

CHAPTER 2

Aerial siege of the city of Barcelona: 16, 17 and 18 March 1938

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Bombing on the city of Barcelona on March 17, 1938 by the Italian Legionnaire Aviation.
A bomb hit a trilite truck on its way through the Gran Via (Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare de Roma).

In March 1938, the city of Barcelona was the target of showers of fire from the sky by the Italian Legionary Air Force based in Majorca.¹ Although the raids carried out on 16, 17 and 18 March 1938 were exceptional in the sense that there were many of them and an enormous amount of explosive was dropped, the Catalan capital was regularly bombed from the sea and the sky between February 1937 and January 1939 when Franco's troops entered the city. Nevertheless, the city was not singled out for special treatment. Throughout 1938, cities, towns and villages all over Catalonia were bombed by the Italian and German Fascist air forces that supported Franco: Barcelona, Badalona, Sant Adrià del Besos, Vilanova i la Geltrú, Sitges, Tortosa, Tarragona, Reus, Amposta, el Perelló, Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Granollers, Cambrils, L'Hospitalet de l'Infant, etc.²

The airstrikes on cities in the rearguard during the Spanish Civil War caused widespread international controversy and in April 1937 they were condemned by the United Nations although no serious attempts were made to stop them. The governments of England and France continued with their policy of non-intervention and looked the other way. A young girl from Barcelona, Pilar Dosaigües, wrote the following in her diary:

1 We borrow the expression "showers of fire" from Antoni Rovira i Virgili who used it in the article "Dues ciutats màrtirs", published in *La Humanitat* on 8 August 1938.

2 See Solé i Sabaté, J. M. and Villarroya, J. *Catalunya sota les bombes, 1936–1939*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat; 1996; Íñiguez, D. and Gesalí, D. *La guerra aèria a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Dalmau; 2012; Arnabat, R. and Íñiguez, D. *Atac i defensa de la rereguarda. Els bombardeigs franquistes a les comarques de Tarragona i les Terres de l'Ebre (1937–1939)*. Valls: Cossetània-URV; 2013; Gort, E. and Palomar, S. *Viure sota les bombes: els bombardeigs a Reus, 1937–1939*. Reus: Arxiu Municipal de Reus; 2010; Prat, J. and Pricot, J. *Bombes sobre Girona. La Defensa Passiva a la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Girona: Ajuntament de Girona; 2012; Arnabat, R., Íñiguez, D., Gesalí, D. and Cabezas, A. *Els bombardeigs franquistes sobre el Penedès, 1937–1939*. Vilafranca del Penedès: Institut d'Estudis Penedesencs; 2011.

[the Francoists] have a lot of foreign aircraft and ammunition, but nobody is helping us [the Republicans]. They [the army] are now resorting to 18-year-old boys. They've already been asked to join up. Everybody is very upset because we are losing a great deal of territory, but who knows? I am sure that victory will be ours. But when?³

The aerial bombings were part of the gradual implementation of the concepts of total and aerial war which radically changed the tactics and strategies of warfare. So it could be said that the First World War was the last "old" war and the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War the first "modern" wars.

Total war and aerial war

Aerial bombings were first used as a military tactic in the European colonies in the second decade of the 20th century: Italy bombed Tripoli and Abyssinia; France bombed Morocco and Syria; Spain bombed the Rif; Great Britain bombed Iraq, Burma and India; and Bulgaria and Greece also carried out air raids during the First Balkan War. However, despite the agreements of the Second Peace Conference of The Hague (1907), it was during the First World War (1914–1918) that the first bombs were dropped on European cities by German, French, English, Italian and Russian aircraft. Meanwhile, in Mexico Pancho Villa bombed the "huertistas" and the North Americans bombed Pancho Villa and his troops.⁴ The military tactics may have been new but they were used in "old" wars.

The first theories on total war and aerial war were advanced during the First World War. The German general Erich Ludendorff gave a clear definition of what he understood to be total war: "The whole country, all its men, women and children, are the workers or the victims of war", because "total war saves nothing, respects nothing" and "it will use all weapons, particularly the cruellest ones, which are the most efficient." According to Ludendorff, total war, "not only targets enemy armies, and military organisations and establishments, but uses bombs and propaganda to undermine the will and the force of the moral resistance of the civilian population."⁵

3 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario: hoy ha empezado la guerra*. Barcelona: Espasa Calpe; 2017. p.173–174.

4 Lindqvist, S. *Historia de los bombardeos*. Madrid: Turner; 2002. p. 4–19.

5 Ludendorff, E. *Der totale krieg*. München: Verlag; 1935. See Beckett, I.F.W. "Total War". In McInnes, C. and Sheffield, G.D., editors. *Warfare in Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*. London: Unwin Hyman;

It was also during the First World War that it was first suggested that power in the air and air warfare would be the key factor in deciding conflicts and the English mathematician Frederick W. Lanchester put forward his theories on saturation bombings.⁶ In 1916, the British general Jan Smuts wrote that it would not be long before aerial operations would so devastate enemy territory and the destruction of towns and cities would be on such a scale that they would become the main actions of warfare to which all other operations would be subordinate. Two years later, in 1918, the North-American colonel Billy Mitchel made similar claims: the time of land armies and navies had passed and air power was coming to the fore.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the Italian general Giulio Douhet clearly defined air warfare and strategic bombing as “an action of war that takes place far from the battlefield to strike, among other things, at the city” so “there are no longer any areas in which life can be led in complete safety and relative tranquillity” because “the battlefield now has no limitations” and “there is no longer any difference between combatants and non-combatants.”⁷ This theory was shared by Hugh Trenchard, the father of the RAF.

Spain was not unaware of these new theories on war. At the beginning of the 1920s the first director of the air arm of the Military Aeronautics Service and subsequent head of Franco’s Air Force, Alfredo Kindelán, gave a lecture in which he said that “a technically well-equipped air force with an offensive spirit, can engage in action at a considerable distance and in the very heart of enemy countries, weakening the rearguard and attacking major cities and industrial centres.”⁸

In the inter-war period, the advances made in military aeronautics led to the theories of total war and aerial war converging. The manufacture of large bomber planes that could transport large quantities of bombs relatively quickly over long distances paved the way to the possibility of strategic bombings. And this meant that military strategists could question the traditional division of war into the front (or battlefield) and the rearguard. From this point on, whenever

1988. p. 1–24; and Chickering, R. “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept”. In Boemeke, M.F., Chickering, R. and Förster, S., editors. *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999. p. 13–28.

6 Lanchester, F. W. *Aircraft in Warfare: The Dawn of the Fourth Arm*. London: Constable; 1916 [reprint: London: BiblioLife; 2009]; and Hearne, R. P. *Airships in peace and war*. London: John Lane; 1910.

7 Douhet, G. *El dominio del Aire*. Madrid: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Aeronáutica; 1987 [1921].

8 Kindelán, A. *Doctrina de la guerra aérea, características y modo de empleo*. In *Conferencias Teóricas: Primer curso para Jefes de unidades tácticas aéreas*. Madrid: Talleres Tipográficas Stampa; 192?. Vol. I; p. 34.

a country declared war on another, it had to be aware that the armed conflict would make the whole country its battlefield because both its population and its economy would become military targets. From the perspective of total war it was perfectly reasonable to attack the civil population and bring the enemy's economy to its knees.⁹

It was during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) that the new strategies of warfare were systematically applied for the first time and airstrikes against targets in cities in the rearguard and the civilians who lived there were “normalised”.¹⁰ Raids were no longer isolated events; rather they were constant, systematic and fully integrated into the strategy of total war, as the inhabitants of Durango, Gernika, Eibar, Madrid, Almeria, Valencia, Castelló, Sagunt, Santander, Águilas, Alicante, Alcoi, Cartagena, Albacete, Barcelona, Tarragona and Reus could vouch for.¹¹

During the Second World War, the concepts of total war and aerial war were taken to their ultimate consequences with the systematic bombing of European and Asian cities at considerable distances from the frontline. Clear examples of this are the well-known German bombings of London and other English cities – the Blitz – which killed 43,000, injured 100,000 and left 1,000,000 homeless,¹² and the less well-known allied bombings of 131 German towns and cities, from Dresden to Berlin, which killed 600,000 (most of whom

9 Davis Biddle, T. *Rhetoric and reality in air warfare: the evolution of British and American ideas about strategic bombing, 1914–1945*. Woodstock: Princeton University Press; 2002; and Pape, R.A. *Bombing to win. Air Power and Coercion in War*. Nueva York: Cornell University Press; 1996.

