

## **Belfast Blitz**

*The Second World War proved to be a turning point in Northern Ireland's history. The conflict was the source of much warmer relations between Stormont and Westminster and this provided the basis for the North's best years—the 1950s and 1960s. These developments could not easily have been foreseen in 1939. On 4 September, James Craig, the Northern Ireland premier, affirmed in the Commons that there would be "no slackening in [Ulster's] loyalty" and that all of its resources would be placed at Britain's command.*

*Yet, in stark contrast to elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the pace of life locally continued much as before. Of course, measures such as rationing, censorship, identity cards and travel restrictions were introduced. But there was no conscription, food was relatively plentiful, and for the first two years of the war unemployment remained high. Above all, until April 1941, no bombs fell.*

*Other visitors to the North made less flattering comments. Tom Harrison, a professional wartime observer from Great Britain, expressed shock at the different, more casual, atmosphere he found in Belfast. He noted that "people thought nothing of asking me to lunch and talking the whole afternoon. Being half an hour late for an appointment did not matter in the slightest, and perhaps the most curious shock of all is seeing men lying about in the morning on the grass outside the City Hall or sleeping with their feet up in the backs of cars".*

*He suggested that if they were to behave like this in London or Liverpool, they "would at once be noticeable and might even cause a riot"; he found himself "constantly experiencing a curious of guilt at being there at all. It seemed somehow as if one was getting out of the war and having too easy a life".*

*The lack of a sense of war urgency was also evident in ways which were less visually obvious— these included the consistently modest level of local voluntary recruitment to the armed forces; recurrent and disruptive labour disputes; initially poor productivity in the city's major munitions firms (Short & Harland, Harland & Wolff); and widespread apathy towards civil defence (the wearing of gas masks, implementation of blackout regulations, enrolment as wardens, etc.). Some ministers acknowledged openly and regretfully that Belfast and indeed the Six Counties as a whole were "only half in the war".*

*Several factors help account for this contrast with Britain, such as Northern Ireland's remoteness from the theatre of war and from Westminster, its deep and unique sectarian divisions and, in particular, the absence of conscription which helped so much to sharpen public attitudes elsewhere. A further reason was the complacency and ineffectiveness of the leadership at Stormont. Craig was the main source of weakness. Ill health and exhaustion had dogged his efforts after 1921-2. By 1938, the head of the regional civil service, Wilfred Spender, described him as "too unwell to carry on"; he was then incapable of more than an hour's work per day and prone to making important decisions in a casual, hasty manner; he remained in office out of financial necessity and to satisfy the social ambitions of his wife. The incompetence of his government was more difficult to defend or conceal in the context of war. This was especially so after successive Allied military defeats and the formation of a new and dynamic administration at Westminster, led by Winston Churchill. Thus, by 1940, Spender was convinced that Stormont's ineptitude would finally compel the British government to displace it and impose martial law.*

*On 24 November 1940, Craig died; his most experienced minister, John Andrews, succeeded him. It was an appointment greeted, even within his own party, with resignation rather than enthusiasm. Unwisely he appointed just one new minister, retaining all of his predecessor's ageing, decrepit cabinet. He was himself almost 70 years old, his health was deteriorating and he was personally unsuited to wartime leadership. Under his premiership, the Northern Ireland government plumbed new depths of incompetence, as well as progressively losing touch with the changing mood of the electorate.*

*Neither the confidence nor the prestige of the administration was enhanced by the German air raids on Northern Ireland during April-May 1941. Too late it had begun to appreciate that an aerial attack was likely and that if one did occur there was little hope of avoiding tragedy. Two months before the blitz Andrews was reported to be "very concerned at our anti-aircraft defences" and at the "position which might arise in Belfast after a severe air attack".*

*Due in large part to earlier ministerial neglect and prevarication, local defences were hopelessly inadequate, and the public were physically and psychologically unprepared for the blitz. In September 1940, both Belfast and Londonderry had been provided with a light balloon barrage, which was marginally reinforced six months later. By the spring of 1941, the strength of the anti-aircraft barrage in Northern Ireland had risen to 24 heavy guns and 14 light guns. Twenty-two of these were located in Belfast (6 light and 16 heavy). Four were sited at Londonderry; more were to be transferred from Cardiff, but the Luftwaffe arrived before the guns did. Perhaps the most significant new development had been the transfer, on 20 July 1940, to Aldergrove from Turnhouse, near Edinburgh, of a RAF squadron (No. 245) equipped with Hurricane fighters. Unfortunately these could only operate fully under daylight conditions; experts predicted that any enemy raid in force would be at night. There were no RAF fighters to defend Londonderry. Headquarters staff had moved into RAF Eglinton but the runways were incomplete; not until August 1941 did operational aircraft arrive. There were barrage balloons but no searchlights in the province until 10 April 1941, even though they had been recommended by British defence experts. Nor was there any provision for a smoke screen to conceal Belfast's vulnerable and easily identified dock area.*

