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

Teaching Pack

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

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, civil defence took on an increasingly important role in British policy-making and, by extension, in British society. This collection explores the various forms civil defence took—from the distribution of gas masks and the construction of public shelters, to the imposition of a blackout and the recruitment of wardens—and the ways in which it changed in response to the almost constant evolution of the methods and technologies of warfare.

Civil defence initiatives were also shaped by—and in turn, shaped—the political, social, and cultural context of the time, much of which was thrown into flux by the upheaval of war. The documents in this teaching pack explore the ways civil defence grew and shifted from the earliest reactive efforts of the First World War, through the large-scale and intense programme prompted by the Second World War, and into the anxious and uncertain environment of the Cold War.

The activities contained within this teaching pack could easily take around **30–40 minutes**, though the exact duration will depend on reading time and the breadth and depth of accompanying discussion.

Learning Objectives

1. Explore the origins of Britain's civil defence strategy, in the wake of the first air raids on British soil during the First World War.

2. Gain an insight into the realities of sheltering during the Blitz, and what this can tell us about the effects of the Second World War on British society at large.

3. Investigate how developments in military technology shaped approaches to civil defence and how these were presented to the public.

Historical Background and Context

Britain's island geography had long spared its civilians from the worst impacts of warfare, especially during the increasingly brutal conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That all changed, however, with the advent of military aircraft. By the time the First World War broke out in 1914, the towns, cities, and people of the British Isles were very much in the firing line. It rapidly became clear to the government that efforts needed to be made to protect the public—as well as factories, transport links, and military installations at home—if the war effort was to be sustained. This need formed the impetus behind civil defence.

In reality, though, the bombing of Britain during the First World War remained little more than an occasional nuisance, albeit one which was terrifying and dangerous for those in the targeted areas. The interwar years, however, saw great leaps forward in bomber aircraft and many feared the Second World War would be won or lost through the catastrophic bombardment of cities far from the frontline. As a result, civil defence took on an increased importance in Britain and was really pushed to the test during the Blitz of 1940–1941.

Even that ordeal seemed to be dwarfed by the advent of the atomic age. The examples of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed the awesome power that a single bomb could unleash on a major city. As the Cold War escalated, and the atomic bomb was eclipsed in turn by the even more destructive hydrogen bomb, British civil defence authorities had to balance the need to prepare the country for a possible nuclear attack with the bitter reality that such an attack might not even prove survivable.

