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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Blitzed City

## The Destruction of Coventry, 1940

Written by Karen Farrington

Published by Aurum Press

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*The Destruction of Coventry, 1940*

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# Prologue

For stretcher-bearer Dennis Adler, it was a sight that would remain etched in his memory forever. Aged fifteen, he was already an old hand at working through the night as a volunteer cadet for the St John Ambulance Brigade. He had become accustomed to seeing crushed limbs and bloodied faces, and he could even carry a corpse without flinching. But the waiting room in front of him was like nothing he had witnessed before.

At first glance, it looked like a scene from a military hospital. As bombs plunged through buildings and flames reached the height of rooftops outside, the casualties who poured through the doors looked something like battlefield cannon fodder. Yet, this was not the aftermath of a campaign, nor was it combatants who were suffering such grievous injuries. It was the night of the Coventry Blitz and these victims were civilians who had become the collateral damage of a new phase of a terrifying, modern military struggle.

By day, Dennis Adler was employed helping a milkman to deliver dairy items by lorry to the nearby town of Kenilworth for the Co-op. He had already notched up jobs as an office boy and a factory hand, but it was outdoor employment that he relished and he had more in his weekly pay packet than the ten shillings a week he had previously earned.

He spent his afternoons asleep, and at night, he devoted hours to the Gulson Road Hospital in Coventry. It was a small municipal hospital with a single operating theatre the size of an average

sitting room. Even in those times of crisis, there were no more than four doctors on duty.

Initially, he nearly missed this shift at the hospital. Fearful of the raid's early intensity, his father Harry had almost stopped him from going. As the family made its way to a shelter, Dennis had finally persuaded his father that it was appropriate for him to peel off and report for duty. Dennis did not realise, as he spoke kindly to one patient here and gave a drink to another there, that he had already delivered his last pint of milk. It would be weeks before Dennis left the hospital again.

More casualties arrived who needed his attention. This time, it was a mother with a baby in her arms. Both looked like they were sleeping serenely, but to his horror, Dennis suddenly realised that they were dead. A doctor explained that the invisible force of a bomb blast had killed them. They had died from internal injuries, although both were quite unmarked.

It was not only ambulances that brought patients to the hospital. Every kind of vehicle was used to ferry them in and more hobbled there on foot. Soon, there was no electricity to light the hospital, or water to mop up wounds. It became harder to administer even basic treatment to the streams of people in need.

Later, Dennis recognised some of the firemen being brought in with injuries. They had been stationed opposite his school and used to wave at pupils such as him. All of them died as the hospital struggled to cope, with people perishing from shock, for want of warmth, or for loss of blood.

Alarm at the mounting death toll made him pause for a moment. Then Dennis pulled himself together and helped to move bodies away from the main waiting area to make room for more patients. That night he – along with numerous others – worked tirelessly for the very survival of the city and its people.

# Introduction

On a frosty Thursday night in the winter of 1940, Coventry was laid waste by an aerial bombardment. Today, terror among civilians sparked by a thunderous rain of bombs from high-flying aircraft is a harsh reality that happens on an alarmingly regular basis. Back then, the grim art of the Blitz was in its infancy. Until that fateful raid aeroplanes tended to travel in twos or tens rather than in hundreds. Bombs were getting bigger, but they were still comparatively modest in size. The chances of hitting a target with one that had been launched from an aeroplane at high altitude were slim, as accurate navigation was too often a matter of luck for a pilot and his crew. Conversely, any defence against enemy fliers was still largely ineffectual.

The devastation of Coventry – acclaimed worldwide as a medieval gem – marked the moment that the bomber came of age. Before that moment on 14 November, both sides clung precariously to the moral high ground, claiming their targets were military ones. When the truth of the matter was consistently proved – that bombs fell indiscriminately on the civilian population as well as the munitions factories they worked in – an idea formed in the minds of those planning the attacks: why not bomb the people who were making armaments as well as the armaments themselves, to crush their spirits, create pandemonium and thus bring a speedy end to the conflict?

