



NIGHTS UNDERGROUND IN DARKEST LONDON

The Blitz, 1940-1941*

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After the tragic events of September 11, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani at once saw parallels in the London Blitz, the German air campaign launched against the British capital between September 1940 and May 1941. In the early press conferences at Ground Zero he repeatedly compared the bravery and resourcefulness of New Yorkers and Londoners, their heightened sense of community forged by danger, and the surge of patriotism as a town and its population came to symbolize a nation embattled. His words had immediate resonance, despite vast differences between the two situations. One reason for the Mayor's turn of mind was explicit: he happened at that moment to be reading John Lukacs' *Five Days in London*, although the book examines the British Cabinet's response to the German invasion of France some months before bombing of the city got underway. Without doubt Tony Blair's outspoken support for the United States and his swift (and solitary) endorsement of joint military action also reinforced this mental coupling of London and New York. But the historical parallel, however imperfect, seemed to have deeper appeal. Soon after George W. Bush was telling visitors of his admiration for Winston Churchill, his speeches began to emulate Churchillian cadences, Karl Rove hung a poster of Churchill in the Old Executive Office Building, and the Oval Office sported a bronze bust of the Prime Minister, loaned by British government.¹

Clearly Churchill, a leader locked in conflict with a fascist and a fanatic, was the man for this season, someone whom all political parties

* Article previously published in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 62 (Fall 2002) 11-49 © 2002 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

¹ Mayor Giuliani's televised press conferences immediately after the September 11 attack. "Churchill Mania," *The Economist*, Nov. 10, 2001. See also, N. Ferguson, "The War on Terror is Not New," *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 2001. "Bush Tours the New York Battlefield," *The Times* (London) Sept. 15, 2001, 1. William Farish, the American Ambassador in London, thanked the British people for their "magnificent" response to the terrorist attacks and said that Americans now looked to the bravery of the British during the 1940 Blitz bomb attacks as an example of how to "prevail over an implacable foe," *The Times* (London) Sept. 21, 2001, 2. An additional curious development was press reports that W.H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939" (which begins in "I sit in one of the dives/On Fifty-second Street/Uncertain and afraid") was enjoying popularity on National Public Radio, in Internet chat rooms, and even high school discussion groups. This quickly prompted a heated exchange of letters in the *Times Literary Supplement* about the merits or lack thereof of Auden himself and his poem. J. Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940* (New Haven, 2001).

could invoke and quote, someone who endured and won in the end. The reasons why some narratives about the past are privileged over others, why particular “collective memories” (although this does not imply any detailed knowledge of the past) have special resonance, are complex. World War II enjoys an unrivalled position as a source of reference points for the present; it is widely viewed both as the “hinge” on which much of recent history turned and as a conflict that redefined the moral landscape and mankind’s destructive capacity through its death camps and mass bombings. So saturated is our culture with the war that its use after September 11 is scarcely surprising. But why look to London as a means of processing this disaster? There was, for example, little explicit mention of December 7, 1941; comparisons with a previous “Day of Infamy” would have carried impolitic anti-Japanese messages even if the parallel was, in some respects, more apt. Two additional factors seem relevant here. First, the bombing of London had deep resonance in part because it was widely and brilliantly publicized at the time by American journalists and broadcasters whose reports are renowned.

Indeed, London’s Blitz—its dominant imagery and the web of associations it conjures up—was in many ways always a joint Anglo-British artifact. Second, despite huge public and media fascination with World War II and “the Greatest Generation” in recent years, popular interest in the United States has concentrated overwhelmingly on men and the armed forces.² By contrast, an equally large war boom in Europe has been much more focused on civilians, on women as much as men, and their sufferings and courage. For this reason, perhaps, lacking a home-grown myth ready-to-hand, the Mayor and public figures turned to London.

In the wake of the World Trade Centre attacks the editors of *ILWCH* decided to devote an issue to the different ways that civilians, and especially working-class communities, have coped with various types of disasters. This essay examines the impact of German air raids on London in 1940-1941 and how they altered the city’s position in national symbolism. It focuses especially on how poor, working-class Londoners, who sought safety in makeshift communal refuges and in the Underground (Tube), were represented in contemporary narratives. Working-class neighbourhoods suffered disproportionately from air attacks in the early months; class and social inequity were central to early discussion of the Blitz as well as to debate about patriotism and national identity. Finally, this essay analyses the contribution of Americans in shaping and propagating Blitz mythology and considers briefly some of the ways in which it has been amended and recast in recent decades. In the United States last Fall Giuliani’s main emphasis was on community and the courage and endurance of ordinary citizens. In Britain, not surprisingly, the Blitz evokes a wider and more complex range of associations. A truculent, flag-waving Margaret Thatcher was, for example, able to effectively orchestrate images of 1940 during the Falklands War, while the Gulf War brought forth its own crop of

² To sample this literature, see: Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York, 1998); and, *An Album of Memories: Personal Histories of the Greatest Generation* (New York, 1998). Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Victors: Eisenhower and His Boys. The Men of World War II* (New York, 1999); also Steven Spielberg’s film, “Saving Private Ryan,” released in 1998.

“memories,” revealing, among other things, how “for younger generations the Second World War is still a pivotal experience which has been passed on to them in many ways.” The Blitz—and collective remembrance of World War II in general—show every evidence of a long shelf-life.³

Coping with Raids: London’s Mass Shelters

While other British towns were badly bombed, London was the chief and most consistent German target and suffered the highest casualties, in all some 30,000 dead and over 51,000 seriously injured.⁴ The sprawling city had long been recognized as a defensive nightmare and, as aircraft technology improved in the 1930s, estimates of possible casualties from a full-scale air war were revised sharply upwards. Some contemporaries had speculated that a war might produce as many as 600,000 dead across the country, while in 1939 the military expert Basil Liddell Hart suggested that a conflict could result in 250,000 dead and injured in the first week.

Convinced that “the bomber will always get through,” as they scrambled to organize civil defence, politicians and officials imagined grim scenes of social breakdown, floods of refugees, and hospitals overrun with people suffering from psychological as well as physical injuries. Speaking to the House of Commons in November 1934, Churchill warned: “We must expect that, under the pressure of continuous attack upon London, at least three or four million people would be driven out into the open country around the metropolis.”⁵ A 1938 report presented to the Ministry of Health by a group of psychiatrists forecast that millions of people would be afflicted by varying degrees of neurosis and panic.⁶ “London” the Cambridge philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote “will be one vast raving bedlam, the hospitals will be stormed, traffic will cease, the homeless will shriek for help, the city will be a pandemonium.”⁷ Apocalyptic science fiction now seemed within the realm of possibility.

These widely held fears proved to be unjustified, but in light of them government measures to safeguard the population were extremely limited.⁸ Plans were drawn up for the mass evacuation of “nonessential” groups (principally mothers with young infants and schoolchildren) from urban centres likely to be targeted into safer “reception areas.” But the scheme was voluntary and relied on boarding in private homes; too much responsibility

³ M. Shaw, “Past Wars and Present Conflicts: From the Second World War to the Gulf,” in M. Evans & K Lunn eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1997).

⁴ R. M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950), Appendix 8.43,000 people were killed in Britain in the raids of 1939-1941 and another 17,000 subsequently. Also, U. Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber. The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London, 1980).

⁵ W. Churchill in *PD* (Commons) 295, Nov. 28, 1934.

⁶ Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 39. R.M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, 20-21.

⁷ B. Russell, *Which Way to Peace?* (London, 1936), quoted in K. Young & P.L. Garside, *Metropolitan London: Politics and Urban Change, 1837-1981* (London, 1982) 222.

⁸ On civil defence precautions and the debate over their adequacy, see: T.H. O’Brien, *Civil Defence* (London, 1955); J.F. Baker, *Enterprise versus Bureaucracy. The Development of Structural Air-Raid Precautions during the Second World War* (Oxford, 1978); A.D. Harvey, *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars, 1793-1945* (London, 1992) 663-65. J.S. Meisel, “Air Raid Shelter Policy and its Critics,” *Twentieth Century British History*, 5.3 (1994), 300-319.

devolved on local authorities of varying efficiency; unnecessary secrecy about the destination of evacuees troubled many parents; and, while great attention was paid to the logistics of moving people to new locations, very little serious planning was devoted to their care once they arrived and to the likely social repercussions of so vast a migration. Much has been written about the social, confessional, and ethnic confrontations that occurred in September 1939 when householders across the nation took in 1.4 million evacuees, including a high proportion from the poorest inner-city families. Reception committees were completely unprepared for the condition of some of the children. Far from displaying the nation's unity in time of war, the scheme backfired, often aggravating class antagonism and bolstering prejudice about the urban poor. Within four months eighty-eight percent of evacuated mothers, eighty-six percent of pre-school, and forty-three percent of schoolchildren had returned home. Admittedly, the absence of bombing in the "phony war" period contributed greatly to this reverse movement; yet, when the raids started, evacuation had to be put into operation again.⁹

But, though deeply flawed, there was at least a national evacuation plan to save lives. Far less was done to protect the vast majority of people who, it was clear, would remain in vulnerable areas. In part, government inaction reflected a continuing hope that war could be avoided or that Britain's own bomber force would act as a deterrent to indiscriminate raids. Much of civil defence preparations was left in the hands of local authorities without clear guarantees that their outlays would be covered. Some, as a result, moved slowly, so that when war came the supply of shelters was seriously deficient in towns like Birmingham and Coventry, while in April 1941 Belfast still had spaces for only a quarter of its population.¹⁰ The cost of providing deep bomb-proof shelters (*i.e.*, capable of sustaining a direct hit) was considered prohibitive and there were additional concerns that large communal shelters might become incubators of political disaffection or defeatism. Instead policy favoured dispersed family shelters, constructed by householders in their backyards, and-in areas of tenements and flats without individual gardens-small brick surface shelters; many of the latter were badly constructed and were soon abandoned in 1940 as unsafe. In addition, planning for enemy raids anticipated that they would be of short duration, intense, and during daylight hours. Few people, if any, predicted the nightly assaults that would force Londoners to sleep and spend long periods in shelters. And while concerns had been raised in Whitehall about morale in

⁹ On the government evacuation scheme, aside from Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, see: Bob Holman, *The Evacuation* (Oxford, 1995); B. S. Johnson ed., *The Evacuees* (London, 1986); Tony Kushner, "Horns and Dilemmas: Jewish Evacuees in Britain during the Second World War," *Immigrants and Minorities* 17, 3 (November 1988); J. Davies, "Evacuation during World War II: The Response of the Catholic Church," *North West Catholic History*, 25 (1998); Geoffrey Field, "Perspectives on the Working-Class Family in Wartime Britain, 1939-45," *ILWCH*, 38 (Fall 1990).

¹⁰ A. Sutcliffe & R. Smith, *Birmingham, 1939-1970* (Oxford, 1974) 23 ff.; G. Hodgkinson, *Sent to Coventry* (Coventry 1970). R Fisk, *In Time of War Ireland, Ulster, and the Price of Neutrality* (London, 1983) 479. B. Barton, *The Blitz: Belfast in the War Years* (Belfast, 1989) 63. Lancashire relied heavily on covered trenches at the start of the war and the distribution of Anderson shelters was slow. In the seaport town of Barrow, for example, there were public shelters for only 3,500 out of a population of 70,000. P. Taylor "The Role of Local Government in Wartime, with Emphasis on Lancashire," Ph.D. Diss. University of Lancashire, 1993; Nella Last, *Nella Last's War* (London, 1981) 150.

poor areas and especially that the East End with its Jews and foreigners was "likely to form a most unstable element—an element very susceptible to panic," it was precisely in such areas that shelter provision was most deficient.¹¹

The first major raid on London took place in daylight on September 7, 1940, against the densely packed streets, warehouses, docks, and factories of London's East End.¹² Thereafter the city was attacked, mainly at night, for a period of months. Death and injury were on a lesser scale than had been forecast, but physical damage to buildings was very extensive and the numbers of homeless greatly exceeded earlier estimates. The jerry-built housing of working-class districts often collapsed from the blast. Within six weeks a quarter of a million people needed re-housing, although in many cases this was only for brief periods. So-called "Rest Centres" which were mostly in schools and church halls and were originally envisioned as places where raid victims might rest for a few hours before returning home, soon became overcrowded with people living in them for weeks on end. The majority of the homeless, however, simply looked after themselves, sought help from friends and relatives, or camped out in the shelters [Titmuss, chap. 14].¹³

The intensity and regularity of the raids on London forced the population to develop new routines. Some families "trekked" to open spaces like Hampstead Heath, Epping Forest, or the Kent countryside. After big raids there was a great deal of short-term flight with crowds boarding trains for nearby towns like Windsor, Stevenage, Leicester, and Oxford which were already overfull.¹⁴ The inadequacy of existing shelter facilities quickly became evident. Many were overcrowded, poorly lit, cold, wet, and unsanitary. Some families, carrying bedding and sandwiches, sought out commercial basements in the West End that had been reinforced as shelters.

