Civil defence and central government

French policy-makers were thinking about the dangers of bombing less than five years after the end of World War 1. As early as 1923, Defence Minister André Maginot (later famous as the father of the Maginot Line) issued a 'provisional instruction' on civil defence against bombing; his concerns focused on key administrative buildings and transport networks, not the general public.

Between 1922 and 1 September 1939, the French government issued at least 2 laws, 4 decree-laws, 34 decrees, 109 circulars, 29 instructions, 18 arrêtés (ministerial decisions) and 11 notices relating to civil defence issues. A further four decree-laws, 13 decrees, 9 circulars and 2 instructions followed before the defeat of 1940. No-one could claim that the French government had not thought about the prospect of bombing.

Interestingly, the two leading figures of the wartime Vichy regime, Marshal Philippe Pétain and Pierre Laval, were also prominent in pre-war civil defence preparation: Pétain was France's first General Inspector of Air Defences from 1931, and in the same year Laval signed a new 'Practical Instruction on Civil Defence', which superseded the Maginot text. Laval 's Instruction was complemented in the following years by a series of specialised appendices on such questions as look-out and black-out measures, poison gas, shelters, fire-fighting, medical provision and evacuation. The Law Organising Passive Defence on Metropolitan Territory of 8 April 1935 made civil defence a requirement across the whole of metropolitan France for the first time. In 1938, the Law
on the General Organisation of the Nation for Wartime, and subsequent decrees, moved responsibility for civil defence from the Interior Ministry to the Defence Ministry, where a new civil defence directorate was created; the fact that the Defence Minister, Édouard Daladier, was also the Prime Minister indicated the importance assigned to this relatively new policy area.

In each French département (roughly equivalent to a county: mainland France had 90 départements), the Prefect, the top state official, was required from 1935 to set up a Passive Defence Committee including mayors and local military and civilian experts.Prefects could also demand the creation of similar committees at municipal level, and major cities like Rouen or Lyon had functioning committees well before 1939; some militarily sensitive towns like Brest had set them up even before Laval’s Instruction of 1931. In purely administrative terms, France had gone a long way to create viable civil defence structures by 1939.

This advertisement for an escape ladder contrasts the improvident residents of a block of flats, presumably about to burn to death in fires caused by incendiaries, with the far-sighted purchasers of La Sans Rivale. Courtesy of Archives Municipales de Boulogne.
Civil defence and civil society

France also saw the development of initiatives within civil society. Bodies like the Comité Français pour la Propagande Aéronautique or the Union Nationale pour la Défense Aérienne were active in training civil defence volunteers, as well as publicising the threat from the air through magazines, exhibitions, and lectures. In 1938 Lyon, a major French centre for trade fairs, devoted a whole Salon to civil defence equipment.

The Manuel de la Défense Passive (1938?) was the one of the simplest and best-designed leaflets of the period, offering warnings on the proximity of the air threat with guides to aircraft insignia and different types of bombs, and to such questions as evacuation and the reinforcements and equipment of a cellar. Courtesy of Archives Municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, 6/H/3.

If they cared to prepare for air raids, the public could seek guidance from a wide choice of leaflets, both government-sponsored and private. Some advertised a range of civil defence equipment, from
gas masks (the most common single item) to escape ladders and fire extinguishers. The more public-spirited could be trained as civil defence volunteers.

This 1934 issue of Je Sait Tous presents an alarming picture of France’s unpreparedness for gas attack, while also advertising some of the civil defence equipment, including gas masks, that a middle-class family might buy. Courtesy of Archives Municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt, 6/H/3.
Was France prepared?

The short answer is ‘No’, for five main reasons: too few shelters, inadequate evacuation plans, too few gas masks (though this would matter little, as it turned out), too few volunteers, and a concentration of effort in the wrong places.

• **Too few shelters.** Shelters were potentially the most expensive single item in a civil defence budget. The cost of concrete shelters for the population of Paris alone was estimated at some 46 billion francs – over 50 times the total civil defence budget for 1939. Until 1938, the cost of shelters was expected to be borne by local authorities, and very few indeed were built. When central government, under the provisions of the 1938 law, began to spend large amounts on shelters, it was chiefly on very basic shelter types: while essential buildings – town halls and prefectures, above all – often disposed of reinforced concrete underground shelters, the general public had to be content with trenches, reinforced with wood or concrete, or cellar reinforcement. Useful against blast and splinters, such shelters could never resist a direct hit. Even these modest constructions proceeded slowly, and few towns had proper shelter for much more than 10 per cent of their populations by 1940.

• **Inadequate evacuation plans.** For much of the 1930s, evacuating the non-essential population from urban areas was seen as a cheaper substitute for a massive shelter-building programme. Detailed train timetables were drawn up to take over 400,000 Paris schoolchildren to Normandy. But arrangements for billeting evacuees were imprecise at best, and governments left it unclear whether evacuation programmes were compulsory or voluntary. Some 2 million people, many of them children, were evacuated at the outbreak of war in 1939. Most came home within two months. All official plans, though, were overwhelmed by the exodus of May-June 1940, when between 6 and 10 million people fled their homes in the face of the advancing German armies. In the minds of many ordinary people and even policy-makers, that experience tainted the notion of evacuation as a civil defence measure in all but the most extreme circumstances for the rest of the war.

• **Too few gas masks.** In February 1939, just 289,000 masks were available for the Paris region as a whole – enough for one-tenth the population of the city of Paris. Fortunately, the ban on the use of gas in combat under the Geneva convention was broadly respected by the belligerents in World War 2.

• **Too few volunteers.** France before 1940 was too divided a society for attempts to mobilise the general population for civil defence to achieve consensual support. Civil defence associations were too often associated with the militarist Right. French civil defence and fire services would remain undermanned until defeat and the demobilisation of the army in 1940.

• **Geographical concentration.** Logically enough, much of the civil defence effort before 1939 was concentrated in Paris and in the eastern départements closest to Germany. That mainland France would be bombed chiefly from Britain, and later from Allied bases in Italy and in France’s own North African colonies was understandably not an idea much entertained by the pre-1940 planners. This discrepancy between where bombing was expected and where it happened affected spending priorities and meant that some of the most vulnerable areas after 1940, such as France’s coastal towns, had to start from a very low base of preparation.
La Sirène, published by the Lyon branch of the Union Nationale pour la Défense Aérienne in Lyon, was one of several (usually short-lived) civil defence magazines to appear in the pre-war years. The trench-digging photograph is notable for the characteristic zig-zag pattern of the trenches, designed to resist the effects of the blast, and for the unusual presence of a mechanical digger. Courtesy of Archives Municipales de Lyon, 1127/WP/09.
Two qualifications should be made to this general appearance of unpreparedness. First, France was far from unique. In no belligerent country was civil defence spending a major priority when war was not expected; and when international tensions increased, civil defence had to compete with spending on rearmament. Moreover, all future belligerents overestimated the danger from gas, and underestimated the sheer quantity of high explosives and incendiaries the Allies would be able to deliver by 1943. Second, despite the poor material state of pre-war civil defence, all would not be improvisation after 1940, because most of the administrative structures were already in place. Civil defence was one area in which the government of Vichy France worked broadly within a framework set by its democratic predecessors.

**BOMBING FRANCE: ALLIED STRATEGIES, 1940-1945**

**Germans or Allies?**

France was bombed by the Luftwaffe during the six-week campaign of May-June 1940. Channel ports, towns in the north-east such as Abbeville, and on the Loire such as Blois and Tours, were all hit, sometimes heavily. Paris itself was raided on 3 June and again, by the retreating Germans, in August 1944.

But the Allies were responsible for the great majority of air raids on France. According to the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, France took some 21.8% of the total tonnage of Allied bombs dropped on Europe between 1940 and 1945. That represents some 588,000 tons of bombs, or nearly eight times the roughly 74,000 tons dropped by Nazi Germany on the United Kingdom in the same period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>no.</th>
<th>As % of total</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tonnage dropped</th>
<th>As % of total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1940-1942 (February)</td>
<td>15,598</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1942 (March-December)</td>
<td>3,056</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>14,996</td>
<td>5.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>7,482</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>249,943</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>287,647</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chiefly France, but also, in particular, Belgium and Holland, as well as Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway, and Poland.*

Why bomb France? The psychological factor

After the armistice signed with the victorious Germans on 22 June 1940, France was, in principle, a non-belligerent power. It could never be ‘knocked out of the war’ by bombing, as the Allies hoped to do against Italy or even Germany. But France was also under Nazi occupation, and home to a growing number of German troops and military and naval installations. A growing proportion of French industry contributed to the Nazi war effort. These were the Allies' targets in France; French civilians were strictly – to use a term from the 1960s – collateral damage.

