

Teachers' guide 3: the Blitz



Background: This teachers' guide is designed to provide an overview of information and teaching ideas about the Blitz during World War II and its impact on different places in Britain and the people who lived in them. Because of the focus on different places this topic may be especially useful for teaching local history and the impact of the war on your locality. These notes and the accompanying 'Blitz memorials' information sheet and PowerPoint also provide information about remembrance of the Blitz and the civilians involved – again, this can form part of a local study. Please note these notes and teaching suggestions are not intended to be comprehensive, but you may be able to combine them and the accompanying resources with other resources to create detailed teaching plans. The suggestions below are guidance only and you will need to adapt them to suit your class and curriculum and possibly spread the activities over more than one lesson.

Suitable for: Key Stage 3

Learning objective: Pupils will learn:

- What the Blitz was and why it happened
- About the impact of the Blitz on different places

Key information

- The word Blitz (short for the German word 'Blitzkrieg') refers to the period between September 1940 and May 1941 when many cities in the UK were bombed by the German Luftwaffe.
- Over the summer of 1940 the Battle of Britain was fought between the German Luftwaffe and RAF Fighter Command. This was an attempt to defeat the RAF and destroy key ports and industrial areas, and so pave the way for Germany to invade Britain (in a planned operation named Operation Sealion). However, ultimately this attempt failed, partly due to poor intelligence and subsequent missed bombing targets. Luftwaffe losses outnumbered the RAF's and, following air raids on Berlin which were in response to German bombing of London, Hitler postponed plans for invasion in favour of a change of tactics.
- In a speech given he threatened to completely destroy key cities. The aim now was to break the wartime economy and British morale, forcing the government to surrender.
- The first raid on London took place on 7th September 1940, targeting the East End docks. That night there were around 1,600 casualties, of which 400 were killed. Similar numbers occurred the following night. Over the coming months, with the exception of 2nd November when weather prevented it, London was bombed for 76 consecutive nights.
- At the end of October 1940 the focus of the Blitz shifted to other cities, although London remained a target. On 25th October 170 people died during a raid on Birmingham, then Coventry suffered devastating damage on 14th November during a ten hour attack.

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764

Email: learning@warmemorials.org **Website:** www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org

Registered Charity Commission Number: 1062255

© War Memorials Trust, 2016

- During the raid on Coventry the cathedral was bombed, transport and communication lines destroyed and a third of homes were made uninhabitable. 30 factories were affected with production stopping completely at nine of them. More than 500 people were killed.
- Other cities targeted during the remaining months of the Blitz included Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Portsmouth, Bristol, Belfast, Cardiff and Clydebank near Glasgow. These were important to the war effort as key industrial areas or ports, so damaging them would hamper Britain's ability to fight.
- On 29th December, London suffered one of its heaviest attacks. It was that night that the now famous photo of St Paul's Cathedral surrounded by fire and smoke was taken. It became known as the 'Second Great Fire of London.'
- 10th May 1941 saw the worst raid on London with more than 1000 people killed and Westminster and the Tower damaged.
- There has been much discussion over the impact of the Blitz. It obviously caused disruption, damage to infrastructure, homelessness and many casualties, which should not be minimised. However, the death toll was not as high as expected. In London especially, measures were put in place early (often at the start of the war) on to protect the population – vulnerable people were evacuated; the blackout was implemented and shelters were set up. The government was keen to avoid large public shelters because of the risk of mass casualties, so Anderson shelters and communal shelters were common. It was also keen to prevent deep shelters like the Underground stations because they feared that the safety they offered would encourage people to stay in them rather than go to work and carry on. However, when the severity of attacks increased this was relaxed and tube stations were used to shelter.
- That said, statistics do show that only 4% of Londoners used the Tube to shelter and a further 9% used other shelters. Around 60% stayed at home during raids, which lends support to the popular idea that civilians maintained something of a normal life. Despite the efforts of Germany to destroy morale, for the most part this didn't happen. There was no significant increase in shock or mental illness, evacuation declined and while industrial production and infrastructure were undoubtedly damaged, for the most part repairs were made and production was not completely destroyed, in some areas in fact steadily increased. Communities often came together to support each other and shops and places of entertainment such as cinemas and pubs remained open. The majority of people continued to work and many were mobilised through the AFS, WVS and Home Guard.
- While this does not mean that the Blitz was a positive time, it did mean that ultimately the German aim of breaking British morale failed as people adapted and carried on.

Suggested teaching and activities

1. Using the information above, and other sources, teach pupils about what happened during the Blitz and the impact of the Blitz on Britain as a whole and on the course of the war. Various eyewitness accounts can be found online and pupils should develop an understanding of the key issues.
2. Having looked at the Blitz as a part of the wider context of the war, focus on the impact of the Blitz on your local area:
 - a. The key cities that suffered bombing are outlined in the information above and if one of these is nearby you could help pupils carry out a detailed study of the Blitz in that city – when it was bombed, why (was it a port, key industrial area, etc.), and

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764

Email: learning@warmemorials.org **Website:** www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org

Registered Charity Commission Number: 1062255

© War Memorials Trust, 2016

the impact in terms of casualties, damage done and how the area fared in the aftermath. The long term impact could also be evident still – what rebuilding was done? Are there any indicators now of what happened?

- b. If you are not located near to one of these areas, you might consider choosing one (perhaps as a contrasting locality to where you are) and carrying out a similar detailed study to the ideas above.
 - c. If not, you could look at the impact the Blitz may have had, indirectly, on your area. Was your area somewhere evacuees were placed? Are there any records about your area during the war? Some memorials commemorate wartime incidents such as bombings that were random rather than part of a systematic Blitz. Some examples are given in the accompanying 'Blitz war memorials' information sheet and these sometimes happened in areas outside of the main cities – you could investigate similar incidents in your area.
3. War memorials that commemorate the Blitz also provide a way of examining the role of civilians in the war. Most war memorials remember military personnel and it is the military who we tend to commemorate on events such as Remembrance Day. However, war memorials to civilians help provide a different perspective and can reinforce the idea that World War II required the total mobilisation of the whole population. There is information about war memorials in some of the key areas affected by the Blitz on the accompanying 'Blitz war memorials' information sheet and PowerPoint. Volunteer roles such as the AFS, WVS and Home Guard can be looked at and pupils can consider what impact the Blitz would have had on the daily lives of ordinary people living through it. Various sources are available to assist with this and will enable pupils to look at different aspects.
 4. A particular aspect of the war that is often part of the popular image of it is the stoicism of civilians, and in terms of the Blitz this is often referred to as the 'blitz mentality.' As outlined above, many parts of daily life continued surprisingly well despite bombings and this does tend to make us think that the 'Keep calm and carry on' spirit was widespread and that, on the whole, the civilian population remained optimistic and positive, and supportive of one another. Pupils could consider this in more detail and differing interpretations – is this popular image entirely accurate or did morale suffer to an extent? Were there darker sides to the Blitz? This can help pupils to understand that there are different interpretations of events and that there are often different aspects of the same event to consider when reaching conclusions about it.

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764

Email: learning@warmemorials.org **Website:** www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org

Registered Charity Commission Number: 1062255

© War Memorials Trust, 2016