¹¹ T.L. Crosby, *The Impact of Civilian Evacuation in the Second World War* (London, 1986), 15. See also PRO: CAB 46/ 22-23 (Evacuation Sub-Committee, especially March 13,21, 1931). The unfavourable judgements on the East End were based on air raids in 1917-1918; then the local *East End Advertiser* ran the headline "Cowardly Aliens in the Great Stampede." At this time many workers left London temporarily, but again the emphasis was on Jews. A visitor to Brighton commented "Thousands of people have left London till the end of the Harvest Moon so as to be out of the danger Zone. Brighton is simply packed with Jews from the East End." See T. Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War. Britain and the Great War, 1914-18* (Cambridge, 1986) 509.

¹² J. Mack and S. Humphries, *The Making of Modern London. London at War, 1939-45* (London, 1985), 40-50; also, L. Miller & H. Bloch, *The First Day of the Blitz. East London Memories of September 7th 1940* (London, 1984). Mass-Observation Archive (Sussex) (henceforth MO-A): FR 392 (Sept. 20,1940); FR 403 (Sept. 12, 1940). General studies of the London Blitz are: P. Ziegler, *London at War* (New York, 1995); L. Mosley, *Backs to the Wall. London under Fire 1939-45* (London, 1971); C. Fitzgibbon, *The Winter of the Bombs. The Story of the Blitz of London* (New York, 1957). Two useful general accounts of the raids are: A. Price, *Blitz on Britain. The Bomber Attacks on the United Kingdom* (London, 1977); C. Whiting, *Britain under Fire. The Bombing of Britain's Cities, 1940-45* (London, 1986).

¹³ See also: MO-A: FR 406 (Sept. 1940), FR 465 (Oct. 24, 1940) and PRO: CAB 102/731,733.

¹⁴ MO-A: FR 482 (Nov. 4, 1940); also, FR 451 (Oct. 11, 1940). H. Marchant, *Women and Children Last* (London, 1941), 55. Marchant, working for the *Daily Express*, described scenes comparable to those she had witnessed in war-torn Spain: a "ragged, sleepless army" carrying suitcases, pushing prams overflowing with their belongings, old people in makeshift wheelchairs, others piling onto carts and trucks, forming a steady stream heading out toward the rural hinterland.

In some neighbourhoods people soon selected their own places of refuge-so that communal shelters sprang up in church crypts, beneath factories, and under railway arches. In the worst of them coughs, colds and "shelter throat" spread freely, as did lice and skin diseases like scabies and impetigo. The numbers of tuberculosis cases also rose, but luckily the incidence of diseases like influenza, diphtheria, meningitis, and scarlet fever remained lower than medical opinion feared).¹⁵ The extensive press coverage of the massively overcrowded public shelters by journalists such as Ritchie Calder and Hilde Marchant finally brought the long-festering shelter debate to crisis point. Among the most publicized was the Tilbury, a huge underground warehouse and goods depot between the Commercial Road and Cable Street in Stepney. At times as many as 14,000 people squeezed into its vaults and loading bays, surrounded by crates and rubbish, with only a few earth buckets for lavatories. A safer and even larger refuge on London's outskirts were the caves around Chislehurst in Kent. Though privately owned, they were quickly occupied and by mid-October gave shelter to as many as 15,000 people.¹⁶

But the most important communal shelters were those in the stations of the London Tube or Underground. Although thousands had gone down there during World War I, the government rejected their use as shelters in 1939, arguing both that unhindered movement of commuters and troops must be guaranteed and that occupants might easily acquire a "deep shelter" mentality and refuse to leave. The regularity of the raids, however, made it tempting for increasing numbers of people to enter the Tube and remain there. Minor confrontations occurred, orchestrated in some cases by Communist party activists, between crowds waiting to go below and Underground officials whose instructions were to lock the entrances once a raid began. By the second week of heavy bombing, however, the authorities had yielded to popular pressure and orderly queues of people outside the stations became a familiar sight, waiting for four PM when they were allowed onto the platforms. As captured by Bill Brandt's magnificent photographs, they sat or slept huddled together on platforms, between the lines themselves once the power was shut off, and propped up against escalator stairs. Many families regularly sheltered in the Tube, others went only in periods of heavy bombing. In mid-September about 150,000 a night slept there, although by the winter and spring months the numbers had declined to 100,000 or less.¹⁷ Especially in the deepest stations the detonation

¹⁵ CMD. 6340 *Summary Report by the Ministry of Health, April 1, 1939 to March 31, 1941* (London, 1942). Anxieties about an influenza epidemic were especially great because of memories of the large loss of life in 1918-19.

¹⁶ J. Mack & S. Humphries, *The Making of Modern London*, includes descriptions of the Tilbury and the Chislehurst caves. Nina Hibbin, a *Mass-Observer* in the Tilbury wrote being sick with the stench "It was like the Black Hole of Calcutta. There were thousands and thousands of people, lying head to toe all along the bays, and with no facilities... The place was a hell hole, it was an outrage that people had to live in these conditions."

¹⁷ By mid-September 150,000 a night slept in the Tube; the estimated peak was 177,000 on September 27. A rough census of Londoners in November 1940 placed about four percent in the Tube and equivalent large shelters; nine percent in public surface shelters; and twenty-seven percent in domestic Andersons, i.e., family shelters in backyards. This left over half the population unaccounted for-presumably spending the night in basements or cupboards under the stairs or simply staying in bed or downstairs in their living rooms. In the poorest areas the proportion of people in communal shelters was significantly higher, while many families took

of bombs and anti-aircraft barrages was muffled and rest came easier than above ground; but heavy loss of life resulted from direct hits on several stations (Marble Arch, Baiham, Bank, Liverpool Street, etc.).¹⁸

Before the war psychiatrists had made dire predictions about the likely numbers of psychiatric casualties. These proved mistaken in the extreme. The London Emergency Region recorded an average of slightly more than two "bomb neuroses" cases per week in the first three months of the Blitz. At Guy's Hospital, very close to areas that were severely bombed, the attacks accounted for only a handful of psychiatric cases treated by the outpatient department; at another London hospital only five of two hundred psychiatric cases admitted in a six month period were attributable to the raids. Children also adapted far better than anticipated; the pains of family dissolution caused by evacuation, psychologists began to assert, were more traumatizing than bombs. But while chronic and incapacitating neurosis was rare, there was no way of knowing how many less serious cases went untreated since physical injury preoccupied rescue squads.¹⁹

However, the strain of the raids manifested itself in a variety of less acute signs of emotional stress: anxiety attacks, extreme fatigue, eating disorders, apathy, feelings of helplessness, trembling, tics, and weeping spells. In children minor symptoms such as lack of concentration, excitability, and restlessness were widely detected. A rising incidence of peptic ulcers, coronary symptoms, angina attacks, cerebral haemorrhages, miscarriages, and various menstrual disorders can also be linked to the tension under which people were living.²⁰ So can higher levels of disorientation and senility among the elderly, who suffered enormously from the privations of life in the Blitz. Various minor behavioural quirks were also widespread. Superstition and fatalism were rife: people carried gas masks, sprigs of heather, lucky charms, and other talismans; some refused to wear green; others avoided sheltering with those they thought unlucky. "I have become superstitious about cleaning my rubber boots," a fireman admitted. "After cleaning my boots we generally suffer a blitz, and I am out all night fighting fires. The same thing occurs if I am short of cigarettes while on duty." Many claimed that, "like lightning" bombs never

refuge in the Tube at some point even if they were not "regulars." Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 112, for the November survey. Also, MO-A: FR 436 (Oct. 3, 1940); for public criticism of Tube shelters: MO-A: FR 425 (Sept. 28, 1940); FR 421 (Sept. 27, 1940).

¹⁸ The worst Tube disaster took place March 3, 1943 at Bethnal Green. Someone tripped on the stairs and others fell with the end result that 173 people suffocated to death. A plaque commemorating the dead was finally unveiled in 1993.

¹⁹ R.D. Gillespie, *Psychological Effects of War on Citizen and Soldier* (New York, 1942). Edward Glover, "Notes on the Psychological Effects of War Conditions on the Civilian Population," two parts in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22,23 (1941-42). M. Schmeideberg, "Some Observations on Individual Reactions to Air Raids," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 23 (1942). Aubrey Lewis, "Incidence of Neurosis in England under War Conditions," *Lancet* (July-Sept. 1942). R.H. Thouless, "Psychological Effects of Air Raids," *Nature*, 148 (1941). P.E. Vernon, "Psychological Effects of Air Raids," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 36 (1941); W. M. Burbury, "Effects of Evacuation and Air Raids on City Children," *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1941); A. McClure, "Effects of Air Raids on Schoolchildren," *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 13 (1943). Also PRO: CAB 102/719; INF 1/292 (Feb. 12-, 1941). J.L. Despert, *Preliminary Report on Children's Reaction to the War* (New York, 1944).

²⁰ L. Jams, *Air War and Emotional Stress* (London, 1951).

strike twice in the same place or argued fatalistically: "If your name's on a bomb it will get you." On weekends, large sightseeing crowds, drawn compulsively to bombsites, hampered civil defence work. The public cheerfulness, so often referred to in the press, was not just a fiction, but there was a manic quality to the merriment, a silly giddiness that reflected the supercharged nature of life and the need for cathartic release. Everyone, it seemed, had a "bomb story" and a pressing need to tell it.²¹

Only a minority of Londoners went to the mass shelters, but they soon captured the nation's imagination, becoming the focal point of the debate over civil defence and by extension a yardstick of governmental failure. They illustrated dramatically the tragedy of modern war and the resilience of ordinary people; and, at a time when criticism was beginning to shift from the so-called "Guilty men" to the glaring inequities of pre-war society in general, they also symbolized the deep class divisions which, many left-wing commentators argued, had to be eradicated if the nation was to survive. The large public shelters were also easily accessible. Many churchmen, journalists, and social workers visited them, followed by celebrities and a stream of socially curious sightseers, "slummers" on a new version of a pub-crawl. Foreign dignitaries like Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador, and Wendell Wilkie, Roosevelt's Republican challenger, turned up at the Tilbury, while anyone travelling by Underground in the evening could not avoid encountering rows of reclining figures on the platforms, families camped out, and private life being lived in public.²² The trains continued to run until half-past ten at night and painted white lines reserved a walkway for passengers; scenes of everyday normality and startling, surreal images of wartime dislocation were juxtaposed. "The train had its windows covered with opaque or black-out material," wrote the architect Sidney Troy, "and when it stopped at a station and the doors opened from the centre the effect was remarkably like that of a stage." Early on, some Tube travellers harboured a good deal of prejudice toward these troglodytes who got in their way, abusing them as dirty, cowardly, diseased, work-shy, or simply foreign. Even those more sympathetic could slip into language that underscored social distance. Thus, the novelist Naomi Mitchison, who spent much of the war in a Scottish fishing village, commented: "All so like the Russian stations in 1932, with the families camped in them. I think the *indigènes* are a slightly different race, a shade darker and smaller... They hardly gaze back but go on reading the papers, drinking tea from mugs, knitting... We don't exist for one another" (see figs. 1 and 2).²³

Very quickly certain basic forms of organization began to develop, sometimes spontaneously among shelterers, sometimes organized by local clergymen and air-raid wardens. "Each shelter," wrote Tom Harrison of Mass-Observation, "became more and more a self-sufficient community, with its own leaders, traditions, laws [Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*,

²¹ MOA: FR 975 (Nov. 21, 1941); also, FR 739 (April, 1941); FR 521 (Dec. 6, 1940).

²² N. Farson, *Bomber's Moon* (London, 1941); I. Maisky, *Memoirs of a Soviet Ambassador* (New York, 1967), 119-20; see also: A. Smith & E.A. Smith, "The Starer... and the Stared At," *Seven. A Magazine of People's Writings*, 2.2 (July-Aug. 1942). On criticism of Tube dwellers, see: Tom Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 130.

²³ Troy, quoted in C. FitzGibbon, *The Winter of the Bombs*, 151. D. Sheridan ed., *Among You Taking Notes. The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison, 1939-45* (London, 1985) 115.