The Allies' reasons for attacking France were not always linked to specific objectives. For example, new aircrews, both British and American, were regularly ‘blooded’ over France before being sent to more dangerous German skies; indeed, for its first five months of operations, from 17 August 1942 to 27 January 1943, the US 8th Air Force only hit French targets. Small-scale raids over northern France – so-called ‘circus’ operations – were primarily designed to draw German aircraft away from the new Russian ally after Germany’s invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. And the British, especially during 1941-42, hoped that a strong RAF presence would improve French morale by demonstrating that Britain was still in the war to win, and was capable of hitting French industries working for the German occupiers.

Why bomb France? The key targets

Such ‘psychological’ motivations for bombing aside, the Allies' targets can be divided into six main categories: ports, airfields, industries, V-weapon sites, railways, and targets in support of ground troops.

Ports

• With its meagre forces of 1940, among Bomber Command's first targets were the French and Belgian Channel ports, where German barges were massing in preparation for the invasion of Britain that never came.

• German merchant shipping along the Channel continued to attract small-scale Allied raids throughout the war.

• On a much larger scale, German surface raiders in the port of Brest (the battlecruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, the heavy cruisers Admiral Hipper and Prinz Eugen) occupied much of Bomber Command’s attention from early 1941 until February 1942.

• U-boat centres along the Atlantic coast (Brest again, but also Lorient, Saint-Nazaire, Bordeaux and La Pallice) were the targets of heavy British and American raids, especially early in 1943, when the towns of Lorient and Saint-Nazaire were all but destroyed.

• German enclaves remained in several French ports well after the liberation of the rest of the country in 1944. Some were left intact until the German surrender in May 1945; others, such as Le
Havre and Brest, received heavy Allied raids that reduced the German garrisons but left the towns in ruins.

**Airfields**

Airfields were regularly attacked by Allied air forces, particularly in the months before D-Day.

**Industrial targets**

For most of the war some 30-40 per cent of French industrial output was produced for Germany; France's armaments, construction, and aircraft industries worked practically full-time for the Reich, with well-known French firms like Renault, Hotchkiss, Citroën or Gnôme-Rhône subcontracting for big orders from German enterprises like Heinkel, Junkers, Focke Wulf, and BMW.

The best-known RAF raid against a French industrial target, on the night of 3 March 1942, hit the Renault works at Boulogne-Billancourt and achieved what the newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, Air Marshal Arthur Harris, called a 'concentration in time and in place' without precedent over any target in the war so far. British and American attacks on similar objectives continued throughout the war.
V-weapon sites

V-weapon sites were major French targets from late 1943 until the liberation of France in August/September 1944. They attracted over 117,000 tons of bombs – nearly a fifth of the Allied total. As most sites were rural, human casualties were fairly slight: collateral damage was chiefly to woods, farmland, livestock – and farm workers.

Rail targets
French communications were obvious targets for the Allies from early in the war. The first-ever raid by the US 8th Air Force hit marshalling yards in Sotteville, near Rouen. The RAF made 419 attacks on trains and rail targets just in the four months to 31 January 1943.

The French rail system became a prime objective of Allied bomber forces during the preparations for D-Day, in spring 1944, when the ‘Transportation Plan’ aimed to wreck rail centres and stall the movement of German troops in France. Between 3 March and 5 June 1944, Allied air forces dropped 63,635 tons of bombs on 75 Transportation targets, 40,930 tons delivered by RAF Bomber Command. These raids were initially opposed both by the bombing chiefs – Harris for the Bomber Command and Spaatz for the American air forces – who preferred to hit Germany, and by British politicians, including Churchill, who feared the consequences of French civilian casualties. They were overruled by Eisenhower, the Allied C-in-C in Western Europe, by his Deputy, Air Chief Marshal Tedder, and ultimately by President Roosevelt. Tactical raids on bridges and other rail targets would reinforce the effects of the Transportation Plan after D-Day.

Churchill had reluctantly accepted the Transportation Plan, but agreed an informal upper limit of 10,000 French civilian deaths with Eisenhower’s Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder. The Prime Minister sent a succession of memos to Tedder asking if this limit was being kept to (French figures suggest that some 14,000 civilians died through bombing in April and May 1944, the main months of the Plan’s execution). Note Tedder’s original use of the term ‘credit balance’.

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Support for ground operations

Placed, in effect, under the command of SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) from April to September 1944, the British and American strategic air forces, and the smaller bombers of the Allied Tactical Air Forces, diverted much of their effort to the support of Allied ground troops. In the run-up to D-Day, they hit so-called ‘choke points’ – road crossings in small French towns whose destruction, it was thought, would block the movement of German troops and armour. Air strikes were also called down in direct support of ground attacks – to little benefit over Caen in July, to greater effect prior to the American break-out west of Saint-Lô. With ground support operations and continuing attacks on communications and V-weapon sites, the Allied bombing offensive over France reached a climax between June and September 1944, when about half the total tonnage of the war was dropped.

How did they bomb?

A French report from late 1944 (Service Historique de l’Armée de l’Air, Vincennes, 3D/322) found that some 83 per cent of bombs dropped on France between January 1942 and August 1944 were high explosive, and only 17 per cent incendiaries. Of the incendiary bombs, over half were dropped in just two months – January and February 1943.

Over France, Allied bombers were not trying to burn cities but to destroy precise targets. The major exception to this rule was the raids on the Biscay ports, when it was believed – wrongly – that destroying towns (Lorient and Saint-Nazaire, in particular) could end operations from the U-Boat bases there. The most intensive Allied raids on the Biscay ports were, precisely, in January and February 1943.

The difficulty, for the French people above all, was that neither the bomber formations nor the training of Allied aircrews were well adapted to the aim of precision bombing. To the inhabitants of a French city, a ‘tactical’ raid could still feel like area bombing.

The politics of bombing France

The British War Cabinet never accepted the bombing of France as readily as it agreed to the strategic bombing offensive against Germany. Churchill never liked bombing a people he still regarded as allies. But sentimental reservations were reinforced by strictly political concerns – about the reactions of Vichy France before November 1942 (when it still controlled a fleet and North African colonies), and thereafter about the behaviour of the Free French and the general population (who, it was feared, were becoming more pro-Communist). France’s unoccupied southern zone was not
deliberately bombed until the Germans took it over in November 1942; the city of Paris was largely spared raids. French civilians, especially in coastal areas, were warned by the British to leave, and many did. But military considerations often trumped political hesitation, as with the big raids on the Biscay ports in early 1943 or the Transportation Plan from April 1944. The long late-night sessions of the British Defence Committee and War Cabinet, in spring 1944, were the last political debates over the bombing of France; from May the decisions were taken by SHAEF on a largely military basis, opening the way to the heaviest months of bombing from June to September 1944.

**Bombing France: was it worth it?**

With so many German targets on its territory, France could hardly hope to escape the Allies’ bomber forces. But the usefulness of the Allied bombing of France, like that of the broader Allied strategic bombing offensive, has repeatedly been questioned – by British and American observers as well as French ones. As early as July 1944, a British Bombing Analysis Unit reported that cratering caused by the bombing of Caen had actually hindered the Allied advance (National Archives, AIR 37/761). Harris himself, always more reluctant to bomb French targets than German ones, took an ambiguous view in his memoirs – claiming credit for successful raids while tending to blame the Army for those that were not.

While the debates will continue, it may be useful to divide Allied raids on France into three main categories, though there will always be gradations between them.

In what might appear an uncharacteristic initiative, Harris, as Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, asked for contributions from bomber crews to help French families who had suffered through Allied bombing – either after helping RAF airmen or after being hit. The collection raised £12,765 – gratefully received by the French Health Minister, but slightly less than the cost of a single Lancaster bomber.
Well-chosen targets, efficiently bombed

The Gnôme-Rhône aero-engine works at Limoges, the German E-boat pens in Le Havre, the Saumur rail tunnel, the Dunlop factory at Montluçon, the aviation plants around Toulouse, or the V3 site at Mimoyecques, were all unimpeachable military or industrial targets; all were destroyed with low (though not negligible) loss of French civilian life. Four of these raids were virtuoso operations carried out by the élite 617 Squadron (the Dam Busters) with a precision beyond the capability of most aircrews.