Although it was not the first city to be bombarded – and it certainly would not be the last – the attack on Coventry changed

the tenor of aerial warfare. London had been Blitzed, but the city was too sprawling for the terror to be a game changer. Coventry was smaller and more compact. If the terrible effects of a concentrated attack could be maximised anywhere, it was there and German air chiefs were keen to experiment with this new tactic.

The Luftwaffe not only used incendiaries to best effect but also its navigational technology, which, although far from foolproof, was way ahead of that of the British. It had the means to get pilots to the correct location and help them aim their bombs. Consequently, the facts and figures of the ferocious dusk-to-dawn raid are brutal.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 incendiaries fell on both military and civilian targets. Most were standard blaze-setters, but about a fifth had a delaying device that then caused an explosion in the face of fire fighters, inflicting burns and blindness. More than 503 tons of high explosives tumbled through the night sky, in an estimated 16,000 bombs – some of which weighed as much as 1,102lb. In addition, fifty parachute mines, each weighing in at 2,205lb and containing 1,543lb of high explosives, were dropped.

It is thought that 568 people were killed out of a population of 238,000, with a further 863 seriously injured. The circumstances of their demise are shocking, with people burned, crushed, shocked or frightened to death. The true figures may never be known and the city is still dogged by rumours that the death toll was much higher.

Yet the story of the attack on the city is not just about a switch of strategies by German High Command and those who perished in terror that night because of it. It is the tales of those who survived, drawing on inner resourcefulness and iron will, that make the event so memorable. Not everyone was a hero, although there were many who emerged as such from the fire and the chaos. Nor was there a higher-than-average proportion of cowardice. Most people fell between the two extremes, ordinary people coping as

best they could in appalling conditions. And what the city had in abundance was people.

Coventry was a busy city because it was the beating heart of industrial England. It was heavy with engineering works prior to the war and became more so as the conflict unfolded. Without Coventry and other cities like it, Britain would not have had the means to fight a war. And cities like Coventry needed men – and women – to make them tick.

It was not everyone's first choice to stay on a factory production line. There was evidently some sense of adventure in signing up for the services at the outbreak of war, swapping shabby civvies for a smart uniform, despite the obvious perils. No doubt men heading over to France in 1939 thought the home-based factory hands had a cushy number. However, it was claimed that for every fighting soldier or airman no fewer than seven munitions workers were needed to keep him properly supplied.

A year later, when the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force had returned to home soil and there was not a land-based battle in sight, it was those in engineering who were subjected to enemy attack along with their wives and children, rather than uniformed soldiers.

Now these men whose job on the home front – considered mundane in peace time – made them essential workers could not have signed up as soldiers even if they tried. The industrial muscle that kept the country afloat was inevitably unglamorous and largely went uncelebrated. Those who stayed home to keep production buoyant were financially well rewarded. At a time when coal miners in South Wales were paid only £3 per week, Coventry aircraft workers were bringing home much more than the national average wage of £4 per week, although they were working a sixty-five-hour week to do so.

Ultimately, no amount of income could protect cities and those within them from the attentions of enemy aircraft during the Second World War. There had been aerial attacks in the First

World War, which caused unprecedented alarm, but they did not compare to the scale or intensity of what occurred in the war that erupted little more than twenty years afterwards.

As more men were needed in the services, so the women across Britain stepped up to take their places in the factories and, by 1941, women had been conscripted into aircraft factories, with the reluctant agreement of the unions.

As the heart of England became its front line for a night, the perspective of the people of Coventry was irrevocably changed as was the city itself. Housewives there developed an affinity for their counterparts in Warsaw and Rotterdam; factory workers knew what troops on the battlefield were experiencing and children understood what it was to live in a devastated war zone with all the shortages that that entailed. As a result of the timing of the raid, its intensity and the high rate of civilian casualties, the story of Coventry's Blitz became emblematic of them all.

It is why a forensic investigation into what happened that night and afterwards gives voice not only to Coventry but every other city that was bombed during the Second World War, and since.

