David Fraser's *Blitz*: A Study of Civilians Under Siege

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Abstract

The Second World War was one of the most horrific wars fought in the twentieth century. What is generally remembered about this war is Hitler's gruesome attempt to exterminate all Jews. The memories of concentration camps and gas chambers still linger in the collective memory and are a highly emotive issue. What must also be remembered is that his grandiose expansionist policy resulted in Total War in which all the resources of the enemy became legitimate targets of war. As a result, cities took a tremendous beating and the biggest impact was on civilians.

Hitler, in his attempt to force an armistice on England or an outright surrender, employed what is known as strategic bombing. This concentrated, indiscriminate bombing, popularly known as the "Blitz", began with heavy raids on London on 7 September 1940, during what came to be known as the "Battle of Britain". Represented in popular fiction, film, radio, newspapers and magazines as aggressive British patriotism successfully defending democracy, it must be remembered that it devoured the lives of those not involved in the fighting. In other words, civilians became the main targets.

David Fraser's *Blitz*, a documentary-fiction, chronicles the first shattering eleven days of this holocaust. Fraser, through the experiences of three families and an American war correspondent, whose lives intersect, shows how ordinary men and women coped with the siege; the heroic and the unheroic. This paper shows how the Blitz was a case of government sanctioned civilian victimisation, with the avowed goal of Nazi Germany to cause civilian casualties to undermine civilian morale and Britain's ability to fight. In the end, Fraser demonstrates how these goals were not met.

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The Second World War was one of the most horrific wars fought in the twentieth century, and what remains embedded in the collective memory is Hitler's bid to exterminate all Jews; the horrors of forced migration; of concentration camps and gas chambers. Moreover, his grandiose expansionist dreams led to more atrocities being committed during the course of the war on various fronts by all sides. This led to what is called Total War, wherein all resources used by the enemy became legitimate targets of war. As a result, civilians suffered the most. Civilians in England also became targets of war during what has come to be known as the "Blitz". This concentrated, direct bombing of industrial targets and civilian centers began with heavy aerial raids on London on 7 September 1940, which overlapped with the Battle of Britain, a battle which was fought entirely by air forces.

When the Luftwaffe, as the German Air Force is called, unleashed its arsenal of bombs and incendiaries, 16 other British cities besides London were targeted till 21 May 1941. From 7 September 1940, London was bombed for 57 consecutive nights and, over a period of 267 days, London was attacked 71 times (Roberts). More than one million London houses were destroyed or damaged and more than 40,000 civilians were killed, almost half of them in London.

This heavy indiscriminate bombing mounted on the island nation by Nazi German forces was resorted to in order to compel Britain to agree to a negotiated peace settlement. To achieve this objective, the Luftwaffe (in July 1940) began its air and sea blockade and targeted coastal shipping convoys, ports and shipping centers. On 1 August, the

Luftwaffe was directed to achieve air superiority over the R.A.F. (Royal Air Force). Initially, it attacked air fields, infrastructure and factories involved in aircraft production. However, when its aims were not met, it employed terror bombing on areas of political significance, resulting in heavy civilian casualties. When its attempts in gaining air superiority over the United Kingdom were frustrated, Hitler was forced to postpone and eventually cancel Operation Sea Lion, a proposed amphibious airborne invasion of Britain. Nevertheless, Nazi Germany continued its bombing operations known as the Blitz.

Britain's war time Prime Minister, Winston Churchill's refusal to negotiate an armistice with Germany, resulted in a decisive British victory on 15 September 1940, popularly known as "Battle of Britain Day". Showering high praise on the R.A.F.'s contribution to defend the nation, Churchill summed it up with these unforgettable words: "Never in the field of human conflict, was so much owed, by so many, to so few" (Churchill Speech 1940). That this hard won victory proved to be Britain's "Finest Hour" (Churchill Finest Hour Speech), is indisputable, but it came at the cost of heavy civilian casualties.

