

CHAPTER 2

The Emerging Terror

Introduction

In his poem *Locksley Hall*, written during the 1830s, the decade that Queen Victoria came to the throne, Alfred Lord Tennyson imagined the apocalyptic and sublime power of mass human flight. His ‘Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be’ conjured up a spectral images of the heavens filled with commercial vessels, ‘argosies of magic sails,’ and of celestial conflict between ‘the nation’s airy navies.’⁹ The poet was writing during the second phase of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The railway network was beginning to burgeon across the land, speeding up travel time

How to cite this book chapter:

Clapson, M. 2019. *The Blitz Companion*. Pp. 13–35. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book26.b>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

and bringing once isolated cities and regions into the national infrastructure. Tennyson lived from 1809 to 1892, a lifespan that encompassed the American Civil War of 1860–5 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. The Civil War involved not only armies and navies of the Union and the Confederacy but the societies of the Northern and Southern states of the USA. Arguably the first modern, industrialised total war in which civilians were mobilised or dragged into conflict, the Civil War also saw the military use of manned air balloons to spy from above on enemy positions.¹⁰ During the Siege of Paris in 1871, air balloons were deployed by the French for communications and propaganda purposes.¹¹ These conflicts marked the tentative beginnings of airborne vessels in modern warfare. Floating gracefully through the air, balloons were used as tools for disseminating propaganda, unwittingly anticipating the leaflet drops during twentieth-century wars.

Article 25 of The Hague Convention in 1899 on the Laws and Customs of War on Land stated unequivocally that ‘The attack or bombardment of towns, villages, habitations or buildings which are not defended, is prohibited.’ Article 27 was also explicit about the limitations of offensive military assaults:

In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps should be taken to spare as far as possible edifices devoted to religion, art, science, and charity, hospitals, and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not used at the same time for military purposes.

Articles 22 to 28 of the Hague Convention of 1907 made similar strictures about public buildings, arguing that the rights of belligerents to attack the enemy were not unlimited, and prohibiting the bombardment of undefended cities, towns and villages. (The articles are widely available online).

These conventions were drawn up on the eve of aerial warfare during the twentieth century. Civilians had long been casualties of war, or course, as captives, victims of killing, execution and rape, or seen as figures in landscapes torn apart by conventional warfare. Now however they would become directly targeted from the air. During the twentieth century the Hague Conventions were subsequently updated to address the laws and customs of war from the air, and the United Nations Conventions or ‘Geneva Conventions’ after the Second World War also addressed the problem of minimising civilian casualties. But mass aerial bombardment rendered these stipulations somewhat meaningless: fine words on paper, but easily ignored or negotiated around by belligerent powers seeking to destroy the enemy from the skies.

Fear of the Bomb

Anxiety about the potential of bombing from the air emerged even before mechanised flight was invented, as *Locksley Hall* illustrates. Writers alive to the wonderful opportunities offered by speedier air travel also grasped that air power possessed a hitherto unknown destructive potential. The British science fiction writer H.G. Wells is best known for *War of the Worlds* (1911), an apocalyptic novel about interplanetary aerial conflict which has been made into a number of films. But before hostile aerial bombardment had even happened, Wells wrote *War in the Air* (1908). Portraying mass catastrophe caused by air raids in an industrialised world war, one scene from the novel looked down from a dirigible, an airship, during an air raid on New York:

He clung to the frame of the porthole as the airship tossed and swayed, and stared down through the light rain that

now drove before the wind, into the twilight streets, watching people running out of the houses, watching buildings collapse and fires begin. As the airships sailed along they smashed up the city as a child will shatter its cities of brick and card. Below, they left ruins and blazing conflagrations and heaped and scattered dead; men, women, and children mixed together as though they had been no more than Moors, or Zulus, or Chinese. Lower New York was soon a furnace of crimson flames, from which there was no escape. Cars, railways, ferries, all had ceased, and never a light lit the way of the distracted fugitives in that dusky confusion but the light of burning. He had glimpses of what it must mean to be down there—glimpses. And it came to him suddenly as an incredible discovery, that such disasters were not only possible now in this strange, gigantic, foreign New York, but also in London—in Bun Hill! that the little island in the silver seas was at the end of its immunity, that nowhere in the world any more was there a place left where a Smallways might lift his head proudly and vote for war and a spirited foreign policy, and go secure from such horrible things.¹²

