The Bombing of Gernika

The episode of Guernica, with all that it represents both in the military and the moral order, seems destined to pass into History as a symbol. A symbol of many things, but chiefly of that capacity for falsehood possessed by the new Machiavellism which threatens destruction to all the ethical hypotheses of civilization. A clear example of the use which can be made of untruth to degrade the minds of those whom one wishes to convince.

(Foreign Wings over the Basque Country, 1937)
Ekin
Aberri Bilduma Collection, 11
Xabier Irujo

The Bombing of Gernika

Ekin
Buenos Aires
2021
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I can’t - it is impossible for me to give any picture of that indescribable tragedy. Panic, terror, cries, the imploring calls of the wounded, the piteous spectacle of the dead and most painful of all the fact that we could do nothing to help one another, for those beasts who were flying the planes, pursued with ferocity, machine gunned without conscience everything which moved, bringing terror and death to thousands upon thousands of innocent victims. As the Mayor of Gernika I affirm before the world as to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of the tragedy of Gernika.

(Jose Labauria, 1937)
1. Bombardment. Description and types

A bombardment is an air attack on a land or naval target consisting of the launching of various types of projectiles (explosive, incendiary, or toxic) and, sometimes, the aerial strafing of land or sea positions.

Depending on the objective of the bombardment, they can be divided into three types:

1. Tactical bombing: Aerial bombardment directed against targets of immediate military interest in the context of a battle, such as troops, facilities, or military equipment. Airplanes provide proximity air support to ground forces, directly reinforcing operations on the ground or, where appropriate, carry out air
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interdiction missions, attacking targets that are distant from the battlefield but that are part of the theater of operations (such as destroying a bridge that will be used by enemy troops during a battle). Aircraft used for these actions are medium-sized bombers, ground attack aircraft, and even fighters.

2. Strategic bombing: An air mission independent of naval or land operations, directed against specific objectives of military interest located far from combat zones, such as factories and warehouses, communication nodes, ports, or airports. During these actions, large bombers with a long flight range are preferred, as well as ground attack aircraft.

3. Terror bombing: An air mission whose purpose is to destroy the enemy's morale and, consequently, provoke its surrender, through an
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intense and unexpected attack against a target of great symbolic value. The higher the level of material destruction, the more effective terror bombings are. The performance also increases when a campaign of constant and prolonged bombing is orchestrated. The most common targets are open or defenseless cities and primarily civilian victims.
Terror bombing of Barcelona in March 1938
2. Prehistory of terror bombing

Cities have been subject to bombings for a long time. Henry T. Coxwell, an English aeronaut, dropped the first bomb from an aircraft in 1848. In August 1849, during the First Italian War of Independence, the first aerial bombardment was recorded. On that occasion, the Austrian artillery general Franz von Uchatius sent, from the ships besieging the city, several self-controlled balloons armed with 15 kilos of explosives ready to automatically deflate over the target.

By 1899, there were so many aerial bombardments that the First Hague Convention prohibited aerial bombing.

The first aerial bombing of a ground target from a "heavier-than-air flying machine," or a plane, took place in 1911,
eight years after the Wright brothers invented the self-propelled airplane. On that occasion, Second Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti, a member of the Corpo di Spedizione (Italian Expeditionary Corps), decided to put four 2 kg grenades filled with picric acid (TNP) in a bag and throw them over the oasis of Tajura from a Taube monoplane on an exploration flight during the Tripolitanian War, or Guerra di Libia.

After the terror campaigns of the Zeppelins during World War I, an event would revolutionize the history of aerial bombing in 1919. It happened when Emir Amanullah Khan declared the independence of Afghanistan, sparking the Third Afghan War. British expeditionary troops, depleted after budget adjustments post-1918, could barely hold back the insurgents' attacks. After bombing Dakka and Jalalabad, the British command decided to experiment
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with a new kind of warfare: a single aircraft, a Handley Page V/1500 named Old Carthusian, was sent to bomb Kabul. The operation was carried out on May 24, 1919. The bomber, piloted by two people, dropped four 50-kilogram and sixteen 9-kilogram bombs on the emir's palace. The attack had a great psychological impact, and after a series of new bombings, the emir's troops capitulated in early June.

The message was resounding: the British had won a war by using a single aircraft, in a six-hour operation, with no casualties, minimal cost, and out-and-out efficiency.

European administrations began to invest in bombers and European air warfare experts developed theories about terror bombing, "total war," or the "mechanical army." A new way of making war had been invented.
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Italian airships bombing Turkish positions during the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912)
3. Coup d'etat: Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco

After the military coup of July 1936, General Francisco Franco became one of the main leaders of the insurrection in Spain.

He needed military assistance and, most urgently, planes to transport the rebel troops from the Spanish colonies in Africa to Sevilla (Seville) in the Iberian Peninsula. In their aim to overthrow the Spanish Republic, the rioters were not going to get any assistance from European democratic governments. Therefore, they asked three western European totalitarian governments of the time—Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, and Oliveira Salazar’s Portugal—for help.
With the help of Alfonso XIII, exiled in Rome, the coup leaders, José Sanjurjo and Emilio Mola, had contacted Mussolini after the February 1936 elections. Mussolini, who aspired to control the Mediterranean and create a new Roman empire, had agreed to assist the coup plotters. However, when he was notified in July that “a certain general named Franco” had risen up, he hesitated; General Sanjurjo had died and Mussolini had not negotiated with Franco, nor did he know him. Mussolini did not fully decide to support the coup plotters until he heard, in August 1936, that the French and British governments were willing to sign a non-intervention agreement regarding the conflict: this guaranteed the victory of the coup plotters, since while the Republic would not receive any military assistance, the rebels would be fully supported by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.
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After the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Germany had lost all its African colonies, so that while the rest of the European powers were experimenting with new bombing systems and techniques in their African and especially Middle Eastern colonies, German pilots lacked combat experience. Hermann Göring became one of the most determined apologists for assisting the Spanish plotters in Germany since, as the minister of the air, this war would give him the opportunity to become the second strongman of Hitler's regime, and his successor. By launching a terror bombing campaign, which in his opinion was "the most National Socialist way of waging war," Göring would achieve his goal by early 1938.
Hitler became one of the first allies of General Franco
4. Non-Intervention Committee

The European democratic powers did not want to trigger World War II, and opted for a policy of "appeasement" by granting political and strategic advantages to Germany. The German high command and Hitler himself, for their part, believed that they were not prepared to face "the next war" until 1940, as established by the Four Year Plan (1936-1940) overseen by Göring.

Under these circumstances, the French government, led by Léon Blum, persuaded the British government, led by Stanley Baldwin, to offer Mussolini and Hitler a non-intervention agreement in the Spanish conflict. The proposal was welcomed by the Italian and German regimes who endorsed the agreement in the summer of 1936 without intention of complying with it.
In fact, when Italy and Germany ratified the agreement in the summer of 1936, they both already had units fighting in favor of the rioters. The British and French administrations had perfect knowledge of it, too, since all Italian radio communications were tapped by the British intelligence services.

The non-intervention agreement was not a treaty because there was no written copy of it. It was never an officially signed agreement and its objective was not “non-intervention,” but rather to control the intervention of the Italian-German forces in order to avoid, at all costs, an open international conflict in 1936. It was an oral agreement in which 24 European governments pledged not to intervene and not to sell or send arms to either side.
US Ambassador Claude Bowers accused in his August 30 1937 report addressed to Secretary of State Cordel Hull the farce of the non-intervention committee:

“The Non-intervention Pact was proving itself a dishonest farce. The Fascist powers fought just openly, defiantly, with arms; most of the democracies fought just as effectively, if unconsciously, as collaborationists of the Fascist under the mocking cloak of “non-intervention.” When men of good minds assumed that Italy, Germany, and even Portugal were observing the pact, the dishonesty of the pretense stood out like a sore thumb. This pact has become a mockery by October 1936. It denied the Spanish government arms and ammunition while turning a blind eye to the glaring violations by Germany and Italy. Arms and ammunition poured into
Portuguese ports, and without inspection at the customs were hurried through to Franco’s forces. It was common knowledge. Later, deliveries were made openly through Cádiz, Vigo, Pasajes, and Malaga. On September 16, 1935, John Whittaker, Hubert R. Knickerbocker, and Floyd Gibbons, war correspondents, informed me that rebel aviation consisted largely of German bombers and Italian pursuit planes, and that in Seville they had seen German officers in the cafés.”