118-21].²⁴ Collections were taken up to buy disinfectants and brushes or to tip porters and cleaners at Tube stations. In larger shelters, spaces were allocated for smoking, recreation, nurseries, children's play, and sleeping; rules, mostly unwritten, developed about keeping gangways clear, making noise, and respecting other people's space. While in some locations individuals took the lead and acted as shelter marshals, in many places committees were organized to run things, settle disputes, assign chores, arrange entertainments, and pressure the authorities to make improvements. In the Tube more than thirty stations established committees and by December they had joined forces holding a Tube shelterers conference to share ideas and discuss a common strategy for obtaining more bunks, canteens, and better lighting and sanitary facilities.²⁵ Where local government was slow to respond, as in West Ham and Stepney, there were angry exchanges between local officials and shelter delegations; a deputation from the Tilbury demanding improvements and a ticketing system to reserve places ended up in a melee with the police and several arrests. Other borough councils established welfare committees with broad representation from the shelters.²⁶

Some of this grass-roots organizational activity aroused official concern. Home Intelligence reported that "people sleeping in shelters are more and more tending to form committees among themselves, often communist in character, to look after their own interests and to arrange dances and entertainments."²⁷ Certainly in Stepney, where the Communist party already had a solid base in local tenants' groups, it did play a prominent role; moreover the Nazi-Soviet pact and the dispersal of people with evacuation had weakened the party in some areas and the push to organize shelters was an effort to reconstitute local party structures. Shelter representatives attended the People's Convention in January 1941. Local activists also took the lead in demonstrations to open the London Underground, picketed commercial buildings where basements were locked at night, and demanded that empty flats and houses in more affluent neighbourhoods be requisitioned for homeless raid victims. But their most widely publicized venture was a sit-in, organized by Phil Piratin, Stepney's Communist councilman, at the luxuriously appointed shelter in the Savoy hotel.²⁸ In an effort to discredit public unrest, however, Whitehall was quick to blame political agitators, although the main stimulus was the chronic

²⁴ Harrisson, "The Tube Dwellers" in L. Russell ed. *The Saturday Book* (London, 1943) 107.

²⁵ *Daily Worker* Sept. 13, 1940: "Have you a shelter committee?"; also Sept 17 (Tufnell Park Tube committee), Sept. 20 (Belsize Park); Nov. 28 and Dec. 14 (on the Tube shelterers' conference). See also, E. Trory, *Imperialist War, Further Reflections of a Communist Organizer* (Brighton, 1977) 134ff.

²⁶ *Daily Worker* Oct. 2, 21, 1940; H.R. Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism, 1935-45* (Ilford, 1995) 45. On West Ham, see: E.D. Idle, *War Over West Ham. A Story of Community and Adjustment* (London, 1942); also on the East End: R. Bell, *The Bull's Eye. A Tale of the London Target* (London, 1943). On Stepney, F.R. Lewey, *Cockney Campaign* (London, 1944).

²⁷ PRO: INF1/292 (Dec. 4-11; Dec. 11-18; Dec. 18-24, Oct. 28-Nov. 4, 1940). M-O A: FR 431 (Sept. 27, 1940).

²⁸ For Piratin's raid on the Savoy: P. Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (London, 1948). The raid quickly became well-known throughout London and is cited in many diaries and memoirs of the Blitz. On the picketing of the Carreras tobacco company to open its basement: *Daily Worker* Sept. 18, 1940.

failure of emergency services and glaring evidence of class differences during the crisis.

It was voluntary organizations that responded first, helping to plug gaps in services until state structures responded to new needs. Public shelters soon became sites for social activism and experiments in community formation. The Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance set up first aid posts; the Charity Organization Society distributed blankets, food and clothing to raid victims; and heroic work was done to improve shelters by the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), Salvation Army, YMCA, settlement houses, and church groups. Local doctors donated their time and a number of devoted clergymen, like John Groser, the socialist vicar of Christ Church, Stepney, toured the shelters assisting the sick and aged, making arrangements for the homeless to be evacuated, and trying to deal with a growing youth problem [Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, chap. 14].²⁹ For the elderly, especially if they were physically impaired, queuing, sleeping in damp shelters on hard benches, and negotiating blacked-out streets carpeted with rubble and hazardous power-lines entailed special hardship. Some were found to have virtually moved into some of the public shelters or became in effect permanent residents of Rest Centres; here, at least, they could get help and gain access to social services. Official efforts to evacuate them from their neighbourhoods also met with limited success: "The blind, the crippled, and the very old would say 'Yes, Miss; thank you, Miss; I'll go, Miss,'" wrote an air raid warden, "but they never went." There were also, at first, few places for them in hostels and, despite public appeals, few private billetors were willing to take them.³⁰

It has been argued that London's shelter crisis was becoming more extreme until German bombers allowed some respite by focusing on provincial targets. But in fact by the end of 1940 significant improvements had been made in the Underground and in many of the more notorious mass shelters. Local authorities distributed heating stoves, washing and sanitary facilities were upgraded, and food services were greatly improved by, for example, regular canteen trains on the Tube. In time thousands of tiered bunks were installed in the larger shelters and tickets were issued to regulate the numbers of people and reduce the amount of time spent queuing. In November 1940, at Herbert Morrison's prodding, the Cabinet also reversed its policy, authorizing the construction in the London Underground of deep bombproof tunnels capable of accommodating about 80,000 people. Completed after the period of heavy raids, they were, in fact, never used.³¹

²⁹ Detailed information on WVS Housewives Service can be found in the papers of the Women's Royal Voluntary Service Archive (London), files for the Housewives Service and the London region narrative reports for 1940. K. Brill ed., *John Groser. East London Priest* (London, 1971); L.L. Loewe, *Basil Henriques* (London, 1976). Also on local community initiatives see: MO-A: FR 592 (Feb. 27, 1941). On adolescents in London see also: PRO:INF 1/292 (Nov. 4-11, 1940).

³⁰ B. Nixon, *Raiders Overhead. The Record of a London Warden* (London, 1943) 62. The daily press ran appeals for billetors to take the elderly, e.g., *Daily Herald*, Dec. 17, 1940: "Can You Give Them Shelter?"

³¹ B. Donoghue & G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison* (London, 1973). There is a great deal of information on shelter improvements in the files of the Ministry of Health (e.g., PRO: MH 76 series) and those of the Home Office (e.g. PRO:HO 207 series).

Efforts were also made to combat boredom and raise morale by introducing a range of shelter entertainment like darts matches, dances, amateur singing nights, discussion groups, and sewing circles, while at Christmas, parties were held for the children and the shelter walls were festooned with paper chains and decorations. Other activities were introduced from outside, some inspired by the goal of improving popular cultural tastes. The Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) began holding weekly concerts in about twenty shelters and the WVS set up play centres and story-corners for young children. There were also religious services, film shows, and dramatic performances by several troupes, including the Unity Theatre, which adapted its pre-war experience with co-operatives, trade unions, and civic clubs and began performing in the Tilbury and the Tube. Representatives of the newly formed Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts braved the Underground armed with gramophones and classical music recordings, while several local councils developed library schemes. The borough of St. Pancras soon had up to 2,000 books circulating and Bermondsey about 600, which were left weekly with shelter marshals. The London County Council in February 1941 announced that some 464 evening classes (on subjects from current events to childcare and dress-making) were meeting in the shelters.³² By December 1940 Home Intelligence was reporting that recent improvements had brought a general decline in Communist representation on shelter committees [PRO: INF 1/292 (Dec. 18-24,1940)].

Impressive though the record of voluntarism is, however, it is important not to overstate the level of communal activity. Most people, as has been said, did not use public shelters or went to the Tube infrequently. And a great many of those who slept in the large shelters took little or no part in collective activities or organization but simply bedded down with their own kin and got as much rest as possible before returning home or to work in the early morning. "It would be a mistake," Tom Harrison wrote, "to make too much of these temporary associations" among strangers [*Living Through the Blitz*, 314]. Similarly, despite the frequent claim that Blitz life broke down class barriers and that people were now more willing to talk to strangers ("You can't be standoffish and toffee-nosed with the person who sleeps in the bunk above yours"), the social profile of most shelters was fairly clearly defined [Lawrie, "The Impact of the War on English Cultural Life," 275]. Those who claimed there was greater social cohesion than before were invariably middle class and the contacts cited were fleeting and far less intrusive, demanding, or disturbing than those associated with the evacuation scheme. Against the standard images of altruism and solidarity must also be set contrary evidence of division and selfishness. There were plenty of rows, fights, petty thefts, and arguments about noise and space in public shelters. Vandalism, especially by gangs of youths, became a serious problem in many districts, as did petty pilfering and opportunistic looting.³³

³² R. Calder, *Carry on London* (London 1940); also J.S. Lawrie, "The Impact of the Second World War on English Cultural Life," Ph.D. Diss., Sydney University 1988. B. Sokoloff, *Edith and Stepmother. The Life of Edith Ramsay* (London, 1987) chap. 7.

³³ Roy Ingleton, *The Gentlemen at War: Policing Britain 1939-45* (Maidstone, 1994); H. Mannheim, "Some Reflections on Crime in Wartime," *The Fortnightly*, 157 (Jan. 1942).

Many contemporaries also watched anxiously for any signs of the ethnic and confessional conflicts that had troubled London, especially the East End prior to the war when relations between Jews and Gentiles had been stormy and Mosley's fascists had attempted to build a base of support. Official reports, Mass-Observation records, and press stories were laced with fears that the strains of shelter life might inflame long-standing prejudices. Talk of the dangers of spies and fifth columnists had been rife in the summer of 1940, sanctioned in part by the badly implemented government policy of interning aliens. Of East Enders' anti-Semitism in the Blitz, Ritchie Calder wrote: "it was real, it was dangerous; it was fairly widespread." "But," he added, "the pogrom and anti-Jewish riots which so many dreaded never materialized even in the worst situation the East End has ever had to face." To be sure there were nasty accusations: that Jews grabbed the best places in public shelters, that they were the first to panic and flee, that they controlled the black market, or that as shopkeepers they inflated prices. The *Catholic Herald*, a popular weekly, described the Tilbury as a "brothel" where "the ubiquitous Jew and his family" spread disease and accused Jewish communists of "eagerly fanning" the "red fire." In the same shelter, however, Nina Hibbin found: "Race feeling was very marked-not so much between Cockney and Jews, as between White and Black. In fact, the presence of considerable coloured elements was responsible for drawing Cockney and Jew together, against the Indian." There were also charges from Stepney's black population that they were discriminated against in shelters especially by Jews and Jewish police auxiliaries. The picture is, however, mixed and a good deal of other evidence suggests that the Blitz promoted greater harmony. A Nigerian air raid warden in another part of London wrote fondly of his Blitz experiences and the friendliness of people in his area. Jews and Gentiles cooperated on shelter committees and in civil defence activities. Jewish entertainers were very popular in the public shelters and in some joint religious services were held. In general, popular anger over shelter conditions did not get deflected into racism. Mass-Observation's reports seem to indicate that anti-Semitic prejudice was a good deal more virulent in the suburbs and small towns around the periphery of London to which large numbers of refugees, Jews and Gentiles, had fled.³⁴

With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 the frequency of raids decreased. By then conditions in communal shelters were greatly improved, although homelessness remained an acute problem in many areas. Visiting a Tube station in May, George Orwell found the scene almost too respectable: "What is most striking is the cleanly, normal domesticated air that everything now has. Especially the young married couples, the sort of homely, cautious type that would probably be buying their houses from a building society, tucked up together under pink

³⁴ R. Calder, *The Lesson of London* (London, 1941), 71-75. PRO: INF 1/292 includes reports on anti-Semitism (e.g., Sept. 30-Oct. 9, 1940; July 16-23, 1941). *Catholic Herald*, Oct. 25, 1940. Mass-Observation Nina Hibbin, quoted in T. Harrison, "War Adjustment," *New Statesman and Nation*, Sept. 28, 1940. M. Banton, *The Coloured Quarter* (London, 1955) 76-79. D. Watson, "Research Note: Black Workers in London in the 1940s," *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 1 (March 1996), 150. F.I. Ekpenyon, *Some Experiences of an African Air-Raid Warden* (London, 1943). On wartime anti-Semitism see: Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice* (Manchester, 1989). Also: INF 1/292 (Oct. 7-14, 14-21, 1940).

counterpanes." Even two years later, a residual few thousand shelterers still resolutely occupied the Tube. Their presence, Mass-Observers argued, now had less to do with safety and reflected more the fact that they had grown used to the extended family atmosphere and found it hard to abandon the communal routine. Some were frightened, some lonely, others were homeless, while for the elderly and frail the shelters, especially in areas where many neighbours had moved away, were places where they could find food and company and also access points to welfare services [Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*, 130].³⁵

London and the Nation

London was the first and most consistent German target in the Blitz of 1940-1941. It received the lion's share of media coverage at the time, far more than provincial towns, and has continued to dominate later accounts. Today the word "Blitz" almost always conjures up pictures of the capital city, drawn from newsreels, photographs, and, to a lesser extent, paintings and drawings: of St. Paul's miraculously preserved and silhouetted by the fires that consumed everything around it; of Westminster ablaze with searchlights jerkily raking the sky; and, above all, of Londoners crammed head to toe in the Underground or being dug out of their ruined homes. So firmly are the images of London and Londoners tied to our notions of the nation at war that it is easy to overlook the novelty of this situation.³⁶

Between the wars the landscape that was most closely associated with Britain and Britishness was that of the English countryside, usually located vaguely in the South, quiet, tamed, domesticated—a "Constable country of the mind," as one writer has called it, replete with scenic villages, church spires, hedgerows, and rural craftsmen." This imagery, commercially exploited in Shell's travel guides and billboard ads for insurance companies, was predominantly conservative and inherently anti-urban, achieving its fullest political evocation in the speeches and radio broadcasts of Stanley Baldwin ("England is the country and the country is England"), although one can also find radical populist variants.³⁷ The second iconic landscape of these decades, popular with 1930s writers and film-makers on the left, was the urban North, a terrain of factories and mills, unemployed miners and

³⁵ George Orwell's diary entry for May 6, 1941 in S. Orwell & I. Angus eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, II (1940-43) 399. On the residual Tube shelterers, see: Mass Observation, "The Tube-Dwellers" in L. Russell (ed.), *The Saturday Book* (London, 1943). One report from the WVS to the Ministry of Home Security from January 1942 referred to them as "Tube limpets." WVS Archive, London: Misc. Memoranda Box: Wartime, London Region.