War was no longer somewhere else or far away. Emphasising that modern war, total war, would be ‘everywhere’, all-encompassing, unavoidable, almost morally and practically unable to differentiate between belligerents and the ‘quiet people’, Wells waxed upon feminine vulnerability to force home his point:

There is no place where a woman and her daughter can hide and be at peace. The war comes through the air, bombs drop in the night. Quiet people go out in the morning, and see air fleets passing overhead – dripping death – dripping death!¹³

During the First World War of 1914–18, however, the spectre of large grey airships dropping death from the city skies and of

biplanes coming in to drop bombs on familiar areas of the city, lent war this fearful new dimension, revealing the realities of mass aerial warfare on civilians for the first time.

The First World War and the New Realities of Air Warfare

Those bespoke bombs dropped onto Libya in 1911 and the subsequent Bulgarian innovation were the flimsiest of historical dress rehearsals for what would occur during the rest of the century. The war from 1914–18, however, more fully defined the nature and implications of aerial warfare for civilians. The first bombs to be unleashed came from Germany on Belgium, France and Britain. Minor raids in 1914 were followed by the first so-called ‘strategic bombing campaigns’ by Germany from 1915. As Richard Overy argues, there is no singular or clear definition of strategic bombing. It was first used during the First World War to mean long-range bombing behind enemy lines. It can also mean bombing to assist ground forces, the precision targeting of military or industrial installations, or the more generalised carpet bombing of cities and towns in order to degrade infrastructure, destroy key targets and weaken the ability of a nation to wage war, irrespective of ground forces.¹⁴

During the First World War, German bombing missions over England were aimed at military installations, factories and munitions works, and naval activities in ports. Hence Hull and Whitby in north-east England, and the smaller seaside towns of Great Yarmouth, King’s Lynn and Sheringham in Norfolk, were attacked for their mercantile connections, but also because they were on the East Coast, and easier for the zeppelins to reach. Birmingham was attacked, although the zeppelins failed to reach targets



Figure 1: The Zeppelin Building, Farringdon, East-Central London (photograph by author, 2017).

further west. London was an obvious objective for the Germans, however. The air raids in the First World War drew an early pattern of incursion and destruction that would be more widely replicated in the Second World War. Among the first areas of London

to be hit were the docks along the banks of the River Thames in East London, and adjacent urban areas. Over the course of the First World War zeppelins raided or attempted raids on Deptford, Greenwich, Hackney, the Isle of Dogs, New Cross, Rotherhithe and Stepney. Towns in the hinterland of London, in the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire and Kent were also attacked.¹⁵

The air raids on London provided early clues to the behaviour and morale of urban populations under the bomb. As Philip Ziegler argues, when a nightly air raid on East London was imminent, many East Londoners trekked to the relatively safer areas of West London. Many others took shelter in the London Underground tube stations, huddling together on the platforms as the bombs fell above.¹⁶ Others experienced feelings of anxiety, and one 'terrified housewife' committed suicide. By contrast, children were openly thrilled by the spectre of airships coming across the sky. Anger and shock at the casualties and deaths caused by these unprecedented attacks on British cities rarely led to mass panic, moreover.¹⁷ As Susan Grayzel argues, such behaviour anticipated patterns of coping and of self-protection in later wars.¹⁸

