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“Too ghastly to believe”? Liverpool, the press and the May Blitz of 1941

Liverpool endured more air raids in the Second World War than any British city other than London, suffering 2,736 casualties, with a further 1,173 in neighbouring areas (May Blitz, 2015). Merseyside suffered around 80 bombing raids between August 1940 and January 1942, the peak coming at the start of May 1941 when the Luftwaffe dropped 870 tons of high-explosive bombs and more than 112,000 incendiaries over seven consecutive nights (May Blitz, 2015). In one week 1,741 people from the city, Bootle, Birkenhead and Wallasey were killed (Gardiner, 2011), which, to put this into perspective, represented nearly three per cent of every Briton killed in air raids in six years of war. The docks, through which 90 per cent of imported goods came into Britain, were the principal targets, but the damage to domestic property was considerable. More than 50,000 Liverpoolians were made homeless, only 15 per cent of Bootle’s housing stock was undamaged leaving 25,000 without a home (Gardiner, 2011), and city-centre St Luke’s Church, whose ruins now form a memorial to the dead, was gutted. Other important buildings destroyed included the Mersey Dock Office, the Corn Exchange, the city’s main post office and public library and several more churches. The casualty list could have been worse, but thousands fled to the countryside including the Wirral and north Wales. Maghull, a small town with a population of 8,000 to the north of the city, had made provision for 1,750 refugees but was inundated with 6,000 (Gardiner, 2011).

War is the ultimate news story and circulations rose during the Second World War. According to the Royal Commission on the Press 1947-49, the number of national daily newspapers sold in Britain rose by an average of 55.9 per cent from 1937 to 1947 (86.5 per cent for Sundays), but, paradoxically, the influence of the press declined. Radio audiences boomed so that the BBC became the first point of

news, and trust in the press diminished as the public, on the front line for an extended period for the first time, could compare their newspapers to what they could see for themselves (Report on the Press, 1940).¹ This decline was the continuation of a process that had begun the First World War and is an important focus of study for journalism educators, scholars and anyone with an academic interest in the history of the press in Britain. Liverpool's May Blitz encapsulated that gap between the printed word and what readers were experiencing, so much so that wild rumours about the city spread through the country. It was the ultimate indictment of the credibility of the press; no-one believed what was being printed so the public, in a 1940s form of citizen journalism, invented their own exaggerated version of the news.

Mass Observation and Home Intelligence, two organisations used by the government to monitor morale between 1939 and 1945, chronicled this rising distrust and Liverpool was a particular point of interest. The city was visited in December 1940 and May 1941 and the Home Intelligence reports measure a drop from "reasonable cheerfulness" (Liverpool and Manchester, 1941) to an atmosphere where there was "no power and drive left in Liverpool to counterattack the Luftwaffe" (Liverpool, 1941). With the 75th anniversary of the May Blitz next year, this article will examine the reports that appeared in *The Times*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Liverpool Echo* and hold them up to the official reports that were being read by the Ministry of Information in the first instance and, ultimately, by the Cabinet.

Literature Review

Gramsci (2005) argued that the ruling classes cannot enforce control over the population unless intellectual methods are used, including the media, to create an

¹ By 1944 the BBC's 9 pm news programme was estimated to reach 43 to 50 per cent of the population and the BBC recorded its audience at 34 million (out of a population of 48 million), A. Briggs, A., *The War of Words, 1939-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 43.

acceptable consensus and, in the case of the Second World War, that insisted the war had to be fought no matter the sacrifice. Winston Churchill, as the Prime Minister during the Blitz, had a vested interest in maintaining a narrative of enduring resilience and for two decades after the war his six-volume work, *The Second World War* (1952), set the template:

These were the times when the English, and particularly the Londoners, who had the place of honour, were seen at their best. Grim and gay, dogged and serviceable, with the confidence of an unconquered people in their bones, they adapted themselves to this strange new life, with all its terrors, with all its jolts and jars (p. 293).

His positivist argument was so persuasive that historians subscribed to the tale of unyielding morale until the late 1960s. Taylor, usually a challenger of historical clichés, recorded that, for every civilian killed, 35 were made homeless, with all the social problems that implied, yet wrote of “the unshaken spirit of the British people” and that the raids “cemented national unity” (1988, pp. 502-3). Taylor’s evidence did not come from analysis of contemporary correspondence but was inferred by two votes in Parliament, the second of which was the overwhelming backing of the suspension of the *Daily Worker* in January 1941. “Not a dog barked,” he wrote (1988, p. 503), failing to take into account the “deep sense of disturbance” expressed by the National Council for Civil Liberties, concerns on the political left and a number of readers’ letters that appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* and other newspapers.

