**The Belfast Blitz: April-May 1941**

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On 29 October 1940, Northern Ireland Prime Minister Sir James Craig made his last major speech in parliament—a typically impassioned tub-thumping assault on a Nationalist motion supporting Irish unity. By 24 November, he had died peacefully at his home. After taking private soundings the Governor, Lord Abercorn, asked John Andrews, the Minister of Finance, to form a government.
 **‘Very concerned at our anti-aircraft defences’**

From its inception, Andrews’ leadership appeared ineffectual and vulnerable; neither its confidence nor its prestige were enhanced by the German air raids on Northern Ireland during April-May 1941. Too late, it had begun to appreciate that an aerial attack was likely and that if one did occur there was little hope of avoiding tragedy. Two months earlier Andrews was reportedly ‘very concerned at our anti-aircraft defences’ and at the ‘position which might arise in Belfast after a severe air attack’. Due in large part to earlier ministerial neglect and prevarication, local active and passive defences were hopelessly inadequate, and the public physically and psychologically unprepared for the blitz. In September 1940, both Belfast and Londonderry were provided with a light balloon barrage which was marginally reinforced six months later. By the spring of 1941, the strength of the anti-aircraft barrage in Northern Ireland had risen to twenty-four heavy guns and fourteen light guns. Twenty-two of these were located in Belfast (six light and sixteen heavy). Four were sited at Londonderry (at Corrody and at Galliagh): more were to be transferred from Cardiff, but the Luftwaffe arrived before the guns did. Perhaps the most significant new development was the transfer, on 20 July 1940, from Turnhouse, near Edinburgh, to Aldergrove of a Royal Air Force squadron (No.245) equipped with Hurricane fighters. Unfortunately these could only operate fully under daylight conditions. For ‘certain technical reasons’ experts predicted that any raid in force would be at night. There were no RAF fighters to defend Londonderry. Headquarters staff had moved into RAF Eglinton but the runways were incomplete; not until August 1941 did operational aircraft arrive. There were no searchlights in the province until 10 April 1941, though they had been recommended by imperial defence experts. Nor was there any provision for a smoke screen.
The government’s other preparations were hardly reassuring, particularly after the Coventry attack (14 November 1940) when 50,000 houses were destroyed or damaged and 554 people died. In Belfast, for example, the shelters available could, if fully utilised, provide protection for just one quarter of the city’s population. Its mortuary services had emergency plans to deal with only 200 bodies—a figure described by one official at the time as ‘hardly enough’. Finally, provision had been made for the care of a mere 10,000 people who might be made homeless as a consequence of future enemy action.
For Belfast, like Coventry, the word ‘blitz’ which is so evocative of sudden, terrifying, deadly aerial bombardment, was truly appropriate. In the course of four Luftwaffe attacks on the nights of 7-8 April, 15-16 April, 4-5 May and 5-6 May 1941, lasting ten hours in total, 1,100 people died, over 56,000 houses in the city were damaged (53 per cent of its entire housing stock), roughly 100,000 made temporarily homeless and £20 million damage was caused to property at wartime values. It came twelfth in the ‘league table’ of urban areas attacked in the United Kingdom as measured by weight of bombs dropped. An ARP observer, Major Seán O’Sullivan, came up to Belfast from Dublin on the morning of Wednesday 16 April, hours after the first heavy raid had ended. He produced a detailed report for southern officials:

In the Antrim Road and vicinity the attack was of a particularly concentrated character and in many instances bombs from successive waves of bombers fell within fifteen to twenty yards of one another…In this general area, scores of houses were completely wrecked, either by explosion, fire or blast, while hundreds were damaged so badly as to be uninhabitable… In suburban areas, many were allowed to burn themselves out and during the day wooden beams were still burning… During the night of 16-17, many of these smouldering fires broke out afresh and fire appliances could be heard passing throughout the night… It is estimated that the ultimate number of dead may be in the neighbourhood of 500, and final figures may even approach 2,000. [The death toll was at least 900 and 600 were seriously injured.]
In the circumstances, O’Sullivan considered that the warden service ‘functioned efficiently. From the fact that some 200 incidents were reported from each of the two areas most affected, it must be concluded that [they] remained at their posts and reported damage promptly’. However, his opinion was that the whole civil defence sector was utterly overwhelmed:

The rescue service felt the want of heavy jacks, in one case the leg and arm of a child had to be amputated before it could be extricated…[but] the greatest want appeared to be the lack of hospital facilities… At 2pm on the afternoon of the 16th (nine hours after the termination of the raid) it was reported that the street leading to the Mater Hospital was filled with ambulances waiting to set down their casualties. Professor Flynn, head of the casualty service for the city, informed me that the greater number of casualties was due to shock, blast and secondary missiles, such as glass, stones, pieces of piping, etc.. There were many terrible mutilations among both living and dead—heads crushed, ghastly abdominal and face wounds, penetration by beams, mangled and crushed limbs etc… In the heavily ‘blitzed’ areas people ran panic-stricken into the streets and made for the open country. As many were caught in the open by blast and secondary missiles, the enormous number of casualties can be readily accounted for. It is perhaps true that many saved their lives running but I am afraid a much greater number lost them or became casualties… During the day, loosened slates and pieces of piping were falling in the streets and as pedestrians were numerous many casualties must have occurred.

