

War's greatest picture: The enduring legacy of Herbert Mason's portrait of St. Paul's Cathedral

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"Camera and film have become as essential in this war as guns and bullets." -National Geographic, 1944.

Seventy-five years after Nazi Germany's 267-day World War II bombing siege on Great Britain, street photographer Herbert Mason's portrait of St. Paul's Cathedral standing triumphant amid the smoking ruins of London remains perhaps the most iconic image of "The Blitz" and a lasting symbol of Britain's resilience amid the "ruin and carnage."

September 2015 marks the 75th anniversary of the start of the 1940-41 Blitz, which claimed over 40,000 lives during the course of the war. The Blitz produced some of the most enduring images of what became known as "the people's war."

In a new article just published in the September issue of the *Journal of Modern History*, British cultural historian Tom Allbeson illuminates the vitality of photography as source material, noting that images can be every bit as influential as individuals, ideas, institutions, and innovation and that contemporary history cannot be adequately researched or explained without addressing the ubiquitous medium of photography. Printed photographs were an increasingly important facet of news reporting, and Mason's iconic photograph helped bring about a shared optimism that was crucial in Britain's endurance of the Blitz. "Mason's image offers a shared way of seeing St. Paul's and feeling about the destruction: an emotional community of a nation under fire, connected

to and shaped by its history," writes Allbeson. "[T]he communal act of spectatorship accomplished through press photography is characterized not simply by viewing current events; the press photograph's address to its audience in a given present mobilizes historical references to create emotional bonds."

Mason's photograph has been widely reproduced in the three-quarters of a century since its first publication, perfectly exemplifying how striking images become visual shorthand for momentous events. Coming just weeks after the 70th anniversary of the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki which brought about the end of World War II, we are reminded of the lasting social and political effects of war photography. The article introduces exciting new areas of interdisciplinary inquiry into the recent past, with photography as an integral source for historical research. We can soon expect to see "visual history" join the esteemed ranks of social and cultural history

"By addressing the photograph as a discursive and intentional visual object in use," Allbeson asserts, "it is possible to grasp the dynamic role of vision and visual material in this culturally constructed, politically instrumental and contested collective memory."

More information: www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/682677

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