The manifest violation of the agreement on the part of the Italian and German governments, forced all the administrations involved in the agreement to lie to the press and to their own fellow citizens, and the war—a prologue to World War II—was emphatically called the "Spanish Civil War."
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The recurrent denial of German and Italian intervention by the British and the French administrations, gave rise to the expression coined by the British journalist Claud Cockburn, "Never believe anything until it is officially denied."
Claude Bowers, US ambassador, told Secretary of State Cordell Hull that the Non-Intervention Pact was a dishonest farce.
5. The Basque Country in 1936

Since the abolition of the Basque historical laws (the *fueros*) in 1876, the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) claimed the devolution of the historical rights of the Basques, which in political terms meant independence. After the proclamation of the Spanish Republic in 1932, two autonomy statute projects promoted by EAJ-PNV and the Basque Nationalist Action (ANV-EAE) party were killed by the Spanish parliament.

Finally, after the approval of the statute of autonomy on October 6, 1936, Jose Antonio Agirre was elected Lehendakari (president) of the Basque autonomous state and was sworn in a day later in Gernika. A government of democratic concentration led by EAJ-PNV was formed, including all political parties.
Despite not being part of the leftist Popular Front and being a Catholic party, EAJ-PNV firmly positioned itself against the uprising since the Basque Nationalism did not have any religious or political connections with the rebels. The National Movement (Franco’s governing institution established in 1937) represented totalitarianism versus the Basque democratic republicanism; political centralism and Spanish radical nationalism versus the defense of the political and cultural rights of the Basque people; and, finally, a hierarchical and doctrinaire Catholicism, far from Maritain’s Christian-democratic ideology held by the Basque nationalists.

The confrontation was inevitable, and the first air war action on Basque soil, the bombing of Otxandio, took place on July 22, 1936, just four days after the Spanish military uprising and three days
after the deputies of EAJ-PNV, Manuel Irujo and Joxemari Lasarte, announced by radio their political party’s unequivocal and explicit rejection of the ideological positions and military strategy of the conspirators.
Basque president Jose A. Agirre took the presidential oath of office in October 1936 in Gernika
6. The Basque front in the spring of 1937

General Franco's troops advanced rapidly from the south on Madrid, which they were unable to capture.

On the Basque southern front, Colonel Camilo Alonso Vega advanced north from Gasteiz and occupied Legutio on July 22, 1936, and there he was stopped in his advance toward Bilbao.

General Mola's troops in the Basque Country advanced from the east in Pamplona but could not capture Bilbao.

Lieutenant Colonel Alfonso Beorlegui occupied Irun on September 5; Donostia fell on September 13; Bergara on September 22.
Finally, after the capture of Ondarroa on October 4, the front stabilized on the line marked by Ondarroa, Markina, Eibar, Arrasate, Legutio, and Urduña.

US Ambassador Claude G. Bowers’s map showing the area controlled by the Spanish rebels in grey. In the north, Bilbao is still resisting the rebel advance
7. Everyday routine: “Clear day means bombs”

The start of the spring offensive over Bilbao began with the massive aerial bombardments, from March 31 to April 6, 1937 on the front positions and the open towns of Otxandio, Elorrio, and Durango. As Wolfram von Richthofen, chief of staff of the Condor Legion wrote in his diary, Motxotegi Mountain "was turned into a horrible sea of flames and smoke by the aerial bombs—approximately 60 tons in the span of two minutes."

The aerial bombardment campaign over Bizkaia that began on March 31 did not stop until the fall of the last positions in the Basque Country on August 18. Only on days of bad weather did the bombers stop flying and bombing. That explains
why the gudaris, or Basque soldiers, said “clear day means bombs.”
Based on General Giulio Douhet’s doctrines of war, every day was organized as follows:

- 8am. Attack using artillery and Flak 18 antiaircraft cannons
- 9am. Air attack with explosive and incendiary projectiles
- 10am. Air attack of the Heinkel He 51 ground attack aircraft and reconnaissance units, mostly Heinkel He 45 and Heinkel He 70, which machine-gunned and bombed land positions
- 12pm. New artillery attack at noon
- 2–4pm. New aerial bombardment in the early afternoon
- 4–5pm. One or more lightning strikes of the ground attack aircraft during the afternoon
- Advancing of the infantry by 6pm
This strategy allowed the German air command to confirm that “victory was being achieved from the air” since the infantry only advanced after the leading role of the air force.

Based on doctrines of total war, the civilian population at the rearguard was to be attacked also. Therefore, on average, four cities or towns of the rearguard were bombed daily. Most cities, towns, and villages in Bizkaia were bombed more than one time (Bilbao was bombed more than 50 times in two and a half months).

As a logical consequence of this policy, most victims were civilian.
Open cities behind the lines were bombed every day. In the image, the bombing of Elgeta by Italian planes in 1937
8. Slow advance toward Bilbao

Despite the overwhelming air superiority, after a month of campaigning, the coup troops managed to advance only 10 kilometers (barely 6.2 miles) to Elorrio from the south and had not been able to advance on Bilbao from the east. This equated to a daily advance of just 0.4 kilometers (slightly over 0.2 miles).

The immediate consequence of the poor advance of the rebel units was the quantitative incrementation of the bombing episodes.

There was a constant increase in bombing waves throughout the months of April and May of 1937, as well as a massive use of available air units.
While at the beginning of April the aerial bombings were limited to an average of ten bombing operations and ground attacks per day, between the 22nd and 26th of April up to 15.6 operations per day were recorded.

In the whole month of April there were about 250 bombing operations, whereas in May the number was increased to 300.

The spring offensive closed on August 18 with a frightening count of more than 650 rebel bombing operations on Basque soil.
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Terror bombing of Durango on March 31, 1937
9. “Target Gernika”

Three main factors determined a massive terror bombing event in the Basque Country.

Distress of the Spanish General Staff

- Considering the slow advance of the coup units, enemies of Göring and Mola circulated the rumor that Bilbao was not going to fall. Just as Hugo Sperrle, head of the German Condor Legion, was being pressured by Berlin, Ettore Bastico, head of the Italian units, was being pressured by Mussolini, who needed a quick victory over Bilbao to make up for the Guadalajara disaster.
- The Germans and the Italians blamed General Mola for the slow progress, disqualifying him before Franco. Mola explained to
Richthofen that his plan was to destroy Bizkaia's industry to root out Basque nationalism “to clean up Spain.” Richthofen replied “very clearly and unambiguously,” that he had never heard “such idiocy” before.

Göring's personal interest in the bombing

- Göring wanted to convince Hitler that the air force was his best weapon and, therefore, he had to show him that the Luftwaffe was capable of carrying out actions that were not within the reach of the infantry or the navy, such as sinking ships or burning urban centers away from the front. By achieving this, he would be in a position to convince Hitler that he should invest in fighters and bombers and that the person in command of this force...
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should be the second strongman of the Reich.

