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BRITAIN

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On 12 September 1940 the M.P. and diarist Harold Nicolson dined on grouse with Guy Burgess at the Reform Club in London. As he walked home afterwards, he was caught in an air raid. Terrified, he sheltered in a shop doorway, where he found a drunken prostitute, who asked him to take care of her because she was frightened. Nicolson, needless to say, did not enjoy the challenge and was not eager to repeat it. Only the Second World War could have thrown the upper-class, homosexual man of letters and the earthy streetwalker together in this way, for both were civilians in a conflict which involved non-combatants to a hitherto unprecedented degree.[1]

Few if any historical events have excited so much research and debate as the origins, course and consequences of the Second World War, and for none of the combatants has this been more true than Britain. The orgy of publication and broadcasting which recently marked the fiftieth anniversary of the war's outbreak suggests, indeed, that had the war not existed then it would have been necessary for academics and journalists to have invented it. Yet much of the debate is more concerned with diplomacy and military strategy than with the social history of the combatants. And while the British civilian experience during the Great War of 1914-18 has, in recent years, been subjected to close analysis, there has been less on the later period.[2]

The main focus of writing on British society during the Second World War has been the question of how far the war changed that society. The official histories published during the 1950s, tended towards the view that war had a 'remarkable' impact, making possible the welfare state and managed economy which seemed to characterise post-war Britain. As myth piled upon myth, a cruder version emerged in the popular consciousness: that by singing 'Roll out the Barrel' in their millions in the air raid shelters, the British had forged a new collective spirit and consciousness. During the war this was reflected in new proposals for social legislation, and after the war, in the development of supposedly 'consensus' politics. Arthur Marwick, in a series of books and articles from the mid-sixties onwards, basically accepted the thesis of radical social change, but others, like Pelling, Calder and Smith have been far more sceptical. Much of this debate has become rather stale and self-serving, and the time is ripe to adopt a different focus on the British civilian at war. Because civilians' active support for the war effort was crucial, their morale had to remain at a reasonable level. This paper will ask how far it did so, and why, touching on aspects of mobilisation, before attempting, finally, to relate its findings to the debate about how far the war changed British society.[3]

I

Morale is notoriously difficult to define, but is taken here to mean a belief in the justice of and necessity for the war effort, reflected in a willingness to undertake and continue the fight until victory is won, even in the face of great hardship. It does not necessarily mean cheerfulness or exuberance; grumbling could be a useful safety-valve. On this basis, it can be concluded from a number of indicators that British civilian morale, while fluctuating, remained at a level compatible with the vigorous prosecution of the war effort throughout the period 1939-45.

The first such indicator was public opinion polling. Although polls showed serious fluctuations, two basic points emerge. Firstly, both Britain's wartime Prime Ministers, Neville Chamberlain (to May 1940) and Winston Churchill, had a considerable stock of goodwill. Chamberlain, whose work had crashed to ruins with the outbreak of war, nonetheless had the support of 70 per cent of those polled in November 1939, and although the decline in morale engendered by the prolongation of the 'Phoney War' period up to the spring of 1940 was reflected in a fall in his approval rating, the figure remained over 50 per cent until the eve of his demise in May 1940. Churchill, who succeeded him, had an approval rating of 88 per cent by August that year, and 87 per cent the following June. He was at his least popular after the sudden fall of Tobruk in June 1942, but even then 78 per cent supported him. A year later the figure was 93 per cent. Such approval suggested that there was considerable goodwill for the uncompromising approach offered by Churchill. His government as a whole never approached such levels of popularity. But generally the majority of the population were behind it; only at times of deep disappointment, such as the fall of Tobruk, did its approval rating fall below 50 per cent. On the whole, then, opinion polling suggested reasonably good morale throughout the war.[4]

The second direct indicator of public feeling was the somewhat impressionistic 'morale chart' compiled by the Ministry of Information on the basis of Home Intelligence weekly reports between March 1941 and December 1944. The chart shows considerable vicissitudes in morale. A low point was reached in early June 1941, with the withdrawal from Crete being followed by the heavy air raids which were, in fact, to mark the end of the 'Big Blitz'. Morale then rose considerably following the entry of the Soviet Union into the war, but sank back as the Germans pressed deep into Soviet territory. November 1941 saw a recovery, as improved Soviet resistance was accompanied by the opening of the Libyan campaign. February 1942 again saw a very low point after the fall of Singapore, but by June there was a considerable recovery, with apparent success in Libya, further Soviet resistance, and heavy air raids on Cologne. However, the chart confirms that the fall of Tobruk later that month came as a nasty surprise and severely dented British morale. By the end of the year, though, it had risen considerably, boosted by victory at El Alamein, the Soviet resistance at Stalingrad, and on the domestic front the publication of the Beveridge Report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, which seemed to promise a brave new world of social welfare after the war and which, unprecedentedly for an official publication, became an overnight bestseller. Morale generally rose to a peak in September 1943 with the surrender of Italy, before falling back into a rather flat period in which continuing military success was countered in the public mind by renewed heavy raids on London (the 'Little Blitz') and general war-weariness: 1943 was probably the worst year of the war for British civilians. Things only really picked up with the end of the 'Little Blitz' and the allied invasion of Normandy in the late spring of 1944. The belief now was that the war would be brought to a speedy conclusion, and so the flying bomb and rocket attacks on London, which started about this time, had less of an impact than might otherwise have been the case. Later in the year allied reverses suggested the Germans would still take some beating, and so morale waned, but early in 1945 it became clear that the end was near, although concern about the likely shape of post-war Britain – particularly insofar as war industries were being run down and unemployment was reappearing – now served to replace military worries in damping enthusiasm. On the whole, however, the 'morale chart' suggests that civilians remained firmly behind the war effort, although it is a pity that we do not have similar information about the 'Phoney War' period, for it is then that morale seems to have been at its lowest.[5]