The generic beatification of the British civilian in the Second World War was challenged by Calder’s *The People's War* (1969) that drew on oral testimony and the work of Mass Observation and, along with his subsequent *Myth of the Blitz* (1991), stated that the conventional version of events, while true in parts, did not remain intact when confronted by the evidence. The popular image, he stated, was the creation of propagandists with the willing acquiescence of the press: “Some journalists of the period created a myth of the Cockney wisecracking over the ruins of

his world, which is as famous as the myth of the Few soaring into battle with laughter on their lips, and equally misleading” (1969, pp. 165-66).

Although Calder’s assertions provoked a fierce counter-reaction - Ray (1996, p. 12) described the 12-month period from September 1940 as an “annus mirabilis in British history” – he was hugely influential. In recent years modern academics have used Mass Observation and Home Intelligence reports to revise the story of steadfast spirit and, while none has suggested that British morale was broken by the Blitz, they have qualified the exaggerated claims of universal selflessness and enthusiastic cooperation that were made, frequently by the press. Typical of this approach is Ponting’s 1940: Myth and Reality which reported fluctuating morale, including “depression” and “open signs of hysteria” in Coventry, looting and “wanton destruction” in Portsmouth and Plymouth people questioning whether it was worth fighting on (1990, p. 164). Gardiner (2011) illustrated the state of fear that existed in 1939 when she noted that, within minutes of war being declared, sirens sounded over the capital, Londoners hurried to the nearest shelter and braced themselves for an attack. But they were not in danger; it was a false alarm; the terror and subsequent relief that would mark the Blitz had begun without a bomb being dropped. Gardiner used many of the same sources as Calder, including Mass Observation, but covered the bombing of provincial cities in greater detail and provided greater detail in charting the rise in crime during the war. She noted:

The Blitz has given the British – politicians in particular – a storehouse of images on which to draw at times of crisis... There were thousands of examples of extreme bravery, fortitude and selflessness. There was also a pervasive sense of exhaustion, uncertainty and anxiety, and acts of selfishness, intransigence and contumely (p. xv).

The role of the press in wartime has been debated at length. Carruthers (2000, p. 55) wrote that to maintain morale on one’s own side, and attack the opponents’,

“munitions of the mind” were an integral part of total war and the media received their call-up with other vital industries. Ruling elites, she wrote, echoing Gramsci, had to generate support for the conflict and enlisted the media to help bolster the case. This was particularly the case in the Second World War when the British population was under fire and, as Curran and Seaton observed, “extensive censorship controls were needed, it was claimed, in order to combat the new, deadly technology of aerial warfare” (2003, p. 56). Newspapers, as the principal sources of news at the start of the war, became the focus of this censorship and the consequence was a shaping of content that did not sit easily with the self-proclaimed role of the press as public watchdog. Journalists reporting on the Second World War were faced with a dilemma that, Knightley (2004, p. xi) maintained, remains unresolved to this day:

If doing that as objectively and as truthfully as possible means writing and broadcasting stories damaging to their nation’s war effort, what are correspondents to do? Does the journalist within the correspondent prevail? Or the patriot? And what if reporting patriotically involves telling lies? Is that journalism or propaganda?

That dilemma is central to this article.

Methodology

This will be a qualitative study using Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis framework (2010) and its application to newspapers as outlined by Richardson (2007). The publications, two national daily newspapers and a regional evening, were chosen because they represented publications with different proprietors, target audiences and political leanings. The Times was owned by the Astor family and was the newspaper of the establishment and a supporter of the Conservative Party. Its editor in May 1941 was Geoffrey Dawson, a personal friend of several leading Tory figures, and its circulation in 1939 was 213,000 (Butler and Sloman, 1980). The Daily

Mirror, selling an average of 1.367 million copies a day in 1938 (Butler and Sloman, 1980), was owned by a public company and was aimed at the middle and working classes. Its was a supporter of the Labour Party, was viewed disparagingly by Churchill – “It makes me spit” – and was threatened with suppression in 1942 (Margach, 1978, p. 83).² The Liverpool Echo was controlled by local men who descended from the Nineteenth Century original proprietors and had a daily sale, almost exclusively in Merseyside, of 236,986 in 1939 (Popular Newspapers in World War II, 2015). Originally, the newspaper group, that also included the Liverpool Daily Post, supported the Liberal Party but after the First World War became more independent in its politics (Royal Commission, 1949).