• Hitler's birthday, April 20, was one of the three most important holidays in Nazi Germany. Göring intended to offer a bombing as a gift to the Führer, as he would later do on April 20, 1940 in Namsos; in 1941 in Athens and London; and in 1942 in Malta. The most massive and devastating Luftwaffe bombings occurred on Hitler's birthday. However, in 1937 it could not be, and to Göring’s distress the bombing was delayed to the following Monday, April 26.

The order to bomb Gernika

• The commanders of the Italian and German air forces, Vincenzo Velardi and Wolfram von Richthofen, understood that the capture of Bilbao required intensifying the
terror bombings, through “a decisive blow” that caused the surrender of the Basque forces.

• Richthofen was experimenting with more effective tactical and terror bombing strategies, preparing the Luftwaffe for "the next war." Gernika offered him the opportunity to demonstrate the destructive capacity of the aerial weapon, and to test the new experimental bombers and bombing techniques such as “Koppelwurf” (corral bombing) and the new ground attack techniques (aerial strafing).

• Franco needed to take an important city like Bilbao to be recognized as a “belligerent” on an international level, and Mola needed to advance more quickly after having publicly announced at the start of the offensive, on March 31, 1937, that he “would take Bilbao in three weeks.” Therefore, the two were also in
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favor of implementing “a decisive blow.”

• As Richthofen expressed in writing, the order to bomb Gernika was issued to the Condor Legion by the rebel headquarters. Furthermore, by virtue of article 3 of the General Instructions for Liaison with the Air Forces, remote bombing orders could only be issued by Franco. In sum, only Franco could order the bombing of Gernika, and so he did.
General Emilio Mola, commander in chief of the Spanish Northern Army in charge of occupying Bilbao
10. Seven main reasons for choosing Gernika as a target

There were many cities that the rebel command could have chosen to bomb, but seven main reasons determined the fate of Gernika.

1. Gernika had an adequate size. The city was large enough to be a military objective and small enough to be destroyed in its entirety with the number of aircraft and the quantity and quality of the bombs available to the rebels.

2. Gernika was about 23 kilometers (14.3 miles) from the front line, so it could be occupied a few days after the attack, before the International Committee of the Red Cross, the press, or other international organizations could report, take
photographs, or get any other type of physical evidence of the bombing.

3. The city was completely defenseless and did not have anti-aircraft batteries.

4. Most of the buildings in the town were stuck to one another in closed blocks, separated by narrow streets, and had internal wooden structures, which would prove the usefulness and destructive capacity of the new German incendiary bombs that would be dropped by the thousands after the 250 kilos of explosive bombs.

5. Gernika was one of the wartime district capitals, and the front in the Markina sector depended on its weekly market and its three hospitals. The destruction of these resources would spell disaster for the front at Markina.
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6. Gernika had not been bombed before. Richthofen needed to experiment and measure the results of his raids on the ground, but since most of the population centers were being bombarded by German, Italian, and Spanish units, it was difficult to know the effect of the Luftwaffe units’ attacks specifically. Gernika was suitable for a war experiment.

7. Gernika, seat of the oak tree that symbolizes Basque freedom and representative democracy, a place venerated by the Basque people, was an ideal target to break the morale of the Basque troops, which would be required for them to surrender the day after the bombing under the threat of repeating these attacks against other Basque cities. It was not the first time that Gernika had become the target of the wrath of generals of different colors. Under
the slogan of the Liberal Party—“Ancient Laws and Petrol”—General Baldomero Espartero gave an order in 1835, one hundred years before the bombing, to burn the oak of Gernika, the Parliament of Bizkaia, and the whole town, and to place an inscription on its ruins reading: “Here was Gernika.” *Gernikako arbola* (The Tree of Gernika), a poem composed in 1853 by Jose M. Iparragirre, is still considered by many Basques the unofficial anthem of the Basque Country, and the oak itself the symbol of the freedoms and democratic virtues of the nation. Therefore, it was foreseeable that the attack was going to have a strong impact on the Basque society. On the other hand, “liberties and democracy” were two of the “errors” that Franco and Mola sought to eradicate.
11. The alarm systems and the antiaircraft shelters

At the time, there were no radars or mechanical means to detect the presence of enemy planes. As the only means of alarm, the guards on Mount Kosnoaga—a 273-meter-high hill over Gernika—waved flags when they saw planes over Gernika. These signals were registered by other group of soldiers at the Andra Mari church tower. These watchmen sounded the alarm by ringing the church bells: a slow ringing to announce alarm and rapid ringing to announce danger. On April 26, 1937, Amaia Castillejo’s brother and the ten-year-old altar boy, Pablo Izagirre, rang the bells.

On average, it took people between 10 and 15 minutes to reach the shelters because, in many cases, those who could
hear the bells had to stop whatever they were doing and run for their siblings located in different parts of the city. This factor was taken into account by Richthofen when planning the bombing.

Gernika is located about 10 kilometers from the coast (6.25 miles). Consequently, even though the planes flew low over Gernika coming from the north (from the sea), the watchmen did not see or hear the bombers until they were five minutes or less away from the city center and, therefore, there was literally no time to ring the alarm with enough advance.

Gernika had a total of 17 antiaircraft shelters. As the architect of Gernika, Castor Uriarte, wrote: “We built all shelters the same way. Pine logs eight feet high and about 35 inches in diameter were used as pillars. Other timbers of the same diameter were used
as beams. Five five-millimeter steel plates and, finally, two layers of sandbags were placed on these pillars. In some cases, for example in the case of the town hall shelter and that of Count Arana's house, this construction was made on the first floor or in the basement of these buildings, solidly built on stone. And we also built shelters elsewhere. For example, the narrow street of Andra Mari in the center of the village, between Artekale and Barrenkale streets, was completely covered and used as a refuge. It was about 40 meters long [and 3.65 meters wide] and had two entries from both sides of the street. Indeed, it was just a covered street. This was the only shelter that was not finished on April 26.” That narrow, covered street became a fatal trap for the people sheltered there. Most of them died.
The Tree of Gernika was an early target of Spanish centralist aspirations. Under the motto “Ancient Laws and Petrol” (literally, “we must burn the tree of Gernika”) General Espartero gave an order in 1835 to burn the oak of Gernika, the Parliament of Bizkaia, and the whole town.
12. Typology and number of airplanes and bombs

The data that we have indicates that at least 59 aircrafts took part in the bombing: 27 bombers and 32 fighters, some of which carried out more than one “service” or action over Gernika.

Bombers

1 Dornier Do 17 (from the air base in Burgos)
2 Heinkel He 111s (from the air base in Burgos)
21 Junkers Ju 52s (from the air base in Burgos)
3 Savoia-Marchetti SM.79s (from the air base in Soria)
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Fighters and ground attack aircraft

- 12 Heinkel He 51s (from the air base in Gasteiz)
- 7 Messerschmitt Bf 109s (from the air base in Gasteiz)
- 13 Fiat CR.32s (from the air base in Gasteiz)

This represented 20% of the rebel aviation in the entire Iberian Peninsula in April 1937.

We do not have quantitative data, but it is documented that Heinkel He 45 and Heinkel He 70 reconnaissance aircraft from the Lasarte and Gasteiz airfields also participated in observation tasks. They also routinely operated as ground attack aircraft, strafing and bombing with 10 and 50 kg bombs.
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A total of approximately 41 tons of 50 and 250 kg explosive bombs (with a delay of approximately two seconds, capable of penetrating to the base of a three-story building, exploding and destroying it completely) and 1.5 kg incendiaries were dropped.

Given the limited capacity of the bomb carriers, additional boxes of incendiary bombs were loaded to be dropped by hand by an aviator flying a Junkers Ju 52.
Chains of Heinkel He 51 ground attack planes flying three abreast
13. Strategy of the attack

Gernika was the first town to be bombarded:

1. As a large-scale military experiment through the massive use of bombs (more than 41 tons of explosives).
2. Using a plan of attack that would later be employed elsewhere in Europe during World War II (such as in Warsaw and also by the Allies in Dresden), a combination of carpet bombing, “Koppelwurf” or corral bombing and shuttle bombing.

