

Did Churchill annihilate Coventry to protect an even bigger prize?



On the night of a full moon, Sergeant Werner Handorf, a 24-year-old pilot from Berlin, eased his fully-laden Junkers Ju 88 bomber off the runway and up into the sky.

He had 1,000lb of high explosives in the hold and twice as much in racks along the wings. Around him, hundreds of other German planes were heading from bases in captured France towards the coast of England.

London was the obvious destination, as it had been for weeks as the Luftwaffe blitzed the enemy's capital city. But not this time.

Winston Churchill: Did he know the Germans were going to bomb Coventry?

Handorf turned and caught sight of his navigator poring over a street map of Coventry. This time their aiming point was to be the Midlands – more particularly, the city in Britain's industrial heartland that may well have cost Germany victory in the Battle of Britain. It was in Coventry, with its plethora of vital aircraft factories, that Rolls-Royce engines had

been stripped and re-conditioned to give the Spitfires and Hurricanes their vital edge in the decisive dogfights that summer. Now Coventry was in for a pasting like never before. Hitler had personally ordered it. This "Moonlight Sonata", as the German operation was codenamed, was to be a requiem for Luftwaffe dead.

And so, on that night of November 14, 1940, began an air raid whose ferocity became a byword for devastation. Five hundred tons of explosives, 33,000 incendiary bombs and dozens of parachute mines were dropped onto the compact city centre with its half-timbered houses and winding lanes and the surrounding factories and houses. In less than a fifth of a square mile, 60,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged. The 600-year-old cathedral went up in flames. Thereafter, "Koventriert" "Coventry-ed" was the word the Germans used for annihilating a city with sheer firepower.

But could it have been prevented? Or, at the very least, could its population of up to 300,000 have been warned that their homes and their lives were in danger and allowed to evacuate to safety? A new play, which premiered at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, says so.

The play, *One Night In November*, claims that the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, knew several days in advance that the Germans would attack Coventry but deliberately held back the information.

His intelligence supposedly came from the scientists at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, who, in utmost secrecy, had cracked the Enigma code the Germans used for their military communications. From an intercepted message, they had discovered that the city was a target. But warning the city of Coventry and its residents of the imminent threat would have alerted the Germans to the fact that their codes had been cracked and their security breached.

Churchill considered it worth the sacrifice of a whole city and its people to protect his back-door route into Berlin's secrets. But is it true? Did it really happen this way? The end of 1940 was a terrible and frightening time in Britain. The debacle of Dunkirk had been a mere six months earlier, the Battle of Britain a close-run fight to survive. Coventry, like the rest of industrial England, had been on high alert, its people resigned to taking to their shelters, whether the public ones or the Anderson in the back garden, when the sirens wailed. There had already been 20 air raids since the summer, causing 200 deaths. The Rex Cinema was hit, just as it was about to show *Gone With The Wind*. But nothing that had gone before could have prepared the city for what was about to happen.

In the factories, the night-shift had clocked on. Most of the day-shift workers were at home with their families, the black-out blinds drawn across the windows, settling themselves down for a night

with the radio. At 7.07pm, Civil Defence controllers received an urgent message: "Air raid Yellow. Raiders approaching your area."

Three minutes later, the warning was "Red", and they hit the klaxons to sound the alert. The sirens wailed across a city on which bombs were already dropping. The first were incendiaries, which lit up "like a Christmas tree of sparks," as one observer put it.



Coventry Cathedral in November 1940 after the devastating raid on the fourteenth and today

Owen Owen, the city's only department store, was soon blazing, as were roofs everywhere. Firemen, Home Guardsmen, anyone who was able, rushed at the flames with buckets and stirrup pumps, but their efforts were soon overwhelmed.



After the incendiaries came the bombers, carrying heavy explosives. They homed in on the flames, and the city shook from one end to the other. A policeman recalled how the air was filled with the crash of guns, the whine of bombs and the terrific flash and bang as they exploded.