SOURCE ONE

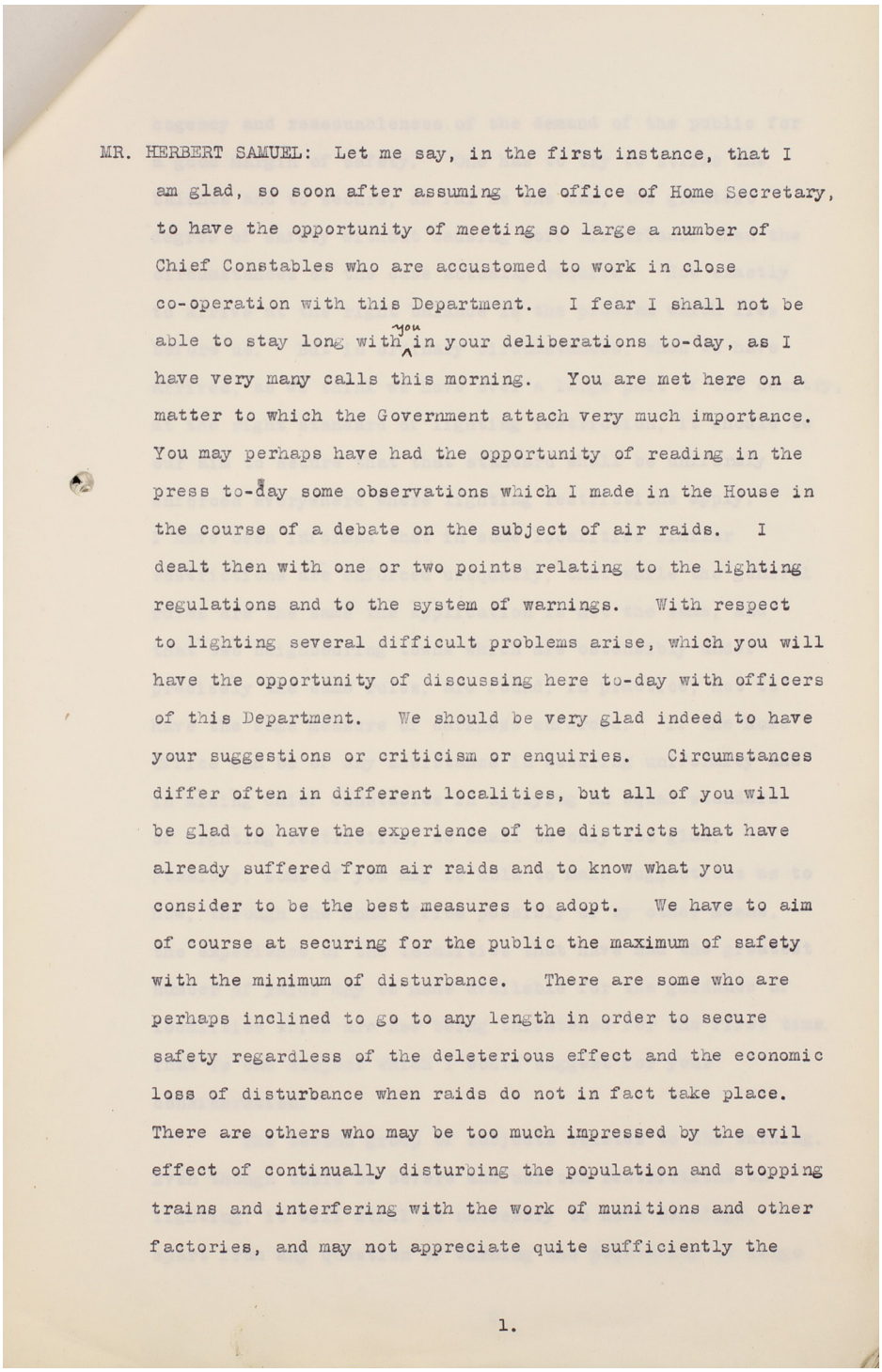
Source Intro

The first air raid on Britain took place in January 1915. The civil defence response which followed was haphazard, inconsistent, and lacking in central coordination. The meeting recorded in this document took place a little over a year later and reflected efforts by the Home Secretary, Sir Herbert Samuel, to rectify this situation by drawing together local expertise on civil defence into a workable national strategy.

Source

"Notes of Deputation of Chief Constables and Telephone Superintendents", 17 February 1916.

HO 45/11193, images 706–709.



MR. HERBERT SAMUEL: Let me say, in the first instance, that I am glad, so soon after assuming the office of Home Secretary, to have the opportunity of meeting so large a number of Chief Constables who are accustomed to work in close co-operation with this Department. I fear I shall not be able to stay long with you in your deliberations to-day, as I have very many calls this morning. You are met here on a matter to which the Government attach very much importance. You may perhaps have had the opportunity of reading in the press to-day some observations which I made in the House in the course of a debate on the subject of air raids. I dealt then with one or two points relating to the lighting regulations and to the system of warnings. With respect to lighting several difficult problems arise, which you will have the opportunity of discussing here to-day with officers of this Department. We should be very glad indeed to have your suggestions or criticism or enquiries. Circumstances differ often in different localities, but all of you will be glad to have the experience of the districts that have already suffered from air raids and to know what you consider to be the best measures to adopt. We have to aim of course at securing for the public the maximum of safety with the minimum of disturbance. There are some who are perhaps inclined to go to any length in order to secure safety regardless of the deleterious effect and the economic loss of disturbance when raids do not in fact take place. There are others who may be too much impressed by the evil effect of continually disturbing the population and stopping trains and interfering with the work of munitions and other factories, and may not appreciate quite sufficiently the

