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*Renegotiating Citizenship through the Lens of the 'People's War' in Second World War Britain**

It may seem surprising that, almost eighty years since the Second World War ended and over fifty years since the home front became a focus for historical study, a lively debate continues to rage around the idea of the 'people's war'. Historians first used the concept to explain changes that they believed were brought about by the war.¹ The debate then turned to whether the concept was a myth: were the population united behind the war effort or did systematic rule-breaking prove otherwise?² From here came discussion of 'the people': which groups were included in—and excluded from—this vision of the nation?³ Other historians have asked who created the 'people's war' narrative: was it imposed from above, or did civilians believe in it and contribute to its development?⁴ Most fundamentally, did it exist at all? Was the term 'people's war' used and understood at the time, or was it invented later by historians?⁵

To begin with the last point, there can be little doubt that 'people's war' was widely used in the popular press throughout the war and that it had many facets.⁶ By 1940, *The Times* labelled it 'the current phrase' to refer to the home front, where, in the context of the Blitz, 'the people' were praised for facing bombing 'without flinching'.⁷ *The Daily Herald*

* We are very grateful to Matthew Grant, Lucy Noakes, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Charlotte Tomlinson, our anonymous reviewer and the *EHR* editors for their invaluable feedback on drafts of this article.

1. A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939–1945* (1969; London, 1992); P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975).

2. C. Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London, 1990); M. Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London, 2000).

3. S.O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003); P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester, 1998); L. Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London, 1998); P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007); J. Pattinson, A. McIvor and L. Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinity in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2016).

4. A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991); M. Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004); J. Hammett, *Creating the People's War: Civil Defence Communities in Second World War Britain* (Manchester, 2022).

5. D. Edgerton, 'The Nationalisation of British History: Historians, Nationalism and the Myths of 1940', *English Historical Review*, cxxxvi (2021), pp. 950–85.

6. Using *The British Newspaper Archive*, we have conducted a comprehensive search of local and national newspapers between 1938 and 1946: *The British Newspaper Archive* (Findmypast and the British Library, 2011–), at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> (accessed 13 Nov. 2023). The conflict was first described as a 'people's war' on 12 September 1939 and references fall steeply after the war's end.

7. *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1940, p. 5.

stressed its ubiquity in January 1941—‘This is a people’s war. That has been said to the point of boredom’—and used the term to criticise the government’s propaganda policy.⁸ As these two examples suggest, the phrase provided an important framework for reconfiguring citizenship from both the top down and the bottom up. It was used to explain the extension of the duties of citizens and, in return, to demand a greater voice, recognition and rewards. In April 1941, for example, a reader’s letter to the *Middlesex Chronicle* called for a more aggressive offensive strategy because ‘The public are getting very tired (and angry) at the delay in hitting the enemy as he deserves ... This is a “people’s war” and the will of the people should be obeyed’.⁹

Exploring wartime uses of the term ‘people’s war’ helps to unpick how citizenship was constructed, understood and performed on the British home front. It allows us to explain individuals’ attitudes and behaviours, and the ways in which ‘ordinary people’, as well as politicians and the press, articulated their hopes in the present and dreams for the future. Following a historiographical introduction in Section I, this article uses the ‘people’s war’ to interrogate attitudes towards citizenship in four ways. The second section shows how the term was used flexibly to make sense of wartime circumstances and new duties of citizenship. Next, we explore how the ‘people’s war’ implied unconditional support and willing service from ‘the people’, but could also be used to criticise the attitudes and behaviours of others. Wartime expectations for ‘active citizenship’ have been analysed by several excellent studies; this article makes a significant contribution to this literature by tracing how such language developed over the course of the war and, still more importantly, by exploring what citizens asked for in return. In the fourth section, we examine demands that the government trust ‘the people’ and listen to their views, while the final section focuses on the forms of recognition and reward that were sought during wartime and for the ‘new world’ to come.

It is significant that even mundane aspects of wartime experience could be understood through the lens of the ‘people’s war’ and active citizenship. Good citizenship during the Second World War has been described by Sonya Rose as ‘involving voluntary fulfilment of obligations and a willingness to contribute to the welfare of the community’.¹⁰ But this could be interpreted flexibly, and Ruth Lister has argued that participation in the duties of citizenship ‘tends to be more of a continuum than an all or nothing affair and people might participate more or less at different points on the life course’.¹¹ And as Matthew Grant has pointed out, although active citizenship is usually equated with good citizenship, individuals fulfilling their ‘social roles and basic legal obligations’ as, for example, ‘mothers, workers,

8. *Daily Herald*, 16 Jan. 1941, p. 2.

9. Letters, *Middlesex Chronicle*, 26 Apr. 1941, p. 4.

10. Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p. 20.

11. R. Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* (1997; Basingstoke, 2003), p. 42.

consumers, tax payers, and law abiders' are highly likely to have seen themselves as good citizens.¹² As this article shows, these basic duties of citizenship proliferated in wartime and so too did the reciprocal expectations of 'the people'.

I

This article builds upon a wealth of scholarship about the 'people's war'. Angus Calder's landmark book, *The People's War* (1969), acknowledged the complexities of wartime society—moral and immoral, optimistic and defeatist—but argued that there was, nevertheless, solidarity and support for the war. What made Calder's argument distinctive was his belief that the British state knew victory depended on the active participation of its citizens and, Calder therefore argued, that 'the people increasingly led itself', because government followed popular opinion to maintain morale.¹³ This idea was amplified by Paul Addison, whose *The Road to 1945* traced a leftward shift in political outlook to summer 1940.¹⁴ Both also argued that British citizens were fighting for the future, and the significance of reconstruction in defining war aims has been much debated by historians. Calder and Addison's more political approach has given way to wider questions about identity. This was encouraged by Sonya Rose, whose influential book, *Which People's War?* (2003), unpacked the myth of a homogenous 'self-sacrificing, relentlessly cheerful, and inherently tolerant people who had heroically withstood the Blitz and were stalwart as they coped with the material deprivations of a war economy'.¹⁵

These understandings of national identity were widely disseminated through the media and in propaganda material. Siân Nicholas has shown how, from the first months of the war, the BBC used 'quasi-military language' to foster an image of the home front, with 'everyone making her or his vital contribution to the war effort'.¹⁶ Film historians have argued that the cinema was another crucial space for developing consensus around wartime identity. While Jeffrey Richards found that almost every wartime film foregrounded three key British qualities—sense of humour, tolerance, and stoicism or emotional restraint—Chapman emphasised the centrality of 'ordinary people': 'class differences have all but disappeared and have been replaced instead by a democratic sense of community and comradeship'.¹⁷ But media representations were not

12. M. Grant, 'Historicising Citizenship in Post-war Britain', *Historical Journal*, lix (2016), pp. 1187–1206, at 1201–2.

13. Calder, *People's War*, p. 18.

14. Addison, *Road to 1945*, p. 18.

15. Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 2.

16. S. Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 1996), p. 108.

17. J. Richards, 'National Identity in British Wartime Films', in P. Taylor, ed., *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (London, 1988), p. 58; J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939–1945* (London, 1998), p. 161.

undisputed. David Clampin showed that commercial advertisers were initially reluctant to endorse such messages and that government propaganda was not automatically accepted.¹⁸ A revealing example here is the 'Silent Column' anti-gossip propaganda campaign, which was loudly criticised as undemocratic and authoritarian. And yet, Jo Fox argued, public opposition to the campaign 'inadvertently sharpened the sense of community from below and became a means through which Britons themselves defined concepts of unity and what they were fighting for ... It was not necessarily propaganda that defined the People's War but responses to it'.¹⁹

Others have highlighted more deeply entrenched hierarchies, inequalities and divisions in wartime society. Rose explored the contradictions and instabilities in the national community in terms of class, gender and race, and analysed the many possible meanings that the 'people's war' could be given by different people at different times: 'They were unified and they did pull together. They understood themselves as being members of the nation, even if they could not agree on how the nation was constructed; on who belonged and who did not, on what made Britain distinctive, or on what membership entailed'.²⁰ With regard to class, Geoffrey Field has argued that, despite an emphasis on class levelling, representations still tended to 'underscore the "Otherness" of workers and the poor'.²¹ Research on gender in wartime has shown that new freedoms experienced by women were offset by other restrictions, and work on masculinity has highlighted hierarchies of service and respect.²² Studies focused on ethnic diversity have drawn attention to further hierarchies, for example the conditional acceptance of Black war workers and hostility towards mixed race relationships.²³ Yet, on the whole, these historians do not claim that the 'people's war' did not exist; rather, they argue that it could take on different meanings for different people at different times.

