

A Testing Time: Homefront Britain 1939-45

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試驗時刻：1939~45 年英國面臨戰爭之研究

【摘要】

1939 年當戰爭來到英國人的家門前叩門時，部分英國人感覺與認知是來自於第一次大戰的經驗與記憶。1914 年至 1918 年的戰爭代表著英國人正常生活的徹底破壞。也許第一次世界大戰初期因士兵與海員而帶來了大量的商機；但戰爭後期英人對戰爭的體會更深刻了，原來，戰爭是耗盡全國的資源與能源，全國上下均為作戰而動員起來，「總體戰」變成了英國人的新名詞，戰爭不僅止於傳統軍力，更是波及民力，無論是藍領的工人或是白領坐辦公桌的職員，也包括公司企業主與工廠大老闆，無一倖免。戰場上的傷亡更對英國人心理無限的傷痛與衝擊。

本文探究英國政府與人民在前一次大戰造成精神與物質的雙重陰霾下，如何面對以及回應第二次世界大戰的來臨，尤其是英國政府的決策者內心的矛盾，究竟此番戰爭又將帶來軍民的傷亡以外，社會動盪與經濟消退等問題又應如何面對。

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As Britain went to war in 1939 there was throughout the nation a heavy sense of foreboding about what was to come. This feeling was in part born of experience. For those who could remember the years 1914 to 1918, war meant the disruption of normal life; if at the start they had imagined it to be largely the business of soldiers and sailors, at its end, they knew better: twentieth century war was 'total war', a new phrase for a new sort of war. Once begun, the First World War came to consume the entire resources and energies of the nations that took part; every citizen was mobilised for fighting or for making the materials needed by those who did the fighting. As the phenomenon of total war developed, it became clear that what was happening constituted a form of test and that what was tested went far beyond the prowess of the armed forces, the traditional decider of outcomes in wars. This war put to the test the capabilities of every institution and profession; none was allowed to stand aside from the war effort; everyone had a role, from the lowliest civil servant to the holders of the great offices of state, from the leaders of industry and labour to the rank and file on the factory floor. And permeating the test of the strength and endurance of institutions and individuals was, most basic of all, the test of the cohesion of the nation. For four years the war placed exceptional strains on the bonds of civil society by exposing millions to death or injury, curtailing freedom of speech, suspending the rights of capital, labour and property and imposing all manner of austere regulation on daily life. At its end, three of the participants, the great multinational empires of Europe, Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian, were no more. The moral appeared to be that total war was fatal for states that were lacking a strong sense of common identity, where the elements of national cohesion were shallowly rooted.

Britain could feel that it had come through the first test of total war with its national identity intact and vindicated. Its institu-

tions had successfully adapted to the extraordinary roles assigned to them in the war and were able, for the most part, to resume their pre-war roles when the emergency was over. Nevertheless, when the threat of war was again renewed in the 1930s, Britain's leaders were anxiously mindful of the terrible warning, given by the earlier conflict, of the power of total war to shred the fabric of nations. How Britain responded to this renewal of the test of total war is the subject of this essay.

I

The war years are understandably remembered as a time of national unity, represented politically by the Coalition Government that Winston Churchill formed in May 1940 and led until the end of the war. But they began with an eight month period in which the government was Conservative in all but name and in which normal, i.e. adversarial, party politics operated. At a time when the national emergency might have suggested that a united nation needed a united government (and the First World War had shown that nothing less was required for victory), Britain retained the divisive system of peace-time. The prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, did offer places to the opposition Labour Party in a re-constituted government, but the offer was rejected and Chamberlain's relief was scarcely concealed. Labour's leaders adopted a policy of what they called 'constructive opposition', i.e. working for a more vigorous direction of the war from outside the ranks of the Government. The reality was that their animosity towards Chamberlain was so intense that they could not bring themselves to work under him, and such was Chamberlain's own standing among Conservatives that there was no prospect of him being replaced by a leader more acceptable to Labour.

In this first phase of the war, then, the period known as the 'Phoney War', Britain's political response to the test of war was manifestly dysfunctional: what came later to be seen as a wasted time in which necessary policy decisions were postponed and the

pace of national mobilisation was laggardly, was in some respects a result of the refusal of the politicians to put country before party.