The buoyancy of civilian morale is also suggested by the more subjective reports of Mass-Observation, the private social survey operation set up in 1937 by Tom

Harrisson and Charles Madge. For example, using these reports many years later, Harrisson assessed the impact of heavy air raids thus:

> The blitz was a terrible experience for millions, yes. But it was not terrible enough to disrupt the basic decency, loyalty..., morality and optimism of the vast majority. It was supposed to destroy 'mass morale'. Whatever it did destroy, it failed over any period of more than days appreciably to diminish the human will, or at least the capacity to endure.

M-O reports were full of grumbles, but contained little that suggested defeatism or the despair upon which it thrives. Life went on; people adapted. The overwhelming impression was that hardships would have to be borne – albeit with no lack of complaint – because any alternative to victory was unthinkable for the vast majority of people.[6]

That this was the case is also supported by what can be discerned of popular opinions of those who were seen as defeatist, pacifist, or disloyal to the war effort. Firstly, the evidence of wartime by-elections is instructive, especially on the 'Phoney War' period. On the outbreak of war Labour and the Liberals, while refusing to enter the Chamberlain government, accepted an electoral truce whereby any seat falling vacant would be filled by a nominee of the incumbent party. This meant that of 138 by-elections during the war with Germany, 65 were unopposed. In the rest, the major parties (usually the Conservatives) were challenged by independent or minor party candidates. From May 1941 onwards, these challengers were almost invariably radicals or socialists of one form or another, and while critical of the Churchill Coalition government (or at least the Conservative party) had no doubts about fighting against Nazi Germany. For example, Common Wealth, the middle-class party which captured a number of Conservative seats from 1943 onwards, couched its argument for common ownership partly in terms of its being the best way of winning the war. The period up to May 1941 is more interesting for the purposes of this paper, for in that time three parties opposed to the war – the Communist party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.), the British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.), and the Independent Labour party (I.L.P.) – ran candidates, and some anti-war independents also stood. Not one of the fifteen candidates managed to gain a seat; most lost their deposits in straight fights, no mean achievement. The best performances came at Kettering, where in the depth of the 'Phoney War' in March 1940 an unofficial Labour candidate gained just over a quarter of the votes, and at East Renfrew in May, when the I.L.P. polled just under a fifth of the votes cast. By contrast, none of the three B.U.F. candidates polled more than three per cent of the votes cast, despite standing in areas of relative strength for the movement: Lancashire, Leeds and the East End of London. These futile challenges came to an end

with the banning of the B.U.F. in May 1940, the C.P.G.B.'s change of line following the German invasion of the Soviet Union the following year, and the I.L.P.'s final collapse.[7]

These results reflected a more general public hostility. The C.P.G.B.'s not altogether unimpressive expansion of the later 1930s was wiped out once it followed Moscow's new anti-war line in September 1939, and it only revived with the switch back of policy in 1941. Opinion was similarly hostile towards the Fascists: there was no outcry when the B.U.F. was banned, and its members interned, on rather flimsy evidence in May 1940. Indeed, when its leader, Sir Oswald Mosley, was released from prison on health grounds in 1943, it unleashed a bitter public outcry, reports 'flood[ing] in of hostile public reaction throughout the country'. Similarly, although there was less of the virulence against those of foreign origin than there had been in the Great War, in July 1940 a poll suggested that nearly half the population wanted all aliens to be interned. Even in the first part of the war, then, when support for the war effort was, perhaps, at its most precarious, there was nothing really substantial upon which pacifists, defeatists or fifth columnists could build.[8]

Willingness to participate in voluntary war work, like air raid precautions (A.R.P.) and the local defence volunteers (L.D.V., or Home Guard) was another index of morale. In the case of A.R.P., though, it helps to highlight the fact that civilian morale was probably never lower than in the period up to May 1940. At the outbreak of war, A.R.P. had had 1.6 million members. A minority of them were paid, at a cost of £3 million a month. By the end of 1939 they were being criticised fiercely in the press and in parliament. There had been no air raids, so they were, it seemed, getting money for nothing. Wardens became the butt of ridicule. Many volunteers left. A.R.P. seemed on the verge of collapse and Chamberlain had to intervene, warning in January 1940 that things would get worse before long. This had some effect, and in any case there was soon more than enough for A.R.P. to do; but the episode is instructive for the low state of civilian morale during the 'Phoney War'. It was only when the war took a turn for the worse, with the German invasion of the Low Countries and France, that morale improved significantly, assisted in no small degree by the replacement of Chamberlain by the more vigorous Churchill. On 14 May a broadcast appeal to civilians to serve in the newly-formed L.D.V. resulted in 250,000 recruits within twenty-four hours. Many people were galvanised into firmer commitment to the war effort by the sense of emergency; the ignominious defeat of Dunkirk became a victory, and King George VI could write privately that with the fall of France he felt 'happier now that we have no allies to be polite to & pamper'. Yet while there was much of this spirit around, it would be rash to take