*The government's other preparations were hardly reassuring, particularly after the Coventry attack (14 November 1940) when 50,000 houses were destroyed or damaged, and 554 people died. Its schemes to evacuate women and children from Belfast were described by one official as a "fiasco"; a mere 4,000 had left by April 1941. The shelters available in the city could, if fully utilized, provide protection for just one quarter of its population. Its mortuary services had emergency plans to deal with only 200 bodies—a civil servant at the time suggested that the figure was "hardly enough". Finally, provision had been made for the care of a mere 10,000 people who might be made homeless as a consequence of any future enemy action.*

*In mid-1940, John McDermott had been appointed Minister of Public Security, with responsibility for making preparations for an air raid; probably from his first day in office he was convinced that the region's immunity hitherto could not last. He was appalled to discover that, up to the date of his appointment, the Home Affairs Ministry was returning fire-fighting equipment to Britain on the assumption that it would not be needed in the six counties. Numerous factors accounted for this attitude—the conviction that it was unlikely enemy bombers would risk twice crossing Britain, where there were more significant targets, in order to attack Belfast; the assumption that Eire's neutrality would likely deter enemy attack; complacency bred by the fact that the province had escaped attack for so long (by March 1941, 28,000 civilians had already died as a result of German air-raids in Britain); lethargy and a lack of war urgency on the part of local ministers, their belief that defence was a Westminster rather than a local responsibility, their lack of funds, and their increasing difficulty as the blitz intensified in acquiring supplies of defence materiel from Britain.*

*Too late most ministers came to acquire a keener sense of reality and proportion. Several factors heightened their awareness of Northern Ireland's vulnerability. The fall of France increased fears of a German invasion of Ireland, and also immediately accentuated the strategic significance of Britain's northwest ports. From late summer, those in Great Britain were the objective of a major Luftwaffe offensive—Glasgow, Liverpool, etc. The likelihood that this might be extended to Northern Ireland was increased in 1941, when more munitions contracts began to be awarded to local firms as mainland industry approached maximum output. Moreover, from September 1940 onwards, enemy reconnaissance aircraft were reported over the province with increasing frequency (Belfast's first red alert was on 1 October 1940, and they averaged almost one per week over the next six months). It has since become clear that the German leadership was preparing for an assault, focussing particularly on the city's expanding munitions producers, its increasingly active docks and its vital public utilities. Comprehensive files were being produced containing aerial photographs, maps and detailed instructions for Luftwaffe crews indicating the position of potential targets and also their defences and military significance. Moreover, local newspapers reported in sombre tones that William Joyce, "Lord Haw Haw", had announced in his radio broadcasts from Hamburg that there would be "Easter eggs for Belfast". It was in this context that a determined but sadly belated attempt was made to strengthen the province's defences and improve the civil defence services.*

*But the time was too short. On 29 March 1941, McDermott wrote to the Prime Minister highlighting in the "strongest possible terms" the utter inadequacy of local defences—the lack of night-fighters, the shortages of anti-aircraft guns and the non-existence of searchlights. He concluded that the position was "not satisfactory"*

and that it was "doubtful whether Belfast was as well defended as any comparable city or port in any other part of the United Kingdom". He finished with a chilling and eerily accurate prediction

*"Up to now, we have escaped attack. So had Clyde side until recently. Clyde side got its blitz during the period of the last moon. There are certain technical reasons which probably give us some ground for thinking that at present the enemy could not easily reach Belfast in force, except during a period of moonlight. The period of the next moon from, say, the 7th to the 16th of April, may well bring our turn".*

Like Coventry, for Belfast the word "blitz", which is so evocative of sudden, terrifying, deadly aerial bombardment was truly appropriate.

On the night of 7-8 April, Belfast experienced a light raid, involving probably 8 aircraft (their navigation lights still on!), which over a three and a half hour period concentrated their attack mainly on the dock area, causing 13 deaths. It failed to shake public complacency; one subsequent report stated that most people acted as if they were: "front seat spectators at a gigantic Brock's [fireworks] carnival put on especially for their benefit".

