



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Dodd, Lindsey

La ville éventrée; or, how bombing turned the city inside out

### Original Citation

Dodd, Lindsey (2013) La ville éventrée; or, how bombing turned the city inside out. In: *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-war Reconstruction*. Ashgate, Farnham, pp. 17-30. ISBN 9781409436980

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/14682/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

This chapter forms part of the book Mark Clapson and Peter Larkham (eds), *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction* (Ashgate, 2012)

### ***La ville éventrée: or, how bombing turned the city inside out***

---

**Lindsey Dodd<sup>1</sup>**

It looked as though Lomme had been the victim of a terrible earthquake. An indescribable chaos: piles of rubble, in which lay more than 400 corpses, thousands of bombs having flattened 3,000 homes. Mournful streets, entirely devastated, the stump-ends of ruins breathless in the moonlight. From the tangle of beams and metal, in a heap of bricks, slate, tiles and plaster, peeked the pitiful remains of furniture, of pillows and mattresses disembowelled, all that constituted the intimacy of home. The extrication of corpses, of the injured, limbs crushed or ripped off, flesh bloodied, sadly coughing their last gasps, provoked the most heartrending scenes of human sorrow.

Chanoïne Detrez, *Tragédies en Flandres* (1953)<sup>2</sup>

Such was the aftermath of a blitz, witnessed by Canon Detrez, in the workers' housing estate next to the freight station Lille-Délivrance in the north of France on 11 April 1944. From 1940, France was bombed, steadily or sporadically depending on location, receiving just over a quarter of the Allies' European bombing effort.<sup>3</sup> After the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940 and the French capitulation in June, bombing became the sole means for Britain to continue offensive warfare on the European continent. The first French targets were German barges amassing on the Channel coast preparing to invade Britain, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding her PhD as part of the project *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe*.

<sup>2</sup> L. Detrez and A. Chatelle, *Tragédies en Flandres (Lille – Roubaix – Tourcoing), 1939-1944*, (Lille, 1952), p. 247. All translations in this chapter are the author's own.

<sup>3</sup> Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris's *Despatch on War Operations* (London, 1995), p. 44, records 955,044 tons dropped by RAF Bomber Command, of which 30 per cent targeted 'occupied territories' (France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia). The US strategic air forces dropped 956,255 tons, and the tactical air forces some 660,000, giving a total of 2.57 million tons dropped on Europe (R. Overy, 'Strategic Air Offensives', in I. Dear (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 1070–72). For detailed analysis of Allied strategy and targets in France, see L. Dodd and A. Knapp, "'How many Frenchmen did you kill?' Allied bombing policy towards France (1940-1945)", *French History*, 22/4 (2008): pp. 469-92; also two books emanating from the AHRC project, C. Baldoli and A. Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Allied Bombs, 1940-1945* (London, forthcoming); R. Overy et al (eds), *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940-1945* (London, 2011).

airfields in northern France. Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command bombed a range of French targets in line with the requirements of campaigns elsewhere. The ongoing Battle of the Atlantic led to attacks on German surface raiders docked at Brest until February 1942, and then heavy raids on the Atlantic ports in early 1943 intending to destroy U-Boat bases there. The RAF and United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) attacked industrial plants across France, including the southern zone from November 1942, which were manufacturing or subcontracting for the Reich, including Renault, Citroën and Gnome-Rhône.

A fifth of the bombs which fell on France were aimed at V-weapon launch sites across the north. French rail installations were a constant target, although the campaign to destroy them intensified in advance of D-Day as the 'Transportation Plan' that sought to hamper German movements following the landings made its mark. Bombers provided support for ground troops from 6 June 1944, and during the months of liberation, German enclaves holding onto port towns were subject to massive air raids to force their surrender. Eighty per cent of all raids on France, and 70 per cent of civilian deaths from bombing, took place in 1944. Yet for some, 'blitzes' were part of daily life from 1940.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly 60,000 French civilians, a toll comparable to civilian deaths from bombing in Britain, were killed by Allied bombs which nonetheless never targeted them as people.<sup>5</sup> After the war, five per cent of all French towns were declared bombed-out, including 20 of the 27 largest cities.<sup>6</sup> 'The Blitz' has come to describe the German attack on Britain particularly during 1940 and 1941, and is sometimes narrowed even further: in popular memory, the experience of London and the East End has come to embody the 'blitz', and its attendant 'blitz spirit' of plucky community resistance. While this stereotype has been challenged,<sup>7</sup> the association between 'Blitz' and Britain is less often questioned. This chapter extends the concept of 'being blitzed' across the Channel, to paint 'blitz' as a transnational phenomenon.

