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The Urban Experience of Modern War. European Cities and Aerial Warfare in World War II

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British cities 'in the front line': representations and realities, 1939-1945

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Urban, industrial and dock areas, where civilians made the most direct contribution to the war effort, were the targets of enemy bombers. Throughout the war the government used ministers' speeches, posters, advertisements, pamphlets, films and BBC broadcasts – which combined slogans, straightforward messages as well as civilian role models – in an effort to stimulate a commitment to the war and behaviour that would assist the war effort.[1] Politicians tried to encourage workers to carry on at work after the air raid siren sounded and to rely on look-outs, known as roof spotters, to warn them of imminent danger. Politicians did this through clear and direct appeals and warnings to those in industrial and urban areas, stating explicitly that the production of materials for the war was vital in order to avoid invasion, and that defeat would follow if civilians did not maintain output, irrespective of whether there was an air raid on or not.

Propaganda thrives on figurative language, and politicians quickly adopted a wartime metaphor by referring to civilians who carried on at work after the siren as Armed Forces 'in the front line'. It was language that was already in common usage, so did not jar or ring false notes; military metaphors abounded in daily speech: on the warpath, in the wars, battling through crowds, plan of action, war of nerves, live to fight another day, and up in arms. (The Ministry of Food used a military metaphor in some of

its advertisements when it urged ‘Eat Wisely to Keep Fighting Fit’.)[2] The concept of the civilian in the front line was a political construction. Civilians had been in the thick of wars in the past, but now the language of the front-line civilian was used to harness civilians in urban areas to the war effort; it was a device for waging war. The use of this metaphor reinforced the message that the role of civilians was essential to avoiding defeat. It was easily understood, for the centrality of the Forces to the outcome of war was self-evident. It tried to engender certain types of behaviour widely associated with the Armed Forces, such as duty, sacrifice, bravery, following orders, teamwork, and loyalty to King and country. The use of military metaphors was inclusive; it challenged the notion of a gulf between the civilians at home and the military that had been such a widespread assumption in the public memory of the First World War.

Churchill spoke in all-inclusive language of the contribution that civilians in production were making to the war. He made an explicit link between the civilian in the factory and the fate of the country. Such a link had been made in the First World War, but in the rhetoric of the Second World War it was the risk entailed in working after the air raid siren sounded that created the notion of the British civilian in the front line, taking similar risks to the troops.[3]

Herbert Morrison, the Labour Minister of Supply in 1940 (subsequently Home Secretary, 1940-45), referred to ‘the great army of workers’ in armaments firms.[4] Ernest Bevin, a lifelong trade unionist, and now Minister of Labour and National Service and member of the War Cabinet, 1940-45, with powers second only to Churchill, linked civilians who produced munitions with Spitfire pilots, admitting that there was a risk in

working after the siren but pointing out that the danger was no greater than for the man in the Spitfire.[5]

The government produced a leaflet in which it acknowledged that working after the siren carried risks, and although roof spotters could reduce these risks, all engaged on vital production were ‘front-line troops’.[6] One Member of Parliament criticised armaments workers who went to shelters during work time: ‘The implication of the statement that we are all in the front line is that we ought to behave as if we were in the front line.’[7] The press reported politicians’ speeches verbatim, which gave them a wide circulation and directness as well as extra gravitas and importance; the newspapers reinforced the politicians’ messages by their own explicit support. Information and explanation were closely welded to exhortation.

The press took up the theme of civilians in the front line, although the meaning shifted depending on the context. In early September 1940 The Times maintained that ‘all engaged in vital production are front-line troops’.[8] As well as using the language of the front line, the national press also merged civilians and the Forces in its language: ‘Every worker is a soldier’; and after the first heavy raids on London, as East Enders trekked off to find alternative accommodation, the Press claimed that the ‘civilian population is taking its Dunkirk’, which also gave a bleak story a positive spin.[9] In explaining the system of working after the siren The Times claimed that the desire of the industrial workers to be ‘treated as soldiers, who do not lightly leave their posts’, was ‘practically unanimous’.[10]

Local newspapers, like national ones, used the same military metaphors as politicians, with claims such as ‘Workers’ readiness to brave the risks of the battle’ and

'We are all in the front line now, whether we are soldiers, sailors, airmen, farm workers, or workers in any industry'.[11] The local Exeter newspaper claimed that taking risks, acting like soldiers and displaying courage were integral to the civilian's role in avoiding defeat, a role, the paper made clear, which involved continuing with work after the siren sounded. It warned 'Wars cannot be won without taking risks'… 'We are all soldiers now, and must accept a soldier's risks as philosophically and as cheerfully as we can'. It was by working after the siren and thereby running the risks of war that civilians were transformed into front-line troops, 'We are "doing our bit" on the Home Front, which just now is the front line'. [12]