recollections of it at their face value. Many people believed the war was lost, but tended not to say so: at the time, for fear of being seen as defeatist; later, because of the knowledge of ultimate victory. Even so, the willingness of Britons to undertake voluntary war duties suggests firm commitment to the war effort, except during the winter of 1939-40; and even then, the findings of opinion polls and the results of by-elections suggested that there was no serious defeatism or pacifism.[9]

Evidence from the workplace also suggests that people were behind the war effort. There was direction of labour on a scale unprecedented in Britain, and this was accepted by the unions and most workers with little question. The very fact that the Minister of Labour and National Service from May 1940, Ernest Bevin, could use persuasion rather than coercion suggested a considerable stock of working-class goodwill towards the fight against the Axis powers. The average working week rose from 46.5 hours in October 1938 to a peak of 50.0 in July 1943. When placed at the side of additional voluntary work in A.R.P., firewatching and so on, this meant a great strain. But the new conditions were accepted. True, real wages rose during the later part of the war; but it could be argued in that case that the pressure of workers indifferent to the war effort would have been to reduce hours, not to increase them, safe in the knowledge that a shorter week would not reduce their standard of living. Absenteeism could be taken as an index of disaffection with the war effort, and indeed, it sometimes reached worrying proportions, particularly in munitions factories. But much of it was explained by women workers having to shop, to queue, or to look after children, particularly since many of the women coming into the factories had not been workers before the war and were living in areas where there was less of a tradition of female employment than in, say, Lancashire, where unofficial support networks existed. Much of the absenteeism was inevitable and had nothing to do with morale; in October 1943 it was accepted by government and employers that workers would need to be absent from time to time, and so an effective scheme for requesting leave was introduced. Despite the cumulative strain between 1943 and 1945, the problem did not increase significantly in magnitude. In coalmining, things did get worse as the war wore on, but much of this was due to problems of an ageing – and thus ailing – workforce in an arduous occupation. Perhaps the best illustration of the morale of the workforce was that even after the most serious air raids people returned to work as soon as they had arranged new accommodation. After the massive raid on Coventry in November 1940, the city was 'mostly back to full industrial production within five days'. The evidence of industrial disputes, similarly, does not point to war-weariness or anti-war feeling among the workforce. There were no anti-war strikes, and Trotskyite agitators made a minimal impact. Strikes and lockouts were banned

under M.L.N.S. Order 1305 (July 1940), but disputes cannot be prevented by laws, and the number of working days lost rose every year between then and 1944, when almost four times as many (3,696,000) were lost as in 1940 (941,000). Yet in many ways these figures support the view that when the peril was greatest, in 1940, workers were prepared to put up with their lot, whereas as things became easier they felt more freedom to air their grievances. Nineteen-forty remains the year with the fewest days lost through disputes since records began in 1893.[10]

The British war economy, indeed, was mobilised far more extensively far earlier than the German. This reflected a number of things. Firstly, Britain, unlike Germany, had no choice. She was fighting for her very survival, whereas Germany was dictating the pace during the early years of the war. This also accounts for the acceptance on the part of business of extensive state control. Secondly, a democracy had a better feel of what its members would take, and what they would not. This was especially the case after May 1940, with the entry into government of Labour ministers who, in many cases, retained close touch with working-class attitudes. Thirdly, it was certainly the case in the early part of the war that people accustomed to fairly high levels of unemployment early in the war were just relieved to have work. Finally, there were fewer ideological barriers to the employment of women. While Summerfield is right to point out that male policy-makers were reluctant to see any serious challenge to male hegemony and the domestic ideology, they were able to reconcile this with an increase in female employment on the grounds that such employment would be temporary. The domestic idyll might be the ideal society for such policy-makers, but the domestic idyll was not seen as an option if Germany won the war. There were priorities.[11]

Overall, then, evidence from the workplace tends to confirm the view of civilian attitudes that has been built up in this section. Broadly, morale remained healthy, although not without serious downturns after military reverses. The populace continued to support the government of the day, and when it seemed – in May 1940 – that there might have been unrest, the British system was flexible enough to permit the formation of a new government under Churchill from within the existing House of Commons. Morale was probably at its nadir, paradoxically, during the winter of 1939-40, when there was no aerial attack and little fighting but when prices were rising faster than wages. It was an enervating, irritating period of waiting for the unknown. Yet even then the point should not be carried too far; an essentially Conservative government retained the support of more than half the population, as did its ostensibly discredited leader, Chamberlain, while parties which opposed the war were regularly humiliated at the polls and no significant anti-war movement grew up. Adversity from mid-1940 onwards merely confirmed civilian support, perhaps even increased it; now people could see the enemy and did not like it. Overall, then, civilians supported the war effort, despite the hardships involved. It remains to explain why this was the case.

