to the status of Elizabeth's and Coombs's—mere means to an end.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Directive Reply 2593, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Directive Reply 1570, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>18</sup> Directive Reply 2467, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

Reading was another common shelter pastime in the south London Blitz experience, one that had far more power to reach across the gender divide than knitting. Unlike Elizabeth, who found shelters too noisy for effective reading, Mr. Walton (and many others) had no problem reading in the downstairs part of his house. Walton, like many other Londoners, wrote that he “read more for lack of other occupations.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps most interesting is that just like Elizabeth’s affinity for knitting, Walton didn’t suggest that he loved reading or found it to be the ideal way to spend evenings (he didn’t; Walton liked to go out with his friends the most), but it was better than sitting at home with nothing to do. By allowing his books to take his mind off his circumstances, he found the ordeal easier. Any form of temporary escape was welcome; literature did it for Walton. Across virtually all forms of shelter leisure, a true prewar passion for a certain activity was not a prerequisite for its execution in a shelter environment. This demonstrates yet another, less obvious change brought about by the Blitz: how the bombing raids forced Londoners to become less picky about their leisure time activities.

Some paired reading with some form of reflection about the material as a way to add a much-needed sense of personal agency to the pastime. Mr. R. Harpur, the elderly man of about 70 whom we have already met, liked reading works of famous mathematicians to pass his time in shelter. Harpur found the works of Leibnitz, Newton, and Bernoulli most interesting and frequently used his diary as a space to figure out algebraic calculations, filling pages upon pages with challenging or confounding calculations. An educated man and a retired electrical technician, Harpur’s obsession with mathematics became his means of escape from the wartime conditions in his Anderson

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<sup>19</sup> Directive Reply 2593, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

shelter. Though certainly not everyone's choice of casual reading material, Harpur's books on mathematics kept his mind off of the war and his algebraic formulas kept him mentally engaged in a way that books alone could not.<sup>20</sup> Pairing his love of reading and mathematics helped him get through the experience of staying in his Anderson shelter for so many hours. Many other Londoners paired activities as well; most common was the pairing of one pastime with conversation.

Not all shelter activities took place just by individuals. Group ethos became a key component, especially as the Blitz dragged on longer and longer. In many cases, families sheltering together took advantage of the time to converse. In particular, smoking and small-talk with family members often went hand in hand and became a marked feature of London's social experience. Cigarette smoking, long a popular pastime in British society, continued in earnest during the war. Families would sit around in the shelters, smoke cigarettes, and chat with one another. The conversations themselves could vary as much as the spaces in which they were held. Sometimes discussions would focus on the war or attitudes towards the Germans (which, given the circumstances, were remarkably kind), but other times, it would be far less serious—a conversation about a favorite film or one's casual walk on a clear, work-free afternoon, for example. One south Londoner wrote that she found cigarettes and conversation particularly enjoyable pair because cigarettes “detach one's mind from one's body for a second or two after each breath,” allowing one the clear headedness required to engage meaningfully in conversation with others. While sitting in her home's cellar, this woman reported that she and her family commonly smoked and enjoyed “plenty of light hearted chatter” to put their minds at ease before

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<sup>20</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

going to sleep.<sup>21</sup> The lucky might even have a bit of alcohol to accompany the tobacco and talking, too. In a war marked by wanton destruction that could not be predicted, she remembered the time spent in the shelter as a strange mix of naturally frightening but also pleasantly relaxing.

Children in shelters occupied a rather contradictory position. It comes as no surprise that many shelters had children in them, and they had to be entertained; adult conversation would not suffice for that. Children became frightened far more easily than adults and responded more dramatically to loud noises. For the sanity of everyone else, parents had a responsibility to keep their children calm—and ideally quiet—during bombing raids. To accomplish this, many parents would play simple games with children or bring their child's favorite toys into shelters and use those to occupy the child's mind until bedtime. Interestingly, parents don't seem to have minded such activities even though they were both time and effort intensive. Though there existed pressure and stress to keep children quiet and under control, many parents loved having the extra time with their young children, understanding all too well that they would soon grow up and no longer spend so much time with their parents. For parents worried about their future relationships with their children, so much time in the shelters gave them time to enjoy the company of their children, even if the circumstances providing it were anything but ideal.<sup>22</sup>

The bombing campaign forced upon the city a number of interesting contradictions, not least of which was the Blitz-driven tension between the need to sleep and the difficulty of it. In part because sleep was so essential to workplace performance and also because

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<sup>21</sup> Diary 5278, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Diary 5278, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

social activities could be quite difficult in the noisy and cramped conditions of shelters, sleep became a high priority. The problem, however, was simple: though some Londoners slept well through the bombing raids and noise of the AA guns, the overwhelming majority did not. The population found sleep elusive owing to any combination of exploding bombs, AA fire, and noise from other sheltermates, depending on the individual's circumstances. On the night of November 5, Mr. Harpur reported that he went into his Anderson shelter around 6:30pm. In the ensuing twelve hours, Mr. Harpur logged not more than a couple hours' sleep owing to the insane noise from bombing raids and the sounds of anti-aircraft gun fire. He found the noise outside practically maddening, and by morning, Harpur had had enough. Though the all-clear did not sound until 8:15am, he left his Anderson shelter well before that and headed for his actual bed in his house, eagerly sleeping for a couple more hours before beginning his day. He simply couldn't take the lack of sleep any more. He appreciated protection from the raids, but he resented that this came at the expense of proper rest, a conflict that all too many other south Londoners had to address. The bombing raids forced upon society a need to sleep—to maintain productivity but also to alleviate boredom—yet simultaneously imposed upon society the exact conditions that were unfavorable to it.<sup>23</sup>

Lack of sleep exacerbated a number of problems, including complaints about shelter conditions. Shortly before the beginning of the Blitz, an observer noted that working class Londoners were already getting very little sleep, forced to stay in shelters from 7pm onwards.<sup>24</sup> With the arrival of nightly bombing raids, however, the situation grew worse;

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<sup>23</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>24</sup> File Report 391, September 6, 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

pressed into shelters with more and more people and surrounded by loud explosions which could come at all hours of the night, average sleep hours declined precipitously. By mid-September, not uncommon was the south Londoner who averaged just a couple hours of sleep a night. Instead of relaxing in their homes or having a pint at the pub, Londoners got to spend hours crammed in next to others, often total strangers, waiting out bombing raids with aggravating noise and no sleep. The elusiveness of restful sleep exacerbated an already difficult situation made many complain more about their shelters as the war went on.<sup>25</sup>

One south London woman, Ms. Cockett, made clear in her writing the effects that lack of sleep could have on one's attitudes towards sheltering and the war in general. Cockett started off by writing that "there's no word I can start off with to give the mood of these ghastly days and nights of bombs on London" before going on to explain how her "house shudder[ed]" when bombs would come. Cockett immediately proceeded to detail how thanks to a combination of noise from her ten fellow shelter mates and the falling bombs, sleep eluded her night after night. For Cockett, the "terrible fires" that she saw out her home's window when she could not sleep at night would "haunt" her, an effect surely intensified by her sleep deprivation. Cockett's diary expresses a strong sense of fear and anxiety about the war and the impacts that the Blitz had had on her life, and these tensions only increased as her nightly sleep average decreased.<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Nichols echoed the sleep problems of Harpur and Cockett in his diary. He reported that when the Blitz began in earnest on September 7, 1940, the bombing in the

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<sup>25</sup> File Report 431, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>26</sup> Directive Reply 1364, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



evening was “indescribable” and “incomprehensible”—quite strong terms for a man who had already endured his fair share of bombing raids. Because of the noise from the bombing raids and anti-aircraft fire near his home, Nichols reported that he often rested in “spells of sleep” which could frequently be interrupted by the aerial attacks. Unable to sleep, all Nichols could do was stay close to the others sharing the shelter and wait for morning to come.<sup>27</sup>

Making up for lost sleep became a critical challenge and provided the city with the opportunity to demonstrate its resourcefulness. Londoners still had to go on with work the following day regardless of how much sleep they got. Thus, Londoners took advantage of the time between the morning all-clear and the time that they had to start getting ready for the day to go to their regular beds and catch a couple hours’ uninterrupted sleep. After spending much of the night of November 5 awake in his Anderson shelter, Mr. Harpur strolled into his house around 7am. He immediately went to bed and slept for an hour or so before beginning his daily routine.<sup>28</sup> Though not all Londoners had the time to go back to bed before going to work, enough did to make these ‘morning naps’ a significant factor in the experience of south London during the Blitz.

Though south London’s population frequently complained about the cramped, boring, and sleepless conditions found within shelters, they also grew adept at finding ways to pass the time and enjoy a few spare hours with friends and family. For parents and families, spending time together was often seen as a small joy in a time of war; even young adults, a demographic which complained most about missing the social activities of city life,

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<sup>27</sup> Diary 5163, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>28</sup> Diary 5098, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

grew to appreciate the intimacy of some shelters. Occasional conversations with neighbors or friends utilizing one's shelter could bring pleasure and happiness as well, helping pass the time. Thus, while the shelter experience should be seen as primarily uncomfortable, the small comforts cannot be ignored either, comforts that grew more significant as the Blitz progressed. How these comforts merged to form a changing consciousness of shelter life is the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

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As the Blitz progressed, the divergence among experiences in different shelter spaces—even those located geographically near each other and containing similar socioeconomic demographics—grew even greater. In some places, shelters took the place of second homes, reaching a status of near affection, while in others, they were still viewed as the isolating, boring, cramped, and grimy spaces that they had been at the beginning of the Blitz. By early October, it becomes clear that while many Londoners saw their shelters as a replacement for their no-longer-safe houses or apartments and viewed them as a second “home,” this was nowhere near universal. Smaller shelters tended to be viewed in a “homelike” manner by their inhabitants, but large shelters still held generally the same opinion among their shelterers as they had when the Blitz began.

For those individuals sleeping in smaller shelters or in their homes rather than large shelters, the sense of ownership over the shelter space was quite pronounced. As one south London woman explained, her psychological need to go to the same shelter each night led her to travel far on a daily basis. She traveled to another part of the city with her

family each night because, as she said, “we’ve got an Anderson there.”<sup>29</sup> Unwilling to shelter in a different place closer to her home, this unnamed woman refused to go anywhere else because the Anderson shelter (most likely at the home of a friend or family member) had become her nighttime home. After spending so much time amongst the uncertainty of bombing raids, she found a certain comfort in sleeping in to the same place night after night even if it made little rational sense to travel so far for protection. She could not bear to be separated from what she saw as *her* Anderson shelter because she saw it as safe—both physically and mentally. But what made her and so many others feel an attachment to spaces that were, by all standards, small, cramped, and uncomfortable? The answer illuminates not just life in the shelters but also individual consciousness in a time when the lines between civilians and combatants were blurred.

The degree to which one perceived ownership over a shelter made a significant impact on the “homey-ness” of a shelter. As mentioned previously, Anderson shelters had a tendency to leak, a problem that could cause extensive flooding inside them and make conditions rather uncomfortable. Mr. Nichols had this problem with his Anderson shelter. To solve the problem, he got a little creative after breakfast one morning. Nichols hated the entering rain, so he rigged up a tarp in front of the entrance. That way, he could still get fresh air to enter the shelter but would have a way to keep the rain out.<sup>30</sup> Quite a clever idea! Though it seems like a small, unimportant detail, Nichols’s willingness to spend the time necessary to properly solve the water problem in his shelter demonstrates his own belief in the importance of taking control of the space that had become his home, even

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<sup>29</sup> File Report 431, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>30</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

though it was still a cramped, often dirty Anderson shelter. If he couldn't sleep in his actual house at night, Nichols figured that he might as well make his Anderson shelter as home-like and comfortable as possible, a move which required him to own his shelter space in a way that government planners could never have predicted. Nichols's decision to rig up the tarp indicates that he felt the shelter was his—after all, he could adapt it as he felt was appropriate.

