

CHAPTER
31

Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE **The Bombing of Guernica**
by Noel Monks

On April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, Nazi planes launched a massive air attack on Guernica, a town in north-central Spain. Noel Monks, a British foreign correspondent, was an eyewitness to the aftermath of the bombing. As you read part of his account, think about what happened as a result of the air attack.

We'd eaten our first course of beans and were waiting for our bully beef when a government official, tears streaming down his face, burst into the dismal dining room crying, "Guernica is destroyed. The Germans bombed and bombed and bombed."

The time was about 9.30 p.m. Captain Roberts banged a huge fist on the table and said, "Bloody swine." Five minutes later I was in one of Mendiguren's limousines speeding towards Guernica. We were still a good ten miles away when I saw the reflection of Guernica's flames in the sky. As we drew nearer, on both sides of the road, men, women and children were sitting, dazed. I saw a priest in one group. I stopped the car and went up to him. "What happened, Father?" I asked. His face was blackened, his clothes in tatters. He couldn't talk. He just pointed to the flames, still about four miles away, then whispered, "*Aviones . . . bombas . . . mucho, mucho.*"

In the good "I" tradition of the day, I was the first correspondent to reach Guernica, and was immediately pressed into service by some Basque soldiers collecting charred bodies that the flames had passed over. Some of the soldiers were sobbing like children. There were flames and smoke and grit, and the smell of burning human flesh was nauseating. Houses were collapsing into the inferno.

In the Plaza, surrounded almost by a wall of fire, were about a hundred refugees. They were wailing and weeping and rocking to and fro. One middle-aged man spoke English. He told me, "At four, before the market closed, many aeroplanes came. They dropped bombs. Some came low and shot bullets into the streets. Father Aronategui was wonderful. He prayed with the people in the Plaza while the bombs fell." The man had no idea who I

was, as far as I know. He was telling me what had happened to Guernica.

Most of Guernica's streets began or ended at the Plaza. It was impossible to go down many of them, because they were walls of flame. Debris was piled high. I could see shadowy forms, some large, some just ashes. I moved round to the back of the Plaza among survivors. They had the same story to tell, aeroplanes, bullets, bombs, fire.

Within twenty-four hours, when the grim story was told to the world, Franco was going to brand these shocked, homeless people as liars. So-called British experts were going to come to Guernica, weeks afterwards, when the smell of burnt human flesh had been replaced by petrol dumped here and there among the ruins by Mola's men, and deliver pompous judgements: "Guernica was set on fire wilfully by the Reds [Communists]."

from Noel Monks, Eyewitness (New York: Macmillan, 1955). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., Eyewitness to History (New York: Avon, 1987), 520–521.

Activity Options

- Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** Make a cause-and-effect chart to illustrate what happened to the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Share your chart with classmates.
- Developing Historical Perspective** Keep in mind that General Francisco Franco and the Nationalists received help from Italy and Germany, and the Republicans were supported by the Soviet Union. Write a press release—a statement to the press—about the bombing of Guernica from the Nationalist point of view.