The study period is from 2 May, the first edition in which news of the raids could appear, until 15 May, comprising 12 editions of each newspaper and allowing time for reflection in the aftermath of the week-long Blitz. The first bomb landed at 22:15 on 1 May, so deadline pressures and delays in relaying news from Merseyside to Liverpool would have made it virtually impossible for detailed news of the first night of raids to appear in the London-based Times and Mirror the following day. However, the Echo, an evening paper that appeared on the streets several hours after the national mornings and who had reporters in the city, would, in normal circumstances, be expected to report fully the previous night’s bombing and any omissions would be down to the censor, who was reluctant to release information for fear that it might aid the enemy by confirming the Luftwaffe had hit its intended target. For that reason many newspapers used vague expressions such as “north west town” until German sources announced the city had been raided.

² This followed a Philip Zec cartoon in March 1942 that that depicted a half-drowned merchant seaman clinging to some wreckage and carried the caption “The price of petrol has been increased by one penny – Official”.

Attention was also paid to the structure in reports. Normal news values dictate that the most important elements should be at the top of the story, so a report on heavy bombing should concentrate on the number of casualties and the extent of the damage. Any variation on this - emphasis on the work of fire-fighters for example - could be due to either censorship or an attempt at propaganda to rally morale or demonise the enemy, although the subjective judgements of reporters, sub-editors and editors, or the influence of proprietors, should not be entirely discounted.

The Newspapers

The Times, which ranged between eight and 10 pages in the study period, first reported Liverpool's Blitz on 2 May, stating: "Raiders were reported over a Western town last night and in other parts of the country, including the Merseyside area" (p. 4). The following day there was a more comprehensive report, but it still comprised only two paragraphs. It stated that "many high-explosive bombs" had been dropped, but in a clear deviance away from normal news practice, which would have led on the number of deaths, the copy emphasised hitting back at the enemy. "Night fighters were in action as well as A. A. [anti-aircraft] guns," the piece read. "One German machine was shot down in a wood and a member of the crew captured. Police are searching for the others" (3 May 1941, p. 4). The censor would have ensured no civilian casualty numbers would be released; and the success did not deserve the trumpeting given that the one downed aircraft marked 1.5 per cent of the 65 bombers over Merseyside, on 2 May (Ramsey, 1988).

Both the above reports were on the main news page, but were close to the bottom. The first time the Liverpool Blitz reached the top of the page was in the edition of 5 May, although Merseysiders hoping to have their suffering fully

acknowledged after four successive nights bombing would have been disappointed. The lead story on page 4 was about a raid by the RAF on Baghdad that had destroyed 22 Iraqi aircraft and the report about the Liverpool raid was a single-column story on the far right of the page. It also emphasised success, the third headline of three claiming a “Night fighters’ record”, and the report read that 16 enemy bombers had been shot down, 13 by Fighter Command. The first indication that Liverpool was suffering came on 6 May when a statement from Liverpool’s Emergency Committee acknowledged that the city had passed through “a serious trial” and a “crisis” (p. 2). The statement continued: “It is a great inspiration to know that Liverpool has not been behind other cities in its realization of the importance of maintaining the steadiness of our civic life.” The fact that the committee felt the need to issue the statement was an indicator of the city’s death toll and damage, although no numbers of the dead were published.³ On page 4 of the same edition the newspaper mocked Hitler for announcing to the Reichstag that only 5,500 German troops had been killed, wounded or gone missing in Greece. “Past experience shows that the faking of casualty lists is part and parcel of the Fuhrer’s tactics.” The irony was, as this article will show later, it was the British figures, not the German, that had lost credibility with the home newspaper audience.

The Times might have been hypocritical, but it could not be accused of labouring Merseyside’s problems because it quickly slid down a news agenda that had other priorities including the landing of Rudolf Hess in Scotland (13 May 1941, p. 4). On 7 May Liverpool was mentioned, but lower down the story and not in the same detail as a raid on Clydeside (p. 9), the following day the area was referred to in a report hailing the shooting down of 10 bombers (8 May 1941, p. 4) and by 12 May the

³ Gardiner (2011, p. 322) stated that the government was “even more careful than usual” in making sure casualty figures in the May Blitz were suppressed to ensure the Germans did not realize the devastating effects of the raids.

only reference to Liverpool and the surrounding area was that it, and other heavily bombed areas, would be the only British cities to receive a shipment of oranges (p. 2). Two Liverpool casualties were reported: the deaths of the stage and screen actress and former fiancé of Fred Perry, Mary Lawson, and her husband Francis Beaumont, who had been visiting friends in the city (10 May 1941, p. 4). She was 30.