This bombardment was a perfect testing ground for the newly created Luftwaffe, the German air force.
Several authors still defend that the target of the bombing was the destruction of the small Errenereria Bridge, aiming to prevent the withdrawal of the Basque troops toward Bilbao. However, the disproportionate force of the attack, and the activity of the fighters machine-gunning civilians for three and a half hours, indicates that it was a terror bombing operation with the intention of completely destroying Gernika. The destruction of the “holy city of the Basques” would demoralize the troops, discourage the civilian population, and precipitate the surrender of the Basque government, prompting the subsequent fall of Bilbao and its heavy industry.

The bombing of Gernika took place on Monday, April 26, 1937, market day. Even if the population were conscious that there was a certain danger of attack,
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no one expected that Gernika could become the target of an attack of such a massive scale as the one that took place that day. Therefore, the market was held as usual and, although it is difficult to calculate, the number of people in Gernika at that time was between 10,000 and 12,000, mostly civilians.

At 4:20 p.m., the bells of the church of Andra Mari alerted the population of the arrival of enemy planes. Most of these aircraft belonged to the German Luftwaffe (renamed “Condor Legion” in 1937), and to a lesser extent to the Italian “Aviazione Legionaria” (Legionary Air Force).

The airfields that served as bases for the bombing were those of Gasteiz for the fighter planes, and those of Burgos and Soria for the bombers.
After the warning, the citizens of Gernika ran to protect themselves in the different shelters that had been built, where they stayed for almost four hours until the bombardment ended. It was an incessant attack with hardly any intervals between the different waves, and was planned using the following tactics:

1. First, a single Heinkel He 51 flew over Gernika from the east. The planes did not come from the north (from the sea) unseen. This was premeditated. That first and sole Heinkel He 51 flew for about fifteen minutes east of Gernika and provoked the system of alarm: The flags from Kosnoaga alerted the two watchmen at Andra Mari who then rang they bells. Consequently, people ran to the shelters. This is precisely what Richthofen wanted—
the victims did not know that the shelters were going to become death traps. As part of this first wave of the attack, minutes after the sole Heinkel He 51 dropped its bombs in the city center, three bomber planes bombed Gernika’s water deposit to ensure that after the bombing there was no water left for the firefighters.

2. One of the consequences of this first wave of attacks was that the people thought the bombing was over. The emergency services start acting; firefighters, nurses, doctors, and other first aid personnel went to the city center to help the first victims. The rebel air command knew that it was going to take about 30 to 45 minutes for the workforce to reach the city center and start assisting the victims. Therefore, they waited until the second wave of bombers to attack the city center and surprised
medics, firefighters, nurses, and other assistants out in the open (this tactic was later employed in other bombings, such as that of Rotterdam).

For forty minutes, between the first and second wave, the fighters and the ground attack planes flew in a circle, preventing anyone from escaping from the urban nucleus, in order to keep everyone within the “circle of fire” of downtown Gernika.

3. Forty minutes later, 21 heavy bomber Junkers Ju 52s bombed Gernika flying from the north and, thus, did so without being detected by the watchmen until it was too late.

The first bombs dropped were breaker bombs, weighing between 50 and 250 kilograms, to destroy buildings. The bombs broke the roofs and detonated two seconds
after falling to the ground, which, in the case of the 250 kg bombs, caused the complete collapse of the buildings. Thus, they exposed the entire wooden structure of the houses. Next, the bombers dropped the one-kilogram incendiary bombs. These bombs contained an alloy of magnesium, aluminum, and zinc that, when in contact with other metals, reacted and caused an uncontrollable fire and temperatures of more than 1,500 degrees Celsius. Consequently, a huge fire broke out in Gernika, which could be seen from villages many kilometers away. Shelters became a deadly trap. After receiving two direct hits with 250-kilogram bombs, the shelter of Andra Mari street collapsed, immediately killing most of the 450
to 500 people who were there and burying the rest alive, who later died asphyxiated or burned. Numerous witnesses have made reference to the screams that were heard for hours, as the fire advanced in the direction of the shelter. Only four survivors have been registered, all of them placed near the entrances of the shelter.

4. Finally, the survivors who were trying to escape from the urban center were once again machine-gunned by fighters and ground attack planes for nearly two more hours (100 minutes). These planes flew in “chains” of three planes diving to less than 50 meters off the ground. Each plane was equipped with two machine guns capable of firing 20 bullets per second. They acted in the surroundings of Gernika, flying in circles to keep the
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population within the perimeter of fire. The city center was made up of very narrow streets and houses linked together, which facilitated the spread of fire.

If the town had been a military objective, and the civilians had been troops defending a fortress or a military stronghold, the machine-gunning would have kept them neutralized within the village's "circle of fire," which would have allowed the infantry to advance without resistance and quickly take the ruins of the town by storm.

But it was a war experiment and, as Richthofen recorded in his diary, it was a great "technical success," since Gernika was completely destroyed and the population was kept immobile, within the perimeter of the town, during
the three long hours that the attack lasted.

Following the logic of the terror bombing, the three regimes of the coup coalition asked within 24 hours of the bombing for the surrender of the Basque government and the Basque troops. However, the Basques did not surrender.
Wolfram von Richthofen, the architect of the bombing of Gernika
General Hugo Sperrle, commander in chief of the Condor Legion
14. Excerpts from personal testimonies

Testimony of Sebastian Uria

“I ran past the San Juan Church and was running through the center of town when I came upon a refuge in one of the narrow streets. It didn’t look like much of a refuge; it was just a street with a pine-reinforced roof over it but, for some reason, I went inside. As soon as I was inside, I knew that I had made a mistake. It was jammed with people. They were standing like sardines in a can. I wanted to get out of there. The bombers would be there any minute and I didn’t want to be trapped. I started working my way through the people and finally arrived at the other entry which opened onto another street. I debated to myself whether or not I should go outside and make a run for the
mountain. I probably would have gone if I hadn’t seen a vacant area just inside the refuge, near the entryway. There was only one other person there, an 18- or 19-year-old girl who was crying. Apparently, the others were afraid to be that close to the entryway. It seemed like a good place to me—at least there was enough light that I could see what was around me. But there wasn’t much time now; I could hear the airplanes coming closer. I crouched down beside the girl and told her not to cry, that we would be all right. The noise of the airplanes kept getting louder and louder and then the girl blurted out to me that she had left her two baby brothers in the house above us and she had been afraid to go get them. That was why she was crying. But I didn’t have time to think about getting them. There was a loud roar of engines. The bombers were right on top of us.”
Father Eusebio Arronategi, one the eyewitnesses of the attack
Sebastian Uria, eyewitness of the attack, lost his left arm in Gernika
The Bombing of Gernika

Testimony of Iñaki Rezabal

“With my body sunk to the ground, I raised my head a little. I looked up with eyes of horror; I saw a flying apparatus, and on its wings I read Junkers. In its cabin I saw two men. I watched a package tear through the air with lightning speed. Right away, an atrocious noise; it was a hand bomb that exploded on my body. I trembled. I was electrified. My breath caught. I gave a cry of pain and was buried in dirt, stones, and smoke. Struggling desperately, I got up. A great grief agitated me. My left arm was shattered. Four inches below the shoulder joint, I had a deep gash from which blood gushed out and I burned all over my body. The meat of my arm was severed, and so was the bone. My left forearm, tendons hanging from it, was mixed with the earth. I crouched down, and,
with an unexpected serenity, I first grasped my injured arm with my right hand and, horrified, I instinctively crossed it over my back, and through my clothes I felt the blood run down from my shoulder to my feet like a river of fire. Like crazy, I started walking without a fixed orientation. I screamed and asked for help. The planes kept bombing. I crossed the corpses of women and children who had been killed, as they fled the town, by the bombs and machine guns from the planes. Cries of the dying and wounded destroyed my ears. I will never be able to forget that tragic picture of a woman who carried a little boy in her arms and held him against her chest. The child shouted, ‘Amatxo, hiltzera noa’ (Mother, I am going to die), and the mother, wrapping her little son with her disheveled hair, while she ran unconsciously, at random, replied: ‘Ez
beldurtu ume; biak hilko gara' (Don't be scared son; we will both die). As soon as the mother had finished speaking, a plane, descending to twenty meters, machine-gunned and killed them.”