The report concluded with the observation that ‘a second Belfast would be too horrible to contemplate’.

**Worse than World War I**

The city’s mortuary services were also overwhelmed and as a result public baths (on the Falls Road and Peter’s Hill) and a large fruit market (St George’s) had to be improvised to cope with the dead. Emma Duffin, who had served as a nurse near the western front during the First World War, was one of those on duty at St George’s market:

All the way to the place I had told myself I was bound to see horrible sights but only when seen could the full horror be realised. I had seen death in many forms, young men dying of ghastly wounds, but nothing I had ever seen was as terrible as this… [World War I casualties] had died in hospital beds, their eyes had been reverently closed, their hands crossed to their breasts. Death had to a certain extent been…made decent. It was solemn, tragic, dignified, but here it was grotesque, repulsive, horrible. No attendant nurse had soothed the last moments of these victims, no gentle reverent hand had closed their eyes or crossed their hands. With tangled hair, staring eyes, clutching hands, contorted limbs, their grey-green faces covered with dust, they lay, bundled into the coffins, half-shrouded in rugs or blankets, or an occasional sheet, still wearing their dirty, torn twisted garments. Death should be dignified, peaceful; Hitler had made even death grotesque. I felt outraged, I should have felt sympathy, grief, but instead feelings of revulsion and disgust assailed me.

The official history says of this attack: ‘Belfast was sorely tried, no other city in the United Kingdom, save London, had lost so many of her citizens in one night’s raid. No other city, except possibly Liverpool, ever did’. In fact, John Maffey, who passed through Belfast on the morning after the first raid, informed the Irish government that the scenes he witnessed there were ‘more horrifying than London because of the numbers of small dwelling houses of poor people which were destroyed. Also, in Dublin the German minister, Eduard Hempel, felt constrained to call by appointment (on the morning of 17 April) on the assistant secretary of the Irish Department of External Affairs, J.P. Walshe, to offer sympathy and attempt an explanation. Walshe recorded that the German was ‘clearly distressed by the news of the severe raid on Belfast and especially of the number of civilian casualties’. He stated that ‘he would once more tell his government how he felt about the matter and he would ask them to confine the operations to military objectives as far as it was humanly possible. He believed that this was being done already but it was inevitable that a certain number of civilian lives should be lost in the course of heavy bombing from the air’.

**The ‘fire-raid’**

However, a further severe raid followed on the night of 4-5 May (the ‘fire-raid’). During the course of three hours, roughly 100,000 incendiary bombs were dropped, followed by high explosives, from an estimated 200 aircraft, mainly on central, north and east Belfast. The resulting fires were on a scale beyond the resources of local brigades within the first sixty minutes. Over 200 buildings were ablaze by the time of the ‘all clear’. The death rate was lower than during the Easter Tuesday attack, but unidentified bodies were once again brought to St George’s market. The key strategic industries sustained very heavy damage. No British shipyard suffered greater physical destruction during a single raid than did Harland & Wolff on this occasion. On the morning after the attack, Emma Duffin noted ‘the smell of burning was in the air. The grass was strewn with blackened and charred papers. There was a sheet from a child’s essay book. On the top of the page I read The End of the World. It seemed appropriate. It was the end of the world as we knew it’. As in mid-April, help in fighting fires and in rescue work was provided by the troops based locally and more was requested from all over Northern Ireland, from Britain, and from Éire. By responding, the South thereby compromised its policy of neutrality and risked becoming a target itself. When war had broken out, Ribbentrop had menacingly informed de Valera that Germany would refrain from hostile action if Ireland maintained an unimpeachable policy of neutrality towards her. According to recent research by Leo Sheridan the Germans were as good as their word and the bombing of Dublin’s North Strand in the same month was no ‘accident’ but a deliberate attempt to intimidate the Southern government.