³⁶ A. Potts, "Constable Country between the Wars," in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London, 1989) vol. III. Also, R. Colls and P. Dodd eds., *Englishness. Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (London, 1986). Also M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1950* (Cambridge, 1981); J. Taylor, *A Dream of England* (Manchester, 1994). J. Giles & T. Middleton eds., *Writing Englishness* (London, 1995).

³⁷ Bill Schwarz, "The Language of Constitutionalism: Baldwinite Conservatism," in *Formations of Nation and People* (London, 1984); P.B. Rich, "British Imperial Decline and the Forging of English Patriotic Memory, c.1918-1968," *History of European Ideas*, 9.6 (1988).

cotton operatives which had once symbolized the manufacturing might of the nation, the sinews of its imperial power, but after 1920 came increasingly to connote a national economy in trouble and multiple social problems. Now, even more than in the nineteenth century, these two geographies remained separate and at odds, neither capable of incorporating the other.

London did not figure much in either of them; indeed the city was often depicted as somehow divorced from the true nation. In Victorian national imagery, of course, London was prominent as the home of parliament and the monarchy, the “heart” of the empire. But after the huge slaughter of World War I, the language of national identity became quieter, less heroic, less bombastic. The inclination to turn inward and to cultivate an insular Englishness was strong, evoking the rolling countryside and the seasonal rhythms of nature more than an imperial world city. The other side of this association of national values and rural traditions was a critique of the urban, which came to focus especially on greater London. Aspects of this were already apparent in the Edwardian era, especially during the agitation over the 1905 Aliens Act and Jewish immigration when many viewed the capital as in danger of being swamped by foreign influences. Between the wars London not only doubled in size, pushing suburban sprawl ever outward, but seemed to have altered its character, becoming more modern, cosmopolitan, and Americanised with its giant cinemas, dance halls, cocktail bars, arterial and by-pass roads. Distaste for what London had become abounds in contemporary comment. From the urban planners who abhorred its “formlessness” and championed “garden cities” to Orwell’s and J. B. Priestley’s indictments of its fast food and cheap commercial products to John Betjeman’s “Come friendly bombs, fall on Slough, it isn’t fit for humans now” and the reactionary ruralism of Dean Inge of St. Paul’s, London’s Englishness seemed in doubt.³⁸

Ironically the bombs brought a great reversal. “London bombed, burned, and battered,” wrote Vera Brittain, “became the suffering symbol of England’s anguish, as well as an indictment of mankind’s “spiritual failure.”³⁹ Suddenly, unquestionably, in 1940 London stood for the nation, much as New York in the Fall of 2001 became a symbol for America and no longer the target for those who rail against welfare cheats, immigrants, and brash urbanites. The *Daily Express* reporter and shelter campaigner, Hilde Marchant, born and bred in the North, had originally felt deeply alienated by the capital; her conversion came with the raids when, she argued, the city rediscovered “that fine, robust, active spirit of Elizabeth’s time, that had been deadened and choked by a hypocrisy of wealth [Marchant, *Women and Children Last*, 184].⁴⁰ Wartime patriotic imagery, as Angus Calder has shown,

³⁸ S. Daniels, “The Prince of Wales and the Shadow of St. Paul’s,” in *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (London, 1993). Also, D.L. Lemahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); Chris Waters, “J.B. Priestley: 1894-1984” in S. Pedersen & P. Mandler eds., *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Mod-ern Britain* (London, 1994); V. Cunningham, *British Writers of the 1930s* (Oxford, 1989), especially chap. 7.

³⁹ V. Brittain, *England’s Hour* (New York, 1941) 214.

⁴⁰ See also J.B. Priestley’s novel, *Wonder Hero* (1933), which depicts London as corrupt and draining the rest of the nation-in many ways the antithesis of the nation’s true spirit.

continued to tap a rich and varied repertoire.⁴¹ Certainly, rural England remained central to expressions of national spiritual values and character—one need only look at recruiting posters for the Women’s Land Army or Powell and Pressburger’s 1944 paean to the Kent countryside in their film *A Canterbury Tale*. But now it shared or contested the terrain with cities, mining regions, and seaports. And when in October 1940 *Life* magazine did a feature on the village of Churchill in Somerset, J.B. Priestley, whose own radio “Postscripts” had dished out a good helping of ruralism, carped: “This isn’t the England that is fighting the war. The Christmas card caricature of England couldn’t fight this war for a couple of days.”⁴² Indeed, London had become the object of a kind of urban pastoralism as artists and photographers, many of them hired by the War Artists’ Scheme, set about capturing the city under fire: the surreal beauty of St. Paul’s, the ruins of the Guildhall, the wreckage of smaller Wren churches, and in the East End, in Graham Sutherland’s words, “the shells of long terraces of houses... perspectives of destruction [receding] into infinity, the windowless blocks... like sightless eyes.”⁴³

Above all, however, London was a human story, a landscape peopled with ordinary, anonymous citizens: fire fighters, heavy rescue workers, good neighbours, and those who carried on with their jobs. As Priestley told his radio audience: “We’re not really civilians any longer but a mixed lot of soldiers, machine-minding soldiers, milkmen and postmen soldiers, housewife and mother soldiers.”⁴⁴ Compared to earlier forms of national iconography, this one was more urban, civilian, popular, and featured workers and women far more prominently and in active roles. At first, especially in the Conservative press, many accounts dusted off and refurbished archaic, stereotypical images of the cheerful cockney: determined to make the best of things, knowing his social place and therefore not threatening, courageous in the face of danger: “The East End loved it” “I wouldn’t miss it for all the tea in China.” Indeed, the 1937 hit show, *Me and My Girl*, with its quaint cockney stereotypes, played in the West End throughout the Blitz. Ironically, before the war the cockney was less likely to be depicted as a national symbol than as an invasive town-dweller, descending on “deep” England in charabancs with litter and loud music.⁴⁵ As one official noted, much coverage of the Blitz in the press merely underscored social difference: “The working masses are almost a race apart, the primitively simple and heroic poor, admired from a distance. They, the people, are admired by we, the leaders and those above.”⁴⁶ But left-leaning newspapers like the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Herald* gave a more complex picture and were quicker to deplore deficiencies in shelter provision and post-raid

⁴¹ A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991). Also, M. Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London, 2000).

⁴² Priestley quoted in N.J. Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign Against American Neutrality in World War II* (Oxford, 1995) 111.

⁴³ Sutherland quoted in M. & S. Harries, *The War Artists* (London, 1983) 188.

⁴⁴ J.B. Priestley, *Postscripts* (London, 1940). Postscript for Sept. 8, 1940, the day after the first major raid on the East End.

⁴⁵ D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998).

⁴⁶ G. Stedman Jones, “The “cockney” and the nation, 1780-1988” in D. Feldman & G. Stedman Jones, *Metropolis: London. Histories and Representations since 1800* (London, 1989) 314.

services, though they too could slip into clichés or a language of “us” and “them” which belied the claim of a unitary nation.

This rediscovery of London as a national landscape was part of a broader reorientation in rhetoric as the nation moved to full-scale mobilization and sought to harness all its energies for a struggle that had so far produced little more than failure and military retreats. “A People’s War” was the portmanteau phrase used to capture the new mood. Implicit in it and in the dominant images of London’s Blitz was a more prominent role for labour and the working class. Recent historical debate has focused heavily on whether or not the political culture was genuinely radicalised in 1940-1941, if opinion moved to the left, or if the talk about social change and collectivism was mostly anodyne and vacuous talk, a short-lived product of national danger, largely engineered by the Ministry of Information (Moi) or quickly taken over and contained by resilient British institutions. This is not the place to evaluate the crisis of the early war years or its inherent possibilities.⁴⁷ Here my focus is wartime representations and public imagery, and they certainly did change, becoming noticeably more democratic in spirit. The new centrality of London and many of the themes of wartime collectivism are exemplified in Humphrey Jennings’ film *Fires Were Started* made in 1942 and released the following year. Briefly, this film, his only feature-length production, depicts a day and night in the life of an auxiliary fire crew in West Ham. A new man, a middle-class advertising copywriter, has joined the dockland unit and the story traces his integration into this little working-class community of fire-fighters and the courage and teamwork that enables them to subdue a dangerous warehouse blaze and save a munitions ship moored nearby. Using real firemen rather than actors, Jennings tried to get beyond the usual lower class stereotypes: he felt, as he wrote to his wife, that he was “really beginning to understand people... and not just looking at them and lecturing or pitying them.” While the firemen represent the nation in its heroic struggle and cooperation across class barriers, they are also distinctive individuals, placed in a specifically working-class culture with its own humour, pastimes, dialogue, and songs; their teamwork also suggests that a new social order could emerge from the local, democratic, voluntary achievements of civil defence.⁴⁸

By the time Jennings’ film appeared it fit into and helped reinforce a certain image of the Blitz firmly rooted in the social democratic patriotism of the war years. Almost exclusively the narrative of the Blitz had become one of unity and social levelling, a purgatorial trial from which a new and better Britain would arise. In a visual sense, of course, the film is now for many people identical with the raids, since its reconstructed scenes have been repeatedly shown as the real thing (actual newsreel coverage of the fires and bombardment is fairly rare). Jennings celebrated the fire-service, but as the next section shows, much of the attention in the Fall of 1940 focused on the

⁴⁷ For example: H.L. Smith ed., *War and Social Change* (Manchester, 1986); S. Fielding, P. Thompson & N. Tiratsoo, “England Arise”: *The Labour Party and Popular politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995).

⁴⁸ P. Stansky & W. Abrahams, *London’s Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War* (Stanford, 1994), chap 2; A. Aldgate & J. Richards, *Britain Can Take It* (Oxford, 1986) chap. 10; R. Colls & P. Dodd, “Representing the nation: British documentary film, 1930-45,” *Screen*, 26 (Jan-Feb. 1985); D. Millar, “Fires Were Started,” *Sight and Sound*, 38 (Spring 1989).

mass shelters and the narratives they inspired are rather different, offering a more ambiguous and sometimes conflicted sense of the nation and social class.

Underground in "Darkest London"

Of the many *lieux de mémoire* of Britain's Second World War, to use Pierre Nora's term, the mass shelters of 1940 are among the most important. Today they evoke images of wartime patriotism, community, and shared danger and present a picture of national endurance and courage. Even at the time, as we have said, they received a disproportionate share of contemporary analysis of the Blitz, compared to the percentage of the population who took refuge there. What was strikingly different in the early months of the raids, however, was that the shelters were central to public debate about official apathy and social inequity; if anything they symbolized social division and fragmentation rather than national unity. They figured large in a mass of books, press articles, memoirs, photographs, and works of art, many of which throw interesting light on the populism of the early war years and the language of class. But before examining how the mass shelters were represented, three general points about the broader context should be mentioned briefly.

First, how the shelters were represented must be set against pre-war concerns in official circles that air raids might well produce widespread panic, disaffection, and defeatism, much of this anxiety being focused on working-class districts. Second, the images of the poor generated by the Blitz must be recognized as following hard on the heels of a whole array of negative stereotypes provoked by the government's evacuation scheme. Evacuation had placed poor working-class families in the spotlight, resurrecting older debates about "problem families" and "the submerged tenth."⁴⁹ And while for some the condition of many evacuees was testimony to decades of neglect, a legacy of pre-war failure, for others the blame rested squarely with feckless, "low grade" mothers and parental irresponsibility. In general, as befitted the theme of "a People's War," not only was Blitz imagery far more positive and sympathetic, but it offered an implicit rejoinder to the earlier furor—focusing especially on brave, caring mothers who made efforts to retain some semblance of family under the most difficult circumstances and fathers who turned up for work no matter how heavy the bombing had been the night before. The kind of public rhetoric that erupted in the Fall of 1939 had become unacceptable a year later once the new language of populist patriotism took hold: now the talk was of a better Britain that would emerge from the ruins of the old—as the novelist Margaret Kennedy put it, "England after the war is going to belong to the shelterers."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Women's Group for Public Welfare, *Our Towns* (London, 1943); Geoffrey Field, "Perspectives on the Working-Class Family in Wartime Britain;" J. Welshman, "Evacuation and Social Policy during the Second World War: Myth and Reality," *Twentieth Century British History*, 9. 1 (1998).