With the formation of Churchill's coalition such partisanship was formally put aside. And indeed, there is no gainsaying the effectiveness of the Government in prosecuting the war, backed as it was by the great majority of the people. For nearly five years the political adversaries of peace-time agreed to sideline any difference that might impede the main goal of victory over the Axis powers, disbanding their pact by mutual agreement only when that victory was won in Europe and near in Asia. Both main parties, it could be said, had an eye to self-interest in taking the steps towards coalition; it was a temporary arrangement, brought on by the need to pursue the national objective. But neither really believed it was thereby sacrificing its own longer-term aims.

It was an intrinsically uneasy partnership, even so, especially for the back-bench MPs of the two parties and for party activists in the country at large. Much of the essential work of government concerned the war economy. Conservative and Labour approaches to economic questions traditionally had different emphases. Progress under the aegis of a coalition would naturally involve a conscious effort by both to show pragmatism and a spirit of compromise. This was rather more easily achieved within the Government than among Members of the House as a whole. At one extreme there were Labour Members who believed the most efficient way to pursue the war was through the immediate public ownership and control of all industries vital to the war effort, while at the other were Conservative Members who expressed alarm that the Coalition was becoming a screen behind which 'creeping socialism' would be established. Party leaders found themselves suspected by some of their followers of allowing advantage from the Coalition to slip to the other side. The strain was most evident in the ferment of debate that followed the publication of the Beveridge Report late in 1942. In essence, that debate was about social re-

form, a reconstruction of Britain that would address the problems of poverty, ill-health and inequality of opportunity. The pressure of Members on their respective party leaders made it virtually impossible for policy proposals to emerge that commanded all-party support. Only in the fields of education, family allowances and the distribution of industry was legislation enacted; for the rest, a succession of white papers disclosed too little agreement among the parties for substantive bills to be presented under Coalition auspices.

Against the claim that the persistence of a degree of party politics impeded the Coalition's effective prosecution of the war it may be argued that this, at least after the most critical period was passed in 1940-41, was a price worth paying. The health of the parliamentary system depends on freedom of debate, and there was a danger that the concentration of power in the hands of the Government, together with the automatic support of the majority of Members that resulted from coalition, would muffle this freedom. Lord Winterton, a Conservative front-bench critic of the Government, complained in 1941 about the blandness of parliamentary proceedings: ministerial statements, invariably followed by 'votes of thanks' from across the floor.¹ This was an exaggeration. There was certainly less of the cut and thrust of normal adversarial politics, but there were several major debates in 1941 and 1942 in which Government strategy and economic policy was strongly criticised, and where the Government's fate depended on the votes taken at the end. The fact that on each occasion the Government won with very large majorities did not detract from the real sense in which the tradition was maintained whereby important matters were opened to vigorous debate in the House of Commons.

What the British political system demonstrated about itself

¹ New Statesman, 19 April 1941.

was its adaptability to contingency. Thus, when there was a desperate need for a sinking of political differences, a form of government came into being appropriate to that need. And when the need was less urgent, when victory was within view, the system allowed a gradual disengagement from the set-up that had served its purpose well. Most remarkable of all is the way it operated to clear the way for putting supreme power into the hands of Winston Churchill in May 1940. In a famous biographical footnote, A. J. P. Taylor described Churchill as "the saviour of his country".² Hyperbole, perhaps, but forgivable and in any case, not unconnected with the facts of Britain's survival, in 1940-41 at least. By an almost miraculous process, the person most fitted for the role of galvanising the British people into a supreme effort of energy and will, moved by stages from the political wilderness to the helm of the ship of state at its most critical moment. A system which could make this happen had passed a test worth passing.

The concentration of great power in the hands of one man - Churchill held the offices of both Prime Minister and Minister of Defence - theoretically posed a threat to democratic norms, and there were at the time some mumblings about a drift towards autocracy. But in reality it was generally understood and accepted that the set-up was strictly for the special circumstances of the war. In any case, Churchill himself had great respect for constitutional traditions and in particular for the sovereignty of Parliament. Talk of dictatorship, actual or planned, was mistaken.