Newspapers reported not only on the air raids but also speculated on the potential changes to everyday life in the event of war from the air. Yet the subject, fearful in itself, also led to humorous and satirical observations. The cartoonist W.K. Haselden, for example, drew an amusing but also insightful portrait of life 'if air raids become a daily occurrence.'¹⁹ While the cartoon is not intended to be an accurate anticipation of the changed contexts of everyday life during air raids, the illustration uncannily hints at some innovations that would be introduced in time for the air raids of the Second World War. Instead of the narrow windows of the house, blackout and storm-proofed curtains were used. The motor car would see its headlamps dipped or turned off, while

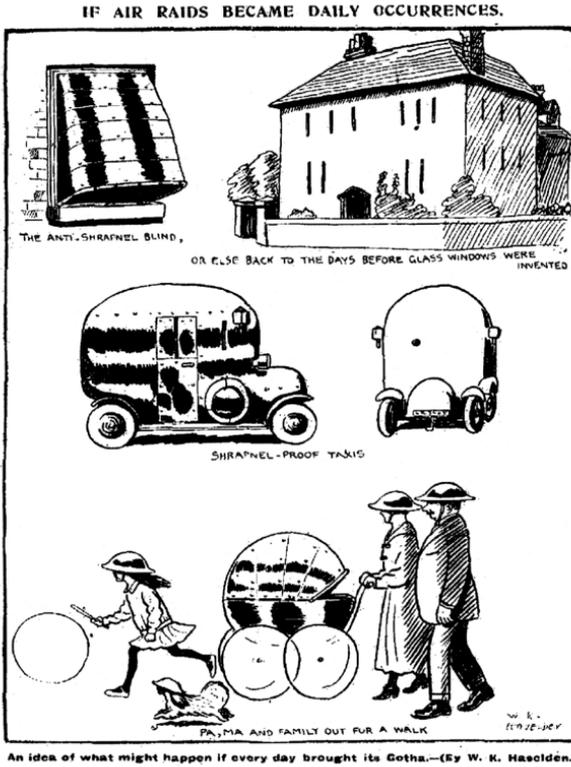


Figure 2: ‘If air raids become daily occurrences’, W.K. Haselden cartoon, *Daily Mirror*, © Mirrorpix.

the cartoon hints at armoured cars for military personnel operating in civilian areas. Protective headwear would indeed be worn by voluntary emergency workers and air raid wardens, and while armoured prams did not materialise, Mickey Mouse gas masks would be introduced for children, for example, alongside normal masks for adults.²⁰

If popular culture made light of the implications of total war, highbrow writers made more serious observations. In the years following the First World War, intellectuals grappled with its

terrible legacy, encapsulated in the modern spectre of air power. The American-born poet T.S. Eliot had been deeply unsettled by the impact of the war. In *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, and written while he was living in London, a much-debated stanza entitled 'What the Thunder Said' begins with a rhetorical question 'What is that sound high in the air'. The poem goes on to evoke a cracked ancient earth, and the 'falling towers' in such historic cities as Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna and London: 'unreal'.²¹ Ancient European cities, bastions of civilisations, are now 'cracked and reformed' in a historically instantaneous moment delivered by modern technology. Furthermore, the sound high in the air and the murmur of maternal lamentation might be viewed as the fear of a mother for her children as the bombers emerge over the far flung landscape, causing the people to flee.

The Waste Land was published almost four years after the Armistice of 1918 and represents an inchoate grasp or fear of the power of airborne destruction. A fuller understanding of the impact of air raids, and of the need to prepare for them in the future, began during the First World War, and continued, albeit in fits and starts, during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1917 the London Air Defence Area (LADA) was established to improve the coordination of British fighter planes when defending the metropolis. And in 1918 the formation of the Royal Air Force (RAF) marked the ascendancy of the national air force within the military capacity of Britain. In 1920, in Iraq, the British developed a policy of using the RAF to police the skies above Mesopotamia. The Minister of War and Air, Winston Churchill, and the Chief of the Air Staff Sir Hugh Trenchard, argued that air power could be deployed to support ground forces, to hit relatively remote targets, and to distribute propaganda.²²

Other countries invested in modern combat air fleets. The United States had created the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in 1917 when America joined the Allies. The French Air Force, first formed in 1909, was expanded to counter a possible German threat following the Treaty of Versailles. In Italy the *Regia Aeronautica*, or Italian Royal Air Force, was established in 1923, the year after Benito Mussolini seized power. The German Air Force, curtailed following 1919, was reborn as the Luftwaffe in Nazi Germany in 1935. That event accelerated air raid precautions, or civil defence, that had been ongoing in Britain since the 1920s. Other countries also began to assemble air defence measures.