The effects of creating homes in shelters were often far reaching, a point on which Nichols again proves a fairly typical south London case. In September 1940, Mr. Nichols hated sleeping in the Anderson shelter out back. Noisy and uncomfortable, he longed for his bed in the house and an end to evenings like the “disturbing nights” of the early days of the Blitz. Not even the time spent with his family made any difference to him. Based on how he felt in early September, Nichols would be the last person an onlooker would expect to someday like his shelter. Yet by late September, that's exactly what happened. One morning, the all-clear sounded at around 5am, at which point Nichols would ordinarily leave the shelter for the comfort of his bed in the house. But by late September, he would often stay in the Anderson even after the all-clear sounded. For him, remaining in the Anderson shelter was preferable to walking the twenty yards back into the house, climbing one flight of stairs, and getting into his regular bed. Why? He saw the Anderson shelter as a second home, making him less inclined to leave and also easing the Blitz experience. He had taken ownership of the shelter, making it relatively comfortable and treating it as he would his home. It also had the added benefit of familial connections. Nichols was able to spend time with his wife, time that he may not have had in the hustle and bustle of prewar south

London life. The fact that Nichols and others stayed in shelters even when they didn't have to is a remarkable reflection of how powerful home spaces could be.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the Blitz failed to impose upon all individuals this broader sense of community. South Londoners staying in large shelters only rarely viewed their shelters with the same affection that those in smaller, far more private shelters did. Unlike in smaller shelters, large public shelters did not grant the ability for individuals to feel as though they genuinely owned the shelter space, nor did they come with the close, intimate bonds that smaller shelters did. As a result, it is no surprise that those taking refuge in them did not view them with the same light as those individuals sheltering with family and friends. The fact that large public shelters never gained the adoration that their smaller brethren did points to the importance of agency and local community in aerial bombardment. Men like Thomas Winters, the man forced out of his Southwark shelter by a bombing raid, did not see their shelters as anything more than a space of protection. Homelike feelings were not there because the shelterers could not take personal control the way they could in smaller shelters and could not share the time as intimately with loved ones.

In spite of the lack of universality of home-like sensations in shelters, the abundance of smaller shelters in south London means that senses of agency and control in shelters were present for a great many south Londoners. Alas, because south London had a relatively higher proportion of smaller shelters than did the rest of the city, it is quite likely that senses of local community were more pronounced in south London than in other areas

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<sup>31</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

of the city. While south Londoners rarely expressed feelings of solidarity with the rest of the country, many personal testimonies point to the existence of support networks within the shelters, networks created and amplified by the space and activities of the shelters themselves. The vastly different experiences of different individuals points, once again, to the extensive range of shelter options that dotted south London.

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The beginning of the Blitz meant that Londoners had to adapt their nightly schedules not only to comply with the extensive blackout but also to ensure their own safety by often leaving their beds in search of safety. South London shelters came in a variety of forms, and what happened inside the shelters varied as widely as their physical characteristics. However, as September gave way to October and November, Londoners got used to their new lifestyles and made the best of difficult circumstances, suggesting that strategic bombing can have contradictory—and sometimes opposite—effects when viewed across time and space. Adjustment took time, but it did eventually happen, and the result was a sense of local community that contrasts sharply with the still uncomfortable conditions of shelter life. Senses of community came out of these shared experiences and attempts to create spaces, homes, and meanings out of war, a process that occurred very unevenly throughout the city. Yet even so, tensions between the discomfort of shelters and the sometimes robust life contained within them continued.

The emergence of home-like attitudes among many Londoners towards shelters primarily represents the formation of a local consciousness about the position of London within the context of total war. Sheltering with and enduring nightly attacks alongside the

same people led not only to a sense of home but also to a true sense of community among those who passed the time together. Many Londoners saw their shelter mates as more than just fellow men but as people with whom they had endured and shared something truly special. But this did not mean that shelters were pleasant! Quite the contrary. Sheltering was an inherently uncomfortable process, marked by tight conditions, lack of social life, and extreme boredom. Thus, the picture of south London in shelters that emerges is one which at first seems contradictory: an area sheltering in discomfort but still finding a way to build communities at the same time.

Elizabeth Wheeler's directive reply to Mass Observation summed up what it meant to shelter; she wrote that raids have "banished all private life entirely. We all live in a community now."<sup>32</sup> Wheeler's writing reflects the dichotomous results of strategic bombing: that it brought senses of local unity but also local dissent; homes amid discomfort; and social lives among the ongoing anxieties and boredom of war. Elizabeth's prewar life had been totally destroyed by the bombs, yet those same weapons had given rise to a new one. The prewar way of life had been put on hold and supplanted by nightly sheltering and cramped conditions sometimes approaching squalor. Inside the shelters, a wide array of activities took place. Sometimes shelters were busy, full of conversation or the occasional game. Other times, they were frightening environments in which individuals confronted their hopes, dreams, fears, and distresses about the future. In south London, just about anything could be found in the shelters.

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<sup>32</sup> Directive Reply 1570, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

Of course, the Blitz had impacts beyond life in shelters. Londoners had to take to the streets to get on with their daily lives, and the confusing, conflicting effects of aerial warfare can be seen there, too. It is to London's transportation structures that we shall now turn our focus.



## CHAPTER TWO

## Transport for London

The preceding chapter explored the complicated nature of shelter in southern London during the Blitz. However, even in a time of total war, the lives of Londoners could not be restricted to their safe shelters. People had to go to work. They had to go shopping to buy food and other basic supplies. They went to visit family and friends, sometimes next door or down the road but often across town as well. Though prewar social venues operated on limited hours during the Blitz, some Londoners went out for an afternoon movie or a trip to the pub, trying to maintain some sense of normalcy. Some brave south Londoners, mostly youth, would even go out for a pleasurable foray without any practical purpose besides clearing their minds, walking their city streets while hoping to avoid bombing raids.

Transportation remains one of the most neglected topics in Blitz historiography, perhaps because transportation networks fit poorly into the postwar mythology of London unity. When the war came to an end, fame fell above all else on shelters. The story of people supposedly working together in the depths of the city to sustain both physical and mental energy in a time of total war had a powerful appeal to postwar narratives constructing the Blitz as Britain's heroic stance. Shelters fit neatly into a myth constructing Britain's ultimate victory as the result of its citizens' superior willpower. With trains dysfunctional, buses barely moving, and walking and biking both immensely dangerous, it became difficult to create any great national story out of London's transportation structures. The "heroic" moments (a mythology which has already been challenged) were superseded by

the moments of fear, something that transportation symbolized all too well. Yet this removal from postwar stories can be leveraged by modern scholars in a productive way because it tells something about the nature of getting around the city. The large silence of transportation structures suggests that trains, buses, and walking were areas of higher than normal anxiety and fear, even in a city full of both. As Judith Walkowitz pointed out in her pioneering study of the West End district of Soho, transportation in London was supposed to be “a modern space open to all,” a description that applies just as well to south London.<sup>1</sup> Yet when the Blitz came, transportation became an area of increased tensions, the result of few communities with which to share the experience.

Virtually every means of mobility underwent change after the commencement of regular bombing raids in late August and early September 1940, and these changes tell much about south London’s population. Most impacted by the destruction were trains and various forms of light rail such as trams. Railways, stations, and even the vehicles themselves were vulnerable to attack, particularly those located nearest the River Thames. However, destruction was not limited to these. Bus transportation endured a variety of service interruptions throughout the Blitz as well, generally owing to poor road conditions or arrival of new air raids but also sometimes due to destruction of buses. And finally (and perhaps most often overlooked) are our own natural forms of transportation: walking and biking. The mere act of walking the city streets could frighten many a cautious Londoner, and the arrival of a new air raid could force one to rapidly take shelter in uncomfortable

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<sup>1</sup> Walkowitz, Judith. *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), image 7, p. 178-179. Walkowitz does a fantastic job discussing the urban space of Soho, and her emphasis on one distinct area of London maintains the understanding that Londoners had of their city. However, readers should note that Walkowitz’s book is rather thin on Blitz-era material. This thesis takes the local which Walkowitz so succeeds at and investigates a very short time period in greater depth and detail.

locations. In spite of the danger, walking remained an important of mobility and is therefore necessary to explore with more precision. Biking, a common sight across prewar London, also maintained its importance throughout the Blitz, though not without challenges of its own. Bikers faced problems from road damage as well as from the oppressive darkness of blackout conditions, making their journeys challenging.

By 1939, public transportation, primarily trains, trams, and buses had become the dominant means of transportation in south London. As a primarily working class area, the rise of the automobile had not yet reached the laboring population south of the Thames; only a rare few in inner south London could afford to own a vehicle or hire a taxi. But fortunately for most, trains remained relatively inexpensive and were ubiquitous. A cursory look at the map of London south of the River Thames shows the dominance of railroads in this area of the city; it was these networks that moved south London. By 1940, more Londoners went to work by train and tram than by any other means, meaning that any disruptions to trains or trams had the potential to interfere with the lives of millions. Buses, more common along shorter transit routes, had similarly become popular before the war. Roadway damage as well as blackout conditions were the main impediments to buses during the Blitz; however, because buses could use alternate roadways whereas trains and trams could not, the Blitz impacted bussing marginally less than it did rail.

Though commonly ignored in the scholarship, transportation disruptions were so severe that they became the most commonly complained about feature of life during the Blitz. Disruption became not just an occasional incident that one experienced every so often but rather a new status quo. London's previously well-organized, on time

transportation structures were no longer the standard. This observation suggests that crowding, delays, danger, and anxiety were the rule, and a rule that was not well loved. It also points to the ever changing nature of transportation. Whereas sleeping venues typically changed just once (at the start of the Blitz) or in response to destruction transportation disruptions shifted week to week, day to day, and hour to hour. By exploring the history of transportation in Blitz-era south London, this chapter will argue that transportation represented the lowest depths of the Blitz, a space in which Londoners came face to face with the immense power of aerial warfare in a way which seldom allowed for claims of collective or individual heroism. It was the space where the Blitz was always altering the normal flow of life and exposing Londoners to the gravest dangers without the communities found in shelters to soothe the problem. However, as with shelter, this picture is not all-encompassing. Some forms of transportation caused more problems than others. Challenging a notion of transportation solely as a harrowing subject, some saw activities like walking not as frightening but as liberating. And as in shelters, locally driven actions helped alleviate some—though fewer than with shelters—of the problems.

Like the preceding chapter, exploration of south London's transportation networks shall be subdivided into its component parts. The first part of this chapter explores various public transportation, emphasizing the changes to train and bus networks. It examines what life on a London train, tram, or bus might have been like and shows how Londoners handled the uncertainties of mobility. It also demonstrates how public transportation felt to Londoners very unsafe—not an unreasonable impression to have—and how public transportation led to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. But it shall also show the challenges to these feelings—how the city's people took small, generally localized and

individualized, steps to give themselves a feeling of control and keep life running as normally as they could. The picture that emerges, thus, is much more complicated than one might initially think: of a city certainly frightened but also one with strains of resistance. Where it existed, south London's sense of resistance was, like in shelters, usually, though not always, based on the actions of lone individuals or small groups rather than massed popular or governmental responses.

In spite of increased mechanization, however, Londoners still had to take to the streets privately to get around, the subject of the second half of this chapter. In a city where many shopped, lived, and worked near each other, walking and biking were already very efficient ways of getting around in the prewar period. With the public transit disruptions that accompanied the Blitz, the prominence and vital importance—as well as the danger—of both increased dramatically. This fact was not lost on the many who implored their loved ones to avoid the streets as much as possible. However, for some, walking retained its prewar appeal; many south Londoners, particularly young adults, saw walking in the same relaxing spirit that they had seen it in before the war. The danger seems not to have bothered them much, suggesting that, like with shelter, the outcome of the bombing campaign was very mixed even in a relatively small geographic space. These smaller transportation systems thus add yet another layer of complexity to the story of south London's during the Blitz.

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On Monday, September 2, 1940, a bystander of the city may have seen S. J. Cartley set off from his Deptford home for work. He arrived at the train station around 8am; ten

minutes later, the train pulled up to the station just as the air raid siren sounded. Suddenly, no one seemed to know what was going on. Few of the train station staff knew what was happening, and no one opened up the shelter near the station. And to make an already confusing situation even worse, patrons of the train station did not go to the shelter, instead standing around on the platform assessing the imminent danger and blocking the way of those trying to find protection.<sup>2</sup>

The chaos which Cartley experienced became a hallmark of train transportation around south London during the Blitz. Trains could cease running altogether, and if they did run, they could be late or skip over stations due to bomb damage. Since railroads were often located in large, vulnerable open areas, they usually suffered more than roads when bombs came.<sup>3</sup> Assuming they were running at all, trains and the stations supporting them could be very busy, particularly during rush hours when many Londoners were traveling to or from work, creating claustrophobic environments amplified by the delay-driven crowding. And of course, in a city facing constant aerial assault, exposure out in the open or being stuck on a train created obvious safety problems as well, a facet of transportation not lost on the population either.