The language of the 'front-line civilian' appeared not only in politicians' speeches and the press, but also in a range of other media. The BBC attempted to instil in civilians a sense of their role as a 'fighting front'; it referred to workers 'in the front line' and broadcast talks that emphasised that 'Britain Could Take It'.[13] JB Priestley both in his Sunday evening Postscripts, broadcast on the BBC between June and September 1940 and listened to by roughly 1/3 of the population, and in the 1940 Ministry of Information film Britain at Bay, which he wrote and narrated; government campaigns on various aspects of wartime life; national savings campaigns, and even novels all used military metaphors and likened civilians to front-line troops, although in these cases all civilians, not just those working through the siren, were included.[14] Newsreels also used military metaphors, for example, in September 1940, one announced 'Everyone in the Front Line'. Another newsreel referred to Dover as 'the front line'.

Between the retreat from Dunkirk in May 1940 and D-Day in June 1944 more civilians were on the receiving end of the enemy's attacks and more civilians died as a

result of enemy fire than soldiers, many of whom were in training camps in Britain rather than fighting overseas: the term 'front-line civilian' was, therefore, an apt one, but the concept was a political and cultural construction, and it was polysemic and contested. When politicians used the term 'front-line civilian' they were expressing a bundle of ideas that included risk, danger and duty, but above all they were referring to those civilians who actively undertook work that carried a war-related risk. It was an allocution. They were not referring to civilians who were the passive victims of air raids in their own homes. The term was also used more widely but, for government and sections of the press, it had a very precise meaning. Language, like much else, was contested and developmental. The government's use of the term 'front line' meant more than being the passive victim of war, or of coping with the effects of war; it involved an active role, taking risks in order to prosecute the war. Politicians and journalists used the term not only to describe the role of civilians, but also to encourage them to behave in a particular way; the term was, therefore, used to influence behaviour. Politicians used the words to try to encourage people to behave as if they were 'in the front line' and to encourage others to see them as if they were in the front line too. The government's message was about the importance of people's actions, but when the wider public used the term, they meant the wartime experience of risk and danger in air raids, irrespective of any action they may or may not have taken.

In 1941 Ritchie Calder described people in the blitzes on London as in the front line.[15] Picture Post carried a photograph of a BBC basement with two women on camp beds reading and a man studying. The caption ran 'A front line trench in the war of nerves. Tin-hatted Laurence Gilliam Plans a Drama Programme'.[16] Shelters too could be

transformed into military language. One man used a military metaphor when describing in his diary the mass burial of civilians killed in an air raid; he wrote of them as 'unknown warriors'.[17]

The term 'front line' entered common usage beyond politicians and newspaper journalists. Colin Perry, a teenage London diarist consciously adopted the language of the media and used the term in a number of related ways, none of which involved working after the siren sounded.[18]

When politicians and newspaper journalists used the metaphor of civilians as front-line troops it incorporated notions of discipline, hierarchy and unquestioning obedience to authority, and as such it was not a radical message. Yet, when people behaved as politicians encouraged them to behave, and when they withstood the onslaught of bombs, it enhanced people's sense of self-importance, which suggests that behaviour and actions encouraged by the government may have had some unintended consequences.

After the worst of the blitzes, in May 1941 the compilers of the secret Ministry of Information's Weekly Home Intelligence Reports drew parallels between civilians and troops in the field, and found similar factors affecting the behaviour of both. First, they thought it extremely important that people had a secure base. A safe refuge somewhere was important in enabling people to stand up to continuous night raiding. This is borne out by the way in which people actively sought ways of coping with blitzes, by for instance taking to shelters and the London underground at night or by trekking out of cities at night and back in again during the day to do their jobs. Many civilians in air raids were in familiar surroundings, unlike soldiers who were often in unknown territory.