10 Chickering, R. “La Guerra Civil española en la era de la Guerra Total”. *Alcores*, 2007; 4:21–36; Mastorrilli, E. “Guerra Civile Spagnola, intervento italiano e guerra totale”. *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 2014; 6(3):68–86; and Morley, J.W., editor. *The China Quagmire: Japan's Expansion on the Asian Continent, 1933–1941 (Japan's Road to the Pacific War)*. Columbia: University Press; 1983.

11 Solé i Sabaté, J. M. *España en llamas: la guerra civil desde el aire*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy; 2003. For the bombing of Gernika, see Irujo, X. *El Gernika de Richthofen: un ensayo de bombardeo de terror*. Gernika-Lumo: Gernikako Bakearen Museoa Fundazioa; 2012; Patterson, I. *Guernica y la guerra total*. Madrid: Turner; 2008; Bernecker, W.L. *Cincuenta años de historiografía sobre el bombardeo de Gernika*. San Sebastián: Universidad del País Vasco; 1988; Momoitio, I. and Núñez, A.T., coordinators. *El bombardeo de Gernika y su repercusión internacional*. Gernika-Lumo: Fundación Museo de La Paz de Gernika; 2012; Cava, M^a. J. *et alii*. *Memoria colectiva del bombardeo de Gernika*. Bilbao-Gernika-Lumo: Gernika Gogoratzuz; 1996; Southwort, H. *La destrucción de Guernica: Periodismo, diplomacia, propaganda e historia*. Barcelona: Ibérica de ediciones y publicaciones; 1977; and *The crime of Guernica: we refuse to condone such atrocities by our silence*. New York: Spanish Information Bureau; [1937?]. For Durango, see Irazabal, J. *1937 martxoak 31 Durango 31 de marzo de 1937*. Abadiño: Gerediaga Elkarte; 2001.

12 Bungay, S. *La batalla de Inglaterra*. Barcelona: Ariel; 2008; and McKee, A. *La batalla de Inglaterra*. Madrid: Fermín Uriarte; 1966.

were civilians) and left 7,500,000 homeless.¹³ And, of course, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁴ In fact, all the conflicts in the second half of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st have been total wars and airstrikes targeting civilians have become the norm.

The new concepts of total war and aerial war made it necessary to rethink defence systems, particularly the strategies to defend cities in the rearguard and to protect their inhabitants. The English were the first to work on developing anti-air defences although they did so on the basis of the outdated principle that gave priority to defence against gas and not against high explosives. In 1924 the Air Raid Precautions Committee was set up in England, and in 1935 it became a Home Office department. Between 1935 and 1938 it published three issues, and 500,000 copies, of the series *Air Raid Precautions Handbook* for civilians.¹⁵

At the beginning of 1936, just before the start of the Spanish Civil War, the military engineers Sánchez-Tembleque, Gámpora and García Alós pointed out the dangers of future aerial war for the civilian population and suggested that anti-air defences needed to be organised for protection.

A new type of warfare has emerged that reaches the interior of a country with no need to breach the coastal or land defence systems, or defeat the armed forces. The army of the air, reinforced with the latest offence technology, has made the whole national territory a frontier, has created the air frontier and turned all the inhabitants of a country into combatants.¹⁶

13 Sebald, W.G. *Sobre la historia natural de la destrucción*. Barcelona: Anagrama; 2003 [1990]; Andersch, A. Weis, P. *On the natural history of destruction: with essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry and Peter Weiss/W.G. Sebald*. Londres: Penguin; 2004; Musgrove, F. *Dresde y los bombardeos británicos sobre Alemania*. Valladolid: AF Editores; 2005; Taylor, F. *Dresde: el bombardeo más controvertido de la Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy; 2005; Hastings, M. *Bomber Command*. London: Kindle Edition; 1999; and Friedrich, J. *El incendio. Alemania bajo los bombardeos, 1940–1945*. Madrid: Santillana; 2003.

14 *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Report of the British Mission to Japan*. London: Home Office and the Air Ministry; 1946; Hogan, M.J., editor. *Hiroshima in history and memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1996; and Weller, G. *Nagasaki: las crónicas destruidas por MacArthur*. Barcelona: Crítica; 2007.

15 Pons, J. "Presentació". In Pons, J. *Lliçons de Barcelona: informe britànic sobre el bombardeigs de la ciutat, 1938*. Barcelona: Fundació Carles Pi i Sunyer; 2004. p. 9–28.

16 Sánchez-Tembleque, L., Gámpora, J. and García Alós, J. *Defensa Antiaérea de las Poblaciones Civiles*. Segovia: Academia de Artillería e Ingenieros; 1936. p. 9.

Bombs from Majorca to Barcelona

In July 1936, the island of Majorca was taken by Franco's forces. Catalonia perceived this to be a threat although the central government did not. A Catalan expedition led by Colonel Albert Bayo was organised with the aim of winning back Majorca for the Republic.¹⁷ The expedition failed with tragic consequences for Catalonia and the Republican Mediterranean shoreline because the Italian Legionary Air Force used the aerodrome of Palma de Mallorca as a base for their Savoia S-81 and Savoia S-7 bombers while the aerodrome at Pollença became the base for the German Heinkel He-59 floatplanes and their Italian counterparts with Spanish pilots from the Brigada Hispana. The Italian and German aircraft based in Majorca were fully operative as from June 1937 and the two forces coordinated with each but often independently of the rest of Franco's aircraft based in the peninsula. Their objective was to control the air space over the Mediterranean and systematically bomb the shipping and the towns in coastal areas at little more than an hour's flying distance and at no great risk.¹⁸

The Fascist air forces had the support of Franco's espionage and information services, which provided intelligence on the targets to be bombed in Catalonia. The SIFNE (Servicio de Información de la Frontera Nordeste de España) had been functioning since 1936 with its base of operations in Biarritz and headed by leading members of the Catalan right wing. In February 1938 this service became part of the SIPM (Servicio de Información y Policía Militar).¹⁹

17 Cruells, M. *L'expedició a Mallorca: any 1936*. Barcelona: Editorial Juventud; 1971.

18 Grassia, E. *L'Aviazione Legionaria da bombardamento – Spagna 1936–1939*. Rome: IBN Editore; 2009; Emiliani, A. *La Aviación legionaria: España 1936-39*. Madrid: San Martin; 1974; Emiliani, A., Chergo, G.F., Vigna, A. *Spagna 1936-39: l'aviazione legionaria*. Milan: Intergest; 1973; Alcofar Nassaes, J.L. *La aviación Legionaria en la guerra española*. Barcelona: Editorial Euros; 1975; Rovighi, A. and Stefani, F., *La partecipazione italiana alla Guerra Civile Spagnola (1936–1939). Volume II. Documenti e Allegati*. Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Ufficio Storico; 1993; Emiliani, A. "Mille aeroplani italiani per la Spagna". In *Ebre 38. Revista Internacional de la Guerra Civil 1936–1939*, 2008, 3:65–69; Pedrali, F. *Guerra di Spagna e aviazione italiana*. Rome: Ufficio Storico. Aeronautica Militare Italiana; 1992; Reis, K. and Ring, H. *The Legion Condor. A History of the Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War*. West Chester: Schifer Military History; 1992; Permuy, R.A., O'Donnell, C. *As de Picas. La escuadrilla de hidros de la Legión Cónдор en la Guerra Civil Española, 1936–1939. La Luftwaffe en España 2*. London: Galland Books; 2008; and Schüler-Springorum, S. *La Guerra como aventura: La Legión Cónдор en la Guerra Civil española, 1936–1939*. Madrid: Alianza; 2014.