---

<sup>4</sup> Archives Départementales du Morbihan (hereafter ADM), 7W.4794: Interior Ministry, Civil Defence Department, *Bulletin d'Information de la Défense Passive et de la Protection contre l'Incendie*, no. 28 (1945).

<sup>5</sup> Estimating the precise number of civilian dead by bombing is difficult as some victims were unidentifiable, not all attributions of cause of death were accurate, and record keeping broke down before the air raids ended. A 1948 official figure is quoted in the *Journal Officiel* as 56,896 (see Dodd and Knapp, "'How many Frenchmen did you kill?'" , fn.1, p. 470 for further discussion of the death toll, and comparisons with Britain and Germany).

<sup>6</sup> D. Voldman, *La reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954* (Paris, 1997), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> It was most notably deconstructed by Angus Calder in *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991).

As doctrines and weapons of air war, and means of civilian protection, evolved during the interwar period, so too did a tension over preparedness that spanned the continent.<sup>8</sup> If bombs were transnational, so too was the fear they engendered. Of course, the context of the conflict greatly affected the nature and scale of impact; it is important to note, for example, that the Allied bombing of the 'occupied territories' (France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia) never intended civilian death in the way that German raids on Britain, Allied raids on Germany and the atom bombs did. Using the example of France, this chapter examines the moment when the legacy of a blitz begins: in the immediate aftermath. Before homes are rebuilt, they must have been torn down; before we can speak of reconstruction, we must look at destruction. Canon Detrez described the shape of the aftermath, muddling together physical and human debris.<sup>9</sup> The legacy of any blitz is greater than its impact on the built environment; the legacy of these air raids is found as much in perception and memory as it is in the landscape.

Bombing changed the nature of conflict. No longer was military combat confined to the battlefield. World War II thrust its way into the domestic space, affecting children in new and dramatic ways. Propaganda, conscription and rationing played a part in this total war which required the participation and mobilisation of entire nations, but bombs penetrated the depths of private life, entering the world of home, neighbourhood and school, catapulting children into the public sphere. But even before bombs fell, there were hints that home was at risk: criss-crossed tape at the windows and blackout curtains suggested that home was under siege. Signs indicating public shelters to be scurried to in the dead of night confirmed that home was no longer safe. Gas masks took the threat one step further. The use of poison gas had been outlawed at the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, although this was violated by both sides during World War I and public awareness of this most feared of weapons escalated during the interwar period.<sup>10</sup> Gas masks indicated that neither home nor shelter was adequate

---

<sup>8</sup> For a military perspective on escalating airmindedness, see chapters by D.E. Showalter and H. Strachan in R. Chickering and S. Förster (eds), *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 2003). A cultural perspective on British interwar anxieties is provided by R. Overy in *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2009), and the French case was dealt with by L. Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie d'une défaite: origines de l'effondrement militaire français de 1940* (Lausanne, 1973); see also E. Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York, 1994). For defence planning as an indicator of growing fears about air war, see L. Dodd and M. Wiggam, 'Civil defence as a harbinger of war in Britain and France during the interwar period', *Synergies Royaume-Uni et Irlande*, 4 (2011): pp. 139-50.

<sup>9</sup> Detrez and Chatelle, *Tragédies en Flandres*, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Baumann, T. and Segesser D. M., 'Shadows of total war in British and French military journals', in R. Chickering and S. Förster (eds.), *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 219-221; the mounting public fear of chemical warfare is analysed by E. Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: WW Norton, 1994), p. 238 and L. Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie d'une défaite: origines de l'effondrement militaire français de 1940* (Lausanne: Ed. L'Age d'Homme, 1973), pp. 305-8.

against this most feared of enemies: your safety now had to be carried. No roof, no window, no door was enough. Gas never came, but the bombs which tore apart roofs, windows and doors upended normal ideas of domestic security. This chapter moves through a blitzed town,<sup>11</sup> gazing upon its streets, its houses, and on the bodies strewn among the rubble in order to evoke and analyse the initial aftermath of an air raid through the perceptions of its observers.<sup>12</sup> The words are those of French adults who saw these sights as children: they are not children's words. It is almost impossible to hear the 'child's voice' in the past, unmediated by the adult world.<sup>13</sup> Yet these oral history narratives have a unique capacity to reveal how events experienced in childhood reverberate across a lifetime. Thus a further dimension of the legacy of blitz is revealed in the final part of this chapter: the legacy of the Allied bombing of France not upon the cityscape, but engraved upon the memories of survivors. However, our journey through *la ville éventrée*, the disembowelled town, begins at street level.