Legitimate targets, high collateral damage

Although the overall effectiveness of the Transportation Plan has been questioned, it is hard to imagine the Allies not attacking rail targets – the main channel for German reinforcements – in the weeks before D-Day. But big rail centres, such as Sotteville near Rouen or Fives outside Lille, were almost invariably surrounded by railwaymen's housing, and civilians suffered accordingly.

Similar examples abound in relation to other types of target. Attacks on Le Creusot failed to do major damage to the heavy engineering works there, but wrecked workers' housing and a hospital; the heavy American raids against industrial targets in Nantes in September 1943 took a hitherto unprecedented toll of casualties; the bombing of Le Havre in September 1944, while an obvious means to dislodge a well dug-in German garrison, left the town 80% bomb-damaged and killed over 2,000 French civilians.

Ill-conceived raids

A third category of raids, finally, was ill-conceived from the start. The attacks on Lorient and Saint-Nazaire in 1943 left the towns destroyed but the submarine pens intact (as they remain to this day); a memo from Harris referred to the 'futility' of a policy which he felt had been imposed on Bomber Command by the Admiralty. There is no evidence that the attacks on 'choke points' on the eve of D-Day did more than destroy small Norman towns and villages. Panzers, it was found, could go round the wrecked target areas.

Photographic reconnaissance

Preparations for D-Day included an ambitious programme of aerial reconnaissance by the RAF, under which the whole of Belgium and Northern France were divided into sectors 1 degree of latitude by 1 degree of longitude. For each numbered sector, the reconnaissance programme produced a thick file of 'tactical targets' including airfields, rail installations, roads and waterways, enemy headquarters, motor transport parks, ammunition and fuel dumps, coastal defences, electric power installations, port areas, and industrial plants. The dossiers were held by the Army and Navy as well as the RAF. Samples for the Le Havre file are exhibited here.
RAF Reconnaissance produced a series of Tactical targets files for each of 37 sectors in Belgium and Northern France. The level of detail is shown by the page for the centre and port area of Le Havre. © Crown Copyright. Courtesy The National Archives, AIR40.1286.

Over France as over Germany, the RAF was meticulous about preparing reconnaissance images of all targets before, during and after raids. Exhibits here cover raids of September 1944 which created, in
the words of the Immediate Interpretation Report, 'an area of complete devastation' in the centre of Le Havre.

On 5 September 1944, 335 aircraft from RAF Bomber Command dropped 1,882 tons of bombs on the centre of Le Havre, aiming at a 'troop concentration' that was not there. Routine reconnaissance photos recorded the raid. 'TI's' are Target Indicators.

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**Propaganda from the air**

Allied bombers did not only drop bombs. According to Tim Brooks (British Propaganda to France, 1940–1944: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), France received some received 676 million leaflets from the air – nearly 45 per cent of the total British leafleting effort. A four-page 'newspaper', Le Courrier de l'Air, 'delivered by your friends in the RAF', accounted for much of this; a similar American publication, L’Amérique en Guerre, was dropped by the US 8th Air Force.
‘The Renault factories were working for the Germans; the Renault factories were hit.’ Leaflet produced by the British Political Warfare Executive and dropped over France after the RAF raid on Renault in March 1942.

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Leaflets offered general war news, with Soviet victories prominently featured, affirmed the unity of the ‘Big Three’ Allied powers, and gave an upbeat presentation of the tortuous affairs of the Free French. A special place was reserved for the bombing war against Germany, with a pictorial issue devoted to 617 Squadron’s attacks on the Ruhr dams in May 1943. A little more rarely, the leaflets mentioned Allied attacks on France, often to point out that the targets were French factories working for the Germans. Finally, the leaflets carried practical information: BBC frequencies appeared in every issue of *Le Courrier de l’Air*, and the French were urged to evacuate the coastal zones already subjected to restricted access by the Germans. *L’Amérique en Guerre* even advised the French to stay away from a named list of possible targets across France.

On the eve of D-Day, towns and villages across Normandy were invited by Allied leaflets to ‘leave this town’. Tragically, most civilians saw their own localities as of no strategic importance, and thought that the warnings were meant for someone else.
'What the RAF is aiming at in France.' The first Courrier de l'Air after the German invasion of the USSR, on 3 July 1941, highlights 'Circus' operations over northern France, and stresses that they help draw the Luftwaffe away from Russia.

_Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/2._

'Imposed by Hitler, Laval takes power'. A less than flattering profile of Pierre Laval, in the Courrier de l’Air of early May 1942, is juxtaposed with claims that Allies attacks on French territory are aimed at Germany’s war effort, and are effective.

_Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/2._

'Leave the forbidden zones!' Late in 1942, the Courrier de l’Air told French civilians to evacuate the restricted coastal areas as defined by the occupying Germans. This was the prelude to the bombing offensive on the Biscay ports.

_Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/2._

'The Allied offensive against the railways.' This article from Le Courrier de l’Air, in September 1943, made an explicit link between shortages of locomotives and rolling stock in Germany, and raids on rail workshops and locomotive works in France.

_Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/2._
'To the inhabitants of this town.' The last warning: this leaflet, dropped in Normandy on the eve of the D-Day landings, made no reference to a specific locality and was ignored by most people who read it. 

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, FN61/2.

'Towards the final assault': early in April 1944, Le Courrier de l'Air announced the start of the 'Transportation Plan' – but remained silent on civilian casualties. 

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/2.

Issue 74 of L'Amérique en Guerre, dropped early in November 1943, inspired a Vichy imitation, closely following the original – and steeped in anti-semitism.

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/1.
Issue 74 of L’Amérique en Guerre, dropped early in November 1943, inspired a Vichy imitation, closely following the original – and steeped in anti-semitism.

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/1.

‘Happy Birthday!’ In August 1943, L’Amérique en Guerre invited its readers to celebrate the first anniversary of the first raid on French territory by the US 8th Air Force.

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, PA/1.

THE FRENCH STATE AND BOMBING, 1940-1945

After the signature of an armistice with Nazi Germany on 22 June 1940, the common assumption was that the war was practically over. A new authoritarian and pro-German regime, installed at the spa town of Vichy on 10 July under the supreme authority of Marshal Philippe Pétain, scaled down
France's civil defence programme; indeed, some of the pre-war trenches were filled in, and many others left unmaintained.

Not for long. Britain's determination to continue the war, and to inflict French casualties if necessary, was proved by the attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 July, by sorties against German airfields in France, and, in September, by heavy raids on France's Channel ports.

The Vichy government based such legitimacy as it had on its claim to be protecting the French from the worst effects of the war. With the intensification of British, then Allied, air raids from 1941 onwards, it was obliged to renew and extend civil defence measures. It continued to do so right up until the regime's collapse in August 1944.

Air raids were also a welcome propaganda opportunity for Vichy. After each major attack, the official media – radio, cinema newsreels, newspapers, and posters – united to accuse the Allies of actively seeking the destruction, not of German targets, but of French cities, industries, and civilians.

Government and civil defence

The legal and administrative structures for civil defence inherited from the pre-1940 Third Republic were broadly maintained under Vichy, with prefects and mayors playing a key role at the grass roots. The biggest single change at the top was the move of civil defence back from the Defence Ministry to the Interior Ministry, in April 1942, just before Pierre Laval’s return to head the Vichy government. As Laval also became Interior Minister, civil defence once again fell under the control of the leading government figure, as it had under Daladier in 1938. Early in 1943, Laval also created an ‘Interministerial Service for Protection against War Events’ (SIPEG), a body designed to co-ordinate the efforts of divisions across different ministries – civil defence, but also roads, transport, health, education, and refugees. In the wake of the Renault raid of March 1942, information-gathering procedures were also improved, and the Bulletin d’Information de la Défense Passive informed senior civil defence personnel at national and local levels, not only of casualty rates, but of different types of bombs used, the performance of different types of shelters, and of developments in civil defence organisation. Both the SIPEG and the Bulletin d’Information were kept on by the Liberation governments after the collapse of Vichy.