Testimony of Juan Sistiaga

“There was a big mansion just north of a small plaza in the northeast section of Guernica. The mansion had a stone wall around it and a bomb had fallen and broken part of the wall. Lying nearby were two girls and a man who must have taken refuge near the wall. The man and one of the girls were dead. The other girl was still alive, but her abdomen had been torn open and her intestines were hanging out. Her eyes were open, and they seemed to be pleading to me for help. I knew that she was mortally wounded but I knelt down,
and she struggled to get up. I held her under the shoulders and tried to assure her that a stretcher was on the way and that we would take her to the hospital as soon as possible. She just looked at me. She never said anything. She was a very beautiful girl with light brown hair. I was still holding her and talking to her, and waiting for a stretcher, when I heard the sound of airplanes. I looked back over my shoulder and saw them. They were those ugly three-motored German bombers. They were low and right upon us. I turned and looked back at the girl. She was dead. I had seen death many times on the front, but a wave of emotion came over me. I laid her down gently and motioned for the other gudariak to take cover.”
The Bombing of Gernika

Testimony of Maria Olabarria

“From where we stood, we saw the bombs fall. The planes went around and around above us. It seemed that they were seeking us. And it was true: they were looking for four women. There was a house nearby. We ran to the entrance. It was closed. Then we stuck ourselves physically to the doorjamb, willing to protect to each other. I was in the middle. A plane circled the house, shooting with the machine gun. Dust jumped before us. Suddenly we heard a sickening crunch: a bomb was dropped on the house. The trembling threw me to the ground amid stones and bricks. My eldest daughter, who was twenty-seven, died instantly, crushed. The other, the youngest, who was getting married, had time to hold my hand, squeezed it a little and said, “Ouch!” She sighed, and staring at me, died. I do not know how long I
was there between my two dead daughters, blood running down my neck. After a while, I was picked up.”

Testimony of Imanol Agirre, a 9-year old boy in 1937

“The bells always rang when planes passed over on their way to bomb Bilbao. We got used to it. That day, too, when the town was full of peasants and cattle for the market, the bells rang, but nobody took much notice. Suddenly there were crashes. I saw spurts of flame and smoke coming from the far side of the town. To the shelters! To the shelters! People began to run in all directions in a wild panic. I ran with a friend and my uncle toward a small factory where shell parts were made. There was a high wall we could get behind.
Bombs were dropping incessantly; we were almost choked by smoke and dust. But no bomb hit the factory. Factories are the safest places to be, far safer than hospitals.

My uncle called out, “Let’s run to the fields,” and he started off across the street. A plane swooped down and he fell on his side with blood spurting from his head. There was nothing to do and we were frightened, so we left him. Later we both ran out through the orchards and up to the hills where we sheltered under a tree. It wasn’t much protection, but it saved our lives. The planes, five of them, circled round us for about twenty minutes on and off. We heard the machine-gun rattle, but they didn’t hit us.

We saw terrible things.
One man near us had been hunting. He ran across to take shelter in a hut and we saw the planes kill both him and his dog. We saw a family of people we knew from our street run into a wood. There was the mother with two children and the old grandmother. The planes circled about the wood for a long time and at last frightened them out of it. They took shelter in a ditch. We saw the old granny cover up the little boy with her apron. The planes came low and killed them all in the ditch, except the little boy. He soon got up and began to wander across a field, crying. They got him too. It was terrible; we were both crying so much we could not speak. Everybody was being killed, there were bodies all over the fields. We had to pick them up in baskets afterwards. A lot of them.
The Bombing of Gernika

After an age, the planes went away and we went back into Guernica. It was all smoking ruins. I went to what had been our house and nothing was left, not even a piece you could preserve to remind you of your home. There was a doctor driving about in his car helping to pick up the wounded. I don’t know how he escaped death. Sixty people had been killed in a half-built refuge. The airmen had played jokes, too, and dropped spanners and hammers. One dropped a wicker basket with food in it which hit a friend of mine.

Then they dropped some leaflets. They promised us bread and a warm hearth if we surrendered. The warm hearth will be like Guernica, I expect...”
Captain Joseba Elosegi, eyewitness of the bombing. Elosegi was the highest-ranking Basque officer in Gernika
15. Material destruction and death toll

The city center, an area less than one square kilometer, was totally razed. Over 85 percent of the buildings—a total of 271 edifices—were completely destroyed, and only one percent were not affected by the bombing. The incendiary bombs started a fire that could not be put out for several days. In line with the concept of terror bombing, the weapons factories and the Errenteria bridge, the only strategic objectives in town, were not touched by the bombs or the machine-gunning.

The Basque government registered 1,654 deaths. The mayor of Gernika at the time, Jose Labauria, further stated that 450 additional people had lost their lives in the Andra Mari shelter. Together, these make up a minimum of 2,000 deaths.
Father Eusebio Arronategi, who, like Labauria, was in Gernika during the bombing and the following days (helping with the rescue effort and identifying the corpses), said that he saw "thousands of his fellow citizens suffocated, killed, and injured." Forty eyewitnesses, including all the international reporters who came to Gernika, seconded these figures.

Based on the figure of 100 deaths, proclaimed by the rebel authorities in a 1938 report, several authors today still defend that, indeed, no more than 100 to 300 people died in Gernika.

However, there is no piece of evidence that supports those numbers, and every single eyewitness who testified in 1937 mentioned more than 1,000 deaths.

In sum, we can only know that the deaths were more than 2,000.
The total number of fatalities is difficult to ascertain because the more than 60,000 m$^3$ of rubble would not be removed from the city center until the end of 1941.

The Franco regime never officially recorded any deaths and in fact tried and managed partially to eliminate the records prepared by the Basque authorities, thus erasing even the memory of the victims.
Xabier Irujo

This photograph proves that the bombing was surgical: barely ten meters from the white line to the city center, everything was destroyed, while ten meters to the outside of said line, the industrial sector and the houses of notorious pro-rebel inhabitants of Gernika did not suffer any impact.
“It was close to eight. The planes would not return. There was no need. Gernika no longer existed... Everything was rubble and it was hard to recognize the streets... Everywhere you looked, you only saw destruction. (testimony of the gudari Joseba Eloseg)
“We could hear people, under the rubble, calling out to us and weeping, but there was too much debris on top of them and the fires were growing... we had to abandon them. At that moment, I almost went crazy” (testimony of the gudari Sabin Apraiz)
“It was a Dantesque site. We found children next to piles of rubble. When asked where their parents were, they responded sadly, pointing to the mass of rubble: "There."
(testimony of José María Picaza, responsible for the evacuation of Gernika)
“I returned to Gernika the next morning. It was gray and cloudy. Some of the fires were burning and there were smoldering pockets of fire in various places. I went down San Juan Street and saw the body of Felipe Bastarretxea under the Errenteria bridge. He was lying on his back, near a small boat. I crossed the bridge and continued down San Juan Street. When I got close to the shelters, I could hear the screams of the people coming from them. There were still some people alive under the rubble. There were mountains of debris on some of them. It would have been impossible to get them out. I would rather die than see that horror one more time” (Francisca Arriaga's testimony)
My conversation with him took place in an unstable time, when only ten years separated us from the lingering lethargy from years of the oppressive Francoist dictatorship. He came home in the early hours of the afternoon, under a leaden sky. It wasn't raining yet, but it felt like if the storm would drop the sky upon us. He was an extremely vital man, shaped by years of war, exile, and prison that gave him a strong, firm, and tenacious personality. At the age of seventy, he still was very active in politics. He never appeared faint or tired. We sat by the fireplace of our home in Altzuza and he started to talk while holding a photograph.
"After the first attack, we went to the city center and immediately began to remove lifeless bodies from the streets. We organized the most urgent services and assisted the injured. I don’t know how much time had passed, but we believed we were no longer in danger when once again we felt the noise of those heavy German trimotors above us. We tried to get people into the antiaircraft shelters and if they were full, we directed them to places where we thought they would be safe. Now, amid the brutal explosions of the 250-kilo bombs, there was no one in the streets apart from some animals who, like us, ran scared in all directions.