Fear of the Bomb and Preparations for Aerial Warfare, 1918–39

In 1924, a new sub-committee on air raid precautions was added to the functions of the Committee of Imperial Defence in Britain. First formed in 1902, following the ignominious military performance of the British Empire during the Boer War, the Committee for Imperial Defence now began, slowly, to confront the realities of air war for civilian populations. The Chair of the sub-committee was Sir John Anderson, ‘an enormously able but uninspiring public servant’ whose deliberations and preparations established the civil defence apparatus prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.²³

The impact of air raids on innocent civilians during the First World War, and the growing awareness of the terrible potential of bombing in future wars, demonstrated what historians have labelled ‘air-mindedness’ after 1918.²⁴ This was evident in the new conceptual understandings of air power in the writings of military leaders notably the Italian Giulio Douhet and the

American Brigadier William ‘Billy’ Mitchell, ‘the most important advocates of assault on the heart of a nation by self-contained, self-defending bomber formations.’²⁵ In Britain, Captain Basil Liddell Hart, Colonel J.F.C. Fuller and Sir Hugh Trenchard were leading proponents of strategic bombing offensives against enemy nations.²⁶ In sharp relief, heavy bombing could deliver a knock out blow, rendering civilian populations paralysed, and disrupting or destroying ground targets to allow for successful invasion by land forces. In their study of Liverpool’s preparations for air raids, Peter Adey et al. stress the importance of interdependency in Air Raid Precautions (ARP). An attack on one element of the urban infrastructure could have calamitous knock-on effects in a modern state; so joined-up thinking was entirely necessary for holistic preparation for air raids.²⁷

The global threat of air power led to international attempts to limit the potential effect of aerial bombardment on civilian populations as far as possible. Article XXIV of *The Hague Rules of Air Warfare*, drawn up in late 1922 (widely available online), was clear that aerial bombardment was legitimate only when directed at a military objective to military advantage; when directed solely at military forces and establishments; and at factories and other centres manufacturing weapons or ammunition. Any bombardment of human settlements beyond the operations of land forces is prohibited, along with the indiscriminate bombardment of the civilian population. Yet the caveats were fluid, to say the least:

In the immediate neighbourhood of the operations of land forces, the bombardment of cities, towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings is legitimate provided that there exists a reasonable presumption that the military concentration is sufficiently important to justify such

bombardment, having regard to the danger thus caused to the civilian population.

One of the most important consciousness-raising attempts by politicians about the terrible realities of air warfare came in the speech by the Conservative leader Sir Stanley Baldwin to the House of Commons in 1932. Baldwin had been Conservative Prime Minister from 1924–9, and traded on his reputation as a dependable and trustworthy leader. His words had gravitas, and he did not mince them. Highlighting the rapid improvements in flight technology, and speedier and more powerful bomber planes, Baldwin pointed out that no town was safe: ‘The question is: whose morale will be shattered quickest by that preliminary bombing?’