Second, fatigue 'stunned' people and made key personnel less efficient. There was evidence that in heavily bombed cities, such as Plymouth, Portsmouth and Southampton, those with civil defence duties became less efficient when they did not receive enough sleep. Third, conditioning was important. Those who experienced a gradual build up in raids coped better than those who experienced a sudden heavy raid. Fourth, personal blitz experience inevitably affected people's feelings: the sight of badly wounded casualties or sudden death, loss of friends or relatives, 'near misses', temporary entombment or loss of one's home had a definite 'unnerving effect' on people, often delayed for a few hours or a day, and usually temporary.[19] The Ministry of Information also thought that less material factors affected both troops and civilians, although the compilers' comments seem more speculative and it may be that they seized on those reports with which they agreed.[20]

Politicians, journalists and ordinary civilians linked their behaviour and experiences to that of the Armed Forces by referring to themselves in a positive way as being in the front line. Indeed, on numerous occasions civilians and members of the Armed Forces were caught in the same air raids on cities, the latter assisted the civil defence and rescue services, and some of the Forces lost their lives in air raids on civilian targets. These common experiences were more likely to occur in naval and garrison towns.[21] Elsewhere, many civilians during the period of the heavy raids in the early part of the war expressed a distinct hostility towards the army.[22]

How apt then were the military metaphors used of civilians in urban areas? Influences on civilians in cities were both distinctive from, and similar to, those which military analysts and autobiographical accounts identify as important factors in

motivating the Armed Forces. In the Armed Forces selection; training; discipline; loyalty to the regiment, battalion, platoon, or crew members (primary group loyalty); leadership; group support; moral coercion and shame; drink; inducements of the spoils of war; routine; political ideology; excitement; activity and fatigue reducing fear, have all been identified as factors affecting the willingness and ability of soldiers, sailors and airmen to carry on under fire or risk to their lives. [23]

There were some obvious differences between civilians and those in the Forces. For civilians caught in air raids there had been little selection beyond the evacuation from the cities of certain vulnerable groups (although these included children who actually stood up to the experience well). There was no training for civilians, they learnt from experience. There was no discipline imposed on civilians at work as the practice of carrying on after the siren was largely voluntary. There were no inducements from the spoils of war, and although some may have gained courage from drink there is no actual evidence of this happening. Loyalty to a group was not so much a motive as an outcome: after air raids and blitzes people felt a heightened sense of identification and pride in their city or area. How far political ideology or the broader aims of the war induced people to carry on at work is difficult to judge. Memory evidence suggests that it existed, but this does not come through in the contemporary material.

There were also some similarities between civilians in cities and the Armed Forces. It is impossible to assess the role of national leadership, but parents gave a lead to their children: most parents hid their fear and nervousness from their children, and children imitated their parents’ behaviour. People gained strength from the presence of others, whether at work or at home, and from the presence of shelter officials. In some

cases there was moral coercion to continue one's job in raids. Routine was extremely important to people. Some found it easier to cope if they were active and had their minds taken off the dangers. Some, especially young people, relished the excitement of dog fights, although the experience of direct raids and blitzes was extremely frightening, whatever one's age.

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[1] Robert Mackay, Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War (2003), pp.142, 172-3.
[2] Westminster and Pimlico News 27 September 1940.
[3] Randolph S. Churchill (compiled), Into Battle: Speeches by the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill PC. MP. (1941), pp.211, 231, 251,253.
[4] Daily Herald 3 July and 30 August 1940.
[5] The Times 19 September 1940.
[6] The Times 11 September 1940.
[7] Hansard vol. 365 col. 319 Hore-Belisha 8 October 1940.
[8] The Times 11 September 1940.
[9] Daily Express 19 June and 9 September 1940.
[10] The Times 20 September 1940.
[11] Croydon Times 28 September 1940.
[12] Express and Echo 22 August, 30 September, 1 October.
[13] Sian Nicholas, The Echo of War (1996), pp.7, 120, 125.
[14] Western Evening Herald 7 October 1940; JB Priestley, Postscripts (1941); GPO Film Unit Ministry of Information, Britain at Bay 1940; Nigel Balchin, Darkness Falls from the Skies (1942), p.150; Nevil Shute, Most Secret (1945).
[15] Ritchie Calder, Carry On London (1941), p.xiv.
[16] Picture Post 15 March 1941.
[17] Imperial War Museum London. 81/2/1 John Davies 4 December 1940.
[18] Colin Perry, Boy in the Blitz The 1940 diary of Colin Perry (2000). pp. 37,89,152-3, 207.
[19] Public Record Office, Kew, London. PRO INF 1/292 WHIR 7-14 May 1941.
[20] PRO INF 1/292 WHIR 7-14 May 1941.
[21] PRO HO 199/134.
[22] PRO INF 1/292 WHIR 5-12 February 1941, 11-18 June 1941; 1-8 September 1942.
[23] See for instance Lord Moran, Anatomy of Courage (1987). Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds) A Time To Kill 1939-45 (1997)