Half the Battle. Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War

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For a long time after 1945, as Basil Fawlty famously discovered, it was almost impossible to avoid mentioning the war. It has occupied a unique place in the national imaginary, manifesting itself at all levels of discourse from personal reminiscence, to boys comics, films and TV sitcoms, to the rhetoric of political leaders – ad infinitum, and almost, for those of us who grew up in its shadow, ad nauseam. A lot of this was, of course, down to an obsession with a lost, and perhaps imagined, national greatness. But possibly uniquely, the collective memory of this war tended to focus as much on the experience and mentality of the civilian population as on military exploits. The tales told were not just about the Battle of Britain, El Alamein and D-Day, but about rationing, the Dunkirk Spirit, the Blitz, ITMA. And it was out of the experience of the home front, rather than the military exploits, that the post-war generation fashioned a new way of thinking about the nation, which Angus Calder (who thinks it was a bad thing) has labelled the 'Myth of the Blitz'.

According to this story, the war brought out the best in the British people. They responded to the challenge with fortitude, adaptability and resolve, breaking down barriers of class and culture, and generating a new collective sense of social solidarity leading to a more caring society after the war, epitomised in the Labour victory of 1945 and the foundation of the NHS. This story was widely accepted in the immediate post-war years, and arguably, all the rival interpretations of the nature and trajectory of post-war British politics and society took it as their starting-point, whether they approved of it or not. Mainstream Labour and one-nation Conservatives saw it as the founding moment of Keynesian welfarism and the mixed economy; left-wing anti-reformists such as Calder himself saw it as the point where the left was captured by a backward-looking Englishness; while for the Thatcherite right in the shape of Correlli Barnett, the mirage of the 'New Jerusalem' was the origin of all our subsequent woes. But all started from the understanding that the experience of war, or the way it had been manipulated and depicted, shaped the post-war nation, for good or ill. (Interestingly, New Labour seems to be the first major political formation without a story to tell about the war.) Historians too tended to accept 1945 as a pivotal date, and the changed social relations of wartime as its essential precursor: 'England had arisen all the same' were the famous last words of A J P Taylor's 1965 survey *English History 1914-1945* (Clarendon Press; Oxford). It is hard for the 'generation of '45' to read those words without feeling some emotional tug.

But history is cruel, and the end of the much-debated 'post-war consensus' brought the post-war mythology, along with the 'consensus' itself, into question. It was Thatcher and Blair who unwittingly put the home front back on the historical agenda. From the early 1990s, historians such as Angus Calder, Harold Smith, and those whom James Hinton has labelled the Apathy School (Tiratsoo, Fielding, *et al.*), began to revisit the war, to emphasise negative aspects of wartime experience – looting, panic, bigotry, conflict – and to cast doubt on the orthodox story of wartime solidarity and popular radicalism. The revisionists have not gone unchallenged, but one thing remains constant: our understanding of the British people at war is inextricably linked to our interpretation and reinterpretation of the post-war era.

In this context, Robert Mackay's book is most welcome. He is not, of course, the first historian to deal with the home front, nor is this his first foray into the territory, but the particular contribution of this book lies in its focus on 'civilian morale': the state of mind and behaviour of the populace under the stresses of war, which was understandably such a preoccupation of government. In adopting this focus, the book tackles both the revisionist arguments and the 'apathy school' on their home ground, in a reading of the hearts and minds of the people. Mackay tracks morale and its manifold indicators through a wide range of sources ranging from Mass Observation and Home Intelligence reports through contemporary newspapers and BBC Listener Research, to post-war memoirs. His conclusion is that the old story has more truth in it than many recent historians have allowed. The picture was not all rosy: there were wobbles, and there was panic, profiteering and social conflict, but on the whole morale stayed firm and social solidarity and commitment to the war effort remained higher than politicians and officials before 1940 would have dared to hope. The book depicts 'a people who became actively committed to the project their leaders put before them, who cooperated with the drastic re-ordering of daily life that this entailed, and who, on the whole, did so in a spirit of stoical endurance that did not exclude good humour'.(p. 248) In a short but incisive survey of the literature, Mackay is sharply critical of those whom he considers to have presented an unjustifiably bleak view of the home front, in some cases by the simple expedient of omitting the positive evidence. This could therefore be described as a counter-revisionist book, seeking to re-correct what the author believes to be the overcorrection applied by the revisionists to the facile optimism of the post-war myth.