While most social historians of the Second World War have sought to understand why the 'people's war' was an attractive and useful narrative (and thus to explain its perseverance in national mythology), some have denied that it existed at all. A number of 'sensationalist revisionist' histories (to use Mark Connelly's term) highlight looting, black

18. D. Clampin, *Advertising and Propaganda in World War II: Cultural Identity and the Blitz Spirit* (London, 2014).

19. J. Fox, 'Careless Talk: Tensions within British Domestic Propaganda during the Second World War', *Journal of British Studies*, li (2012), pp. 936–66, at 949, 966.

20. Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 290.

21. G. Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 55–6.

22. See, for example, Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*; Noakes, *War and the British*; Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*; Pattinson, McIvor and Robb, *Men in Reserve*.

23. W. Webster, *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford, 2018); L. Bland, *Britain's Brown Babies* (Manchester, 2019).

marketeering and sexual promiscuity to undermine the narrative.²⁴ Yet the scale of these misdemeanours tends to be exaggerated and the conclusions drawn do not reflect the ways in which people understood their own behaviour. Mark Roodhouse has, for example, shown that people could participate in the black market and still see themselves as good citizens, perhaps making an important contribution to the 'people's war' in other areas of their lives.²⁵

More recently, David Edgerton has claimed that the 'people's war' is a concept that 'barely existed' during the war. In an article for this journal, Edgerton argues that 'the idea of a national "people's war" was created by historians in the late 1960s, becoming popular two decades later'. He suggests that historians have misread Calder and Addison's work, treating their research as 'a wartime historical reality, which is itself open to criticism, rather than being understood as a later thesis about the war'. Edgerton argues that 'The main usage of "people's war" was as a synonym for "total war"', and points out that the term 'total war' returns ten times the number of hits when using Google's NGram or the digital archive of *The Times*.²⁶ 'People's war' was, however, understood differently from terms such as 'total war', which, as well as describing mass participation, could also be used as shorthand for 'totalitarian', implying compulsion.²⁷ Moreover, too narrow a focus on word frequencies risks overlooking the fact that the term 'people's war' *was* used.

We trace the word history of the term 'people's war' to show its importance in renegotiating ideas of citizenship during the conflict. This approach draws on the work of Thomas Dixon, who has shown that terms and phrases have dynamic histories and are 'sometimes little more than a "shell" for a range of conceptual meanings'.²⁸ Our approach also draws on the idea of a 'cultural circuit', in which, Penny Summerfield has argued, 'Privately and locally told stories of experience are picked up and enter public discourse in myriad ways', while public discourse 'tend[s] in turn to define and to limit imaginative possibilities for the private and local telling'.²⁹ Applying these approaches to the 'people's

24. Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 9–10. See, for example, N. Harman, *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth* (London, 1981); S. Hylton, *Their Darkest Hour: The Hidden History of the Home Front, 1939–1945* (Stroud, 2001); Ponting, 1940.

25. M. Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain, 1939–1955* (Oxford, 2013).

26. Edgerton, 'Nationalisation of British History', pp. 951, 961. On such techniques, see A. Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxi (2010), pp. 225–31; J.-B. Michel et al., 'Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books', *Science*, cccxxxi (2011), pp. 176–82.

27. T. Wintringham, 'Against Invasion: The Lessons of Spain', *Picture Post*, 7, 11, 15 June 1940, pp. 9–24.

28. Dixon has also emphasised the value of this approach for remaining historically grounded: T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 36–8.

29. P. Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, i (2004), pp. 65–93, at 68.

war', we explore the meaning that the phrase was given in the popular press and how those ideas were reused and modified in life writing. We have foregrounded both mass-circulation newspapers and Britain's local press, as these outlets played a key role in helping people to imagine the nation. The Second World War was a time of growing readerships for popular newspapers and, despite some wartime centralisation, the provincial press situated itself as a trusted source of information and a vital link between local, national and international events.³⁰

The press also gives us a window onto reception. Consider Winston Churchill's speech, the 'War of the Unknown Warriors', which was broadcast by the BBC Home Service in July 1940. The speech did not mention a 'people's war' by name.³¹ And yet, the *Daily Express*, Britain's most popular daily newspaper, with a circulation of over two million, drew a direct link:

The *Daily Express* said: 'This is a People's War'. Other newspapers said: 'This is a People's War'. A few critics pooh-poohed the phrase. But now everybody is using it. Mr Churchill says that this is no war of chieftains or of princes, but of peoples and of causes.³²

It was, then, perfectly possible to make connections to the 'people's war', even when the phrase was not used. This was particularly true for self-narrative texts, as individuals are much less likely than the press to use slogans in their writing. As we will see, a wide range of writers were clearly drawing on the idea of the 'people's war' when constructing their accounts. Public and private discourse about the war informed, reinforced and diverged from each other, and across these texts the concept of a 'people's war' was both salient and malleable.

II

In mid-September 1939, the socialist travel writer and journalist Douglas Goldring asserted that 'This is, perhaps, the first real "people's war" in the whole of English history'. In his 'appeal for co-operation', syndicated to at least twelve local newspapers, he claimed that 'for the first time in our history we have, in the militia', by which he meant the civil defence services (also referred to as Air Raid Precautions or ARP), 'the nucleus of a people's army, in which young men of every class are on an equal footing.' Just a few days into the conflict, Goldring was

30. T. O'Malley, 'Was There a National Press in the UK in the Second World War?', *Media History*, xxiii (2017), pp. 508–30, at 509; G. Hodgson and R. Matthews, 'Never Failed? The Local Reporting of the Blitzes in Coventry and Liverpool in 1940 and 1941', *Media History*, xxvii (2021), pp. 162–76. See also A. Bingham, 'Ignoring the First Draft of History?', *Media History*, xviii (2012), pp. 311–26.

31. Winston Churchill, 'War of the Unknown Warriors', BBC broadcast, 14 July 1940. Text available at <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/war-of-the-unknown-warriors> (accessed 31 Jan. 2023).

32. *Daily Express*, 16 July 1940, p. 4.

already representing civilian volunteers as playing a crucial role, while class levelling suggested an equality of sacrifice. He sketched out other elements of national identity within the people's war too, from Britons as 'lovers of Freedom and Toleration' to 'British good humour'.³³

The following day, the well-connected Conservative MP Victor Cazalet invoked a different reading of the phrase during a parliamentary debate on newspaper censorship. The debate had been sparked by a bungled attempt to withhold news about the British Expeditionary Force landing in France, which had led to the physical blockade of Fleet Street by the Metropolitan Police.³⁴ In a turn of phrase that was picked out by the *Daily Mirror*, he declared the war to be 'a people's war—a crusade' and called on government to 'trust the people [and] tell them all the facts'.³⁵ Cazalet's intervention chimed with wider criticism of the Chamberlain government's approach to the war. Perhaps for this reason, the phrase 'people's war' appeared in a range of political speeches over the coming months, spanning the spectrum of British politics, from Harry Pollitt (leader of the Communist Party) to Oswald Mosley (leader of the British Union of Fascists) via Arthur Greenwood (deputy leader of the Labour Party) and Archibald Sinclair (leader of the Liberal Party).³⁶

Yet the real flexibility of the 'people's war' is demonstrated through its shifting use over time. In spring and summer 1940, the 'people's war' was closely linked to a sense of vulnerability. The German invasion of France led to intense speculation about Britain's readiness to defend its borders. A key voice at this time was Tom Wintringham, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War and written a best-selling book about the experience. He secured a deal with the *Daily Mirror* in May 1940 to write a series of feature articles on the current war, supplementing this 'exclusive contract' with articles for the illustrated magazine *Picture Post* (a selection of which were republished later in the year as a Penguin Special, *New Ways of War*). Wintringham used his platform to launch a concerted—though ultimately unsuccessful—campaign to arm British civilians.³⁷

Throughout May and June 1940, Wintringham urged the government to extend its recently announced Local Defence Volunteers scheme (later renamed the Home Guard) and called for robust instructions

33. Featured in, for example, *Portsmouth Evening News*, 12 Sept. 1939, p. 2; *Falkirk Herald*, 13 Sept. 1939, p. 4; *Merthyr Express*, 16 Sept. 1939, p. 2.