II

"Modern warfare is above all economic warfare" Adolf Hitler

2 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 4n.

once stated. The source of the remark should not blind one to its insight. It had already been demonstrated in 1914-18 that the effective mobilisation of economic strength was one of the keys to victory. In the end it was sheer size of resources that determined the outcome of the Second World War. But this did not alter the importance of maximising the potential of those resources and deploying them efficiently for the particular needs of the war at its different stages. For Britain this was how, in its economic aspect, the test of war presented itself. At first, the response was sluggish. Chamberlain acted as though in putting the economy onto a war footing there was no need to force the pace. His time-scale was three years. But Hitler was not prepared to play the role assigned to him: the successful blitzkrieg that he launched on western Europe in April 1940 placed Britain in a desperate position by June. Not only was the country well short of full economic mobilisation but the Germans had become the controllers of the resources of Britain's friends and allies on the Continent, notably those of France. This situation provided the stimulus for the thorough-going conversion of the economy for war. Under Winston Churchill the Government rapidly made up for lost time. A period of hyperactive improvisation ensued that gradually took on the coherent shape of a fully-integrated war economy. Its first phase was marked by 'crash programmes' aimed at making good the deficiencies in the supply of war materials. Ordnance and aircraft were high priorities in the summer of 1940, and this was recognised in the rapid expansion of factory space and a concentration on the making of only five aircraft types, mainly fighters. Using methods described by Hugh Dalton as "constant banditry and intrigues against all colleagues", the minister of Aircraft Production, Lord Beaverbrook, presided over a doubling of fighter production be-

tween April and September.³ The institutional heart of the conversion to a full-blown war economy was a re-vamped Lord President's Committee. A small group consisting mainly of cabinet ministers, chaired by the Lord President of the Council (initially Chamberlain, then from October, Sir John Anderson), it had assigned to it the general supervision of the nation's economic effort. It co-ordinated the work of the other home Cabinet committees with an economic remit (Home Policy, Food Policy) and from January 1941 it oversaw the activities of two other groups, the Production Executive and the Import Executive. The former was chaired by the Minister of Labour and National Service, Ernest Bevin, and its functions included the allocation of labour, raw materials and factory space, and the setting of priorities when necessary. Sir Andrew Duncan, Minister of Supply, chaired the Import Executive whose task was "to animate and regulate the whole business of importation in accordance with the policy of the War Cabinet".⁴ Over the next eighteen months, owing mainly to the skill and effectiveness of Anderson, the Lord President's Committee gained in standing and power, becoming the real power-house of wartime economic policy, while other committees gave up part of their functions to it or disappeared entirely. While it is true that the revised Emergency Powers Act of May 1940 placed almost limitless powers in Government hands, in practice the conversion to a total war economy proceeded by consent rather than compulsion. Little direct control of industry occurred; ownership remained in private hands and there was no programme to create a state-sector. Some basic industries and services, such as the railways and the ports, did come under direction amounting to Government control, and the Board of Trade made detailed directives to consumption

3 Fighting With Figures (HMSO, 1995), p. 170.

4 Announcement in The Times, 2 January 1941.

goods industries, e.g. hosiery, pottery, floor-coverings.⁵ For the most part, however, control was indirect. Owners and managers of private firms were left to work out their own ways of adapting to an operational environment in which the Government determined prices centrally, allocated raw materials and labour, licensed capital equipment and varied the tax burden.

In order to economise on materials and labour, civilian production was reduced by the control of raw materials, the imposition of 'utility' standards for many products, and the introduction of manpower budgeting and allocation. A series of National Service Acts made all men and women between 18 and 50 liable for military or essential civilian service. Skilled workers were husbanded by a Schedule of Reserved Occupations and their numbers increased by a big expansion of government training centres. To release shipping space for imported war materials a drive was instituted to raise agricultural production at home. Its instruments were subsidies, scientific advice, fertilisers and machinery.

Although physical planning was the chief means of managing the war economy, the Government also manipulated the financial and fiscal regime to help output and productivity: increases in direct and indirect taxation; near-monopoly by the Government of available capital; cost of living controls.

How successful were these policies and instruments in maximising Britain's economic potential?

In terms of national income the answer is clear: between 1939 and 1945 national income increased by two-thirds, the most rapid period of growth occurring between 1939 and 1943. Within this growth was a large shift in the distribution of national expenditure. The government sector accounted for 12.5 per cent of total national

⁵ A major crisis in the coal industry led to government control under the new Ministry of Fuel and Power in June 1942.

expenditure in 1938; by 1943 it was 52 per cent. This increase was achieved at the expense of investment in non war-related activity and of consumption of non war-goods and services. In effect, the war was being paid for by a massive capital investment programme undertaken by the State; the economy became a market where the State financed production and consumption.⁶ Gross domestic product grew at an average annual rate of 6.2 per cent, reaching a peak in 1943, 27 per cent higher than in 1939, though falling back by 1944 to below the 1940 level. This compared favourably with the expansion in real output achieved in World War I: then, the peak year (1917) was only 1 per cent above the pre-war level.