The Daily Mirror, eight pages in each of the 12 editions, did not acknowledge Liverpool's May Blitz until Monday, 5 May, when its front page carried a report on the city being bombed for the fourth night in succession the previous night. A more detailed report, on Saturday night's raid, appeared on page 3 under the headline "Liverpool's worst Blitz" and, while it gave greater details of the death and destruction than The Times, it had a strong undercurrent of propaganda. "Last night demolition and rescue squads were still at work," its second paragraph read. "A heavy pall of smoke hung over them. They brought out many dead." The short sentences were used to create impact, a literary device that continued lower down when the list of casualties read like a charge sheet against the Luftwaffe: a deputy matron, doctors, nurses and ambulance men. The ones who escaped were cast in a heroic light, so the nurses showed "exceptional courage and coolness" while patients "showed no sign of panic". The contrast of the callous Germans and brave Brits was stark, demonstrating newspapers' predilection to apply Van Dijk's (2000) ideological square - positive self-representation and negative representation of others - in times of war.

The surviving nurses and patients also provided examples of role models, conforming to Jowett and O'Donnell's (2012, p. 299) assertion that messages are more resonant when "they seem to be coming from within the audience", and the Mirror publicised another on 6 May. She was Sarah Mawson, 68, who had rescued her four grand-children from the bomb-wreckage of her Liverpool home. There was

no report, just a headline, "Granny saved the family", and a caption under a posed photograph on page 5 of Mrs Mawson and her relatives sitting on chairs balanced on the rubble. The picture, designed to embody resilience, might have been taken in the aftermath of the May bombings but the words suggested otherwise, referring only to "when a Blitz hit Liverpool". News, by its nature, needs to be new and a journalist is taught to make reports up to date, so the photograph either related to an older raid, or the censor had insisted on the ambiguity. The following day, the role model was a "weary-eyed" Liverpudlian in his 60s who was watching rescue workers trying to find the bodies of his two sons amid "charred ruins" (7 May 1941, p. 3). The sons, both in the Auxiliary Fire Service, had been trapped after going into the building to rescue a fire-watcher, and the heroic narrative was underlined by the father's wearing of "frayed war medals on his chest". He refused to give his name, but was quoted as saying: "This is a war for nameless heroes. The lads would sooner have it that way."

The man may have been genuine, a fiction, or an amalgam of several images by the reporter, but he marked a high point in terms of coverage. By 9 May, Liverpool was becoming stale news and a seventh successive night of bombing was marked by only a small story of 70 words on page 3. The number of casualties was described as "heavy" and the negative representation of the attackers was underlined by a list of damaged buildings: three hospitals, a maternity home and churches. It required celebrity status from that point for the Mirror to report on Liverpool, the May Blitz being mentioned only once more in the study period, a short story noting the death of Mary Lawson (10 May 1941. Her demise merited a photograph and a place on the front page.

The size of the Liverpool Echo, four to six pages, underlined the difficulties caused by the rationing of newsprint, and the editorial challenge of providing

adequate coverage in such a limited space. The first night of the May Blitz was reported on 2 May, and it was not difficult to detect the influence of the censors or the propagandist. The story appeared inside (p. 5), when a raid on the city in a Liverpool newspaper would normally be the lead on the main news page, there were no details of where the bomb landed, nor the number of casualties, and the headlines emphasised the positive. The lead read "Hero in night fighter" and the sub-heads below it played down the effects of the bombing: "Short, sharp raid"; "Few Merseyside casualties", "A bomber down"; and "Fire-fighters again do good work". The copy used the pejorative "raiders scuttled for home, when an objective report could have used "turned" or "headed". The following day's coverage led the edition but followed a similar template, so that, although the Air Ministry anticipated a large number of casualties, "the Echo understands that, happily, they are not so heavy as was feared" (3 May 1941, p. 4). The cross heads emphasised the German crimes - "Hit a cemetery" and "Four hospitals" - which contrasted the targets of the RAF in an adjoining report where "fires were seen in the industrial areas and docks".