34. F. Williams, *Press, Parliament and People* (London, 1946), pp. 3–4.

35. Quotation from *Daily Mirror*, 14 Sept. 1939, p. 2. See also Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., House of Commons, 13 Sept. 1939, vol. 351, col. 695.

36. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 12 Oct. 1939, p. 10; *Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, 26 Oct. 1939, p. 4; *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 6 Nov. 1939, p. 3; *Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald*, 22 Dec. 1939, p. 7.

37. Wintringham did convince Edward Hulton (the proprietor of *Picture Post*) to bankroll a Home Guard training school at Osterley Park on the outskirts of London. See S.P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard: A Military and Political History* (Oxford, 1995), p. 71.

about how to defend against invasion. As he argued on 28 May 1940, 'If the Germans land, we should make it a people's war'.³⁸ Wintringham's use of the phrase drew on the rhetoric of the Spanish Civil War and a similar egalitarian argument to that made by Douglas Goldring. However, set against the backdrop of the Dunkirk evacuation, its literal interpretation had the most impact. Indeed, his call to arm civilians was repeated by Clement Davies, the former National Liberal MP who had organised opposition to Chamberlain during the Norway debate in May 1940. In an interview quoted by the *Sunday Dispatch* and at least seven local newspapers, he said that 'this is a people's war and the people have got to be armed'. His vision encompassed the whole population: 'They should be given hand grenades, bombs, pistols—anything ... A boy who can throw a ball can throw a bomb ... Women should have grenades to defend their homes and their babies.'³⁹

These comments pre-empted a Ministry of Information pamphlet, *If the Invader Comes*, which was distributed in mid-June and reproduced by most national newspapers.⁴⁰ The pamphlet demonstrates a very different view of the war, urging people to 'stay put' in the event of an invasion to keep roads free for military use. The active role for civilians would be limited to keeping watch, refusing to help the invader and obeying orders from military authorities. However, showing just how malleable the 'people's war' was, the Ministry of Information reinforced its more restrained message in newspaper advertisements: 'Remember, this is a People's War. Even though you may not wear a uniform, you will help Britain to win by carrying on at your desk or bench, no matter what happens ... that's why you must STAY PUT'.⁴¹

Although the scale of this information campaign was well received, the social research organisation Mass Observation believed the failure to offer practical examples of resistance was 'out of touch with common sense'.⁴² This feeling remained throughout the invasion scare. On the day the first copies of *If the Invader Comes* were delivered, a *News Chronicle* column written by T.L. Horabin, Liberal MP for Cornwall North, argued that the threat of invasion should be met by 'a people's war' fought by 'one vast army'. He suggested that organised and informal elements might work together, including 'every man and boy capable of bearing arms and every woman with the courage to sling a milk-bottle at a cyclist invader ... The people are seething with

38. *Daily Mirror*, 28 May 1940, pp. 6, 10. See also T. Wintringham, 'Arm the Citizens', *Picture Post*, 7, 13, 29 June 1940, pp. 9–21.

39. *Sunday Dispatch*, 16 June 1940, p. 7. On Davies's opposition to Chamberlain, see D.J. Dutton, 'Power Brokers or Just "Glamour Boys"? The Eden Group, September 1939–May 1940', *English Historical Review*, cxviii (2003), pp. 412–24.

40. *The Times*, 19 June 1940, p. 3; 20 June 1940, p. 2.

41. Ministry of Information [hereafter Mol] advertisement, 'To the Workers of Britain'. See, for example, *The People*, 11 Aug. 1940, p. 4.

42. Brighton, University of Sussex, Mass Observation Archive [hereafter MOA], FR 216, 'Invasion Leaflet', 20 June 1940.

indignation that their services are not being utilised for what they know must be a fight to the death.⁴³

Calls to hand out rifles and Molotov cocktails sat alongside broader definitions of active citizenship. Under the title ‘The People’s War’, the *Western Gazette* appealed for readers to join civil defence in June 1940: ‘the ordinary citizen will go quietly about his duty in whatever way it may be possible to help, and we hope with the admonition in mind: “Think always of your country before you think of yourself”’.⁴⁴ Instructing readers that in a ‘people’s war against tyrants ... service has many forms’, the *Belfast Post* summed up what duty could entail: civil defence, war work, National Savings, collecting scrap for salvage and remaining calm were all presented as forms of service.⁴⁵ The *Banbury Advertiser*, meanwhile, praised all who ‘in whatever form are serving in the people’s war for the establishment of finer and better order than the world has yet known’, including those in the organised services alongside those who ‘serve in ways which do not command the limelight’.⁴⁶ We see this language in newspaper letter pages too. In July 1940, for example, a reader of the *Birmingham Gazette* declared that ‘Every able-bodied citizen can be given some place in an all-inclusive scheme of defence’.⁴⁷

This process reached its peak as bombing raids became more frequent. In late August 1940, *Picture Post* published an ‘Air Raid’ feature issue showing Britain’s civil defence services at work, beginning with the now-established trope of a nation at war: ‘The thing that most distinguishes this war from all previous wars is that to-day everyone is in it’.⁴⁸ *Picture Post* was not alone; various commentators sought to comprehend the Blitz by invoking the battlefield. British towns and cities were now on the ‘front line’, and those who lived in them were described as heroes.⁴⁹ The phrase a ‘people’s war’ was amended to suit the new context. An article published in both the *Newcastle Journal and North Mail* and the *Western Mail* on 2 September 1940, for example, reflected that the war had entered a new phase:

We are now fully aware that this is in every sense a ‘People’s War’. To beat Hitler we have to adjust our lives and mental attitude, even to the ordinary

43. *News Chronicle*, 18 June 1940, p. 4.

44. *Western Gazette*, 21 June 1940, p. 8.

45. *Belfast Post*, 24 June 1940, p. 4. See also H. Irving, “‘We Want Everybody’s Salvage!’: Recycling, Voluntarism, and the People’s War”, *Cultural and Social History*, xvi (2019), pp. 165–84; R. Watkiss Singleton, “‘Doing Your Bit’: Women and the National Savings Movement in the Second World War”, in M. Andrews and J. Lomas, eds, *The Home Front in Britain: Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 217–31.

46. *Banbury Advertiser*, 17 July 1940, p. 4.

47. *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 July 1940, p. 4.

48. ‘Air Raid’, *Picture Post*, 8, 7, 17 Aug. 1940, pp. 9–29, at 10.

49. See, for example, *News of the World*, 1 Sept. 1940, p. 6; *Southern Reporter*, 12 Sept. 1940, p. 4; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 18 Sept. 1940, p. 2. The phrase was adopted as the title of the Mol’s Official War Book on the Blitz, *Front Line 1940–41: The Official Story of the Civil Defence of Great Britain* (London, 1942).

things of life: place of sleep, hours of sleep, household re-arrangements. We cannot leave everything to those intrepid and invincible pilots.⁵⁰

At the turn of the new year, the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury* echoed the message that 'a state of emergency will be recognised in every home and there will be a war job for everyone ... Civilians will now have to think and act like soldiers in many ways'. 'Most of us', the paper argued, 'will welcome this approach to the people's war'.⁵¹

These articles formed part of an often-remarked-upon inversion of Britain's usual wartime experiences. During the Blitz, civilians faced greater danger than the military, as the *Lancashire Daily Post* reported in December 1940: 'this is a people's war, and the civilian is as much in the front line as the soldier ... getting on for twice as many civilians as members of the forces have been casualties in a pension scheme'.⁵² In Portsmouth, days into the Blitz, the local newspaper announced that 'It is a people's war with a vengeance. We are all in the front line to-day, and we are all standing up to it with the same courage and determination as those who are armed for the fight'.⁵³ The short propaganda film *London Can Take It!* shows just how ubiquitous this framing was. The ten-minute film contains no fewer than six references to 'civilian soldiers' or 'the people's army'.⁵⁴ Although commissioned for release in the United States, the film was seen by ten million people when shown in British cinemas in late October and remained a central component of the Ministry of Information's non-theatrical film programme until mid-1941.⁵⁵ A post-Dunkirk Mass Observation report, meanwhile, found that most civilians did not think there was a great gap between themselves and soldiers, and their attitude towards servicemen was 'covered with a steadily accreting layer of indifference'.⁵⁶

The end of the Blitz did not signal the end of the 'people's war'. The phrase continued to be used in civil defence appeals, albeit against a backdrop where such efforts were increasingly balanced with paid work and war weariness. In August 1942, for instance, both the *Gloucester Echo* and *Cheltenham Chronicle* reported on a speech by a civil defence officer in the South West. He reminded his audience that 'This was a people's war, and before it was finished the people would realise that they were all in it'. The officer then 'appealed to the members of the Civil Defence Services to examine themselves as to whether or not they were pulling their weight and to encourage others to join and have training'.⁵⁷ The threat to civilians from V-weapons in 1944–5 led to

50. *Newcastle Journal and North Mail*, 2 Sept. 1940, p. 4; *Western Mail*, 2 Sept. 1940, p. 4.