In terms of labour mobilisation Britain did relatively well. Of the main participants, only the Soviet Union, with 54 per cent of its working population in war-related work, did better than Britain's 45.3 per cent.⁷ Also, only the Soviet Union outdid Britain in exploiting the potential of female labour: in Britain 2.2 million of the 2.8 million increase in gainfully-occupied persons between 1939 and the peak year of 1943 were women.⁸

Behind the growth in national income and employment lies a remarkable expansion of the war sector of industry, with a corresponding contraction of the consumer sector, and an equally notable growth in agricultural production. Although the planning was short-term and the pace rather slow, the Coalition Government nevertheless succeeded in manipulating the economy into fitness

6 A. Milward, *War, Economy and Society 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 60.

7 M. Harrison, "Resource Mobilization for World War II: the U.S.A., U.K., U.S.S.R., and Germany, 1938-1945, *The Economic History Review*, (May 1988), p. 186.

8 M. Harrison, *ibid.*

for total war. Official statistics published after the war testify to an eight-fold increase in the total output of munitions of all sorts between 1939 and the end of 1943 though the broad picture conceals unevenness of development in the war industries as a whole and numerous inefficiencies in particular sectors.⁹ The policy of reducing consumer goods production reached its projected levels in most branches by the end of 1943, mainly because of the effectiveness of the control of raw materials. Meanwhile the food production drive was so successful that a full 10 per cent reduction in Britain's food needs from imports was recorded. And as it raised its output, the farming industry underwent accelerated modernisation through mechanisation and the application of science to methods of production.

That the mobilisation of resources and expansion of output may be counted as remarkable achievements, none would deny. The productivity of labour, however, is an aspect of Britain's wartime performance that has elicited critical comment. Statistics for output per worker show that although it was 15 per cent higher in 1941 than in 1939, this was in fact the best year of the war; thereafter, productivity declined to a point in 1945 only 4 per cent better than the last year of peace.

In this connection, the generally unhappy state of labour-employer relations during the war was unhelpful. After a fall in 1940, the number of strikes rose, and the number of days lost through strikes increased from 1,077,000 in 1941 to a peak of 3,696,000 in 1944. Absenteeism was also a persistent feature of the industrial scene. On the other hand, a better picture emerges when one realises that much of the conflict in wartime labour relations was concentrated in one industry: coal mining. It accounted for 46.6 per cent of the strikes, 55.7 per cent of the work-

⁹ Fighting With Figures, pp. 148-179.

ing days lost and 58.5 per cent of the workers involved. Also noteworthy is the success in reducing industrial conflict of the joint production committees of workers and managers initiated by Bevin, and in place in most larger enterprises by the end of 1943.

If the test of war found labour productivity and industrial relations wanting, the same cannot be said of the Government's wartime financial regime. The weapons of taxation, forced savings, rationing and the stabilisation of the cost of living brought rigorous austerity, but were the means by which financial disaster was averted. Receipts from direct taxation quadrupled and those from indirect taxation tripled; forced savings increased seven-fold; the cost of living index, after a sharp increase between 1939 and 1941, stabilised thereafter; real personal consumption was reduced to 79 per cent of the pre-war level.¹⁰ The extent to which Britain battled to pay its way is reflected in the proportion of government expenditure borne out of current revenue. It was 37.6 per cent in 1940-41 but had actually increased to 54.2 per cent by 1944-45.¹¹ This still left nearly 46 per cent to be met by other means. Initial Government hopes that increased expenditure could be met by an export drive soon proved illusory: export earnings began to decline at once and by 1943 were half the level of 1938. Meanwhile the cost of imports had risen by one third. Nor was the forced savings policy equal to the need: the deficit was £10 billion by the end of the war. In the first year the gap was managed by running down gold and hard currency reserves and selling overseas assets. Another recourse was the accumulation of external debt. Fortunately, much of this was held in the form of Sterling balances, that is, the credits of Sterling Area countries held in blocked accounts in Lon-

10 *Fighting With Figures*, p. 221; S. Pollard, *Development of the British Economy*, p. 327.