I jumped inside a wrecked house because we had the false belief that two bombs never fell in the same place. I leaned against the wall and felt that my head explode from the shock wave."
The Bombing of Gernika

My ears were bleeding and, dazed, I could not see clearly, and it was difficult to breathe. I don’t know how long I was there, unable to move and half-buried in rubble. Then, I began to hear the clatter of machine guns: the fighter planes were now strafing at those who escaped from that hell. Yes, they descended to about forty meters and shot women and children fleeing in terror, and the victims did not understand why someone wanted to kill them. Hours later, many of them would lie lifeless with those expressions of disbelief on their faces.

I lost contact with my battalion mates and continued to wander, alone, through the streets covered in smoking debris. I met my liaison, a young man from Asteasu, and together we passed the church of San Juan, which was on fire. I was surprised to see that the old
Xabier Irujo

Cafe del Norte on Barrenkale Street was intact in the middle of that desolation. Once again, I thought that the bombardment was over, and I sent the young man for help. I never saw him again.

On Barrenkale, I met our chaplain Andres Untzain who, together with the parish priest of Gernika, Father Eusebio Arronategi, assisted the wounded and dying in front of the skeleton of his burning church. Pale as death, he told me: “Get out of here; they are going to kill us all.” And it was true, those planes were coming to kill us all.

At that moment, I experienced an event that I will never forget. A woman, totally covered in dust, as if she were wearing a macabre off-white mask, approached me shouting: "My son, my son!" She took my arm and dragged me over to the pile
The Bombing of Gernika

of rubble that a few hours before had been her house. Feverishly, I brushed away the remains that covered the baby until I ripped my nails. Despite the loud detonations around us, I could only feel the presence of that woman next to me. She wouldn’t let me rest until I found her son. He was no more than three years old. His clothes were soaked in the still warm blood of his lifeless, broken body. I handed him to his mother in silence. She let out a hideous cry and disappeared into the smoke with her dead child in her arms. That image has haunted me ever since.

I stayed in Gernika until the next morning. In the middle of the fire, we had worked all night. The bodies of the dead—torn, burst, and scattered everywhere—were mixed with the bodies of animals. A strong smell of burning meat enveloped us. Two lambs
Xabier Irujo

had survived, roaming the rubble, bleating in search of their mother. Everything around me was sinister, absurd, totally incomprehensible. Gernika was a corpse.

At that moment, Faustino Pastor, a gudari from our battalion, took this photo of me. It is said that I was looking at my watch, trying to figure out what time it was. It wasn’t that. I was looking at my hands, which were shaking. Try as I might, I couldn’t separate them. Reddish and sticky, the blood of the victims kept them closed, and in Gernika there was no water with which to rinse our wounds. I remained there in silence, dejected, staring at those people whose blood covered my hands; their bodies would never be buried. At my feet, a gruesome chorus of voices screaming for their lives came from beneath the ruins. They would die more than ten
The Bombing of Gernika

hours later, in a terrible agony of fire, and there was nothing we could do for them..."

At that moment, a lightning bolt struck through the window and into the fireplace. And we all fell silent. His name was Joseba Elosegi and he was the first person who told me the story of the bombing.
Captain Alberto Elosegi standing on the ruins of Gernika the morning after the attack
17. The news

The first international correspondents to report on the bombing were Noel Monks (the first international reporter to arrive in Gernika and the only one who saw the bombing from the outskirts), George Steer, Christopher Holme, Mathieu Corman, and Scott Watson.

Most of them would later write in book format about what they saw in Gernika.

The news quickly spread around the world and became front page news in most of the newspapers of the European and American democracies.

Thousands of articles covered the news. Of the sixty-three articles published by the New York Times between April 27 and July 4, 1937, forty of them (or 60%)
Xabier Irujo

referred to the total destruction of the town. Eighty percent of the articles that appeared on April 27 in American newspapers about the bombing were published on the front page.

When Picasso exhibited his canvas in Paris, Gernika was already worldwide news. Subsequently, Picasso's Guernica has become an icon of the horrors of war and has helped to keep the memory of the bombing alive.
"I Saw the German Planes Bomb Guernica," article by Noel Monks in the *Daily Express*, May 1, 1937 (p. 10).

“I am just back on leave from Bilbao and Guernica. Six people already have asked me: “Who did bomb Guernica?”

I will swear to it that Franco’s German avia-tors bombed Guernica, and that they killed 1,000 civilians.

When Franco hastened to deny that his German planes have wrecked the ancient Basque capital, he was trying to make liars of the three accredited war correspondents who were on the spot.

Another London newspaper correspondent, Reuter’s correspondent, and myself.
Xabier Irujo

He tried to tell us that we didn’t see thirty German Junkers bombers flying towards Guernica at four o’clock on the afternoon of April 26, just ten minutes before, according to the stories the survivors told us later, they swooped on the defenceless town.

Franco told the world there were none of his planes up that day, because of bad weather. I’m telling the world now that there were. I saw them. My two colleagues saw them. Six thousand inhabitants of Guernica saw them. And Monday, April 26th, was the sunniest day of all I spent on the Basque front.

I’m not calling Franco a liar. Maybe he didn’t know the Germans were up. Franco’s German allies of the air work independently of Salamanca.

I think their strafe of Guernica was done entirely off their own bat.
The Bombing of Gernika

I was among the ruins of Guernica one hour after the raiders had done their work.

I wandered all over them, as far as I was able: the whole town was in flames.

I saw bodies in the fields spotted with machine-gun bullets. I interviewed twenty or thirty survivors. They all told the same tale. Those who could speak. Some of them could only point skywards, put their hands over their ears and rock to and fro in terror.

I went back to Bilbao and wrote my story.

I was back at Guernica at day-break. I saw 600 bodies. Nurses, children, farmers, old women, girls, old men, babies. All dead, torn, and mutilated. Basque soldiers were getting the bodies from the wreckage, many of them weeping.
I came to what had been an air-raid shelter. In it were the remains of fifty women and children. A bomb had dropped right through the house into the cellar.

Does Franco expect the world to believe that fifty women and children fled into an air-raid shelter when their house was mined?

Or trapped themselves below there while the house above them was set alight?
I went back to Bilbao and wrote another story, just what I had seen. Just as I would have written it if it had been a Franco town in ruins.

Then next day came the cable from my office. I read it three times before I was convinced that it was serious.
The Bombing of Gernika

My two colleagues who had been with me at Guernica received similar messages. We took them in to Foreign Minister Men-tiguren. I'll never forget the look on his handsome face.

He shrugged his shoulders. Gentlemen what can I do for you? You saw really more than I or any member of my Government. Go back to Guernica, talk to whom you like. There will be no censorship today.