**Fear and panic**

After the first severe attack, William D. Scott, permanent secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, advised Andrews that he should make a personal appeal emphasising that ‘our best reply…is redoubled effort’. He quoted as a possible source of inspiration an extract from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: ‘It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work’. Its sentiments if not its eloquence are discernible in Andrews’ subsequent press statements. In fact, fear and panic had already reached epidemic proportions, especially in Belfast. O’Sullivan observed after the Easter Tuesday raid:

From the early morning of the 16th and all throughout the day there was a continuous ‘trek’ to railway stations. The refugees looked dazed and horror stricken and many had neglected to bring more than a few belongings—I saw one man with just an extra pair of socks stuck in his pockets. Any and every means of exit from the city was availed of and the final destination appeared to be a matter of indifference. Train after train and bus after bus were filled with those next in line. At nightfall the Northern Counties Station [York Street] was packed from platform gates to entrance gates and still refugees were coming along in a steady stream from the surrounding streets… Open military lorries were finally put into service and even expectant mothers and mothers with young children were put into these in the rather heavy drizzle that lasted throughout the evening. On the 17th I heard that hundreds who either could not get away or could not leave for other reasons simply went out into the fields and remained in the open all night with whatever they could take in the way of covering.

That same day Moya Woodside noted in her diary:

Evacuation is taking on panic proportions. Roads out of town are still one stream of cars, with mattresses and bedding tied on top. Everything on wheels is being pressed into service. People are leaving from all parts of town and not only from the bombed areas. Where they are going, what they will find to eat when they get there, nobody knows. This business presents a problem of the first proportions to Stormont.

The condition of those fleeing from the city shocked Woodside as much as did their numbers:

My mother telephoned to say that she took in eight evacuees last night, two mothers and six children. Says one mother is about to have another baby any minute, that they are all filthy, the smell in the room is terrible. They refuse all food except bread and tea; the children have made puddles all over the floor etc.. She is terribly sorry for them and kindliness itself but finds this revelation of how the other half live rather overpowering.

The next day, she continued:

Belfast slum dwellers are pretty far down and to those not used to seeing poverty and misery at close quarters the effect is overwhelming. ‘The smell is terrible’, said my sister-in-law. ‘They don’t even use the lavatories, they just do it on the floor, grown-ups and children’. She said she had been given the job of finding private billets for the evacuees and she was ashamed to have to ask decent working people with clean houses to take in such guests. More are ‘scared out’ than ‘bombed out’, too.
 **‘Ditching’**

After the May raids the assessment given in the German media that Belfast’s industry had been devastated beyond recovery would have been widely accepted within the city itself. Morale all but collapsed. A Ministry of Home Affairs’ report estimated that by the end of that month as many as 220,000 persons had temporarily fled from the capital. They scattered through Ulster and beyond. They arrived in Fermanagh having ‘nothing with them only night shirts’; 10,000 crossed the border. Superimposed on the massive British military presence, available accommodation was stretched beyond its limits. Dawson Bates had to inform cabinet of the rack-renting of barns, and in some areas of up to thirty people crowded together in small houses. Even in early August Moya Woodside described a ‘friend whose car broke down…in a tiny seaside village…The food situation is alarming. He could not find…anywhere to stay the night and had to sleep out in the sandhills…He was unable to get anything to eat…even of tea and bread. Village shops were completely sold out’. Three weeks earlier, she herself visited a family in Belfast which was ‘paying the full rent for a house of which the two upper rooms were quite uninhabitable, the downstairs windows covered with felt, and the gas supply cut off. All cooking had to be done in semi-darkness over an open fire’. It was ‘little more than a shelter. Yet there is competition even to get these’. Thousands of those remaining in the city ‘ditched’; during the hours of darkness they streamed (‘trekked’) along the main arterial roads to the suburbs, to shelter in parks, ditches and hedgerows, until first light when they felt it safe to return. The scale of continuing public fear was highlighted when, after an air-raid alert on 23 July 1941, at 2am, an estimated 30,000 fled from the city in motor vehicles, bicycles and on foot; an eye-witness likened it to ‘the crowds at a football match’. No aircraft appeared and no bombs fell.
Few in number and of short duration, the raids on Belfast may have been but, on two occasions at least, they were as severe as any on Britain. Nevertheless, any advantage the Luftwaffe might have gained was inevitably lost by their failure to press home the attack. The city was soon back on the road to recovery. Within a few months, Belfast and indeed the rest of Northern Ireland, were contributing more to the war effort than they had done before.

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This article is an extract from the author’s Northern Ireland in the Second World War (Ulster Historical Foundation, 1995).

**Further reading:**
B. Barton, *The Blitz: Belfast in the war years* (Belfast 1989).

R. Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality 1939-45* (Dublin 1983).

R.S. Davison, *‘The Belfast Blitz’, The Irish Sword, Vol.XVI, No.63* (1985)