II

Pre-war governments had been, if not obsessed, then heavily preoccupied with the question of civilian reactions to a major war. Technological developments – particularly long-range bombers, but also poison gas and better submarines – suggested that, even more than in the Great War, the civilian would be as much in the front line as the soldier in uniform. And how would civilians react to that? The collapse of Germany in 1918 preyed on many minds. The 'stab in the back' theory – that an undefeated army had been betrayed by domestic disturbance – was one to which Britain's pre-war planners, no less than the Nazis, subscribed. For those planners, often of military background and somewhat contemptuous of anyone not in uniform, the average civilian was less the British bulldog than the pampered poodle: lacking in moral fibre, easily demoralised, neurotic under pressure and as likely to snap at its owner as at the latter's assailant.

The effect of aerial bombardment on civilian life was the greatest worry. Reading the forecasts of planners today, with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that no claim could be too outlandish. Estimates of bomb capacity and likely casualties based on the experience of a few Zeppelin raids during the Great War had been revised upwards in the light of the use of Italian bombers in Abyssinia and German ones in Spain, so that by March 1939 the scenario was for at least 700, but possibly up to 3,500, tons of bombs to be dropped on the first day of the war, with 700 tons per day for some weeks thereafter. It was expected that anything up to a quarter of this tonnage would be poison gas. There would be 72 casualties per ton of bombs dropped. There was talk of 200,000 casualties in the first ten days, a third of them fatal.[12]

Against this it was thought that little could be done. There were new defences, such as radar and better fighter planes; children could be evacuated from the danger zones and passive defences could be improved by the employment of A.R.P. wardens and the construction of shelters and trenches. Gas masks were issued to the entire population. Yet the mood in Whitehall remained that of former premier Stanley Baldwin: 'the bomber will always get through'. Churchill had talked of three or four million people flooding out of London 'under the pressure of continuous air attack'. Planners felt that there would also be up to three times as many cases of neurosis, mental illness, insanity. On these projections the first fortnight of war would see over 900,000 physical casualties (over 300,000 fatal) and 3,000,000

psychological casualties. Aerial bombardment, it seemed, would mean the onset of the apocalypse.[13]

But as we now know, these estimates were far too pessimistic. There were no serious German raids until the summer of 1940, a year after the outbreak of war. It was something of a paradox, noted above, that morale seemed to improve once the bombing had begun. Now at least people felt involved, and also knew that the raids were neither so heavy nor so destructive as most had feared. In addition, sheltering facilities had been improved considerably since September 1939. This is not to trivialise the raids that took place. Most large centres in Britain were bombed at some stage during the 'Big Blitz' (September 1940-May 1941). On the night of 18-19 September 350 tons were deposited on London. The first big raid on Coventry, in November, saw over 500 tons dropped, and was so destructive that it added a new word to the German language, *Coventrieren*. Bombing continued intermittently almost until the end of the war: raids on tourist cities during April-July 1942, 'tip and run' raids on a wide range of targets from then until early 1944, the 'Little Blitz' of industrial areas January-March 1944, and V-weapon attacks (flying bombs, rockets) thereafter.[14]

This was a different pattern to that predicted by the pre-war planners, but would the result be much the same anyway? In some places, morale seemed for some time to be on the point of collapse. Mass-Observation found that in Coventry after the first big raid:

> There were more open signs of hysteria, terror, neurosis, observed than during the whole of the previous two months together in all areas. Women were seen to cry, to scream, to tremble all over, to faint in the street, to attack a fireman, and so on. ... On Friday (15th) evening, there were several signs of suppressed panic as darkness approached. ... If there had been another attack, the effects in terms of human behaviour would have been much more striking and terrible.

Many citizens felt that Coventry was finished. Meanwhile, Plymouth, which suffered six raids between November 1940 and April 1941, was another city where the predictions seemed to have been borne out; the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, believed that the large numbers of people trekking out of the city at night suggested that its morale had gone completely.[15]

Yet Plymouth was not finished; most of the people there who trekked out into the countryside at night as protection against further raids trekked back in the morning for work, as they did in many other areas. Similarly, Coventry was back at work within a week; and in any case, what stands out from the M-O report is the fact that the scenes of disorder witnessed were exceptional. Morale was not cracked by aerial bombardment for a number of reasons. Firstly, the raids were neither as heavy nor

as concentrated as pre-war planners had anticipated. Secondly, the casualty ratio was nothing like that predicted. The 70,995 tons dropped during the war should have resulted, according to the pre-war ratio, in 5,111,640 casualties, 1,703,880 of them fatal. In fact, there were 297,610, 60,595 of them fatal. The ratio of casualties per ton was not 72 but 4; morale was, accordingly, far less affected than had been feared. Thirdly, there was protection in the form of shelters and trenches. Londoners ignored official advice, a significant minority using tube stations as deep shelters, while confounding official fears that this would lead to a 'deep shelter mentality' among an army of 'timorous trogladytes' by leaving every morning to go to work. Fourthly, the development of post-raid services also contributed to the maintenance of morale. In many places this development was rather sporadic and *ad hoc*, but as local authorities became better organised, and co-ordinated with voluntary bodies, the rest centres for the homeless became more comfortable and the dissemination of information was greatly improved. Fifthly, revenge attacks could help lift spirits, although, either for humanitarian reasons or because they feared provoking still further attacks on themselves, those in the worst-hit areas were often the least vengeful. Finally, there was a resilience about the British people which came as a surprise to most of those in authority. This is not to subscribe wholeheartedly to the 'Roll Out The Barrel' view. But people did readjust quickly to a life involving the blackout, lack of sleep and the ever-present threat of death. Often a kind of grim fatalism took over. For all these reasons, bombing did not have the catastrophic consequences predicted.[16]