11 *Fighting With Figures*, p. 221.

don, accumulating through exports to Britain. £2.7 billion of Britain's £3.4 billion external liabilities in 1945 was accounted for in this way.

The war exposed the weaknesses of the British economy: antiquated plant and methods; lack of skilled workers and inadequate technical training; poor labour-employer relations; conservative and complacent management and unions. While some industries had none of these defects, many had them in sufficient measure to impair overall performance. When account is taken of the circumstances of disruption, constraint and strain under which the resources of the nation were mobilised, however, what is remarkable is how well the economy performed.

III

Britain was spared the trial of invasion and occupation, but it experienced with other countries another aspect of total war: mass bombing. Never as bad as in pre-war imaginings, it was bad enough, nevertheless, especially for London and the larger industrial cities that were repeatedly attacked. The worst period began on 7 September 1940. For 76 consecutive nights (2 November excepted), with an average of 200 aircraft., the German air force bombed London, killing 10,000 people and causing huge and indiscriminate damage to buildings and utilities. Most of the population was forced to spend the nights in shelters and the work of the capital was disrupted. But apart from episodes of locally intense and devastating raids, and the very destructive V-weapon bombing of the London area in 1944-45, Britain's experience of bombing fell far short of what had been feared or expected. Instead of the 1.75 million deaths and 3.5 million injured anticipated by pre-war planners there were 60,000 deaths and 300,000 injured. Horrific though it was, 14 November 1940 in Coventry, when a single raid killed 554, seriously wounded 865, destroyed 1,000 homes, damaged 32,000 more and halted work in 21 important factories, was

not typical; few in Britain experienced its like. Instead, the average urban dweller was required to adjust to a level of danger and disruption that was endurable and, with luck, survivable.

Mitigating the effects of bombing was the aim of Air Raid Precautions (ARP) and post-raid services. A remarkable organisational success was registered in the evacuation of 1.5 million people from designated danger areas to safe areas during the first week of the war, and a parallel evacuation of 25,000 civil servants from London to temporary offices in the regions. The enemy's bombers were hindered by a range of measures: a 'black out', or curbing of electric lights at night; barrage balloons; anti-aircraft batteries; radio jamming or 'bending' of the directional beams that guided them to their targets. Physical protection from bombs and gas was to be provided by air raid shelters and gas masks. The gas never came, but the shelters were certainly put to the test, with mixed results. Providing shelters for 48 million people was a daunting task for any government. The solution of communal surface shelters proved to be false; they were not proof against blast, let alone direct hits. Rather late in the day the authorities made good the inadequacies of shelter provision by building deep shelters and issuing millions of family-sized shelters. In the meantime, the inhabitants of the capital turned the Underground railway system into their shelter of choice, an illegality that the authorities wisely condoned. Elsewhere, a sad testimony to official improvidence, until the deficiencies of the shelter programme were put right, was the early-evening 'trekking' of thousands of inhabitants from their city homes to the relative safety of the surrounding countryside. Fire prevention and fire control also proved to be an area of civil defence that took the authorities time to master. The organisation of fire services was at the level of the municipality, too small a unit, as it turned out, to deal with the size of the fires that typically resulted from bombing raids. By the end of the Big Blitz it was clear that nothing less than a unified fire service was needed. Herbert Morrison, the

home secretary, announced the creation of a National Fire Service in May 1941, to remain in being for the duration of the war. Within six months a more streamlined and efficient service was in place, though ironically, the need for it was never as great as it had been during the blitz of 1940 to 1941.

Some of the urgency of fire-fighting in that phase of the war might have been mitigated had there been adequate attention to fire-watching. The hazards of incendiary bombs were well-known; a single canister embedded in the roof of an unattended building could initiate a major conflagration. And yet, there was no requirement on the public to participate in fire-watching as a preventive measure. The exception to this was the Firewatchers Order of September 1940, which required owners of large factories, warehouses and yards to provide night-time fire-watching. Many such premises were saved because of this simple safeguard. The massive fires in the East End of London during September and October of 1940 were in part a product of the failure of the Government to give the Order a more general application. Moreover, the destructive fires in Coventry on 14 November and in Manchester on 22-23 December showed that the authorities in those cities had learnt nothing from London's prior experience. Nor had London itself. On 29 September, the City, left largely deserted for the weekend, was ravaged by fires set off by incendiary bombs. In the middle of it all was St Paul's Cathedral, largely unscathed, for significantly, it had its team of fire-watchers, who acted quickly to deal with the incendiaries that poured onto it. But most other buildings were unwatched. From Fleet Street to the Tower of London whole areas were reduced to smoking rubble; many treasured ancient buildings and churches were gone forever. The following day at an angry Cabinet meeting Churchill ordered that steps must be taken to ensure that such a disaster never happened again. Morrison announced the introduction of compulsory fire-watching, to extend to all men aged between 16 and 60; soon the increase in the number

