



1937-04-26

AIR-RAID SHELTERS ROUTE



The New York Times

Historic Basque Town Wiped Out;
Rebel Fliers Machine-Gun Civilians

...ces of German-Type Planes Fling Thousands of Bombs
and Incendiary Projectiles on Guernica, Behind Lines, as
Priests Bless Peasants Filling Town on Market Day

Euzko Deya

LA VOZ DE Euzkadi - LA VOIX DES BASQUES

LS ONT DETRUIT
GUERNIKA

GUERNIKA DESTRUIDA
POR EL ESPANTOSO BOMBARDEO
DE LA AVIACION

The terrible bombing raids suffered by the Basque Country from 22 July 1936 onwards led the Basque government to decree that air raid shelters be built in all towns, regardless of whether they were of any strategic or military value. The Mayor of Gernika instructed municipal architect Castor Uriarte to have at least six shelters built for public use. At the same time, a large number of private shelters were also constructed.



Andra Maria street air-raid shelter

The biggest shelter of all was on Calle Andra Maria, where the tourist information office now stands. Measuring 146 m², it extended all along the street and was made of thick wooden beams roofed with sandbags. The plan was to reinforce the roof with steel sheets, but they did not arrive in time. It was hit by one block-buster bomb and totally destroyed. It was built to hold 450 people and was full to capacity at the time of the bombing.



Pasealekua air raid shelter old entrance

'The safer shelters were on the west side of the Unión Square. The wall on this side rests against the mountain slope. We just dug four cave-shaped shelters into the mountain slope. They were about 10 metres deep. These four shelters were for the people from the market area and from the Feriál'. Castor Uriarte, municipal architect (1937)
Two of the four tunnels dug in 1936 were reopened in 2018. The smaller of them, which was never finished, now contains a scale model of the shelter as initially built. In the other you can see an audiovisual presentation with light and sound effects showing what it was like for those who sheltered here during the raid.



The former Astra armaments factory air raid shelter

The Talleres de Guernica (TdeG) factory built two shelters for its workers in September 1936:

- The first is now known as the "Astra" shelter. It takes its name from the renowned Astra 400 "la Puro" handgun, which was manufactured in Gernika in the first half of the 20th century.
- The second shelter is 22 m long and 5 m wide, and built with solid, 1 m thick walls.



Talleres de Guernica air raid shelter

TOURIST INFORMATION OFFICE

November-March
Monday to Friday: 10:00-18:00
Saturday and Sunday: 10:00-14:00

April-October
Monday to Saturday: 10:00-19:00
Sunday: 10:00-14:00

Photo credits : Documentation Centre on the Bombing of Gernika
Caption credits: Xabier Irujo

THE ASTRA SHELTER

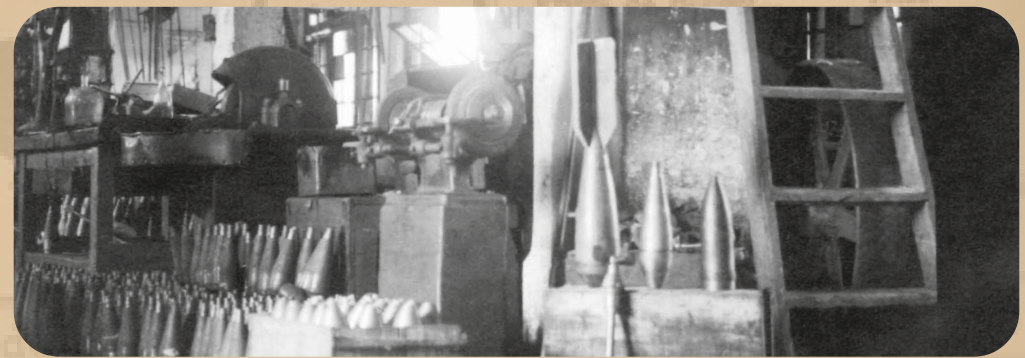
The Astra shelter was built in September 1936 to house workers at Talleres de Guernica and other local factories.



Talleres de Guernica



It was restored and opened to the public when the old Astra Unceta y Cía workshop was demolished in 2005. It was built of concrete and camouflaged under a false roof so that it could not be identified as a bomb shelter from the air.



The aircraft that took part in the attack took off from airfields in Gasteiz, Burgos and Soria.



Recreation of Junkers Ju 52 planes flying on Gernika in formation

They included Junkers Ju 52, Heinkel He 111, Dornier Do 17 and Savoia-Marchetti SM 79 bombers accompanied by Heinkel He 51, Messerschmitt BF 109 and Fiat C.R.32 fighters and ground attack planes. Aircraft belonging to the Northern Air Force based in Lasarte also took part, taking aerial photographs of Gernika.

EXPERIMENTAL WARFARE



Wolfram von Richthofen

The main job of Wolfram von Richthofen on the Basque front was to develop a new form of bombing. He climbed a hill near the front line every day to observe the bombing raids.

There, he took notes on how to increase the effectiveness of future raids.

In the afternoons he would go to see the effects of his bombing raids on neighbouring towns as they fell into rebel hands.