On the basis of those predictions, however, pre-war governments had believed that lives could be saved by the evacuation of large numbers of people from coastal areas, ports and industrial towns into the countryside. Morale would be bolstered too, because parents could at least be sure that their loved ones were safe. So, on the outbreak of war, millions of children, some with their teachers or mothers, were sent away to be billeted with families in supposedly safer areas. In three days 1,473,000 people were moved, with their consent. (Around 2,000,000 more people evacuated themselves privately.) But many soon drifted back as the promised air raids did not materialise. Although there were further waves in late 1940 and mid-1944, evacuation remained unpopular. It broke up families; it imposed new burdens in the reception areas, not least on the families who took evacuees in. Not all cases were bad. Farmers picked strong boys who would help them on the farm. Many children and hosts got on very well. But many did not, and it was these stories that hit the headlines. Caricatures soon developed of the evacuee child as a lice-ridden, ill-clad, bed-wetting, foulmouthed horror; of the evacuee mother as a sluttish, homesick and idle layabout; of the host as a snobbish, interfering, exploi-

tative tyrant. Of course, this was not the whole story, but government circles were worried that social divisions were being highlighted. Yet it is too simplistic to portray the division as being between middle-class hosts and working-class evacuees. It was as much a clash between rural and urban workers and their lifestyles. Among ordinary men in a Somerset pub there was 'some ill feeling ... that strange women from the cities were in the habit of coming into the tap room in the evenings and drinking half a pint, or even gin, like a man. Such a thing had never happened before in the village, and no one liked it.' The clash, as Nicolson realised, was 'not between the rich and the poor but between the urban and the rural poor'. Titmuss recorded the story of the six-year-old from Glasgow who was reprimanded by his mother in front of their hostess: 'You dirty thing, messing the lady's carpet. Go and do it in the corner.' It did not take a bourgeois to be appalled by such habits. Rather, the worst horror stories of slum evacuees – which were by no means typical – represented a challenge to notions of 'respectability' which were shared by working- and middle-class alike. Even so, the experience of the first evacuation was so traumatic for all concerned, especially in government circles, that the later waves of evacuation were far better planned and executed. Insofar as it was supposed to have boosted morale, the first wave of evacuation, at any rate, seemed to have been a dismal failure.[17]

Yet evacuation did have its benefits. It saved lives; it enabled parents, freed from family ties, to work longer hours in the war industries; and it relieved overburdened city authorities of many social welfare duties. By mixing up the population it gave a powerful impetus towards universalistic provision of welfare services, such as was later to be embodied in the post-war 'welfare state' rather than allowing the authorities to retain more selective pre-war practices. It also acted as a safety-valve: it was an option parents had if the raids got worse. That was a considerable source of reassurance to many.

Evacuation raised for government another of its bogeymen: social division. Most inter-war Conservative statesmen had been wary of 'the masses', and although Chamberlain was less fearful than Baldwin, his predecessor, there was considerable fear of how the population at large would respond to war. There had only been three elections held on the basis of universal adult suffrage, one of which (1929) had produced a Labour government and another of which (1931) was by now seen as an exceptional event. Many pointed to the Britain of the 1930s and saw it as a period of conspicuous consumption on the one hand and grinding poverty on the other. Of course, this was simplistic; but it preyed on the minds of those in power, who were relieved, after extensive bombing of the East End of London, that the West End was also attacked. Here, though, was a key to greater social cohesion: bombs did not

discriminate between buildings any more than between prostitutes and men of letters, and if even Buckingham Palace could be bombed, then in a very real sense everyone was 'in it together'. This had already found political form in Churchill's Coalition government. Like the nation, it was not always unanimous. But there was a basic agreement that the war had to be seen through to the bitter end. For in fact, the British working classes were far more patriotic than the largely middle-class people in Whitehall realised: as George Orwell noted perceptively in 1941, their patriotism was 'profound, but ... unconscious'. Similarly, as Orwell pointed out, there was no substantial upper- or middle-class fifth column movement. If British society in the 1930s had exhibited some signs of cleavage, they were nowhere near as great or as significant as those which were to lead France towards ignominious surrender at the very time that Britain was preparing to stand alone against German aggression.[18]