Taking a train meant getting to a train station, a proposition that in and of itself fast proved problematic and demonstrated the Blitz's power to disrupt without killing. A great many Londoners could not even start their journeys, unable to reach the station due to air raids. One day in mid-August, Ms. O.E. Cockett prepared to head off to the train station to head home from work. Right as she was about to leave her work as a civil servant, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Directive Reply 5039.3, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>3</sup> *The London County Council: Bomb Damage Maps, 1939-1945*, London Metropolitan Archives.

the air raid siren went off, forcing her to temporarily delay her departure. When the all clear finally sounded, Ms. Cockett “raced off to the station” trying desperately to catch the next train back to her home. Unable to make the train in time, she had to wait 15 minutes for the next train to come. Such was a day in the life of south London during the Blitz. Waiting around for trains, especially after the long work days required by the war, became common and particularly irksome for those in a city accustomed to well-regulated transit services.<sup>4</sup> In the ever-changing conditions of the Blitz, many small issues combined to form big ones, just as Cartley and Cockett discovered.

Even assuming that trains were running, many did not go all the way to their intended destinations due to rail destruction, a further frustration that, in addition to invoking ire due to the delays, exposed Londoners to danger for even longer. Ms. Corfe had family living in Buxton, and she liked to try to visit them (yet another reminder of the importance of friends and family during the Blitz). However, when the Blitz came, Ms. Corfe found it increasingly difficult to do so because on any given day, the chances of the trains actually going all the way to her final destination could be slim to none. Corfe’s words themselves put it nicely: with “no trains, no trams, very few crowded buses running quite likely not to go the whole way,” traveling by train became extremely difficult during the Blitz. And because some of the delays took place once trains had already left the station, not uncommon was the train left idling on the tracks, exposed to any danger that might come overhead.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Diary 5278, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>5</sup> Diary 1543, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

Thanks to service disruptions, trains and their stations often ended up completely packed. One day in late August, O.E. Cockett's crowded train pulled into London's Waterloo Station. Ms. Cockett then wrote that she had to push through crowds of commuters just to get off the train; meanwhile, the loudspeaker overhead blared that commuters should try to use the London Underground when possible because it had been less disrupted by air raids.<sup>6</sup> One can practically sense the confusion and disorder in Waterloo Station that day. Cramped, filled with stinking, stale air and noisy, Ms. Cockett and her fellow Londoners missed the more normal train travels of prewar days as they pushed and sweated their ways through rush hour crowds trying to get home to friends and family.

This strange, often random-feeling train crowding turned out to be one of the main irritants during the Blitz, an irritant actually amplified by one's experience on *empty* trains. As Ms. Cockett's example shows, many trains were packed to the gills, creating a claustrophobic environment. But this was not always the case. A train could be packed today only to be nearly empty tomorrow. One day, Ms. O. E. Cockett went into London on a crowded train, yet the following day, that same train had barely a third of the previous day's passengers.<sup>7</sup> The gross variation along the same train line from one day to the next was not lost on Cockett or the other passengers. The variance reminded individuals that one simply had no way of knowing if a train would be full or empty until actually heading to the train station to find out. In a city that prided itself on predictable and reliable transportation networks, the absence of order was resented indeed. Not only did Londoners not know if the train would be running on time (or running at all), but they also

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<sup>6</sup> Diary 5278, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>7</sup> Diary 5278, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



didn't know how comfortable the trip might be. Would the train be smashed full? Or would it be completely empty? The answer was anyone's guess. While it seems like Londoners would have appreciated the variation since it sometimes produced empty trains, the shifting nature of train loads—even when it did produce empty trains—caused more angst than it did pleasure because of what it represented.

In sharp contrast to the strategic bombing narratives normally told of all Londoners “pitching in” for the good of all, train and tram conductors often made themselves part of these problems when trouble arose instead of the solution, particularly towards the start of the Blitz. Often unaware of what to do during a raid, it was not uncommon for a conductor to suddenly end a journey because of a raid, a problem amplified by a lack of credible training. One tram conductor described the issue nicely to a *South London Press* reporter. He stated that “[conductors] have been given no definite instructions what to do in a raid. It is up to us to decide whether we continue the journey or take shelter.”<sup>8</sup> This meant that passengers at stops farther along the line were stuck waiting either for the next one or forced to take a bus or walk.

And of course, the frequent danger of train travel during the Blitz cannot be neglected, a danger that underscored the limits of what Londoners would do to keep life running as it had before. Once trains left their stations and began their routes to the next station, they were particularly vulnerable. They often could not simply stop and allow their passengers to get off in the event that an air raid came overhead. Though most train stations ostensibly had a bomb shelter nearby and an evacuation plan in place in the event

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<sup>8</sup> “Tram Driver’ Refusal,” *South London Press*, August 30, 1940, Southwark Archives.

of a raid, such plans usually fell to the wayside in practice. As experienced at Cartley's train station, the most common reaction to an approaching raid was not mass participation but rather inactivity! More often than not, no one or just a couple of individuals would step forward to open a shelter or give directions to passengers. Ms. O. E. Cockett, acutely aware of the vulnerability that railroad travel faced from bombing raids, refused to take the train over long distances alone during the Blitz, fearful of what would happen if a raid came overhead while she was in transit. While Cockett liked to head up to Essex to visit friends and catch some fresh air, her anxieties about traveling there alone in a railroad situation whose service and safety could be severely compromised kept her from doing so. Protecting herself was worth the sacrificed time with friends and family—for her, not even her own social networks were strong enough to make her get on a longer train ride.<sup>9</sup>

Ms. Cockett's anxieties were not without basis either. Destruction of transportation networks wasn't just a myth—it was a reality reinforced by the experiences of everyday individuals. On September 17, an incendiary bomb fell on the Heme Hill Railroad Station in the London Borough of Lambeth. An unfortunate tram waiting in the station caught fire. Miraculously, all the passengers on the tram were able to evacuate to safety before it went alight, but for many, it was a particularly close call. The experience was an apt reminder that one could never totally know when bombs might fall or when one might be the victim of a falling bomb.<sup>10</sup>

We have seen unpredictability used multiple times as a catchword for disruption, and Londoners living through the Blitz hated this element of life most of all. After the week

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<sup>9</sup> Diary 5278, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>10</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 386, September 17, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

of service disruptions described above, Nichols explained how one could not know what the train service status might be until one actually set off from home to find out. If Nichols got lucky, trains would be running on time. If unlucky, they wouldn't be running to his station at all, a frustrating experience for someone trying to get to work on time every day.<sup>11</sup> To compensate, one had to leave home with enough time to get to one's destination (typically work) by some other means in the event that the normal transit services were not running properly. Given how many south Londoners liked to go back to bed after a night of sleeping in the shelters (explained in chapter one), leaving home earlier to get to work meant more than just a frustrating commute: it meant a loss of precious hours of uninterrupted sleep. And above that, one never knew if the train would be crowded or relatively open—a factor which controlled the level of comfort with which an individual traveled. Full trains could be claustrophobic and uncomfortable; empty trains far more peaceful and relaxing. And the arrival of an air raid overhead could put safety in jeopardy and create an anxious citizenry, further complicating an already difficult situation. Only later in the Blitz did train staff learn how to properly handle the ever-changing set of challenges posed by the assault, meaning that frustration truly did reign. These frustrations were made all the more intense by the feeling of “alone-ness” so commonly felt on trains. Physically separated from loved ones, Londoners too often had to sit in silence, busied only by the (generally anxious) thoughts of their minds.

South London was clearly an area of substantial disruption during the Blitz. What factors made disruption better, and what factors made it worse? How could improvements be made? Not surprisingly, geography was one of the main indicators of disruption. The

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<sup>11</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

gross overcrowding of Cockett's particular train at Waterloo indicated how service disruptions across southern London were based largely on where exactly the train was within the city. Because large train stations such as Waterloo Station were normally located in the more heavily bombed areas near the river, train delays at Waterloo and stations like it tended to be worse than those farther south, away from the targeted river. The closeness of railroad tracks to one another as they approached the major junctures near the river intensified the effect. One bomb near the river—where tracks were closer together—had a higher chance of causing disruption than if it fell further to the south, away from the tight crowding of tracks. And because so many Londoners passed through the major stations near the river, the physical arrangement of railroads combined with the river-targeted German bombing campaign made for even more disruption. The general picture that emerges, thus is that those farther away from the River faced fewer disruptions. Though bomb aiming during the Second World War was inaccurate, the German emphasis on the Thames meant that more bombs fell near it than farther away from it, and the greater spacing of tracks and less crowding farther south reduced the damage done when a bomb did land in these areas.

Proper planning, which was almost always done on a small, local scale, also helped keep the system running. Platform staff, many acting on their own volition and without instructions from superiors, opened shelters to passengers. Some trains were able to depart or leave a bit earlier to avoid bombing raids. Train stations without shelters equipped themselves with them—or found a suitable shelter nearby and arranged for it to absorb stranded passengers should danger approach. Conductors operating a train during a raid could stop near a large shelter and allow their passengers to disembark and seek

protection there or continue on to the next station, where protection was likely to be available. These initiatives were all about local individuals in small-scale circumstances making decisions largely disconnected from the national picture. And as the various individuals keeping the train system operating understood the nature and impact of raids better and better, the process worked ever more effectively.

Perhaps the best relief from the stresses of transportation was finding a spontaneous “community” on the trains to offset feelings of loneliness. On September 18, Mr. Cartley found himself on a particularly full train on his way into the city. But instead of sitting quietly, Cartley made small talk with those around him, later remarking that people seemed to be in good spirits thanks to the conversation. It helped pass the time and kept everyone’s minds off the crowding, delays, and safety issues.<sup>12</sup> Even when conversation was of a sadder nature, it still helped Londoners with their own anxieties. While on a train himself one September day, R. J. Nichols came across a family whose home had been destroyed. The family was in transit to a relative’s house where they intended to stay. While such stories normally reminded Londoners of how badly their co-locals’ lives had been impacted by the war, it seems to have had the opposite effect on Nichols. He found the conversation nice. It was admittedly sad, yes, but it gave him someone to talk about and added a much-needed personal aspect to transportation networks so often lacking any sense of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

The other primary form of public transportation used by Londoners again demonstrated the same mix of anxieties and local solutions: buses. Used by countless

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<sup>12</sup> Diary 5039.3, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

Londoners on a daily basis, the bus system complimented the existing train systems, particularly over shorter distances. But when the Blitz came, bus systems changed dramatically. Because they had to pick up excess passengers neglected by train services, they became much more crowded than most Londoners were used to. Since much of south London's working population had to commute into the city center to work, it was essential to keep at least some form of public transportation running, and the relative flexibility of buses made them ideal for the role. And like with trains, their routes changed with alarming frequency in response to bomb damage and road closures. Given the initial slowness to find solutions to train delays, figuring out how to deal with disruptions to bus service—trains' main replacements—became key.<sup>14</sup>

Largely owing to their role as train replacements, buses saw their importance in south London's transportation structures greatly increase during the Blitz. This meant that their scheduling became haphazard. Because buses were recruited into service on an as-needed basis, things taken for granted in peacetime could become major issues during wartime. Pressed into service so hastily, buses often did not even have their destinations written on them, a problem which Mr. Harpur experienced on November 15. Harpur intended to go to Croydon and lined up in the correct spot to catch the bus going there, but to his surprise, the bus that pulled up did not indicate its destination! Unable to tell where the bus was actually headed, everyone else lined up began asking the bus driver where he

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<sup>14</sup> Most of the roads used by buses in south London during the Blitz came from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century transformations of the city's urban landscape. In the first chapter of her book Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Judith Walkowitz discusses the changing layout of Soho, an area of London's West End, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jerry White also extensively tackles the issue of late Victorian London road restructuring across the entire city in his book London in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God (London: Random House, 2007). While this thesis does not discuss either topic in great detail, both Walkowitz and White have contributed much-needed research to the study of London history.

was heading. Both a waste of time an inconvenience, even small disruptions like this could take their toll on the transportation networks.<sup>15</sup> And with buses changing their “routes” so frequently, it becomes clear why even just keeping the signage on the vehicle straight, far less anything else, became a challenge.