The night of Saturday/Sunday marked the heaviest bombing of the May Blitz, although the Echo, which did not have an edition on the Sunday, could not reflect on it until the edition of Monday 5 May when a comment piece on page 2 praised the resilience of the air defences. Under a sub-headline "Merseyside carries on", it noted that 16 bombers had allegedly been shot down, adding: "Some of our best-known landmarks have been damaged; hospitals, churches and many houses have been hit and the loss of life will be heavy....that we can bring down 16 enemy planes in a night should indicate that our defenders can give a bit back too." On a main news page that included seven photographs on the Blitz, a message from the Lord Mayor, Sir Sydney Jones, asserted: "No efforts are being spared to see that all the services

which so vitally affect the city and the life of the people at the present time are being maintained to the fullest possible extent” (p. 4). This article will show that, contrary to Alderman Jones's assurance, an independent report revealed that Liverpudlians had lost faith in the local authority.

Even though the Echo was a Liverpool paper, the interest in the raids began to dwindle, possibly because the censors' insistence on lack of detail meant that reports full of un-named civilian targets became repetitive. A report on 6 May introduced a literary flourish by describing a blazing Liverpool church (St Luke's) where "the ever-changing patterns of the flames as seen in the many windows appearing like living stained glass", but the reference was towards the end of a long report on page 6 that was led by an attack on the Rhine headed “RAF Attack Mannheim”. Instead of reporting the bombing there was a search for heroes: fire-fighters and an ARP [Air Raid Precaution] telephonist who matched “the courage of her soldier fiancé, who took part in the epic of Dunkirk” on 7 May; and three women who had put out fires in "one of the city's fashionable shopping streets" two days later. To discover the extent of the problems in the city the reader had to look at a large display advertisement that urged Liverpudlians affected by the bombing to boil water for at least two minutes with the accompanying information: “Do not be alarmed if the water to your premises has the taste of chlorine. This is an indication that the purity of the supply has been safeguarded” (10 May 1941, p. 3). Only on 15 May (p. 4) was the newspaper able to identify which famous buildings that had been damaged, including Liverpool Central Library, Liverpool Museum and the Rotunda Theatre. Earlier mention had been prohibited.

Home Intelligence

While the newspaper reports about the May Blitz consistently stressed the fortitude of the Liverpool people, another analysis of the mood of the city was less upbeat. A Home Intelligence inspector, who had lived there as a child and who had good links with the university, the Conservative Association, social welfare movements and the ARP, wrote a report on 22 May 1941 after a personal visit (Liverpool, 1940). He conceded that this was not the “penetration study” of normal HI reports on morale, but did include contact with a wide range of people including officials, the clergy, a doctor, policemen and many “ordinary people”. Interestingly for this article, one of his interviews was with the editor of one of the Liverpool newspapers – there were three: Liverpool Echo, Liverpool Daily Post and Liverpool Evening Express – but did not specify which. The author, too, was not identified but had been to “nearly every important Blitz town and studied it”.

The report listed two most striking features: the almost universal criticism and dis-satisfaction with the city’s post-Blitz administration; and an atmosphere of ineptitude and a “relative lack of energy”. The author noted that dis-satisfaction was prevalent in most bombed cities but “never from so many sources and such vehemence as in Liverpool”. He also wrote about the absence of vigorous reconstruction and rehabilitation:

The general feeling – it is difficult exactly to express it, but residents spoken to felt it too – that there was no power and drive left in Liverpool to counter-attack the Luftwaffe. It was being left to the citizens of Liverpool to pick themselves up.

Elaborating on the above, the inspector made a series of observations that contradicted the resilience being reported in the press. He noted that, for the first time in any town, a conversation was heard where “one side argued in favour of our surrender”; that morale, while impressive, particularly among the young, was not good enough to stand up to further long series of raids; and of a “complete divorce”

between key local politicians and the “worried or bewildered 99 per cent”. The author’s criticisms of the local authorities included lack of information, inadequate planning with regard to rest centres and the feeding arrangements that “completely collapsed”. Yet he noted that no-one had been dismissed or penalised for these confusions, “on the contrary, there is said to be talk of honours”.