The city's first major attack came one week later, on Easter Tuesday night, 15-16 April. An estimated 180 aircraft participated in an assault lasting for five and a half hours (11:30pm-4:55 am). Bombs fell on average at a rate of two per minute. There was virtually no resistance from the ground; due to blast damage to the city's telephone exchange the anti-aircraft guns fell silent from 1:45am. By the time of the "all clear", rung by hand-bells because of a power failure, an official report stated:

*"Quiet residential areas were enveloped by flames ... eating their way from street to street as quick as a man could walk" 35,000 houses were damaged. An 11 year old child living in East Belfast recorded: "The sky was red, pure red. You would have thought someone had set fire to the world".*

An Air Raid Precautions observer from Dublin, Major Sean O'Sullivan, came up to Belfast on the morning of Wednesday 16 April, hours after the raid had ended. He produced a detailed report for southern officials. It stated:

*"In the Antrim Road [North Belfast] and vicinity the attack was of a particularly concentrated character and in many instances bombs from successive waves of bombers fell within 15-20 yards of one another ... In this general area, scores of houses were completely wrecked, either by explosion, fire or blast, while hundreds were damaged so badly as to be uninhabitable ... In suburban areas, many were allowed to burn themselves out and during the day wooden beams were still burning ... During the night of 16-17, many of these smouldering fires broke out afresh and fire appliances could be heard passing throughout the night ... It is estimated that the ultimate number of dead may be in the neighbourhood of 500, and final figures may even approach 2,000".*

Afterwards, the Belfast Telegraph reported: "bodies being recovered from heaps of rubble all over the place".

The final death toll was at least 900, with 600 seriously injured. It was so high because of the inadequacy of the city's defences, the dearth and under-use of shelters, the small numbers who had been evacuated, and the fact that so many bombs had fallen on densely populated, working class areas. A Corporation medical official had earlier described some of the houses in these as "mere hovels"; in some districts each dwelling was occupied by up to thirty people. Given the circumstances, O'Sullivan considered that during the raid the warden service:

*"Functioned efficiently. From the fact that some 200 incidents were reported from each of the two areas most affected, it must be concluded that [they] remained at their posts and reported damage promptly".*

However, his opinion was that the whole civil defence sector was utterly overwhelmed. He continued: "The rescue service felt the want of heavy jacks; in one case the leg and arm of a child had to be amputated before it could be extricated ... But the greatest want appeared to be the lack of hospital facilities ... At 2pm, on the afternoon of the 16th (9 hours after the termination of the raid) it was reported that the street leading to the Mater Hospital was filled with ambulances waiting to set down their casualties ... Professor Flynn, [father of his more famous son, Errol], head of the casualty service for the city, informed me that the greater number of

casualties was due to shock, blast and secondary missiles, such as glass, stones, pieces of piping, etc ... There were many terrible mutilations among both living and dead—heads crushed, ghastly abdominal and face wounds, penetration by beams, mangled and crushed limbs, etc. ... In the heavily “blitzed” areas people ran panic-stricken into the streets and made for the open country. As many were caught in the open by blast and secondary missiles, the enormous number of casualties can be readily accounted for. It is perhaps true that many saved their lives running but I am afraid a much greater number lost them or became casualties...During the day, loosened slates and pieces of piping were falling in the streets and as pedestrians were numerous many casualties must have occurred.”

The report concluded with the observation that:“A second Belfast would be too horrible to contemplate”.

Ulster author Brian Moore was an Air Raid Precautions warden attached to the Mater Hospital, and he helped coffin the dead. In his book *The Emperor of Ice Cream* he wrote recalling his experiences: “In the stink of human excrement, in the acrid smell of disinfectant these dead were heaped, body on body, flung arms, twisted feet, open mouth, staring eyes, old men on top of young women, a child lying on a policeman’s back, a soldier’s hand resting on a woman’s thigh, a carter still wearing his coal-slacks, on top of a pile of arms and legs, his own arm outstretched, finger pointing, as though he warned of some unseen horror. Forbidding and clumsy, the dead cluttered the morgue room from floor to ceiling”.