19 Bertrán i Musitu, J. *Experiencias de los servicios de información en el nordeste de España (SIFNE) durante la guerra*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe; 1940; and Soler, J.R. and López-Brea, F.J. *Soldados sin rostro. Los servicios de información, espionaje y criptografía en la Guerra Civil Española*. Barcelona: Inédita Eds.; 2008.

We should also bear in mind that as from autumn 1937, Barcelona became the functioning capital of the Spanish Republic. With 1,065,000 inhabitants and more than 250,000 refugees, it became the political centre of the Republic (the city was home to the Catalan government, the Republican government and the Basque government), and also the major city in military and economic terms. It was, therefore, the main target of the Italian and German air forces which supported Franco.

Between March 1937 and January 1939 the alarm was sounded on more than 400 occasions and 240 air raids partially or totally destroyed some 6,000 buildings, killed more than 2,750 people outright and injured more than 7,000.²⁰ Of course, the bombings disrupted daily life in Barcelona. They generated numerous material and immaterial dysfunctions because of the permanent anxiety about when the city would be targeted by another raid.

To fully comprehend the tragic horror of all the hours of endless anxiety you need to have been there and seen with absolute clarity that every minute might be the last of your life and, even worse, the last minute of the life of your loved ones. You need to have felt the serene and resplendent calm of the night torn asunder by the horrific crack of monstrously destructive bombs, while the nervous, epileptic shrillness of the anti-aircraft artillery responded exasperatingly in the sky crisscrossed with search lights.²¹

The defence of Barcelona

At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, most people were not aware of the human and material damage that could be caused by airstrikes on the cities in the rearguard. Fortunately, both the Republican military and civil authorities were well aware of their potential for destruction so they took measures to inform and protect the Catalan population from the very start of the conflict.²² As from

20 The number of victims would exceed 4,000 if we were to count all those who died of their injuries afterwards. Much of the documentation on the Barcelona bombings and shelters is held at the Administrative Archive of Barcelona (AAB); the Salamanca Centre of Documentation for Historical Memory; the Historical Archive of the Air Force (AHEA); the CRAI of the Pavilion of the Republic at the University of Barcelona (CRAI PR-UB); the Historical Archive of the Association of Architects of Catalonia; Syndicated Collection of the Architects of Catalonia; the National Archive of Catalonia (ANC) and the Military Aeronautics History Office in Rome. Military Operations in Spain (USAM-OMS).

21 *Un tema inesgotable*. Anonymous text by the Board for the Passive Defence of Catalonia. CRAI-PR-UB.

22 Pujadó, J. *Oblits de rereguarda: els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona, 1936–1939*. Barcelona: PAM; 1998; Arnabat, R. "Refugios antiaéreos: aproximación histórica, arqueológica y patrimonial". In *Historia del*

the summer of 1936, the central government, the Catalan government and the Barcelona City Council went to considerable trouble to protect the Republican rearguard from Fascist air attacks both actively (detection and neutralisation of the attacking planes) and passively (protection of the civil population).²³ To start with, batteries of anti-aircraft guns were set up in Montjuïc and at the two ends of the city, and two yachts equipped with radios sailed up and down the coast to warn the Ministry of Defence of impending danger. As complementary measures, planes were entrusted with keeping watch on the coast from the air, and aerodromes were either constructed or improved. The first *Instruccions en cas de bombardeig aeri* (*Instructions in the event of an air raid*) were laid down by the Minister of Defence of the Catalan Government, Lieutenant Colonel Díaz Sandino, in conjunction with the Barcelona City Council, on 21 September 1936. The text was essentially a list of instructions that had to be followed in the event of air raids and the measures of prevention that could be taken: street lights had to be painted blue or the shelters to be used during air raids had to be clearly signalled. These were the first measures taken to protect the Catalan capital, the embryo of the passive and active defence strategy that would gradually adapt and respond to events and the availability of economic and material resources. In parallel, the ground floors of some blocks of flats, and railway and underground stations were converted into shelters, and the first alarm systems and camouflage were installed. Some months later, in the autumn of 1936 the poster *Instruccions a seguir en cas de bombardeig* was printed which graphically and straightforwardly explained how civilians had to behave in the event of an air raid.

In the autumn of 1936 and the winter of 1937 work began on the construction of shelters in official buildings. In May 1937, the Catalan government drew up a list of technical specifications for the construction of

Presente. 2017; 29:95–106; Arnabat, R. “La Generalitat de Catalunya pionera en la defensa passiva”. In Sobrequés (dir.) *A 80 anys del cop d'estat de Franco. La Generalitat de Catalunya i la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya; 2017. p. 243–272; Arnabat, R., coord. *Els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona: criteris d'intervenció patrimonial*. Barcelona: MUHBA; 2009; Lusa, G., Roca, A. and Valentines, J., editors. *El Fons Ramon Perera: Imatges de la defensa passiva a Catalunya (1938–1939)*. VI Jornada Memorial Democràtic a la UPC. 18 de desembre de 2008. Fem memòria per fer futur. Barcelona: Càtedra UNESCO de Tècnica i Cultura-Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya; 2008; Armengou, M. and Belis, R. *Ramon Parera, l'home dels refugis*. Barcelona: Rosa dels Vents; 2008; and Contel, J. M. *Gràcia, temps de bombes, temps de refugis. El subsòl com a supervivència*. Barcelona: Taller d'Història de Gràcia; 2008.

23 Arnabat, R. and Íñiguez, D. “Atac i defensa” p. 153–299 and Arnabat, R. and Cabezas, A. “La defensa passiva i la defensa activa al Penedès”. In Arnabat, R., Íñiguez, Gesalí, D. and Cabezas, A. *El Penedès ...* p. 109–183.

shelters (*Normes generals i instruccions tècniques*). Barcelona City Council followed suit and, in many respects, took the initiative in the document *Refugis: instruccions elementals per a la protecció contra els atacs aeris amb bombes explosives i incendiàries*. In another attempt to tackle the issue, Barcelona City Council set up the Passive Defence Office (ODP), headed by the councillor Manuel Muñoz Díez.²⁴

During this initial period, the difficulties of protecting a city such as Barcelona, in particular, and the Catalan coast, in general, became quite clear. Passive defence involved, among other things, signing up and training civilians, implementing systems of camouflage, muting street lighting, sounding the alarm, running salvage operations and building shelters, while active defence focused largely on the military organisation to combat the threat by locating and neutralising the enemy with anti-aircraft artillery, fighter planes, ships and coastal artillery, radio transmissions, searchlights, sound-ranging equipment, coastal watchtowers, etc.

A key moment in the active defence of Republican cities was the creation of DECA (the Anti-Air Defence Authority) in March 1937 and its incorporation two months later into the new air force that had been set up as an independent entity. In October 1937, the headquarters of DECA was transferred, as was the central government, from Valencia to Barcelona which made organisation and deployment more efficient throughout Catalonia. This facilitated the emplacement of an anti-aircraft battery at the top of the Turó de la Rovira, first used in the raids of March 1938 and the centre of the active defence of the city of Barcelona until the end of the War, together with the artillery located in the Casa Antúnez, Poble Nou and Santa Coloma to cover the access to the sea.²⁵

Particularly important in terms of passive defence was the effort made by the City Council: underground stations and basements were converted into shelters for civilians; the shelters were cleaned and maintained, and provided with lighting and security; the population was informed about what they had to do in the event of an air raid, instructions were printed and distributed all over Catalonia; and courses were set up to train passive defence personnel. Of the

24 Muñoz Díez, M. *Memòria de Defensa Passiva Antiaèria*. Tasca de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona (handwritten report from August 1937), held at AAB, Local Board of Passive Defence, M-101.