A cause for concern for the inspector was the spread of rumours that stemmed from the lack of information. The first concerned a peace demonstration in Liverpool, that has been a point of contention ever since. The Liverpool Echo journalist Arthur Johnson comprehensively dismissed the rumour in his diary (2005, p. 155) – “A man was sent to prison for a month at Manchester for spreading such rumours, all of which were completely baseless” – but Herbert Anderson, who was interviewed for the Imperial War Museum sound archive, stated: “There were small groups marching with banners indicating that they wanted an end to the war” (Levine, 2006, p. 412). The Home Intelligence inspector acknowledged that some of the most responsible people in Liverpool said there was substance to the story, but came down on the side of denial. “No doubt they are wrong,” he wrote (Liverpool, 1941). He was similarly dismissive of gossip that said the city had been placed under martial law and cordoned off from the rest of Britain, again blaming the local authorities: “Never before has the absence of information and explanation been so apparent.” As a consequence, when cars had been refused access into and out of Liverpool so that debris could be cleared from the streets, people jumped to conclusions:

From this simple source the rumour spread like wildfire. It has been heard., for instance, by one person in London within three hours, from a responsible MP, a BBC official, a senior civil servant, the editor of an important paper, and a senior officer in the Services.

He asked for stories to appear in national newspapers and the BBC to refute the rumours and for the speedy restoration of phone and telegram services that were still

not operating nearly a fortnight after the May Blitz. He also recommended that mobile telegram units should be sent to cities after they had been bombed. This, he wrote, would reduce rumour and ensure that members of the armed forces would receive news of their families with the beneficial consequence of improving morale and reducing absenteeism.

“Have you heard about Liverpool?”

Even in the early weeks of the Second World War, Mass Observation reported that people said it was "useless to buy newspapers since all the front pages were identical and could not be trusted" (Hylton, 2001, p. 151), and in May 1940 Home Intelligence reinforced this estimate: "The general curve of distrust of the news has been rising during the last year" (Report on the Press, 1940). This became more pronounced by personal experience. Rita Maloney, a 20-year-old clerical worker and Mass Observation diarist, responding to the Manchester Blitz of December 1940, was typical:

When we heard the BBC's summing up of our Blitz, making it sound rather like a village which had had a stick of bombs dropped on it, along with many others, we wondered how true the reports on Coventry and Liverpool were, and all the other towns. We are carrying on and "taking it" because we've got to, but we aren't very happy about it (Liverpool and Manchester, 1941).

When Coventry had been badly bombed a month earlier a Preston salesman, Christopher Tomlin, said people did not believe the casualty figures they were reading. "Some of my customers say: 'If they mention 1,000 killed you can take it for granted there are lots more'" (Garfield, 2005, p. 413).

The danger of gossip, spurred on by a near vacuum of news, was detailed by the Home Intelligence inspector in an appendix of "typical extracts" that he added to his report (Liverpool, 1941). The main one was from a member of the WAAF

[Women's Auxiliary Air Force] stationed near Preston and written on 10 May 1941.

She quoted a colleague called Jean: "Have you heard about Liverpool?... They say people want to give in." A second quotation was indicative of cracks in the veneer of togetherness:

I don't believe it's the people. I think it's those wretched Irish trying to create panic. It's very easy to. They're going around shouting "Stop the War" and "We've had enough!" English people wouldn't do that... I was told they have got martial law there, and that if anyone is found saying they want the war stopped, they're shot on the spot.

Later the correspondent and her colleague hitched a lift in a lorry that had come from Liverpool. The following conversation was reported:

Jean: They're saying terrible things about Liverpool. Some of the stories are too ghastly to believe.

Driver: However bad they are, they can't be worse than the truth, that's a fact... There's 50,917 dead, and God-knows-how-many wounded, just walking the streets, with their bandages on.

Jean: There's martial law, isn't there?

Driver: Well, not exactly. But there is a lot of military with bayonets – they've more or less taken over.

The surprise was the detail. Where the figure of 50,917 came from is unknown, but the driver, who said he had been taking Liverpool's people to the county to escape the bombing, clearly had more belief in the source than in his newspaper. The WAAF correspondent heard similarly worrying conversations, including that between two women, one of whom wanted to see relatives in the city. "They've got martial law there. There's a lot of fifth column business, and they've been told to shoot on sight."

Another observer, a "working man" from Leek, Staffordshire, also had a grim story. Reporting that general morale was "very unsteady", he had a litany of rumours emanating from Liverpool including "train loads of corpses have been sent up from Merseyside for mass cremation". The other rumours included: martial law in the city;

homeless and hungry people marching round the bombed areas, “carrying white flags and howling protests”; and food riots.