We all three went back to Guernica. We searched the ruined town and surrounding countryside. One of my colleagues found three dud incendiary bombs. They were German bombs, branded with the German eagle. We were more convinced than ever that the Germans had destroyed Guernica if we needed anything more convincing than what we saw with our own eyes at four o'clock on the afternoon of April 26th.
I cabled the office the details required, that the German bombers we had seen near Guernica were of the heavy Junkers 52 type with chasers of the Heinkel 51 type. That has never been denied.

I’m waiting now for Franco to produce proofs that the Basques destroyed their own ancient capital and murdered their own women and children. Franco has had what is left of Guernica for ten days now. I’m waiting for the personally conducted tour of Guernica by correspondents with Franco’s forces. How well do we know these tours it was with Franco's forces when he took Malaga.

I waited for three days outside the city, with other journalists, while the Press officers went in and did a little “arranging”.

Xabier Irujo
The Bombing of Gernika

Not one journalist was allowed inside Malaga until three days after it was captured. The only journalist who stayed in there until Franco came in was arrested. He is still in jail at Seville.

We correspondents at Bilbao were in Guernica before representatives of the Government were there. We went alone. The journalist who moves a single kilometre alone in Franco’s territory is jailed at once or expelled.

And now I'll give you a personal reason why you should not take much notice of what Franco’s mouthpiece, bull-throated General Queipo de Llano, says. Speaking from Seville the other night, on a further denial of the Guernica outrage, the general said: “That Señor Noel Monks. He’s a drunkard. He was drunk all the time he was with our forces”.

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Fact is, I’m a teetotaller. Have been all my life. Ask anyone who knows me. But don’t ask me who bombed Guernica. I might take to drink.”
The Bombing of Gernika


“Guernica, the most ancient town of the Basques and the centre of their cultural tradition, was completely destroyed yester-day afternoon by insurgent air raiders.

The bombardment of this open town far behind the lines occupied precisely three hours and a quarter, during which a power-ful fleet of aeroplanes consisting of three German types, Junkers and Heinkel bombers and Heinkel fighters, did not cease un-loading on the town bombs weighing from 1000 lb. downwards and, it is calculated, more than 3000 two-pounder aluminium incendiary projectiles.
The fighters, meanwhile, plunged low from above the centre of the town to machinegun those of the civilian population who had taken refuge in the fields.

The whole of Guernica was soon in flames except the historic Casa de Juntas with its rich archives of the Basque race, where the ancient Basque Parliament used to sit.

The famous oak of Guernica, the dried old stump of 600 years and the young new shoots of this century, was also untouched. Here the kings of Spain used to take the oath to respect the democratic rights (fueros) of Vizcaya and in return received a promise of allegiance as suzerains with the democratic title of Señor, not Rey Vizcaya.
The Bombing of Gernika

The noble parish church of Santa Maria was also undamaged except for the beautiful chapter house, which was struck by an incendiary bomb. At 2 a.m. today when I visited the town the whole of it was a horrible sight, flaming from end to end.

The reflection of the flames could be seen in the clouds of smoke above the mountains from 10 miles away. Throughout the night houses were falling until the streets became long heaps of red impenetrable debris.

Many of the civilian survivors took the long trek from Guernica to Bilbao in antique solid-wheeled Basque farmcarts drawn by oxen. Carts piled high with such household possessions as could be saved from the conflagration clogged the roads all night.
Xabier Irujo

Other survivors were evacuated in Government lorries, but many were forced to remain round the burning town lying on mattresses or looking for lost relatives and children, while units of the fire brigades and the Basque motorized police under the personal direction of the Minister of the Interior, Señor Monzon, and his wife continued rescue work till dawn.

Church Bell Alarm

In the form of its execution and the scale of the destruction it wrought, no less than in the selection of its objective, the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective.

A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched.
The Bombing of Gernika

So were two barracks some distance from the town. The town lay far behind the lines.

The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race. Every fact bears out this appreciation, beginning with the day when the deed was done.

Monday was the customary market day in Guernica for the country round.

At 4:30 p.m., when the market was full and peasants were still coming in, the church bell rang the alarm for approaching aero-planes, and the population sought refuge in cellars and in the dugouts prepared after the bombing of the civilian population of Durango on March 31st, which opened General Mola’s offensive in the north.
The people are said to have shown a good spirit. A Catholic priest took charge and perfect order was maintained.

Five minutes later a single German bomber appeared, circled over the town at a low altitude and then dropped six heavy bombs, apparently aiming for the station. The bombs with a shower of grenades fell on a former institute and on houses and streets surrounding it.

*The aeroplane then went away.*

In another five minutes came a second bomber, which threw the same number of bombs into the middle of the town.

About a quarter of an hour later three Junkers arrived to continue the work of demolition, and thenceforward the bombing grew in intensity and was continuous, ceasing only with the approach of dusk at 7:45.
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The whole town of 7000 inhabitants, plus 3000 refugees, was slowly and systematically pounded to pieces.

Over a radius of five miles round a detail of the raiders’ technique was to bomb separate caserios, or farm houses. In the night these burned like little candles in the hills. All the villages around were bombed with the same intensity as the town itself, and at Mugica, a little group of houses at the head of the Guernica inlet, the population was machine-gunned for fifteen minutes.

Rhythm of Death

It is impossible to state yet the number of victims. In the Bilbao Press this morning they were reported as fortunately small, but it is feared that this was an understatement in order not to alarm the large refugee population of Bilbao. In the hospital of Josefinas [Asilo
Calzada], which was one of the first places bombed, all the 42 wounded militiamen it sheltered were killed outright.

In a street leading downhill from the Casa de Juntas I saw a place where 50 people, nearly all women and children, are said to have been trapped in an air raid refuge under a mass of burning wreckage. Many were killed in the fields, and altogether the deaths may run into hundreds. An elderly priest named Aronategui was killed by a bomb while rescuing children from a burning house.

The tactics of the bombers, which may be of interest to students of the new military science, were as follows: First, small parties of aeroplanes threw heavy bombs and hand grenades all over the town, choosing area after area in orderly fashion.
The Bombing of Gernika

Next came fighting machines which swooped low to machine-gun those who ran in panic from dugouts, some of which had already been penetrated by 1000 lb. bombs, which make a hole 25 ft deep. Many of these people were killed as they ran. A large herd of sheep being brought in to the market was also wiped out.

The object of this move was apparently to drive the population underground again, for next as many as 12 bombers appeared at a time dropping heavy and incendiary bombs upon the ruins.

The rhythm of this bombing of an open town was, therefore, a logical one: first, hand grenades and heavy bombs to stampede the population, then machinegunning to drive them below, next heavy and incendiary bombs to wreck the houses and burn them on top of their victims. The only counter-
measures the Basques could employ, for they do not possess sufficient aeroplanes to face the insurgent fleet, were those provided by the heroism of the Basque clergy. These blessed and prayed for the kneeling crowds—Socialists, Anarchists, and Communists, as well as the declared faithful in the crumbling dugouts.

When I entered Guernica after mid night houses were crashing on either side, and it was utterly impossible even for firemen to enter the centre of the town.

The hospitals of Josefinas and Convento de Santa Clara were glowing heaps of embers, all the churches except that of Santa Maria were destroyed, and the few houses which still stood were doomed. When I revisited Guernica this afternoon most of the town was still burning and new fires had broken out.
The Bombing of Gernika

About 30 dead were laid out in a ruined hospital.

A Call to Basques

The effect here of the bombardment of Guernica, the Basques’ holy city, has been profound and has led President Aguirre to issue the following statement in this morning’s Basque Press: “The German airmen in the service of the Spanish rebels have bombarded Guernica, burning the historic town which is held in such veneration by all Basques. They have thought to wound us in the most sensitive of our patriotic sentiments, once more making it entirely clear what Euzkadi may expect of those who do not hesitate to destroy us down to the very sanctuary which records the centuries of our liberty and our democracy.
Before outrage all we Basques must react with violence, swearing from the bottom of our hearts to defend the principles of our people with unheard of stubbornness and heroism if the case requires it.