### Street and community

While bombs usually hit their intended targets, at least in some percentage, and factory or rail installations were temporarily or permanently damaged, a large proportion missed. They tended to fall on surrounding workers' housing. Street by street, at community level, civilians felt the impact of the bombs. The destruction can be viewed objectively, as physical damage to the structures of community life; for example, the raid on Lille-Délivrance of 10 April 1944 destroyed seventeen schools. By July 1941, Brest's civilian and maternity hospitals were both out of action,<sup>14</sup> and bombing had forced the closure of seven bakeries, two grocers, two fuel merchants, two butchers and one greengrocer.<sup>15</sup> Communications were affected as cables came down, and debris hampered traffic. Water, electricity and gas were

---

<sup>11</sup> The author's research (mainly) draws upon experiences in three case study towns, the industrial Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, home of Renault's main factory; the Breton port of Brest; and the industrial suburbs and railway hubs of Lille in the Nord *département* (a *département* is an administrative division of France comparable to a British county, and the territorial basis for the system of state field services headed by the prefects).

<sup>12</sup> The oral history narratives used here come from a series of interviews conducted by the author in 2009. While most interviewees did not request anonymity, only first names have been used throughout this chapter. Interview dates and interviewee locations are listed in the bibliography. All interviews have been archived in interviewees' local archives in France, namely the Archives municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, the Archives municipales et communautaires de Brest and the Archives municipales de Lille.

<sup>13</sup> L. Jordanova, 'Children in history: concepts of nature and society', in G. Scarre (ed.), *Children, Parents and Politics*, pp. 3-24, pp. 3-5.

<sup>14</sup> Archives Municipales et Communautaires de Brest (hereafter AMCB), 4H4.27: 'Etat numérique des immeubles détruits et endommagés depuis juillet 1940', 23 July 1941.

<sup>15</sup> AMCB, 4H4.27: Secretary General of Brest to Under-Prefect of Brest, 4 June 1942.

interrupted,<sup>16</sup> and important community buildings became unusable. The central Police Station in Lille was damaged in May 1944; in Brest, the Festival Hall and the Remand Home were struck in 1941.<sup>17</sup> Allied bombs hit all the key loci of community life. Residents in Lille-Moulins complained that, months after an air raid, bomb sites in their district were being used to dump household waste, which posed a terrible health hazard; children, with school disrupted, played in the rubble.<sup>18</sup> Priority for clearance and reconstruction was given to the economic centres of local life, not poor workers' housing. Blocked streets prevented the removal of debris and refuse, and resources were too scarce for clearance. Bombed-out towns became dirty, dangerous and infested, and daily life, already complicated by shortages, became more difficult.

Into this bombscape stepped the children of this story, blinking in disbelief. This objective destruction was viewed, then, by many subjectivities. People described the peculiar unreality of the immediate aftermath. Dust coated everything as plaster, bricks and stone blown apart slowly fell; it hung in the air, ghostly and opaque. Visibility was poor in the fug of dust and acrid smoke, and, with electricity cut, Jean P. found, 'there was no light. The darkness was total'. Bernard B. described the disorientating sounds and sights: 'All you could hear were police sirens, fire engines, ambulances, 'di-ding di-ding di-ding', and you saw flames, flames everywhere.' There were odd sensations underfoot. Claude walked in his slippers 'in dust, on broken glass, a blanket of dust, glass on the ground', sensations heightened by his unprotected feet. While the all-clear had been a relief, this was a strange new world. It assaulted the senses and baffled comprehension.

Dazed survivors set off home through the rubble, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied, desperate to find their loved ones. Chaotic scenes increased children's anxiety. Led home, stunned, by her mother, Thérèse recalled that 'there was nothing but wreckage from school to my house, everything was demolished, walls were demolished, trees were down, cables were down, telephone wires, everything, everything, everything'. Finding home intact was a relief; after that life continued in the monotonous bombscape. Walking through once-familiar streets, Cécile saw 'ruined houses, ruined houses, ruined houses. All down the street – another one, and another'. Lucien, too, illustrated such stunned disbelief: 'Now it was just a field of ruins. The whole district destroyed. We walked for months and months in ruins. There was nothing to repair it with.' Everything that had been familiar had gone.

---

<sup>16</sup> Archives Municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt (hereafter AMBB), 6H77: 'Bombardement aériens des 3 mars 1942 – 4 avril – 3 & 15 septembre 1943: déblaiement', Nov. 1943.

<sup>17</sup> AMCB, 4H4.27: 'Etat numérique des immeubles détruits et endommagés depuis juillet 1940', 23 July 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Archives Municipales de Lille (hereafter AML), 5H10.3: President of 'Mouvement populaire des familles de Moulins-Lille' (Verhey) to Mayor of Lille, 29 July 1944.

Children knew every lamppost, tree, every slope and drain in the streets that formed their playgrounds. Josette said of the streets where she had played, 'we couldn't recognize them anymore'. Pierre too expressed a sense of loss: 'It was unreal. You said, "It's just not the same anymore".' Yvette was no longer allowed outside: 'Even in our own garden, we weren't allowed to play anymore. It was too dangerous.' Children lost their points of reference in communities battered by bombs, and the new neighbourhood became a place of danger and prohibition.