Some of the Vichy regime’s most notorious figures – Laval himself, but also police chief René Bousquet, or Joseph Darnand, Minister for the Maintenance of Order from January 1944 – played a sometimes crucial role in improving France’s civil defences. Civil defence was perhaps the least odious thing they did. Vichy-appointed prefects and mayors attempted to respond to local civil defence needs. Even the head of the SS and Gestapo in Paris from 1942, Carl Oberg, worried about the working conditions and morale of Paris firemen.

Shelters

Shelters: digging a ‘family trench’ in Avranches, summer 1944. Useless against a direct hit, this shelter would have protected its occupants against blast and splinters. Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.
Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.

Photo: Andrew Knapp
Vichy had inherited inadequate shelter provision from the previous regime, and faced obvious handicaps in developing it further. German demands on the economy meant that from 1941, vital raw materials such as steel, wood, and concrete, as well as labour, were all in short supply. An official report from January 1942 suggested that some form of shelter was available to 8 million civilians, and places for 420,000 more were underway. That left at least 8.5 million city-dwellers whose continued presence was considered ‘necessary’ without protection.

Several means were used to improve shelter provision within the constraints imposed by the Occupation. A form of cement was made with chalk; mayors in Le Havre, Toulon and elsewhere tunnelled into the soft rock on the slopes above their towns; and in 1944, householders were offered government grants to dig ‘family trenches’ in their own gardens, but without the framework of British-style Anderson shelter (some Norman householders left this very late, starting their digging on 6 June 1944). Though far from adequate, French shelter provision was better in 1944 than in 1940 and saved many lives: repeated civil defence reports stressed that most casualties occurred in the street or in unprotected buildings, not in shelters. These four photographs from the northern town of Lille show some of the variety of shelter provision devised.
Emergency services

The 1938 Law on the General Organisation of the Nation for Wartime envisaged the recruitment of civil defence teams from municipal workers, volunteers, civilian conscripts, and military sections. All were used to bring services more or less up to strength after 1940. In addition, specialised teams from the building industry – and on occasion from mines – were requisitioned for the delicate work of rubble clearance in the immediate aftermath of a raid, when trapped victims might still be saved. Youth volunteers, organised as the Équipes Nationales, worked alongside the regular teams; so too, on occasion, did the notorious Vichy Milice. In naval ports such as Brest or Toulon, firemen from the navy supplemented the civilian fire teams.
Transporting the wounded. These five pictures show the job being done by regular civil defence workers, by nuns, and (according to the caption) by young fascists of the National-Revolutionary Youth.

Many emergency teams were woefully ill-equipped, lacking uniforms (armbands often had to do), helmets, and even basic tools like picks and shovels in many cases. Availability of fire engines and medical supplies also fell short of demand. Really big raids – as on Lorient in January 1943, or Rouen in April and May 1944, or Caen in June 1944, or Le Havre in September – could still overwhelm the emergency services. Accounts from Nantes indicate that some members of the police force, traumatised by what they had seen, disappeared home to their villages, or drank themselves silly. Yet in no major town did emergency services collapse for a long period.
Trapped victims. The immediate task of civil defence teams after a raid (here, on the Paris suburbs, probably in May 1944) was to dig out the living or, when this could not be done immediately, to pump fresh air to them.
Collection BDIC-MHC (photo DNP). Tous droits réservés.

A notable innovation, from 1943, were the two 'SIPEG trains'. Fully equipped with emergency supplies, medical and social teams, a kitchen, operating theatres, a maternity suite, and berths for the wounded, these were expected to rush to the site of a raid from bases in Paris and Lyon and provide speedy help. Smaller railbus units, with up to 70 berths, were intended to evacuate the wounded. Neither worked fully as planned, however. They were too small to provide more than complementary cover for a really big raid; railways themselves were often bombed, preventing access to city centres; and one of the SIPEG trains was itself wrecked in the raid on Lyon of 26 May 1944. Nevertheless, the trains did make some contribution after the bombing of Le Creusot in June 1943, Le Portel the following September, or Rouen in April 1944. They also served as a propaganda tool, as the newsreels show.

Institut National de l'Audiovisuel links (France-Actualités newsreels produced under the Vichy regime): the SIPEG train, 1944 (three extracts):
http://www.ina.fr/recherche/recherche?search=SIPEG&vue=Video

Evacuation of school-age children

Unlike Great Britain, France had no centralised scheme for removing children from areas threatened by bombing; yet very many thousands of French children spent time away from home during the
war, sometimes with school friends or siblings, often sent alone, in order to escape the Allied bombs.

Before the war, plans were made to evacuate non-essential persons, and especially children, from 21 départements considered to be at risk, as well as from France's three biggest cities, Paris, Lyon and Marseille. Some plans involved detailed rail timetables. But it was not always clear how evacuees were to be looked after; organisers often relied on town-dwellers making use of rural relatives for accommodation. Of the 2 million or so people, mostly children, evacuated in September 1939, most were back home within two months. This initial evacuation had gone badly for many children with no relatives to go to. Those from the western Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt found themselves in ill-equipped seaside camps and villages, sleeping on straw and with inadequate facilities. It is unsurprising, then, that parents soon retrieved them. By early 1940, France’s Higher War Council had drawn its own conclusions and drastically scaled down evacuation plans. The negative experience of 1939 was compounded by the traumatic mass exodus of May-June 1940, which saw between 6 and 10 million people take to the roads in an attempt to escape the advancing Germans. This, above all, gave evacuation a bad reputation in France; in April 1941, the Défense Passive directorate considered that ‘large-scale or widespread population movements’ had been ‘condemned by the experience of war’, and that future plans should assume that the population would stay put.

At the same time, however, the growing RAF bombing offensive over France pressed policy-makers in the opposite direction, especially in the most affected localities. In autumn 1941, for example, schools in Brest remained closed to encourage parents to send their children away; yet evacuation was still voluntary in principle, as the local German authorities forbade the mayor to make it compulsory. After the area bombing of nearby Lorient in January 1943, the authorities in Brest, fearing that their town would be next, stepped up the pressure: ration cards were withdrawn from all economically ‘useless’ parts of the population, children under 14 included, and convoys began leaving the town, taking citizens to designated reception départements of the Loir-et-Cher and the Sarthe.

Following the Renault raid of March 1942, residential areas near potential targets across Occupied France were labelled ‘threatened zones’; all school age children were supposed to leave them. Again, the authorities favoured family solutions. But some official evacuation did take place. It was run locally by education and/or refugee services in each département, as well as by municipalities; there were also many independent initiatives run by charities, religious groups, political organisations and even trade unions. Some children were put up by strangers in private homes, such as those sent from Brest to Lyon, although more were housed collectively in castles, holiday camps and boarding schools. In November 1943, France’s Director for Refugees reported that 150,000 schoolchildren had been evacuated, with more being taken by bus or rail to the countryside every week. This figure was probably an underestimate that did not take into account small-scale local initiatives.
Nevertheless, an effective nationwide evacuation scheme faced four main obstacles. In the first place, the distinct between targets and safe areas was changing and unpredictable. Most of Normandy, for example, was seen as relatively safe – until it became a battleground in June 1944.

The second problem was parents. The thought of sending a child away was fraught with anxiety, particularly as reception areas were usually quite distant and transport disrupted. While the authorities emphasised the health benefits for children of a stay in the country, poorer families feared that the loss of ration cards if children left home would have a devastating effect on the family food budget. Parents were worried about the care children would receive at the hands of strangers. Children’s health could affect their chance of being accepted on evacuation schemes. In practice, this was more likely to affect poorer families. The third obstacle was the Germans. France’s national territory was traversed by several demarcation lines – between the occupied North and the ‘free’ South, but also between the coastal zone and the rest of the country, for example – which hindered any possible nationwide evacuation plan. The occupiers also prevented citizens leaving threatened towns in the areas where they had direct military control. In some places they also censored public discussion about evacuation. They also knew that ordering evacuation would send a dangerous message that Allied air raids were beyond the control of German anti-aircraft defences.

Retaining the population provided a wealth of opportunities for anti-Allied German and collaborationist propaganda. Large scale population movement was difficult to administer and potentially threatening to internal security. The final obstacle was the French government. A coherent national policy emanating from Vichy might have helped promote evacuation; but policy evolution was slow and ad hoc, reacting to rather than anticipating events. Not surprisingly, therefore, children were always present, albeit often in diminished numbers, in towns subjected to air raids.
The role of the Germans

From 1940, the occupying German forces were in charge of the ‘active’ defence of France – anti-aircraft guns and fighters. A brief drive in 1943 to recruit French troops to man rail-borne anti-aircraft batteries fizzled out owing to demoralisation among the French and mistrust of them by the Germans. At the same time, after the German take-over of the southern zone of France in November 1942, and the consequent opening-up of this area to Allied raids, French recruits joined an observer corps and worked closely with the Germans; but by the summer of 1944 this group too was melting away thanks to attacks by the Resistance on isolated look-out stations, and desertions by the men.

