

H-NET Book Review: Peter Stansky. *The First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940*. Published on H-German (October, 2009)

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Whose Myths and Whose Reality?

Was fall 1940 truly Britain's "finest hour," as Winston Churchill memorably suggested? More particularly, are time-honored stories of stiff-lipped Londoners refusing to buckle under the onslaught of the Luftwaffe on the first day of the Blitz (September 7, 1940) myth or reality? These are the questions Peter Stansky addresses in this well-written, occasionally almost sentimental, essay. He concludes ultimately that the popular version of Blitz history substantially reflects reality, but nevertheless contains many elements of heroic, comforting, and somewhat off-target mythology.

The Blitz as a historical event has been the object of a great deal of research. In constructing his account, Stansky's technique is to rely upon ubiquitous quotations from those who actually were there, rather than on data or public opinion polls. Clearly, first-hand testimony is valuable. Two problems emerge with his approach, however. First, British witnesses to the bombing attack of September 7, 1940, which constituted the Luftwaffe's first large assault on London, nearly always paint those events in favorable hues. Only a few observers have chosen to speak about the less admirable episodes of panic, looting, and robbery that also occurred on that day and, indeed, throughout the Blitz.

As Stansky notes, American commentators such as Edward R. Murrow and Eric Sevareid played an important role in the development of the sentimentalized version of the Blitz, and they did not attempt to hide their fervent support of the British. Their audiences had little difficulty in separating the good guys from the bad after listening to them. Murrow opined, "This night bombing ... makes headlines, kills people, and smashes property; but it does not win wars" (cited on p. 108), and concluded, "They are sustained by the history, tradition and folklore of this island; supported by that well-mannered, sub-surface British arrogance which admits no questioning of the superiority of Britain and Britishers over any and all other nations and other peoples" (cited on p. 110). As this evidence demonstrates, if British rectitude, cohesion, and courage during the Blitz are the stuff of myth, then non-Britons bear considerable responsibility for the development of this notion. In truth, however, very few media commentators disputed this heroic view. Those underneath the bombs falling on the London docks, however, may have been less likely to see those events through the same lens.

The second difficulty is that available accounts of the Blitz are heavily drawn from the ranks of upper-class Britons, academics, and the literati. The voices of commoners and the partially literate--the very individuals who soaked up the lion's share of German bombs on London's East End and in its dockyards on September 7--have often been substantially lost to history. Stansky's account reflects this difficulty. Indeed, he appears to prefer to quote poets, essayists, novelists, and playwrights rather than ordinary citizens in the

street. In his account, we are treated to stories surrounding what was playing at West End theaters ("The Thin Man" [1934], among others), excerpts from Dorothy Sayers's poems, and ubiquitous references to authors ranging from Graham Greene to Bernard Kops. Works of fiction are utilized to buttress historical claims. The art of these comments notwithstanding, it is possible to admire Harold Nicolson's scenic description of combat aircraft that "flash like silver gnats above us in the air" (cited on p. 31) without also believing that this is the way the majority Londoners experienced the bombing. The work errs thus not only because it always fails to consider the average citizen's perspective, but also because of the inadequate weight given to the views of such individuals when they are available. If Britain was still class-ridden in 1940, then Stansky's rendition of what occurred on September 7th reflects that division and offers an essentially upper-class, predominantly literary view of events. The author comments that "the most powerful evidence of what happened during the Blitz is the testimony of the people themselves" (p. 183). Unfortunately, the slice of people consulted in this telling of the story only partially represents that British society. Of course, good history writing need not be empirical. Nevertheless, if one seeks to demonstrate how the British people felt at that moment, and how they behaved, it is difficult to do so without reliance upon some macro-level data, such as (for example) public opinion polls. A scattering of such evidence does survive, but Stansky does not marshal it to enlighten readers.

Quite a few pages of the work are focused on the argument made by Richard M. Titmuss in *Problems of Social Policy* (1950) that the inability of the British government to deal with all of the manifold

challenges of the Blitz whetted the taste of the British public for enhanced governmental activities and thereby directly stimulated the development of Britain's postwar welfare state. This assertion is aggressive and only partially accurate, for several reasons. First, we can observe retrospectively that all things considered, the 1940 British government dealt with the problems of the Blitz remarkably well. Second, in contrast to the view of some that the British government entered the war grievously unprepared, not only had it developed a functioning civil defense and fire network, but also it had tested, manufactured, and deployed both the Hurricane and Spitfire fighter planes and, in addition, had deployed a sophisticated radar warning system that spanned all threatened areas. No empirical evidence is offered in support of the Titmuss hypothesis, which Stansky unfortunately presents in a very sympathetic light.

Ultimately, Stansky concludes that a great deal of heroic behavior was displayed on September 7th, though the heroic may have been overemphasized in many accounts. However, he ultimately avers, "if the myth of the Blitz is considered at its more modest level, then I believe it has a fair amount of validity" (p. 186). This non-controversial conclusion has been offered many times previously. Finally, it is worth noting that the terrain this book covers is ground already well plowed. As Angus Calder, a major historian of these events, has written, "no archive of such abundance exists for any other 'major event' in British history" (cited on p. 183). One therefore must ask what makes this book distinctive. Certainly, the conclusions Stansky draws about heroism and myth are not unusual. The volume's distinctive contribution turns out to be its use of literary

and cultural materials and references as a means to enlighten the reader and place events in perspective. This strategy, however poetic, often turns out to provide only a partial view of the momentous events of September 7, 1940.

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