We cannot hide the gravity of the moment; but victory can never be won by the invader if, raising our spirits to heights of strength and determination, we steel ourselves to his defeat.

The enemy has advanced in many parts elsewhere to be driven out of them after-wards. I do not hesitate to affirm that here the same thing will happen. May today’s outrage be one spur more to do it with all speed.”
The Bombing of Gernika

Monument of George L. Steer in Gernika

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I saw the German 'planes bomb Guernica

by NOEL MONKS
Daily Express Staff Reporter

I AM just back on leave from Bilbao and Guernica. Six people already have asked me, “Why did you go to Guernica?”

I will never do that again. The Spaniards were bomed and burned, and I asked nothing.

I FELT back to Bilbao and wrote a story about the town and the people. I was a war correspondent. I like that. I was with the Spaniards. I was with the Spanish people.

N OF course, I was there. I saw the 'planes bomb Guernica. I saw the people die. I saw the town burn. I saw the Spaniards cry.

I FELT back to Bilbao and wrote a story about the town and the people. I was a war correspondent. I like that. I was with the Spaniards. I was with the Spanish people.

No one journalist was allowed inside Guernica until after the town was destroyed. We were not allowed inside Guernica until after the town was destroyed. We were not allowed inside Guernica until after the town was destroyed.

The journalist who took a picture of the town was shot in the head. He was shot in the head. He was shot in the head.

I was there. I saw the 'planes bomb Guernica. I saw the people die. I saw the town burn. I saw the Spaniards cry.

One of Noel Monks’ articles in the Daily Express
18. The lie

On the 27th of April, at seven o’clock in the morning, General Franco ordered to deny that Gernika had been bombed and to say that the city had been set afire by the Basques. He ordered that "the fierce system of the Reds to set afire all urban centers before the withdrawal" be denounced.

As a consequence, the press, the radio, and all media controlled by the Francoist government and its allies in Germany, Italy, and Portugal, denied that Gernika had been bombed and printed news declaring that the town had been burned by the Basques themselves.

One of the most active perjurers was General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano who broadcasted from Radio Sevilla that
Gernika had never been bombed and accused international reporter Noel Monks of being “a drunker and a liar.”

Furthermore, the regime ordered the writing of two reports stating that Gernika had been burned by the Basques: the Machimbarrena-Milan del Bosch report (published in Gasteiz on May 1, 1937) and the Herrán report (published in English, in London, to disseminate the lie of the “burning” of Gernika in the United Kingdom) in 1938. This is the report in which it was stated for the first time that the number of victims “of the fire” in Gernika was 100.
Following orders from General Franco, General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano denied that Gernika had been bombed from Radio Sevilla.
Joachim von Ribbentrop, German ambassador to the United Kingdom and a member of the Non-Intervention Committee, was one of the most active deniers of the bombing in the international arena
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Radio Salamanca's message, “Miente Agirre” (Agirre lies) reproduced in the newspaper Proa, in León, on April 29, 1937:

“This is not the first time that Aguirre, a mandarin from the Republic of Euzkadi, has lied. Aguirre declared today that foreign aviation at the service of national Spain, has bombed the city of Guernica and set it on fire to hurt the Basques in the depths of their feelings. Aguirre lies, lies; he knows it well. First of all, there is no German or foreign aviation in national Spain. There is Spanish aviation, noble and heroic Spanish aviation, which has to continually fight with the red aircraft, which are Russian and French, and are driven by foreign pilots. Second, Guernica has not been burned by us. Franco's Spain does not burn. The fire torch is a monopoly of those who set fire
to Irún, those who set Eibar on fire and those who tried to burn alive the defenders of the Alcázar of Toledo. If we did not know that Aguirre knows that he is lying—like what he is, a common criminal—we would remind him that, among those who fight on the Vizcaya front, along with the "gudaris," there are Asturian miners, professionals of destruction by the flame and the gasoline, and the barbarous dynamite of Marxist violence, with whose collaboration Aguirre has wanted to remain as a king. Not only for being Guernica, but we also have respected Guernica. We have respected it and Basques in good faith, as we respect everything that belongs to Spain and what must be forever, very soon, the unique and true Spain."
19. Denial and reductionism

The “official version” of the Francoist dictatorship for 39 years was that Gernika had not been bombed but burned by the retreating Basque troops.

The mere mention that Gernika had been bombed could be punished with heavy fines or imprisonment.

This campaign of official denial, one of the most widespread in time among those recorded in Western Europe in the twentieth century, has, since 1975, given rise to a “reductionist” school of thought, tending to accept that a bombing occurred, but minimizing the terms, nature, and scale of the event. Among the many factors that have been denied or reduced we can mention the following:
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1. Denial of Spanish and Italian participation by assuming that it was an “only German” operation;
2. Denial that the order came from Franco who, according to several authors, “did not know anything about the bombing”;
3. Reduction of the number of planes involved, which according to some authors were no more than 28, and the number of bombs dropped;
4. Reduction of the level of material destruction, which according to many authors was 71% of the town; and
5. Reduction of the number of deaths by adopting the number given by the rebel authorities in 1938 (100 deaths “or a little bit more than that”).
20. Reconstruction

The regime used the reconstruction of Gernika as a means of propaganda. A propaganda leaflet of the Francoist dictatorship reads: "Let us drown so much evil (the assertion that Gernika had been bombed) with the maximum good that is goodness, truth and justice." This is how Franco became "the architect of peace."

In August 1939, the Council of Bizkaia commissioned the sculptor José María Garrós to make three wooden crucifixes with wood from the tree of Gernika to be given to the Pope, to Franco, and to the council's own session hall. During the ceremony of reception of the cross, Franco, on October 21, 1939, granted Gernika the benefits of an "adopted town" for the purposes of reconstruction.
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This way Gernika was “adopted” by the person who had ordered its destruction.

The works of reconstruction were overseen by the General Directorate of Devastated Regions dependent of the ministry of government. As stated in the report by the General Directorate’s architect, Gonzalo Cárdenas, Gernika had in April 1937 a total of 318 buildings, of which 271 were completely destroyed during “the fire,” and all the others affected to a different degree. The 271 houses destroyed by the bombing of Gernika represent 85.22% of the buildings in the town and 67.58% of the total number of buildings destroyed in the whole of Bizkaia (excluding Bilbao) during the war.

The National Service for Devastated Regions estimated the value of the buildings destroyed in their entirety to be 11,940,791 pesetas. This represents
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34.1% of the total expenses produced by the damages suffered in Bizkaia as a whole (which amounted to 35 million), not counting those in the capital.

The widening of the streets made it necessary to carry out expropriations, which was suffered by those families who, because they were exiled or were considered “not adept” (mostly Basque nationalists), lost the right to request any compensation for their loss.

All the work of debris removal and reconstruction were carried out by prisoners of war until 1945.

On February 13, 1946, Franco was named Gernika's "adoptive son" and so the person who “had adopted” Gernika became its “child.” In commemoration of Franco's "thirty years of peace," on January 29, 1966, the city council
awarded the dictator the diamond medal to the merit of Gernika.

After ten years of reconstruction, all rebuilt houses in Gernika were auctioned. The former owners who were lucky enough to have the right to request their former houses had to pay for them. All the money from the “Gernika auction” went to the central Spanish government. Obviously, corruption was rampant.

In 1949, the mayor the town, Vicente Rojo, forced the owners of burial chambers or tombs with inscriptions in Basque in Gernika to remove them and replace them with other ones written in Spanish.


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