Part of the legacy of blitz was the scars left upon the urban landscape; but change went further than physical appearance: 'the people who had been bombed-out left', said Christian, 'and few came back'. Community is more than streets and buildings; it is an intricate network of social relationships, all of which were affected by bombing. In bombed towns in France as elsewhere, community relations adapted, as did relations between bombed-out citizens and the state, upon which many then became dependent.<sup>19</sup> The idea of 'Blitz spirit' to describe a community newly pulling together in the face of this shared catastrophe can be applied to French localities under the bombs. Social capital – community and kin networks – was a key resource. Immediate assistance was local and unofficial: 'first on the scene were the neighbours', Pierre commented. People had derived reassurance from one another in communal bomb shelters, and now they helped clear their own streets and dig out neighbours, some providing permanent or *ad hoc* accommodation to bombed-out friends and family. Some of this solidarity extended outside the local community; thus, in a way, bombing drew the nation together. Donations and condolences arrived at town halls from across the French empire. The government tried to co-opt this goodwill, translating it into the National Revolution's language of duty and sacrifice;<sup>20</sup> yet giving was also the result of personal compassion. However, solidarity worked best at a distance. When refugees arrived in quiet villages, generosity wore thin as charity became an obligation rather than a choice.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the legacy of blitz, on the townscapes, on community characters and histories, and in the perceptions of survivors, is evident in a way that could appear surprising given the absence of public discourse on the Allied bombing in France.

## House and home

---

<sup>19</sup> On state and other charitable aid to victims of bombing, L. Dodd, "'Relieving sorrow and misfortune"? State, aid and ideology in bombed-out France, 1940-1944', in Overy *et al*, *Bombing, States and Peoples*, pp. 75-99.

<sup>20</sup> The National Revolution was the name given to the programme of socially conservative reforms implemented by dominant traditionalists in the Vichy administration during the first years of its power, under the banner of 'Work, Family, Fatherland' (*Travail, Famille, Patrie*).

<sup>21</sup> See Dodd, 'Children under the Allied bombs', part III, 'Experiencing bombing', regarding behaviour during air raids, the evolution of responses (including Vichy's response) to bombing and the idea of solidarity, and the consequences for bombed-out people and refugees.

We now move deeper into children's private worlds, to house and home: the place where a child should feel most protected. The French authorities had relied on domestic cellars as bomb shelters.<sup>22</sup> But bombs pounded straight through multiple storeys, burrowing into cellar floors before exploding. Blast blew walls off apartment blocks, violating the privacy of the domestic interior. In some cases, skeletal architecture was all that remained. Local people took part in a new kind of grisly local tourism. Andréa said 'On Sundays, we'd go to see where it fell, to look at the wreckage. A Sunday stroll, eh!' Part of the interest derived from the relief of having been spared. It was also intriguing. Yves was curious: 'On the outside, there was nothing, just the front door, nothing behind it. Everything had fallen into the cellar; just the front remained.' One could peer into private spaces. Walking across bombed-out Brest, Jean P. found the sight compelling: 'You could almost enter the intimacy of people's private lives. You could see a bit of colour, and say 'Look! They've got one of those carpets!' You saw inside their homes. Their privacy was no longer their privacy as everything was wide open.' Unlike an adult might, he did not seem to empathize, or feel he should look away. He was fascinated by the exposed detail of other lives. It was difficult to see this building as a home like his own. It could be disassociated from its inhabitants, and became part of the great spectacle of war.

And what about home? Blast came into Michel T.'s flat like a burglar, blowing off the window latches. Bernard L. mentioned a detail that struck at the heart of domestic vulnerability: 'there was glass all over the bed.' Military aggression had penetrated the most intimate part of the home. Some damage was structural and reparable; some was not. Edith's mother had evacuated her children in a hurry in April 1944. Her father returned for the family's belongings: 'He walked down the street, and he got to the bottom, and said, 'But – ! Hang on! Where's the house?' He walked back up to find an enormous crater. The house had gone. We lost everything. Everything, everything, everything.' There began a long period of poverty; their belongings were gone, their mother was depressed, and the children went to school with holes in their clothes. The legacy of bomb damage endured long after the dust had settled.

'House' is made of bricks and mortar, but 'home' includes the people inside. The relief at finding house intact was topped by the relief of finding home. Children waited anxiously for parents to return, or hurried home from school to find them. Andréa remembered being frantic:

'I want to go home, I want to go home, my Mum'll be waiting!' I got home, and my mum said 'Oh, my little girl's alive!' But Dad? Where is he? We set off together on the route that he took in the evenings – and there! Oh, there he is at the bottom of the street! Oh, he's coming, he's alive!