Baldwin was content to ram home his point that rapidly evolving aircraft technology was a threat in and of itself:

I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. *The bomber will always get through.* [Take] any large town you like on this island or on the Continent within reach of an aerodrome. For the defence of that town and its suburbs you have to split up the air into sectors for defence. Calculate that the bombing aeroplanes will be at least 20,000 feet high in the air, and perhaps higher, and it is a matter of mathematical calculation that you will have sectors of from 10 to hundreds of cubic miles.²⁸

The famous warning that ‘the bomber will always get through’ was accompanied by the latest military thinking about the need for sectors of air defence to calibrate as far as possible the number and trajectory of incoming enemy planes, and to facilitate the

most efficient defence system, albeit within highly difficult circumstances. The point about suburbs is often ignored by historians, but it is a reminder that while the town and city centres offered higher densities of population and infrastructure to the invader, outlying areas were also vulnerable despite their more residential character. Between the wars, British cities had witnessed extensive suburbanisation. The social consequences of this were a broad segregation of the classes into mostly working-class inner-urban areas, and suburban working-class council estates. The middle classes increasingly settled in private owner-occupied suburbia.²⁹ The spatial consequences were visible in the much-detested sprawl of the cityscape, and the mass arrival of the semi-detached house along the new roads that spread out into the countryside from the town and city centres. When the poet John Betjeman wrote in his 1938 poem *Slough* 'come friendly bombs and fall on Slough, it isn't fit for humans now' he was only half-joking.³⁰ He hated the new suburban settlements around London, and had clearly understood the new realities of air power. He was air-minded.

Baldwin continued with the most chilling passage of all, warning that 'the only defence is in offence, which means that *you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves*'.³¹ This was to be the reality of the next war, he correctly predicted.³² Like H.G. Wells before him, Baldwin emphasised the shocking scenario of killing women and children. In essence, because the bomber would always get through, the awful lesson was that the defending nation would feel compelled to violate the principles laid down in the Hague Conventions on Air Warfare. Baldwin's seemingly heartless words must, however, be viewed with the context of the disarmament

debates that were taking place in Britain and across the world. Just two years later, however, Baldwin made another famous speech in which he moved toward rearmament. By then, Nazi power in Germany had been brutally entrenched, and Germany had pulled out of the Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, as early as November 1933.³³ Baldwin pledged that the National Government would ensure that British air power ‘shall no longer be in a position inferior to any country within striking distance of its shores’, and he went on to issue an almost subliminal message to Germany:

When you think of the defence of England you no longer think of the chalk cliffs of Dover, you think of the Rhine. That is where our Frontier lies.³⁴

The National Government initiated an expansion of the RAF from 1934. It was opposed by the Labour and Liberal parties because it might accentuate the interwar arms race.³⁵ Another prominent conservative politician, Winston Churchill, was however growing increasingly fearful of air warfare. He was keenly aware of the main problems and consequences inherent in indiscriminate bombing, arguing to an American audience in 1934 that ‘air bombing of the non-combatant population for the purposes of slaughter’ would upset public opinion and alienate allies. He also raised what Michael Sherry has termed the ‘overlooked question’ of how a civilian population under heavy bombardment, who wished to surrender could make their will known to the enemy above.³⁶ Speaking to the House of Commons on 30 July 1934, in a debate on German rearmament, Churchill also warned that London was going to be a potential target for aerial bombing. ‘With our enormous metropolis here’:

the greatest target in the world, a kind of tremendous, fat, valuable cow tied up to attract the beast of prey, we are in a position in which we have never been before, and in which no other country in the world is in at the present time.³⁷

Although London was the largest city in Europe during the 1930s, industrialisation and urbanisation had created large cities and towns across Western Europe, Soviet Russia and North America. Yet in another context Churchill was unwittingly correct: interwar suburbanisation was at its most extensive in England, and English cities lay prone and sprawling beneath the dangerous skies.³⁸

In 1934 the League of Nations called for an international process of disarmament, a call enthusiastically supported by the various pacifist groups in interwar Britain, both religious and secular. The No More War Movement, the Quaker Friends Peace Committee, the Labour League of Youth and the Peace Pledge Union were among the leading pacifist organisations that understood the growing threat of air power, and the increased vulnerability of civilian populations to mass death and destruction. Marches and demonstrations, and signing the petition or 'pledge' to end wars were increasingly prominent during the mid-1930s, although pacifism remained a marginal cause.³⁹