Before the war, the government had believed that its own propaganda could play a major role in maintaining civilian morale. It was wrong. The morale-boosting campaigns of the Ministry of Information (MoI) were often ignored, sometimes irritating, and almost always ineffective. This was hardly surprising. The best antidote to air raids that an eve-of-war MoI committee could come up with was the vigorous dispensation of cups of tea to the frightened populace. The MoI's first poster campaign was a disaster. '*Your* courage, *your* cheerfulness, *your* resolution will bring *us* victory' might have seemed a stirring cry to its composers, but to most people it read as though the many were going to be fighting for the good of the few. Later campaigns were often little better. What the public wanted was less exhortation, which it saw as patronising, and more news, for the release of the latter increased a sense of responsibility and trust and also prevented the circulation of rumour. The withholding of news of the Norwegian campaign in the spring of 1940 was a major reason why the country was so taken aback when the reverses were finally revealed. It took government some time to see this, but from July 1941, when the newspaper proprietor and Churchill acolyte, Brendan Bracken, took over at the MoI, more news began to be released. The ministry also came to play a useful role in helping government to know more than ever before about ordinary people through its involvement with Mass-Observation and the Wartime Social Survey. But the exhortation stopped. Propaganda had not played the role in maintaining morale that the planners had hoped it would.[19]

In short, many of the expectations of the pre-war planners had been less than wholly fulfilled. The outbreak of war was not followed by heavy air raids. When raids began, over a year later, they were nothing like as destructive as had been anticipated. Nor did they produce a general collapse of morale or destroy social

cohesion; rather the reverse. But two of their major means of lifting spirits - evacuation and propaganda - had had at best limited success in doing so. So why was morale maintained throughout the war?

III

As well as the factors mentioned above, six other considerations helped to maintain civilian morale during the Second World War. They were the nature of the enemy and the progress of the war itself; leadership; aspects relating to work; the supply, distribution and quality of food and other essentials; the availability of less strictly essential goods and entertainment; and the promise of a better future after the war.

The first of these was in some ways the fundamental one. The enemy was such that there was little doubt that victory must be had; left-wingers, who hated fascism, were as committed as anyone, something of a contrast with the Great War. Morale tended to fluctuate with Britain's fortunes in the war, as noted above, and from late 1942 onwards, it was clear that the war would be won. Thus war-weariness was countered by confidence in the success of the effort. Before that, there was still a sense of excitement which helped to buoy up morale. In addition, it was a war of movement: there was none of the trench warfare of 1914-18 which might, had it been repeated, have led to a general feeling of futility and discontent. All in all, it was during the early part of the war, when real wages were falling, nothing seemed to be happening and there was great fear of the unknown, that morale was at its lowest.

Leadership was another important factor in maintaining morale, although it is difficult here to separate myth from reality. Chamberlain was not a good wartime leader. Arguably the most formidable force in inter-war British politics, he was almost certainly suffering terminally from cancer by the time war broke out, and to this was added bitter disappointment at his failure to preserve the peace. He seemed to many to lack the will to fight. His successor never gave that impression. Always a political pugilist, Churchill was the ideal man to take office in May 1940. He made a significant positive impact on wartime morale. He inspired the country through his broadcast speeches and his bulldog spirit, and boosted morale by visiting bombed areas. Just as important, though, was the all-party nature and general air of competence of the government Churchill led. The presence of Britain's leading trade unionist, Bevin, at the M.L.N.S. reassured many workers who might otherwise have been less ready to change working practices in the interests of war production. The removal of the 'Men of Munich' during 1940 also helped gain public confidence. The leading politicians of the 1930s were soon discredited as having led Britain in irresolute and wrongheaded policies abroad and unimaginative and

parsimonious policies at home. This was rather unfair, but it took hold, as the massive sales of 'Cato's' *Guilty Men* (1940) showed. The 'ins' of the 1930s – Chamberlain, Hoare, Simon, Halifax, *et al* – were thrust from meaningful office at home. This undoubtedly boosted morale during 1940.[20]

A number of factors relating to work and wages also helped to maintain civilian spirits. Firstly, unemployment was eliminated from the economy after the spring of 1940, once the economy had switched over more or less fully to a war footing. This in itself was enough to lift the spirits of the one million plus who had been unemployed until the outbreak of war, many of them for months or even years. Sober social surveys during the 1930s had come to the conclusion that many of these people would never work again. Now there was a labour shortage (see Table 1); married women were now implored to enter the factories, although, as Summerfield has shown, male poicy-makers 'searched for a compromise between the two spheres of [women's] activity, domestic and industrial, such that neither would be profoundly changed'.

Table 1. Unemployment, 1938-45

June	Registered Insured Unemployed
1938	1,710,000
1939	1,270,000
1940	645,000
1941	198,000
1942	87,000
1943	60,000
1944	54,000
1945	103,000

Source: *Ministry of Labour Gazette*

Secondly, wages rose, partly due to the shortage of labour. Thirdly, price controls were introduced on basic food stuffs in December 1939 on a temporary basis, and from August 1940 these subsidies were made 'permanent' in order to reduce the chances of a damaging spiral of wage-price inflation. In April 1941 the subsidies were extended further; clothing prices were controlled and the introduction of cheap 'utility' clothing and furniture later in that year eased the inflationary pressure still further. All this meant a significant increase in real wages during the war. What is perhaps most noteworthy after that is the fact that it was after more than two years of war, when war-weariness and discontent might have been expected to start taking hold, that wages really began to outstrip prices, so giving a powerful boost to morale just when it was needed (see Table 2).