⁵⁰ M. Kennedy, *Where Stands a Winged Sentry* (New Haven, 1941) 232.

Finally, contemporary representations of the shelters formed part of a broader tide of criticism that enveloped the nation in 1940. Its initial targets were Neville Chamberlain and individual Appeasers, but it quickly escalated into a general critique of the pre-war social and political order. A large, diverse group of liberal and leftwing “war commentators” advocated radical measures as a requirement of national survival. They included novelists, academics, clerics, journalists, and broadcasters; most were London-based, experienced the Blitz, and visited the shelters. They demanded, with varying levels of specificity, changes that would revitalize the nation and “bring the real England to the surface:” new blood, new ideas, collective goals over individual or group interest. As Richard Weight has argued, the crisis also brought a rediscovery of patriotism, a “return to Albion,”⁵¹ on the part of British intellectuals—catalysed in some cases by disillusionment with Communism as a result of Stalin’s purges and the Nazi-Soviet pact.⁵² “Patriotism,” wrote Orwell “against which the socialists fought so long, has become a tremendous lever in their hands” [Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn,” II, 94]. There was also renewed enthusiasm for what we might call the failed socialist project of the 1930s, when despite the conjuncture of political and economic crisis, British workers had conspicuously failed to display the militancy anticipated by many on the left or to pose much of a challenge to the capitalist order. Though the Labour party had absorbed much of the blame for this with Ramsay MacDonald cast as chief miscreant, many writers had also suspected that British workers might be just too passive, malleable, or conservative to produce a radical politics. In 1940, however, the combination of German bombs and governmental failure seemed to have shifted opinion to the left and created an opportunity for a radical agenda. This mixture of patriotism and renewed faith in working-class agency pervaded many early accounts of the mass shelters, which were often embraced as experiments in community formation, popular democracy in action. And yet the language used to describe them was often curiously literary and distancing—at times romantic, exotic, or patronizing.

When investigative reporters such as Ritchie Calder descended underground, followed by officials, novelists, correspondents from overseas, artists, and photographers, how did they depict what they saw, on what traditions did they draw? Much has been written about the apocalyptic imagery of Blitz writing and the aesthetic response of many observers to the scary, surreal beauty.⁵³ But very little attention has been paid to the stylistic techniques and conventions of shelter narratives. One influence was the documentary movement of the 1930s and Mass-Observation and, of course, Mass-Observers were present in London’s shelters. Another related influence was the genre of social travel writing, popular between the wars.

⁵¹ R.A.J. Weight, “Pale Stood Albion: The Formulation of English National Identity 1939-56” PhD. Diss., London University 1995; *idem*, “State, Intelligentsia and the Promotion of National Culture in Britain, 1939-45,” *Historical Research*, 69.168 (February 1996).

⁵² There is no satisfactory account of the radical outpouring of 1940-41. A few sample publications include: G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941); R. Acland, *Unser Kampf* (1940); William Connor [“Cassandra”], *The English at War* (1940); G.D.H. Cole *et al*, *Victory or Vested Interest?* (1942); T. C. Worsley, *The End of the Old School Tie* (1941); N. Davenport, *Vested Interests or Common Pool* (1942).

⁵³ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War* (London, 1995).

A best-selling example was H. V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1927) and he followed this in 1940 with *I Saw Two Englands*. Even more influential was J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), a modern tour of Britain's social and cultural landscape, showing the divisive consequences of the depression and especially its corrosive impact on masculine work cultures. Early in the war Vera Brittain had hoped to write a sequel to it, but petrol shortages and restrictions on travel limited her to London and the Home Counties.⁵⁴

Most of all, however, shelter investigators drew on a long tradition of urban exploration that included Henry Mayhew, Andrew Mearns, James Greenwood, Arthur Morrison, W.T. Stead, Charles Booth, and many others. These middle-class "urban spectators" (usually male) traversed the labyrinthine modern city, transgressing normal class boundaries, and mapping for their readers the alien and unfamiliar territory of "the abyss" or "outcast London".⁵⁵ Their narratives of social discovery combined social concern and voyeuristic elements; demands for reform and fascination with spectacle; motifs from imperial travel writing and, sometimes, a good dose of moralizing; and a rhetoric of class and poverty that was simultaneously sympathetic and distancing. Sometimes explorers adopted disguises to pass more easily; such subterfuges were, however, unnecessary in a war that opened new sites like shelters for investigation and allowed writers, under cover of the blackout, to navigate normally closed environments without raising suspicion.⁵⁶ London examples can be found between the wars—Tom Harrison's tramping in the East End and Orwell's forays among the down-and-outs in London and Paris come immediately to mind—but by the 1930s, with the industrial depression and mass unemployment, the favoured locales for such journeying had moved north. Orwell braved the Brookers' tripe shop in Wigan, Mass-Observation focused its energies on Bolton, other explorers took on Wales, and John Grierson, the father of British documentary film, sought to escape the West End and "travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesbrough and the Clyde."⁵⁷ Yet the original and classic terrain for urban spectatorship was London's East End—which suddenly found itself in 1940 at the centre of the shelter crisis.

Of the many shelter narratives written during the war, two will suffice to illustrate their major themes and stylistic conventions. First, the widely debated exposés of Ritchie Calder, written for the *Daily Herald* and *New Statesman*, which soon appeared in two books that are still often cited by historians. Calder, a lifelong socialist long interested in the problem of

⁵⁴ H.V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London, 1927); *I Saw Two Englands* (London, 1942). Morton's second book, though published in 1942, describes a journey made in 1940. J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London, 1934; 1984); Vera Brittain, *England's Hour* (London, 1941).

⁵⁵ On urban explorers, see: P.J. Keating, *Into Unknown England* (Glasgow, 1976); J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (Chicago, 1992) chap. 1.

⁵⁶ Wartime also provided a range of new opportunities to women to cross class bound areas: aside from the communal shelters, there were munitions factories and the uniformed services. On factories, see: Mass-Observation (Celia Fremlin), *War Factory* (London, 1943); Inez Holden, *Night Shift* (London, 1941); D. Murray Hill, *Ladies May Now Leave Their Machines* (London, 1944).

⁵⁷ G. Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937); much of M-O's Bolton work remains unpublished, but see: D. Sheridan & A. Calder eds., *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-1949* (London, 1984); Grierson quote in A. Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, 1995) 185.

poverty, was in the vanguard of reporters pressing for government action to clean up the mass shelters. In his columns he appears as an active informant, experiencing the city for himself and ferreting out the truth about the shelter crisis; his style is colourful, literary, if sometimes a little overdone. "The typewriter" he begins in one book "is treading flakes of soot into the paper as this chapter is being written... I have wandered through the blazing city, down into the back courts and up the side streets, tripping over hoses, cowering as buildings lurched and toppled."⁵⁸ To explore the shelters, like so many urban spectators before him, he relies on "sponsors" or intermediaries: local clergymen like the Reverends John Groser and W.W. Paton but even more the Dickensian figure of Mickey Davies, a hunchbacked, former optician, not much over three-and-a-half feet tall, who was the chief organizer of a large crypt shelter in Stepney and subsequently became its official marshal.

"Mickey, the midget," he writes: "led me out of the shelter into the street. "Come on," he said. "You haven't seen anything yet." They enter the crypt, descending to a "dimly lit interior." It "was *Grand Guignol!*" we are told. An old man slept on one stone coffin, another was in use as a card table, while a navvy had levered off the lid of a third large sarcophagus and "was snoring blissfully, his deep breathing stirring up wafts of white dust... bone dust!" People lay packed together in the aisles or sat on narrow benches, hugging hot water bottles. This and similar places, Calder writes, "made the conditions described by Dickens seem like a mannered novel by Thackeray. The Fleet Prison and the Marshalsea were polite hostleries compared with conditions which existed when the "blitzkrieg" first hit London and drove people underground." "The foetid atmosphere of most of them was like the germ-incubation rooms of a bacteriological laboratory, only the germs were not in sealed flasks, but hit you in the face in a mixed barrage." Most notorious, however, was the Tilbury (described but not named) where "One had to pick one's way along the roads between the recumbent bodies" and people slept in the warehouse bays beside cartons of rotting foodstuffs. "To begin with there was practically no sanitary provision, and the filth seeped into the blankets or was spread by trampling feet. Cartons filled with margarine were sometimes stacked up to form latrines." For Calder, and for many who came after him, such squalor was best communicated through allusions to "Eastern bazaars," "Cairo bazaars," "unequaled by anything west of Suez;" the scene could only be captured by comparison with orientalised "others." The strangeness of this urban spectacle required the conventions of imperial travel-writing which always moved in two directions, "a dialectic of the familiar and unfamiliar;" explorers both explained foreign parts by reference to home-grown rookeries and slums, and re-imported the analogies to capture Britain's urban poverty [Calder, *Carry on*, 36-39].⁵⁹

⁵⁸ R. Calder, *London* (London, 1941) 17.

⁵⁹ Calder, *The Lesson of London* (London, 1941) 85-86. For comparisons with the Orient: in addition to the books cited, see Calder, "The Danger of Disease," *New Statesman and Nation* (Oct. 19, 1940). Compare Kingsley Martin on the Tilbury: "Whites, Jews and Gentiles, Chinese, Indians, and Negroes lie there miscellaneously... at nights, [it] looks, as one resident said to me, exactly like a bazaar in Cairo." K. Martin, "Report on East London," *New Statesman and Nation* (Oct. 5, 1940). Also, the description given of a queue outside the shelter by R. Bell, Co-ordinator

Like earlier East End explorers, visitors to shelters were particularly struck by the profusion of ethnic and racial types living there. Traditionally the *entrepôt* for successive waves of immigrants and the abode of foreign seamen, the East End had often been represented as a microcosm of Britain's empire or an alien arena in the heart of the metropolis. Again Calder's language is suggestive of earlier descents into "darkest London" and the imagery of imperial exploration. Led by Mickey up a ladder in the crypt shelter "to family tombs high up in the wall," he confronts "a brown baby face with startled black eyes, under a turban, staring at me for a moment in the flickering candlelight before it disappeared under the bedclothes beside its Indian mother. Stretched on the floor was the tall figure of an ex-Bengal Lancer, his magnificent shovel beard draped over a blanket, his head turbaned and looking, in sleep, like a breathing monument of an ancient Crusader" (see fig. 3). Or, still more vividly described, the Tilbury with its residents "piled in miscellaneous confusion:"

Nothing like it, I am sure, could exist in the Western World. I have seen some of the worst haunts on the waterfront at Marseilles which are a byword, but they were mild compared with the cesspool of humanity which welled into that shelter in those early days. People of every type and condition, every colour and creed found their way there-black and white, brown and yellow; men from the Levant and Slays from Eastern Europe; Jew, Gentile, Moslem and Hindu. When ships docked, seamen would come in to royster for a few hours. Scotland Yard knew where to look for criminals bombed out of Hell's Kitchen. Prostitutes paraded there. Hawkers peddled greasy, cold, fried fish which cloyed the already foul atmosphere. Free fights had to be broken up by the police. Couples courted. Children slept. Soldiers and sailors and airmen spent part of their leaves there. [Calder, *Carry on London*, 38-39]⁶⁰

Edwardian spectators had reacted both negatively and positively to such diversity, using it to support or contradict prejudicial stereotypes. In 1940, however, such descriptions, besides spicing up a narrative, were deployed to show how shared danger could nullify division and produce cooperation among the most dissimilar groups. Calder's dominant theme is the construction of community. "As long as I live," he wrote, "I shall never forget the stampede when the gates were flung open and the swarming multitude careered down the slope, tripping, tumbling, being trodden on, being crushed, and fighting and scrambling for the choice of sleeping berths." But, miraculously, these people soon established rules, elected delegates, set up committees and arranged entertainment; here was grassroots democracy in action with "natural" leaders like Mickey Davies emerging and helping to produce order among "people who had been

of Civil defence in that Region in *The Bull's Eye*, 54: "Some weird Eastern caravan seems to have come to rest here-dark-skinned men in turbans with huge burdens on their backs; fat, blowsy women, shouting in strange tongues to grubby children in the gutter; here a fez, there the keen, roving eye of the lascar. A thick-lipped Negro, lounging against the wall, leers and laughs with a painted girl at his elbow." See also, E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Also M. Valdeverde, "The Dialectic of the Familiar and the Unfamiliar: The 'Jungle' in Early Slum Travel-Writing," *Sociology* (Aug. 1996).

⁶⁰ Compare *The Lesson of London*, 86, in which he adds to this list of shelterers Polynesians and "probably Sun-Worshippers."

herded across Europe, first by the knout and then by the rubber truncheon, and with them the rough cockneys." My aim here is not to question the authenticity of Calder's shelter articles, but to suggest that what they offer is not transparent observation, but an interpretation shaped by the well-tryed conventions of urban exploration, whose travel and literary references codify the social distance between observer, presumed reader, and those observed even as they express sympathy and admiration [Calder, *Carry on London*, 40, 43, 53].