of incendiaries being dropped caused the Order to be extended to women. The benefits of improved fire-watching were felt even in the few months that remained of the Big Blitz; by the time of the 'Baedeker' raids on historic towns in mid-1942 and the Little Blitz of early 1944 it was part of civil defence routine.

The 'post-raid services' aspect of ARP planning was largely the product of intelligent guesswork. Here, too, the actuality produced surprises. Instead of problems of gas de-contamination and mass burials, the authorities were faced with accommodating, feeding, and otherwise meeting the welfare needs of large numbers of bombed-out families. How they coped with these scarce-foreseen tasks was starkly revealed in the detailed reports made by Mass Observation. In Coventry Mass Observers noted that after quickly getting the streets cleared of rubble, the civic authorities relapsed into a sort of hopeless inertia. Ten days after the raid there was little or no public transport, only two Rest Centres were operating, the utility services were confused, and there was almost no information. "The whole tempo would have been altered in Coventry if the authorities had expended 5 per cent of their energy in considering the problems of those who had not been wounded but only had their windows broken and their ears bombarded by twelve hours of row." Mass Observation's suggestions included mobile canteens, loudspeaker vans to give information, special reserves of voluntary workers, and rest centres on the safer periphery. The Council's lack of leadership and energy contrasted with the vigour and enterprise of the factories in getting back to full production, mostly within five days. Coventry was no exception; the willingness of local authorities to learn from the experiences of others was negligible. As sociologist Richard Titmuss put it: "The same thing for each of some thirty cities . . . the same meagre provision of clothing, blankets and washing facilities, first-aid, lavatories, furniture and information and salvage services, the same inadequacy of unsupported public assistance officials and of casually

organised volunteers, the same weak liaison with the police and civil defence controls . . . All these faults were constantly in evidence during the winter of 1940-1 as one city after another was bombed'.¹² To a far greater extent than was acceptable they chose to muddle through the problems; and to a far greater extent than was reasonable they relied on the freely-given efforts of public-spirited citizens. In some respects the selfless labour of ordinary people represents the best of Britain at war, but it was presumed upon to excess, as much in Westminster and Whitehall as in town halls across the country. This was more than officialdom deserved, since its attitude towards the public in the early part of the war was secretive, bureaucratic and mistrustful.

IV

When democracies are at war with autocracies they hesitate to limit basic liberties, since the very existence of such liberties is one of the most important ways in which they are to be distinguished from the enemy and why, in part, they are at war with them. They fight at a disadvantage, therefore, since the maintenance of basic liberties can impair and weaken the war effort. Britain came to terms with this problem in its own idiosyncratic way. Just as parliamentary liberties were not essentially denied, civil liberties more generally were adapted to the special circumstance of war, but within a framework of law and consent that made it clear the changes were temporary. Conscription was alien to British traditions, but it was universally accepted as necessary and besides, it was accompanied by the right to conscientious objection. In contrast to its forerunner in the First World War, moreover, the system for dealing with appeals was liberal and humane. The growth of active pacifism in the interwar years was grounds for official anxi-

12 R. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London: HMSO, 1950), p. 309.

ety about the numbers of men who might object to military service, compared with the First World War. And at the start of the war as many as 2 per cent of those called to register objected for reasons of conscience. But this rate was not sustained and by the end of 1944 it had fallen to 0.2 per cent. The Government was able, in these circumstances, to take a relaxed view of the danger of war resistance and to highlight its own virtue in its treatment of resisters. Thus the high profile exemptions granted to creative artists like the composer Benjamin Britten, the pianist Clifford Curzon and the painter Victor Pasmore, which demonstrated the authorities' sensitivity to the claim that creativity was a precious resource that must be nurtured, even in the midst of war.