25 Vera Deleito, A. and Vera Deleito, J. *Defensa Antiaèrea Republicana (1936–1939, Artillería y Refugios (Algo de valor))*. Valencia: Jorge Vera De Leito; 2000; Salas Larrazábal, J. *Guerra Aérea 1936/39*. vol. III: Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa; 2001; and *Como se defienden las ciudades del ataque aéreo. Por el Jefe de Defensa Antiaerea de Barcelona*. [Mexico?]; Editorial Proteo; 1940.

three secretariats of the Passive Defence Board of Catalonia, the Secretariat for Planning and Public Works, also known as the Secretariat for the Construction of Shelters, directed first by Santiago Pons and as from February 1938 by Ramon Perera, was entrusted not only with constructing shelters but also of studying materials, the attackers' bombs, and the destruction and damage caused to buildings, and coordinating technicians, engineers and laboratories for experimental tests.²⁶

The residents of Barcelona and the City Council went to a great deal of trouble to construct the air-raid shelters. In total, work began on 1,300 shelters, although some of them were never actually finished. The lack of economic and material resources meant that the ambitious programme of air-raid shelters in the city was not completed.²⁷ Even so, the planning and construction of the shelters was the result of a group effort between military leaders, the City Council and the Catalan government and involved engineers, surveyors, labourers and volunteers. That is to say, it was a joint project, which was not always coordinated, between civilians (building shelters in the suburbs), military leaders (making the necessary resources available and conjuring up the first rules from nothing) and civil institutions (using their equipment and technicians to supervise, print instructions and provide premises, tools, materials, etc.).

Despite all the shortcomings, it should be said that for some periods Barcelona was one of the best defended cities in Europe, and although the artillery was modest it was efficient at neutralising attacking planes.²⁸ It was also without a doubt the first modern European capital to design such a well-organised anti-aircraft defence system from practically nothing and rise to the challenge of actively defending the city against the powerful Italian and German air forces. As can be seen from the documentation produced by both attackers and defenders, and particularly from the reports written by the Italians, the anti-aircraft response was efficient and violent, which made it difficult for the

26 Valentines, J. "Redefinicions socials i espacials de l'enginyeria a la Guerra Civil a Catalunya. El Fons Ramon Perera i la defensa passiva". Lusa, G., Monforte, A., Roca, J. i Valentines, J., editors. *El Fons Ramon Perera ...*: p. 18–19.

27 Carta Arqueològica de Barcelona. Barcelona: Servei d'Arqueologia de Barcelona; 2010 [available at <http://cartaarqueologica.bcn.cat/>]. See Arnabat, R. coordinator. *Els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona...*

28 *Defensa/BCN 1936-1939. Guia d'Història Urbana*. Barcelona: MUHBA; 2011; Arnabat, R., Gesalí, D. and Íñiguez, D. "Barcelona sota les bombes franquistes". In *L'Avenç*, 2009, 344:44–52; and Arnabat, R. Barcelona 1938: guerra aèria i guerra total. In *L'Avenç*, 2018, 446:44–52; Arnabat, R. "La defensa de Barcelona: del relat històric als elements patrimonials", Arnabat, R., coordinator. *Els refugis antiaeris...* p. 27–54; and Gesalí, D. and Íñiguez, D. *La guerra aèria...* p. 197–264.

attackers to carry out the raid or intercept the Republican fighters assigned to the rearguard.²⁹

If we put the task of active defence in an international context, we can see that other countries did not have the means to defend themselves against aerial attacks in 1938 or the experience to respond to the threat. Only England would manage to do so, albeit only as from the middle of 1940 and once their advanced industry and technology had allowed them to reinforce their defence system with radar stations and a large number of fighters and anti-aircraft guns. In any case, the experience of the Republican anti-aircraft defence system was the basis on which other European countries designed their own systems during the Second World War, although the country that it had most been studied by, England, did not exploit it to its full extent because Churchill's Conservative government, in a decision that clearly discriminated between the classes, refused to build air-raid shelters for the workers.³⁰

Barcelona: Republican capital and Franco's priority target

The first Italian airstrike on the city of Barcelona was on 16 March 1937 and the notes made by the attackers contain these premonitory words: "the effect on the morale of the people has been enormous" because "the aerial offensive has gone straight to the heart of Red territory and the centre of the city, the most strongly protected area."³¹ As from that day, over the next year the Legionary Air Force bombed Barcelona on 31 occasions, killed 955 and injured 1,070, and totally or partially destroyed 133 and 534 buildings, respectively. Particularly bloody were the raids on 15, 19 and 25 and, above all, 30 January 1938 when nine tons of explosives were dropped, killing 459 people, among whom were numerous children. Some of the bombs struck the school and the air-raid shelter in Sant Felip Neri, where the shrapnel marks can still be seen in the square.³² These

29 See, for example, "8° Stormo B. V. Diario storico" [from 12 January 1938 to 31 May 1939] held at the Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare de Roma. Operazione Militare Spagna [USAM-OMS]. Cartella 51/B.

30 Pujol, J. *Lliçons de Barcelona...*, p. 9–28.

31 Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare. Operazione Militare Spagna (USAM-OMS), box 73.

32 All the data on the bombings in this text have been taken from the information available in the AAB. Fons de la Junta de Defensa Passiva de Barcelona (ACB-FJDPB) and USAM-OMS. See also Villarroya, J. *Els bombardeigs de Barcelona durant la Guerra Civil*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat; 1999; Albertí, S. and Albertí, E. *Perill de bombardeig! Barcelona sota les bombes (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Albertí Editor; 2004; Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs a Barcelona durant la guerra civil*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2005. See also www.barcelonabombardejada.cat; Domènech, X. and Zenobi, L. *Quan*

attacks were the prelude to the strategic and saturation bombings of March. Pilar Dosaigües, the young girl from Barcelona, explains it in these terms:

This morning at about 9.30, when I was doing some housework, I heard the sirens and immediately afterwards the bombs. We went out onto the balcony and saw the planes flying very high, surrounded by the smoke of the missiles that the anti-aircraft guns had fired at them. Immediately we saw two columns of dense smoke coming from the houses that had been hit. At 12.30, the planes returned and dropped more bombs.³³

The January bombings in 1938 were a source of encouragement for the Italian Fascist leaders and considerable concern for the Republican government and army, the Catalan government and the Barcelona City Council. On 2 February 1938, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian foreign minister, wrote about the January bombings in his memoirs: “Mussolini has ordered the coastal bombings to be stepped up; they completely undermine the spirit of the people.” And on 8 February 1938 he said that after the success of the bombing on 30 January:

Mussolini planned to restart the bombing of the coastal cities to destroy any resistance by the Reds. I was given a report on the recent air raids by an eye witness, which I passed on to Il Duce. He had never read such a terrifying document even though only nine S.79s had flown and the raid had lasted a minute and a half. Buildings had been destroyed, traffic brought to a standstill and people were in a blind panic. It was a good lesson for the future. There is no point in designing anti-aircraft defences or building shelters: the only protection against an air raid is to evacuate the cities.³⁴

The air raids prompted a timid reaction from the British, French and Belgian governments. On 10 February a heavily attended meeting was held in Paris to condemn the bombings of the cities and towns in the rearguard. It was organised by Rassemblement pour la Paix, led by Víctor Basch and Professor Langevin, and it was presided over by Diego Martínez Barrio. In parallel, in the British House of Commons, the Welsh Labour MP and miner, Morgan Jones, tabled a motion that criticised the bombing of cities in the rearguard.

plovien bombes. Barcelona: ECOS; 2009; Dueñas, O. *El port de Barcelona: objectiu militar durant la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Museu Marítim; 2016.

33 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 158.