For Calder, above all, the shelters held the promise of more active forms of citizenship and democratic community. He stressed spontaneity and organization from below. Official confusion and neglect had triggered the natural skills and teamwork of ordinary self-appointed or elected shelter organizers. The element of middle-class surprise in such accounts is also notable, given abundant evidence of community-based systems of mutual support in working-class neighbourhoods and the East End's interwar record of "Poplarism," rent strikes, and anti-fascist mobilization. Sometimes, of course, the organizational efforts got a well-meaning push from outside. The American psychiatric social worker Noel Hunnybun spent four months in an office building shelter with 180 people, mostly East Enders. The owner had provided various amenities and staff from the Friends Ambulance Unit worked there. "The organizers," Hunnybun reported, "were anxious to develop initiative and community sense within the group, and their preliminary planning was all to this end." Thus, while the leader of the Friends unit appointed an interim committee, it was replaced by a democratically elected one "as soon as the shelterers got to know something of each other's worth." Several "showed real gifts of leadership" including a cleaning woman, a mother of six who took over the canteen, and a railway worker in charge of entertainment: "he had an extraordinary knack of controlling a crowd and could produce order without giving offense."⁶¹

Another account of life in a shelter also deserves mention, *Living Tapestry*, this time a curious piece of fiction completed at the war's end. Its author was "Peter Conway," a pseudonym for a Russian *émigré* surgeon and prolific writer, G.A.M. Milkomane. Though he claims to have spent a lot of time in the large shelters and purports to be documenting fact, by adopting a fictional form he has license to indulge his fantasies and, as a result, rehearses some of the more voyeuristic and erotic elements found in the work of earlier urban explorers. Again we learn of the shelters through intermediaries. The book begins with the author, a doctor, being given a tour of a mass shelter by a medical friend; there he meets a man in his early thirties, Keith Munro, who seems unlike the other residents. A lower-middle-class bookkeeper with literary pretensions, Munro becomes the informant through whom the author's experience in the shelter is filtered; the bulk of the text is represented as Munro's notes about living for weeks in a vast warehouse shelter modelled on the Tilbury. There he is transformed by cooperation with the residents, losing his natural reserve and becoming an organizer and leader. He even gets scabies, conventionally presented as

⁶¹ N.K. Hunnybun, "Work in a Shelter," n.d. 1940, in Association of Psychiatric Social Workers Archive, folder 11/1, Birmingham. This archive has now been relocated to the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

the scourge of the poor, but here seen as a mark of unity. Munro too is shocked by the rich assortment of races and nationalities and finds himself sharing space with a Jewish orthodox family and a tough casual labourer. "I would talk to a man and find myself in perfect agreement with him, and only later, perhaps when he had turned away, realize that he was a Negro or a Swede." He adds: "I became conscious for the first time, I believe, of the underlying sameness of humanity."⁶²

As in Calder's account, "Conway's" dominant theme is the emergence of "communal life on a scale and intimacy no one could have dreamed of in times of peace." Democracy and leadership seem to evolve naturally with officialdom "always one step behind the spontaneous organization of the shelterers themselves." Improvements are secured, tickets issued, canteens opened, entertainments arranged, and abuses controlled by the residents themselves. When a spate of thefts occurs, significantly the culprits are outsiders masquerading as wardens. "We learnt that the will of the people could be law, that it needed no panoply of police and regulation to give it force and power." As his social and racial prejudices drop away, so does Munro's initial shock at the forced intimacy of the shelter and at the way in which private life was lived out in public. Here his gaze could light on women breastfeeding, people disrobing, dishevelled frocks, naked thighs unconsciously uncovered in sleep, and the "rough, sexual horseplay" of the younger people. Going to the shelter entrance one night, he is accosted by a young prostitute and later manages a brief fling with a "dark, foreign looking" married woman, an Italian, who is terrified by the bombs. Like "darkest London" in the 1880s, the mass shelter (and the blackout) is a terrain for fantasy, an opportunity for chance sexual encounters. London as "sin" city gained a new dimension in the war years (and soon gave rise to growing public concern about young girls "running wild"). Mild guilt follows a fling: "That was my last adventure of this kind in the shelter... during those nights we became different people, our entire scale of values shifted and distorted by the nightmare condition of our lives... it is all the more strange in that these lapses go side by side with a growing community consciousness. Having killed off Munro with a bomb fragment, the final parts of the book examine life in the Tube and a shelter shared by a group of middle-class flat dwellers. The new "informant" is an air-raid warden, but his account is anaemic to say the least, designed merely to indicate for comparative purposes that though these cliquish suburbanites lack the natural gregariousness of the poor, they do draw together and cooperate in response to German bombs. No sex here, just a chaste addendum to the first and more lively part ["Peter Conway," *Living Tapestry*, 46, 45, 48, 84, 91].

⁶² "Peter Conway," *Living Tapestry* (London, 1946), 61. George Alexis Milkomanovich Milkomane was born in Baku 1903, the son of a Czarist military officer. After attending the Russian Naval Academy and studying medicine in various cities in Western Europe, he settled in England in 1932 and became a naturalized citizen in 1938. During World War II he was associated with the Emergency Medical Service and subsequently carried on a private practice as a plastic surgeon. His more than one hundred books (novels, histories, and works on medicine) were published under at least five pseudonyms (suitable perhaps for a man whose profession was to change or disguise people's appearance). He even used the pseudonym "George Sava" for his memoir, *A Surgeon Remembers* (London, 1951) and his 1993 entry in *Who's Who*.

The mass shelters found a place in much of the writing of the period. Published collections of letters usually included at least one trip to them. A letter by the novelist and playwright, Fry Tenneson Jesse, for example, described a night in a basement shelter with its working-class denizens; she had first tried the Aldwych Tube “which I had heard was a good one to see,” but couldn’t get in. She admired the occupants’ calmness and ability to sleep: they were “the real heroes of this war... who bear all this so as to go on with their ordinary work.” Novels, many of them by women, also used the shelters to explore the class difference with aristocratic women characters who navigate the blitzed inner-city or work at mobile canteens and relief services. Shared grief and danger produce empathy, but the novels make no pretence that social mixing has somehow made their worlds less separate.⁶³

But while novels, letters and press accounts had an impact at the time, the most vivid and enduring images of the mass shelters are visual: the record produced by photojournalists such as Bill Brandt, Bert Hardy, and George Rodger and the pictures of a number of contemporary artists, most famously the remarkable series of shelter drawings by Henry Moore. It was photography especially that captured the London shelters for the rest of the nation: “All new experiences today seem spoiled by Picture Post,” wrote one young Mass-Observer on reaching London in October 1940, the Tube being “exactly like what he had imagined and seen pictures of.” But the photographs also echoed the prose descriptions, capturing similar scenes and portraying the social contrasts between the crowded Tube and the smart patrons of the West End’s Hungarian restaurant (photographed by Rodger) comfortable on camp beds. Intertextuality is everywhere: thus, when the poet Louis MacNeice described Tube couples with “their coloured blankets and patchwork quilts” he was directly quoting Brandt.⁶⁴

Bill Brandt, the son of a prosperous English father and German mother, had spent most of his life on the Continent. He arrived in England in 1931 at twenty-seven years of age and quickly emerged as one of the leading documentarists of English social life in the Thirties. Influenced by Priestley’s *English Journey*, he had travelled with his camera to the North to produce *The English at Home* in 1936, some of whose images of the working class may well have influenced Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier*, while his London scenes reveal him as among the capital city’s most accomplished pre-war “urban spectators.”

⁶³ F Tenneson Jesse and H.M. Harwood, *While London Burns* (London, 1941), 117-32. Susan Ertz, *Anger in the Sky* (London, 1943); Noel Streatfield, *I Ordered a Table for Six* (London, 1942).

⁶⁴ B. Hardy, *My Life* (London, 1985); Hardy’s work appeared in *Picture Post*. George Rodger worked for *Life* and *Picture Post*, see *The Blitz Photography of George Rodger* (London, 1990). Mass Observer quote: A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 143.



Bill BRANDT, "Elephant and Castle Tube Station," November 1940,
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

He was a Continental "outsider," trained in Man Ray's Paris studio, with an eye for the surreal and fascinated by the social inequities and the visual language of class in Britain. Soon after the Blitz began Brandt was commissioned by Mol to photograph London's shelters; the project was cut short when he got sick.



Bill BRANDT, "Elephant and Castle Tube Station," November 1940,
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

There is no record that Brandt and Calder toured together the crypt at Christ Church, Spitalfields, and whether photography emulated prose in this case or the other way round is unclear, but the likeness of their images is extraordinary—for example, Brandt's celebrated shots of a navvy asleep in a sarcophagus and a Sikh family in an alcove (see fig. 3). Brandt recorded the squalor as well as the social aspects of life underground—the slop buckets, primitive toilets, and dripping walls, along with shelterers playing cards,

reading, chatting, and sleeping tightly-packed together on Underground platforms at the Elephant and Castle and Liverpool Street. He was fascinated by darkness, strange spaces, nativity scenes of mothers and babies. His Tube photographs are mesmerizing and jarring: dim-lit stations, with strong contrasts of light and dark, enhanced by Brandt's flash bulbs and long time exposures; quiet, peaceful images of shelterers asleep or doing very ordinary things (like undoing their boots or snuggling under a quilt); and yet their surreal station milieu and the chaotically intermingled bodies of these Londoners proclaim the larger reality of noise, danger and terror.⁶⁵

If Brandt's shelter compositions have become indelibly inscribed in the history of the Blitz, the same can be said of Henry Moore's drawings. They were very different, of course; Moore, unlike Brandt, seems strangely impervious to the shelter literature and press reportage of the time. But larger forces from the beginning linked the two: selections from their work were published together in the magazine *Lilliput* in December 1941, and both were featured in the exhibit *Britain at War 1941* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Moore's chance encounter with the mass shelters has been described innumerable times. Despite the urging of his friend, Kenneth Clark, chairman of the War Artists' Advisory Committee, Moore who had fought and been wounded in World War I had little desire to become an official war artist. Travelling into central London in early September to eat with friends, he returned home by Tube and found himself riveted by the crowds of people at every station and by their connection to his own work. As he recalled later:

When we got out at Belsize Park we were not allowed to leave the station because of the fierceness of the barrage. We stayed there for an hour and I was fascinated by the sight of the people camping out deep under the ground. I had never seen so many rows of reclining figures and even the holes out of which the trains were coming seemed to me to be like the holes in my sculpture. And there were intimate little touches. Children fast asleep, with trains roaring past only a couple of yards away. People who were obviously strangers to one another forming tight little intimate groups. They were cut off from what was happening above, but they were aware of it. There was tension in the air. They were a bit like the chorus in a Greek drama telling us about the violence we don't actually witness.⁶⁶

He returned regularly to the shelters, spending nights unobtrusively making the rapid sketches and brief notes from which he recreated the

⁶⁵ On Brandt: I. Jeffrey, *Bill Brandt. Photographs 1928-83* (London, 1993); N. Warburton, *Bill Brandt. Selected Texts and Photography* (Oxford, 1993). J. Buggins, "An Appreciation of the Shelter Photographs Taken by Bill Brandt in November 1940," *Imperial War Museum Review*, 4 (1989). Bill Brandt, *Behind the Camera: Photographs 1928-1983*, text by M. Haworth Booth & D. Mellor (New York, 1985).

⁶⁶ P. Stansky & W. Abrahams, *London Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War*, 34 and chap. 1 as a whole. H. Moore, *A Shelter Sketchbook* (London, 1988) introduced by F. Carey. The date was probably September 11. In that month Moore had decided not to continue teaching at the Chelsea School of Art, which evacuated to Northampton; he was also finding it difficult to obtain materials for sculpture and only returned to it in 1943. To that extent he was looking for a new means of financial support and a new artistic medium.

scenes in the daytime. "The only thing at all like these shelters that I could think of," he later commented, "was the hold of a slave ship on its way from Africa to America, full of hundreds and hundreds of people who were having things done to them which they were quite powerless to resist." The claustrophobic spaces of Moore's private nightmares had turned into everyone's reality. His favourite locations included the Tilbury, but most of all he was fascinated by the unfinished Liverpool Street tube extension, whose entire length was at night a spiral vortex of sleeping bodies: "dramatic, dismal lit masses of reclining figures fading to perspective point. no lines, just a hole, no platform, and the tremendous perspective" (see figs. 4 and 5). Through Clark, Moore soon gained official status, working intensely for two months until shelter conditions were improved. By then they seemed almost routine; their regulated more fixed-up state held less interest for him.