Table 2 . Cost of Living, Wage Rates and Weekly Earnings, 1938-45

Month	Cost of Living (all items)	Weekly Wage Rates (all industries)	Weekly Earnings (manufacturing)
1938 Oct	...	...	100
1939 Sep	100	100	...
1940 Jan	112	105-6	...
Jul	120	113-14	130
1941 Jan	126	118	...
Jul	128	122	142
1942 Jan	129	127	146
Jul	129	131-2	160
1943 Jan	128	133	165
Jul	129	136-7	176
1944 Jan	128	139-40	179
Jul	130	143-4	182
1945 Jan	130	145-6	176
Jul	133½	150-1	180

Source: H.M.S.O., *Statistical Digest of the War* (London, 1951), p. 8.

Bevin's determination to use his powers at the M.L.N.S. to promote working-class standards, as with his Catering Wages Act, 1943, also helped keep labour relations harmonious, as did his preference for persuasion over coercion. There were breakdowns, but good sense usually prevailed. There were no mass prosecutions of strikers. Morale was bolstered, then, by full employment, rising real wages, and a flexible government response to industrial difficulties.[21]

Morale also depended, of course, on whether there was anything on which to spend those increased wages. The most essential issue was the quantity, quality and distribution of food. In the inter-war years, British agriculture had been severely depressed, and the country had relied heavily on imports. Shipping space was obviously at a premium in wartime, as the Germans waged a fierce battle against British vessels, and food had to vie for space with essential raw materials and other commodities. In the years 1934-8 the annual average amount of food imported had been 22.5 million tons, yet in November 1940 the war cabinet was forced to recognise that only 15.5 million tons of food could be imported in the second year of the war; and as it turned out, the actual figure for 1941 was some way below that. After that, imports fell even lower, partly because of foreign exchange shortages (although American Lend-Lease, amounting to around 7 per cent of consumption per annum, helped) and partly because of the effects of submarine attacks in the Atlantic. Losses of food at sea amounted to 700,000 tons in each of 1940 and 1941, and 500,000 tons in 1942. Much less was lost following victory over the submarines

in the early part of 1943. Shipping production began to show a net gain, but despite this food imports did not rise greatly (in each of the years between 1942 and 1945 inclusive, imports never exceeded 12 million tons). The country got by, though, mainly because the government had promoted domestic agriculture on an unprecedented scale. The amount of land ploughed was increased by half, there was considerable mechanisation and more use was made of fertilisers, so that domestic food production rose dramatically over 1938-9 by 36 per cent to 1941-2 and by 91 per cent to 1943-4.[22]

Throughout the war, then, the overall quantity of food available was sufficient to feed Britain, provided that it was distributed effectively. For that, rationing was the answer. In the first months of war, food distribution became a source of great social friction; few topics aroused such ire. With reluctance and characteristic nervousness, Chamberlain's war cabinet began to ration key foods like butter, bacon and sugar. Margarine, meat, cheese, soap, sweets and tea were included later. The system was not watertight, and there was a constant struggle to get a little extra. There was a black economy but its historian has concluded that there was not in any meaningful sense 'a black market' such as thrived in America and most of Europe. This was 'a tribute to the success of British rationing policy, based on a genuine sense of shared national sacrifice', and to a well-administered and equitable policy.[23]

The quality of the food available was also important. In 1940, when things looked particularly grim, a committee of scientists reported that the nation's nutritional needs could be met by a 'basal diet' comprising wholemeal bread, oatmeal, fats, milk, potatoes and vegetables. Ministers and officials were horrified: such a diet would have dire consequences on morale. Churchill, always aware of the importance of a satisfactory diet, insisted early in 1941, to the dismay of officials, that consumption should be cut as little as possible even if that meant taking up valuable shipping space with items that were not strictly essential. The government was slow to raise the wheat extraction rate for flour because of the unpopularity of brown bread in most households. Food policy overall was reflected by the advice of the Ministry of Food official 'to put the basal diet to sleep for the duration of the war'. Morale was not going to be allowed to suffer unduly because of food, and fortunately Britain's position was always strong enough to ensure this. In addition, the better allocation of resources, and enforced concentration on healthier foods, meant the diet of the average Briton actually improved during the war.[24]

It also helped morale that the supply of less strictly essential goods and of entertainment was maintained as far as possible. Once again, flexibility and humanity in government combined with British and American seapower made this

possible. For all that it was lamented by sections of the population, the British civilian was highly susceptible to the appeal of beer and tobacco, and government was highly susceptible to the appeal of the tax revenues they produced. Accordingly, beer – albeit watered-down – continued to be produced in large quantities. Rationing was never introduced, although some publicans evolved their own schemes for combating the rather erratic supply system. Despite transport shortages and the bulkiness of bottled beers, 'little or nothing was done to deny [them] to any part of the country'. Overall, beer consumption rose by a quarter during the war, helped by higher wages and severe cuts in the production of spirits.[25]