34 Ciano, G. *Diarios 1937–1943*. Barcelona: Crítica; 2003. p. 83–87.

In the opinion of this House, the growing horror of the aerial bombardment of defenceless civilians should be expressed in an international agreement by virtue of which all nations shall co-operate in its prohibition. This House urges His Majesty's Government to exert its influence to this end.³⁵

The motion was passed unanimously and was supported by the government, who declared that they were already working on the issue and would continue to do so because "unless something can be done to meet this menace the peoples of the world in the latter part of this century are going to live as troglodytes." However, speeches aside, both the British and the French governments took a very lukewarm stand on this question.

The non-intervention policies adopted by the Western democracies led to serious problems in supplying the Republic with arms and humanitarian aid. In an attempt to reverse this trend and to generate a current of international opinion in favour of the Republic, in February 1938, the mayor of Barcelona, Hilari Salvadó, and several councillors travelled to France, Belgium and England to give their eye-witness accounts of the lethal air raids on Barcelona, seek humanitarian aid and explain the systems of passive defence that had been implemented.³⁶ In an interview published in *La Vanguardia* on his return, the Mayor said that London had been very interested in the anti-aircraft defences in Barcelona.

The part of my mission that I am most happy with, and which I believe to have been most successful, was our attempt to inform the English authorities and public opinion of the scale of the airstrikes on our city. On this issue there was a certain amount of confusion. Or rather, their impression was the same as in Paris and Brussels where they still recalled the action taken by the German planes against civilians during the Great War and assumed that the attacks by the Fascist planes on Barcelona were of a similar nature.

It did not take me too long to convince them of their error. Of course, this issue was of great interest to the authorities, and particularly to the Parliamentary Committee which is currently busily engaged in designing the anti-aircraft defence system of London, a city of enormous size. In fact, their interest was such that, after our initial conversations, they put Doctor Gispert and myself in touch with the specialists. We told them how our passive defence system was organised in the minutest detail, with particular attention to the

35 Rovira i Virgili, A. *Contra els bombardeigs aeris*. In *La Humanitat*, 8 February 1938. p. 1.

36 Vinyes, P. *Alcalde Hilari Salvadó de Barcelona quan plovién bombes*. Barcelona: Fundació Josep Irla; 2016. p. 139–174.

features of our air-raid shelters and the depths at which they had been built. They were greatly impressed by everything we had to say and I would not be at all surprised if, as a result, they made considerable changes to the structure of their defence system.³⁷

Just a few days later a delegation of English, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish ministers of parliament, writers and journalists visited Barcelona City Council to see *in situ* the effects of the air raids and show their solidarity with the Republican people.

The March raids: a direct order from Mussolini

According to the diaries of Galeazzo Ciano, on 16 March 1938 Benito Mussolini ordered a saturation bombing mission on the city of Barcelona. A staunch believer in Giulio Dohuet's theories of air warfare and strategic bombing, Mussolini regarded "an action of war that takes place far from the battlefield to strike, among other things, at the city" to be a good strategic option. That is to say, he believed that the bombing of cities in the Republican rearguard – in this case Barcelona –, in conjunction with the advance of Franco's troops in Aragon after the offensive that had been initiated on 9 March, would undermine the morale of the Republican civilian population and "weaken the morale of the Reds."³⁸

Any explanation of Mussolini's decision should also take into account the international context: on 8 March negotiations on the Mediterranean had begun between Italy and England in Rome; between 10 and 13 March there had been elections in France that had been won by the Popular Front and León Blum, who was more sympathetic to the Republic, was appointed president of the government. His intention was to reopen the border with Spain, which would make it possible for the Republic to be supplied with war materials (the border was in fact opened on 17 March); and on 12 March Austria was annexed by Germany, an action that Italy did not agree with. All of this convinced Mussolini that the time was ripe for a show of force, which prompted his order for the strategic bombing of Barcelona. He wanted "Italians to generate horror by their aggression and not pleasure by their mandolin playing" because "Our stock will go up in the eyes of the Germans, who love total and ruthless

37 El Alcalde Barcelona nos comunica sus impresiones de su viaje por Europa. In *La Vanguardia*, 27 February 1938, p. 8

38 Ciano, G. *Diarios....* p.106–109.

war.” It was also a response to the new government in France, which was more sympathetic to the Republican cause, and the immediate re-opening of the French border with Spain. What is more, just a year before, the Italian *Corpo Truppe Volontario* had been defeated by the Republicans at Guadalajara and Mussolini wanted to take advantage of the moment to take revenge for the defeat. Count Ciano says the following in his memoirs:

The truth about the Barcelona bombings is that Mussolini gave the order to Valle in the Chamber just a few minutes before giving his speech on Austria. Franco knew nothing about it and yesterday asked me to suspend operations because he feared complications abroad. Mussolini believes that these bombings are very useful to weaken the morale of the Reds while the troops advance in Aragon. And he’s right. When I told him about my conversation with Perth [the English ambassador], he did not appear to be too concerned. Rather, he was pleased by the fact that the Italians had managed to generate horror by their aggression and not pleasure by their mandolin playing. Our stock will go up in the eyes of the Germans, who love total and ruthless war.³⁹

Three days in March 1938

On the morning of Wednesday 16 March, General Valle sent a telegram to General Velardi, the head of the *Aviazione Legionaria delle Baleari* (ALB: the Balearic Legionary Air Force) with Mussolini’s orders: “Iniziare da stanotte azione violenta su Barcellona con martellamento diluito nel tempo” (Initiate an attack on Barcelona tonight and then pound the city at regular intervals).⁴⁰ The raids began that very night at 22.08 and lasted until 15.00 on Friday 18 March. In total there were 12 bombings, each one of which lasted for two minutes.

On 16 March at 22.08, five Savoia S-81s belonging to squadron 251 of the 25th Night Bombing Group of the 21 Stormo based in Palma de Mallorca dropped fifteen 250-kilo bombs and twenty-five 50-kilo bombs that struck various targets in Barcelona, Hospitalet de Llobregat and Prat de Llobregat. A second raid targeted Sant Andreu, Poble Nou, Sant Adrià and Badalona.⁴¹

The third, fourth and fifth raids were carried out at 7.36, 10.27 and 13.57 by 16 Savoia S-79s belonging to squadrons 18 and 52 of the 27th Fast Bombing

³⁹ Ciano, G. *Diarios....* p.108–109.

⁴⁰ Telegram *Urgentissimo* 5626 *partito da Roma il 16/03/1938*. USAM-OMS, box 75.

⁴¹ CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 16/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj.B., M101 JLDP/5767/2.2, 2.6 and 2.4; USAM-OMS 67–92; USAM 74–26.

group of the 8 Stormo, also based in Palma de Mallorca. They dropped eight 250-kilo bombs, a hundred-and-twelve 100-kilo bombs and sixty-eight 20-kilo incendiary devices to increase the amount of damage because the explosives opened up great holes in buildings and went through several floors while the incendiaries exploited the holes to set the interiors ablaze. The bombings targeted the central areas of the city: Carrers Rocafort-Corts, Avinguda Layret, the Concepció Church, Portal Nou, Provença, Moll d'Espanya, Casp, Exposició, Can Tunis, Sant Pau Hospital, Àngels, Carme, Paral·lel, Poble Sec, Ronda Universitat, Gran Via, Plaça Universitat, Plaça Catalunya and Passeig de la Rambla. Finally, at 22:17 seven Savoia S-81s belonging to squadrons 251 and 252 dropped twenty-eight 250-kilo bombs which targeted Carrers del Camp, Marimón, Sant Gervasi, Sant Mario, Muntaner and Sapion.⁴²

In the raid that took place at 14.14 on 17 March, a bomb scored a direct hit on a Republican army truck that was driving along the Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes on the corner with Carrer Balmes, just in front of the Coliseum. The 27 soldiers in the truck were killed outright, as were all the pedestrians nearby. Their remains were spread all over the streets. The New York Times reporter, Herbert L. Matthews, reported the incident as follows:

