

This Is London

In 1940, while the British were dodging German bombs, Americans listened in—live on the radio.



British fighters, climbing almost straight up, trying to intercept the bombers before they got away. It went on for two hours and then the “all-clear.” We went down to a nearby pub for dinner. Children were already organizing a hunt for bits of shrapnel. Under some bushes beside the road there was a baker’s cart. Two boys, still sobbing, were trying to get a quivering bay mare back between the shafts. This afternoon we drove back to the East End of London. It was like an obstacle race—streets roped off, houses and shops smashed, a few dirty-faced, tow-headed children standing on a corner, holding their thumbs up, three red buses drawn up in a line waiting to take the homeless away, men with white scarves around their necks instead of collars and ties, leading dull-eyed, empty-faced women across to the buses. Most of them carried little cheap cardboard suitcases and sometimes bulging paper shopping bags. That was all they had left.

September 10, 1940—6:45 p.m.

These raids against London are, I think, being rather fully and accu-

ately reported in the United States. Sometimes you get the news a bit late. For instance, when I was talking to you last night I knew all about that big fire down near St. Paul’s, had been watching it from a rooftop, but couldn’t talk about it. The German planes were still overhead and the Ministry of Home Security had no desire that they should be told, by means of a broadcast to the States, just what fires had been started and where they were. And I might add that I had no desire to assist the German bomb aimers who were flying about over my head.

We are told today that the Germans believe Londoners after a while will rise up and demand a new government, one that will make peace with Germany. It’s more probable that they’ll rise up and murder a few German pilots who come down by parachute.

The politicians who called this a “people’s war” were right, probably more right than they knew at the time. I’ve seen some horrible sights in this city during these days and nights, but not once have I heard man, woman, or child suggest that Britain should throw in her hand.

September 13, 1940

This is London at three-thirty in the morning. This has been what might be called a “routine night”—air-raid alarm at about nine o’clock and intermittent bombing ever since. The anti-aircraft barrage has been fierce but sometimes there have been periods of twenty minutes when London has been silent. That silence is almost hard to bear. One becomes accustomed to rattling windows and the distant sound of bombs and then there comes a silence that can be felt. You know the sound will return—you wait, and then it starts again.

September 18, 1940

The individual’s reaction to the sound of falling bombs cannot be described. The moan of stark terror and suspense cannot be encompassed by words, no more can the sense of relief when you realize that you weren’t where that one fell. It’s pleasant to pick yourself up out of the gutter without the aid of a searcher party.

In many buildings tonight people are sleeping on mattresses on the floor. I’ve seen dozens of them looking like dolls thrown aside by a tired child. In three or four hours they must get up and go to work just as though they had had a full night’s rest, free from the rumble of guns and the wonder that comes when they wake and listen in the dead hours of the night.

List three ways in which the bombings inflicted hardship on the residents of London. Then circle the parts of the text that support your answers and write the appropriate number next to them.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Between the Lines

4. The U.S. began the war completely neutral, then started sending aid to England in September of 1940. Would Murrow’s broadcasts have led Americans to support the new policy or oppose it? Back up your answer by referring to at least three specific parts of the broadcasts.

Taking It Further

1. As a history teacher, you have to compare radio broadcasts with the diaries of Londoners as sources for the bombing of England. What might the radio reporter—whose job it is to collect information on the bombings—tell you that the diarist might not? What might the private source (diary) tell you that the public source (radio) might not? Identify the possible biases of each source.

2. If you were to do a paper on the Battle of Britain, what questions would you want to answer? Make a list of five or more. Then list the sources—besides radio reports and diaries—that you would use.

3. Pick one of the following topics, research its role in the Battle of Britain, and prepare a three-minute presentation on the subject.

- Winston Churchill
- The RAF
- Evacuation
- American pilots
- The German invasion
- Civil defense