Chapter One

# ‘The bomber will always get through’

*Stanley Baldwin*

For centuries manned flight was nothing but a distant dream pondered by intellectuals and scientists alongside the ambitious, the brave and the downright foolhardy. They watched birds soaring overhead and wondered how life would be enhanced if only mankind could mimic those aerial antics. Through the ages, men tried strapping on feathered wings, attaching themselves to kites, experimenting with rotor blades and even flirting with the idea of gliders. A few even threw themselves from towers to put flawed designs to the test.

Yet even the noblest of dreams can have unintended consequences, and if those aspiring aviators had known what lay ahead, they might have been more careful about what they wished for. When it finally arrived, the reality of manned flight proved to be both a blessing and a curse.

Initially, the prospect of easy, speedy travel across countries and continents seemed to bring universal benefit, but a few short years after man’s ingenuity took him soaring above the clouds, the military saw ominous potential. From that point, it was a devastating new weapon that could rain death from the skies hundreds of miles from home territory.

Senior officers and eager engineers began toying with the notion of using aerial advantage to unlock a swift victory in military conflicts. Within a few short decades a new age had dawned, where strategic bombing became the norm. (Ultimately, the term 'strategic' – which implied a theoretical purpose or design beyond widespread destruction – could be substituted by area, tactical, precision, carpet or terror.)

The ensuing losses among pilots and aircrew – brave young men killed at a tender age – were shocking. But the death toll among the professionals has been dwarfed by the number of people on all sides who have died in the past century beneath a Blitz of bombs, either in their homes, or at their workplaces or while taking shelter from the onslaught.

However, if the generals and politicians of the early twentieth century believed aviation technology would make war redundant, they were wrong. Air superiority has never been sufficient to finish a war once it has begun, although there were plenty who convinced themselves otherwise.

Before the Second World War, the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was in the vanguard of these people, when he issued a dire warning:

> I think it is well also for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through. The only defence is in offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves…
>
> But when the next war comes, and European civilisation is wiped out, as it will be, and by no force more than that force, then do not let them lay blame

> on the old men. Let [young pilots] remember that they, principally, or they alone, are responsible for the terrors that have fallen upon the earth.

During the 1930s, when Baldwin was making his point, the thought of a war dominated by aerial bombers was feared much as nuclear war would be in the 1950s and 1960s. It's worth assessing the short history of flight that had unfolded in Baldwin's lifetime to understand why he was fearful.

At the outset, manned flight as a tool of annihilation was a long way from the minds of those engaged in the drive to push back the barriers of science. Pioneers like these were fuelled by what sometimes seemed to be an insurmountable challenge. A desire among those in ancient civilisations to take to the air was evident in the fabric of the fables they produced, the most memorable of which was of Icarus coming down to earth with a fatal bump after flying too close to the sun with wings made from feathers and wax.

For years, it seemed that the only option was to mimic birds. But as the centuries wore on, fresh ideas gradually came to the table. Leonardo da Vinci, now renowned for being ahead of his time, made more than 100 drawings that illustrated his ambitions about flight, mostly centred on what he termed an Ornithopter. Although it was never made in his lifetime, it might be seen as a distant ancestor of the modern helicopter.

Skip forward a few more centuries and the first major development appeared, the hot air balloon, invented by brothers Joseph and Jacques Etienne Montgolfier in 1783.

For the first time, men and women could take to the air to enjoy the panoramic views and hitherto unknown speeds of travel; beautiful, undoubtedly, and breathtakingly impressive.

And quickly the military made use of them, with a tethered balloon forming part of the defences during the French Revolutionary Wars and silk balloons featuring in the American Civil War.

During the 1870 Siege of Paris – when Baldwin was an infant – balloons were a symbol of resistance after rampant Prussian forces had beaten a path to the gates of the French capital city and isolated it from the rest of the country. Inevitably, there were soon woeful shortages of food and information. Yet the city had some talented technicians who could construct a new hot air balloon every twelve days when they worked at full stretch. Then, the aim was to pilot one of the craft to an unoccupied area to discharge important messages and intelligence. More than sixty balloons, with at least 110 passengers, went aloft during the five-month siege, doing valuable reconnaissance work in the process.

