

HISTORY

History Germany bombs London



Germany bombs London

7-15 September 1940

On 7 September 1940, the Luftwaffe unleashed a merciless bombing campaign against London and Britain's major cities. Instead of breaking morale, however, the raids only galvanised the will of the British people for the rest of the war.

Photo: Winston Churchill inspecting bomb damage in Battersea, South London, 10 September 1940. (Getty Images)

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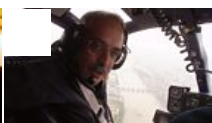
Germany bombs London



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Hitler targets London

On 4 September Hitler, frustrated by the RAF's superiority over the Luftwaffe and enraged by its bombing of German cities, vowed to destroy the British capital and the spirit of its people.

In response, the Luftwaffe shifted its focus from attacking RAF Fighter Command's bases and communications networks to bombing Britain's cities. Hermann Goering, the Head of the Luftwaffe, had severely lost face over both the bombing of Berlin, and his force's failure to defeat the RAF. He hoped that the intense bombing of British cities would both destroy public morale and draw the remaining RAF fighters into battle and annihilation.

The bombing begins

After a preliminary raid on 5 September, the bombing started proper on the afternoon of the 7th. Almost 1,000 German aircraft - over 300 bombers escorted by 600 fighters - crossed the Channel. It was the largest collection of aircraft ever seen. Fighter Command had not expected raids on London, but now attempted to intercept the waves of bombers. A huge dogfight developed over London and the Thames Estuary.

Convinced that the German invasion of Britain was imminent, the country was put on the highest alert. Signals of impending invasion went out - the code word "Cromwell" was sent to military units and church bells rang.

Some of the German bombs did fall on their intended target of the docks, but many fell on the residential areas around them. Substantial parts of East and South-East London were devastated, 430 civilians were killed and 1600 seriously injured. Firestorms ravaged the city, acting as beacons for the second wave of bombers that evening.

After the raids Winston Churchill shared the public's fury and defiantly announced: "He [Hitler] has lighted a fire which will burn with a steady and consuming flame until the last vestiges of Nazi tyranny have been burnt out of Europe".

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Bombing continues for the next 76 nights

Although no-one knew at the time, this was the beginning of the Blitz. With the exception of one night, when the weather was bad, the bombing continued for the next 76 nights consecutively, with daytime raids as well. Liverpool, Manchester, Swansea, Cardiff, Bristol, Southampton were also targeted.

Now that the Luftwaffe's resources were directed into bombing civilians, Fighter Command had an opportunity to repair its infrastructure and attack anew. As well as their own lives, the pilots were now battling to protect their homes and loved ones all over the country.

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