51. *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 4 Jan. 1941, p. 4.

52. *Lancashire Daily Post*, 16 Dec. 1940, p. 1.

53. *Portsmouth Evening News*, 18 Sept. 1940, p. 2.

54. *London Can Take It!*, dir. H. Watt and H. Jennings (GPO Film Unit, 1940).

55. Chapman, *British at War*, pp. 98–9. In Britain, the film was titled *Britain Can Take It!*

56. MOA, FR/274, 'Relations of Civilians and Military', 16 July 1940, pp. 14, 22.

57. *Gloucestershire Echo*, 17 Aug. 1942, p. 4; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 22 Aug. 1942, p. 3.

another spike in usage. The *Dover Express and East Kent News* greeted an official announcement that the threat had passed by noting that:

all and every service has given of its very best, but over and above all has been the People themselves—the great and glorious People—whether a bus driver, a waitress or a housewife at home—who beat the V1. It has been indeed a People's war.⁵⁸

That this reflection was premature—as flying bomb attacks continued until spring 1945—does not take away from its importance.

While the threat to life and limb from aerial bombing solidified the idea of the 'people's war', the phrase was never limited to such uses. It could describe all manner of wartime activities, from recycling—'On the salvage front, as on other fronts, it must be a People's War'—to conserving coal and gas, where 'It is a people's battle in a people's war for a people's peace, and you are the army of fuel savers.'⁵⁹ The most consistent use of the 'people's war' to encourage this form of wartime participation related to the National Savings campaign. National Savings was a pervasive part of life on the home front and had the largest publicity expenditure of any government department.⁶⁰ It was also one of the first to adopt the language of the 'people's war', stressing from July 1940 that 'Every man and woman is in the line of battle' and urging them to 'Lend every pound, every shilling, every penny to the Nation'.⁶¹ With around one-third of the population belonging to a National Savings group during the war, saving was presented as an activity which allowed almost anyone to do their bit, whether a child 'with a bagful of halfpennies' or a 'well-to-do' saver.⁶² As a savings group in Northwich put it in 1943, 'This was a people's war, and the people—every man, woman and child—had to do a fair share'.⁶³

III

The duties of citizenship in the 'people's war' might have changed over the course of the conflict, but the message that civilians were now at the heart of the war effort was constant. As the *Burnley Express and News* commented in July 1940:

58. *Dover Express and East Kent News*, 22 Sept. 1944, p. 2.

59. *Barnoldswick and Earby Times*, 13 Mar. 1942, p. 4; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24 Aug. 1942, p. 4.

60. V. Carolan, 'Lend to Defend: The National Savings Committee During the Second World War', in S. Eliot and M. Wiggam, eds, *Allied Communication to the Public during the Second World War* (London, 2020), pp. 39–51; Singleton, 'Women and the National Savings Movement', pp. 217–31.

61. National Savings advertisement, 'In Defence of Britain'. See, for example, *News of the World*, 14 July 1940, p. 3.

62. *Evening Despatch*, 18 Oct. 1940, p. 6; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 4 July 1941, p. 4.

63. *Winsford Chronicle*, 16 Jan. 1943, p. 5.

This time people were rushing to give service, and if ever there was a people's war this was it. This was a people's war, affecting the lives of every man, woman and child. Some were dressed in khaki and some were disguised as civilians, but they were all in it together. They had in this past nine months found a great reservoir of energy and good spirit waiting to be tapped.⁶⁴

The following year, Liverpool's *Last City Evening Express* explained that 'This war is a people's war in the sense that never before has war's stark reality been brought home to so large a proportion of the population ... [everything] is affected in one way or another.'⁶⁵

The 'people's war' was not, however, synonymous with total war. Where total war merely described the participation of the whole population, in the 'people's war' support and sacrifice was willingly (even enthusiastically) given. This was explained in an article published in May 1940, in newspapers from Essex, Devon, Kent, Sussex, Dumfries and Galloway, Musselburgh, Sunderland and London:

If ever there was a people's war, this is it. No scheme of politicians betrayed us into it; no imperialist or capitalist interests have manoeuvred us into this war; this war is a war that the people demanded and the people are determined to wage with every resource available, on the land, in the air, on the sea, in the waters below the surface of the sea, wherever the enemy can be struck ... Our resolution must be tempered steel, our courage unbreakable, our endurance hard as diamond.⁶⁶

Following VE Day, a similar message was printed in Borrowstounness, Scotland: 'This war just brought to a victorious conclusion was a people's war as no previous war has been ... practically all of us have performed extra duties without desire for reward, in the hope that our weak services would, in some measure, hasten the day of peace.'⁶⁷

That these new responsibilities were accepted without complaint was, it was reported, due to universal support for the war, 'an astonishing unity of motive'.⁶⁸ Thus, the *Birmingham Post* reported on a speech by the local bishop in May 1940, in which he proclaimed that 'This war, waged tardily and reluctantly, is a people's war. It is not a politicians' war. It is not, most emphatically it is not, a *Realpolitik* war ... France and Great Britain are whole-hearted behind their leaders'.⁶⁹ Five years later, a similar message was printed in the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*: 'This has been a people's war, supported by the moral indignation of

64. *Burnley Express and News*, 24 July 1940, p. 6.

65. *Last City Evening Express*, 11 Sept. 1941, p. 2.

66. *Thanet Advertiser and Echo*, 21 May 1940, p. 3; *North Devon Journal*, 23 May 1940, p. 4; *Bromley and West Kent Mercury*, 24 May 1940, p. 6; *Musselburgh and Portobello News*, 24 May 1940, p. 2; *South Essex Mail, East Ham Echo and Barking Chronicle*, 25 May 1940, p. 2; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 25 May 1940, p. 4; *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 25 May 1940, p. 6; *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 27 May 1940, p. 2.

67. *Bo'ness Journal*, 18 May 1945, p. 2.

68. *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 18 Jan. 1941, p. 4.

69. *Birmingham Post*, 1 May 1940, p. 4.

the people, immeasurably aided by the mute endurance of the people, brought to a triumphant conclusion by the toil and sacrifice of the people.⁷⁰

This language was also used by 'the people' themselves. Mr Pettit, a ninety-year-old air raid warden from Ipswich, explained in the *Daily Mirror* that 'duty first has always been my motto ... I am as fit as can be and enjoy life as much as ever'.⁷¹ When two fifteen-year-old respondents to a pre-war civil defence survey were asked their reasons for enrolling, one answered: 'Well I was really needed ... There was such a lot of work and not enough to do it'. The other said he joined from a 'sense of duty', because 'I wasn't old enough for the territorials or anything'.⁷² Even those who did not consider themselves to have relevant skills and experience put themselves forward, such as the volunteer who said that 'if there was anything I could do, washing up and cleaning, I would willingly help'.⁷³ A rather more cynical Mass Observation diarist, who managed a salvage depot, commented that she 'Didn't care about it much but had to play my part'. When she described the work of her volunteer group, however, she wrote that 'It resembled a grandfather's club more than anything else. And quite nice, too, something for these old pensioners, which helps them to feel they are doing their bit'.⁷⁴

Discussions of duty also appeared frequently in local magazines for the civil defence services. These were collaboratively produced by personnel, and were usually bottom-up initiatives with local leadership rarely involved.⁷⁵ They allowed local social groups to co-produce narratives which placed the volunteers at the centre of the 'people's war', and writers frequently praised their colleagues for willingly accepting important new duties. A month into the conflict, a contributor to the magazine of East Bowling, Bradford, wrote that 'Perhaps never before have the people of our Empire been called upon to make such a sacrifice for an ideal, the British ideal of liberty ... in this patriotic duty the ARP is doing its part'.⁷⁶ Three months later, the same magazine featured an article which described a warden post containing men and women of all classes, who 'quarrel about our politics, find fault with our government, and grumble about everything we meet', but still performed

70. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 12 May 1945, p. 4.

71. *Daily Mirror*, 7 Aug. 1942, p. 2.