Bill BRANDT, "Sikh Family at Christ Church, Spitalfields," November 1940,
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

The drama had passed and he shifted his attention briefly to coalminers, but was dissatisfied with his drawings of coal hewers. The son of a miner (who had later become a mine engineer), the world of the Father was less compelling to him than that of the Mother and soon he left the War Artists' scheme altogether. But the experience left a permanent mark on his artistic development, softening the abstract aestheticism of his pre-war sculpture and reaffirming his humanist side. "Without the war," Moore later commented: "which directed one's attention to life itself, I think I would have been a far less sensitive and responsible person."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ D. Hall, *Henry Moore* (New York, 1966) 104; J. Russell, *Henry Moore* (New York, 1968) 81-84; M. & S. Harries, *The War Artists*, 192. A. G. Wilkinson, *The Drawings of Henry Moore* (London, 1977) chap. 5; J. Hedgecoe & H. Moore, *Henry Moore* (London, 1968). Also, "Shelter Pictures by Brandt and Henry Moore," *Lilliput* (Dec. 1942); K. Vaughan, "War Artists and the War" in *Penguin New Writing*, 16 (Jan-March 1943).



Henry MOORE, "The Liverpool Street Extension," 1941,
reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation

The shelter drawings were done from memory while the scenes were still fresh in Moore's mind. "You couldn't sit in the shelters and draw people undressing their children," he commented, "It was too private." "I had to behave as though I wasn't trying to look; they were undressing, after all... I would have been chased out if I'd been caught sketching [Stansky & Abrahams, *London's Burning*, 36; M. & S. Harries, *The War Artists*, 192].⁶⁸ As always with our "explorers" there is an element of voyeurism; Moore caught the intimacy of these bodies, arms linked, joined together under wave-like sheets and blankets. His preoccupation with mothers and maternity well predated the war, but in these dim caverns his productivity exploded. His nurturing mothers, heads of sleeping shelterers, and groups of figures sitting awkwardly or reclining are stripped of circumstantial details; they are not Londoners so much as suffering humanity: passive, austere, ghostlike, and monumental. Unlike Brandt photographs or the texts of Calder and "Conway" or indeed the more anecdotal style of other shelter artists, Moore's drawings make no special reference to class, community, or nation, nor do they capture the cluttered, interactive gregariousness of shelter life. They universalise London's raid victims who could, it seems, be anywhere in Europe and whose densely packed bodies seem equally to anticipate the horrors of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald. Moore's intensely personal vision had raised life in the mass shelters to epic status; the haunted, static quality of his art must have seemed unreal and far removed from the average shelterer's experience. By contrast, most depictions of the Blitz revolved around the themes of nation, class, and above all, community. While the raids, it was argued, had confirmed the nation's strengths, they had also underscored its class divisions and awakened the need for human as well as physical reconstruction.

⁶⁸ Other artists at work in the shelters included Edward Ardizzone and Feliks Topolski, both of whom included more specific references to dress, individual physical features, and gestures and depicted more the socializing that went with shelter life. See also the Hungarian born artist Joseph Bato's published sketchbook of the Blitz: *Defiant City* (London, 1942).



Bill BRANDT, "Liverpool Street Underground Station," November 1940,
 Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

Yet, for all their differences one of the powerful motifs that connects the abstractions of Moore, the more literal work of other artists, and the photographers is the imagery of protective, nurturing mothers and young infants. Women and children were represented as those for whom the war was being fought; they were the epitome of defenceless civilians, victims of modern war; and the children pointed to an uncertain future. Some images were explicitly religious—for example, a mother and child on a Tube platform, a nativity scene with "Angel" the station name prominently displayed. These maternal pictures offer a striking contrast to those two years later which portray women engaged in new non feminine roles, in uniform or producing munitions. In 1940 few women had been mobilized. Moreover, they should be set against the stereotypes produced by evacuation. To contemporary eyes the class dimension of these scenes was implicit and never far from the surface. Mass shelters might epitomize shared danger and wartime community; but it was poor, working-class families who were at the centre of the shelter crisis and who largely inhabited the Tube and the Tilbury. And contemporaries all knew that. A year before, the distinguished historian, R.C.K. Ensor, then acting as an evacuation volunteer, had lambasted similar mothers and infants as "the lowest grade of slum women-slatternly malodorous tatterdemillions trailing children to match."⁶⁹ Poor mothers, said to be lacking "the most elementary ideas of decency and home-training," were largely blamed for evacuation's failure. "Far too many women," the Ministry of Health had concluded, "failed to accept or understand their responsibilities as mothers and housewives." "The London woman," another official report noted tartly, "...

⁶⁹ R. C. K. Ensor, "The Great Evacuation," *The Spectator*, Sept. 8, 1939, p. 349. Ensor's word choice seems to have been strongly influenced by C. Williams Ellis, *England and the Octopus* (London, 1928) 128. A trivial point, perhaps, but it does suggest that he viewed these working-class evacuees through the prism of interwar anti-urban literature, which viewed the vulgar masses as a threat to the England's countryside.

is not overburdened by domesticity.”⁷⁰ Now suddenly, like London itself, they stood for the nation. Brandt captures some of this in his wonderfully ironic picture of a sheltering woman with a child huddled next to her. She sits, tight-lipped, her gaze hard to read but with a hint of defiance, next to a makeshift lavatory; the sign “Ladies” with all its *double-entente* leaps out at the viewer (see fig. 6).



Bill BRANDT, “SE. London Air Raid Shelter,” November 1940,
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London

Lions and Eagles: Co-Producing the Blitz

“As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.” These are the opening words of Orwell’s most important political tract of the war years, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, written in the Fall of 1940. In it he tried to recapture patriotism for the left, arguing that the Blitz had both freed Britain, “the most class-ridden country in the world,” from its pre-war malaise and that victory required radical social change. The same planes also circled above the heads of a remarkable collection of American writers, journalists, and broadcasters whose views of Britain were not only profoundly shaped by the raids, but who played a major role in interpreting and projecting the Blitz experience both for Americans *and* for Britons as well. Many of them—Edward R. Murrow, Vincent Sheean, Eric Sevareid, James Reston, Drew Middleton, Quentin Reynolds, Dorothy Thompson, Helen Kirkpatrick, to name but a few—were leading figures in the news business during and after the war.⁷¹ Some, like Negley Farson, had known

⁷⁰ National Federation of Women’s Institutes, *Town Children Through Country Eyes* (Dorking, 1940) 20-21; Parliamentary Papers, *Summary Report by the Ministry of Health*, CMD 6394 (April 1, 1941 to March 31, 1942); *Report on Conditions in Reception Areas* (HMSO, 191) 3-4.

⁷¹ In addition to the press corps, other observers also wrote of their admiration for Londoners and sought to encourage American intervention. See, for example, the admiring book by the economic attaché, Harvey Klemmer, *They’ll Never Quit* (London and New York, 1941).

England for many years; many others were recent arrivals. But, as their reports and memoirs show, all became participant observers, victims of the raids, and partisans with no pretence of neutrality. Far from being simply transmitters of British propaganda or willing instruments of Whitehall's efforts to influence U.S. opinion, they were vital co-producers of the "Blitz," co-authors of its symbolism, its images of British character, and its insertion as the pivotal episode in a larger drama of national renewal—the claim that a more democratic, less class-bound society would emerge from the war.

Like their British counterparts, American correspondents became a new breed of "urban spectator." They toured London, surveyed the wreckage, often took their turns at fire-watching from the rooftops, and visited shelters, spending time in the Tube and mass shelters, especially the Tilbury, which became a stop on everyone's tour. Most undoubtedly knew that they were revisiting the haunts of their compatriot Jack London, author of one of the classic explorations of the East End, *People of the Abyss* (1903). When Ralph Ingersoll, the editor of *PM*, made a quick trip in November 1940, he was escorted by Hilde Marchant around the shelters; both wore tin hats to "look less like slummers and more like officials." Bunks and a ticketing system had already made the Tilbury more orderly than in the early days, although sanitary arrangements were hardly improved. It was impossible, Ingersoll wrote, to take in "the thousands of people sleeping in a dim-lit cave... the whole experience shocked so that it numbed." Like Moore, he too was both horrified and fascinated by the Liverpool Street Tube extension: "For literally half a mile we walked, after each step having to find a place to put the next foot down without stepping on something human." A socialist, and none too subtle, Marchant next took him to the deluxe shelter at the Dorchester Hotel with its waiters, neat cots, curtained spaces, silks and "lovely fluffy eiderdowns." Writing a "London Letter" for the leftist New York periodical, *Common Sense*, the poet Louis MacNeice counselled possible visitors: "If you want a Hogarthian contrast, go down—any time after seven PM—into one of the Tube stations (the subways) and follow it up by a visit to the Ritz bar."⁷²

Many, it seems, did just that, although Nicholas Cull has pointed out that American press dispatches, aside from James Reston's column in the *New York Times*, ignored Phil Piratin's highly publicized occupation of the Savoy Hotel shelter.⁷³ Cull views this as self-censorship, motivated by a desire to downplay glaring evidence of social inequality, which did not fit their analysis of Britain. But, in fact, their reports were often critical of official failure and they fully grasped the class dimension of the shelter crisis. Their silence over Piratin's raid probably had more to do with deep distaste at this time for the Communist party and its imperialist war doctrine and demands for a "people's peace," viewed by contemporaries as

⁷² R. Ingersoll, *Report on England: November 1940* (New York, 1940) 81-103, quotes are from 84, 86, 87, 92, 95. Ben Robertson, who also wrote for *PM* travelled with them; he wrote of the shelters: "The sights were appalling, and even to visit them was dreary, discouraging work. Even the best shelter was bad—London's sleeping place was a sort of hell under the earth." B. Robertson, *I Saw England* (New York, 1941) 153. Alan Heuser (ed.), *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford, 1990) 101.

⁷³ N. J. Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign Against American Neutrality in World War II* (Oxford, 1995) 105-106.

tantamount to defeatism. More striking, perhaps, is their relative silence—compared to most British visitors to the East End—about the ethnic diversity of some of the mass shelters. Negley Farson whose *Bomber's Moon* was published by the London firm of Gollancz in 1941 was an exception, visiting the Tilbury on Yom Kippur and repeatedly comparing the shelters to Eastern Europe or Russia: “exactly like the scenes in the railway stations of old Russia; or it might be the East Side of New York.”⁷⁴ American observers mostly presented composite images of resilient cockneys and the common traits of the British working class rather than diversity. Vincent Sheean was more critical, at least in his memoir published in 1943, admitting that he only went into the deep shelters once or twice and emerged “almost choked by the smells, physical and psychological, that filled such lower air.” Echoing critics at the time, he commented on the “astonishing number of foreigners,” adding “This may have been because Whitechapel and Blackfriars are the abode of poor foreigners by tradition, but also, perhaps, because the foreign parts of the London population had less incentive to get jobs above ground and brave the bombs.”⁷⁵

In general, however, the American press corps presented the Blitz in very similar ways to their British counterparts. Aside from praising the courage, teamwork and capacity of ordinary Londoners, they argued that this trial by high explosives and fire was turning Britain into a more democratic country, where social distinctions would become less hidebound and corrosive. In Ingersoll's words: “A nation cannot sleep wherever it finds itself at night, and with whomever happens to lie down next to it, and not have things happen to its class distinctions” [Ingersoll, *Report on England*, 217]. “We thought,” Severeid recalled, “that perhaps a wonderful thing was happening to the British people: some kind of moral revolution was underway... Men who could accomplish with their hands—firemen, first-aid volunteers, bomb extractors—now became not only important but honoured citizens.” The nation, he wrote, was beginning to understand “that a broker in the city was of scant value compared with the man who could fashion an airplane propeller.”⁷⁶ Politically most were inclined to the left, most had distaste for privilege and discrimination, and they were closely aligned with British journalistic and broadcasting circles that had become more radical in the first two years of the conflict. And yet their own social position was ambiguous and complicated. As foreigners, lacking a recognizable “posh” accent, they could cross boundaries—as had been true earlier for Jack London

⁷⁴ N. Farson, *Bomber's Moon* (London, 1941) 90, 96, etc. He was highly critical of official “apathy” callousness, and inactivity.

⁷⁵ V. Sheean, *Between Thunder and the Sun* (New York, 1943) 234-35. George Orwell, an ardent urban explorer of the 1930s, made only a couple of trips to the shelters. His comments, which were generally critical, also focused repeatedly on foreigners and Jews among the shelterers. For example in October 1940 he visited the Tube stations at Chancery Lane, Baker Street, and Oxford Circus in the West End: “Not all Jews, but, I think, a higher proportion of Jews than one would normally see in a crowd of this size. What is bad about Jews is that they are not only conspicuous, but go out of their way to make themselves so. A fearful Jewish woman, a regular comic-paper cartoon of a Jewess, fought her way off the train at Oxford Circus, landing blows on anyone who stood in her way.” Orwell's diary entry for October 25, 1940 in S. Oorwell & I. Angus eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, II (1940-43) 377-78.