Britain's tradition of tolerance came under strain when Defence Regulation 18B was put into operation. Under this, individuals suspected of being a danger to national security could be interned. Early victims of the regulation were citizens of enemy countries resident in Britain (about 80,000 in 1939). By far the majority of these were refugees from persecution, many of them Jews. But their German or Austrian citizenship made them objects of suspicion and, at least for a while, deprived them of their liberty. In the charged atmosphere of the summer of 1940 the classification of aliens into 'A' (dangerous), 'B' (suspect), and 'C' (harmless) gave way to an indiscriminate round-up. Thousands of people, regardless of age, sex or state of health, were herded together and held under guard in makeshift accommodation scarcely fit for human beings. The hysteria behind this derived from reports about fifth columnists and spies assisting the Germans in their occupation of Norway and the Netherlands and rumours of the existence of such elements in Britain, ready and waiting to do the same thing if the Germans invaded. But by mid-July the panic had run its course. The Government admitted that 'most regrettable and deplorable things' had happened and action was taken to review every case, so that by the summer of 1941 the only aliens

held against their will were those who manifestly posed a threat to national security. On balance, the internment episode reflected more credit than shame upon British society. What began as a dangerous and near-hysterical lurch towards the police state ended in a re-assertion of tolerance and calmness. May 1940 was, after all, a time of national peril and justifiable anxiety. That British traditions of tolerance and justice were being broken was recognised, but accepted as an urgent, if temporary, necessity. As the leader-writer of *The Spectator* put it: "the internment plan will fall hardly on thousands of completely innocent men and women. It must be so. No risks can be taken now. And most of those interned will soon be able to dispel suspicion and regain their liberty".¹³ The assurance was made good. In the end that journal's optimistic caution more truly represented national consensus than the rabid, racist patriotism of the *Daily Mail*.

About 1,800 British citizens were also detained under Regulation 18B. Most were members of the British Union of Fascists. By mid-1941 three-quarters of these detainees had been freed, and selective releases continued beyond this time, even extending to the leader of the BUF, Sir Oswald Mosley. Prudence might have suggested, at least until June 1941, when the USSR became an ally, that members of the Communist Party of Great Britain ought also to have been detained. The Joint Intelligence Committee had in May 1940 warned that Communists ought to be seen as potential 'fifth columnists', and the Ministry of Information was receiving intelligence reports in the same vein from the regions through the spring and summer months of 1940. But the Communists were left alone. And it was an irony not lost on the propagandists of the Ministry of Information that during this same period, members of the German Communist Party (those, at least, who had not fled into

¹³ *The Spectator*, 17 May 1940.

exile) were either dead or in prison.

Even democracies, however, cannot wage total war without some form of censorship of the communication media. The temptation to influence or even control is strong for governments trying to expedite policies without the drag of public debate that an unrestrained Press and radio stimulates. In Britain the temptation was resisted, although the power was there throughout to silence those judged to be speaking against the national interest. Exceptionally, this power, embodied in Defence Regulation 2D, was exercised in January 1941 when the principal organ of the Communist Party, the *Daily Worker*, was finally suppressed, after a period of seven months under warning that this was being considered by the Home Secretary, on the grounds of "systematic publication of matter calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution of the war to a successful issue".¹⁴ That 2D was so little used during the war, however, is testimony to the genuine concern of the Government to preserve as much as was safe of the tradition of free speech.

V

Before the war, official expectations about popular morale in a future war were generally pessimistic. Consequently a great deal of government effort went into containing what it took to be an inevitable problem. Measures to sustain popular morale took a variety of forms. Prompt responses were made to the deficiencies that bombing revealed in Air Raid Precautions and post-raid services. To persuade people that the burden of the war was being equally borne, food and other basic necessities were rationed, prices and rents were controlled, excess profits were taxed, real wages were allowed to rise. The nation's health was tackled through free vaccinations against disease, the extension of free hospital treatment to

14 A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 83.

most people, the introduction of free or cheap orange juice, cod-liver oil and vitamins for infants, the expansion of the school meals service. In acknowledgement of their psychological value, alcohol and tobacco remained off-ration and in sufficient supply. Diversion and relaxation was encouraged by the direction of resources into entertainment by direct subsidy to the providers and through two purpose-made organisations, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts and the Entertainment National Services Association. Local authorities followed the Government's lead by increasing their budgets for public entertainment, often taking the form of summer entertainment in the parks - dances, circuses, regattas, concerts, opera, ballet, and musical comedies.