Towards civil defence, the occupiers’ approach was erratic. At times they sought full control over civil defence policy across the whole country, in order to ensure the implementation of their priorities – protection for their own forces and for French personnel working directly for them. In practice, however, manpower considerations led them to leave the job to the French, though not without trying to supervise them at all levels. The Germans were similarly unpredictable in relation to evacuation, often discouraging it in zones (for example Brest in 1941-2) where the French authorities sought to promote it, but enforcing it when it suited their own military priorities. Aside from the brutal emptying and destruction of the Vieux Port area of Marseille in January 1943, the Germans cleared several quarters of Le Havre in 1942-3, and ordered the evacuation of the Mediterranean coastal area early in 1944.
Emergency relief: a Red Cross canteen for bombed-out families in the Paris suburbs.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.

Official mourning: a poster following the March 1942 attack on Renault's Billancourt plant.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.
Genuine civil defence co-operation between Germans and French, especially during raids, was not unknown: the Germans lent firemen and their equipment in Nantes in September 1943, for example, and at times allowed civilians to share their shelters. But competition for scarce resources was more frequent. Mayors in Normandy repeatedly complained of building new shelters for civilians only to see them requisitioned by the German armed forces. Even without that, the enormous German appetite for money, raw materials, and labour were a constant pressure against adequate provision for French civilians. By June 1944, air raid victims in Rennes were being buried in shrouds because the occupying army had requisitioned all the available coffins.

Funerals: Rennes, March 1943.

Collection BDIC-MHC (Agence Fulgur). Tous droits réservés.

Emergency relief

Few plans had been made for assisting bombed-out individuals and families. Again, the Vichy authorities were obliged to be seen to do something, but laboured under severe constraints, with payments to Germany absorbing about half the state budget.

Significantly, one carriage on each SIPEG train was devoted to 'Administration', reflecting a crucial priority for the bombed-out – getting the documents needed to make a first claim. The carte de sinistré (or de-housed person's card) and the carte de réfugié were the indispensable basic documents opening the way to direct state payments. These included one-off sums to replace clothing and furniture lost in air raids, and regular monthly allocations for refugees. These were paid as of right, but were severely means-tested: a common complaint was that the maximum income allowed to claim a refugee’s allowance was below what almost any manual worker could earn. They were also complex to administer. Many bombed-out households would also depend on para-public or charitable organisations of various types.
Emergency relief: the Vichy government equipped two relief trains to bring medical assistance, food aid, clothes and a claims processing office to air raid victims. Though often hampered by damage to the rail network, the trains proved their usefulness on several occasions - and were also intended to fulfill a propaganda function. The train here is seen bringing relief to Le Creusot in June 1943.

Propaganda

Air raids offered Vichy propagandists excellent opportunities to represent both the wickedness of the Allies and the regime’s commitment to help French victims of war.

The message

The main message of Vichy’s propaganda on air raids was fivefold, though usually only two or three components would appear in a single item.

- **Anglophobia** The Allies, it was claimed, were France’s ancestral enemy; they had burnt Joan of Arc in Rouen, forced Napoleon into exile, betrayed France during the campaign of 1940, and destroyed the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir. Air raids were set in this long-term context.

- **Civilians as targets.** The existence of German military objectives on French soil was either omitted or minimised in propaganda statements. Instead, they claimed that French civilians and the French economy were the real targets of raids.

- **‘Anglo-Saxon’ economic domination.** The Alliance bombed France because a weak France, it was argued, would open the way to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ economic domination of Europe.

- **Anti-semitism.** Vichy presented the continuation of the war after 1940 as due to the actions of Jewish businesses seeking a quick profit or Jewish communists seeking world domination from
Moscow. This alliance between Bolsheviks and capitalists was no more explained by Vichy than it was by Nazi Germany.

- **The regime as comforter and protector.** Marshal Pétain’s broader claim to bring help and comfort to the French people was backed up by a number of well-publicised visits to bombed localities, either by the Marshal himself or at least by his personal emissary Colonel Bonhomme. In his willingness to undertake visits, Pétain has more in common with the British authorities, including Churchill and the King and Queen, than with Hitler and Mussolini, neither of whom cared to be identified with the misfortunes they had brought on their countries. News features also stressed the role of the civil defence services and para-public bodies like the Secours National or the Comité Ouvrier de Secours Immédiat. The SIPEG train, finally, was the emblem of modern, efficient, rapid and practical assistance after raids.
‘The British started it’: a leaflet claims that the British first bombed civilian populations.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.

‘Thanks to the British – our stations of the Cross’: a French soldier is borne down by the weight of a cross, apparently forced upon him by the British. The burning of Joan of Arc, and Napoleon’s exile in St Helena, serve as reminders of British perfidy.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.

‘Murderers always return to the scene of their crime’: a poster links the bombing of Rouen with the burning of Joan of Arc by the British in the same city.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.

‘Cowards! – France will not forget!’ The simplest French poster against the bombing, with the Parisian basilica of Sacré Coeur in the background.

Collection BDIC-MHC . Tous droits réservés.
The media

With all the media closely controlled by the Vichy censorship services and by the German Propaganda-Staffel in Paris, there was no shortage of methods to project the Vichy message.

- **‘Live’ events.** Visits by Pétain or other dignitaries of the regime to bombed towns were well covered by the media but also of direct importance in the localities themselves. Funerals following big raids were carefully choreographed public events, in which leading Church figures like the cardinal-archbishops of Paris (Suhard) and Lyon (Gerlier) invoked divine authority to condemn bombing.

- **Cinema newsreels.** *France-Actualités*, run from 1942 by Vichy under German supervision (and with an agreement to use shots from German newsreels) was the main source of visual information about bombing for the French public. It was characterised above all by its presentation of the French as the innocent martyrs of a senseless and savage enemy.

- **Newspapers and magazines.** The print media were submitted to daily guidelines by the censorship offices. On 14 March 1943, for example, they were obliged to carry a banner headline ‘After the Anglo-American aggression against Rennes’, to show the ‘tragic aspect’ of Rouen after a recent Allied raid, to relate Colonel Bonhomme’s recent visits to bombed towns, and to quote from Josef Goebbels’s speech covering, among other topics, air raids. The following 7 April, the quotation of specified phrases from a speech by Finance Minister Pierre Cathala on the recent raids on the Paris suburbs was required. Weekly papers like *L’Illustration* could back up the message with generous photographic coverage.

- **Radio.** Vichy-controlled radio stations carried commentaries alongside their regular news items. The star radio performer as the heaviest Allied raids got under way in Spring 1944 was the Information Minister himself, Philippe Henriot, who had a daily commentary slot.

- **Brochures.** In 1943 the Information Ministry began to commission a series of illustrated magazine-style brochures called ‘Nos villes dans la tourmente’ and covering some 20 heavily-bombed towns and cities. Most were printed in 25,000 copies and followed a standard formula: a presentation of the historic pre-war locality, followed by an account of the raid, followed (if possible) by depictions of Pétain, or the SIPEG train, or both, arriving to bring succour and comfort to the victims. Quotations from the French and the international press were inserted to illustrate both the barbarity of the deed and the cynicism of the Allies.

- **Posters.** The posters that appeared on French walls in the aftermath of a raid engaged some of France’s ablest designers, capable of linking at a single glance the effects of bombing with Britain’s past misdeeds towards France and the French.

Did the propaganda work? Pétain’s appearances in bombed towns certainly drew big and supportive crowds. Henriot’s broadcasts were judged so dangerous by the Resistance that they organised a successful assassination attempt against him on 28 June 1944. The theme of economic warfare against France continues to appear in personal accounts 65 years after the end of the war, probably because attacks on Anglo-American capitalism struck chords on the French Left as well as among Vichy supporters.
That aside, there is little sign that propaganda had much lasting effect. Reports on public opinion from Vichy’s prefects to the Interior Ministry told a fairly consistent story: people sought their information from the BBC and (further south) from Swiss radio, which enjoyed greater credibility than French media of whatever type. Anger at British and American raids could certainly flare up in bombed localities, especially after the intensification of raids from 1943 on, but it rarely lasted, and did not translate into positive support for Vichy, still less for the Germans.