72. MOA, TC/23/2, Fulham ARP survey responses, May–June 1939.

73. Ibid. Quoted in C. Tomlinson, 'A Million Forgotten Women: Voluntarism, Citizenship and the Women's Voluntary Services in Second World War Britain' (Univ. of Leeds Ph.D. thesis, 2021), p. 57.

74. MOA, Diarist 5275, 11 June 1943.

75. J. Hammett, "'The Invisible Chain by Which All Are Bound to Each Other': Civil Defence Magazines and the Development of Community during the Second World War', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, xi (2018), pp. 117–35.

76. *The Warden, East Bowling*, no. 1 (Oct. 1939), p. 8.

their 'duty to unite against the common foe'.⁷⁷ In Edinburgh, duty was linked to historic national characteristics: 'service to the community comes down through the ages'.⁷⁸ Others suggested that these qualities would be taken into peacetime to make a better world: a Lewisham warden hoped that 'each and every one of us will be a better citizen, and find happiness in giving service and help to our neighbours'.⁷⁹

As in the press, understandings of the 'people's war' in these group publications reflected the changing circumstances of war. A Bedford warden reassured colleagues in January 1940: 'The fact that up to the present you have not been called upon to meet such emergencies as we have been led to expect, in no way detracts from the value of the services you are rendering to the town and country'.⁸⁰ Four months later, as air raids began to hit Britain, a Halifax warden praised personnel for their 'commendable zeal for service', and reassured them that, although they had not yet seen action, 'we read that where necessity has made its urgent call, wardens have acquitted themselves well, acting with bravery and efficiency'. He again linked successful service to national character: 'It is typical of our race that we can play hard as well as work hard, laugh both in gaiety and adversity ... may sociability and the spirit of *bonhomie* remain to assist in making our duty our delight'.⁸¹ Following the V-bomb raids of 1944, a Dulwich warden wrote that the 'Outstanding impression is one of a deeper comradeship ... Bound together by common danger and shared duties ... [we] found anew The Spirit of 1940 in those days of that last grim summer'.⁸²

But while these narratives tended to assert the value of voluntary service and praised dutiful colleagues, there was room for criticism. Statements rebuking individuals for avoiding their wartime responsibilities were not uncommon. In Ipswich, a report stated that 'There is a place for everyone, be it on duty, or in the shelter, and everyone is expected to take his or her place as rapidly and quietly as possible', while a Bradford warden warned that the untrained were 'a menace and a nuisance'.⁸³ Contributors often thought that conscription should replace the initial emphasis on voluntarism for civil defence work, and in January 1941 a writer for Wembley's magazine argued that it would 'Rope in the Slackers' who were 'exercising their freedom to escape civil responsibility'.⁸⁴ A reverend volunteer in Dulwich, on the

77. *The Warden, East Bowling* (Jan. 1940), p. 17.

78. *The Siren, Bristol*, i, no. 2 (Feb. 1940), pp. 3–5; *Wardens' Post, Edinburgh*, no. 1 (Dec. 1939), p. 7.

79. *B Twenty-One, Lewisham*, Victory Edition (June 1945), p. 1.

80. *Wardens' Post, Bedford*, no. 1 (Jan. 1940), pp. 1–2.

81. *The Siren, Halifax*, i, no. 2 (May 1940), p. 34.

82. *Wardens' Post, Dulwich*, ii, no. 17 (Jan. 1945), p. 3.

83. *The Warble, Ipswich*, no. 4 (Apr. 1940), p. 79; *The Warden, East Bowling*, no. 1 (Oct. 1939), p. 6.

84. *ARP, Wembley*, ii, no. 10 (Jan. 1941), p. 3.

other hand, urged his colleagues to regard the failings of those who had not ‘felt the call of duty’ as ‘their misfortune, not their fault’.⁸⁵

Discussions of equal sacrifice also featured regularly in the popular press, but the central concern there was profiteering. Days into the war, the *News Chronicle* insisted that this conflict should be different: ‘The last war permitted many private individuals to line their own pockets with complete disregard for the public welfare. The public is not in a mood to tolerate any repetition of that scandal. This is a people’s war.’⁸⁶ The *Worthing Herald* complained in September 1940 that ‘we talk glibly of “equality of sacrifice” and a “people’s war”’, but ‘Some are profiting, others are being ruined, by this war.’⁸⁷ Until the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, communists were often quoted declaring the war to be capitalist or imperialist—‘it was not a people’s war, not a just war, and not a democratic war’—and they were both praised and criticised for such statements.⁸⁸

The difficulties faced by workers were emphasised in early 1941 in the *Daily Herald*, which cautioned that working conditions would lead to a ‘deep feeling of injustice amongst the workers, a feeling that the policy of this being a “people’s war” simply means that the working people have to bear the brunt of the burdens’.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Newcastle’s *Evening Chronicle* was one publication among many to highlight the maldistribution of food:

The man who works hard in the shipyard or factory, and then finds it difficult to get a piece of cheese when he gets home is hardly likely to believe this is a ‘people’s war’ if he finds that some people are getting two, if not three, dinners in the West End of London each night by the simple expedient of moving from café to restaurant.⁹⁰

Such inequalities were discussed within social groups too. A member of the Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS) recorded strong emotions during a conversation about the black market with her local leader: ‘she was furious ... she maintains that Woolton [Minister for Food] should be shot, or put into a concentration camp for not getting to grips with the Black Market’.⁹¹

As Edgerton highlights, this critical use of the ‘people’s war’ was part of an effort by the British Left to hold the government accountable: ‘the United Kingdom, or the British Empire, was *not* actually fighting a “people’s war”, but *ought* to be doing so.’⁹² This is a point that has been

85. *Wardens’ Post, Dulwich*, i, no. 1 (Sept. 1943), p. 3.

86. *News Chronicle*, 15 Sept. 1939, p. 6.

87. *Worthing Herald*, 6 Sept. 1940, p. 6.

88. *Western Mail*, 16 Oct. 1939, p. 7.

89. *Daily Herald*, 3 Mar. 1941, p. 2.

90. *Evening Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1941, p. 2.

91. MOA, Diarist 5412, 25 Feb. 1942. Quoted in Tomlinson, ‘A Million Forgotten Women’, p. 144.

92. Edgerton, ‘Nationalisation of British History’, p. 963.

analysed in greater depth by Rose, who argues that ‘Official injunctions to “equality of sacrifice” provided both a language and a rationale for continuing expressions of class resentment’; and yet, such discussions of inequality ‘generated both the palpable desire for some vague sort of utopian social transformation and the fear that nothing would change.’⁹³ These fears were bound up with the memory of the ‘broken promises’ that had eroded trust in established politics after the First World War.⁹⁴ Moreover, as we have shown, this was only one meaning among many: the ‘people’s war’ asked citizens to take on a range of additional duties and could be used to frame and explain both willing and unwilling service. In the final two sections, we look at what the people asked for in return.

IV

One month into the war, under the title ‘Please, Mr Chamberlain, Don’t Treat Us Like Children’, a columnist for the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* called for an increase in communication between the rulers and the ruled. He argued that ‘this is essentially a people’s war, and therefore it is essential that we should be in it up to the hilt’. To illustrate the central place of civilians in the conflict, he drew a comparison with the First World War: ‘We are not the children that we were in 1914, to be beguiled through a war by bands and marching troops and flags and music hall songs and sentimental appeals to our patriotism’. The earlier conflict set the scene for the writer to demand a more democratic and negotiated form of citizenship: if civilians had an important practical role to play, they deserved to be given information rather than propaganda, and for their views to be listened to. This was not only because the altered nature of warfare on the home front demanded a shift in communication strategy, but also because civilians could, and should, be trusted ‘as sane thinking citizens, ready to co-operate and sacrifice’.⁹⁵

Frustration with propaganda, and the suspicion that important news was being needlessly repressed, endured for the duration of the conflict. The press used the idea of the ‘people’s war’ to criticise the government’s approach in three ways. First, it was argued that additional duties should be matched by increased rights: citizens had taken on significant new responsibilities and, in return, deserved to be trusted. In July 1940, for example, the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury* complained that ‘If it really is to be a people’s war, a war in which the people of this country feel they are the trusted partners of the Government ... there

93. Rose, *Which People’s War?*, pp. 38, 68.

94. C. Griffiths, ‘Broken Promises and the Remaking of Political Trust: Debating Reconstruction in Britain during the Second World War’, in D. Thackeray and R. Toye, eds, *Electoral Pledges in Britain since 1918: The Politics of Promises* (Cham, 2020), pp. 95–115.

95. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 14 Oct. 1939, p. 7.

is still room for vast improvement in the Government's propaganda methods.⁹⁶

In the same month, a letter featured in the *Northern Daily Mail* of Hartlepool criticised limitations within local democracy:

This, says Mr Churchill, is the people's war. The people have to pay for it as well as fight it. Why then deny them a say in its direction? When taxation is heaviest, sacrifices greatest, and individual obligations are rapidly increasing, it is more important than ever that ratepayers should exercise their rights of control and criticism through elected, not selected representatives.⁹⁷

It is significant here that, although the writer mentioned a range of duties that citizens were undertaking, the key reason that they deserved a voice was not 'active' forms of citizenship but paying their rates. Two and a half years later, a letter in the *Birmingham Gazette* used the same rationale to argue that insufficient information had been communicated about peace aims: 'this is supposed to be a people's war and the people have not as yet had an opportunity of voicing their opinion ... we must insist that before they receive any mandate they must disclose in plain language what plans they have for ensuring the peace and international co-operation'.⁹⁸

A second major reason for communicating with the people was that it would be dangerous not to. The *Newcastle Journal* reported in November 1939 that 'You cannot order people about from morning to night without gravely weakening the spontaneous volunteer spirit, which still remains the true expression of our nationhood'. This was, rather, 'a people's war', in which 'the Government should trust those on the home front and enlist their co-operation'.⁹⁹ Tom Wintringham invoked a similar spirit in *Peoples' War*, his 1942 follow-up to *New Ways of War*, when he declared: 'You do not make a People's War by ordering people to do things. You do it by convincing, arousing, letting loose their energies'.¹⁰⁰ This reasoning was particularly powerful around the fall of France in June 1940. A letter published in the *Hampstead and St John's Wood News and Golders Green Gazette* argued that 'One of the fundamental lessons to be learnt from the debacle in France is the appreciation that this is a People's War and that we all have to play a positive and not a passive role in the armed struggle'.¹⁰¹ The *Express and Echo*—under the header 'Curiosity is Natural'—declared that 'In a people's war people want to know what is happening and they have a right to be told. France was sold to the enemy by this simple trick of censorship. That must not happen here.'¹⁰²

96. *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 27 July 1940, p. 4.

97. *Northern Daily Mail*, 16 July 1940, p. 2.

98. *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 Dec. 1942, p. 2.

99. *Newcastle Journal*, 6 Nov. 1939, p. 7.

100. T. Wintringham, *Peoples' War* (London, 1942), p. 57.

101. *Hampstead and St John's Wood News and Golders Green Gazette*, 15 Aug. 1940, p. 3.

102. *Express and Echo*, 12 July 1940, p. 3.

Finally, it was said that the people should be listened to because they had good ideas. The relatively informal organisation of many voluntary services meant that local groups could allow for initiative from the bottom up, and the *Lancashire Daily Post* reported early in the Blitz that ‘This is where the appeal of the Home Guard comes in for volunteers in a people’s war for freedom, democracy and generally sane living ... They are men with ideas on what they are doing, which ideas can be usefully shared to the benefit of all’.¹⁰³ *The People* reported a few days later that even industrialists and big business were listening to new ideas: ‘the more it is a people’s war, the more quickly it will be won. Britain, during the last year, has been revolutionised in its thought.’¹⁰⁴ And two years later, the *Nottingham Journal* reported Lord Strabolgi’s argument that civilians should also have a say in military matters: ‘I am all for prodding the military experts until they are spurred into more vigorous action. This People’s War is too serious to be left entirely to the generals’.¹⁰⁵

All three motivations for listening to the people were underpinned by negotiations over how democracy should function in wartime. In summer 1940, this discussion was advanced in two rather odd episodes. The first was a column in the *News of the World* by Leslie Hore-Belisha, who had been sacked as Minister of War by Chamberlain earlier in the year. On the same day that Churchill gave his ‘War of the Unknown Warriors’ broadcast, Hore-Belisha argued that the government needed to ‘trust the people’ and called for parliament to play a more active role in shaping government policy.¹⁰⁶ Hore-Belisha had an obvious axe to grind, but his column in Britain’s most popular newspaper appeared at a time of growing controversy about the nature of the British political system. Indeed, it was only a week after the publication of Cato’s *Guilty Men*, a damning indictment of appeasement written by the journalists Michael Foot, Frank Owen and Peter Howard.¹⁰⁷ The point about trust hit a nerve, fanning criticism of the ‘Silent Column’ anti-gossip propaganda campaign. The government was accused of wanting to clamp down on any criticism of its actions and hastily abandoned the campaign less than a fortnight after it had begun.¹⁰⁸

This controversy gave way to a second, this time sparked by questions about the availability of thermal underwear, a topic that was included in doorstep interviews by the Wartime Social Survey. The science journalist Ritchie Calder highlighted these ‘silly questions’ in a *Daily Herald* article that accused the government of replacing the

103. *Lancashire Daily Post*, 8 Oct. 1940, p. 4.

104. *The People*, 13 Oct. 1940, p. 2.

105. *Nottingham Journal*, 13 Oct. 1942, p. 4.

106. *News of the World*, 14 July 1940, p. 7.

107. The phrase ‘people’s war’ does not appear in *Guilty Men*, most likely because it was written before the phrase was popularised by Tom Wintringham and the *Daily Express*.

108. Fox, ‘Careless Talk’, pp. 947–50.

‘Silent Column’ with a ‘Gossip Column’.¹⁰⁹ His article led to a barrage of criticism against the Ministry of Information, which was accused of employing ‘Gestapo’ methods to ‘snoop’ on the public. The debacle was felt most keenly in press and parliament, reflecting a belief that the wartime state had trespassed on their traditional roles as interpreters of public opinion.¹¹⁰ Some, however, drew on the language of the ‘people’s war’ to defend the use of doorstep interviews. Francis Williams, for example, the former editor of the *Daily Herald*, argued that the government had to understand public attitudes about all aspects of wartime life, ‘if we are to fight and win this war as a people in arms’.¹¹¹

The government was also criticised for its use of censorship and, as we have already noted, one of the first recorded uses of the phrase ‘people’s war’ came in a parliamentary debate about censorship in September 1939. Complaints about the system of press censorship continued throughout the first half of the war and the phrase cropped up regularly. Later that September, the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury* stressed that a people’s war should not be fought ‘in a red tape enclosure discreetly veiled from public gaze’.¹¹² In summer 1940, the *Lynn News* called for greater freedom to report on air raids by arguing that ‘We are told that this is a “people’s war” that we are “all in the front line” and so on. Then why not treat us as a nation in arms and not as a flock of sheep shut up within hurdles?’¹¹³ This argument was common during the Blitz. Others, such as the *Lancashire Daily Post*, were concerned that censorship was a lost opportunity: ‘In newspaper offices in this country there must be hundreds of the epics of the people in their people’s war which remain untold’.¹¹⁴ But the censors themselves invoked the ‘people’s war’ to explain why certain things had to remain unsaid. On New Year’s Eve 1940–41, Cyril Radcliffe, the civil servant responsible, gave a BBC ‘Postscript’ designed to take the sting out of his critics, stressing that ‘We are all in it, in this business of keeping valuable information out of the enemy’s hands’.¹¹⁵

These arguments played out at a local level, too. In February 1941, a letter to the *Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail* criticised the council for holding its meetings in secret because ‘We are in the midst of a people’s war, and the people are rightly fighting for freedom; which is the freedom to listen to any public representative, as well as free speech’.¹¹⁶ Such criticism could also come from within. An alderman of

109. *Daily Herald*, 25 July 1940, p. 3.

110. H. Irving, ‘The Ministry of Information on the British Home Front’, in S. Eliot and M. Wiggam, eds, *Allied Communication to the Public during the Second World War* (London, 2020), pp. 21–38, at 28.

111. *Evening Standard*, 6 Aug. 1940, p. 5.

112. *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 27 Sept. 1939, p. 4.

113. *Lynn News*, 13 Aug. 1940, p. 9.

114. *Lancashire Daily Post*, 27 Nov. 1940, p. 1.

115. *The Times*, 1 Jan. 1941, p. 4.

116. *Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail*, 14 Feb. 1941, p. 2.