Consequently, the first anti-aircraft guns were developed by the Prussians in an effort to fell the balloons and gain an upper hand in this new and unfamiliar manner of warfare.

Steel baron Alfred Krupp modified a 1-pounder gun and installed it on the back of a horse-drawn carriage. Known as the *ballonkanone*, it proved to be the humble beginnings of an entirely new facet of military hardware.

Balloons then evolved into powered airships which could be dispatched in chosen directions rather than remain at the whim of the wind. The process of evolution continued when planes were developed in the first decade of the twentieth century after the Wright brothers' historic flight in 1903. Though not everyone could see the potential in military terms: Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch, who was considered to be one of the best military minds of his generation in France, believed flying to be a sport rather than a military strategy.

The neighbouring Italians begged to differ. A relatively new country with major ambitions, Italy initiated a war against the Ottoman Empire in North Africa with the unashamed intention of carving out an empire. In doing so, it became the first nation to flirt with aerial bombardment.

On 1 November 1911, two months after the start of the conflict, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti flew from an airfield in what is now Libya over the Ain Zara oasis with four round grenade-style bombs in the cockpit of his Etrich Taube plane, each weighing about 3lb. Three were nestling in a lined, leather case on the floor while a fourth was snug in his flying jacket. As he approached his target, the trail-blazing aviator kept one hand on the wheel while using the other to lay the bomb from his jacket in his lap. Then he ripped out the safety catch and tossed it over the side of the German-made aircraft, carefully avoiding the wing. As dark clouds rose from the tents below, Gavotti threw out two more bombs before flying to a military camp near Tripoli and dispatching the fourth. No one was hurt in the raid, but Gavotti had set down a marker in what turned out to be a victorious campaign and was lauded for doing so. The following year, he undertook the world's first night-time mission.

The Italians also deployed airships in a war that is mainly significant for revealing the weaknesses of the failing Ottoman Empire. At the time, airships had been flying for longer than aeroplanes and had at least as much military consequence. Their reputation and potential were largely down to innovative thinking by German innovators. By the turn of the twentieth century, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin was working on what was effectively a motorised balloon. It was his idea to develop the bullet-shaped airship, and his

LZ1 made its maiden flight on 2 July 1900. It travelled three and a half miles in eighteen minutes, thanks to two 14 horsepower (hp) engines, with two gondoliers slung beneath to house the crew.

Abundant modifications in construction were made to ensuing models, and the future of the Zeppelin seemed assured until the doomed LZ4 was destroyed in 1908 on home turf by a storm as it attempted a twenty-four-hour endurance flight. This might have signalled the end for the airship, but the German public, imbued with patriotic fervour for the venture, donated six million marks to build the next one. So successful was the Zeppelin that all airships became known by this name, even when some were made by another manufacturer.

Initially, the aim was to provide passenger transport, but with the onset of the First World War, the potential for military engagement became quickly apparent. Airships were almost immediately deployed by Germany in the Low Countries and five months later the first air raids were unleashed on British soil. An initial foray was made on 19 January 1915 when two airships set off from Germany with 30 hours' worth of fuel, eight bombs and twenty-five incendiary devices. Kaiser Wilhelm II would not give his permission for it to bomb London, where his cousin King George V lived. But his sensitivities were not sufficient to stop the bombing of Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn, two targets on the east coast of England that so far had been touched by the war only through the departure of their young men to the Western Front.

After lighting a path with the incendiaries, the crews bombed these comparatively rural outposts and killed nine people. Furthermore, they created panic among residents

who had expected a seaborne invasion rather than one from the skies. It was, of course, a completely unknown concept to those on the ground, although there had been attacks on east-coast towns from ships so far out at sea that they could not be seen, which had evoked similar levels of shock. Still, people everywhere, subjected to rumours about sightings of the gas giants, were filled with dread at the thought of aerial bombardment, a condition flippantly known as 'Zeppelinitis'.