As the Second World War unwound on various fronts, both the Nazi and the Allied forces increasingly resorted to civilian victimization, "a government sanctioned policy in war time that targets civilians intentionally or fails to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants" (Downes 21). Though thought to be morally wrong and considered bad strategy because it strengthens an adversary's will to resist, it is used even by democratic governments for they believe that it "might contribute to victory (or stave off defeat or lower their cost of fighting" (Downes 5). Punishment strategies aimed at an adversary's civilian population is implemented with air power, sea power or economic sanctions, to extract meaningful concessions.

To achieve victory during the Second World War both the Nazi and British air forces resorted to strategic bombing. They attempted to destroy civilian habitat, communications and industry, though at first civilians were not direct targets. After Bomber Command accidently caused civilian casualties on 25August 1940 during an air raid over Berlin, Hitler issued a directive on 5 September to attack cites, including London. These planned reprisals were called "revenge attacks": *Vergeltungsangriff* (Ovary 83). In the resulting Blitz, the Luftwaffe mounted a pattern of repeated attacks, initially day and night, over an extended period. This indiscriminate bombing failed to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants.

The Blitz has been powerfully portrayed in popular literature, film, radio, newspapers and magazines. David Fraser's *Blitz*, a documentary-fiction, brings to life the first eleven days of this holocaust. The choice of this novel for inclusion in this paper has been influenced by Lydia Schumanand Deidre Johnson's collection of essays entitled, *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass Fiction Produced in America (2002)*. This volume which covers the period from the 1830s to the 1950s shows how popular literature reflected the concerns of the day that was clearly important to a large number of readers. Fraser's novel falls into this category and shows how Londoners, specifically civilians, under siege reacted.

Saturday 7 September 1940, London basks in the hazy sunshine of another glorious autumn day. But at 15:50 hours, when Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, looks down at the map table he sees well over 400 aircrafts not split up in the face of the approaching R.A.F. Hurricanes and is alarmed. Several minutes later this swarm would be over London, "tier upon tier of them, an armada more than a mile high; eight hundred square miles of devastation moving like a locust plague upon the English capital"(Fraser5). At 16:30 hours, Melvyn J. Shaffer, newly arrived American war correspondent, is out on the

streets to investigate the carnage. He sees the damage the unrelenting waves of bombers cause on the East End, specifically the dock area. He sees people queuing up at the underground shelters, many of whom will be denied entry. The journey from London Bridge to the Surrey Docks is littered with "burst water mains, fractured gas pipes, rubble, craters, fallen trolley-bus wires, gutted lorries and broken traffic lights" (Fraser 43). With bombs, incendiaries and landmines falling relentlessly on the city, Fraser documents both the heroic and the un-heroic acts of the ordinary men and women in the East End, the target of the Blitz during the first few days.

This is portrayed through the lives of two neighbouring families, the Warrenders and the Scullys, who live in adjoining houses in a tenement called Nelson's Green. When the attack begins, Elsie Warrender is more concerned about her husband, Jack's dinner being spoiled than ducking for safety. Life for her was becoming more difficult ever since the war began. Also, with rationing being enforced, shopping was becoming a strain, and it was getting harder to snatch a few hours' sleep between the sirens. No amount of persuasion from Alfred Dunn, the local Air Raid Precautions warden in Nelson's Green, could persuade Elsie and Florence Scully to use the communal shelter. Even when " a stick of bombs rained to earth nearby, their explosions becoming one, a prolonged cacophony of shrieking steel" (Fraser 53), both women refuse to leave their houses till their sons PaulWarrender and Derek Scully return. Both these boys are out on the docks "nicking" amidst the confusion and panic, the fires, the rubble and dead bodies. They bring Shaffer, who has lost his way, to their homes on Nelson's Green. What struck Shaffer the most about the women was that they were apparently impervious to the dangers of their situation. It is apparent that they were trying to bring a semblance of normalcy into the situation and were trying to stave off fear by getting involved in their normal, everyday work like fixing a "nice cuppa rosie" (Fraser 72). This stoic acceptance calls for a lot of courage and Shaffer admires them when he sees that "their plain, hard-worked

faces were fixed with homely smiles of vacuous confidence and they sipped their tea, as though it were their elixir of life" (Fraser 73).