**THE ALLIED BOMBING OF FRANCE: EFFECTS**

Bombing rarely achieves its objectives with speed, certainty, or completeness. Attacks on the Channel ports in 1940 were part of a wider effort to stop a German invasion of Britain; raids on industrial targets one slice of the broader offensive against the German economy. Destroying the Biscay ports made (at best) a small contribution to the Allies’ effort in the Battle of the Atlantic. The Transportation Plan hindered but did not halt the movement of German troops and armour across France. The battle against Germany’s V-weapons was begun by bombing but only completed by the liberation of the ground from which they were launched.

*How it was: two postcards of the Bassin du Commerce in pre-war Le Havre, with the theatre at the western end.*

*Havre postcards: Courtesy of the Archives Municipales du Havre (Tous Droits réservés).*
Three postcards of the port of Le Havre after the raids of September 1944. Courtesy of the Archives Municipales du Havre (Collection Fernez). (Tous Droits réservés).
On the French, however, the effects of bombing were immediate and terrible: the killing and wounding of civilians and the destruction of the places where they lived and worked.

**THE HUMAN COST**

**Deaths: the individuals**

Each air raid victim was an individual. Most died more or less horribly. Fires burnt people alive; falling buildings crushed them; collapsing shelters smothered them; bomb blast tore them limb from limb, or burst their lungs, leaving them apparently unscarred but still quite dead; water from burst mains seeped into blocked cellars and drowned their inmates. Most left parents or spouses or children or siblings, some of whom watched them die, to mourn them – and in some cases to write of their experiences in the most poignant terms.

Following an American raid on 8 March 1943, the Rennes police drew up a routine tally, now kept in the Departmental Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine (502/W4/19). Its equivalents can be found in archives across France. It is a list of 220 victims as they lay in their numbered coffins. One hundred and ninety-seven of them were identified; but it is the unnamed occupants of the remaining 23 coffins, briefly recorded against possible future enquiries, who underline the human cost of a catastrophe typical of those visited on French towns.

185 Child, 4-5 years old

186 Young man, white metal ring
187 Married woman aged 35-40
188 Girl, aged 15-16, dark hair
189 Medium-sized man, blue striped shirt, not married
190 Well-built woman, naked, brown hair, about 40
191 Carbonised body of a man, found at l'Économique shop
192 Carbonised body of a man, found at l'Économique shop
193 Man, 60, well-built, grey moustache, small mouche
194 Fairly large man, age unknown, shirt with small check pattern
195 Man with white collared shirt, tie with grey stripes
196 Well-built elderly woman, carrying a sailor's beret as a keepsake in her corsage
197 Woman's head, found in rue Plelo
198 Woman's body, found in the café on the corner of Blvd. de la Liberté and rue au Duc
199 Body of a woman, apparently well-off
200 Boy, aged 4-5, dressed in home-made navy-blue woollen suit
201 Elderly man 60-65, blonde moustache, khaki shirt
202 Headless man – brown corduroy trousers, light laced boots
203 Girl, 17-22, damaged incisor
204 Very well-built man, almost naked, disfigured
205 Child, 5-6, possibly Claude Guillotel
206 Coffin contains human remains found in rue Lucien Decombe
207 Coffin contains human remains found in l'Économique

**Dead and wounded: the numbers**

The French administration under the wartime Vichy regime took pains to record details of each raid: mayors and police departments reported to prefects, who in turn reported to the Interior Ministry, which published a confidential national bulletin (the *Bulletin d'Information de la Défense Passive*) about every two months from spring 1942 onwards. The system only began to break down under the pressure of events in August 1944.

Nevertheless, a precise body count cannot be established for France. Not all victims could be identified; official records of residents, at a time of false papers and conscripted labour moving in and out of France, could never be fully accurate; record-keeping broke down before the raids ended;
and in ground combat zones, victims of bombing could not always be distinguished from those of shelling.

The immediate post-war figures, compiled from post-raid reports filed by French mayors and prefects, indicated a death toll from bombing of 53,601, but stressed that this figure was a minimum. The main advantage of these figures is that they give year-on-year totals. But they do not include the full range of 1944 raids, some on major targets like Le Havre or Strasbourg.

### Raids and deaths from bombing in France, 1940-45: the postwar figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Air raids</th>
<th>Civilian deaths</th>
<th>Civilians injured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>As % of total No.</td>
<td>As % of total No.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>210*</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3,543*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1,357</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2,579</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>788</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>7,482</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>37,128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>9,436</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>53,601</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Figures include victims of German raids. Victims of Allied raids only were 292 dead and 636 wounded.

**Source:** Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction de la Défense Passive, *et de la Protection contre l'Incendie*, no. 27 (1945).

The omissions from the BIDP table give credibility to the official, and slightly higher, total of 56,896 published in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française* on 26 May 1948. Eddy Florentin, in *Quand les Alliés bombardaient la France* (Paris: Perrin, 1997), gives a figure of 67,078 deaths but cites no source. The most detailed regional research on the question, undertaken from the Centre de Recherches en Histoire Quantitative at Caen, suggest that the older, and lower, figures are broadly accurate (cf. Bernard Garnier, and Michel Pigenet, *Les victimes civiles des bombardements en Normandie* (Caen: La Mandragore, 1997)). A rough figure of 57,000 civilian deaths from bombing across France therefore appears the best estimate in the current state of our knowledge. The total is very unlikely to be less.

**Regional totals**
Probably one-third of the deaths occurred in Normandy in the spring and summer of 1944, with Caen and Le Havre sustaining some 2,000 victims each, Rouen some 1,800, Lisieux nearly 800 and St-Lô 500 (though the greatest proportional loss was in the village of Évrecy, which lost 130 of its 430 inhabitants). But no region was spared. In absolute terms, the single most deadly Allied raid of the war occurred in Marseille on 27 May 1944, when an attack by the US Fifteenth Air Force claimed at least 1,831 victims.
Le Havre, Winter 1944-45. A report by H. Holbek, a Swedish Quaker visitor to Le Havre, described popular feelings there in November 1944. ‘One notices a sense of bitterness towards the British, a profound chagrin and disappointment, in Le Havre. The city’s life was always turned towards England […] No-one complained about the 136 earlier raids, whose military necessity was acknowledged. The last one was different: there were no Germans in the area destroyed, no military objectives, no road crossings: nothing that could explain it. Even if they don’t understand the raid, they would accept it if they felt a little looked after. The British radio promised long ago that aid would come as soon as the country was liberated. But as time passes, the Allied authorities (referred to more and more as the Occupying authorities) do nothing. […] At present, 20,000 people are sleeping on the ground without blankets.’ (The National Archives, FO 371/49071/261: ‘Conditions in Normandy : Quaker’s observations on relief measures.’ Courtesy of Archives Municipales du Havre (Collection Fernez). Tous droits réservés.

Comparisons: France, UK, Germany

France probably suffered slightly fewer victims than the 60,595 recorded as killed in the UK between 1940 and 1945, despite receiving nearly eight times the tonnage of bombs. To put it another way, while it took about 1.2 tons of bombs to kill a British victim, it took about 10 tons to kill a French one.

An obvious reason for this is that the Allies were not trying to kill French civilians. About a fifth of their bombs were dropped on V-weapon sites, situated in rural areas where civilian casualties were slight. The relatively small proportion of incendiary bombs may also have contributed. Warnings to civilians, and care in the planning and execution of raids, should not be discounted, even though their effects were often limited.

Another contrast is with Germany. Both Hamburg, in 1943, and Le Havre, in 1944, received some 9,000 Allied bombs in the space of a week, and both suffered cruel material devastation. But whereas in Hamburg, over 40,000 civilians lost their lives, in Le Havre the death toll was ‘only’ 2,053, thanks to a combination of evacuation, air raid precautions, and Bomber Command’s more limited use of incendiaries.
Only one-fifth of bombs dropped by Bomber Command's on Le Creusot on 19/20 June 1943 hit the industrial targets there. A hospital was among the other buildings damaged.

Collection BDIC-MHC. Photo NORA. Tous droits réservés.