Almost all the windows from Passeig de Gràcia to Carrer Mallorca were blown in. A little closer to the point of the explosion, the streetlights had been torn out of the ground and the trees were splintered and ablaze. A full bus near the point of impact had been reduced to a shapeless mass of junk. All over the place there were slimy masses of blood that had once been human beings. A pall of smoke and dust hung in the air for hours as did the bitter smell of gunpowder and other chemical substances.⁴³

On 18 March, the first alarm sounded at 1.14 but there was no bombing. At 4.30, the third day of air raids on Barcelona began when three Savoia S-79s belonging to squadron 10 dropped twenty-four 100-kilo bombs and twelve incendiary devices on Carrers Rosal, Carretes, Font-rodona and Barbarà. At 7.00, the second raid began when three more Savoia S-79s dropped six 250-kilo bombs, twelve 100-kilo bombs and nine 20-kilo incendiary devices on Sant Martí and Sant Andreu. The third attack, at 9.30, was executed by three Savoia S-79s belonging to squadrons 18 and 52, which dropped the same bombs as in

42 CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 17/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj. B., M101 JLDP /5767/ 2.2, 2.4 and 2.6; USAM-OMS 17, 18-7, 19-8, 54-16, 59-48, 62-62, 63-67, 63-71, 67-92, 74-26.

43 Reproduced by Jackson, G. *La Guerra Civil española. Antología de los principales cronistas de guerra americanos en España*. Barcelona: Icària; 1984.

the previous raid on the Barceloneta, (Gasòmetre) and Montgat, Ausiàs Marc, Marina, Estació del Nord, Poble Nou, Parc, Passeig Pujades and Diputació. At 13.11, there was a fourth raid involving three more Savoia S-79s, which dropped twelve 250-kilo bombs that targeted Carrers Paral·lel, Montjuic, Floridablanca, Urgell, Borrell and Poble Sec. At 15.00, the fifth and final raid was executed by three Savoia S-79s from squadron 18. This raid released a total of six 250-kilo bombs, twelve 100-kilo bombs and nine 20-kilo incendiary devices, which targeted the industrial zone of Besós and Sant Adrià.⁴⁴

The leaders of the various airstrikes targeting Barcelona during those three days of March were the following: on 16 March, Captain Gaspare de Cecco; on 17 March, Colonel Ernesto Rossanigo (*Righelli*), Major Mari Cesar Di Carlo and Captain Ernesto Balbo di Vinadio (*Boeri*); and on 18 March, Captain Gaspare de Cecco and the lieutenants Dulio Piacentini, Generoso Faralli, Fortunato Profumi (*Polimanti*), and Paolo Zanini (*Zerilli*).⁴⁵

In total, 51 planes from the Balearic Legionary Air Force were involved: 32 Savoia S.79s known as “Falchi delle Baleari” (Balearic falcons) or “Sparviere” (sparrow hawks), and 19 Savoia S-81s known as “Pipistrelli delle Baleari” (Balearic bats), which dropped 486 bombs with a total of 50,090 kilos of explosive, as much as had been dropped on the Catalan capital in the previous 11 months. The areas most affected by the bombings were between the Carrers Entença, Còrsega and Marina, as well as Sant Gervasi, la Sagrera and Montjuic. The 41 hours that the airstrike lasted was a period of uninterrupted fear, tension, anxiety and terror, which rendered all theories on attacks from the air obsolete (see table 1).⁴⁶

44 CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 18/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj.B., M101 JLDP/5767/2.2, 2.4, 2.6; USAM-OMS 17, 18–7, 19–8, 54–16, 59–48, 62–62, 63–67, 63–71, 74–26.

45 This information was found in several files in the *Diarios Stóricos* of the squadrons and the groups taking part in the USAM-OMS

46 Langdon-Davies, J. “Bombes sobre Barcelona”. In Langdon-Davies, J. *La Setmana Tràgica de 1937 i altres vivències*. Barcelona: Edicions 62; 1987. p. 167–174; Villarroja, J., Lo Cascio, P. and Olivera, S. *Tres dies de març. Imatges: 1936–1939: bombes sobre Barcelona*. Girona: El Punt; 2008; and Grassia, E. “Barcelona, 17 e 18 marzo 1938”. In *Diacronie. Studi di storia contemporanea*, 2011, 7 [http://www.studistorici.com/2011/071/29/grassia1_numero_7].

Table 1. Summary of the Barcelona bombings of 16, 17 and 18 March 1938

Times	16 March	22.08		
	17 March	00.04; 1.37; 7.40; 10.27; 13.57; 22.17		
	18 March	04.03; 7.00; 9.30; 13.11; 15.00		
16 March	1	5 Savoia S-81	5,000 kg	15x250 + 25x50
17 March	3	14 Savoia S-81s	16.250 kg	49x250 + 80x50
17 March	3	16 Savoia S-79s	14.560 kg	8x250 + 112x100 + 68x20
18 March	5	15 Savoia S-79s	14.280 kg	30x250 + 60x100 + 39x20
Total	12	51 planes	50,090 kg	486 bombs
		32 Savoia S-79s	102x250 kg	= 25,500 kg
		19 Savoia S-81s	172x100 kg	= 17,200 kg
			105x50 kg	= 5,250 kg
			107x20 kg	= 2,140 kg

Source: Drawn up by the author from the sources cited of the USAM OMS and AAB-M.101.

In the documentary *La ciutat foradada*, Teodor Garriga explains that the RAC radio station had a record that gave warning of an impending raid on one side and sounded the all clear on the other. Those in charge of putting the record on made a mistake in March 1938, which confused the population and increased the feeling of anxiety, chaos and panic.⁴⁷

The entries made by the Italian pilots in the squadrons' logbooks clearly show that the raids were specifically designed as a strategy of saturation bombing to demoralise the Republican rearguard: "Da due giorni dura il martellamento di questa città piena di obbiettivi militari. Di giorno e di notte l'Aviazione Legionaria sta rovesciando tonnellate di esplosivo sul principale centro nemico"; "Repitere ancora l'azione su Barcellona che nello spazio di 36 hores e' stata sottoposta ad un vintina di bombardimenti nella speranza di una rivolta" always with the hope that "la popolazione è demoralizzata."⁴⁸

The final outcome was 979 fatalities, 1,500 wounded and 273 damaged buildings.⁴⁹ The Barcelona City Council made a public announcement stating

47 DVD: *History Board. La ciutat foradada*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2005.

48 USAM-OMS, boxes 62 and 71.

49 The mayor, Hilari Salvadó, claimed that during the three days of the bombing 875 people had been killed – 512 men, 245 women and 118 children – and that there were approximately 1,500 wounded (*Diari de Barcelona*, 21 March 1938). *La Vanguardia* of 21 March 1938 gave the figure of 873 dead (118 children). The Passive Defence Board of Barcelona reported that 192 bombs had been dropped, which killed 551 people and wounded 1,151, totally destroyed 76 buildings and partially destroyed 97, and damaged 273 (a total of 446); these figures are the same as the ones provided by the Catalan government on 26 March 1938. Villarroya, J. *Els bombardeigs ...*, first claims that 872 people were killed (including those who died in the days following the raids) and then, a few pages later, raises the figure to 979.

that, although the only objective of the airstrike had been to “demoralise the rearguard”, there was no reason for “the people’s enthusiasm to wane” and that the Council “was undertaking the work required for the city to be duly defended and to be able to thwart the cowardly system used by the nations who engage in what they refer to as total warfare.”⁵⁰