Busing faced many of the same problems encountered by trains. Most buses operated along major roadways; unfortunately, these also tended to be the roads that suffered the worst damage due to bombing—again a reflection of geography. To make buses faster, routes operated on major thoroughfares. During the Blitz, this became a liability. Major roads generally had fewer buildings nearby to contain the power of an explosive, so bombs hitting on major roadways caused greater damage—and greater disruption—than if they fell on a smaller side street, endangering the lives of bus passengers in the process.<sup>16</sup> When buses came upon damaged or destroyed roadways, they had to navigate around, delaying the trip. Since road closures diverted more than just buses, traffic jams ensued. This problem was exacerbated if debris happened to fall in the roadway (very common) or if emergency vehicles, which typically used main thoroughfares to make their way through the city, came through and delayed traffic. And buses themselves could be hit by bombs, usually killing all on board. For fear of causing a panic, newspapers seldom reported on bus bombing incidents that caused death, but civil defense files make clear that when confronted with bombing, south London’s overloaded buses usually saw at least one death. Just like how trains and trams engendered negativity, buses

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<sup>15</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>16</sup> *The London County Council: Bomb Damage Maps, 1939-1945*, London Metropolitan Archives.

had a similar effect due to a similar combination of factors, delays, crowding, and safety chief among them.

The only way to offset the combined issues of rail and road was to figure out how to use both systems fluidly, substituting one for another on an individual basis. On September 18, Mr. R. J. Nichols found that the trains from his home were not running; typically when this occurred, he would walk to work instead. But on this day, Nichols got particularly lucky—the bus services still operated. This enabled him to substitute one form of transportation for another, not requiring a substantial expenditure of energy on his part either. Nichols remarked how happy he was to have some form of actual transport instead of trekking off on foot, a sentiment shared by many other Londoners happy to finally be provided with alternative transportation. It was often individuals just making their way about the city who figured out how to best get to their respective destinations, a process done without advice from officials from government or transportation authorities.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the danger and reminders of randomness, south London's population appreciated the bus replacement schemes. This suggests that Londoners understood both the importance and impact of local efforts to organize transportation. On September 9, S. J. Cartley had to take a combination of trains and buses to get home from work. He remarked that the transit system was running so late that "it was getting dark [by the time the bus got to the next train station]," from which he had to then re-board a train to complete his trek home.<sup>18</sup> He was not happy about the constantly changing nature of transportation systems, but at least public transit was operating all the way to his destination. Because he did not

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<sup>17</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>18</sup> Diary 5039.3, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



have to spend time walking home, Cartley arrived sooner and was able to spend more time “resting” (owing to shelter challenges, how much sleep he got could be anyone’s guess) than figuring a way home. Official records indicate that local authorities did indeed implement extensive bus substitutions throughout the Blitz; these worked remarkably well as a compliment to trains, and they were popular with the citizens for their simplicity and as a symbol of official attempts to keep life orderly.

But more often than not, it was again local tendencies rather than centralized planning that kept the bus system running. On the November day that Mr. Harpur’s bus failed to indicate its destination, prompting a wave of inquiries directed at the driver, Londoners showed odd—and often overlooked—creativity. To make clear where the bus was going, Harpur took advantage of the bus’s dirt-covered body to scrawl the destination on what he, probably in an understatement, described as a “dusty window.”<sup>19</sup> What motivated him was a local sensibility and a desire to help those in his social circle. Others in the immediate area—on the bus and at the bus stations—benefitted because a stranger wrote the route number on the side of the bus. Taking small steps to make life easier for oneself and those in one’s immediate vicinity was much less about providing for the good of the nation or turning small actions into nationalistic symbolism than it was simply taking care of those sharing a transport space. In these efforts, bus drivers gradually started to pitch in, too. Because so many roadways were put out of commission temporarily when bombing raids came in, drivers used their knowledge of the local area to redirect their buses around bomb incidents. Though it cost the passengers precious time and forced them to stay on overcrowded buses even longer, it nonetheless contributed to keeping the

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<sup>19</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

system running as efficiently as it did. The drivers shared similar ideologies: they felt that at least part of their job was to help the local population get around, a sentiment firmly affixed in a desire to help those in their geographic area, both friend and stranger.

As with other elements of the Blitz, however, the experiences of some lie far outside the norms. There were a few individuals, most among young adults seeing the war as an exciting break from the monotony of everyday life, even managed to enjoy parts of their travel disruptions. In 1989, fifty years after the start of the war, Britain went into a year of re-living and sharing the experiences of it. When looking back on his experiences as a young man in south London, Donald Beale remembered that on one day, he had seen the East End docklands burning while on a train ride home through Southwark. Beale remembered the experience as “awesome”—as a “memory that will remain with me to the end of my days.”<sup>20</sup> In his young years, Beale felt that there was something exotic and thrilling amidst the terror of the war. It was a time which he saw as the making of history, and he was intrigued to live it, a sentiment reflected in his use of the word “awesome” to mean “awe inspiring.” Of all the memories that Beale could have chosen to recall fifty years later, he felt it necessary to point out just how “awesome” he thought the fires were—a stunning reflection of one man’s introspective experience aboard a south London train one day, watching what he saw as the fascinating yet terrifying destruction of a city.

The evidence from south London’s public transport systems points towards a few different conclusions, often running against one another. Most notably, transportation disruptions impacting train schedules aggravated and irritated south London’s population

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<sup>20</sup> “War Work Starts in Earnest,” *South London Press*, September 5, 1989, Lambeth Archives

largely because the train system had become so vitally important to keeping the region moving. Losing it meant the loss of ability to travel throughout the city rapidly and affordably. In spite of upset, however, Londoners proved fairly willing to deal with the changes, if for no other reason than they had no choice. While Londoners did often pitch in to help keep the operation running as smoothly as possible, it was done out of a sense of “south London-ness”—of a feeling of connection to those sharing the transportation system. The connections between and among individuals in the same geographic area were primarily responsible for the corrective action taken by citizens. As with shelter, this is not to suggest that senses of nation did not exist at all but rather to argue that they were not always the most salient features of south London’s experience during the Blitz.

In spite of local actions to combat the challenges of trains, trams, and buses during the Blitz, transportation remained the lowest point of life for many south Londoners. Why? Because it was a place largely devoid of community. Though Cartley was able to make basic conversation on his travel, most were not. Sitting in fearful silence on a bus or train, away from friends and family, meant internalizing one’s own stresses and anxieties. There was no one to talk to; no one to distract one’s mind; no one with whom to feel connected. Local efforts to keep public transportation running safely and efficiently no doubt helped lessen tensions, but they were not able to erase them. For many, the commute was the worst part of the day and a symbol of the destructive potential of modern war.

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But what happened when the trains, buses, and other forms of public transportation could not run or did not run efficiently enough to make them worth the while? Or how did

one get around on short distance treks, journeys where public transit made little sense? In both cases, walking or biking answered the question. Before the war, walking had established itself as the easiest and fastest way to traverse short distances. The advent of bombing and the train, tram, and bus disruptions that accompanied it only increased the importance of non-mechanized transportation. The second part of this chapter, thus, explores this non-mechanized mode of transportation both as a substitute for mechanized transportation but also as a form of mobility that could stand on its own. Walking and biking contain many of the same contradictions and challenges faced by public transportation, namely the balance between necessity and danger. But it also offers a unique insight because it was perhaps the only means of transportation by which south London's population could feel a sense of ownership and agency—a sense of control which, as we shall see, was hotly debated among Londoners.

The process of walking in a city under attack carried with it a host of different problems. Most notably, the unpredictability of air raids meant that one could easily be forced into any nearby shelter when bombers suddenly came overhead. One day while out walking, R. J. Nichols happened upon two bombing raids. With the arrival of planes overhead, Nichols both times made his way into public shelters to avoid bombings. Inside, he “had to stand as beds were lying around with women and children on them.” Nichols had fallen on bad luck to be twice interrupted on his trip, and the air raids caused him to be delayed, holed up in a cramped, dirty public shelter with young children and their caretakers. Inside these cramped quarters came the same anxieties and fears of shelters: fears about the safety of oneself and one's family; the uncertainty of life during war; and the

random nature of destruction. When caught in a raid, walking served not only as a physical sign of danger but also as a time of fear and angst as well.<sup>21</sup>

Once inside a shelter, one could have no way of knowing how long the raid would last, transforming the ordinarily fast act of walking into a very slow way around. Though more common in the early days of September, the frequency of major daylight raids dwindled rapidly as the Blitz wore on. This meant that as September gave to October and into November, getting caught in a shelter while traveling occurred more often in the evenings and at night than it did during the day. It was not uncommon, therefore, for an individual forced into a shelter to have to stay there for many hours or, in the case of major attacks, the whole night. As was demonstrated in chapter one, spending the night in a public shelter—with others away from their normal shelter due to transportation disruptions, it bears mentioning—was in no way an enjoyable experience. Because it meant that an individual was stuck away from home without friends or family, it was lonely. And in this loneliness came worries about loved ones—a return to south Londoners' desires to maintain the stability of their local connections. Ms. Corfe, who lived just five minutes from work and walked there every day as a result, echoed these concerns. Corfe worked a long job, meaning that she had to walk home at night. By 8pm, when Corfe was able to leave work, German raids had generally started, and this meant that Ms. Corfe had to guess the right moment to leave work. Guess incorrectly, and she could find herself ushered into a shelter by a warden as bombs fell nearby—or worse.<sup>22</sup> Under such conditions, it is no

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<sup>21</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Diary 5285, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

wonder that Corfe described her trips home in heavily euphemistic language as “a bit unnerving”.<sup>23</sup>

Given how many more people were walking during the Blitz, the time delays from raids steadily ate into rest time. R. J. Nichols made note of the marked increase in walking in his diary on September 18. He noted that owing to transportation disruptions, most of the city had to simply fall back on its feet to get around, not a particularly comfortable arrangement.<sup>24</sup> Alluding to the sometimes considerable distances that Londoners had to walk, Nichols went on to say that while some simply get stuck waiting for delayed trains to arrive, “others have to walk to and from their work.”<sup>25</sup> Nichols’s diary entry mentions how tiring this could be; expecting long days of work already, many Londoners missed having their normal ways to get around intact because walking required both physical and mental exertion—physically to move one’s body over sometimes considerable distances and mentally as Londoners worried about impending bombing raids during their journeys.

Cycling faced many of the same problems as walking. In addition to the usual complement of bombing raids and unenviable delays, biking faced additional problems from blocked roads and blackout conditions. Londoners cycling around the city had to be aware of road closures, many of which made passage by bicycle impossible. On September 13, St. Thomas’s Hospital near the River Thames was bombed, knocking debris onto the street below. While such a road was likely passable by foot, riding a bike over broken glass and past extensive ruins became impossible. Londoners trying to bike across the river from Westminster had to walk their bikes over or around the damage in the roadway, an

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<sup>23</sup> Diary 5285, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>24</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>25</sup> Diary 5163, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

inconvenience indeed. And when night fell, the blackout conditions made seeing the pavement near impossible, descending the city into an eerie darkness.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the obvious danger, Londoners walked onwards. For most, this was a matter of necessity—someone had to go to work or go to the store, and there was no other way to get there. But sometimes, walking did not have any clear link to survival and instead became tied to local communities and shared socializing. On Christmas Day 1940, much of south London took advantage of the reduced bombing intensity to catch a casual stroll. While out walking that evening, Ms. Corfe reported that it was “very dark but not cold, and we kept meeting other gangs of people.”<sup>27</sup> Like Corfe, much of the city took the day as a time of relaxation, and in the strolls around south London that day, there were surely countless groups of passer-bys exchanging hellos or running into acquaintances and sharing a brief conversation. These events made the danger worthwhile as they lessened the burden of life during wartime.

It is easy in hindsight to declare Christmas a safe day for a walk—there were few raids on Christmas Day 1940, though this was obviously a fact which Londoners could not predict at the time. But what about other days? South London’s population, particularly the young, still took occasional walks around town just for pleasure. The willingness of some to do so suggests that the German aerial assault failed to terrify the city’s population as was intended and that for many, the social bonding of walking with a friend or family member outweighed the potential danger.

