Rain of Terror

The First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940
by Peter Stansky
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Reviewed by
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How well do democracies bear up under the strain of terror? The question has been posed time and again. England, Spain, Germany, Italy, Greece, and of course Israel are but some of the countries that have been plagued by bouts of terrorist violence, some of them prolonged. The United States was tested severely on September 11, 2001.

A very different kind of extreme case is a starting point for some suggestive comparisons. Beginning on September 7, 1940, Great Britain's capital was pounded by Germany's Luftwaffe for 57 consecutive nights. After that initial phase, with somewhat decreasing intensity punctuated by a few enormously destructive raids, London and other British industrial and port cities were bombed without interruption until May 11, 1941. On that final night, after nine months of trying to bring the country to its knees, the Germans unleashed their most lethal raid, killing nearly 1,500 Londoners. Altogether, the death toll in London from the Blitz was 40,000.

How did Londoners hold up? That is the question Peter Stansky takes up in *The First Day of the Blitz*. Stansky, a historian at Stanford who has written widely on British social history, makes evident that there are really two subjects here. The first is the historical reality of how Londoners suffered and coped. The second is "the myth of the Blitz," which has been handed down to us as a picture of the English people drawing together, going about the tasks of rescue and reconstruction, all the while stoically sipping tea amid the fires and the rubble. Is that picture valid or not?

The numerous diaries and other sources that Stansky has combed to re-create the horrors of wartime London, concentrating on the impact of the very first German attack, are as indelible as our own tales of September 11. As one air warden recorded, September 7, 1940 was "one of the few war dates fixed in our minds forever. And not the date only, but one hour of it: about five o'clock on that September Saturday."

It was at that moment that a kind of hell descended from the skies. The bombs ignited the largest conflagration in London's history, surpassing even the Great Fire of September 1666. One woman, writing down what she had witnessed from inside a shelter in a school building where, along with a great many children, she had taken refuge on that first night, would later recall the scene:

> Sticks of bombs whistled down, and the air was literally torn apart in a loud rushing noise as they sped earthward. Everybody instinctively crouched. Holding my breath in an agony of suspense, I waited for the blast fully expecting to be blown to pieces. The bombs exploded, rocking the great building to its foundations, but by some miracle the school escaped unscathed and nobody was hurt. But the awful expectancy had been too much, and I sensed a rising panic as the overwrought women burst into tears and the little ones sensing their fear began to scream.

The sense of panic would not last. As the rain of fire continued for days, then weeks, then months, Londoners—or at least those who chose not to be evacuated—became remarkably inured. With the passage of time, the horror stories became a commonplace and then began to lose all interest. "Bomb bores," as those who insisted on telling their tales of near death were called, came to be a peril of their own, especially notorious in train compartments.

Alongside this demonstration of the human capacity for adaptation, the terror also elicited a great deal of cooperation and heroism. Volunteer air wardens and shelter marshals carried out a range of onerous responsibilities, from preparing the public for expected poison-gas attacks to gathering corpses for pick-up by roving vans dispatched from the city morgue. Firefighters played a crucial role; exposed to both the flames and the falling bombs, many

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of them perished. And at all levels of society, notes Stansky, there was "a great emphasis on not showing fear, on rising above the situation, on conforming, one might say to the stereotype of the British character of the 'stiff upper lip.'"

In all these respects, then, the myth of the Blitz is not a myth at all. But that is hardly the end of the story. In the opening phase of the German aerial assault, fear of social collapse, of the kind predicted by H.G. Wells in *The War in the Air* (1908) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), was widespread. Some of it was justified. For the flip side of social solidarity was social disintegration. From the outset, the authorities were alarmed about the staying power of the populace in the face of the German air assault, which was assumed to be a prelude designed to soften up England for a naval and paratroop invasion.

The Ministry of Information, on a war footing since September 3, 1939, prepared daily "house intelligence reports," which included a section on morale. Four days into the Blitz, according to the report, morale was "rather more strained than the newspapers suggest." Unspecified material and psychological factors were noted as the cause. Rumors, similarly unspecified, were said to be stoking fears, and at the center of some of them were the city's Jews.

Thus, one daily report took note of a groundswell of anti-Semitism, arising "not so much on account of a marked difference in conduct between Jews and Cockneys, but because the latter, seeking a scapegoat as an outlet for emotional disturbances, pick on the traditional and nearest one." Another report took a different tack entirely:

> Owing to the behavior of the Jews, particularly in the East End, where they are said to show too great a keenness to save their own skins and too little consideration for other people, there are signs of anti-Semitic trouble.

Such friction was hardly the only problem. There was a great deal of looting, and black markets in stolen goods soon emerged. "People were like vultures," wrote a police officer, "going into bombed-out houses and shops, and they'd even take rings and valuables off dead bodies." It was estimated that some 42 percent of the looters were air-raid wardens and firemen who had ready access to bombed-out sites. In September alone, hundreds of cases of looting came before the courts. In successive months, the number rose into the thousands.

In a few respects, then, the myth of the Blitz is indeed a myth.

What does this story mean for us? At various junctures, Stansky adverts to 9/11, noting that the Blitz "has often been cited as an example of how citizens can withstand attack, draw together, and perform heroic actions"; "certainly," he adds, "this was the case in New York City on September 11, 2001." But he never develops this theme, instead resorting to such banalities as the assertion that both September 7, 1940 and September 11, 2001 "had much to say about death, destruction, and our survival as human beings."

In truth, the differences between the dramatic events of the past and those of our own time are numerous and too apparent to list. But if the images of the two eras cannot be readily matched, the strains that beset Britain during the Blitz may perhaps be usefully compared with the strains that beset us now.

Overall, of course, we are in a far better position than the British. Unlike them, we are stronger than our adversaries. But in some areas we have been behaving worse. It is not that we suffered from looting and social disorder either on September 11 or in its aftermath; not at all. Nor, despite the efforts of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, has a new strain of anti-Semitism, tied directly to the wars precipitated by 9/11 become visible among the American people.

Our real problem is that we are deeply disunited about how best to confront those who would destroy us. The causes of that disunity can be debated, but the fact of it is something that few would have predicted in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Nor is it in the least clear where this division is going to lead us. Unlike the British, and unlike Americans themselves in World War II, many of us seem convinced that victory over our adversaries is an impossibility, or that we have only ourselves to blame for their aggression against us. The consequences of this attitude, should it continue to gain traction, cannot be specified, but can be all too clearly foreseen.

Such, at any rate, are some of the troubling thoughts provoked by Peter Stansky's absorbing book.