At first, at the international level, Count Ciano attempted to convince Perth, the English ambassador in Rome, that Franco had ordered the air raids but the truth is that Mussolini had given the orders to General Valle. In fact, as a result of international pressure, Franco asked Mussolini to stop the bombings which had initially been planned with no final date in mind. Ciano himself wrote: “Franco knew nothing about them [the bombings] and yesterday [18 March] he asked me to suspend operations because of complications from abroad.”⁵¹ The telegram sent by Franco to General Garda on 18 March and forwarded to Mussolini said: “Generalissimo ordina sospendere bombardamento Barcellona. Ho avvertito in proposito superiori autorità.”⁵² In fact, the British Government Code and Cipher School was able to crack the codes of the Italian communications, particularly those of the Regia Aeronautica, during the Spanish Civil War, so the British were fully aware of the details of the airstrikes on Barcelona by the Italian bombers from Palma de Mallorca (see Alberto Santoni).⁵³

Civilian eye-witness accounts

Many of the residents of Barcelona left accounts of the bloody Fascist bombings. On 17 March, Pilar Dosaigües wrote the following:

Last night, just after I had gone to bed, I was woken by the sirens, and the noise of the anti-aircraft guns and the bombs exploding. I got up when I heard Mary, Mummy and Tere shouting. I went out on to the balcony and saw that the market very near home was on fire. The rebel criminals (I have no other words for them) were dropping incendiary bombs. What a terrible fire! It lit up the whole of Barcelona. [...]. I went back to bed but could not sleep because

50 Reproduced by Aisa, F. *L'Ajuntament de Barcelona. República, guerra i revolució (1931–1939)*. Barcelona: Editorial Base. Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2009. p.506.

51 Ciano, G. *Diarios* p. 108–109.

52 Franco's telegram 080 *urgentissimo* to Mussolini forwarded by Garda to Mussolini on 18 March 1938: from Logroño to Palma at 21.00 (USAM-OMS, box 75).

53 Santoni, A. *Ultra Intelligence e macchine. Enigma nella guerra di Spagna 1936-1939*. Milan: Mursia; 2010. p. 165–166.

of the infernal noise of the bombs and the missiles. It was so loud and there were so many of them that I was deafened. The bombing started at half past ten and stopped at three or four o'clock in the morning, with some moments of respite, although the Germans [Italians] were soon back. The Spanish would be incapable of doing such a thing. They have got so much material and so many planes they want Catalonia to surrender first and then all Spain.

It was half past seven. I was still in bed when I heard the sirens and immediately some enormous explosions. I got up in a tremendous hurry, went out on to the balcony and, well, saw two large columns of fire and smoke in front of me. They had done a lot of damage again. Later, at just after ten, I was by myself doing some sewing on the machine when I heard some more explosions. I got up and saw the whole of Barcelona enveloped in smoke, houses in ruins and what looked like a road of very thick, black smoke. [...]. I was frightened. I was shocked to see everybody, young and old alike, running as fast as they could to get to the shelter where they all crammed in.

They were back again at two o'clock when we were just about to lay the table. First, we heard the sirens so we went out on to the balcony. Then we heard the planes and, immediately afterwards, right in front of our eyes we saw two great spouts of flame from the incendiary bombs. The cobblestones, the rooftops, everything was blown away by the immense bombs. We thought it was the end of the world. In the afternoon we didn't set foot out of the house. We just waited. It's horrible! Mummy is very down, everybody is crying, they feel bad, all with headaches. We just can't carry on like this.

We're waiting to see whether they will come back tonight and whether we will be alive tomorrow. Life is so uncertain at the moment.⁵⁴

Pilar's testimony is corroborated by Francisca Rius, also from Barcelona:

Last night we had three bombings and today four. Our city is a horrific sight.

This morning I was with Núria in the Concepció market when the enemy planes dropped a bomb on the bell tower of the Concepció church.

Schools have cancelled classes. It is said that there have been a thousand victims today.⁵⁵

The following day, 18 March, Rius wrote the following:

Nothing special has happened to bring the hunger of our household to an end. [...]. Now, when the sirens go off, we go to a very well-made shelter in Carrer Igualada. But, even so, things are worse than yesterday. The enemy

54 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 174–175.

55 Rius, F. *Diari íntim. La vida quotidiana a la rereguarda*. Barcelona, 1938–1939. Barcelona: PAM; 2009. p. 39.

planes come and bomb us every three hours. In just 18 hours we have had seven high-intensity bombings. Today, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Uncle Rius was in a bank when they bombed the Plaça de Catalunya. Two bombs hit the bank and the street corner and the Hotel Colón was struck three times. The Barcelona and Novetats theatres were also destroyed. The Ronda de Sant Pere and the Ronda de la Universitat are a horrible sight but the stretch of the Gran Via between the Rambla la Catalunya is where the bombing has been worst. Everybody is in a real panic and a lot of families spend the night in the underground or go into the countryside. This is the heaviest bombing we have had to endure. The markets are not getting any supplies. Instead of vegetables I have had to buy some stuff that we used to give to the rabbits. Last night we slept in our clothes and we had our bags packed just in case we had to leave in a hurry.⁵⁶

And also on 18 March, Pilar Dosaigües wrote the following:

Last night those damned pirate planes with their constant bombing wouldn't let us sleep again. I was still in bed this morning when the sirens went off. The bombs started falling immediately afterwards [...]. At ten they were back again and I watched as they dropped their bombs and raised so much smoke that it covered the sky. Everybody ran to the shelter and stayed there. At half past one they came again [...]. At half past four, the sirens sounded the alarm once more. All in all, they don't want to leave us alone.⁵⁷

The next day she wrote:

Strangely enough, the rebels haven't come today. We got quite used to them coming every three hours. According to what Franco has said on Radio Salamanca, he wants to raze the city to the ground before Sunday and he is giving all the Catalans 48 hours to get out if they want to. A lot of people are going out into the country or back to their villages.⁵⁸

The writer Josep M. Folch i Torres visited Barcelona with his son on 31 March and he recorded this impression of the city for posterity:

Poor Barcelona! What a sight! [...]. Mountains of rubble. Whole houses are completely gone. Iron doors are blown in. Even today (after 17 and 18 March) they are still searching for bodies under the rubble. It's horrifying! [...]. Poor Barcelona! The people in the street are a sorry sight. The platforms of the

⁵⁶ Rius, F. *Diari íntim...*, p. 39–40.

⁵⁷ Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 175.

⁵⁸ Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 176.

underground station are full of endless rows of mattresses with sad women who spend hours sitting on the ground, looking sorrowful, so sorrowful, and thinking of their children and their country.⁵⁹

These eye-witness accounts reveal the harsh reality of life in Barcelona at that time. People were living in fear and aspired only to survive, permanently anxious for their family and friends, and for the immediate future. Olga Grinyó, another inhabitant of Barcelona, explains it in these words: “We had the feeling that we were completely defenceless, we had nothing to defend ourselves because the guns, the anti-aircraft guns, were working but were not bringing anything down. We didn’t know whether the planes were German or Italian. All we heard was rumours....”⁶⁰ And the newspaper *La Humanitat* claimed that “the whole world is horrified and repulsed by the criminal bombings carried out by the Italo-German air force on the cities of Catalonia.”⁶¹

Accounts from abroad

The bombings had enormous international repercussions. The European press reported and condemned the events in Barcelona. *The Times* denounced that the bombings “did not have military targets” but “were aimed at a part of the old city where the poor lived like rabbits in their burrows.”⁶² Even *L’Observatore Romano*, the mouthpiece of the Vatican, condemned the bombings and admonished Franco although, as it turned out, the people responsible for the bombings were in Rome, next door to the Vatican:

The number of victims has now gone up even more because of the recent bombings in Barcelona. These victims are innocent. The Holy See condemns the attacks and, faithful to its mission, continues to advise moderation and caution to bring the horrors of war to an end.⁶³

The indirect response from the Cardinal Primate Isidro Gomà, three months later, was the following:

59 Folch i Torres, J. M. “El llibre blau”, reproduced by Guillamón, J. *Patufet en Guerra. La il·lusió de la normalitat*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya; 2017. p.22.

60 Reproduced by Margarit, J. “Baixar al metro”. In *Estació de França*. Madrid: Hiperión; 2006.

61 *La Humanitat*, 22 March 1938.