While Elsie and Florence find normalcy in routine work during these abnormal times, people like ex-marine sergeant Arthur Scully, recalled to the colours as an active pensioner, take pride in doing their duty. As he and Churchill watch the East End burn from the Annexe rooftop, Scully refuses to take compassionate leave even though he is consumed with worry about his family. As he puts it across to Churchill: "…respectfully, sah, I never stood down from my post in my life, sah, and I don't aim to start now, sah…Not with Jerry up there sah" (Fraser 61).

Others like Alfred Dunn, Jack Warrender and his son Barry have joined the civil defence service and take their duties and responsibilities seriously. During these trying times their public spiritedness is tested to the limit. Alfred Dunn, the local Air Raid Precautions warden in Nelson's Green, does his best to ensure that everyone is in the safety of the shelter when the air raid sirens go off. He hands over his post to Jack Warrender after he gives his wife Maud some pills to end her suffering and then goes into hiding to evade arrest. When the Blitz strikes, Jack is shell-shocked after witnessing his tiny office in the Surry Docks and the people he knew blown into nothingness. Now that he has something substantial to do, the meaninglessness of his existence no longer clings to him. His son Barry, who is a part of the Auxiliary Fire Service,constantly fights raging fires that bombs, incendiaries and mines set off. One day, exhausted fighting fires, he falls into a sewer and is presumed dead.

The Warrenders are dispossessed when their house in the Green is reduced to rubble by a UXB, an unexploded bomb. In the spirit of friendship and good neighbourliness the Scullys give them shelter in their tiny cramped home. Surprisingly, Jack appears unmoved as he watches the remains of his bombed-outhouse, being "carted away like a dustbin full of rubbish"(Fraser, 293). Ironically, the levelled ground on the Green "seemed to hold more promise than regret" (Fraser 292), for it

gives them the opportunity to move out of the neighbourhood to a hopefully better life. The exodus begins when his daughter Gladys, a dancer at the Café-de-Paris, grabs the opportunity to leave. Derek too is to accompany her for Arthur feels he would be away from the influence of his gang and hopefully reform his ways. Later, the two men decide to send the women and the children away to the countryside as they would be safer there. Besides, "they'd be getting out. Shaking the dust" (Fraser 486).

As is the case in all wars, death too stalks the two families. With Paul seriously injured after being thrown under a mountain of debris by the raining bombs and in hospital and Barry presumed dead, Elsie and Jack's grandson is "born with no dad and christened with incendiaries" (Fraser458). This increases the responsibilities Jack has to shoulder, and he does not crumble this time. Miraculously, Barry is alive. He was in hospital recuperating after nearly drowning in a sewer. His was a case of mistaken identity. Unfortunately, it was his colleague who had died fighting fires. It is now Arthur's turn to be bereaved. Gladys sees Derek and his friend being bombed and disappearing in a "vast smoke belching hole licked by the flame tongues" (Fraser 513). Jack had to argue with his friend to stop him from making a futile journey up West to see for himself and ascertain if Derek was really dead. He finally convinces him that his place is with the women, the living.

Life and death and personal loss and destruction are the common threads that bind all wars. One would have expected that the people's morale would have been at its lowest ebb and that Hitler would have achieved his aim. But, as has already been pointed out, punishment strategies aimed at breaking the enemy's will rarely work. Churchill, after his visit to the East End understands this fact clearly: "… The people received me with cheers and laughter and the bravest of faces. They can be bombed and their homes destroyed and some of them will be killed – but the Narzees will never break their spirit" (Fraser188).