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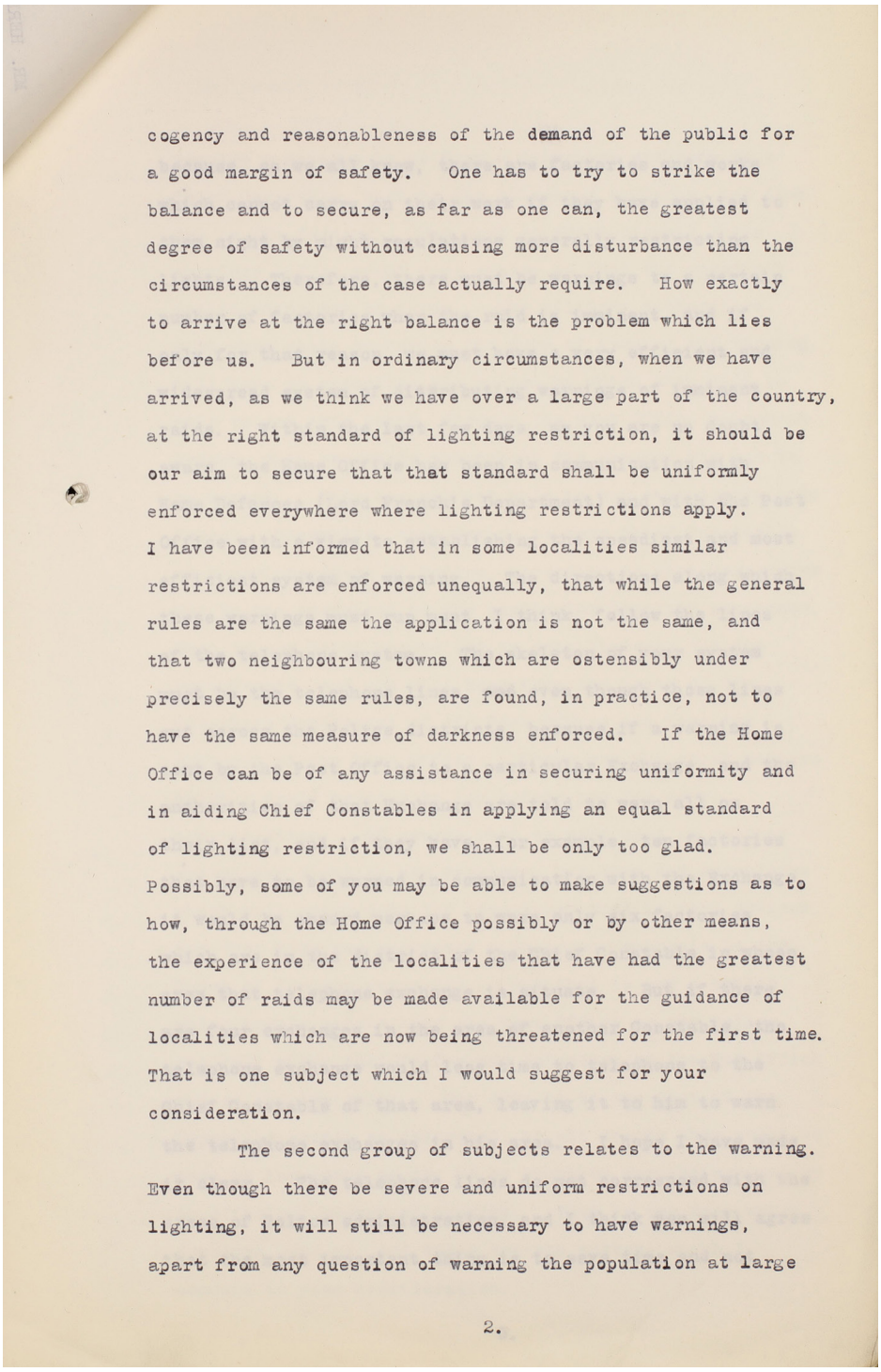