He interviewed people and took notes on how to improve bombing techniques. He observed that 250 kg bombs could penetrate as far as six storeys into a building and that the effects of bombs were greater in narrow streets because of the pressurised air of the blast wave. He also observed that basement bomb shelters were not safe, as their entrances could easily be blocked by rubble.

He concluded that these shelters could not be destroyed but could still be turned into death traps.



OUTCOME OF THE EXPERIMENTAL WARFARE

Richthofen paid particular attention to the raids on Durango, Eibar and Gernika.



German soldiers checking the ruins of Gernika after the bombing

In Durango he ordered 50 kg Italian-made burster charges to be dropped from an altitude of 1000 m. After the town was occupied he confirmed that the bombing had affected the roof structures and upper floors of the houses.

He calculated that 55% of all the buildings were destroyed.



El Feriál in Gernika

In Eibar, Richthofen ordered the use of 100 kg Italian burster charges which could go through four storeys and affect basements. Repeated attacks from altitudes of 600-800 m proved more effective than the attack on Durango. The Italian incendiary bombs destroyed wooden roof structures, furniture and the upper floors of buildings, but many buildings were unaffected by fire because they were already in ruins from previous raids.

The rate of destruction is put at 60%.

But it was in Gernika that the destruction reached its peak. Richthofen honed his bombing technique by launching a mixture of 250 kg explosive bombs and 1 kg incendiary devices (accounting for 65-85% of the total) from a height of 800 m.

The buildings hit by the 250 kg bombs collapsed completely and the rest were burned down by the incendiary bombs. **85,22% of all the buildings were destroyed.** The Basque Government registered 1,654 deaths. In addition, Mayor Jose Labauria recorded that 450 people lost their lives in the Andra Maria shelter.



EFFECTS OF THE BOMBING ON THE SHELTERS IN GERNIKA

As Richthofen expected, some shelters were buried under the ruins, with serious consequences for the people who had taken refuge there.

- The shelter on Calle Andra Maria, which suffered a direct hit from a 250 kg bomb, collapsed killing most of the people in it instantly.
- A large-calibre bomb also hit the town hall, bringing down the building on top of the bomb shelter in the basement. The entrance was blocked for around four hours and several people were injured by fragments of masonry brought down from the ceiling by the explosion. But rapid action by rescue teams enabled a tunnel to be opened up and most people were brought out alive.



- A powerful bomb exploded on the street that ran above the shelter at Plaza de la Unión (now called Pasealeku Plaza), shattering the water main so that water leaked into part of the shelter below the point of impact. But this shelter,

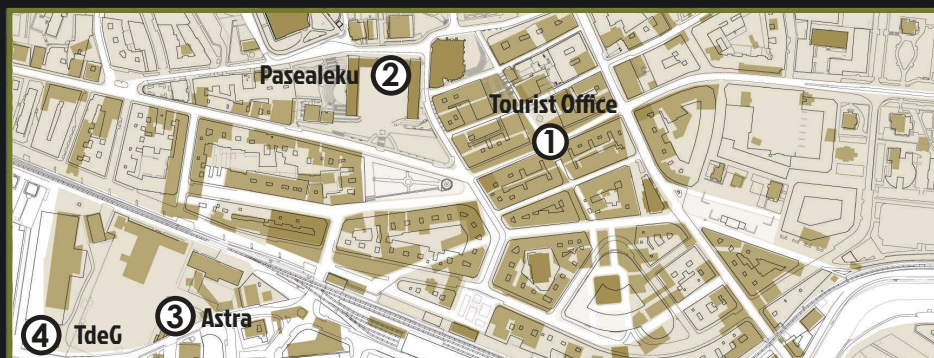
which was several metres below ground level, held fast and those within it survived.

- The Astra shelter was not attacked because it was close to the armaments factory.



Andra Maria Street

26th April 1937



Buildings in Gernika before the 26th April 1937

■ THE BOMBING OF GERNIKA.

On 26 April 1937 the town was attacked from the air by aircraft from the Condor Legion and the Aviazione Legionaria in the service of Franco, out of the aerodromes in Vitoria, Burgos and Soria.

As described by The Times reporter George L. Steer, the attack took place in several stages:

1. The first wave of bombing was carried out by six bombers accompanied by a few fighters to alert the population and give them time to get to the shelters. Many of these shelters, including those at the town hall and the church of Andra Mari, were to turn into death traps. The town's water cistern was destroyed to prevent it being used by fire-fighters after the raid.

2. The fighters then attacked in waves, circling overhead and strafing those who tried to get out of the town centre.
3. Junkers Ju 52s then carried out what is known as a "Koppelwurf" high-intensity bombing run from north to south, dropping a mix of explosive and incendiary bombs that reduced the town to rubble.
4. Ground attack aircraft circled again, raising the death toll still further.

The engineer and officer of the Condor Legion, Joachim von Richthofen wrote that at least 31 tonnes of bombs were dropped from Junkers Ju 52s, but that figure does not include those dropped by fighter-bombers or the boxes of incendiary devices hand-launched from the bombers.