More raids followed, and eventually the Germans extended their range by the end of May to include London and other cities. Zeppelins swooped in virtual silence, having killed the throb of their engines at an appropriate moment. Looming above the chimneys, they disposed of their payload, then rose swiftly into the clouds after firing up once more. The effect of these sinister sights on the ground caused dread and curiosity. Londoners fled to shelter in the Underground stations, behaviour that was initially frowned upon by the authorities who were concerned that it would hinder the transport system. Eventually, the government relented, although posters made it clear that birds, dogs, cats and, oddly, mail carts were not permitted in stations. One estimate put the number of Londoners seeking overnight shelter from the Zeppelin raids at 300,000.

At first, there were no defences that could counter the threat. Guns on the ground did not have the range or the agility to shoot down a high and moving target. But, as always, warfare brought forth new defensive as well as attacking technologies. Artillery became more powerful, not least to counter the threat that airships posed to the trenches, and searchlights were installed in cities to illuminate targets. A blackout was declared in major cities. Barrage balloons, which resembled airships but were tethered to the ground,

were also sent up around London. The balloons, sometimes armed with explosives, were on steel cables strong enough to bring down low-flying craft. Sometimes, a cable was also strung horizontally between balloons to trip up the incoming enemy.

As time went by, Zeppelins, which had once stolen in over the British coast unseen and untroubled, found themselves spotted by coastal observation stations and ships and their radio messages monitored by listening stations. It meant an alarm could be sounded after warnings were phoned through to the Admiralty in London and aeroplanes in the home defence force – generally speaking the BE2c bi-plane – could be scrambled. Now armed with incendiary bullets, lone pilots had plenty to aim at as they tried to ignite the gases that kept the Zeppelin in the sky.

Indeed, more aircraft than ever were devoted to countering the airship menace. In June 1915, a British fighter pilot brought down an airship for the first time by dropping bombs on its roof. Now, it was the turn of the machine guns that defended the airships to appear clunky, although it was some time before the feat of 1915 was repeated.

As far as civilians went, however, the threat remained a considerable one. One London woman wrote to her mother in Devon after witnessing a raid and told her how the city sky was illuminated by fire:

> It's a wonder that I'm alive today and I must confess that last night I thought it was all up with us. I don't want to alarm you, mother, but it's no good concealing facts, is it? One of the Zepps was almost over our house, and a terrible cannonading was going on all around. It is impossible to describe it all and you could never

imagine what it was like. I have never spent such an awful half hour before and I was horribly frightened. In fact, we all were, even the boys. I am jolly glad you were not there, dear.

The Zepps got right into the city this time and did heaps of damage around Liverpool Street and Wood Street. There must have been more than one because they seem to have been nearly all over London last night.

The excitement was terrible, people were rushing about in the street, half dressed. Whistles were blowing and specials were going around ordering all lights out. It started just before 11. None of us had gone to bed when suddenly we heard a terrific noise quickly followed by the loud booming of guns.

Instantly there was confusion and I knew at once it was Zepps. One of the boys ordered us all into the passage, turned out the lights and opened the doors for we could tell that the Zepp was jolly near. There we waited with white faces listening to the awful booming outside and expecting the house to topple down on us at any minute. I can't describe the sensation, it was simply awful.

Despite the threat, these observers were desperate to witness the scene:

We rushed into the garden and there, almost above us, was the Zepp. It was far different to what I expected to see and it was a great sight. Imagine a long, cigar-shaped car lighted up by the searchlights and surrounded by the starry blue sky. It was hard to realise that it was on such a desperate errand and we gazed, fascinated.

> The shells from the anti aircraft guns were bursting all around and each boom sent an awful thrill through us. I shall never forget that night.

As for the airship crew, which numbered about twenty, they were dressed in thick winter clothing to guard against the freezing temperatures that they experienced as they flew high above the earth. At first, the hit-and-run missions seemed safe enough. But as Britain resolved her air defence issues, there were more casualties, and eventually the hearts of everyone aboard were thumping with fear while the raids were in progress. After a number of costly Zeppelins were brought down, these air raids began to peter out. More than fifty had taken place, involving 115 airships with losses among crew running at about 40 per cent. About a quarter of the raids were over London, with some raids taking place in the Midlands, including one in Coventry, and a few in Scotland.