cogency and reasonableness of the demand of the public for a good margin of safety. One has to try to strike the balance and to secure, as far as one can, the greatest degree of safety without causing more disturbance than the circumstances of the case actually require. How exactly to arrive at the right balance is the problem which lies before us. But in ordinary circumstances, when we have arrived, as we think we have over a large part of the country, at the right standard of lighting restriction, it should be our aim to secure that that standard shall be uniformly enforced everywhere where lighting restrictions apply. I have been informed that in some localities similar restrictions are enforced unequally, that while the general rules are the same the application is not the same, and that two neighbouring towns which are ostensibly under precisely the same rules, are found, in practice, not to have the same measure of darkness enforced. If the Home Office can be of any assistance in securing uniformity and in aiding Chief Constables in applying an equal standard of lighting restriction, we shall be only too glad. Possibly, some of you may be able to make suggestions as to how, through the Home Office possibly or by other means, the experience of the localities that have had the greatest number of raids may be made available for the guidance of localities which are now being threatened for the first time. That is one subject which I would suggest for your consideration.

The second group of subjects relates to the warning. Even though there be severe and uniform restrictions on lighting, it will still be necessary to have warnings, apart from any question of warning the population at large

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because, as we all know, there are factories and works which cannot carry on their work if they have applied to them night by night regulations generally restricting lights. Therefore, there must be warnings to a certain number of factories when the raid is imminent, and if only for that reason, we must have a very efficient and widespread system of distributing warnings of imminent raids. Within the last few days, as you are no doubt aware, the Home Office has been in communication with Home Defences (Lord French's Department) and with the Post Office with a view to establishing the speediest and most efficient system of warning. The directions along which these warnings must run must, I think, follow the lines of the telephone system. The skeleton of your system must be the telephone lines, ~~and~~ even though those lines cut across the Police districts, because if a warning is sent by the Post Office to a particular Exchange, and the authorities of that Exchange are told to warn all on their list, and if they have, for example, ten factories that have to be warned in communication with the Exchange, it would be absurd perhaps to warn only six factories which are in the district of the Chief Constable in whose area that telephone exchange is situate. But if there are four exchanges in the area of another Constable, the telephone exchange would lose time to telephone to the Chief Constable of that area, leaving it to him to warn the telephone exchanges in his area. I hope I have made it clear. The telephone lines do not correspond with the areas of Police administration, and I think you will agree that the most important thing is to save time and not

require a message to go from a telephone exchange to a Chief Constable, back to the telephone exchange, and then out to the factory. You want to short-circuit these warnings and to adapt your system so that the speediest notification may be given. The military authorities, with whom rests primarily the duty of issuing the warning, will have to establish the system by which they will be able to get into touch, through the Post Office telephone branch, with everybody throughout the country who has to be warned. They are not yet able to put that system into force. Meanwhile, they desire to warn Chief Constables or Superintendents of Police, according to whatever system may be the speediest in the particular locality concerned. That is now being worked out in detail between the two Departments, and you will hear from the heads of the Telephone Department of the Post Office and from the officers of the Home Office. These are the chief matters which I would venture to lay before you for your consideration. Of course what we want most is neither restricted lighting nor warnings, but guns and aeroplanes which will bring down the Zeppelins; that is very obvious, and that view was expressed with proper emphasis by the House of Commons yesterday. But that is not a matter which humble people like the Home Office or the Police can deal with: that is for our defenders at the War Office and at the Admiralty. Our duty is to see that if the Zeppelins cannot be destroyed, at all events they shall be made as innocuous as may be by lighting regulations and by an efficient system of warning. That is the duty which devolves upon us, and those are the matters which I commend to your consideration.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were the priorities of this early civil defence endeavour and why were they considered of such vital importance?

2. Where did responsibility for civil defence sit during the first half of the First World War and what were the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?