---

<sup>22</sup> See Dodd, 'Children under the Allied bombs', ch. 4 'Preparing for bombs' for details of national, local and domestic interwar civil defence planning; also Dodd and Wiggam, 'Civil defence'.



This small family found each other safe and sound. Young children Sonia and Thérèse, at school in the Lille suburb of Hellemmes on 13 January 1943, were too young to find their own way back. Sonia's father rushed to where he had seen the bombs drop – his daughter's school – and so was there, in a moment engraved on memory, as she emerged, dazed but unharmed, from a trench shelter. Thérèse's mother arrived 'crazy' with worry, and found her daughter in shock, but safe, protected by the nuns who ran her school. Edith's mother, absent during a heavy raid in April 1944, arrived home to find her two daughters with a neighbour. But where were her two sons?

Mum said 'And Henri? Where's Henri?' Well, Henri was with the Lavalettes. Mum went to get him. Good. 'And Jacques? Where's Jacques?' We don't know. Evening came, and still no Jacques. Mum took her three remaining children, and we went to Aunt Lucie's. On the road, she stopped everyone she met – and this is etched on my mind – 'Have you seen a young boy, blond, with glasses?' She said that to everyone we met.

The memory of her mother's desperation is an indelible legacy, as events unfolded that changed the family's future. For those who lost loved ones in bombing, this legacy held within it an emotional despair which echoed the desolation of the ruined landscape.

### **Body and self**

This journey through the bombed town now turns to its inhabitants. Bombing did to the human body what it did to buildings: it exposed to public view intimate interiors with the same disregard as it had exposed carpets and bed linen. After the raid on Renault of 3 March 1942, eighteen people were found dead in the streets; similarly after the 4 April 1943 raid, the police reported on bits of human remains 'picked up in the streets'.<sup>23</sup> Official reports commented on the condition of the dead, their bodies 'horribly mutilated', and unidentified body parts were carefully recorded: 'Woman's head, around 40 years old, grey hair, black eyebrows, blue eyes, 110 rue de Silly, Boulogne.' Death was violent, public and on a large scale. Makeshift morgues were set up across Lomme, bodies laid out in the fire station, a *brasserie*, two schools, the village hall, the youth club and a garage.<sup>24</sup> Community centres of learning, play and leisure were transformed by grief. In the aftermath of bombing, death was unavoidable: a rude awakening for young children to the idea of mortality. In the aftermath of bombing, death was hard to

---

<sup>23</sup> AMBB, 6H72: 'Bombardement par avions effectué le 3 mars 1942', report, 15 Feb. 1943.

<sup>24</sup> AML, 5H10.3: Central Police Commissioner to Head of Civil Defence in Greater Lille, 11 Apr. 1944.

avoid, whether strangers, acquaintances, friends or family, pushing the boundaries of children's knowledge back further.

Death had moved from the privacy of home into the public realm, like children brought into the public world by war. The two met in the streets. The death of strangers held some of the fascination of other people's ruined homes. Max, who later became a doctor, said 'I saw bodies lined up on the pavement. It's there that I saw my first cadaver, the head sticking out. It really affected me'. Other children heard stories that rattled them. Bernard L. and Jean C. in Lille both recounted the story of local schoolgirls playing basketball in the playground: 'a plane came over in the day and no-one knows why, it dropped a bomb. They were all killed.' How easily it could have been them! The idea of having escaped death marked many stories. Sonia overheard details of violent deaths from her older brother who had helped in the wake of the raid of 10 May 1944 on Hellemmes: he returned shaken, and transmitted his anguish to his young sister: 'He said "My God! There was an airman's leg!" And when he said that, he was sick.' Her empathy with him has transferred and lodged his memory in her mind.

Some teenagers were put into 'official' contact with the dead. In Boulogne-Billancourt, Bernard B. was part of a youth group set to work on Parisian bombsites. He said:

Everything was smashed up. To pick it up – , do you understand? It's awful. There were firemen there, they were collecting it with shovels, the pieces. They put it into big steel bins, brought them to us, and there was a lorry, and we put the – , they brought us those things, and we put them in – , you had to put it into the coffins. There were coffins there in the lorry. We had to – , with a shovel.

His halting speech<sup>25</sup> illustrates the difficulty he found in describing this appalling task. He angrily asked: 'Can you believe they made us do that? Weren't there men that could do that? Eh? Fifteen years old, picking up flesh and mud, and putting it in coffins. No, it's awful. Horrible. Why did they treat us like that? No! We were too young for that.' Bernard's experience contradicts the images of enthusiastic parades of young people, won over to Vichy's National Revolution and keen to serve Marshal Pétain. Youth workers were taken off bombsite work following casualties from unexploded bombs. Death itself made a difference, but witnessing death was not considered damaging. Yet its legacy is evident in Bernard's memory.