⁷⁶ E. Severeid, *Not So Wild A Dream* (New York, 1946) 174. See also: Dorothy Thompson, “The Example of England,” *New York Herald Tribune* (Sept. 23, 25, 27, 1940).

in the East End. They went to the mass shelters but also frequented the Ritz, Savoy, and Claridge's; they toured the bombsites of Southwark and Whitechapel, but dined with Sybil Colefax, Lady Astor, Duff and Lady Diana Cooper, and went to Ditchley Park for weekends with Ronald Tree. Ben Robertson of *PM* felt uncomfortable dining in grand hotels once the raids got underway: "the food and the music got on your conscience when hundreds of thousands were in shelters, when people on every side were dying."⁷⁷ Some of their convictions that British society was opening up, becoming more egalitarian, probably reflected more the unprecedented ease with which they now traversed social divides than any solid evidence that class mattered less among Britons.

Anti-fascist, sympathetic to England's plight, eager to awaken the American public to the perils of isolationism, they willingly joined what Nicholas Cull has shown to be a wide-ranging and successful British campaign to reshape American opinion and combat the Anglophobia and strong distrust that existed in parts of the Midwest and elsewhere. The British authorities were fearful of mounting too open and blatant a campaign and recognized that reports by the American press corps had far more credibility than anything emanating from their own information services. To this end censorship restrictions were eased, and American reporters got unprecedented access to bomb sites and to people and received close cooperation from Fleet Street and the BBC—as CBS's European director and an ardent champion of Britain's cause, Murrow gained unrivalled access to the corridors of power and was even allowed (for the first time ever) to cover an air raid live, *unscripted*, from the roof of Broadcast House. The articles, broadcasts and best-selling books made many of them national heroes in the United States; they also helped, as opinion polls showed, to transform American attitudes. A "spiral of cooperation," in Cull's phrase, built on common convictions, translated into shared metaphors, common themes, and unanimity in representing the Blitz [Cull, *Selling War*, 99]. There were many other aspects to the British publicity campaign: broadcasts by Priestley and other prominent figures, lecture tours, recordings of Churchill's own speeches, and much else—including very active work by sympathetic groups in America. The United States was also bombarded by visual images of London's Blitz. These included newsreels and officially funded documentary films such as *Britain Can Take It* (1941), which was produced for American audiences and through Warner Brothers' good offices was shown in 12,000 cinemas within a few months of its release. There were also exhibitions of war art and photography like the work of Brandt and Moore, while American magazines, notably *Life* with Cecil Beaton and George Rodger, gave prominent displays to the work of British photographers.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ B. Robertson, *I Saw England* (New York, 1941) 137. The book sold well in the United States. On social life see, for example: Vincent Sheean, *Between Thunder and the Sun* (New York, 1943).

⁷⁸ On *Britain Can Take It*, aside from Cull, see: Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London, 1974). Watt claimed that Reynolds was the first "star" to be produced by documentary. Cecil Beaton's *Life* cover picture (Sept. 23, 1940), showed a little girl in hospital, bandaged, clutching a teddy bear, and staring out at the camera. It was very effective propaganda. See also Cecil Beaton, *War Photographs 1939-45* (London, 1981); Beaton, *The Years*

One other aspect of the publishing campaign, recently explored by Fred Leventhal, was the considerable role of women writers, who produced “a continuous stream of publications... aimed at a largely female readership.”⁷⁹ Some were US citizens or British-born correspondents for American journals, like Phyllis Bottome or the *New Yorker’s* Molly Panter-Downes. It was a graduate of Barnard College, Alice Duer Miller, whose narrative poem, “The White Cliffs,” was the original inspiration for Vera Lynn’s war anthem—and the poem itself sold 300,000 copies in America and 200,000 in Britain.⁸⁰ Many of the female publicists were British, most famously Jan Struther, whose *Mrs. Miniver* became a runaway success; in 1942 Metro Goldwyn Meyer (MGM) pushed the story forward in time, turning it into a Blitz film which topped the box offices on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸¹ Novels set in the Blitz also sold well, while another interesting tributary of the “stream,” largely forgotten today, is the profusion books and anthologies of letters, mostly edited and written by women, which were published in the first two years of the war. The earliest examples were correspondence to evacuees in North America; then came letters, usually written to American friends and relatives, describing wartime conditions and civilian experience in the German raids. At a time when most of the population was regularly writing large numbers of letters, the epistolary form was a natural one for publishers who received government encouragement. It captured at once the continuities and the novelty of life, underscored the intimate personal networks linking the two nations, and by focusing on homes and families, registered the ways in which every facet of life was being redefined, erasing normal distinctions between public and private. Compilations of letters from many sources also conveyed a sense of the collective, shared experience of war, and editors sought to include a broad cross-section of the nation, although in truth very few contributions came from working-class women.⁸²

The influence of American reporters on the Blitz was not restricted to American audiences. Their articles were widely quoted, many of their books were published and read in Britain and several became well-known figures there—notably Murrow and Quentin Reynolds of *Colliers Weekly Magazine* who did the whispered voice-over for *Britain Can Take It*. The film was shown all across Britain and for many in the provinces soon became almost

Between: Diaries 1937-44 (London, 1965). Also, A. A. Michie & W. Graebner (eds.), *Finest Hours* (New York, 1941) by two *Life* journalists.

⁷⁹ F. M. Leventhal, “British Writers, American Readers: Women’s Voices in Wartime,” *Albion*, 31.1 (Spring 2000).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Phyllis Bottome recorded her views of the shelters and much else in *Mansion House of Liberty* (Boston, 1941). She also wrote a Blitz novel: *London Pride* (New York, 1941). Molly Panter-Downes, *Letter from England* (Boston, 1940). On Alice Duer Miller, see: K.M. Short, “The ‘White Cliffs of Dover’: Promoting the Anglo-American Alliance in World War II,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 2.1 (1982). Vera Lynn, *We’ll Meet Again. A Personal and Social Memory of World War II* (London, 1989).

⁸¹ Alison Light, *Forever England* (London and New York, 1991), chap. 3.

⁸² B. Curtis Brown & Jan Struther eds., *Women of Britain: Letters from England* (New York, 1940); Diana Forbes Robertson & R.W. Straus eds., *War Letters from Britain* (New York, 1941); F. Tenneson Jesse & H.M. Harwood, *London Front* (London, 1941); *While London Burns* (London, 1942). Jean LORIMER, *Pilgrim’s Children* (London, 1942); Mrs. St. Loe Strachey, *These Strange Years* (New York, 1942). Molly Panter Downes, *Letter from England* (New York, 1940). On letter writing in the war years see: M. Jolly, “Everyday Letters and Literary Form: Correspondence from the Second World War,” PhD. Diss., University of Sussex, 1997.

synonymous with the London Blitz. Indeed, when Reynolds gave one of the regular "Postscripts" to the BBC's nine o'clock news in June 1941, he received a postbag of some 7000 fan letters. These American commentators played a large role in describing London and its population under fire and in representing, as "outsiders," British character and values in ways that were deeply flattering. The US entry into the war only served to strengthen these bonds.⁸³

These comments, I hope, have sufficiently illustrated ways in which the mythology of the Blitz was from the start an Anglo-American co-production. The interpretive context at the time (and for some years thereafter) can be summarized by the phrase "the People's War"—a populist patriotism, which combined criticism of the past with expectations of social change and inclusive messages of shared heritage and values. It was soon tied to a narrative of the growing power of organized labour and after 1945 to a triumphal account of Labour's victory and the achievement of the welfare state. In 1940-1941 the two concepts that were central to the discussion were national unity *and* class inequality. Often class and nation are seen as contradictory, but during the crisis of the Second World War in Britain ideas about the class structure, the nation and its identity were being reciprocally reconstructed.⁸⁴ The middle-class commentators, examined above, used a variety of metaphors and conventions to describe the shelter crisis, but for the most part they reconciled the claims of nation and class by placing them in a larger narrative of national regeneration and future reform.

Over the last sixty years, of course, the story of London's Blitz has been retold selectively to suit changing times and political moods. Some elements have been revised, sanitized, or omitted altogether with the passage of time. What we might call the characterological Blitz—the images of popular courage and endurance—has remained the same. In other ways the symbolism and function of the Blitz has gone through changes. Thus, in recent times, the older social democratic Blitz with its emphasis on the inner-city and industrial working class has yielded ground—in popular novels like those of R. F. Delderfield and recent TV serials—to emphasis on middle-class experience with wealthy families or streets of suburbanites as emblematic of the nation at war.⁸⁵ Some of this is politically conservative reiterating the themes of community, family, social stability, and national community but with tacit reference to later social fragmentation, welfare dependence, dysfunctional families, and multi-ethnicity. My main point,

⁸³ Edward R. Murrow, *This Is London* (New York, 1941) enjoyed huge sales. A.M. Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times* (New York, 1986). Quentin Reynolds, *The Wounded Don't Cry* (New York, 1941). A. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 225.

⁸⁴ My forthcoming book on the British Working Class in the Second World War tackles the issues of class and national identity in much greater detail.

⁸⁵ For recent discussions of changing representations of the war: R. Bromley, *Lost Narratives: Popular Fictions, Politics, and Recent History* (London, 1988). Also Geoff Eley's analysis of films and much else: "Distant Voices, Still Lives" in R.A. Rosenstone ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, 1995); Rosenstone, "Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory and World War II," *American Historical Review*, 106.3 (June 2001). Also, on the erosion of the "People's War" in film in the 1950s: J. Ramsden, "Refocusing the "People's War": British Films of the 1950s," *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 33 No 1(1998).

however, is that the fusion of class and nation into some kind of stable vision continues to be problematical in current portrayals of the Blitz. Two brief examples must suffice to show this.

Shortly after the World Trade Towers were attacked, Masterpiece Theatre aired "The Cazalets" on public TV stations, a serial drama of wartime Britain.⁸⁶ It was the Blitz country house and Mayfair-style. The war is seen as the end of an era, the demise of high society. Sexual morality occupies much of the foreground, with a liberal garnish of lesbianism and adultery, but otherwise the story is one of sacrifice and courage set within irreversible social decline. A second illustration concerns the public shelters more directly. In 1989 with great fanfare London's Imperial War Museum opened its interactive "Blitz Experience" exhibit. Here visitors are conducted into a brick shelter; they sit in the dark listening to tapes of bombs, communal singing, cries, and instructions from "George," a working-class raid warden. They then emerge as a flashlight picks out scenes of a devastated street, a pub in ruins, and images of London on fire. As Lucy Noakes points out, the original script for the exhibit went through multiple revisions, excising references to squalor, overcrowding, the death toll when mass shelters were hit, and other unpleasant aspects.⁸⁷ We are left with cheerful cockneys, togetherness, and common purpose, which, George intones, made it all bearable. In other words, cosy working-class solidarity—nostalgia for a traditional working class that no longer exists and for neighbourhoods, some of which were destroyed by the bombs and others by the bulldozers of slum clearance. Implicit here is also a white homogeneous working class prior to post-war New Commonwealth immigration; ironic this, in view of contemporaries' emphasis on the diversity of the mass shelters. In these two examples, class is not eliminated from the story of the Blitz (as many historians have often intimated); rather class and nation are woven into larger narratives of cultural loss.

As I write, former Mayor Giuliani is in London receiving an honorary knighthood from Queen Elizabeth. His day, the *New York Times* reports, included a guided tour of Churchill's War Room, his underground command centre in Westminster. Also, at each of his many meetings Mr. Giuliani "discussed how the attacks on New York had instantly invited comparisons with London during the Blitz when the city had persevered [*New York Time*, Feb.14, 2002]. The image invoked here is one of ordinary citizens' stoicism and endurance, one of a renewed sense of community in the midst of disaster. But perhaps a couple of other parallels to New York's crisis are relevant. First, neither London nor New York were accustomed to being seen as emblematic of their respective nations, far from it. And then there is the social symbolism of the two situations. Just as London's crisis enhanced the status of labour, so after a long period when young professionals, such as set-managers, media types, and dot.com entrepreneurs eclipsed everyone else in civic life, suddenly another New

⁸⁶ "The Cazalets," Exxon Mobil Masterpiece Theatre; shown on WLIW, New York, Oct. 22-Nov. 19, 2001.

⁸⁷ L. Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London, 1998); Noakes, "Making Histories: Experiencing the Blitz in London's Museums in the 1990s" in M. Evans & K. Lunn eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1997).

York—of fire-fighters, police, postal and construction workers moved centre stage along with respect for their courage, skills, and dedication. For a couple of weeks, rhetorically at least, the city seemed to have been recaptured by Josh Freeman's world of New York labour.⁸⁸ Finally, there is the ethnic diversity that so many of London's shelter explorers wrote about. The scores of obituaries for Trade Tower victims published for months in the *New York Times*, many of them immigrants, confirmed daily the social and ethnic diversity of those buildings which were indeed a microcosm of New York City and its unrivalled position as a Mecca of hopes, ambitions, and creativity. Fleeting though such moments may be, when a large and diverse city comes to symbolize a nation, the nation is better for it.

⁸⁸ J.B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York, 2000). For Camille Paglia's rather different response, welcoming the return of "real men," see P. Leigh Brown, "Ideas and Trends; Heavy Lifting Required: The Return of Real Men," *New York Times* (Sunday, Oct. 28, 2001).