"The sky seemed to be full of planes. As we made our way along the high street we must have dropped flat a dozen times and thought our end was near." In their bunker beneath the General Post Office, the trackers of the Observer Corps grasped the reality.

"Wave after wave of planes were coming in without a break," one noted. "We knew then that this raid was different." The formations droned in endlessly, dropped their bombs, then broke off to return to their bases in France, refuel, reload and come back to deal more death and destruction.

It was this relentless concentration on one small target that made the raid ground-breaking in every sense. In the medieval cathedral, Provost Howard was throwing sand over the nave and chancel to try to douse the flames. The oak ceiling was ablaze. The lead on the roof began to melt. Firemen arrived to try to save the city's best-loved building but they were powerless.



There was no water in their hoses the mains had been shattered. "With intense horror," the provost recalled, "we realised that nothing more could be done. We got out the Cross and candle sticks from the high altar, a silver wafer box and a wooden crucifix."

And then, with these few treasures, the clergyman left, turning back to see "the organ, famous back to the time when Handel played on it, become a burning mass". One helpless onlooker, a civil defence worker, never forgot the "drip, drip, drip of molten lead". But he couldn't stay for long. He was needed where a land-mine had exploded, bringing the end of a house down on top of a public bomb shelter and demolishing it.

People were trapped underneath. "We dared not use picks or shovels but had to pick up the bricks with our bare hands. After a time, we came to the occupants. Some were quite cold and others were still warm, but they were all dead." The intensity of the fires forced people out of their hiding places. As she dashed from one shelter to another, a schoolgirl stopped in her tracks at the sight of the sky "red, just like blood I remember thinking, and then suddenly I was deadly frightened. As we ran with buildings on fire and dropping into the road around us, it reminded me vividly of a film I had seen, The Last Days Of Pompeii."

As the raid reached its climax around midnight, an observer recalled "a satanic sight, fire raging all around us and everywhere chaos, rubble and destruction". Overhead, Flight Sergeant Handorf, surrounded by anti-aircraft fire, looked down on the destruction.

"A tug at the bomb lever, a sharp turn of the aircraft and another bomb load whistles earthward. A red fire glows steeply upward. Here is another factory which will do no more war work for Herr Churchill ... " he recalled later, in his memoirs.

One witness had etched on her memory "enemy planes coming and going unmolested" during the night, and even when the morning came some were still there "flying blatantly low over our heads, circling round and gloating over their success". She then put the question that others were also asking: "Where was our air force?" A lot of people in Coventry felt they had been left undefended but this was one of the many myths about that night. In fact, the 24 heavy anti-aircraft guns in six sites around the city had blazed away until some ran out of ammunition and others were too hot to handle.

Nearly 7,000 shells were fired at the Luftwaffe, ten rounds every minute. But they were as ineffective as the 120 RAF fighters sent into battle. They and the flak guns didn't register a single "kill" between them. Of the 449 German bombers that descended on Coventry, every one returned to base safely. The all-clear was given at 6.16am on Friday morning, though the sirens did not sound.

There was no electricity. It was left to wardens and policemen to shout the news into shelters and basements: "It's all over!" Then a shattered population emerged into a place crushed beyond imagination.

"Roads impassable with debris, flames licking across the street amid the smoking ruins of distorted buildings and craters big enough to swallow a bus," declared a municipal engineer.

The city was "a write-off". It was a theme picked up on street corners ' or what was left of them.

"Coventry's finished," was a common lament. The word soon spread that casualties were colossal. An alderman from the local council was shocked by "the bodies of women piled up one upon the other, a tangled mass of humanity" at a shopping centre. "I saw a van filled with bodies," said another observer. "Two men were carrying a stretcher with a body on it and a little girl was running after them screaming 'Mother!' I shall never forget that all my life."