Towards the end of the war the MOI produced a chart that recorded graphically the course of public morale according to Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, made from March 1941. The chart shows quite sharp fluctuations of level, apparently in relation to wartime events; thus a rise when Germany turns away from Britain and attacks Russia, a decline at the setbacks of the surrender of Singapore and the fall of Tobruk. But the overall picture is clear: morale holds up through the years of tedium and deprivation as it had through the traumatic period of military defeat, threatened invasion and mass bombing. Mass Observation's reports broadly confirm this; they disclose much grumbling, some bitterness and occasional despair, but the overwhelming impression is of a willingness to see the business through, to endure the strain and the boredom, and comply with the orders and regulations which those in charge said were necessary. It is undeniable that the so-called 'Dunkirk Spirit' was a short-lived phenomenon, fading away as the invasion threat receded and the bombing slackened off. But when this critical period was over there was never any doubt that national solidarity, of which morale is the index, was real, and would sustain the drive to victory. In some ways, the period that followed the

Emergency was a more exacting test of morale; its four years demanded the less heroic qualities of stamina and patience. It was to be expected, then, that the strain would tell. The rise in industrial conflict, the decline in industrial productivity, the persistence of profiteering and black-marketeering are indications of this. But these were blemishes on national solidarity rather than evidence of its absence. To a remarkable degree, the class society that Britain still was demonstrated a cohesion functional to modern war.

As we have seen, the instinct for survival in the face of a ruthless enemy goes a long way to explaining the behaviour of the British people during the Emergency of 1940-41. But what is the explanation for their generally good morale through the four following years?

An important factor was the political leadership embodied in the Government formed by Churchill in 1940. Churchill himself personified the spirit he hoped the people would evince, providing a model of determination, and in his speeches, inspiring others to rise to the challenge of events. But it was also important that his Government was a National Government, sufficiently representative of all classes to command the loyalty, or at least the acquiescence, of the large majority of the nation; the abatement of partisan politics helped to create a sense of one nation and a common purpose. A part was also played by the conscious attempts of this National Government to adopt morale-sustaining policies, particularly those that raised the material standards of life for the poorer sections of the nation, and those that sought to equalise the burdens of the war. That unemployment was gone, that feeding and health was better, that the better-off were seen to be bearing burdens, too, could only help the majority to identify with the national project. A more disputed factor of explanation is the existence of a popular sense of optimism about the future. Some reports and surveys suggest a degree of fatalism about the prospects of a better life after the war and scepticism about the promises of the politicians in that

regard. But an impression is also given of widespread belief that there would be no return to the worst of the thirties. An accumulation of words from various sources helped to sustain people in this belief: the Beveridge Report, the Press and radio debate that followed it, the documentary and feature films with a 'new order' message, the White Papers on reconstruction; then, in 1944, the Education Act, concrete evidence that change was on the way. Finally, perhaps the best explanation is also the simplest: the people supported the war effort because there was really no alternative. Defeatism and apathy would bring something worse, a society run to serve German needs and ends. However riven by class antagonisms British society might have been, there was a loathing for Nazism that was unifying, and there was sufficient sense of a way of life worth preserving to produce the solidarity to see off the threat Nazism posed to it. What the test of war revealed, above all, about Britain was that it was a cohesive society, that the divisions and injustices within it were of less account in the end than what united it. Hitler's hope that class-division and separatism would be the Achilles heel of the British ruling establishment proved to be vain. Class divisions and class attitudes remained much as they had been in the 1930s and were no more conducive to the breakdown of society in the war than they had been before it. George Orwell, writing in 1941, put it thus: "the English sense of national unity has never disintegrated . . . Patriotism is finally stronger than class-hatred".¹⁵ As a symbol of this feeling, the monarchy consolidated the popular affection it had gained in the later 1930s. The fact that the king and queen had shared with ordinary citizens the dangers of the Blitz, Buckingham Palace being bombed no less than nine times during the course of the war, was an important ex-

15 G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 118.

planation for this, together with their tireless insistence on visiting every bombed city, meeting and talking with people that had lost their relations and homes. Churchill remarked: "This war has drawn the Throne and the people more closely together than was ever before recorded"¹⁶. The queen admitted to being glad that the Palace had been bombed: "It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face", she said.¹⁷ As for separatism, the Union had scarcely looked stronger. Laughing at the wrong-headed presumptions of Goebbels' propaganda, the British closed ranks and, as in 1914-18, saw the thing through.

16 Quoted in J. Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI: his life and reign* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 470.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 467.