3. How significant was civil defence to the wider British war effort during the First World War?

SOURCE TWO

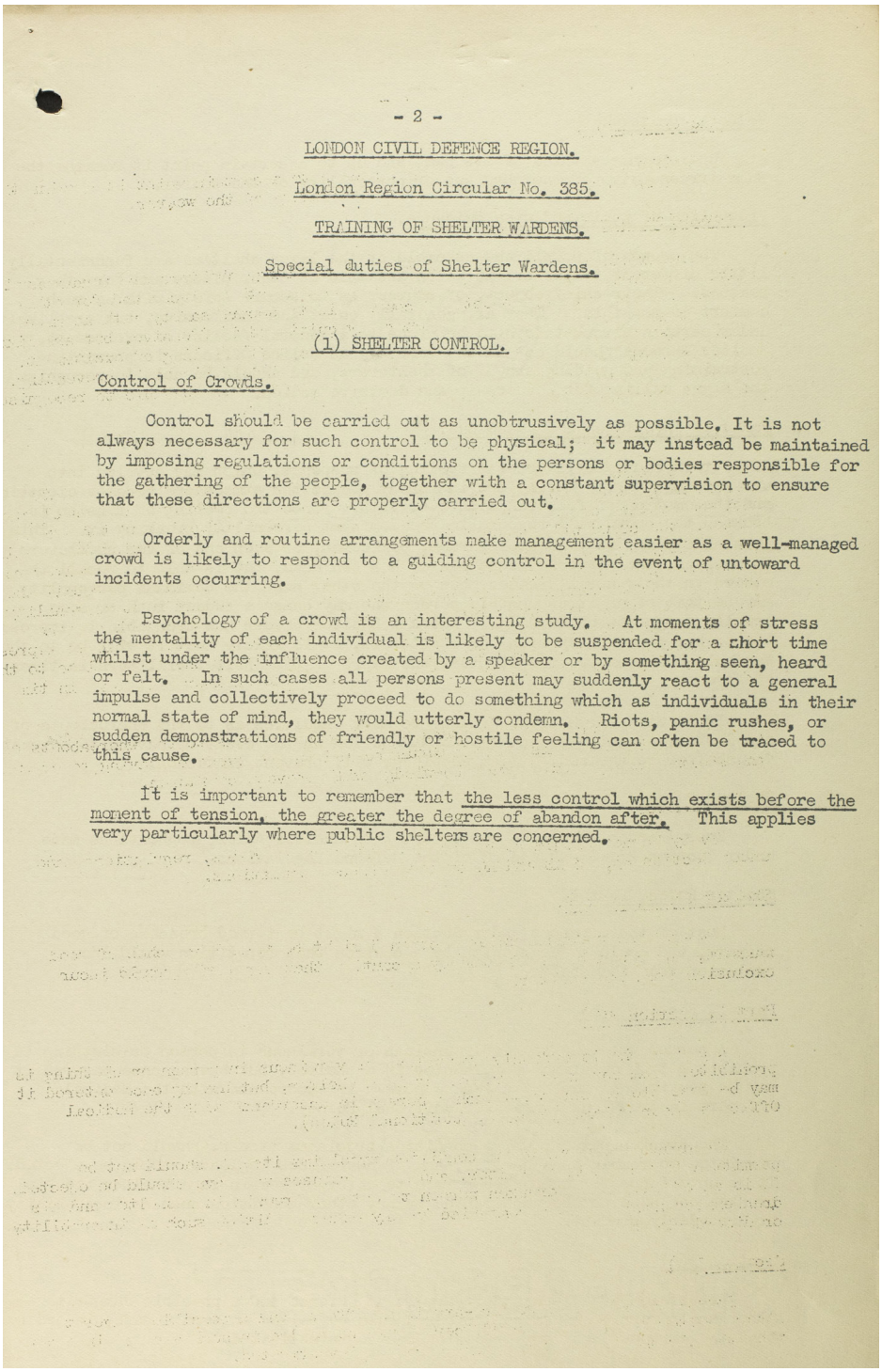
Source Intro

Between September 1940 and May 1941, Britain experienced an almost uninterrupted period of daily or nightly air raids, targeting London and a number of other major cities. This became known as the Blitz. While the government had long feared an attack of this scale, they were still fairly unprepared and the provision of public shelters remained inadequate. Many Londoners, therefore, took matters into their own hands and sought shelter on the Underground. This was initially resisted by the authorities, but they later relented and began to provide facilities for regular overnight shelterers, including the appointment of shelter wardens. This document details some of the training with which these wardens were provided.