Is Mackay's picture a convincing one? His approach is systematic. The book is divided into two halves. The first half is chronological, assessing the state of civilian morale through the four distinct phases of the war: the Phoney War, the emergency of 1940, the 'Britain alone' period of 1940-1, and then the long haul to victory, 1941-5. The second half is thematic and explanatory, examining a range of relevant factors, including propaganda, air-raid precautions, recreation and leisure, and 'Beveridge and all that', which might explain why morale remained relatively high. But first it is necessary to define what 'morale' means. Bravely – some would say recklessly – Mackay quotes on his very first page Paul Addison's observation that 'civilian morale' was 'the woolliest concept of the war', and then goes on to write a book about it. However, in essence, he follows in the footsteps of Mass Observation and Home Intelligence. Adopting their definition of morale as a fusion of specific attitudes and behaviour, he observes what they observed, supplementing it with the additional insights and evidence available to the historian.

In the first half of the book the strains to which the civilian population was subjected are described in detail, and their responses evaluated as far as possible on the basis of Mass Observation and Home Intelligence reports, social surveys and reminiscences, contemporary sources and facts and figures where appropriate. The picture that emerges is little different from the more sophisticated version of the myth which was the conventional wisdom for the first half-century after the war: 'Overall, the traditional picture of a spirited and resilient people is a valid one' (p. 134) – though with some reservations. Morale seemed to dip when there was nothing much going on, as in the Phoney War of 1939-40, and during the long concluding phase after mid-1941. At moments of acute crisis – the summer of 1940, the subsequent heavy blitz – despite the imminent prospect of invasion, the threat of sudden death and the strains of sleep deprivation and physical destruction, morale seems to have been surprisingly good. The predicted panic failed to manifest itself, as did the expected epidemic of mental illness and, despite persistent reports of looting and 'trekking' out of beleaguered cities (in many ways a rational response rather than an act of panic), troops who had been on

standby to help keep order were not needed and were stood down. Although morale did tend to fluctuate with the war news, a substantial majority of the population seems to have believed throughout that the war would be won. By the long final phase, people had settled down to wartime conditions, just as in the previous decade many of them had settled down to unemployment. Boredom and frustration were the main problems: a few even confessed to enjoying the air-raids for the excitement and interest they added to a humdrum life. The war was not a good experience, but Mackay argues that only by focussing on a disaffected minority and an unrepresentative selection of incidents can it be made to appear unremittingly negative.

So if morale was on the whole so good, why? The second half of the book seeks an explanation. What about propaganda? The government believed throughout the war that morale could be lifted by news manipulation, attempts to stimulate patriotism, Churchill's speeches and Priestley's broadcasts, and films showing the exemplary behaviour of ordinary people at war. To what effect? The BBC carried out detailed listener response surveys, but with inconclusive results. Many people said they could spot propaganda a mile off, and resented it: Britain was not the kind of culture to swallow whole what its rulers offered. The impact, Mackay concludes, was bound to be 'at best marginal', and he repeats approvingly Tom Harrisson's observation that morale was operating on a whole other level, untouched by propaganda.(p. 182) This discussion mirrors the similarly inconclusive debate about the impact of jingoism in late Victorian and Edwardian popular culture: one can make all kinds of assumptions about what its effects *must* have been, but one can't get inside people's heads to find out. Mackay's cautious conclusion is surely justified.

Chapter 5, entitled 'Easing the Strain', discusses a variety of strategies that were implemented in the hope of making life more acceptable for the population, including air-raid precautions, rationing, improved welfare and working conditions, and leisure initiatives, ranging from ENSA and the BBC to the provision of 'inessentials' like beer, tobacco and cosmetics. Some strategies that might appear purely military in intent, such as anti-aircraft barrages and bombing raids on Germany, were really undertaken to boost home morale. And despite Chamberlain's crass assumption in 1939 that cinemas and radio would have to be closed down for the duration (which certainly tells us something about elite attitudes in the late 1930s), the government quickly reached a sensibly permissive attitude to the small pleasures of life – Churchill himself intervening to ensure a reliable supply of cut flowers. Other measures addressed the issue of fairness, so that those who made the sacrifices were cushioned as much as possible against the impact of scarcity, and the rich were not able to buy themselves out of the tribulations of war. The realisation that small, ordinary comforts, and the mundane playground principle of fairness were more important from day-to-day than national pride or grand principles was an important stage in the wartime education of officialdom. As to whether it helped to win the war, we can only assume, like them, that it did.