Brighton was endorsed by almost every member of the town council when he said, in April 1942, that:

This is supposed to be a people's war, carried on by the money supplied by the people and by the sacrifice of the blood and the lives of the people, and I say the people have the right to know how the war is going on. And within reasonable limits we, in this chamber, have the right to express our views to those who are concerned with the defence of this country.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, in Dalkeith, Midlothian, a Centre of Public Opinion was established because 'this was a people's war, and it was with a view to having the opinion of the man in the street heard that these meetings were being held'.¹¹⁸ The more the British were asked to consider the future, the more common such refrains became, even if the rhetoric did not always match the reality.¹¹⁹

V

The central place that discussions of war aims held in the 'people's war' has been well documented by historians. Addison's suggestion that 'All three parties went to the polls in 1945 committed to the principles of social and economic reconstruction which their leaders had endorsed as members of the Coalition' set up a lively debate in the 1980s and early 1990s about the nature of this 'consensus' and the extent to which it was ever realised.¹²⁰ This debate has recently been rekindled by articles questioning popular support for the National Health Service, and arguing for attention to be paid to radical Conservatism.¹²¹ We focus instead on the way in which these debates shaped the language of the 'people's war'. Indeed, just a month into the conflict, the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* demanded that 'This is a people's war—it must be a people's peace', and suggested that planning should begin immediately, 'before the war fervour carries us away, before propaganda bemuses our brains, before suffering and sacrifice inflame us to retributory demands'.¹²²

Calls for both citizens and their government to think carefully about what the new world should look like were a mainstay of the press throughout the conflict, and goals were crystalised in response to evolving discussions of reconstruction and, in particular, the Beveridge

117. *West Sussex Gazette and South of England Advertiser*, 30 Apr. 1942, p. 4.

118. *Dalkeith Advertiser*, 27 Aug. 1942, p. 3.

119. See S. Cowan, 'The People's Peace: The Myth of Wartime Unity and Public Consent for Town Planning', in M. Clapson and P.J. Larkham, eds, *The Blitz and Its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-war Reconstruction* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 73–85.

120. Addison, *Road to 1945*, p. 14. See J. Harris, 'War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War', *Contemporary British History*, i (1992), pp. 17–35.

121. N. Hayes, 'Did We Really Want a National Health Service? Hospital, Patients and Public Opinions before 1948', *English Historical Review*, lxxvii (2012), pp. 625–61; K. Kowol, 'The Conservative Movement and Dreams of Britain's Post-war Future', *Historical Journal*, lxii (2018), pp. 473–93.

122. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 7 Oct. 1939, p. 7.

Report (*Social Insurance and Allied Services*, November 1942). Vague assurances that there was a 'good time coming',¹²³ and calls for 'a social security system fairer and better than in the past',¹²⁴ gave way to detailed discussions of inequality and how it should be addressed. The language of the 'people's war' was used to validate these demands. At the 1942 Civil Defence Day parade in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, a local vicar speculated that 'it is a people's war, and out of the people's war there is going to emerge a people's charter', which would eliminate unemployment and address shortages of houses, food and clothing. He vowed that 'We are not going to stand for it as we did after the last war'.¹²⁵ A letter to the *Essex Chronicle* the following year demanded: 'Why not a definite programme? Why the delay? ... how about the "Voice of the People" from those who have fought a "people's war".' The writer laid out his own proposals: nationalisation of industry, an overhauled civil service, improvements to education, a 'huge and powerful' military, the abolition of Unemployment Insurance and a more generous pension scheme.¹²⁶

There was undoubtedly popular engagement with plans for reconstruction, and these were filtered through the lens of the 'people's war' and increased demands on citizenship. Rewards did not, however, have to wait until peacetime. The introduction of medals for heroic conduct by civilians was a significant way in which the state recognised that the expectations for citizenship had changed, as the *News Chronicle* argued in August 1940:

The civilian population can be relied upon to do its duty with or without recognition. This is a people's war, and the people intend to win it whatever it costs them ... The time has come when the nation should be allowed to show its respect and gratitude to its civilian heroes as well as to its military heroes by the bestowal of a special decoration.¹²⁷

At the beginning of the Blitz, the *Daily Mail* campaigned for 'a new Order of Gallantry ... to provide distinctive awards to the heroes and heroines of the ARP'.¹²⁸ The paper claimed that 'Few suggestions ... have met with so enthusiastic a response', because 'everyday [the public] read of deeds of valour which, if performed in battle, would have been rewarded with Service decorations of a high order'.¹²⁹ By the

123. An article by Douglas Goldring was published under the title 'There Is a Good Time Coming' in *Hawick Express*, 6 Nov. 1940, p. 8; *Motherwell Times*, 6 Nov. 1940, p. 3; *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, 6 Nov. 1940, p. 3; *West Ham and South Essex Mail*, 8 Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Herne Bay Press*, 9 Nov. 1940, p. 4; *Long Eaton Advertiser*, 15 Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Beeston Gazette and Echo*, 16 Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Stapleford and Sandiacre News*, 16 Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Thanet Advertiser*, 19 Nov. 1940, p. 2; *Hartlepool Gazette*, 23 Nov. 1940, p. 2.

124. *Birmingham Post*, 19 Nov. 1940, p. 2.

125. *Sleaford Gazette*, 20 Nov. 1942, p. 1.

126. *Essex Chronicle*, 31 Dec. 1943, p. 10.

127. *News Chronicle*, 1 Aug. 1940, p. 4.

128. *Daily Mail*, 9 Sept. 1940, p. 2.

129. *Daily Mail*, 12 Sept. 1940, p. 2.

end of September 1940, the George Medal and George Cross had been introduced by the king, to be awarded for civilian bravery.

When medals were awarded to civil defence personnel, the honour was usually shared with colleagues. This reflects both the fact that citizens worked together to achieve heroic deeds, and the belief that modesty was the appropriate British response to praise.¹³⁰ When five London wardens were decorated for saving lives under aerial bombardment, they were reported to be 'rather surprised and a good deal embarrassed', and their Chief Warden said that it 'must be considered as an honour to the whole service rather than to individuals'.¹³¹ Similarly, when a rescue worker was awarded the George Cross, he commented that 'I never dreamed of such a thing. One thing that I am certain about, and that is that the men of my rescue squad are marvellous and deserving of every praise'.¹³² Likewise, a warden presented with the British Empire Medal in 1945 wrote that 'my post know that this is their award too, for without their courage, loyalty, and good work, this honour could never have been achieved'.¹³³

Yet among voluntary workers we are more likely to find a concern with recognition than with reward. This mirrors the responses to the civilian Book of Remembrance displayed in Westminster Abbey after the war, as discussed by Lucy Noakes in this forum, where the formal recognition of loss and sacrifice was valued highly. In civil defence magazines, discussions of peace and remembrance also focused on the recognition of valued service. A Sheffield warden argued in late 1944 that if civil defence 'was necessary in war, it—or something very much like it—will be supremely necessary in the days of peace', while a contributor to Ipswich's magazine in April 1943 wrote that 'our mission here on earth is to create unity among all peoples, and disperse, as far as lies within our power, the milk of human kindness ... [the spirit of civil defence] must not be allowed to die'.¹³⁴ A national civil defence association, with the aim of maintaining 'the comradeship and traditions of civil defence and the development of a fine spirit of community service', had recruited over 100,000 members by September 1945.¹³⁵

The value of service could be recognised in various ways during the conflict, and the state consciously used uniforms, badges and certificates to encourage participation in a range of voluntary work. A salvage collection depot manager in Battersea reported that, when she handed out badges to volunteers, the recipients were 'Very proud', and Charlotte Tomlinson has found that it was common for WVS

130. Hammett, *Creating the People's War*, pp. 83–4.

131. *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 21 Feb. 1941, p. 1.

132. T. Hissey, *Come If Ye Dare: The Civil Defence George Crosses* (Matlock, 2008), p. 13.

133. *B Twenty-One, Lewisham*, iv, no. 2 (Spring 1945).

134. *The Warble, Ipswich*, iv, no. 4 (Apr. 1943), pp. 313–14; *All Clear! Sheffield*, no. 36 (Nov.–Dec. 1944), pp. 19–21.

135. *ARP and NFS Review*, viii, no. 4 (Sept. 1945), p. 100.

volunteers to keep their badges, certificates and uniforms long after the war, suggesting that they held a special significance for the women.¹³⁶ Civil defence faced some public criticism before the Blitz, but during that period a warden who was mocked for wearing his badge nevertheless insisted that 'I believe that we who own these badges, have earned the right to wear them with a certain degree of pride, not for what we have done, but for what we are prepared to do'.¹³⁷ The recognition he received from colleagues was enough to bolster his pride.

