

# Read the information below and complete activities 1-3

## UNIT 1 SECTION B: LOCAL STUDY

### MacDermott's reforms

In June 1940, John MacDermott was appointed to the new post of Minister of Public Security. He organised:

- ▶ the rapid erection of public air-raid shelters
- ▶ the reinforcement of the emergency services
- ▶ efforts to evacuate children from Belfast.

At the same time, blackout curtains were used to stop lights alerting *Luftwaffe* pilots to the locations of towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

### MR. DE VALERA'S SYMPATHY

#### Wholehearted Help for Belfast

MR. DE VALERA, speaking at Castlebar on Saturday, expressed sympathy with the victims of the air attack on Belfast, and promised "any help we can give them."

"This is the first time I have spoken in public since the disaster in Belfast," he said, "and I know you will wish me to express, on your behalf and on behalf of the Government, our sympathy with the people who are suffering there."

"In the past, and probably in the present, too, a number of them did not see eye to eye with us politically," Mr. de Valera continued, "but they are all our people, they are one and the same people, and their sorrows in the present instance are also our sorrows."

"I want to say that any help we can give them in the present time we will give to them wholeheartedly—(applause)—believing that were the circumstances reversed they would also give us their help wholeheartedly."

▲ Newspaper report on de Valera's reaction to the Belfast Blitz.

### The events of the Belfast Blitz

However, it was too little too late. When over 150 *Luftwaffe* aircraft bombed Belfast in April and May 1941, the city still only had 22 anti-aircraft guns, insufficient air cover from fighter aircraft and public shelters capable of housing no more than a quarter of the city's population.

The *Luftwaffe* bombed Belfast four times in 1941 (7–8 April, 15–16 April, 4–5 May and 5–6 May). Belfast was targeted for a number of reasons:

- ▶ Germany was aware of the key role that the city's industries were playing in the war effort.
- ▶ Northern Ireland was important strategically.

As a result of these attacks:

- ▶ The city's most densely populated areas were bombed: 955 civilians were killed and 2,436 were injured.
- ▶ Almost 57,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, leaving in excess of 100,000 people temporarily homeless and 15,000 permanently affected.
- ▶ In the short term, many thousands fled Belfast to the rest of Northern Ireland and even to Éire, enduring harsh conditions.
- ▶ Belfast's industrial infrastructure, the bombers' main target, suffered extensive damage. It took six months for industrial production to recover.

### The impact of the *Luftwaffe* raids

Belfast suffered more, relatively speaking, from *Luftwaffe* attacks than other British cities had, at least up to that point (Source A). The 745 deaths that resulted from the raid of 15–16 April was greater than the number of deaths resulting from a single raid elsewhere in the UK.

**Source A** Ernst von Kuhren, a German journalist, reporting his impressions of the Blitz of 4–5 May 1941 (adapted).

I can really say that I could not believe my eyes. When we approached the target ... we stared silently into a sea of flames such as none of us had seen before ... In Belfast there was not a large number of fires, but just one enormous fire which spread over the entire harbour and industrial area.

Other parts of Northern Ireland also suffered, although not on the same scale. Derry/Londonderry was also raided in April 1941 and, although it is probable that the intended target was military, the bombs fell on civilian housing, killing 15 people. Also attacked were Bangor (where five civilians lost their lives) and Newtownards Airport (where ten guards died).



◀ Luftwaffe map from 1940 showing key targets in Belfast.

## An unexpected impact of the Blitz

What the Luftwaffe attacks exposed clearly was the poverty, poor housing and levels of health being endured by many in Northern Ireland, particularly its urban areas. Only 50,000 houses had been built in the interwar years. In addition, housing standards were significantly lower than those in Britain and it is estimated that up to 5,000 existing houses were uninhabitable even before the war. Indeed in the aftermath of the air raids, the Home Affairs Minister, Dawson Bates, described those living in Belfast's slums as 'nearly sub-human'. Contemporary reports would appear to support this, showing that children were infested with lice and many were suffering from illnesses such as tuberculosis (responsible for half the deaths of 15–25-year-olds).