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

“It was a job for an older woman and my experience at the hospital should have prepared me to some extent ... The place was full of coffins ... Red Cross and St John ambulance nurses and some civilians met and went around with relatives. Two men went around with each group and opened the coffins, lifting the lids ... A man watered the floor with disinfectant from a watering pail; a wise precaution as the place smelt. It was a hideous nightmare. All the way to the place I had told myself I was bound to see horrible sights but only when seen could the full horror be realized. I had seen death in many forms, young men dying of ghastly wounds, but nothing I had ever seen was as terrible as this ... [World War I casualties] had died in hospital beds, their eyes had been reverently closed, their hands crossed to their breasts, death had to a certain extent been ... made decent. It was solemn, tragic, dignified, but here it was grotesque, repulsive, horrible. No attendant nurse had soothed the last moments of these victims; no gentle, reverent hand had closed their eyes or crossed their hands. With tangled hair, staring eyes, clutching hands, contorted limbs, their grey-green faces covered with dust, they lay, bundled into the coffins, half-shrouded in rugs or blankets, or an occasional sheet, still wearing their dirty, torn, twisted garments. Death should be dignified, peaceful: Hitler had made even death grotesque. I felt outraged, I should have felt sympathy, grief, but instead feelings of revulsion and disgust assailed me”.

On 21 April, 163 unclaimed and unidentified bodies were taken from St. George’s Market and given a public funeral

.The official history says of this attack: “Belfast was sorely tried, no other city in the United Kingdom, save London, had lost so many of her citizens in one night’s raid. No other city, except possibly Liverpool, ever did ... [They] wondered how the life of the city could be renewed”.

In fact, John Maffey, the British ambassador in Dublin, who passed through Belfast on the morning after this raid, informed the Irish government that the scenes he witnessed there were “more horrifying than London because of the numbers of small dwelling houses of poor people which were destroyed”.

Also in Dublin, the German Minister there, Dr Eduard Hempel, felt constrained to call by appointment (on the morning of 17 April) with the Irish Minister of External Affairs, J. P. Walshe, to offer sympathy and attempt an explanation. Walshe recorded that the German official was “clearly distressed by the news of the severe raid on Belfast and especially by the number of civilian casualties”.

Hempel stated that "he would once more tell his government how he felt about the matter and he would ask them to confine their operations to military objectives as far as it was humanly possible. He believed that this was being done already but it was inevitable that a certain number of civilian lives should be lost in the course of heavy bombing from the air".

After the attack, W. K. Scott, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, advised Andrews that he should make a personal appeal emphasising that "our best reply...is redoubled effort". He quoted as a possible source of inspiration an extract from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work". Its sentiments if not its eloquence are discernible in Andrews' subsequent press statements. In fact, fear and panic had already reached epidemic proportions, especially in Belfast; its most obvious symptom was a "crash evacuation", which was unprecedented in its scale and entirely unforeseen by the government. Even during the raid, people had begun to flee from the city—by car, on bicycles and on foot. O'Sullivan observed:

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

The latter were colloquially known as "ditchers"; during the hours of darkness they went "up the road" to take cover in hills, parks and fields, lying under hedges, and in dugouts and barns.

That same day Moya Woodside, wife of a South Belfast surgeon, noted in her diary: "Evacuation is taking on panic proportions. Roads out of town are still one stream of cars, with mattresses and bedding tied on top. Everything on wheels is being pressed into service. People are leaving from all parts of town and not only from the bombed areas. Where they are going, what they will find to eat when they get there, nobody knows. This business presents a problem of the first proportions to Stormont". The condition of those fleeing from the city shocked Woodside as much as did their numbers. She reported that: "My mother telephoned to say that she took in 8 evacuees last night, 2 mothers and 6 children. Says one mother is about to have another baby any minute, that they are all filthy, the smell in the room is terrible. They refuse all food except bread and tea; the children have made puddles all over the floor, etc. She is terribly sorry for them and kindness itself but finds this revelation of how the other half live rather overpowering".

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

By late April, it was officially estimated that 100,000 people had fled from the city.

### **The 'fire raid', 4-5 May 1941**

Belfast experienced a further devastating bombardment on the night of 4-5 May—popularly referred to as the "fire raid". During the course of 3 hours, roughly 100,000 incendiary bombs were dropped, followed by high explosives, from an estimated 200 aircraft, mainly on the central, northern and eastern portions of the city. Unlike Easter Tuesday when 50 bombers had had to divert due to deteriorating weather, conditions for bombing were described as being perfect. Afterwards, an official report stated that: "within one hour, the resulting fires were on a scale beyond the resources of local brigades".

