

## About British Online Archives

British Online Archives (BOA) is one of the UK's leading academic publishers and online repositories. Hosting over five million records, carefully sourced from private and public archives, such as The National Archives (UK) and British Library, our primary source collections cover over 500 years of world history.

They boast extensive documentation from across the globe, providing invaluable source material for students and researchers working within a range of scholarly disciplines, including history, politics, sociology, and international relations. Our unique digital collections offer insights into global historical events and trends, typically through a British lens. They serve to broaden our understanding of history, and help us to make sense of contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes.

### Related Collections:

Our primary source collections are organised thematically so as to enhance user experience and boost discoverability. Via careful reflection on our archival holdings, and in dialogue with scholars, we have grouped our collections under eleven key historical themes.

*Britain Under Threat: Civil Defence in the Era of Total War, 1914–1989*, falls under the broad themes of “War, Security, and Intelligence”, “Science and Technology”, and “Media and Communications”. You can explore related collections, such as *British Government Information and Propaganda, 1939–2009*, and *Military Intelligence Files: Land, Sea and Air, 1938–1974*, by scanning the QR code.



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Britain Under Threat: Civil Defence in the Era of Total War,  
1914–1989

## Britain Under Threat: Civil Defence in the Era of Total War, 1914–1989

One of the defining characteristics of total war is the erosion of the distinction between the home front and the frontline. During the twentieth century, when total war reached its zenith, civilians became direct targets and new technologies threatened enormous destruction, not just on the conventional battlefield but in Britain itself. As a result, an entirely new wing of government was brought into being, responsible for civil defence, and tasked with protecting Britain and its citizens from these new and terrifying threats.

Comprising over 100,000 images from hundreds of government files at The National Archives (UK), this collection explores civil defence in Britain from 1914 to 1989. Throughout this period, civil defence took on a broad and diverse definition, encompassing everything from building air raid shelters and distributing gas masks to stockpiling medical supplies and issuing propaganda. As a result, *Britain Under Threat* offers a unique window into many aspects of British life between 1914 and 1989.

The sources shed light on social dynamics, group psychology, design and mass production, concepts of home and family, public relations and propaganda, and government intervention.

The documentation likewise facilitates exploration of discourses of citizenship, fear and other emotional responses, and the history of everyday life. In these ways, and in many others besides, this collection offers a major insight into the changing social, political, cultural, and ethical landscapes of modern Britain.

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*“Britain Under Threat showcases the vital role which civil defence played in the lives of the British people during the turmoil of the twentieth century.”*

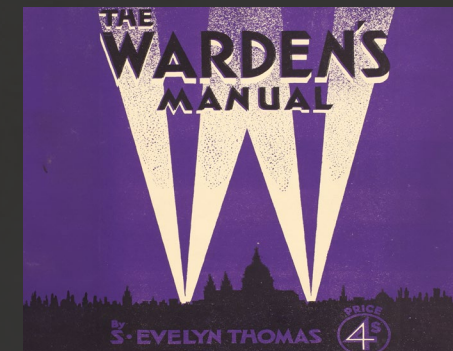
Dr Charlie Hall (University of Kent)



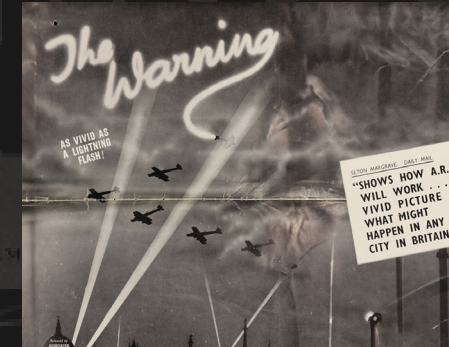
This collection brings together a diverse range of material on civil defence, responsibility for which was often shared among multiple government departments. It is not just official voices which emerge through the files in this collection, however—the experiences and perspectives of ordinary citizens living through extraordinary times can be found throughout.



Civil defence evolved throughout the twentieth century, in the face of new social, technological and strategic challenges. By utilising this collection, students and scholars can chart developments over 75 years.



Key themes include the relationship between the state and its citizens, the changing face of warfare, views on class and gender during times of crisis, and the emotional effects of conflict on civilians.



While the collection is rooted in the social, political, military, and cultural history of Britain, it also offers insights into a wide range of related phenomena, including psychology, sociology, design, even architecture.



Civil defence officials sought to communicate important messages to the public in engaging, clear, and memorable ways. Such propaganda often contributed some of the most enduring images from the period.

Civil defence would have meant very little to the vast majority of the British public before 1914. However, once the First World War broke out, and especially once the threat of aerial attack on British cities was realised, it rapidly became a top priority for government planners and ordinary citizens alike. Later technological developments, such as chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, and the atomic bomb, posed new challenges and prompted new responses. This collection allows users to explore the full range of civil defence measures, from designs for rudimentary First World War gas masks to television messaging about nuclear war in the 1980s.

As this collection shows, civil defence was not a story of unmitigated success. The authorities responsible faced considerable criticism and difficulty, much of which is captured in these files. For example, conditions in many of the public air raid shelters during the Second World War were far from ideal—they were cramped, unsanitary, and lacking in essential facilities. During the Cold War, meanwhile, official messaging around the atomic threat was criticised both for being too alarmist and for downplaying the gravity of the situation.

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Sources include: The National Archives (UK)