

# Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7411,Royal-Air-Force-in-September-39.html>

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## Royal Air Force in September '39

Did the British and French air forces limit their combat flights to dropping leaflets over the cities of the Third Reich in September 1939? Such view was formulated in science and popular science articles.



In the work of the well-received and renowned author, prof. Wojciech Roszkowski, we may find only a small mention of the operations of the

British and French air forces. Emigration historian Józef Garliński wrote some more on the topic. However, even he failed to avoid mistakes by stating:

The British flew over the Third Reich only to drop leaflets appealing to stop the war. [...] Only once was there a combat flight targeting the German navy base at the Helgoland island and suffering heavy casualties.

A different picture of the activities at the western front can only be found in some publications.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the Polish historians, in formulating their opinions, followed the evaluation of one Edgar James Kingston McCloughry, the deputy commander of the British air force. After all, he wrote in his memoirs: “the activity was limited to dropping leaflets”<sup>4</sup>. The problem is, he used this remark as a reference to the “main drop of strategic air force” and not to all the operations of the Royal Air Force.

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## Leaflet operations

The British did not only drop leaflets on Berlin. On the night from September 3<sup>rd</sup> to September 4<sup>th</sup> 1939, ten Whitley bombers from squadrons 51 and 58 made their first raid on Germany, dropping around 6 million leaflets over Hamburg, Bremen and Ruhr. The operation of dropping leaflets was conducted intensively for the first

two weeks of war.

The first English leaflet was the two-page *Warnung* dropped on the night from September 3<sup>rd</sup> to September 4<sup>th</sup>, and September 8<sup>th</sup> to September 9<sup>th</sup> 1939. The British had been preparing for the propaganda war for several years prior. According to the decisions of the air force command, made in September 1938, the leaflet operation was to begin immediately after the declaration of war and before bombing the enemy territory. In September 1938, the short text of the leaflet was prepared, entitled "*A Message to the German people from the British people*". In April 1939 it was decided that the leaflets were to be dropped over highly populated territories (without major risks of losing planes). The operation "Nickel" was to be conducted from Great Britain, with auxiliary airfields in France where the Blimp Squadron no 1 "M" was to be stationed at as well.

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