Cities, towns, villages

The most conspicuously undamaged town in France was Paris: raids here, though not unknown, were rare and relatively light. But the capital was an exception. According to Danièle Voldman (La Reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), p.35), 36 out of France's 56 towns and cities of over 50,000 people were officially classed as war-damaged, having suffered levels of destruction of at least 30 per cent. Allied bombing was the chief cause of this, though not the only one. As the list below shows, no major region of France was spared.

Northern France: Amiens, Boulogne, Calais, Lille

Brittany: Brest, Rennes

Normandy and neighbouring regions: Angers, Caen, Le Havre, Le Mans, Rouen

Paris suburbs: Argenteuil, Asnières, Boulogne-Billancourt, Courbevoie, St-Ouen

Central France: Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Lyon, Orléans, St-Étienne

Eastern France: Nancy, Metz, Mulhouse, Reims, Strasbourg, Troyes

Loire Valley: Nantes, Tours
South-Western France: Béziers, Toulouse

South-Eastern France: Marseilles, Nice, Toulon.

The damage was particularly intense in Normandy: 82 per cent of Le Havre was damaged or destroyed, 73 per cent of Caen, 42 per cent of Rouen, as well as 77 per cent of the smaller town of Saint-Lô, and 75 per cent of Lisieux. The ports of Brest and Boulogne, as well as Lorient and Saint-Nazaire – suffered destruction in excess of 80 per cent. Again according to Voldman, between 10 and 15 per cent of France's total stock of 12 million housing units were destroyed.


*Photo RNP. Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.*
Rouen, spring 1944. The space in front of the cathedral was levelled after fires broke out during the campaign of 1940. Allied raids in spring 1944, aimed at bridges and rail installations, set light to the cathedral itself, though the fire was put out. The historic Palais de Justice was another casualty.

Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.

Survivors of raids still suffered materially from the bombing. In Nantes, some 60,000 people were reported bombed out after the raids of September 1943; in the small railway junction of Modane, on the route into Italy, three-quarters of the population – suffered the same fate; in Lyon, the figure was estimated at 25,000, in Marseille, at 30,000, after the big raids of May 1944. Post-war estimates ran to 1.2 million homes destroyed across France, leaving 2.2 million people to be re-housed. The task of reconstruction took a generation, during which tens of thousands of French families lived in all kinds of temporary accommodation, including Nissen huts vacated by Allied troops.

Bombing also wrecked the French economy, albeit temporarily. In 1945, industrial production was at half of pre-war levels, food production at 61 per cent. Some 15 per cent of industrial capacity was destroyed. Shortages were compounded by transport difficulties. Less than half of the rail network was working, and 5,000 bridges wrecked; most of France's docks and merchant shipping were destroyed. In August 1947, the daily bread ration was cut to 200 grammes, below its level under the Occupation. Infant mortality, which rose by 40 per cent in the immediate post-war period as a result of food shortages and poor housing, may be viewed as an indirect effect of bombing.
It was common for photographs of destruction by bombs to be sent as postcards. This shows the destruction of rail installations at Vire, in Normandy, by a raid on 6 June 1944.

Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.

The village of Dugny, north of Paris, was wrecked in a US 8th Air Force raid on Le Bourget airfield on 16 August 1943.

Photo Aujourd'hui. Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.
THE FRENCH PEOPLE AND BOMBING, 1940-1945

Part of the British ‘Blitz spirit’ was about demonstrating to a loathed attacker that the civilian population could ‘take it’. This was largely absent from France. For most of the French, the Allied air forces were not sent by an enemy intent on destroying their country. The Allies’ ultimate purpose, entailing the liberation of France from an oppressive occupying power, was shared by the French; their readiness to bomb military and industrial targets in France, broadly accepted in principle; but the large-scale death and destruction visited on the civilian population was, unsurprisingly, far less welcome. Yet it was just as necessary as in Britain to protect persons and property and to help bombed-out survivors.

The French therefore responded ambiguously to the Allied air offensive. Participating in civil defence, for example, whether simply by obeying black-out regulations or by joining a civil defence team, inevitably meant co-operating at some level with the Vichy authorities and quite possibly with the Germans too; the Vichy government, and the fascist movements in Paris, tried to turn any form of mobilisation to their own political advantage; but that did not turn all civil defence personnel into collaborators. Indeed, one of the largely untold stories about occupied France is that of the social solidarity, however imperfect, which could develop in the face of bombing.

Young bombed-out evacuees from Paris take the bus to the Château d’Hermonville, in the département of the Marne. The sponsoring organisation, the Comité Ouvrier de Secours Immédiat, was financed chiefly from the confiscation of Jewish-owned goods.

Collection BDIC-MHC. Tous droits réservés.
The Secours National had premises all over France, but they were not immune from bomb damage.

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Facing the bombs

Many of the French assumed that the armistice of 22 June had ended the war. Residents of the Channel ports soon discovered that it had not: for them, the usual questions associated with bombing, such as shelters and evacuation of children and non-essential persons, were posed from September 1940 at the latest. Other localities went largely undisturbed till 1944; others still were subjected to frequent overflights by Allied aircraft, and thus to air raid alerts, but were only attacked in 1943 or later. How you responded to bombing as a civilian therefore depended on how frequently, and in what ways, your village or town had been visited from the air.

A report prepared for the French General Staff in the last months of the war asserted that 'nine times out of ten, air raid victims are above all the victims of their own ignorance, their own panic, or their own indiscipline', and claimed that high casualties in Marseille were due to the population's Mediterranean 'insouciance'. The constant refrain of the Bulletin d'Information sur la Défense Passive was the high proportion of casualties found on the street, and the protection, however partial, available to those who used even the most rudimentary shelters.

Shelter discipline was often dearly bought. The first big raid on a town was almost invariably the most deadly. Nantes had had over 300 alerts before 16 September 1943, but fewer than ten raids, all of them light; 965 deaths for 385 tons of bombs dropped; on 23 September, 480 deaths for 310 tons. Nantes received more bombs in 1944 than in 1943, but suffered one-eighth the number of victims. The differences between first and subsequent major raids were comparable in Marseille, Toulon, or Lyon. Smaller towns could also be casual in their approach. At Condé-sur-Noireau, south of Caen, the mayor preferred not to distribute the Allies' warning leaflet (which did not name any
locality) for fear of spreading panic. Some residents started digging trenches on 6 June. Most of the town was destroyed in raids the following day, and the mayor, a doctor, died from wounds sustained while caring for the victims.

From 6 June 1944, the first and terrible bombardment of Caen took place, the town was burned. Our house was badly hit, the walls, the windows, the ceilings, everything blew apart. It was on 8 June that we left our dear house to go to the German shelter in the rue Isidor Pierre, but we were sent away because the general staff from the castle were settling in there. So, not knowing where to go, we went to the University, where we stayed eight days. Then after these eight quite peaceful days, we began to get frightened again because everything was burning and everything was a heap of ashes. But we didn’t stay long among the ruins because one morning Monsieur Maurot told us that everything was on fire nearby, so Papa went back to the house and found the car, which he parked in the Fleury Quarries. We were walled in there, you couldn't sleep very well, and we slept on wet straw, and it was there that our poor Mummy was killed.

Michèle Oudinet, ‘Débarquement de nos libérateurs les Anglais’, Témoignage écrit 14, Mémorial de Caen.

Courtesy Mémorial de Caen, TE14.

Large-scale evacuation to avoid air raids was also quite rare. The exodus of 1940 evoked fresh and negative memories of administrative chaos, the separation of families, and a return to homes looted
by Germans or criminals. Few wished to repeat the experience; nor did the government encourage it at first. Nevertheless, it gathered pace from 1942, with 150,000 schoolchildren evacuated, according to (probably conservative) official figures by November 1943. Heavy bombing led families to leave some towns precipitately, with or without official encouragement, even if only to localities a few miles away. Brest had already lost half its 68,000 inhabitants by February 1942; the population of the Lorient area fell from 80,000 to 12,000 in January 1943 (considerably limiting the death toll there). About 100,000 Nantais left their city after the September 1943 raids, though many came back. When Caen became a war zone in June 1944, some 20,000 people trekked some miles to shelter in the quarries surrounding the city (http://www.ouest-france.fr/actu/loisirsDet–Refugies-dans-les-carrières-pendant-la-guerre–_3723-962099_actu.Htm). They stayed there for weeks, living off supplies brought from home or taken from bombed railway trucks, or off the meat of animals killed in the fighting. But 20,000 residents of Caen still hung on in their own city.