In fact, the toll was lighter than anyone dared hope. The number killed was 568 ' horrific, yes, but not exceptional by the war's grim standards. A further 863 were seriously injured. Yet you won't find this spelled out in the new play. The only reference to casualties is a hysterical warden screaming: "There must be 20,000 dead out there! We've been sold down the river here. Hung out to f***ing dry."

Nowhere ' not in the script, nor in the programme ' is that exaggeration corrected. You could leave the theatre thinking the death toll ran into many thousands. (It did in London. In the Blitz there, 14,000 died in 57 raids over

four months.) And what of the accusation of "being sold down the river, hung out to dry", that Coventry was allowed to burn by Churchill to protect the Enigma secret?

It is an allegation that was first made more than 30 years ago in books about secret intelligence and was the subject of intense dispute among experts in the 1970s, before being discounted as untrue by most historians.

Norman Longmate, the most knowledgeable expert about the Coventry blitz, comprehensively exonerates Churchill. "No citizen was left to die, no humble home left to burn for reasons of high strategy," he concluded in his book *Air Raid*. "Churchill did not even know on the afternoon of November 14 that Coventry was likely to be attacked. He thought London was the target that night and, Churchillian as ever, stayed there deliberately so as not to be thought to be running away from danger."

But there is often a germ of truth in conspiracy theories and in this case it came from intelligence records, which showed that, *three days before the attack*, a German prisoner of war in British hands told a stool pigeon planted in his cell that the Luftwaffe had a new strategy. Instead of hammering London, it was planning large-scale attacks at night on industrial centres.

He had no dates but named Birmingham and Coventry as possible targets. His story was not acted on because he was a new and untested source. Meanwhile, on that same day, November 11, the decoders at Bletchley got the first wind of "Moonlight Sonata" in a German message, though not when it was planned for. There was a list of four target areas, all in the south of England, and a strange codeword they could make no sense of - "Korn". No one put two and two together and married this information with the POW's story.

Moreover, the connection between "Korn" and Coventry was never made, according to the official history of British Intelligence. Why should it have been? There was nothing obvious (or even cleverly cryptic) about it. However, this is precisely the connection that is made in the play. Its leading male character, a Bletchley code-breaker, works out that Coventry is about to be bombed, wants to tell his girlfriend who lives there with her family but is ordered not to.

Hence the conspiracy. But, though it works as drama, so far, it doesn't stand up as historical fact. There is no historical evidence that anyone this side of the Channel knew Coventry was in danger until well into the afternoon of November 14. That was when the navigational beams sent out by the Germans to guide their pilots to the target showed them converging on the city. At that point radio devices were directed to jam the beams and at least confuse the bombers but these were wrongly set, by error or accident, and nothing stood in the way of the Luftwaffe squadrons.

In the end, Coventry got little warning. There were foul-ups in communications that day that meant information was slow getting through to the city authorities. But nothing suggests this was intentional; it was cock-up not conspiracy at work here. That is not the message of *One Night In November* as it pursues the supposed culprits who let Coventry burn.

The publicity for this play asks provocatively: "Would you sacrifice a city to win a war?" It's a good enough question for moral debate. And the answer of any leader in World War II would have been yes. In a fight to the death, in a war of attrition, terrible decisions had to be made, and Churchill did not shirk them. But over Coventry, it did not apply. He had no case to answer. If there was any comfort to be taken from Coventry's ordeal it was that, far from being a betrayal, it became a decisive rallying point for the war effort.

Total war was what Hitler had dished out. Britain's leaders now realised they would have to do the same if they were ever to defeat him. Sir Arthur Harris, when he became head of Bomber Command, took the destruction of Coventry as his template for what he and his bombers could do to Germany. Except that he planned to do it bigger and better, with more planes and an even greater concentration of firepower. And he did.

The real truth about the Coventry blitz 'uncomfortable as some still find it' is that, over the next four and a half years, Hamburg, Cologne, Berlin, Dresden and dozens of other cities in Germany would reap the whirlwind unleashed that moonlit night in November 1940.

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