62 *The Times*, 18 March 1938.

63 *L’Observatore Romano*, 24 March 1938.

Indeed, the war needs to be brought to an end. But it cannot end in compromise, in agreement or in reconciliation. The hostilities must be taken to the limit and victory must be claimed by force of arms. The Reds have to surrender because they have been defeated. War is the only possible way to peace. If peace is to be organised within a Christian constitution, all the putrefaction of lay legislation must be eradicated.⁶⁴

In Barcelona, the American ambassador said that the bombs “deliberately targeted the centre, the busiest and most densely populated part of the city, where the people were eating, strolling, resting on their beds” and that “when the attacks finished, nine-hundred men, women and children had been killed, many of them blown apart or disembowelled.” And he added, “white men have never been involved in anything like this on such a terrifying scale. The bombs had no military target.”⁶⁵ The United States Senate unanimously approved a text of protest condemning the airstrikes on the civilian population. And the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, said:

On this occasion, when the loss non-combatant civilian human lives is perhaps higher than ever before, I believe that I speak on behalf of all Americans when I express my horror of all that has occurred in Barcelona and the sincere hope that in the future clusters of civil population will not be the target of military bombings from the air.⁶⁶

During his visit to Barcelona, the British commander, Noel de Putron MacRoberts, spoke of “massive terrorism from the air.”⁶⁷ The British journalist, John Langdon-Davies, author of *Air Raid* published the article “Bombs over Barcelona” in the English journal *The Listener* on 14 July 1938.⁶⁸ The French general Camille Rougeron, who studied the role played by aircraft in the Spanish Civil War, claimed that “although at first sight it does not seem to be a perfect example of the aerial warfare described by Douhet between great industrial nations – that is to say, a series of operations in which each side attempts to

64 Statement made in Budapest on 28 June 1938, reproduced by Sueiro, D. and Díaz Nosty, B. *Historia del franquismo*. Barcelona: Sarpe; 1986. Vol. I, p. 56.

65 MacRoberts, N. de P. A.R.P. *Lessons from Barcelona. Some hints for local authorities and for the private citizen*. London: Eyre & Spottiswode; 1938, reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs...* p. 43–45.

66 Reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs ...*, p. 43–45.

67 MacRoberts, N. de P. A.R.P. *Lessons from Barcelona. Some hints for local authorities and for the private citizen*. London: Eyre & Spottiswode; 1938.

68 Langdon-Davies, J. “Bombes sobre Barcelona”, p. 167-174; and *Air Raid. The technique of silent approach, high explosive panic*. London: George Routledge & Sons; 1938.

destroy the adversary's means of production – [...] it does, however, have all the necessary elements to be regarded as such.”⁶⁹

The German ambassador in Franco's Spain, Eberhard von Stoner, wrote the following from Salamanca:

Hundreds of houses and streets have been destroyed by the bombs [...]. So far there have been 1,000 deaths, but numerous corpses are believed to be under the rubble. There are more than three thousand wounded. Apparently a bomb killed a whole queue of women waiting to buy milk, and another scored a direct hit on the entrance to an underground station, killing all the people sheltering there.

And in a subsequent report he said:

I am convinced that after the war, in both Spain and abroad, the Italians and ourselves will be severely criticised, because it was not the Spanish aircraft that bombed their own cities but the allied aircraft of Italy and Germany.⁷⁰

In July 1938 the Universal Conference against the Bombing of Open Cities and for the Peace Campaign was held in Paris, where Jaume Miravittles, Commissioner for Propaganda of the Catalan Government, presented the film *Catalunya màrtir* by Laia Films.⁷¹ In his speech, the French writer André Maurois said: “I think that all violence exercised in times of war or revolution on non-combatants – the elderly, women, children – is a crime. It is also a mistake, because hate engenders hate. And the idea that terror can bring peace is as false as it is cruel.”⁷² But nothing changed: the Fascists carried on bombing the cities in the Republican rearguard and the democratic European powers continued not to support Spanish democracy.

69 Rougeron, C. *Les enseignements aériens en la Guerre d'Espagne*. Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault; 1939, p. 141. See also, Launoy, C. *Les bombardements de Barcelone*. Brussels: Les Editions Action et Civilisation; 1938; and *Bombardements et agressions en Espagne: juillet 1936–juillet 1938*. Paris: Comité Mondial contre le Guerre et le Fascisme; 1938.

70 Reproduced by Bowen, W.H. *Spaniards and Nazi Germany: Collaboration in the New Order*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000; p. 45–46.

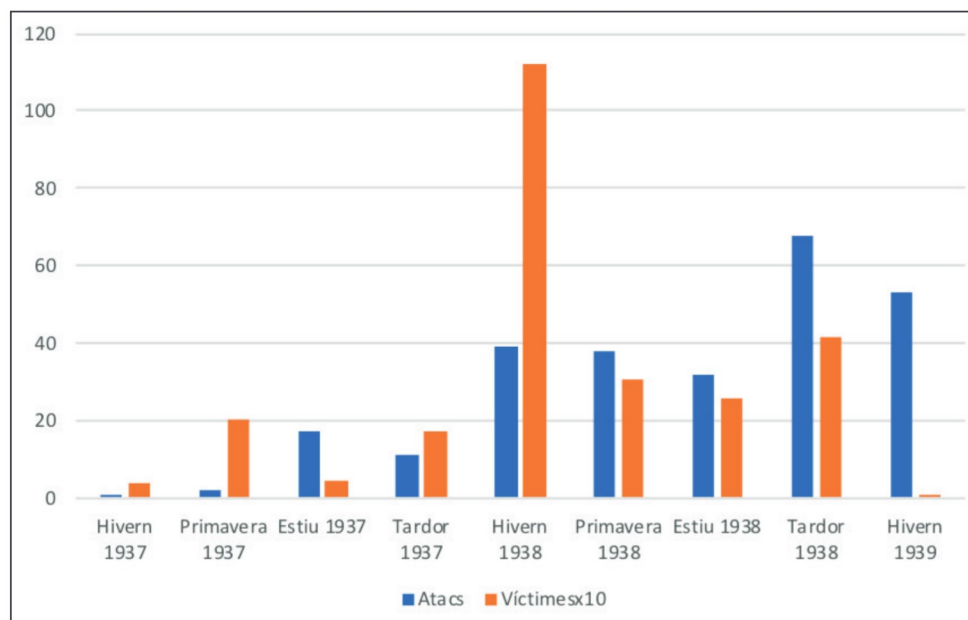
71 Jaume Miravittles i Navarra, J. *Els anys de joventut (1906–1939)*. Figueres: Ajuntament de Figueres i Diputació de Girona; 2016.

72 Reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs...*, p. 43–45.

The following days

One of the consequences of the three days of bombings in March was that the defence systems of Barcelona were reinforced. In terms of active defence, the number of anti-aircraft guns and fighters was increased so that the city could be better defended; and in terms of passive defence, the sections of the Passive Defence Office were strengthened and the construction of air-raid shelters was speeded up. The implementation of passive defence prevented thousands of deaths because, although the number of air raids and the amount of explosive dropped increased between winter 1938 and the end of the war, the number of fatalities decreased (see table 2).

Table 2. Bombings of the city of Barcelona and fatalities



Source: Drawn up by the author from the sources cited of the USAM OMS and AAB-M.101

All in all, it can be concluded that Barcelona put all its efforts into resisting the onslaught and not becoming a martyr to the systematic air raids by the Fascists, who were putting into practice the new theories on total war and strategic bombing. It was precisely the ability of the inhabitants of Barcelona to resist that the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, spoke of in a speech in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940: "I do not at all underrate the severity of the ordeal which lies before us, but I believe our countrymen will show themselves capable of standing up to it, like the brave men of Barcelona."⁷³

⁷³ Churchill, W. *La Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros; 2014.

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Destruction caused in the center of Barcelona by the bombings of March 16, 17 and 18, 1938.
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