Conclusion

None of the rumours was confirmed, and the press was correct not to print them, but so much was withheld because of censorship and newspapers’ inclination to support the war effort that people would have assumed reports had been modified for propaganda purposes even if they had done. The disbelief, the exaggerated stories and the falling levels of trust could hardly provide a more damning verdict of the press in May 1941. A Home Intelligence report published in three months earlier (Morale in 1941, 1941), quoted a remark “(private of course) by a famous columnist” that read: “Journalists report the cheers. No one dare report the tears”, and this was borne out by The Times, the Daily Mirror and Liverpool Echo in the two weeks during and after Merseyside’s May Blitz. The press’s narrative could be summed up by James Kelbrick: “There were so many buildings just smashed to pieces – but the spirit of Liverpool was so good. There was such togetherness and sharing” (Levine, 2006, p. 412). But there were other stories such as Marie Price’s:

Churchill was telling us how brave we all were and that we would never surrender. I tell you something – the people of Liverpool would have surrendered overnight if they could have. It's all right for people in authority, down in their steel-lined dugouts, but we were there and it was just too awful (Levine, 2006, p. 412).

Her story and others like it that revealed normal human reactions from people who were afraid, weary and fed up, were ignored by a media wary of government censure and, as with many cities outside London, Liverpoolians were left to feel their suffering had not been properly represented. Gardiner (2011, p. 167) wrote:

Aggrieved citizens felt that the singular nature of their suffering was not given due acknowledgement: they just became part of the aggregate of incidents. People in Bristol, Liverpool, even Ramsgate, felt that it was invariably the London Blitz that was given most attention by the media, with an occasional exception such as the high profile raid on Coventry, while the rest of the nation took the usual back seat. This was clearly not good for morale.

The Home Intelligence report on Liverpool and Manchester in January 1941, stressed that the local press can do much for morale, but queried the inclination for positivism. Bomb victims, they wrote, wanted praise and emphasis, not the belittling of their suffering. The inspectors asked: "How far do the morale effects of Blitz censorship outweigh the military necessities of suppression" (Liverpool and Manchester, 1941). It was a valid question that was never properly answered and there were consequences beyond the standing of newspapers. Harrison's report (Morale in 1941) of February 1941 stated that the "intense ballyhoo" about wonderful morale after each town has been blitzed had been a formula that "infuriated each place in turn". He added that the effect of the journalism was that it made it "practically disloyal to suggest that morale is not perfect" and that the "rosy atmosphere of 100 per cent morale had been so pronounced that Home Intelligence inspectors had begun to doubt their findings about weak morale in Manchester, Portsmouth and Bristol."

Newspapers did not report the worst effects of the bombing and, in so doing, undermined the genuine courage showed by many people; if the norm was bravery then the truly brave were just normal, not exceptional. The public, many of whom harbored natural concerns that fell short of that image of relentless stoicism, did not always relate to that ideal and, consequently, the messengers in the form of the media were met with skepticism or were simply ignored. Worse, when towns and cities were bombed, they caused more harm than good. In short, propaganda often had the opposite effect to what was intended.

Seven decades on from Liverpool's May Blitz, that is an outcome worthy of consideration for journalism educators, who frequently confront the issue of propaganda and also stress the need for reporters and editors to write with the target audience in mind, but are confronted with contradictory outcomes when looking back

at the Home Front in the Second World War. The top-down model of news remained intact between 1939 and 1945, in that what appeared in British newspapers reflected the views and values of an elite anxious to create an impression of universal resolution under fire. The readers at the bottom of this paradigm only embraced this narrative, however, when it suited their self perceptions and rejected it comprehensively when they were the victims of the Luftwaffe's bombing, very notably in the case of Liverpool in 1941.

Yet - and this ought to intrigue anyone teaching journalism - newspaper circulations rose during the Second World War, even though the shortage of newsprint meant that editions were drastically reduced, in the Liverpool Echo's case to just four pages. The press's ability to provide entertainment and divert minds from the dreadfulness and tedium of war seemingly outweighed the public's disinclination to believe what they were reading. So, to paraphrase C. P. Scott's famous statement about news values, were facts sacred? Or were the British public prepared to come to an unspoken agreement about what they were reading, accepting that, like so many other commodities, accurate reporting of the Blitz was rationed to help the war effort? The evidence suggests they were.

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