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<sup>26</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 275, September 13, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Diary 5285, December 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

However, the response from those opposed to this unnecessary excess walking revealed the fracture lines within local communities even while the activity of casual walking was seen as reinforcing community to those participating. Particularly for the young, walking as a form of defiance granted a sense of agency and control which could be hard to come by in a city under attack. It created a time and place to meet and spend time with friends. And it allowed people out of the rigid confines of shelters or work, adding some variety to an otherwise regimented lifestyle. But when viewed by others, it was an act of suicidal stupidity. Ms. E. B. Cockett was in the latter category, claiming that it was not only senseless but actually selfish of people to go out for leisure in the evenings since doing so forced apprehension on family members awaiting the return of their loved ones.<sup>28</sup> This contrasted with the strong desire shown by young going out for walks as a way to catch up with their friends. It points to an underlying conflict between different members of like families and communities regarding the appropriate balance between accepting danger and embracing resistance. While some individuals saw walking as a legitimate social activity and as a way of maintaining dignity in a time when Londoners were packed into shelters, their relatives disagreed. The dichotomy demonstrates that even in small social groups composed of supposedly similar individuals, disagreements emerged over the correct way to run one's life and the types of communities considered "appropriate" in the midst of war.

A discussion of transit during the Blitz can hardly be considered complete without examining this most fundamental form of mobility. Walking and cycling, important in the lives of millions of south Londoners before the war, remained equally important when

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<sup>28</sup> Diary 5277, August 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



bombing raids commenced. Often used alone but also used in complement with (or to replace) public transportation, walking and biking gave the ability to go to work, to make trips to the store, to see family, or to serve as a way to stand up to German aircraft. But for some, the act was more than that; it was a legitimate way to squeeze a few much needed minutes of social time—or even just time to relax and think—into the day. This view was often hated by family members, not least because it caused the latter intense anguish as they awaited their loved one's return from the streets. Though clearly a dangerous activity that could lead one to significant bodily harm or death, the desire to maintain social circles outweighed the risk for some.

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South London proved remarkably willing to shift from one transportation method to another as circumstances themselves changed, though the vehicle for these changes was far more often localized, individual reactions to changing circumstances than it was either massed public responses or intervention from above. For many, trains and their close relatives trams were the primary forms of transportation, but as trains relied on carefully planned railroad links and had to run on specific tracks to avoid other traffic, even slight bomb damage could cause immediate problems. The same held true for buses—when roads suffered bomb damage, authorities would close them for repairs, forcing buses to route around them. Compensating for these changes could mean waiting for another train, taking a bus, walking, taking shelter, or even abandoning the journey altogether. Considering that Londoners got up each morning not knowing which combination they might have to take to reach their intended destinations or if they would even reach their

destinations at all, it is no wonder that transportation became the most loathed aspect of Blitz life. For most south Londoners, stepping onto a train or bus in the morning represented the worst part of their day because it was most dangerous and offered the least significant communities to help combat the angst.

It is no hyperbole to state that the Blitz heavily disrupted south London's transportation. Though the railways near the River Thames typically receive the most mention in official histories of the Blitz, areas south of the river were far from immune. Roads both wide and narrow (though wide suffered worse) had massive holes ripped in them, further exacerbated by debris and water main breaks which clouded the streets. While some of these problems, such as major bomb damage, were handled by authorities, most of the immediate changes—the ones that actually kept the city running—came from a much more organic amalgamation of individuals. Most of the citizens who stepped forward to help held personal desires to ensure the best for their fellow community members. Was the thought of “nation” in their minds? Perhaps. But it was almost certainly not the salient feature since these individuals could only influence transportation networks in a much more localized way. It is clear that since south London's transportation structures never locked up completely in spite of the hatred and fear held inside Londoners within them, some factor must have been at play holding the machinery all together. I have argued that it was in fact ties to local communities and the individuals around one, whether known or anonymous, that encouraged enough individual action to keep the system functional.

Individuals going from shelter out into the transportation structures of south London had to have a second destination, too. For most, this was work, one of the most

varied and interesting aspects of London life and the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

## CHAPTER THREE

## A Day at the Office? Work in Wartime South London

The final chapter of this thesis builds upon the previous two chapters' work illuminating life at home and out on the streets of wartime south London. Of course, the Blitz could not end the need to go to work and earn a living. Even in a time of war, shops had to open, industry had to continue, and various services had to still function. How exactly this came about and the implications that it had for the city's population form the basis for this chapter. What exactly could one expect to see and hear while at work? What happened if a bombing raid came through during work hours, and what role would employees play in the cleanup after a bombing raid? Would employees be protected from raids, both physically and financially? And how did business owners respond to the uncertainty of operating in a city which could be bombed at any moment? But more importantly, how did bombing impact the lives of individual Londoners? When one lost work owing to bombing, what could he or she expect to think or feel? This chapter explores places of employment as spaces of economic activity but also as easily (and frequently) disrupted locations and as spaces with varying degrees of personal importance to workers. Especially with smaller businesses, work as a place with personal meaning to the owners, staff, and patrons was particularly pronounced.

Perhaps more so than in any other arena, authorities in the late 1930s anticipated that work would be impacted with the coming of war. The government augured that German aerial assault would target industrial areas of the country, trying to disrupt industrial production and demoralize the population as much as possible. Both were causes

of immense concern. The Blitz proved some of the government's prewar expectations correct. Industrial enterprises, particularly those located near the easy-to-locate River Thames endured heavy bombing, so much so that most of south London's industrial areas near the river were listed by postwar bomb survey maps as having suffered "total destruction."<sup>1</sup> However, aerial bombing was extraordinarily inaccurate, and German bomber crews often made few attempts to hit strategic targets. The result—far more random bombing—created havoc for a wider portion of London's workforce than might initially be assumed. This meant that even work spaces further south, away from the more easily and deliberately targeted River Thames, had to confront bombing disruptions as well. Often, these disruptions proved just as onerous on the workers as near the river. Yet the intended demoralization did not lead to calls for Britain to make peace. It is in this tension that one finds personal interests and local loyalties play the key role in keeping places of employment running.

South London's primary forms of large work sites were various types of industrial production as well as healthcare institutions, notably hospitals and ambulance services. Many of these, not least the Southwark docklands and St. Thomas's Hospital, sat near the river. As mentioned previously, the highly targeted nature of the River Thames meant that industries along the shoreline suffered badly. However, any large work space, even if not located near the industrial enterprises that dotted the riverbanks, could be equally dangerous. When attacked, hospitals could have entire sections collapse. Industrial offices and factories could be all but leveled. Or damage could be much more moderate. The first part of this chapter explores the intersection of bombing and large places of employment,

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<sup>1</sup> *The London County Council: Bomb Damage Map, 1939-1945*, London Metropolitan Archives.

focusing first on industry and then on healthcare professions, the two main forms of large employment in the area. As the government created explicit regulations for businesses with more than thirty workers, this first section shall also follow that standard.<sup>2</sup> This section shall first demonstrate that large places of employment had a high degree of variation. However, even in the changing and varied conditions of the Blitz, work places had to keep running, and this chapter argues that it was a feeling of local loyalty which contributed to, complimented, and sometimes even superseded broader notions of citizenship and national identity. The important factor in Londoners' minds was not only the health and safety of the nation but of the local area to which an individual belonged as well.

Much of south London to this day is composed of small shops, owned and operated by local residents and employing far fewer than thirty people. The same situation held true at the time of the Second World War. The Blitz impacted their businesses perhaps even more dramatically than it did large work places, and the second part of this chapter will explore these environments. Smaller, typically tighter knit, and less regulated by the government, small spaces of work had some distinct differences from the larger work spaces. Because of their smaller scope and scale, local businesses were more likely to be significantly impacted if hit by an air raid. But the smaller scale and more intimate atmosphere for both employees and patrons meant that destruction had a deeper personal impact. Destruction of one's shop felt intensely personal in a way that the destruction of no other work place could match. The second part of this chapter will explore in greater depth how personal motivations and local loyalties upset individual lives but also how they kept the stores and shops of south London working during the Blitz.

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<sup>2</sup> "A.R.P. in Industry," July 1939, Lambeth Archives.

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On November 20, 1940, the Blitz hit the newspaper the *News Chronicle* during the middle of the night. Reported the air raid personnel who responded to the incident, a high explosive bomb “penetrated [the] roof, knocking out [the] side wall and putting printing machinery on [the] ground floor out of action”—surely an event that would have caused death had anyone been inside. But it didn’t require death for fear to come through. Anyone witnessing the destruction that night could not have escaped the reality that, had anyone been working within, serious injury or death were the only likely outcomes.

For the people of nearby Southwark, the Blitz opened on a much more ominous note with the utter destruction of perhaps its largest industrial employer, the Surrey Commercial Docks, in what is now one of the most famous single bomb incidents of the Second World War. Located across the River Thames from the docklands of the East End, the Surrey Commercial Docks were a major shipping port for the city of London that were gutted by fire on the first night of the Blitz. Recalled Thomas Winter, who was sheltering nearby at the time the inferno began, “outside all hell had been let loose upon us, [...] the docks surrounding us [...] a raging inferno as fire, many hundreds of them, were spreading and building up to one gigantic conflagration.”<sup>3</sup> Another observer, Cornelius Carson, who was out on the streets when the bombing of the Docks began, wrote that “bombs were constantly falling” and “on several occasions it was necessary to throw oneself flat on the roadway to avoid being injured.”<sup>4</sup> The next morning, workers found their place of employment destroyed, never to return to its former self for the remainder of the war. In

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Winter, “A Shout from the Night,” March 1995, Southwark Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Witness, London Metropolitan Police, October 19, 1940, Southwark Archives.

that single evening, the livelihoods of hundreds of workers had been utterly transformed, a traumatic change only adding to the stress of life under bombardment. Fortunately uncommon, the destruction of the docklands was more than just a major economic blow to south London. The destruction cost thousands of workers their incomes, leaving them on their own to find new work and seek the assistance of friends and family in the meantime.

One immediately notices a stark difference between the relatively mild destruction of the *News Chronicle* building and the complete ruin of the Southwark docks. This intense variation in the level of destruction was one of the overarching themes of south London's experience with industry during the Blitz. Yet from the standpoint of the workers, the scale of destruction didn't always matter so much. Large or small, bomb damage served as a reminder of one's own mortality—that one could be killed virtually at any moment by a raid. In a way not seen in shelter or transportation, the heavy burden borne by industry also made workers realize in a particularly pointed way that *they* were the intended targets. It was comparably easier to sleep in a shelter and hear the bombs go off nearby knowing that they were directed at one only in an indirect way; while working in large industries, there was no escaping the sensation of being targeted. Workers were fair game, and they knew it. The unsurprising result was anxiety and concern for themselves, their friends, and their families.

South London bore witness to numerous other occasions when large factories or other industrial enterprises were entirely destroyed by raids, an incident which usually meant an end to employment for workers, too. Early in the morning of September 26, 1940, incendiary bombs hit Hydes Bird Seed Factory, gutting the building and rendering the



factory a total loss. Because the bombs fell in the middle of the night (the typical time for major German raids), no one was at the factory and thus caused no casualties. But the next morning, workers who typically had a place to go to work no longer did. As reported by an observer, the building was “completely burnt out,” and with it, so too was a “normal” work day for the factory’s employees. When this happened, workers typically had to find new jobs in different factories. Fortunately, because of the demands for workers during the war, finding new work typically wasn’t terribly difficult, but it nonetheless disrupted the lives of the employees in ways that south London had not experienced before. In the memories of many, total destruction of one’s own space—a place that ensured an individual financial stability—was one of the most anxiety-provoking experiences of all.<sup>5</sup>

Most bombing raids caused only minor damage to the majority of industries hit, but even without total destruction, the lives of workers could still change. Just causing damage was enough to disrupt the flow of an organization sufficiently to add a burden to the workers. A return to the *News Chronicle* demonstrates this. The *News Chronicle* bombing incident failed to knock the paper out of commission since even with some bomb damage, the remainder of the building could still operate and function as usual. Printing delays were expected after the bombing raid but not a total closure of the facility. However, because the operation did not run as it had before, work hours and activities changed. Some workers had to leave their ordinary jobs to repair bomb damage. Other cases of only partial destruction highlight the largest disruption of all: sending staff home in response to an attack. On September 15, a high explosive bomb fell near a major electric power station in south London, creating an eight foot deep crater. While the incident did only minor damage

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<sup>5</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 518, September 26, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

to the building and did not kill or maim any workers, the cleanup and danger posed by the incident meant that the power company kept some of its workers out of work that day. Much of south London's working class population relied on working every day to make ends meet. The loss of work time and the pay that accompanied it caused great anxiety among the workers involved if the business did not pay its employees for lost work time (many did, but not all), as most south Londoners did not have enough money saved up to provide for their families during a long period of underemployment.<sup>6</sup>

Just the threat of damage and destruction was enough to serve as a reminder of how indistinguishable the lines between civilians and combatants had become with regards to industry. On September 18, an unexploded anti-aircraft shell landed on the south bank of the River Thames right next to the Royal Flour Mills, causing no damage at all. When a worker spotted the shell and reported it around 9am, the air raid worker receiving the message noted that the shell had to be removed by 12pm or the tide of the river would come in, burying it and thus making it impossible to remove and possibly detonating it. The shell was removed successfully and did not detonate, meaning that workers nearby could stay on the job, and no property damage resulted from the episode. For a city used to destruction, the safe removal of an unexploded anti-aircraft shell was lucky indeed. Yet even amongst the luck, not lost on the population was the fact that the great outcome had been largely a matter of luck. The shell could have landed right on top of the Royal Flour Mills just as easily as it had on the shore of the Thames, potentially igniting the flammable flour dust. Such incidents were yet another reminder of how random the situation was and how the Blitz could strike anyone's life at a moment's notice.