Tobacco also had a vital part to play. A shortage of cigarettes after an air raid, for example, could have an effect on the nervous condition of many people, as was the case in Southampton late in 1940. Government recognised this. In March 1942 it agreed, despite the acute shipping situation, that 'in the interests of efficiency and morale', 'tobacco supplies should be maintained at the level of demand', so extra space was allocated during the coming year to prevent stocks falling to a dangerously low level. Indeed, by 1943, imports were outstripping those of the last year of peace. The importance of tobacco supplies to morale was widely recognised.[26]

The same was true of entertainments. At the outbreak of war, in anticipation of massive aerial attack, all public places of entertainment were closed down. They were soon reopened. The effect on morale of continued closure was not something to be contemplated with equanimity. In the midst of air attack people were to look for entertainment despite – or because of – their troubles. In Southampton the few places that remained open did 'a roaring trade', and M-O found that young Londoners craved diversion. Even the football pools were revived. During the height of the London blitz, cinemas remained open; by the middle of the war, nationally, up to 30,000,000 seats a week were being sold, and since many of the films shown – such as Howard's *First of the Few* or Olivier's *Henry V* – were intended to boost morale, this was no bad thing. Whereas expenditure on food, clothing and household goods fell during the war, that on beer rose by a quarter, on tobacco by a sixth, and on entertainments by over two fifths. The effect on civilian morale was considerable. Ascetics' dreams were thwarted, but the result was a far happier nation. What is 'good' is not always best.[27]

Finally, many have argued that a key factor in maintaining civilian morale was the promise of a better future after the war. While historians differ as to whether this promise was a good thing, few would dispute its existence. The inter-war decades rapidly became discredited: the 'outs' got their revenge while the inter-war leaders were hamstrung in defending their by no means execrable record by the widespread belief that they were to blame for the war. Thus there emerged a strong

body of opinion to the effect that 'things must never be the same again'. This did not only cover left-wingers. The Ministry of Information soon came to the conclusion that it was the best way to inspire Britons in the war effort, although its early statements, were bland. In fact Churchill was keen to avoid precise statements before the end of the war, but he was unable to stop plans like the Beveridge report being mooted. The immense popularity of that report certainly suggested that many civilians were boosting their own morale with visions of a brighter future, and white papers on employment and health, and the Education Act of 1944, seemed to be moving in the same direction. And underneath all this was a flood of books, pamphlets, broadcasts and films all telling the same story. The MoI's own film unit came to be staffed with left-wingers who produced masses of films along the same lines, contrasting a grim picture of the inter-war years with the full employment of wartime and concluding that if only government continued to organise the nation's resources in peacetime then a prosperous future was assured. Such films generally concluded with advice to vote to ensure that there was no return to the 'bad old days', which was basically a call to vote Labour. Feature films often conveyed a similar message against the backdrop of a very partial image of inter-war Britain: thus *Love on the Dole* (1941) ended with a statement from the Labour minister A.V. Alexander that such conditions as the – fictional – film showed must never be allowed to return. If it would be going too far to say that all this talk of a better post-war world inspired the nation to victory, it did at least remove a lot of the fear that wartime gains would be snatched away once peace was restored, as was believed to have been the case after 1918. Thus it helped to boost morale, particularly since there was so little consideration given to those who might lose out under the new regime.[28]

IV

The government planners of the 1930s would have been pleasantly surprised by the resilience of the British civilian at war. They had feared that aerial attack and privations would lead to mass hysteria, massive casualties and the opening up of social divisions on an unprecedented scale. The home front might be the one on which the war was lost, as was believed to have been the case in Germany in 1918. The expedients they thought would be especially useful in combating such problems – evacuation and propaganda – turned out, in the event, to be of limited value. Instead, civilian morale was maintained by patriotic feeling for a struggle that was eventually successful; faith in the nation's leaders; rising wages and full employment; adequate supplies of good food and 'essential luxuries' like tobacco; and a hope that the post-war world would be a better one. Given these, morale never

looked like cracking, particularly after the enemy came out in his true colours with the onset of the 'Big Blitz' in September 1940; even before then, while there had been confusion and some demoralisation, there had been no substantial support for the few who believed that the war was not worth fighting.

The war had revealed, above all, that British society was not as fragmented as the inter-war pessimists had believed. Similarly, it showed that that society was more malleable than they had thought to be the case. In the 1930s governments had been nervous of initiating substantial changes in legislation or practice, even though they had sometimes wanted to, for fear of letting loose movements and forces they could not control. Compelled by circumstances to make some of those changes, they found that this was not so, although it took sections of the Conservative party some years to appreciate the fact. The war helped to promote change in Britain, and that change often made a substantial difference to the lives of ordinary people. But as this paper has suggested, those changes could only be limited because, in many essentials, the British people remained the same. As they were not made into quivering jellies by the air raids, so they were not made into utopian idealists by the MoI film unit. Their social, economic and political concerns, beyond victory in the war, remained narrowly focussed. This was perfectly understandable, but its corollary was a lack of scope for governments to transform society, even if they had wanted to do so. Within those parameters there was a meaningful shift in emphasis because of the new possibilites opened up by the war, but it would not do to overstate it. The British civilian at war was in most ways the same person as before or after, but living for six years under different conditions. Harold Nicolson and the prostitute would have been as ill-at-ease with each other in a darkened doorway in 1946 as they had been in 1940.

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