---

<sup>25</sup> During this part of the interview, many of Bernard's sentences remained hanging, unfinished, as he struggled to narrate this experience. In the transcription, this appears as – , .

Death was at the heart of Edith's interview. As we saw earlier, Edith's mother took her three youngest children to Aunt Lucie's after the raid: 'And still no Jacques. Then a priest from Jacques's school who'd been clearing the bombsite near the depot recognized Jacques's body. Afterwards, they told us his fingers were all damaged. He'd been trying to dig through into the next cellar.' Jacques had been buried alive, possibly on his way to freedom when the cellar collapsed. The details of his death haunted Edith in adulthood.

Streets and houses were irrevocably changed by bombing, as were the children who lived through it. Being bombed and surviving had all sorts of impacts on the self. As the bombs fell around Pierre in Lomme, huddled with his family under the stairs, 'we felt the world was collapsing around us. We said "This is it. We're going to die." I don't know how I could have thought that at the time'. Pierre was surprised that as a child he could have felt such despair, but such was the intensity of fear that even a small boy speculated on his survival. In the aftermath, and in bombing's legacy, understanding what had happened and seeing its results made people ponder the hand of Fate, God or Luck in their continued existence; the final player in this game was Self: Me. For many who survived, the decision that made the difference between life and death was their own. Thus these narrators controlled the enormity of their own survival and helped themselves deal with the awful, perhaps fated, willed or unlucky, deaths of others.

### **Private, collective and shared memory**

The legacy of bombing began in the immediate aftermath of an air raid. While some traces remain visible across the physical landscape of France – as elsewhere – others are invisible. In the streets of Brest, as elsewhere, the legacy of bombing is still clear. Gone are the prewar buildings of Brest's long history; the main square, the reconstructed town hall and the church are stark and angular, with monuments commemorating fallen servicemen prominently positioned. Few *brestoïis* now remember Brest 'as it was'; those who do point out landmarks from days gone by, days when, Andréa said, 'Brest was a joyful town'. Voldman calculates that 65 per cent of French towns of over 50,000 people were officially classed as war-damaged after the war; much of this was down to the Allied bombs. All regions were affected, although Normandy suffered most; the Atlantic ports of Brest, Lorient and Saint-Nazaire, and Boulogne-sur-Mer on the Channel, suffered destruction in excess of 80 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Andréa's nostalgic view of her town before the deluge is not unique; it also points to the enduring place of bombing in memory, both in the private memories that colour and shape private lives, and in more collective or shared forms of memory, that colour and shape national histories.

---

<sup>26</sup> Voldman, *La reconstruction des villes françaises*, p. 35.

The sounds of bombing held a particularly important place in memory because of their meaning during the event. Hearing a bomb falling could suggest its weight and proximity, but it also indicated the listener's survival: the bomb had already fallen elsewhere when its sound arrived. Many narrators remarked that they had never forgotten the whistles and booms of those frightening moments. Sound memories still sparked anxieties today. A few of the narrators mentioned fearing thunderstorms, whose rumbles, cracks and flashes of light sparked images from long ago. Michel J.-B., who lived through the heavy bombing at Lille-Délivrance in 1944, said that for many years after the war he was afraid of thunderstorms because 'they made me think of the windows smashing into pieces'. For Thérèse, low-flying planes remained a reminder of 'waking up in the middle of the night'; she never wished to visit an air-show, and the noise of planes in war films upset her, evoking emotional responses from childhood: 'it's the noise, it's the planes, it's the bombing, this fear, this dread.' Municipal sirens are tested regularly in many French towns, and this eerie noise inspires anxiety among elderly members of the population. Serge described the response, from sense to emotion to action: 'The siren, it was scary. And now, your instinct is to look around – where were you going to hide? Where was the way down?' The endurance of such reactions suggests the strength of their imprint during childhood.

Josette remarked upon a trace of blackout: she dislikes the dark, which reminds her of anxiety and fear awaiting bombers and bombs. Yvette did not recall having been particularly frightened as a teenager by the bombing in Brest; but light and dark had their impact upon her too. One night, fifty years later upon leaving a restaurant she saw the beams of a nearby lighthouse: 'And there, suddenly I started trembling. I saw everything I'd known during the war. And I started trembling – *trembling!* There was no noise, no bombs, no shells, just the lights – only that – and it all came flooding back.' She concluded that even as a teenager, she was 'imprinted with this anxiety'; 'children are sensitive, whatever age', she said. In her recollections of war, anxiety and fear was bound up tightly with her upsetting evacuation experience; but this response to the beams, internalized somewhere, revealed her recognition that bombing had posed a threat to self and loved ones. Other memories have become the building blocks of her personal history, and have taken precedence in her interpretation. Yvette's experience mirrors the memory of bombing at the national level: although subsumed beneath 'more important' events, it never disappeared completely.