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<sup>6</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 333, September 15, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

Given the danger faced by workers in large enterprises, ensuring safety at work places was essential in the minds of government, employers, and employees alike. How was this accomplished? The government mandated that all work places with greater than fifty workers have a full shelter facility available for use in raids. It further required that all businesses employing thirty or more workers take action to ensure the safety of their employees (the nature of such requirements was often poorly explained). Wrote the government mandate, employers had to ensure that a “suitable proportion of the employees are trained and equipped in first aid and in fire-fighting and anti-gas measures,” a direct response to prewar assumptions that both poison gas and high explosive bombs would fall on the metropolis. Businesses did follow these requirements, and their employees had a place to take shelter if an air raid came overhead (though not necessarily just because the air raid sirens sounded).<sup>7</sup> But just because businesses had shelter facilities and emergency plans did not mean that they were *always* followed. Workers often carried on through raids, either because the workers themselves saw no need to take shelter or because employers held a strong desire to maintain production for as many hours per day as possible, placing the staff in harm’s way.

When bombing caused physical damage, it was generally up to the workers of the business to fix it. Hit by a high explosive bomb on September 20, the Schweppes factory in south London suffered a damaged roof. The bomb blast buried three workers beneath rubble, and the owners had to fix the hole torn above. That job, thus, fell to the workers. They had to climb up high above the factory floor, fix the gap in the roof, and continue on with their jobs afterwards. Some of the workers were undoubtedly friends with the three

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<sup>7</sup> “A.R.P. in Industry,” July 1939, Lambeth Archives.

trapped workers and had to continue to work even while worrying about the fate of their coworkers and their families. This is a common narrative across virtually all of south London's industries. With few exceptions, damage done meant cleanup work for the staff, performed as anxiety about the fate of fellow workers raged. Government services to help those who had suffered from bomb damage seldom helped factories and other forms of large industry.

Why, given the danger and angst that came with workplace bombing, did workers actually put themselves in harm's way as much as they did? It seems more likely that workers went up there because they had a personal interest in doing so—an interest in keeping their jobs so that they could provide for their families as well as care for the nation. Workers wanted their factories to work well for the simple, practical reason that they wanted to make sure that they had access to a steady income! Workers wanted to be able to provide for their friends and families; given the uncertainties of life during the Blitz, it was unsurprising that many Londoners opted to take the risk of climbing atop a bomb-damaged building if it meant providing stability for their loved ones. The cleanup work fell to workers, and it was their sense of caring for their homes, families, and livelihoods—all of which depended upon factory pay—as well as the safety of strangers that motivated them to push onwards. It was not just one particular loyalty that pushed the workers; rather, it was a varied and complicated process with the specific loyalties different from worker to worker, factory to factory.

Factories and other forms of industry were not the only large facilities that employed Londoners, however. One of south London's other large employers of people

were hospitals and ambulance services, facilities which logged increased employment throughout the war thanks to high demand from both the city's population and the military. Though also housed in large facilities like the bigger industries detailed above, hospitals notoriously required *all* of their buildings be in operation in order to function properly. This formed a sharp contrast to industry, where damage to some of a building still meant ongoing production throughout the undamaged parts of the facility. Thus, bombing raids had the potential to cause more significant disruption to healthcare than to factories. Because of the vulnerability and necessity of having all or almost all of a structure in operation, hospitals and ambulance services in south London suffered particularly badly, creating unsafe and frightening conditions for the workers and impacting the delivery of healthcare to the population.

St. Thomas's Hospital, which rests just across the River Thames from the Houses of Parliament, is perhaps the most famous example of hospital bombing in south London during the Blitz. St. Thomas's was bombed so badly during the war that it had to be completely rebuilt in the late 1940s. Just two days into the Blitz, St. Thomas saw its first of many bombing attacks. The raid knocked out all power to the hospital, making the work of the staff incredibly difficult. Damage was not limited to power facilities, however. One observer reported that the bomb damage had demolished the entire east wing of the building, dropping masonry onto the nearby roads and making them impassable. The high explosive bombs made the rest of the building "unsafe" and killed a dozen, including a few hospital workers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 128, September 9, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

During incidents, the work required of hospital staff was very intense. When the hospital was yet again bombed on September 15, the main central part of the hospital caved in, causing 42 casualties. An observer noted that the hospital was “disorganized owing to electricity mains, water, and gas trouble.” In addition to cleaning up the mess, staff had to deal with a wide range of maladies. A woman named Miss Ross sustained “small multiple cuts to the head” while another woman, Miss Horton, was dealing with “multiple cuts on head” and “injuries to eyes.” Finally, to make the situation worse, hospital staff had to function under the mental pressure of losing one of their own. Nurse Yorks, a staff member at the hospital, passed away in the raid.<sup>9</sup> Cleaning up after such an attack was to be no easy task.

Just like in the factory industries, it was up to the staff of the hospital to clean up the mess left behind by the raids, a job which local loyalties pushed them to do. When St. Thomas’s Hospital was bombed, the staff, not government or emergency response personnel, had to get the facility back in operation. Midwives and other medical staff no doubt did not enjoy cleaning up after bomb damage, nor was the danger of cleaning up a tall, stricken building located on the banks of the Thames lost on them. Yet in spite of the obstacles, they did so anyways. Why? The employees needed the money, and just as importantly, they wanted to be sure that if needed, medical care would be available for their loved ones and their communities—as a sense of solidarity in a variety of ways. As with industrial workers, it was about doing what was “right” for King and Country but also, and often more importantly, about what was best for the individual and right for his or her local community.

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<sup>9</sup>Lambeth Civil Defense File 334, September 15, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

And while the staff cleaned up one day, there was never any saying if they would simply have to repeat the ordeal again the next day, calling again on the same motivations to step in. Alas, St. Thomas's was again bombed just four days later on September 13; this time, the top three floors of the hospital were rendered inoperable, launching debris onto the ground surrounding the hospital. As always, the staff had to set to cleaning up the mess—a ritual that they would repeat at least a dozen more times before the end of the Blitz. Still, an air raid warden reporting on the incident wrote that there was “no panic” among the patients or staff. Everyone kept at their business, doing their best to keep the hospital running in spite of the damage. But this relative calm came because the workers felt a personal need to pitch in—for the sake of themselves, their loved ones, and their co-nationals. The story of hospital cleanup is just one part of a larger whole, underscoring the variety of loyalties which Londoners felt during the Blitz.<sup>10</sup>

Ambulance services were not immune from the disruption of the war either and serve as an excellent example of how the war changed medical work in different and interesting ways. The primary change to happen upon ambulance workers were their shift hours. Most ambulance stations in south London employed around thirty-five full time and an additional ten part time workers.<sup>11</sup> But as Ms. Corfe, an ambulance station employee, discovered, this did not mean regularity to work schedules. Ms. Corfe reported to Mass Observation that her shifts changed to two 16-hour night shifts (running 5pm to 9am) as well as two 8 hour days (running 9am to 5pm) each week. Though Ms. Corfe liked the changed work schedule as it allowed her three days off per week to do her shopping and

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<sup>10</sup> Lambeth Civil Defense File 275, September 13, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

<sup>11</sup> “London Emergency Medical Guide,” Lambeth Archives.

keep her home up and running, not everyone agreed with her assessment. Many other ambulance workers found the shifting work schedules annoying and did not appreciate the lack of stability in their lives. Change, while not universally resented, was far from universally loved, either, as it got in the way of how one “normally” ran one’s life.<sup>12</sup>

For Corfe and her fellow health workers whose schedules had been impacted, spending more nights at the station meant sleeping at work. The experience of staying overnight at work placed severe strains on the local communities so vital to material and mental survival during the Blitz. In compliance with government regulations mandating shelter be provided for workers, overnight staff slept in shelters, as they were most likely to experience a raid while on duty. In Corfe’s case, the “shelter” was the basement of the station. She shared that shelter with the motley assortment of her co-workers who might be on duty that night, and it was not as peace-loving as home shelters tended to be. A strong sense of community did not exist in work shelters the same way that it did at home and with one’s friends. Though Corfe spoke favorably of some experiences in her home shelter, she shared none of the same enthusiasm for nights spent at work, a reflection of the tension that must have existed underneath her ambulance station during raids. Sleeping not with friends and worried about family at home, it is no wonder that tensions ran high at work.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of meaningful social networks at work made dealing with the immense danger imposed upon emergency workers much more difficult to handle. Ambulance drivers had to work through the bombing raids, traveling to bomb sites as more warheads

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<sup>12</sup> Diary 5285, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Diary 5285, September 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



fell, an extremely dangerous situation. But even for people like Ms. Corfe who worked at the district posts and did not travel out during the raids, danger at work was a constant, an occurrence that engendered concerns about safety. When the Germans bombed her post in mid-November, Corfe noted a change in many of her coworkers. The incident hit her post hard, leaving “soot littered everywhere, the ambulances blasted to bits” outside. But it also destroyed a sense of safety and security that had sustained the post since the start of the war. Many of her coworkers began expressing fears about safety and survival, and Corfe reported a dull, boring, and emotionally draining mentality around the station. Just like how it opened up the roof to allow water to leak through, the episode brought to light underlying concerns about fear, danger, and the randomness of survival itself among a population that did such a job keeping the city running during the Blitz. These problems were made worse by the fact that the employees at Corfe’s station do not seem to have talked about their experiences. To Corfe, the bomb coming through the roof had shattered more than just metal and glass: it had shattered a confidence and exposed the limits of community as well.<sup>14</sup>

Air raid wardens and various other emergency personnel, treated extensively in the literature of the Blitz and thus discussed only briefly here, also faced similar conditions to Corfe and her ambulance workers. Air raid wardens, firefighters, and ambulance drivers all had to respond to bomb incidents when dispatched, frequently finding raging fires or unexploded bombs nearby. In the midst of such chaos, these individuals were expected to maintain order, issue clear directions, and protect the citizens as much as possible—a stressful job indeed. The clarity with which these personnel worked suggests that in spite

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<sup>14</sup> Diary 5285, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.

of the trauma of war and limits of community at work, south London's emergency personnel still had a sense of service to their fellow south Londoners, a sentiment that carried them through the stress of the job. Prewar government fears of panic and disorder did not materialize in the streets of south London in large part thanks to the stressful, dangerous work of emergency personnel, almost all of whom came from the areas in which they worked and thus had personal ties to their particular area of the city.

Working in a large industry or hospital setting required the willingness to work during and around air raids. Employers expected their workers to assist in the cleanup after air raids, and it does not seem that workers resisted these calls to action. They pitched in and did a good job of it, primarily because personal ties to the city and its people urged them to do so. Still, Ms. Corfe's account demonstrates how constant action by workers mixed with fear, upset, and trepidation in complex ways. There seems little doubt that south London still feared its circumstances even while working through them.

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For all its fame as an industrial powerhouse and a city of large places of employment, smaller work spaces remained a significant part of south London's economy then as well as now. The area had a remarkable array of different businesses, ranging from small corner stores selling any manner of goods to pubs, cinemas, and banks. What would happen when a bomb hit a store? Would it stay open, or would it close? How often were shops totally destroyed (meaning the loss of work for employees), and how often did they just suffer minor damage, such as broken windows? And how did the Blitz intersect with the personal lives of not just employees but patrons as well?