*Their best efforts were thwarted by an acute shortage of hose and appliances, blast damage to water pipes, and falling water levels as the tide turned. Eyewitnesses later claimed that, during the attack, the explosions were audible in Bangor and Lisburn and that, by dawn, the inferno they had caused was visible from the Glenshane Pass, 50 miles away. Over 200 buildings were ablaze by the time of the “all clear” at 4:25am (their still smouldering shells may have attracted 3 bombers who attacked the city shortly after midnight on the following night, killing 14 people). The number of fatalities reached almost 200, and once more the unidentified bodies were brought to St George’s Market. The death toll was lower than on Easter Tuesday, because the attack had taken place on a Sunday night, had focussed mainly on the docks and city centre, and had featured a high proportion of incendiary devices. In addition, the shelters available in Belfast had been more fully occupied, and a large proportion of its citizens had already fled into the immediate countryside and beyond.*

*During the “fire raid”, Belfast’s key strategic industries sustained very heavy damage. No shipyard in Great Britain suffered greater physical destruction during a single attack than did Harland & Wolff on this occasion. A doctor, working at a hospital close by stated: “Bombs fell so fast that we had not the time to remove our steel helmets to adjust the chin strap before another fell”.*

*The Belfast Telegraph reported the damage was so extensive that citizens, who had lived in it all their lives, lost their way in the city centre next day. On the morning after the attack, Emma Duffin noted: “the smell of burning was in the air. The grass was strewn with blackened and charred papers. There was a sheet from a child’s essay book. On the top of the page I read “The End of the World”. It seemed appropriate. It was the end of the world as we knew it”.*

*As in mid-April, help in fighting fires and in rescue work was provided by the troops based locally, and more was requested from all over Northern Ireland, from Britain and from Eire. By sending firemen and appliances to Belfast, the south compromised its policy of neutrality and risked becoming a target itself. When war had broken out, Ribbentrop had menacingly informed de Valera that Germany would refrain from hostile action if Ireland maintained an unimpeachable policy of neutrality towards her.*

*For the first and only time in the entire war, Belfast made headline news in the German media after the 4-5 May raid. In graphic and detailed accounts, the claim was enthusiastically repeated that its industry had been devastated beyond recovery—its shipyard “completely destroyed”, its aircraft factory “severely affected”. These reports would have been widely accepted within the city itself. Morale all but collapsed; there was a widespread fear that the Luftwaffe was intent on pulverising the city. One diarist wrote at the time: “I found myself thinking that the people who had been killed outright were probably not the most unfortunate ones”.*

*A Ministry of Home Affairs report estimated that by the end of that month as many as 220,000 persons had at least temporarily evacuated from the capital. They scattered throughout Ulster. They arrived in Fermanagh having “nothing with them only night shirts”; 10,000 crossed the border. Superimposed on the massive British military presence in the province, available accommodation was stretched beyond its limits. Dawson Bates, the Minister of Home Affairs, had to inform the cabinet of the rack-renting of barns, and in some areas of up to 30 people crowded together in small houses.*

*Even in early August Moya Woodside described a “friend whose car broke down...in a tiny village”. She continued: “The food situation is alarming. He could not find... anywhere to stay the night and had to sleep out in the sand-hills...He was unable to get anything to eat...even tea and bread. Village shops were completely sold out”. Three weeks earlier, she herself visited a family in Belfast, which was “paying the full rent for a house of which the two upper rooms were quite uninhabitable, the downstairs windows covered with felt, and the gas supply cut off. All cooking had to be done in semi-darkness over an open fire”. It was “little more than a shelter. Yet there is competition even to get these”.*

### ***The practice of ‘ditching’***

*Thousands of those remaining in the city “ditched”; during the hours of darkness they streamed (“trekked”) along the main arterial roads to the suburbs, to shelter in parks, in ditches and hedgerows, until first light when they felt it safe to return. The scale of continuing public fear was highlighted when, after an air-raid alert on 23*

July 1941, at 2:00am an estimated 30,000 fled from the city in motor vehicles, bicycles and on foot. An eyewitness likened it to “the crowds at a football match”. No aircraft appeared and no bombs fell. It was not until August 1941 that most of those who had evacuated, returned. They had quickly become bored with country life and irritated by the increased distances they had to travel to work. Moreover, they were encouraged to come back by the fact that Luftwaffe attacks on British cities had ceased from mid-May, and the belief that, after Hitler had launched Operation Barbarossa against Russia (26 June 1941), Germany’s bombers had transferred to the Eastern Front.