But it wasn't the only method of attack from the air suffered in Britain. German aircraft raided the nation's shores as early as 1914 and these became larger and more robust as the conflict wore on, especially so when the hopes invested in airships began to vanish. Their visits caused still more casualties. Raids like the one on 25 May 1917, when twenty-three Gotha bombers dispensed bombs over southeast England during the night (increasingly the favoured time for sorties), served to lower morale among the British population. With the final death toll from both types of air aid topping 1,400 it is easy to see why the government feared the raids would undermine the war effort.

Of course, Britain was in possession of aeroplanes at the outbreak of the war and they did not stand idly by. In 1914, before the appearance of airships over British shores, there

were a series of raids on Zeppelin sheds to destroy the new-age weapons. However, German Zeppelins went on to bomb targets in Greece and Bucharest in 1916. There were abundant cries of 'foul play' from those on the ground because at the time there were protocols in place governing the conduct of war. In the last half of the nineteenth century, there had been growing disquiet among the thinking classes about the fate of soldiers on the battlefield, both in Europe and during the American Civil War. As the age of set-piece skirmishes diminished, there seemed a growing need to codify behaviour in war towards soldiers and civilians. The results were a series of Geneva Conventions and Hague Conventions, which ran parallel to curb military excesses.

The first legislation to limit aerial attacks was drawn up as early as 1899 and is known as the Hague Convention II. One of its declarations specifically states that those powers signing up are forbidden, for five years, from launching 'projectiles and explosives from balloons or by other new methods of similar nature'. The Convention was renewed in 1907. Moreover, land and air warfare were bracketed together as far as the bombardment of undefended towns was concerned. Surprise attacks were also prohibited. The commander of an attacking force was obliged to warn the authorities of an intended target about what was to take place. But the development of aeroplanes soon outran even these plans for possible legislation, let alone any signed and sealed international agreement, as each new model had ever greater capabilities.

Then in 1911, the Madrid Resolution declared that aerial warfare was legal provided that it met certain conditions and was not more destructive than war on land or at sea. With the rapid advances in aircraft technology, there was an

unwillingness among countries to sign up to something that might ultimately hamper their ambitions. Some experts were certain that air supremacy would guarantee victory. Lieutenant Colonel Giulio Douhet, a notable military theorist, expounded his beliefs in a 1921 book called *The Command of the Air*. Surprisingly, he was an army man rather than an early pilot, but he was convinced of the virtue of military aircraft. Defence against air raids from anti-aircraft guns and fighters was pointless, he declared, and all efforts should be devoted to corralling more powerful aerial bombing forces than any neighbouring country. A second edition of the book, published in 1927, was translated into English, French, German and Russian and became a standard military text. He was perhaps correct in assuming that aeroplanes were offensive weapons par excellence. Accurately, he predicted that 'the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy'. But his pessimistic scenarios for aerial warfare were fortunately flawed. He wrongly believed that a combination of fires and poison gases dispensed by attacking aircraft would leave entire regions paralysed: 'A complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country subjected to this kind of merciless pounding from the air. The time will soon come when, to put an end to the horror and suffering, the people themselves, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, would rise up and demand an end to the war – this before their Army and Navy had time to mobilize.'

The political classes did take note, however, and some sought to counter the threat. The result was the Hague Rules of Air Warfare, produced in 1923 – but never ratified by

countries still reluctant to rein in the new and exciting aerial weapon now tantalisingly within their grasp. Had it been signed and sealed, this new set of rules would have restricted aerial bombardment to military targets and outlawed attacks on cities and towns. In cases where military targets were embedded in civilian populations, the code categorically declared 'the aircraft must abstain from bombardment'.

In another article of the proposed rules, there was an avowed aim to protect historic sites: 'In bombardment by aircraft all necessary steps must be taken by the commander to spare as far as possible buildings dedicated to public worship, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospital ships, hospitals, and other places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided such buildings, objects or places are not at the time used for military purposes.'