Source

"London Civil Defence Region: Instructors' Course for Officers Responsible for Shelters", 1941.

HO 207/386, images 174–179.



LONDON CIVIL DEFENCE REGION.

London Region Circular No. 385.

TRAINING OF SHELTER WARDENS.

Special duties of Shelter Wardens.

(1) SHELTER CONTROL.

Control of Crowds.

Control should be carried out as unobtrusively as possible. It is not always necessary for such control to be physical; it may instead be maintained by imposing regulations or conditions on the persons or bodies responsible for the gathering of the people, together with a constant supervision to ensure that these directions are properly carried out.

Orderly and routine arrangements make management easier as a well-managed crowd is likely to respond to a guiding control in the event of untoward incidents occurring.

Psychology of a crowd is an interesting study. At moments of stress the mentality of each individual is likely to be suspended for a short time whilst under the influence created by a speaker or by something seen, heard or felt. In such cases all persons present may suddenly react to a general impulse and collectively proceed to do something which as individuals in their normal state of mind, they would utterly condemn. Riots, panic rushes, or sudden demonstrations of friendly or hostile feeling can often be traced to this cause.

It is important to remember that the less control which exists before the moment of tension, the greater the degree of abandon after. This applies very particularly where public shelters are concerned.

Value of Uniform.

Uniform has a value of its own, and up to a certain point it remains the same irrespective of the physique or personality of the wearer.

Prevention of panic and wise guidance.

The crowds of people who assemble at the large shelters are fundamentally little different to the crowds which assemble at other places and for other reasons. Their chief object, of course, is to secure safety with as much comfort as possible. They are generally quiet and inoffensive, but are likely under certain circumstances to be prone to a general feeling of excitement. Shelter Wardens should act in the same way as Police Officers in preventing, restraining and guiding crowds of shelterers, and should be able to recognise the signs calling for leadership and decisive action.

Panic is infectious and dangerous.

It is caused by a general feeling of suspense, which may develop into unreasoning fear. During the incipient stages the atmosphere becomes electrical and the emotion of fear can almost be felt. Once the feeling of tension is broken, the crowd will respond to the dominant personality breaking it. This personality may be a Shelter Warden, policeman, or even one of the shelterers themselves, who not only keeps his or her own head, but is able to recall the others to their normal senses, but on the other hand the dominant personality may be that of an irresponsible person who may cause a sudden rush or some equally dangerous proceeding. Where a Shelter Warden has been able to impress his or her personality upon the shelterers, it is likely that it will be to the Warden's dominant personality that the users of the shelter will turn in times of stress.

It is wise for Shelter Wardens to make enquiries as to the whereabouts of the Shelter to which his charges should be led in the event of having to evacuate the shelter being used. Such knowledge will prevent confusion.

Shelter Rules.

Every Warden should be conversant with Shelter Rules, regulations made under Section 23, 23 AB and AC of the Defence Regulations.

Shelter Rules, Part I.

Most of the offences under Section 3 might be termed breaches of good manners, and could be dealt with by a caution that repetition would incur exclusion from the shelter.

Part I, Section 3(b)

A person who is offensively unclean or verminous in person or clothing is prohibited from entering or remaining in a shelter, but having once entered it may be possible to deal with such a person in accordance with the Medical Officer's instructions (Para. 2, Additional Rules).

The drunken person, whose condition proclaims itself, should not be permitted to remain in a shelter, and if he refuses to leave should be ejected. It is an offence for a drunken person to enter or remain in a shelter and his drunkenness need not be accompanied by any other condition such as incapability or disorderly conduct.

Section 3(g)

Possession of a loaded fire-arm is an offence and a possible danger to other shelterers. A Police Officer should be called in such a case, in order that the circumstances of possession can be investigated.