Meanwhile, police reports indicate that “ditching” had also become a feature of contemporary life in many of the province’s larger county towns. The habit was spread by evacuees from Belfast. In addition, it was because on Easter Tuesday night (15-16 April) a number of bombing incidents had occurred at various places, scattered along the Luftwaffe’s flight path. In the most serious of these the same features which had characterised the experience of the northern capital were paralleled though on an infinitely smaller scale—most of the bombs fell on residential property, the public was unprotected and unprepared, the defences were inadequate, blackout measures defective and the few shelters available under-utilised. In Londonderry, fifteen people were killed when ex-servicemen’s homes were struck in Messines Park. Ten guards died in Newtownards when explosives fell on the town’s airport and five civilians when private housing was struck in Bangor, a quiet seaside town without any obvious strategic targets.

### **Conclusion**

In the course of the four Luftwaffe attacks on Belfast, lasting ten hours in total, 1,100 people died, over 56,000 houses were damaged (53% of its entire housing stock), roughly 100,000 made temporarily homeless and £20 million damage was caused to property at wartime values. It came twelfth in the “league table” of urban areas attacked in the United Kingdom, as measured by weight of bombs dropped. Arguably, the air raids had a graver impact on the morale of the city’s citizens than on its industrial production or the activity of its docks. By 1941, Belfast had undoubtedly become a legitimate target for the Luftwaffe. Thus Dr Hempel had justified the Easter Tuesday attack to Walshe by stating: “that he felt quite sure that his government would not have ordered a raid on Belfast if it had not become absolutely essential for the prosecution of the war. Belfast had become a very important port, especially for the transshipment of foodstuffs, and to abstain any longer from bombing the port and the industrial areas around it would have greatly handicapped the German blockade of Great Britain.”

The city was an increasingly significant base for naval vessels engaged in the Battle of the Atlantic, its port was used for the import of war materiel especially from the US and, after a slow beginning, war production in its industries steadily accelerated, having only been temporarily disrupted by the air raids.

Unemployment throughout the north actually fell by 30,000, between January-June 1941, owing to local firms attracting more British war contracts, to military enlistment, and the increasing numbers employed building shelters, and servicing members of the expanding armed forces based in the province—British and later American. Between 1940-44, Belfast’s shipyards produced 140 warships, 123 merchant vessels (10% on UK output), 500 tanks, 13 million aircraft parts and numerous ordinance pieces. Its aircraft factory made 1,200 Stirling bombers and 125 Sunderland flying boats and repaired 3,000 aircraft. Collectively munitions producers in the city produced 75 million incendiary bullets, 50,000 bayonets and various fittings, including components for the Mulberry floating docks used during the Normandy invasion. One-third of the ropes required by the War Office (a quarter of a million tons) were made at Belfast rope-works; in addition, it manufactured 50,000 camouflage and cargo nets. Belfast’s textile and clothing industry contributed significantly to the province-wide output of 2 million flax fabric parachutes and 200 million yards of cloth for the forces; during the war, 90% of British servicemen’s shirts were produced in Northern Ireland.

In political terms, the blitz exacerbated further the government’s problems, confirmed its directionless, hesitant posture and lessened still further its residual popularity. During and after the raids, MacDermott was the butt of very bitter verbal attacks from backbenchers at Stormont. In an attempt to mollify them, he addressed a Unionist Party meeting on civil defence and the cabinet reluctantly agreed to a parliamentary demand for a secret session. But his main concern was the impact of the raids on the attitude of the general public. In late May, he even raised with Spender the possibility that public anger over the lack of local preparation for Luftwaffe attack, and the inadequacy of Northern Ireland’s defences might result in an assault by irate mobs on

*the parliament buildings at Stormont. It did not materialise. Nonetheless, in the context of the deepening and unprecedented unpopularity of his government—in the province, in parliament and within his own party—Andrews was eventually compelled to resign as prime minister in April 1943.*

*However, by then, Stormont's relations with Westminster had already begun to improve. When writing to commiserate with Andrews, Churchill stated: "But for the loyalty of Northern Ireland and its devotion to what has now become the cause of thirty governments or nations, we should have been confronted with slavery and death, and the light which now shines so brightly throughout the world would have been quenched".*

*He later observed that their relationship had been "tempered by fire", by which he meant their shared experience of the blitz.*