This observation gets to the heart of the matter: Londoners under siege do not buckle under pressure as their morale is high, and Churchill can count on his people to ride out the storm. Shaffer, in his series of broadcasts, conveys this sentiment succinctly as well as tells the Americans how the people cope. He makes his countrymen aware of things like food rationing; of people like Elsie Warrender who despite being dispossessed, living in other people's houses and dealing with a shell shocked husband reports for work; of the less lucky ones tramping the streets looking for homes for themselves and their families; of children playing war games with imitation sten guns and accidentally detonating UXB's; of school days being interrupted by the drone of Heinkels and Dorniers and falling bombs; of rationing telling on children's health; of children being left unattended because their mothers have joined the work force. He pays the East Enders the supreme compliment when he signs off one of his broadcasts with:"… Yet crazy as it may seem, the question these people are asking themselves tonight is not, how long can we take it? but, how long can Hitler keep it up? There's a world of courage between these two question marks" (Fraser 210).

All this would seem to suggest that the British were locked in national solidarity during the ordeal. However, Angus Calder in his *The Myth of the Blitz (2003),*challenges this assumption and exposes some of the counter evidence of anti-social and divisive behaviours. In particular, class division was most evident and Fraser deals with these aspects adroitly.

Captain Freddie Green, a self-proclaimed profiteer, keeps open house where the who's who of London meets. This "criminal accomplice, universal uncle, public benefactor"(Fraser 254), heads a gang that ropes in youngsters like Derek and Paul to go "nicking" tea, sugar, butter foodstuff and perishables from warehouses in the docks during raids. With strict rationing being enforced, such luxuries are gifted to his affluent visitors to persuade them to participate in his dubious dealings. Apparently

such tactics work for him as he is much sought out clandestinely. When the law does finally catch up with him, he is merely deported to Northern Ireland and not imprisoned as names in his visitor's book would be an acute source of embarrassment for the government.

What Fraser emphasizes more is the difference in attitude between the affluent West Enders and the not-so-privileged East Enders, towards the constant raids. "During the first weeks of the London Blitz, the Luftwaffe bombing was concentrated on the East End, on its narrow tenements, riverside docks and warehouses" (Thomas 2). On 7 September, the City of London remained unscathed. However, traffic in the East End comes to a standstill because sightseeing West Enders come in droves to gawk at the devastation. This makes fire fighting and rescue services impossible. Shaffer's neighbour, Archie Fisk, "party giving firewatcher," (Fraser 529) and his group of friends consider themselves immune from the raids as they watch them from their rooftop. Their reasoning being, "Jerry never comes this way" (Fraser 15). Even Shaffer feels he can watch the vapour trails and dog fights from his rooftop with impunity. When he reaches the quiet normalcy of his apartment after completing his investigation of the East End on the first day of raids, he is struck by the contrast. When he goes to the Café-de-Paris to escort Gladys to her house, he "felt as if he was in a time warp. It was mind crippling; ludicrous. An hour separating carnage from sybaritic self-indulgence" (Fraser 76). Paul and Derek, in their forays to the West End are struck by its luxurious surroundings and do not find any signs of rationing. Archie Fisk introduces Shaffer to "shelter-slumming or shelter-crawling, as the *demi-monde* termed it … a fast growing recreation for those comfortably off and bored with the West End" (Fraser, 476). He visits Tilbury Shelter, the biggest and the most sordid. Words were inadequate to describe the pathetic condition of the people crammed into it, with no water or sanitation facilities available. All this did result in resentment especially since the ones in the West End like in the Savoy

were fantastically comfortable. The Communist Party made political capital out of it, so much so, the government was actually "concerned by the possibility of domestic insurgency" (Thomas 2).