Such efforts were to no avail, however. In 1935 Adolf Hitler announced the Luftwaffe to the world. Despite the Treaty of Versailles, German air power would become a major element in Nazi rearmament and military production. New fighter planes were introduced. In Britain, a new Air Raids Precautions Department was created in April 1935 in a timely response to the militarisation of Nazi foreign policy. In the same year the German *Reichsluftschutzbund* (Reich Air Protection League) issued a

poster of Herman Goering stating 'Air defence fighters have as much responsibility and as much honour as every soldier at the Front'. As Overy argues, civil defence under the Nazi regime was more militarised in character than British ARP. A greater pressure to participate in the collective defence of the Fatherland led to over 15 million Germans participating in the *Reichsluftschutzbund* by 1939, and 22 million by 1941. That was over a quarter of the German population.⁴⁰

From Predictions to Realities: Air Raids in Spain and China

The second half of the 1930s witnessed a number of horrifying air raids, brutal evidence of the terrors to come. The Spanish Civil War from 1936–8 initiated the era of fascist air raids against civilian populations in Europe. German pilots were to gain their first combat experience as the Luftwaffe now put its theories of air attack into practice.⁴¹ At the behest of the Falange leader General Franco, on 26 April 1937, the Luftwaffe bombed communist Republican forces in the Basque town of Guernica in Northern Spain. About a thousand civilians were killed. Guernica was an important moment in the growing international awareness of air warfare. During the 1930s the British public had been receiving many serious warnings about the growing importance of air warfare, alongside many novels of varying quality about the terrible nature and consequences of future air raids during war. For example, the film *Things to Come* (1936) directed by Alexander Korda and based upon the novel by H.G. Wells, depicted bleak representations of modern air warfare, as the wireless, blaring air raid sirens and barking megaphones announce the disruption and

destruction of urban and suburban life. The air raids on Guernica were real, though, and marked a turning point in Britain's fear of the bomber, as the public now reluctantly accepted the certainties of air warfare.⁴² This realisation was compounded by the raids conducted by the Royal Italian Air Force on Barcelona in March 1938.⁴³

The threat of modern air warfare was not confined to Europe. The Japanese air raids on Chinese cities from July 1937 ran parallel to this new understanding, and were accompanied by more extreme reminders of the horrors of conflict. The Second Sino-Japanese War began when Japanese fighter planes engaged in skirmishes with the Chinese forces. The Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) was unable to resist air penetration, and the Japanese relied heavily upon the bombing of towns and cities, attacking both military and civilian targets from September to early December. The air raids devastated many smaller towns but also larger cities, notably the then capital of China, Nanking, leading to a mass exodus of people from the city that more than halved its population. Widespread international condemnation of the bombing was reflected in the British weekly magazine *The Spectator*:

The protests made by the British, American and other Governments had as their background far more vehement outbursts of public opinion. In this country *The Times* promptly opened its columns to a correspondence in which such various writers as Sir Francis Acland, the Bishop of Bristol and Mr. J. M. Keynes expressed the growing body of opinion in favour of bringing Britain, the United States and Holland into line, with a view to cutting off trade relations with Japan. *The News Chronicle* has followed suit by organising a national protest

meeting at the Albert Hall, with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the chair.⁴⁴

Being killed by bombs was arguably preferable to the forms of death that were inflicted on the Chinese during the Nanking Massacre. Many thousands of men, women and children, including babies, were murdered with guns and swords, and many sadistic forms of execution were deployed. Rape, looting, arson and torture were commonplace atrocities. Biological warfare was also used against the Chinese.⁴⁵ In total, about 15 million Chinese people lost their lives during the Japanese occupation, which finally ended with the entry into China of Soviet Russia in the late summer of 1945, and with the devastation caused by the bomb.⁴⁶

The American President Franklin D. Roosevelt was shocked and angered by the air raids in the latter 1930s, denouncing the bombing in words which have been returned to since by critics of American post-war bombing campaigns:

The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centres of population during the course of hostilities which have raged in various quarters of the earth during the past few years, which has resulted in the maiming and in the deaths of thousands of defenceless men women and children has sickened the hearts of every civilised man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the consciousness of humanity.⁴⁷

In Britain, the enigmatic J.B.S. Haldane, the Anglo-Indian geneticist, and an avowed communist, warned a crowd at Trafalgar Square that 'half a dozen aeroplanes could pulp them in a few minutes'.⁴⁸ He also argued that the sinister alignment of Germany, Italy and Japan was leading to the sharing of ill-gotten intelligence

from their air raids. Haldane was by no means alone in such fears. Politicians of the Left and Right, national newspaper leader columnists and many other writers called for practical anti-aircraft and civil defence measures, and citizen awareness and training schemes, to be put into place in London and across the country.⁴⁹

In 1937 the Air Raid Precautions Act received royal assent, creating the civil defence apparatus that would be reinforced by the Civil Defence Act 1939, and mobilised on the eve of war in September 1939.⁵⁰ The air attacks on Spain and China occurred during the gathering crisis between Czechoslovakia and Germany, and the Munich debacle in September 1938. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler repeatedly negotiated over German plans to annex the Sudetenland, leading to heightened fears across Europe and in Britain that the Nazis might land a knock out blow. Over 150,000 Londoners left the capital in the autumn of 1938 in a kind of historical dress rehearsal of wartime evacuation. Thirty eight million gas masks were distributed, and trenches were dug in the Royal Parks of London. As Chamberlain argued in a BBC broadcast on 27 September 1938:

How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing.⁵¹

For reasons which were not crystal clear to them, the British people were increasingly compelled to engage in air raid precautions. The final years of the 1930s witnessed an intensification of ARP in Britain that mirrored preparations in other European countries. As Lucy Noakes argues, the ARP Act of 1937 ‘marked a significant shift in the relationship of the civilian citizen to the wartime state’ as people were encouraged to take up defensive responsibilities,

which of course reflected contemporary gendered ideas of masculinity and femininity.⁵² The government issued posters and advertisements calling for both male and female volunteers to join up as ARP wardens, men to sign up as volunteer fire fighters and women as auxiliary nurses. The blackout was enforced in 1939, so that homes had to hide their interior lights to the outside world, and cars had to drive with dipped or no headlights, lest the enemy above sighted the city below. The years leading up to the war also witnessed a significant increase in social capital, in the commitment of individuals to volunteer their time and effort for the good of community and country. Yet although the British public were increasingly being prepped for total warfare and air raids, many commentators remarked upon the apathy of large swathes of the British public towards Air Raids Precautions, an indifference that continued to a degree even into the war itself.⁵³

Evacuation: A Case Study in London

The declaration of war on Germany by Chamberlain on 3 September 1939 was preceded by a mass evacuation of children from London and other large cities. Over four thousand children went overseas, but most were moved elsewhere in Britain to so-called 'reception towns' in safe areas away from bombing routes. In all over 3.5 million people, most of them children, were dispersed from the largest cities.⁵⁴ From 1–2 September already rehearsed plans for evacuation were put into place across the country. Local authorities were responsible for organising this mass movement, coordinated from schools and other places of education.⁵⁵

The experiences of young men and women at the Regent Street Polytechnic (now the University of Westminster) in the heart

of London provide a fascinating case study of evacuation, and glimpses into the everyday perceptions of evacuees. The auxiliary Secondary School and Craft Schools at the Poly, located in other sites close to the base at Regent Street, provided occupational training and apprenticeships for children and teenagers. A breezy report in the *Polytechnic Magazine* for September 1940 on the evacuation of the Craft Schools was both proud and relieved at the safe removal of children, but it was clear the process was not as straightforward as it could have been:

From various sources, chiefly the wireless, the staff and pupils of the Craft Schools heard that at last it had happened, and that the once hypothetical evacuation was to be carried out. We duly assembled at the Great Portland Street Extension on Friday, September 1st, completely equipped with luggage and gas masks, the boys having been previously well informed as to the amount of luggage, etc., required. The boys were very cheerful and there were obvious signs of disappointment when we learnt from the LCC Evacuation Officer that it would be impossible to move us on that day. We were therefore told to go back home and return on the morrow at the same hour—8.30 a.m. The next day, Saturday, the numbers in our ranks had increased, and we moved off in earnest by bus from Oxford Circus to the Holborn Underground entrance. There were a few mothers to see the boys off, but the partings seemed quite cheerful, and in spite of the serious international situation quite a holiday spirit prevailed. At Holborn we were compelled to wait for some time, and in order to avoid congestion at the railway station we spent this time at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Southampton Row. We eventually entrained for Ealing Broadway, and on arrival, were speedily transferred to the train for ‘somewhere

in England.' We had a comfortable journey with plenty of room and you can imagine our delight when we learned that we were going in the vicinity of the famous Cheddar Gorge and right into the 'Heart of Mendip'. We got out of the train at Cheddar Station, and after waiting some considerable time were conveyed by buses to our destination—Winscombe, a beautiful village nestling at the foot of the Mendip Hills.⁵⁶

A later report on the experiences of the boys and girls coming to terms with life a long way from London, while generally upbeat, admitted that some schooling time was being lost. Young people in country towns or urban areas had more to stimulate them in common with the types of lives they had led in London, while those in small villages or hamlets had to make their own fun, and become more self-reliant, something viewed as a positive consequence of evacuation. The report then made a claim about social class mixing that became a key theme in the so-called 'myth of the Blitz' discussed in the following chapter:

Some of the boys are billeted in palatial homes, whilst others may be living in homes not quite up to the standard of their own, but all are fortunate in having comfortable dwellings with fairly modern conveniences. *This will have the effect of showing how different classes of people live*, and should be invaluable to them in later life, whether or not they become leaders in industry, professional men, or members of the working classes.⁵⁷

Denied a normal full-time education, this was a kind of 'Polytechnic of Life' experience, increasing sensitivities across class divisions, while preparing the young for their future occupational roles in the British class system.

The nationwide evacuation scheme was voluntary, and working-class parents such as those of the young students at the Poly took advantage of the local authority educational schemes and the arrangements offered by the Poly itself. Middle-class parents, by contrast, sent their offspring to live with friends and relatives elsewhere in the country. The lack of compulsion in the evacuation process was symptomatic of the strength of democracy but also an internal weakness. By December 1939 many young people from all across Britain, not only from the Poly, had returned home for Christmas, often to the annoyance and frustration of the authorities who wished to keep them in the relative safety of the reception areas. The so-called 'Phoney War', a distinct lack of military action on the Home Front, explained why many people wanted to go back home.⁵⁸ So too, of course, did homesickness and a longing to be with family and friends in the old neighbourhood. During the early months of 1940 many evacuees trickled back home. It would take the sea-borne heroics at Dunkirk in May, and the Battle of Britain in the spring and summer of 1940, to shake them out of their complacency.

Conclusion

Whatever the context – prediction, preparation or reality – the onset of air warfare cast a dark shadow over the interwar years. As Overy argues, the 'voyage of the death ship' captivated and exercised elite writers, brought images of carnage and destruction into popular culture, and caused politicians, both local and national, to assemble air raid precautions as war loomed. The bombing of Spain in 1937, notably, was a lightning rod of realisation. Left-wing activists denounced the atrocity in demonstrations and

writings, pacifists were re-energised in their hatred of warfare, while thousands of Basque children were evacuated to Britain, and elsewhere.⁵⁹ This was the compelling harshness of air raids: a local catastrophe would inevitably have significant international consequences. Those young boys and girls from northern Spain or at the Regent Street Polytechnic threw into relief the disturbances and distortions that would affect everybody, in Britain and across the world, once war broke out in 1939.