Due to pressures on finance and manufacturing during the war, such recognition could be slow to materialise, and this could cause resentment. In January 1941, the ARP officer for Wembley called for 'fair play for civil defence' and, in the context of the Blitz, objected to the Home Guard being better supplied with higher-quality uniforms.¹³⁸ Unequal pay and compensation could also indicate inadequate recognition and deter citizens from taking on additional duties. The Housewives' Service was established to provide assistance to air raid wardens, but it could not be officially affiliated because the government refused to include the organisation in the civil defence compensation scheme. This ruling caused some local dissent, and in August 1940 the Town Clerk of Barnes wrote that 'it is extremely difficult to maintain the interest of these women volunteers and their willingness to help whilst there is doubt as to their position in case of injury while performing their voluntary duties'.¹³⁹ Two years later, the civil defence Inspector General, John Hodson, was still arguing for a change of policy. After overseeing a successful exercise, he reported to the ARP Department that these housewives deserved 'encouragement' and 'official recognition' in the form of equal compensation, because the 'valuable service we shall get from them will to my mind be worth any additional liability'.¹⁴⁰

Volunteers were also frustrated when assigned work that did not reflect their skills. Mass Observation wrote a series of reports on women who were 'rebuffed at every turn' and argued that 'it cannot be claimed that the Government is making anything like full use of the woman power of the country'.¹⁴¹ One woman reported that, despite seeing adverts in the newspapers for volunteers 'day after day' and having control room experience, when she tried to sign up for part-time work, she was rudely told that all the services she was qualified for were full.¹⁴² Similarly, a pre-war survey respondent complained that when she went to enrol, despite her extensive catering experience, she was instructed

136. MOA, Diarist 5275, 30 June and 29 Oct. 1943; Tomlinson, 'A Million Forgotten Women', p. 188.

137. *The Siren, Halifax*, i, no. 2 (May 1940), pp. 36–7.

138. ARP, *Wembley*, ii, no. 10, (Jan. 1941), p. 2.

139. The National Archives [TNA], HO/186/1657, Arthur Fox to Ministry of Home Security, 19 Mar. 1940.

140. TNA, HO/186/1657, Note on exercise at Carshalton, Hodson, 11 Feb. 1942.

141. MOA, TC/32/1/A, 'Women in Wartime', 4 Jan. 1940.

142. MOA, FR/209, 'An Observer's Experience Trying to Help Her Country', 19 June 1940.

that ‘we’d have to do as we were told. “There are such things as scrubbing floors you know” they told me’.¹⁴³ A female ambulance volunteer eventually resigned because the value of her work was not recognised by male colleagues who, unlike her, were paid for their labour:

Now we are in the state of paying four First Aid Men three pounds a week each, to do nothing, and when they are asked to clean the place up they say they are not paid to do charring! So it has been left to the volunteer ladies who also have their own homes to run, and are ratepayers into the bargain.¹⁴⁴

Here she reflected on the range of duties of citizenship that she was performing—volunteering, caring for her family, paying rates—and for which she should receive acknowledgement.

But while a lack of recognition from local organisers and the state could drive some to reject the new wartime duties of citizenship, for many volunteers it was sufficient to have their value recognised by their communities. Ideas about community were central to the ‘people’s war’: as Rose has argued, ‘the most powerfully compelling historical memory of wartime Britain was that Britons felt that they were an integral part of a community’.¹⁴⁵ At the height of the Blitz, a London warden reflected along these lines in his civil defence magazine:

At least one good thing has come out of this war. It has fostered comradeship and good-will among us as never before. The great stand against the Blitz has brought us together in a manner unparalleled in our national history. The helping hand, the sacrifice of comfort and pleasure for the benefit of our neighbours—these are the credit balance of a grim account. ARP has done something more than answer the murderous assault from the skies—it has softened our hearts towards our fellow man.¹⁴⁶

The radical changes proposed by Beveridge and the Left sat alongside relatively minor signs and signals that demonstrated to individuals that they were valued and respected. Recognition of duty, sacrifice and the willingness of civilians to become ‘active citizens’ in a variety of ways was, therefore, central to ‘the people’s’ understanding of ‘the people’s war’.

The ‘people’s war’ was not only a widely used phrase during the Second World War, it also provided a framework to negotiate the duties and rights of citizenship on the British home front. Active citizenship during wartime required civilians—men, women and children—to take on a range of new responsibilities—both arduous and mundane—and to accept the risks of invasion and aerial bombardment while they ‘stayed put’. The phrase ‘people’s war’ reflected the central place of civilians

143. MOA, TC/23/2, Fulham ARP survey responses, May–June 1939.

144. MOA, Diarist 5255, 27 Oct.–1 Nov. 1940.

145. Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p. 2.

146. *Listening Post, Coulsdon and Purley*, no. 13 (Dec. 1940), p. 3.

within the war effort, but it also implied that the British people were willing and committed participants in it. This, in turn, allowed both political actors and ‘ordinary people’ to define what they were fighting for, and provided a language with which to demand wide-ranging changes.

We have demonstrated that, although service was willingly given, ‘the people’ did want something in return: they felt that they deserved to be trusted, listened to and told the truth by the government; rewards, including a ‘people’s peace’, were demanded from the first months of the conflict; and signs that service was recognised and valued could be crucial to maintaining an individual’s engagement in the war effort. Indeed, discussions of the ‘people’s war’ were themselves important indications of the significance of ‘ordinary people’, while the increased use of opinion surveys was just one sign that the state recognised the need to listen to their views. It is notable that these discussions cut across established political boundaries. As Geoffrey Field has suggested, ‘Like all such slogans, the “people’s war” was effective because it was vague’.¹⁴⁷

In this article, we have focused on the ‘people’s war’ fought on the British home front because national citizenship was the dominant context in both the popular press and life writing. The press did, however, also reflect on international circumstances: comparisons were made to ‘people’s wars’ being fought in the USSR and China; stories of the ‘people’s war’ were used in attempts to persuade the USA to join the conflict (as Sean Dettman and Richard Toye discuss in this forum); and it was suggested that, if India were liberated, this would allow a ‘people’s war’ in support of the allies to begin there.¹⁴⁸ Acknowledging other ‘people’s wars’ in the past, present and future did not diminish the contemporary significance of the ‘people’s war’ fought by British civilians, although it does highlight fresh avenues for historians exploring the myth. Indeed, scholars are increasingly tackling the ways in which civilian involvement in the Second World War was shaped by national contexts and cultures, with comparative studies reinforcing the importance of the ‘people’s war’ as a frame of reference.¹⁴⁹

Wartime narratives about the ‘people’s war’ and citizenship were developed within the ‘cultural circuit’, from both the top down and the bottom up, and we have explored some of the ways in which the popular press and life writing reflected and reinforced each other. Due to the flexibility of these ideas and the message that there was a ‘place

147. Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil*, p. 377.

148. See, for example, *Sunday Mirror*, 20 July 1941, p. 14; *News Chronicle*, 10 Oct. 1940, p. 4; *Yorkshire Observer*, 26 Aug. 1940, p. 6; *Leicester Evening Mail*, 5 Nov. 1940, p. 4.

149. For two comparative perspectives, see A. Wilson, J. Fennell and R. Hammond, eds, *The Peoples’ War? The Second World War in Sociopolitical Perspective* (Montreal, QC, 2022); C. Andrieu, *When Men Fell from the Sky: Civilians and Downed Airmen in Second World War Europe* (Cambridge, 2023).

for everyone' in the war effort, it was possible to understand even minor duties and responsibilities as significant aspects of the 'people's war'. A whole range of people were able to write themselves into the 'people's war' and, as Calder has argued, 'acting in accordance with this mythology, many people—not all, of course—helped make it more true'.¹⁵⁰ A sophisticated command of this language allowed individuals to perform specific identities and tell particular stories about their place in the wartime nation long after 1945.¹⁵¹ The process of negotiation that we have explored in this article thus not only sheds light on wartime experience, but also suggests new ways to think through vernacular understandings of citizenship in the post-war world and beyond.

The 'people's war' was such a powerful framework because it allowed virtually anyone to understand and represent their behaviour as making a vital contribution to the war effort—on a local, national and even international scale. What was more, as 'good citizens', they could ask for almost anything in return.

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150. Calder, *People's War*, p. 14.

151. Hammett, *Creating the People's War*, pp. 228–9.