Most common in cases of store bomb damage was just that: damage. Exposed to the open streets and easily destructible, windows not surprisingly suffered badly during the Blitz. In far more cases than not, any store near a bomb incident had window damage.<sup>15</sup> However, other forms of damage could also take place. Storerooms and walls could fall to destruction as could entire stores, closing them until repairs could be made. Small business owners did try to keep their stores open, but this was challenging owing partly to bomb damage and partly to societal anxiety about shopping in a store that had just suffered attack. The latter observation suggests that physical destruction to a shop had a psychological effect not only on its workers but on its patrons as well.

The damage done to small shops generally shut the store temporarily, depending on the level of damage, a reflection of destructiveness of the air raids on small places of employment but also assumptions about the population at large. One September day, an incendiary bomb raid hit a brewery as well as a few shops nearby. The brewery suffered minimal damage and remained closed for a short while, but the flames gutted the stores nearby. Unable to keep their shops open, the owners had to affix signs to the front of their buildings informing customers that they would not be opening for some time, their stores completely ruined beyond repair.<sup>16</sup> But anxiety about the willingness of customers to visit a recently bombed shop also came through. Over the first weekend of November 1940, a series of high explosive bombs fell on a major department store in south London, damaging the store, a nearby cinema, and a small shop nearby as well. The little shop was utterly destroyed, killing the store owner and his family, but the others were not badly damaged.

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<sup>15</sup> "Control Room Diary," 1940, Lambeth Archives.

<sup>16</sup> "The Week of Wanton Murder," *The Free Press*, September 1940, Lambeth Archives.

However, the shops closed for the rest of the day, reopening the in the morning. Even though they did not have to close their shops to rebuild, the owners did so anyways because they believed that no one would want to shop at a place that had so recently been hit. This reflects concerns on the part of store owners about resolve and morale within the general population—that people would be too scared to shop somewhere that had just been bombed.<sup>17</sup> One store owner summed his anxieties up well. Donald Beale, a worker in a south London shop, recalled in a later interview that after bombs had fallen nearby, the owner declared that “we would close early because there would not be any customers around after what had just happened.”<sup>18</sup>

Unless retained at work to participate in cleanup duties or given pay for days of work missed from attacks, a bombing raid meant time off from work and lost income as well. This became a major problem for those living paycheck to paycheck, reliant upon steady work to feed their families. For those who worked in small shops, for example, the destruction of their place of employment meant finding new work altogether. This placed an added burden on workers already struggling to keep their homes intact, families together, and lives normal.

Opening shops following a raid was important for more than just employees. Given the abundance of looters in wartime south London, fixing shops quickly to keep out potential profiteers was essential for business owners, too. Without being open, business owners clearly had no way to make money. But a more insidious problem taunted destroyed businesses as well. South London’s news services and civil defense records are

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<sup>17</sup> “Shops, Churches, and Hospital,” *British Free Press*, November 1, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

<sup>18</sup> “War Work Starts in Earnest,” *South London Press*, September 5, 1989, Lambeth Archives.

littered with cases of looters arriving at bombed-out stores to take whatever valuables they could find before disappearing. Though wardens or observers sometimes managed to call police, this was not always the case, and it seems that most looters escaped without facing prosecution. Barbara Underwood, a 29 year old widow, was one of the unlucky looters caught by the authorities. After stealing two blouses valued at about 12 shillings from a Brixton store, a magistrate fined Underwood 40 shillings.<sup>19</sup> But more common were the looters who targeted a bombed out pharmacy in Bermondsey. Though a witness notified police and police dispatch was noted in the civil defense logbook, no record of arrest or prosecution exists. Like countless others, the pharmacy thief was never located, hidden as anonymously as many others in the damaged landscape of south London. These individuals eroded the economic vitality of shops as well as whatever sense of security both workers and patrons alike had left when their place of employment or neighborhood store had been bombed.<sup>20</sup>

The widespread existence of shop looters points to the limits on communal unity in wartime south London. While a great many citizens felt a sense of duty to do what they could to help their friends and family, the temptation to make profit with little chance of detection motivated a not insignificant minority to actively work against the common good of friends and neighbors and steal. Looting signals that the German bombing campaign was unable to come anywhere close to forming any totally unified community within the city—not even on a local level, where personal loyalties ran deep. The Blitz certainly contributed

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<sup>19</sup> “Lost Her Man at Dunkirk, Now a ‘Nervous Wreck,’” *South London Press*, September 13, 1940, Southwark Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Bermondsey Civil Defense File 229, September 12, 1940, Southwark Archives.

to (or at the very least exposed) local unity and a sense of “togetherness” with others, but looting reminds us of the stark limits of such loyalties.

Even for those working at un-bombed shops, the war still affected their lives. Most stores opened later in the mornings and closed by 6pm to avoid bombing raids, reducing the workforce needed to keep them running.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, stores could open on reduced hours; cinemas across the city, for example, were forced to close by 9pm to give patrons sufficient time to get home before the likelihood of bombing raids increased dramatically. To offset the earlier closing time, cinemas were permitted to open earlier, changing the work schedules for employees.<sup>22</sup> Such changes made workers resentful of the raids because they disrupted the normal flow of life and demanded alterations to notions of “normalcy.”

In a time of exceptional trouble, however, some store owners kept a sense of humor about them. Unwilling to let the German bomber pilots have the last laugh, one of the store owners affixed a sign to the outside of his store claiming that the shop was “closed for alterations (to Berlin).” At once a humorous distraction from the war and a sinister reminder of the terrifying power of Second World War aerial bombardment, the sign represented the owner’s attempt to distract from the damage that had been done to him. For a man unable to resist the power of the bombs, he was at least able to resist the psychological effects of them—plenty good enough for him! Similar signs popped up elsewhere across south London, applying crude humor to offset feelings of vulnerability. Such signs must have been important because years later, those who survived the Blitz in south London frequently remembered shops near their homes that sported such signs. The

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<sup>21</sup> “Shops Open Later, Close Earlier: Duplicate Stocks in Safe Basements,” *South London Press*, September 24, 1940, Southwark Archives.

<sup>22</sup> London County Council minutes of proceedings, October 22, 1940, London Metropolitan Archives.

signs helped the owners feel a sense of agency over their lives, but they also served as one of many ways to hold a community together that was riddled with angst and uncertainty.<sup>23</sup>

There were, however, some who refused to give in to the German raids at all, resolving to stay open no matter the circumstances. When the war began in September 1939, Matthews posted a sign outside his shop stating that he would remain open from 9am to 11pm regardless of what the Germans did. The press played up these stories, making them seem regular and standard—reflecting official attempts to maintain high morale around the workplace in a time when government planners had anxieties about the willingness of workers to carry on during war. Men like Matthews became the love of government officials and the press since they provided stories of grand triumph over the German onslaught, acting as a respectable, tough Englishman even if they too were not particularly common.<sup>24</sup>

Shops were not the only small places of employment, nor were they the spaces with the most powerful meanings to their patrons, either. Cinemas and pubs, the two most common social spaces throughout the region, faced damage and destruction alongside the rest of the city. While such attacks caused workers many of the same concerns as store damage and destruction did, the danger to these social spaces had a powerful meaning to the citizens of the city as well. It again underscored how close the war really was to each individual's life by demonstrating the vulnerability of one's local community, a community intrinsically tied up with the places of entertainment in one's neighborhood.

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<sup>23</sup> "The Week of Wanton Murder," *The Free Press*, September 1940, Lambeth Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Photograph, *The News*, April 23, 1943, Lambeth Archives.

As alluded to previously, one of the most common places of leisure in south London was the cinema. British cinema had reached a point of popularity in the 1930s that was never to be surpassed, and with a wide selection of films to choose from available at cheap prices, it is no wonder that Londoners took full advantage of the opportunity to see a movie. Newspapers implored people to visit with synopses of new films and easy-to-understand cinema locations—and visit they did.<sup>25</sup> However, it was common for movie theaters to send patrons into shelters when raids came by, or at least to offer it as a possibility. Mr. R. Harpur's mid-November trip to the cinema with his wife was repeatedly interrupted by alert announcements made by cinema staff about air raids with the cinema offering shelter to those who wanted it.<sup>26</sup> Though Harpur refused, choosing instead to keep watching the movie, many others chose to go. Being forced into a shelter at the cinema had a psychological impact on guests. The experience served as a reminder that the war made no distinction between "war industries" and the social relaxation of Londoners. Everyone—and everything—was at risk.

Any visitor to London today can scarcely miss the abundance of pubs—short for public house, or a traditional meeting place of locals—in the city. This surfeit of pubs is not new; south London was dotted with pubs, run by families or business partners, during the war. For many, however, damage done to pubs served as a constant reminder of how close the war (and the death that followed it) was to the lives of patrons and staff alike. The Blitz removed the distance between the stressful real world and the relaxation of the pub, making the latter no longer immune from the former.

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<sup>25</sup> "Three Kinds of Comedy," *South London Press*, September 6, 1940, Southwark Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Diary 5098, November 1940, Mass Observation Archive.



One Sunday night in mid-October, patrons of a south London pub gathered as they normally did, drinking whatever alcohol could be procured in the wake of material diversions and calls to limit alcohol consumption during the war. In the back of the pub, a darts match kept a few men happily engaged, free from the worries of wartime. Then, suddenly, the pub took a direct hit from a high explosive bomb. The pub was leveled immediately, killing several and injuring more. For the survivors—staff and patrons alike—such incidents underscored that even the formerly safe space of a pub was no longer safe. Public houses, a space in which the troubles of modern life could be temporarily forgotten for a pint with friends, no longer seemed safe to those who witnessed their destruction. The sense of communal ownership over a pub could be shattered in one unlucky bombing incident.<sup>27</sup>

For those cleaning up after the destruction of pubs, this division made itself quite clear. One November weekend, Constantine Fitzgibbon, a south London woman, was asked by a friend to help dig out a pub which had been hit by a high explosive bomb. Recalled Fitzgibbon, “in [the back of the pub] sat a man with an unspilled pint[...] he was split, stone dead.” The man at the back of the pub had never seen it coming, happily enjoying his beer just moments before the high explosive bomb killed him instantly. Constantine seems to have recalled the moment particularly strongly, choosing to spend her limited newspaper space recalling it over other events. It reminded her that death could come randomly, at any time at all, and without any sort of warning at all. Fitzgibbon realized that the randomness of death could hit anyone at anytime, a realization that became all too clear as she cleaned out the decimated bar, a place that she had perhaps enjoyed a pint, too.

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<sup>27</sup> “Death and Damage from the Sky,” *British Free Press*, October 18, 1940, Lambeth Archives.

The destruction of pubs, while not any worse materially than the destruction of other types of stores, hit home with people in a way that other bombing incidents didn't. Pubs were supposed to be spaces of great merriment and fun in which individuals felt a sense of ownership; if they, too, were being hit by bombs, there hardly seemed a space in the city safe.<sup>28</sup> The *South London Press* published stories of destroyed pubs virtually every day, reflecting societal interest in the pub as a space of relaxation and enjoyment as well as a space of income for the employees. The pub became a metaphor for the destruction of the city as a whole; the formerly fun place had been turned into a ghost town. For a society adjusting to fewer social outlets during the war (a theme discussed in detail in chapter one), the loss of pubs had both symbolic and literal meaning. The reminder hit even more poignantly than with cinemas, not least because of how personal pubs felt to many south Londoners. Destroyed pubs represented the not always glamorous side of local communities—that sometimes one's sense of a local community meant more hurt than relief.