The legacy of the blitz on Edith's family was tragedy. Edith understood her mother's grief, but it blighted her childhood. She also suffered more complicated feelings of guilt. When she first told the story in her interview, she said her mother had left before Jacques sneaked out against her wishes. Later, she admitted to mistrusting her memory:

I ask myself today, I often wonder: had he already left while our mother was still there, and we hid it from her? That's a question I'm always asking myself. Because I really feel very guilty, and it's not right to feel so guilty because Jacques had gone out when he shouldn't have done. He wasn't allowed to leave; I should have said to Mum 'Jacques has gone out!' If she was still there, of course. I don't know any more.

Edith could not rid herself of the feeling that she could have prevented the destructive chain of events that followed. We will never know the 'truth'. Edith could not reconcile herself with the past because she could no longer remember it exactly. When a disturbing event exists only in private memory, with no public presence, it can torment the mind without relief. Unanswered questions about the purpose and possible prevention of tragedy and trauma were at the forefront of many narrators' minds, preventing them from composing 'comfortable', integrated versions of past events.<sup>27</sup> For some – particularly younger children – it was hard to ascribe to bombing a clear purpose in the broader narrative of war. The public absence of discourse on bombing in France has created a void for Edith; she has no other points of reference to help her cope with the guilt, anger and sorrow at her brother's death.

Bombing has triggered idiosyncratic reverberations in private lives. They may be heard rarely or weakly, but their presence is undeniable. Bombing penetrated not just homes, but minds. That a generation of French people jump whenever the municipal siren is tested, and that thunderstorms and low-flying planes trigger fear and anxiety, are demonstrable impacts in the present. Yet these people, by and large, do not consider themselves to have been traumatized, nor do they rate bombing as the worst experience of war. Why do those most affected seem ambivalent when speaking of the effects of the Allied bombing?

The bombing of France has been described as a 'black hole' in French collective memory of World War II.<sup>28</sup> The notion of 'the collective' is problematic when referring to memory, because *particular* events are only experienced by *sections* of the largest 'collectivity' – the nation, in this case –

---

<sup>27</sup> For a theoretical analysis and practical application of the idea of the 'composure' of comfortable personal memories about traumatic moments in the past, see A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> J.-F. Muracciole, 'Le bombardement stratégique en France durant la seconde guerre mondiale: premier bilan et pistes de recherche', in M. Battesti and P. Facon (eds), *Les bombardements alliés sur la France durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale: stratégies, bilans matériels et humains* (Vincennes, 2007), pp. 173-78, p. 174. On the problematic notion of 'cultural memory' as used by historians, see A. Confino, 'Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method', *American Historical Review*, 102/5 (1997), 1386-1403, and W. Kansteiner, 'A methodological critique of collective memory studies', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 179-197.

and then in *unique* ways by individual members of that collectivity. As lived and remembered experience are so fractured, it is arguable that there can even be a 'collective memory' of war; there are, however, strong public representations of war at the national level (repeat) (e.g. in films, books, television, media, memorialization, politics, academia), that plant the seeds of a dominant narrative of the past that take root over time and grow until they block out parts of lived experience. In France, the key players in this dominant narrative have changed little over time: resistance and collaboration loom large in any discussion of World War II. The only way of recounting the past is by using the language of this hegemonic discourse.<sup>29</sup> Stories that fit the discourse have recognisable, familiar elements which aid the storyteller, whether or not they were personally experienced. They are part of the told tale, not necessarily the lived experience. Yet no such recognisable, familiar storytelling has ever been constructed around bombing.<sup>30</sup>

Bombing was a pivotal moment in some childhoods; it was an intense sensory and emotional experience; it had a lasting impact. But it has not featured within public representations of war in France, partly, perhaps, because of the difficulties of assimilating this 'friendly' aggression into the story of collaboration and resistance, partly because the enormous regional diversity has prevented the construction of a common story. As such, it has lost its place in histories of the war. Yet bombing exists in memory in collective forms, if not in 'collective memory'. The importance of bombing as a collective – or preferably *shared* – experience is reflected in memories. *Shared* does not imply a homogeneity of experience in the way that 'collective' does; the experience remains individual, but events and responses can be shared, although they are not always. It is hard to escape the desire to generalize, or at the very least to see patterns or trends; thus, remaining purely at the individual level is unsatisfactory, and we are drawn into making comparisons across experiences, which show memories of bombing to be shared, if not collective.