Finally, the book discusses the impact of 'Beveridge and all that': the promise of post-war reconstruction and no return to the Thirties that gathered strength after 1941, culminating, arguably, in the election result of 1945. Steven Fielding has argued that the war left people disengaged and cynical about politics, but even he does not deny the popular support for the Beveridge Report and the desire for its implementation after the war. More importantly, people believed it would be implemented. While in 1941, people were generally pessimistic about the post-war future, by 1943, as both Gallup and MO discovered, they were firmly expecting improvement, in the shape of more state intervention and better social services; this seemed to be justified, not just by what politicians had said, but by what the wartime coalition had actually done in terms of welfare provision. Whether the 1945 vote was pro-Labour or simply anti-Conservative, no one seems to doubt that it was pro-Beveridge. Mackay argues that the solid, and justified, expectation of post-war improvement, by contrast with the pessimism of the 1930s, was a major influence in maintaining people's commitment to the war effort.

So, the overall wartime picture is of a population less anxious and panicked, more stable and committed, than anyone had anticipated in 1939. The war may indeed have developed the consciousness of the British people, but it was even more of an education for the British elite. At its outset, not knowing what to expect, they had expected the worst. As the conflict drew on, they learned that war would not shatter the fabric of

civilisation, that ordinary people were just as committed to preserving that fabric as they were. Here, Churchill's romantic nationalism and Priestley's leftist populism came together: they both thought one could trust the people, while Chamberlain did not, and even Orwell had had his doubts. From another standpoint, one could say that the imposed dominance of the 1930s, when people were expected to put up with what they got, was replaced by an expansive hegemony in which people had been won over to active participation in the serious and costly project of winning the war. Explanations of how this happened, as Robert Mackay acknowledges, are not simple, and in the end he falls back on a fairly familiar list of factors, public and private, but all 'operating within a mental framework of common identity and shared destiny' – the 'invisible chain' which Orwell said bound the nation together.

And invisible chains are surely what it is all about. Addison was not far wrong in his scepticism about 'civilian morale'. 'Morale', after all, was a term invented to apply to soldiers. But soldiers on active service are bound together by training, military discipline and hierarchy, and a group life apart from the rest of society. How do we apply the same concept to the immensely varied and unstructured, indeed virtually unknown, mass of the civilian population, held together, if at all, by altogether different forces? Orwell was on the right lines when he tried, in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1941), to explain wartime solidarity in terms that went beyond the war itself and into the roots of British culture. The very term 'civilian morale' is itself a cultural artefact, the product of unspoken beliefs, which serves to organise our thinking in certain ways rather than others. It identifies wartime as being a different form of social existence, in which we speak of civilians with the same language we normally apply to soldiers. But it is also the product of a psychological theory and a political culture. To win the war, the state needed people to behave in certain ways; to do certain things (working hard, volunteering, cooperating) which would help the war effort; and to avoid doing others (looting, rioting, fleeing) which would hinder it. 'Civilian morale' proposes that these behaviours arise from a state of mind, and that the best way to influence the behaviour is to address that state of mind. This view is, of course, part of an overall conception of the self, but it is also profoundly shaped by the values of a particular culture. Some states, it implies, may be able to coerce people into behaving as they wish, but in a democracy, if you don't win hearts and minds for a big project like the Second World War, then you have already failed. The popular mentality is not simply a means to an end: it is in a way what is being fought for. Hence, the war has to be defined, not as an elite, 'king and country' project in which the populace dutifully play their part, but as one which is wholeheartedly shared by all: as much Nella Last's war as Winston Churchill's.

This book gives a broad and convincing picture of the attitudes and behaviour of the British people at war, and to my mind it effectively rebuts the single-minded pessimism which some find seductive (though perhaps this is my post-'45 romanticism speaking). But at the same time it suffers from a certain narrowness of focus, which is often the case when well-established issues and debates are being addressed. Perhaps we need to break out of the framework set by these issues and debates. To discuss wartime civilian morale is really to discuss the mentality (dare one say *mentalité*?) of a particular population at a particular time: the unspoken shared beliefs and attitudes – if any – which unite (or divide) them. This indicates the need to set the war within a much broader chronological and conceptual framework of British cultural history. We also need a broader geographical context. One of the surprising aspects of this book, and other studies of British civilian morale, is that they rarely draw on studies of the only comparable population to undergo comparable experiences, which is, of course, Germany. How did German civilian morale differ from the British, and why? Only with a comparative approach can we start to identify what specific characteristics of British culture may have given rise to this particular set of responses, and only with a broader timeframe can we set them within the context of the development of British culture as a whole. The mentality of wartime is too important for its study to be confined to the six years when the war was actually going on. But then, it is easier to say these things than to do them.

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