Assistance during and after raids

Even without a discernible 'Blitz spirit', the French managed to maintain a significant level of civil defence manning as well as a diverse charitable infrastructure right through the war and occupation.

During raids: civil defence personnel

Among city-dwellers, between one in 30 and one in 120 had some civil defence role to play. The metropolitan département of the Seine, with Paris at its centre, disposed of some 42,000 for a total population of 5 million. Ratios in the provinces could be much higher. In Nantes, by April 1944, there were some 2,600 civil defence personnel for a pre-war population of about 200,000; in Lyon in September 1943, 8,500 for a population of 600,000; in Marseille, 22,000 for 900,000 inhabitants; in Lille, 4,370 for 200,000; in heavily-bombed Boulogne-sur-Mer 1,133 for a population of 50,000. Avignon and Caen, with pre-war populations amounting to 60,000 each, had 2,100 and 1,440 civil defence personnel respectively. This does not count voluntary bodies like the Équipes Nationales.

Civil defence personnel included municipal employees, military companies kept on in a civil defence capacity (the Bataillons de la Défense Passive), requisitioned men, and volunteers. But the latter group could attain a high proportion – as many as half in Nantes, for example. Joining a civil defence team had several attractions: it was paid, though not well; there was some provision for special rations; and it offered the possibility – though not the guarantee – of escaping labour conscription to Germany. At the work could be dirty, at times stomach-churning, and often dangerous: Nantes, for example, lost 22 of its civil defence personnel in action.

After the bombs: orchestrated charity

With state aid meagre and means-tested, bombed-out families also looked to a variety of charitable sources. This was a sector that combined the best and the worst, real solidarity with funding directly linked to the Holocaust. Major sources of charity included the following.

• The Secours National. Founded during World War 1 as a relief agency for the home front, the Secours National was revived in 1938 under the Daladier government and placed under the direct patronage of Pétain from 1940. It was a para-public relief organisation, funded in part by the government but not under direct government control and drawing on charitable donations too. In principle, it had a monopoly on the distribution of charitable donations raised by any organisation
for civilians within France, though it sometimes delegated this. The Secours National had more discretion on how it distributed aid than the state, and ideological considerations, linked to the government’s highly traditional ideas about the French family, might influence its decisions. The Secours National distributed money, but also aid in kind, chiefly food, bedding and clothing, to bombed-out individuals and families. Of its total budget of 4.25 billion francs in 1944, about one-third came from donations.

- **The Comité Ouvrier de Secours Immédiat (COSI).** Founded in 1942 after the raid on Renault’s Billancourt plant, the COSI worked independently of the Secours National to provide assistance in the wake of air raids. It also disposed of two refugee centres for children. The COSI was largely financed by Germany, out of proceeds from the confiscation of Jewish property. Its leading figures, both at the central and the local levels, came from Paris-based fascist organisations like the Rassemblement National Populaire and the Parti Populaire Français, which found the Vichy regime too luke-warm in its collaboration with the Nazis. These men were later found to have awarded themselves more than generous salaries and expenses.

- **Town adoptions.** A number of seriously bombed French towns and cities were 'adopted' by localities that had so far escaped air raids. Brest was the first such town; it was adopted by Lyon under an initiative that owed much to the Church, and notably to Cardinal Gerlier. Lorient was adopted by the département of Seine-et-Marne. Other adoptions followed, with the increasingly pressing encouragement of the Vichy authorities. At the minimum, the practice entailed the vote of a significant grant of money for air raid relief from the adopting locality. It would also, typically, offer a focus for charitable events of all kinds, such as sporting meetings or variety performances. Sometimes, too, the adopting localities would take in refugees. The system did, however, have obvious faults. Adopting localities might in turn be bombed and have to revise their priorities. Le Havre and Rouen were unfortunate enough to win adoptions, respectively, from Algiers and Oran – towns which fell under Allied control from November 1942.

- **Public subscriptions.** Any major bombardment led to a subscription for bombed-out families being launched by the local press. In Brittany, for example, 4.2 million francs – four times the amount of emergency aid allocated by central government – were collected for the residents of Nantes by January 1944; the Gaillac region also thoughtfully donated several hundred litres of wine. In Rennes in 1943, the average personal gift was 100 francs, but wealthy individuals could give as much as 25,000, and sporting and other associations raised comparable sums.

- **Prisoner-of-war contributions.** Most remarkably, gifts came from French workers in Germany and even from prisoners of war, the product of collections and the takings from performances in the camps. This appears to have been particularly common among groups of Breton prisoners, with Brest, Rennes and Nantes the major beneficiaries. The exchange rate of 20 francs to one reichsmark for once worked in France’s favour, with a number of Stalags sending gifts of 20,000 francs or more.

Every type of charity was orchestrated with a political purpose. The Vichy government sought to present the nation as united in the face of Allied aggression, the Paris-based fascists to highlight Vichy’s supposed failures and their own greater dynamism in bringing help to the needy. But the fuel of their ambitions was the generosity of the public, who proved remarkably willing, in a period of austerity, to make donations to relieve suffering and misfortune.
Friend or foe? How the French saw the bombers

There is little doubt that most of the French – at least if their localities were not directly hit – positively welcomed Allied raids in the first two-and-a-half years of the Occupation. The diarist Liliane Schroeder recorded feelings of ‘jubilation and enthusiasm’ as she watched the Boulogne-Billancourt raid from Paris on the night of 3 March 1942, and found the Parisians ‘unanimous’ in their approval of the raids in the following days. Jean Guéhenno, similarly, found that they ‘had difficulty hiding their jubilation.’ The graves of RAF pilots who died over France were covered in flowers, at night, by civilians. Quite simply, such a visible sign that Britain was still in the war, and capable of hitting targets linked to the Germans, held the promise of ultimate liberation.

Attitudes became more reserved, and in some cases hostile, from 1943. This is clear from both from police and prefects' reports and reports from the postal censors (who freely opened private letters under Vichy). There were three obvious reasons for this. First, the Allied air forces no longer offered the sole promise of Germany’s eventual defeat. Stalingrad, and to a lesser extent the Allied campaigns in North Africa and Italy, offered the prospect of victory against the Nazis on land. Second, the scope and frequency of Allied air raids intensified, with Lorient and Saint-Nazaire being almost wholly wrecked by the spring of 1943, and Nantes suffering unprecedented casualties, for France, six months later. Third, the entry of the United States into the war led to what was perceived as a new and more pitiless style of bombing. It was widely held that while the RAF tried hard to minimise civilian casualties, if necessary by taking risks and bombing low, the US Air Forces bombed in formation from 20,000 feet, and therefore indiscriminately. ‘It would help’, wrote René Massigli, the foreign affairs spokesman for de Gaulle's French National Liberation Committee, 'if our American friends could be taught British methods'.

French resentment at bombing rarely translated, however, into general anti-Allied – still less pro-German – sentiment. The hopes of Vichy's prefects, with almost each new raid in 1943-4, that the tide of opinion would turn, and the British War Cabinet’s serious fears on the same score, were unfulfilled. An obvious reason for this was that at the same time as the bombing intensified, the German occupation and the Vichy regime became steadily more intolerable. Worsening food shortages, round-ups of Jews, increasing brutality towards Resistance suspects, and compulsory labour in Germany for young men all meant that unless you were a direct victim of a raid, the prospect of liberation seemed well worth the bombing that would precede it.

A good sign of continued acceptance of the bombing, despite everything, was the continued willingness of French Resistance networks to help downed Allied airmen escape. This was of material as well as moral importance to the Allies: it cost considerably more to train a bomber crew than to build the aircraft they flew in. Most estimates suggest that between 2,000 and 3,000 crew members got home from Belgium, Holland, and France thanks to local helpers, all of whom were risking their own lives. One French account by a civil defence volunteer, for example, recalls using his official status and helmet to spirit away an RAF airman whose aircraft had been brought down during the destruction of Lorient.

With the Liberation in 1944-5, resentment of the Allies was largely confined to the worst-hit areas. Even there, the sentiment was sorrow as much as anger. As the headline of Le Havre's first post-Liberation newspaper 'We awaited you with joy, we welcome you in mourning.'
Link to University of Reading's France under Allied Attack, 1940-1945 website: [http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/france-under-allied-air-attack/](http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/france-under-allied-air-attack/)

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