It is wise to take "loading" for granted where the possession of fire-arms in shelters is concerned.

Section 4.

The rules under Section 4 may be relaxed at any shelter as found desirable or necessary and should be the subject of local instructions.

Powers of Arrest.

A Police Officer has powers of arrest without warrant with regard to offences shown under these sections, but his decision as to whether he will arrest or not must be accepted. Penalties for contravention of or failure to comply with the rules under Section 23AB are imprisonment not exceeding three months and/or a fine not exceeding £100 on summary conviction.

Other offences.

There are other offences which may come to the notice of Shelter Wardens; larceny, assaults of various kinds, persistent and serious gambling, and disorderly conduct. These cases all require the attention of a Police Officer, who will know how to deal with them. At the larger shelters and Underground Stations where Police are on the spot, an Officer can be called at once. At smaller shelters the Warden should be instructed to send for Police assistance through the nearest Warden's Post, and the Post should ring up the Police Station direct. The fact that a call made in this manner will be quickly answered should be emphasised, as there have been cases where Wardens have allowed persons using shelters to get the upper hand and by threats and intimidation break rules with impunity. It is obvious that when this kind of thing occurs the Warden has lost all chance of leadership and a sudden emergency would place all the people in the shelter at the mercy of any person who, acting on a selfish impulse, might cause a panic.

Quarrelsome and disorderly persons.

It is not fair for the lives of decent, orderly people using a shelter to be made a misery by quarrelsome and disorderly persons and quick Police action is necessary. It has been found that youths just under army age can cause quite a lot of trouble, and it would not be considered a sign of weakness on the Warden's part to request that a Policeman should occasionally look in at the shelter. Wardens are not always big, powerful looking men who can quell trouble with a glance, and many Shelter Wardens are women, but it is possible to get a good deal carried out if tact and moral suasion are employed. If the Warden feels, however, that his authority is being challenged, and that the trouble must end in a physical clash in which he will be over-borne, he should not risk a scene in which his dignity, safety, and future authority will be imperilled, but send for assistance through the nearest Warden's Post. It is always easier to deal with trouble in the early stages, and thus prevent it becoming serious. This fact should be stressed to all Wardens.

Smaller Shelters.

It is not always possible to select a suitable type of Shelter Warden in the smaller shelters and advantage must perforce be taken of voluntary offers of help received, but much may be done by careful training. Where it is known that the Shelter Wardens cannot be entirely depended upon or where they are new to the job, a request should be made for occasional Police supervision. Prevention is always better than cure and if trouble does develop the Police are bound to come into the picture sooner or later.

There are cases where Shelter Wardens are shop-keepers in a district and, therefore, anxious not to offend their customers who may also be shelterers under their charge, or cases where Shelter Wardens might permit irregularities because the offenders were friends or neighbours. In both cases occasional Police supervision would probably prevent any trouble.

Police Liaison Officers.

Every Borough has an appointed Police Liaison Officer, usually an Inspector who acts as a link between the various A.R.P. services, Borough officials and the Police Force.

Difficulties insoluble by ordinary means should be brought to the notice of this Officer through the usual routine methods of reporting. These Liaison Officers have been closely connected with A.R.P. work from its commencement, and they have many useful contacts. They may be able to give useful advice, particularly with regard to the Police aspect of any project which may be planned concerning shelters.

Preventing Trouble.

It is of the utmost importance that the Police should be informed beforehand of any action which is to be carried out and which may involve trouble with members of the public. Such actions as the transference of people from one shelter to another, the removal of bedding, enforcement of rules concerning infestation should be reported to the Police before the time and day upon which they are to take place. Previous information enables arrangements to be made for one or more officers to attend and so lessen the possibility of any breach of the peace.

Co-operation with the Police.

Shelter Wardens will be giving the utmost assistance to the Police if they use every possible means of influence to prevent people rushing from shelters at night to inspect bomb damage, or to gaze at fires which may still be raging when the "all clear" is heard. The Police are generally aware of the difficulties which confront Shelter Wardens in the management and supervision of shelters and will continue to give every possible assistance by all means in their power.