They were wonderful sentiments from well-meaning negotiators, but they amounted to nothing without the relevant signatures. Thus, as Europe shaped up for its second major conflict in just over two decades, there was nothing to dissuade the hawks among the air force commanders from unleashing the horrific weapons at their disposal.

As it was, the size of national air forces grew and their actions remained unfettered by legislation. Britain began radically expanding her air capability from 1934 and, by 1936, had reorganised in earnest to meet a growing threat from Germany, creating bomber, fighter and coastal commands.

Following the First World War the Germans had been prohibited from having aircraft by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, but under Hitler's leadership, they disregarded its provisions and the Luftwaffe was unveiled in 1935. Despite

this development and the regional threat it represented, there is evidence that Hitler was at first reluctant to embrace the potential of aerial bombing in warfare. In 1935, he told one correspondent: 'War has been speeded up too much and made too overwhelmingly destructive for our geographical limitations. Within an hour – in some instances within forty minutes – of the outbreak of hostilities swift bombing machines would wreak ruin upon European capitals.'

Certainly, the newly wrought Luftwaffe operated differently from Britain's Royal Air Force, which had been formed in 1918. Rather than categorise its aircraft by function, the Germans operated Luftflotten in territories. According to Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder, the Germans never learned to use their Luftwaffe to best effect. But it wasn't for want to trying. Moreover, the Germans were already flirting with the idea of bombing civilians rather than military targets.

The bombing of Guernica in Spain stands out as the starkest legacy of a diplomatic failure which resulted in the lack of international laws governing aerial assaults. Spain became embroiled in a civil war from 1936 as Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco tried to overthrow the Republican government. The conflict became a focus of the right–left fissure that was splitting Europe at the time. The Republicans attracted the support of the International Brigade, typically comprising idealists, writers, artists and others. Franco called on the support of Hitler, by now the undisputed ruler of Germany, who was re-arming his country at speed. To Spain, the Führer dispatched the Condor Legion, an off-shoot of the as yet untested Luftwaffe. On 26 April 1937, at the behest of Franco, German airmen,

helped by counterparts from Fascist Italy, unleashed a rehearsal of the chaos that would soon blight much of Europe.

Guernica was close to Republican forces, but could not be categorised as a military base. Indeed, on the Monday the attack happened, it had been bustling with market-goers. Although the attack came in several waves, the primary damage was caused in just fifteen minutes in the late afternoon as three bomber squadrons attacked the town. At the same time, biplanes were strafing the roads leading out of the town, shooting anyone who tried to flee. For years, the death toll was said to be 1,650, although the figure has been revised downwards since the 1970s and currently the total is generally thought to be around 300. But the sense of shock was palpable. In Britain, a Gaumont newsreel told cinema goers: 'This was a city and these were homes, like yours.'

Afterwards, Franco's forces blamed Republicans for destroying the town with explosives as they retreated. It was the journalists present, most memorably George Steer from *The Times*, who helped to set the record straight. Steer became a champion of the Basque population – which suffered as a minority no matter who was in power – and wrote strikingly about this unacceptable new face of warfare. From shell-shocked victims and terrified refugees, Steer drew extraordinary testimony:

> In the form of its execution and the scale of the destruction it wrought … the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective. A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched. So were two barracks some distance from the town. The town lay

> far behind the lines. The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race.

On his trip to Guernica, Steer was accompanied by the *Daily Express* correspondent Noel Monks, who reported in similar terms. Monks' first task was to help Basque soldiers collect charred bodies that the flames had claimed:

> Some of the soldiers were sobbing like children. There were flames and smoke and grit, and the smell of burning human flesh was nauseating. Houses were collapsing into the inferno.
>
> In the Plaza, surrounded almost by a wall of fire, were about a hundred refugees. They were wailing and weeping and rocking to and fro. One middle-aged man spoke English. He told me: 'At four, before the market closed, many aeroplanes came. They dropped bombs. Some came low and shot bullets into the streets.'

Despite the power of the words dispatched by the British journalists, their versions were rebutted by Franco's aides who released false information through a powerful international network.