The memories of stores and small work spaces were so powerful that they lasted well beyond the Blitz itself, as one girl's memory of the war describes. While walking home from school one day, a young south London girl and a friend got trapped outside in an air raid. Just as a fighter swept low over south London to strafe the shops with machine gun fire, Mrs. Violet Jones, owner of a pickle shop and remembered lovingly as "the pickle onion lady," snagged the girl and her friend, pulling them into her shop. As Jones slammed the door behind her, machine gun bullets sliced through the wood, exploding the pickling onion barrels and spraying the young girl with pickle juice. Though the girl professed to never be

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<sup>28</sup> Constantine Fitzgibbon, "Memories of the Blitz," Lambeth Archives.

able to eat pickled onions again and always felt ill at the smell of them, she ended her testimony with a simple note of thanks to Mrs. Jones and her pickled onion store: “thank you dear lady for my life and that of my friend.” In the spirit of Mrs. Jones, not all shop experiences were bad.<sup>29</sup>

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The changes brought to workplaces by the Blitz underscored the totality of the whole experience perhaps more than any other. Full destruction was not necessary to remind employees just how near death and danger were during the Blitz. Disruption to factories, known for their timely performance and streamlined procedures, reminded the workers that even London’s large industries were not immune from the damage (and of course, reading the news about the docks burning didn’t help either). And for small shop owners, blasted in windows and the fragments left on the floor were a somber reminder that the Blitz had shattered more than just store windows; it had shattered lives. Many store owners were not lucky enough to have their shops survive the Blitz; many were destroyed, some to be rebuilt later and others gone for good. Nearly eighty years later, the destruction wrought on workplaces by the Blitz stands as a somber reminder of the true human cost of war.

In the final assessment, how did workers respond to these changes? Most worked through them, pitching in as necessary to clean up bomb damage and keep their places of employment running as normally as it could. Employers expected them to do so, and there do not seem to have been significant cases of workers doing otherwise. While a few revealed

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<sup>29</sup> “The Pickle Onion Lady from Peckham,” May 8, 2013, Southwark Archives.

in the experience, many saw cleanup and a “carry on” mentality as an essential facet of their own personalities and did so mainly for the good of themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. The majority of workers carried on first because their livelihoods depended on it and because of a sense of duty to others, both known acquaintances and to strangers. Again, this is not to suggest that in work places there weren’t real senses of community and nation; as in shelters, people at work did often have close bonds with their fellow employees. But as Ms. Corfe’s testament to depressed attitudes and the occasional spar with a coworker showed, even these connections had their limits that could not be easily assembled.

### Conclusion: the Blitz in World History

This thesis has argued that the majority of unity exercised and the sorts of communities that mattered most in south London throughout the Blitz were not simply those at the national level but also those at the local. Blitz-era south London saw variation become the norm, a norm reinforced by the different forms of local and national networks at work within the city. For millions of Londoners, the Blitz underscored that which made their specific area of the city distinct from others, in both positive and negative ways. This thesis has attempted to restore those distinctive voices to a historiography which almost always addresses the city of London as a whole and often failed to incorporate the

Life during the Blitz was far more complicated and filled with far more anxieties and differences among individuals than one might initially think. Our popular memory is of stories of heroic Londoners posting humorous signs on their store fronts or “carrying on” in spite of the bombing going on around them. To be fair, these stories did happen, and we are justified in including them in memories of the Blitz. But they were relatively uncommon and do not represent the complete reality of life during war for the majority of the population. They remain the notions of a fringe, and this thesis has restored the silenced voices of the rest of the population. Life during the Blitz usually was not filled with any many heroic tales such as these, and this thesis addresses the feelings of the common south Londoner to the story and to explore how diverse his experience could be.

In the closing of this thesis, it is worth returning to a rather old question: if the Blitz was a relatively tame example of Second World War bombing, why does it command such a dominant presence in our minds? In spite of the trauma to its survivors, it is hard to escape the truth: that the Blitz was not even close to the deadliest, most destructive, or longest bombing campaigns of the war. The Blitz was comparably short, lasting not even a full year with sustained, daily bombardment for just about three months. The US bombing campaign on Japan, also short, far exceeded the Blitz in time span, while the dual British-American raids on Germany lasted longer still. Admittedly, the US/ British raids seldom targeted the same city in consecutive nights, but the point stands: the Blitz made Brits genuinely scared of bombing, but it was an event hardly on the scale of what would come later.

The Blitz was also one of the least destructive strategic bombing campaigns of the war in terms of human life. Though estimates vary, 40,000 British civilian deaths during the entire eight-month campaign seems to be a commonly accepted number. The Germans did real damage, yes, but hardly on the scale as seen elsewhere during the war. To put the Blitz's toll in perspective, the Royal Air Force killed more than 40,000 individuals in a *single night* when 787 RAF bombers attacked Hamburg on the night of July 27-28, 1943. Temperatures in the blazing city approached 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. A British pilot observing the destruction below noted that the city looked like a volcano—as if all the bomber pilots were doing was simply “putting another shovelful of coal into the furnace.”<sup>102</sup> The US

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<sup>102</sup> Stephen A. Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War Two* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), xii. This book is highly recommended for those interested in the ethics of the British strategic

attacks on Japan make even such attacks on Germany look relatively humane; in a single night, the United States burned or asphyxiated to death over 100,000 Japanese, mostly women, children, and the elderly when it assaulted Tokyo in March 1945. According to Stephen Garrett, throughout the entire war, the Luftwaffe managed to deliver just 1 ton of bombs on the United Kingdom for every 315 that the United States Army Air Force and Royal Air Force dumped on Germany.<sup>103</sup> It is hard to miss the gross discrepancy in tonnage, a tonnage which translated into damage and destruction done.

Much of the Blitz's popularity, of course comes from the myth-making of it after the war rather than the reality of the event itself. The Blitz's "after the fact" importance is a consideration unique for historians of Britain during the Second World War; after all, it was only after Britain won the war that the nationalist narrative of a "down-but-not-out" Britain standing strong as one and then rising back to victory actually made sense as a coherent narrative.<sup>104</sup> The stories of German and Japanese bombing do not align with any great national narrative of the Second World War the way that the Blitz does for Britain, for those nations did not win. And align it has. For British nationalism, the Blitz represented a time when free, democratic society stood alone against a European continent overrun by the evils of fascism—the horrible "other" to the glamorous, British "us." The Blitz represented the great triumph not just of the British war machine, which managed to maintain

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bombing campaign of Germany, a topic which this thesis did not treat but which deserves considerable attention in its own right.

<sup>103</sup> Stephen Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War Two*, 193.

<sup>104</sup> Angus Calder addresses this idea extensively in his book *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Publishing, 1991).

air superiority in the summer of 1940, but of the entire British population as well. Perhaps Winston Churchill put it best when he declared that “history is written by the victors.” Britain won the war, and the Blitz played and continues to play a key role in Britain’s national memory of it in large part because of it.

And while much of the perceived importance of the Blitz can be attributed to the importance of it to British national myths, this in no way impinges upon the Blitz’s value beyond the lens of postwar idealism. Though it was not the largest, longest, or deadliest strategic bombing campaign, it offers historians both of Britain and of warfare and social history a unique case study with which to consider their own scholarship—a case which goes far beyond the postwar mythology of the event. While no doubt a challenge to sift through the nationalist myths to get to the experiences of those who lived it, doing so offers a wealth of opportunities to scholars that have yet to be fully explored.

For one, there is something to be said for the Blitz’s timing: it was the first true event of its kind. Though hardly the first time that bombs had been dropped on civilian population centers, the Blitz was the first time that a large-scale campaign had been launched and carried out over many months targeting a civilian population in a routine, systematic way. It was the first time that a civilian population demonstrated that the great airpower theorists and their advocates in governments around the world had been wrong. It demonstrated to the world what happened when a city or cities faced sustained aerial bombardment. As the prevalence of aerial bombardment has only increased in the years since the end of



the Second World War, so has interest in the world's first great example of aerial bombardment. The Blitz will forever hold that claim to fame, not as the largest, longest, or deadliest, but as the first sustained aerial assault.

The Blitz is also particularly intriguing because of the way that it underscores the larger failure of imagination from those whose theories laid the ideological framework for it. These thinkers, whose lives and theories stretch far beyond the British Isles, suggest just one of the ways that the Blitz can have importance for scholars not only of Britain but for other fields as well. This is a theme that began long before the first planes swooped over London that August day. The bomber emerged in combat during the First World War, an infant weapon which, while frightening, had limited capabilities. Bombers were slow, hard to maneuver, light on armament, and very vulnerable to attack. Many simply fell apart long before reaching their targets. But few doubted that the years after the First World War would witness revolutions in the technology and tactics. Thus, in the years leading up to the Second World War, virtually every airpower theorist believed that strategic bombing would bring about the rapid surrender of a population. The German plan to bomb British cities, particularly London, relied on the notion that doing so would force a surrender, removing the need to invade Britain and allowing Hitler to focus on other priorities. This was a common idea in 1930s Europe. Argued famous Italian airpower theorist Giulio Douhet, "a complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country subjected to this kind of merciless pounding from the air." British thinker Sir Basil Liddell Hart shared Douhet's sentiment, claiming that in the next war, bombing would be *the* decisive strategy

since civilians under attack from the sky would necessarily demand surrender immediately.<sup>105</sup> In spite of the ominous prewar predictions, the forecasted outcomes never came to fruition in any theater of war. The Blitz was the first case to suggest that the prewar airpower thinkers had been wrong, but it was far from the only one. For any scholar trying to evaluate the effects of aerial bombardment and its effects on civilians, it seems the Blitz is a strong choice.

The Blitz may not have been the biggest, deadliest, or longest incident, but its experiential value at the time—that is, not in hindsight as part of a national myth of British unity and ultimate victory—is nonetheless extreme. British citizens at the time understood that what they were experiencing would later be remembered as a key part of history. Their pivotal role in the story of history's largest war was not lost on them. To many who survived it, the Blitz represented a time when the very idea of progress itself, seemingly so benign before the events of 1914 plunged Europe into conflict, once again seemed a mockery.<sup>106</sup> But in spite of the horror of living in a city under constant attack, Londoners understood and frequently recorded their belief that the future would be interested in the event, a sensation described long before any national myth of the Blitz had time to form in the postwar world. And because Londoners understood that what they were experiencing was the making of a history, there remains much for scholars to learn. It is in this sense that the Blitz illuminates the history of London, the United Kingdom, the Empire, and social history more generally. The Blitz grants scholars the remarkable ability to

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<sup>105</sup> Stephen Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War Two*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> David M. Kennedy, "Introduction" in S.L.A. Marshall, *World War One* (New York: Mariner Books, 1964), vii, introduction written 2000.

study the history of ordinary men and women at a time in which their most fundamental security—that of life itself—is removed. It offers historians a way to see inside the workings, both bright and dark, of cities and countrysides under attack. It demonstrates where loyalties rested as well as where they didn't. And it offers scholars thinking not only about other instances of aerial bombardment but about the history of everyday men and women both in and out of war a very different lens through which to view the ways in which humans interact with one another. These are all themes that have implications far beyond the history of the Blitz, London, and the Second World War itself.

Given how much the Blitz can tell present-day observers about humanity itself, it should be no surprise that thinkers in the academy as well as common men and women across a variety of spaces and times have drawn links between the Blitz and other bombing campaigns in an attempt to bring understanding to their own presents. In the United States, the obvious link drawn has been to Vietnam, a conflict which many felt the Blitz offered a constructive lens through which to view the United States' deliberate bombing campaign in southeast Asia. And, alas, there is much to learn from the Blitz today. As civilians, politicians, and scholars continue to consider the possibilities and limitations of airpower into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there remains value to looking back seventy years to the dark days when Britain stood alone—to see, above all else, how people respond to bombing and how they perceive their own world within it. Far more than just suggesting that strategic bombing does not yield the surrenders envisioned by the airpower theorists in the

1930s, the Blitz underscores the complex ways in which people simultaneously adapt and maintain their lives in the midst of virtually random destruction.

It was not long ago that the First World War receded out of living memory, leaving behind just the archives of its existence to speak for it. The Second World War and with it, the Blitz, are but a generation away from approaching that point. Yet it seems unlikely that the end of its survivors will diminish interest in the Blitz. It is likely to remain a part of both British memory and historical scholarship for years to come. In spite of the heavily studied nature of the Blitz, this interest should be seen as a resoundingly positive development. Years of separation from the present do not diminish the fact that the Blitz promises to offer future lessons to scholars of all types. The Blitz matters to British historians, including those who do not study the Second World War, London, or urban spaces, for it informs the wartime constructions of self, family, community, country, and nation. It matters to social historians of all types trying to make out the patterns in the lives of common people. It matters to scholars trying to understand strategic bombardment; for those trying to analyze how and why people react the way that they did under assault both in London and elsewhere; during the Second World War, before it, and after it. And of course, it matters to the United Kingdom, for the Blitz is perhaps *the* defining feature of the Second World War for British nationalism. Though scholars' and civilians' understandings of the Blitz may in the future change, there seems little doubt that individuals will remain interested in examining and exploring what the Blitz did to London, Britain, and the world, even two generations after it ended.

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