---

<sup>29</sup> On the 'Vichy Syndrome' and the problematic nature of the historiography and political discourse on the period, see, *inter alia*, H. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome* (Cambridge, MA, transl. A. Goldhammer, 1994); H. Rousso and E. Conan, *Vichy: un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris, 1994); also on memory in France, recently, O. Wieviorka, *Le mémoire desunie: le souvenir politique des années sombres de la libération à nos jours* (Paris, 2010); also, J. Adler, 'The Jews and Vichy: reflections on French historiography', *The Historical Journal*, 44/4 (2001): pp. 1065-82; D. Reid, 'French singularity, the Resistance and the Vichy syndrome: Lucie Aubrac to the rescue', *European History Quarterly*, 36/2 (2006): pp. 200-220; and B. Gordon: "'The "Vichy Syndrome" problem in history', *French Historical Studies*, 19/2 (1995): pp. 495-518.

<sup>30</sup> Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics, method', in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp. 75-86. The problem of collective memory in the French case is treated in Dodd, 'Children under the Allied bombs', pp. 11, 268-75.

'Collective memory' implies that a set of memories are held by a large number of people; paradoxically, it is an exclusive concept. It flattens experience to a set of averages and excises from its sanctioned way of storytelling any elements that do not fit the mould. For this reason, we must probe its antithesis, the atomized diversity of private memory, and move upwards, out of the unique to view shared experiences across groups. Yet we cannot discard collective memory; it is important, built in part from private and shared memories of events and lived experiences, the former intensely personal, the latter recognisably familiar to certain groups. But it is also the product of other intrusions over time: of 'memories' that are officially approved, that become part of the history that is taught in schools or the history used as a national reference point (such as the 'Blitz spirit' in Britain); of 'memories' that are accepted because they 'fit' a national discourse, political or otherwise;<sup>31</sup> of 'memories' that do not belong to a lived experience, but to an ever-shifting interpretation of the past. Sometimes the 'flattening' effect of collective memory is a helpful one, allowing the composure of more comprehensible, more recognisable, more comfortable versions of the past; sometimes it is negative, excluding or isolating those who do not fit. The product of 'intrusion', then, collective memory itself intrudes into private memories too; but private memories can be robust, and can hold their integrity, sometimes against the grain of the dominant narrative.

Bombing created enormous disruptions; in the immediate aftermath, domestic and community life was shattered, and in some areas, desolate and dangerous bombsites became the backdrop to daily life. Damage inside these *villes sinistrées* varied. Some were razed to the ground; in others, the destruction was highly localized. Targets were hit, but so too were all kinds of community resources, from town halls to public *urinoirs*, cemeteries to sports fields. It was particularly troublesome for children and parents when schools were hit. Civilian lives were affected in multiple ways by physical damage to communities. The haphazard nature of where bombs fall played an important role in the aftermath of an air raid: all parts of the urban structure could be struck, all types of homes affected, and all sorts of people. Nonetheless, it was more likely that poorer people would live closer to urban, industrial targets, and that they would face most difficulties in recovering; structures of social capital – family and kinship groups – were the key resource when economic capital failed. The targets had formed the nation's infrastructure and partially generated its income; destroyed and damaged, they were a priority for reconstruction while civilians hung on in prefabricated housing (*baraquements*) until permanent dwellings were built. The Vichy government had been formed with the intention of preventing further combat on French soil, yet capitulation and collaboration brought military activity and civilian suffering to France. Vichy's response to bombing was twofold: first, it needed to minimize the upheaval caused by air raids, to ensure that economic life continued and civil unrest was deterred. The idea of a non-

---

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Wieviorka, *La mémoire desunie*.

interventionist state, dear to the original project of the National Revolution, collapsed under the weight of the crisis, as the government was increasingly forced to support the victims of bombing, refugees and evacuees, alongside other needy parts of the population. Individuals were drawn into dependence on the state. Second, the Vichy government put the Allied bombing to work within its propaganda campaigns, highlighting the state's protective role, painting a picture of an efficient state response, and indicting the Allies' 'aggression'.

There was a 'democratic' face to bombing's destruction which created a shared peril that made the aftermath so fraught with anxiety as people rushed home through dust-filled streets. It also gave rise to local solidarity: nobody knew who might be next. Chaotic scenes could be as disturbing for children as they were fascinating. Pierre commented on the bombscape: 'for a child, it's an incomprehensible image'. Younger children found the scenes more distressing as they upset many certainties of their short lives: if home and school could collapse, where was safety? Haunting memories of destruction and death – exposure to which, in sight or story, was common – are bombing's legacy for those who lived through it as children. Bombing gutted cities; it crumpled streets and the communities around them; it broke up houses and homes; bodies too were struck, with impacts – physical and psychological – on the self. When we consider the legacy of any blitz, we must remember that it is emphatically local and personal; for while bombing turned the city inside out, it also turned human lives upside down.