After bombs hit Buckingham Palace on the 10 and 13 September 1940, and other iconic buildings in the West End, the pain is shared by all Londoners. The Blitz finally sucks the privileged into its vortex. How do they react to the situation? Fraser has also shown them in a heroic light. The King and the Queen do not let the bombing of Buckingham Palace stop them from visiting the East End and commiserating with their plight. "Aristocratic, elitist, privileged, protected" (Fraser 437) Denzel Fletcher-Hale is a member of the special operations group. He affects boredom, indulges in inane conversations and flaunts his association with an Anglo-French German organization called "The Link", so that he can be deported to America, and be sent as an undercover agent to Germany. So far the war had not affected him, but will do so in the future when the occasion arises.

War affects other privileged families too. Charles Russell, a high ranking bureaucrat, attached to the Air Ministry under the protective wing of Air Intelligence, has his own cross to bear. He is at loggerheads with his younger son Ian, a conscientious objector, who refuses to join the Armed Forces. Instead, he has chosen to become a hospital porter. Charles is a First World War Army veteran and in those war-torn days when everyone is expected to do their patriotic duty by enlisting, cannot appreciate Ian's reasons for distancing himself from active combat. This does not imply that Ian is a coward for he is fighting his own war. When the hospital he is working in is bombed, and the geriatric ward caves in, he tunnels for five hours with his bare hands to save Maud Dunn, who is entombed in the debris. That she was dying of terminal cancer and was euthanized by her husband Alfred Dunn is another matter. It takes even more courage to change one's stance, and change it he does when he

decides to enlist in his father's regiment, The Sussex. That still does not change his convictions for, as he tells his brother Tom, "I still believe it's wrong to take human life on somebody's political whim. I can't wipe that out. But things change" (Fraser 434).

That Charles Russell is taunted by Lord Beaverbrook and his colleagues for Ian's convictions is bad enough. He is also made to pay for his daughter, Caroline's indiscretions. He is suspended from his job under the Official Secrets Act, because Caroline, a translator at Bletchley Park, is suspected of giving out secrets to an Air Force officer and is in a relationship with a Frenchwoman. Though the misconception is cleared later, and Charles and his family are exonerated, it causes him a lot of grief.Moreover, he has yet to come to terms with his daughter's sexual orientation. What he is grateful for is that his association with Freddie Green does not come out in the open.

Early during the Blitz Shaffer in a letter to his wife writes: "…but nobody seems to care, except in the dockland area where air raids mean getting blown into pieces. Here, up West as the Cockneys call it, they haven't learned yet what it means to get hurt" (Fraser 191).

All this changes after Buckingham Palace gets bombed and the Russells' experience its insidious effects. 15 September, "Battle of Britain Day" the Blitz engulfs the West End as well as the East End. Dorothy Saundersby, a member of Archie Fisk's merry making group, is hit by an anti-aircraft shell and is reduced to a "misshapen chunk of bloodied meat, leaking fluid and viscera" (Fraser 533). On this day the Scullys had to contend with death and overwhelming grief and accept that Derek was blown to nothingness.

The Battle of Britain Day proved to be a decisive turning point in the war in Britain's favour. Churchill, in heartfelt gratitude, heaped lavish praise on his fighter pilots known as *The Few.* Nevertheless, it does not

ease the pain and the privations ordinary men and women faced. The Blitz was a case of civilian victimization, and Arthur Scully's confusion draws attention to the situation:"…But this wasn't what Winston had to deal with - fractured gas mains, burst water pipes, half-cold meals. No meals at all … It wasn't armies anymore; men fighting men. It wasn't war" (Fraser 293).

As Downes has rightly pointed out, civilian victimization rarely breaks the non-combatant's spirit. The Blitz did not break the Londoner's morale. On the contrary, it tested their endurance to the limit and made them more determined than ever to overcome "Jerry". And overcome they did, despite the continuous terror bombing unleashed on them. Fraser's *Blitz* is a tribute to that spirit. What must also not be forgotten is that even the Allies targeted civilians during the course of the war which culminated in the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even in the present century war continues to be hell for it "devours the lives of those, who are not involved in the fighting" (Downes 1).

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