Guernica wasn't the first attack of its kind in Spain; Steer had witnessed the Condor Legion in action over Durango earlier the same year, leaving 158 dead. Barcelona was also repeatedly attacked by the Italian Air Force, but its citizens fared better with a network of underground tunnels providing shelters. It was not even the first episode of 'carpet' bombing on a civilian population. Western colonialist

powers had used the technique in Africa and Steer himself had watched the Italian Air Force bomb the Ethiopians. (Poisonous gas dispensed from planes was the Italians' weapon of choice during this conflict.) But the famous painting produced by Pablo Picasso depicting the agony of its population has kept Guernica at the forefront of public consciousness.

Events in Spain and the appalling transgressions of the Italians in Africa served to underline the weaknesses of the League of Nations, the organisation established after the First World War to keep international peace. Further, there was the aerial bombing of Chinese cities, notably Shanghai in 1932 and 1937, by the Japanese during their stealthy invasion. From that city's international sector, British and American residents witnessed the wholesale killings of the Chinese population at close quarters. Hundreds perished, either from shrapnel injuries or after being trapped by falling buildings. Protestors in London, outraged by the deaths, were told by a speaker: 'The air raids in Canton and in Spain are only dress rehearsals for the air raids we may expect on London'.

The failure of diplomats charged with keeping world peace in dealing with the new and awesome aerial threat was by now painfully obvious to all. Flailing in the face of its inadequacies, the League of Nations nonetheless passed a unanimous resolution on 30 September 1938 concerning the protection of civilians from aerial warfare, calling for new and strict regulations. It reminded members that the intentional bombing of civilian populations was illegal, that targets must be both properly identifiable and legitimate military objectives and that any attack on such targets must be carried out in a way that ensured civilian populations in the neighbourhood were not bombed through negligence.

There was, however, a sense that the League of Nations' rules would amount to nothing if war broke out. To underline the point, the prominent peace campaigner Philip John Noel-Baker told Parliament on 21 June 1938, 'The only way to prevent atrocities from the air is to abolish air warfare and national air forces altogether.'

Although he eventually received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1959, the aspirations of this Labour politician and former Olympic athlete, who worked tirelessly for the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations, seemed hopelessly wide of the mark. At the same time, the Assistant Chief of Air Staff was telling people that Britain should expect night raids by between 300 and 500 aircraft in any forthcoming conflict. Britain's Ministry of Health estimated hospital bed requirements following an air raid as between 1 million and 2.8 million. So the idea of Parliament adopting Noel-Baker's favoured option, disarmament, at this stage seemed a non-starter. Yet his views were shared by many, including a considerable number of city councillors in Coventry, who were members of the Labour Party and the Peace Movement. And his fears about the effects of aerial bombing were commonly held as tensions in the world rose.

With the anticipation of war rife, there was a grave tendency to fear the worst. In June 1939, the Air Raid Defence League issued a pamphlet that claimed the number of casualties in a single day's raiding was likely to be 35,000, a figure that would increase to 100,000 in a few days.

A year earlier, Professor J. B. S. Haldane wrote a book called *Air Raid Precautions* with the intention of giving his informed comments to ordinary people. Haldane, a scientist, had been injured by a bomb during the First World War and travelled three times to Spain during the Civil War to

investigate how the population protected itself in air raids. His upper estimate for casualties during a major raid was 100,000 and he gave a no-holds-barred view of its dreadful aftermath: 'Air raids are not only wrong. They are loathsome and disgusting. If you had ever seen a child smashed by a bomb into something like a mixture of dirty rags and cat's meat you would realise this fact as intensely as I do.'

But higher-profile personalities than Haldane also warned of the threat posed by unrestrained aerial warfare. The American President Franklin D. Roosevelt encompassed the thoughts of most concerned people at the start of the Second World War, having witnessed the destruction of Guernica.

> The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population … has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity …. I am therefore addressing this urgent appeal to every Government which may be engaged in hostilities publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations.

For a surprisingly long time, his plea for proper thought among the protagonists held sway. But ultimately, even he could not prevent the inevitable slide into macho military muscle-flexing inspired by air power.