(2) SHELTER MANAGEMENT.

A good shelter does not rest on a question of equipment and amenities, many other factors are concerned - proper use, local rules as apart from the Public Shelter Regulations, proper cleansing, and the inculcation of a community spirit amongst shelterers, and other factors all have their part in this result.

This talk deals with the practical question of shelter use and management; social amenities and general shelter welfare will be dealt with in a separate lecture.

Cleaning - (London Region Circulars Nos. 198, 200, 299 and 319 XV).

Cleaning arrangements made by local authorities vary from Borough to Borough. Wardens should make themsleves conversant with local arrangements and should keep a watchful eye on results, reporting through the proper channels if the work is not carried out efficiently.
(Shelter Superintendents should explain here what is the method employed in the area with which they are concerned.)

In spite of the fact that local authorities are responsible for the general cleanliness of shelters, the shelterers themselves should be encouraged to take a certain amount of responsibility for this. Wardens should educate their shelter users to be "house-proud". Bunks should always be left tidy, no matter what regulations are in force locally with regard to bedding, and each bunk area should be cleared of litter by the users of the bunks themselves.
(Shelter Superintendents should explain here local rules with regard to bedding).

In some Authority areas shelter users are encouraged to assist in the actual shelter cleaning and when such an interest is shown, every effort should be made to give facilities.

Hygiene.

1. Signs of infestation (London Region Circulars 271 & 276).

a. Bed-bugs.

Bed-bugs spend most of their life in cracks and small holes in walls and furniture. They are more usually found where food is present for them, that is to say near the place where a human being is sleeping; they come out only in darkness in order to feed. A common fallacy is the belief that these insects can feed upon dirt or dust. This is not the case; the theory has probably originated from the fact that the bed-bug can live for a long time without food or heat, even for as long as a year.

After a bed-bug has finished its meal it finds its way back to the place where it lives. Just as it enters its hole or crack it deposits its excreta, leaving a black mark; it is these marks which should be looked for when the presence of bugs is suspected.

Bed-bugs can easily be spread; they can be brought into a building in used furniture, wood-work, bedding etc. and are more usually carried by things than on people; it is a simple process for them to be brought into shelters in bedding then to take up their abode in cracks or holes in bunks, wood-work or walls. Much can be done by means of soap and water to get rid of the bed-bug. It is for this reason that much importance is placed upon the regular scrubbing of all wood-work etc. in shelters - a little cresol, if available, should be added to the water.

Cracks in wooden floors, along skirting boards, etc. should be sprayed with soapy water and cresol; a stirrup-pump can be used for this. Another method is to use a blow lamp, going over all apertures such as cracks etc. in the wood-work. The largest cracks should be filled with plaster, and the plaster coated with a vitrifying solution, obtained from the Borough Surveyor.

So far as bunk fabric is concerned, if bugs are suspected a search should be made and bugs found killed by hand; a disgusting method but necessary and efficacious. The insecticidal powder AL.63 is effective though rather slow.

A method of ascertaining the presence of bugs and so getting rid of them is to put down pieces of corrugated cardboard and when bed-bugs have taken up their residence there burn the card-board. Signs of infestation in a shelter should be reported through the usual channels to the Medical Officer of Health. (Shelter Superintendent should state here local procedure for reporting such cases).

b. The Louse.

If a person is infested with lice, they must have originated from another human being; animals do not have lice and it is a complete fallacy to suppose that they can be bred by dirt. The louse multiplies with speed and can rapidly be spread through a crowded community. There are two kinds of lice - head lice and body lice - the one is found mainly in the hair of the head, and the other inside undergarments. If lice get away from the human body they starve to death in a few days. They are very seldom found on walls, floors etc. The presence in a public shelter of a person affected by lice should be reported immediately to the Medical Officer of Health through the usual channels.

c. Fleas and other insects.

It is improbable that fleas will give much trouble if the shelter is clean - they herd in dusty floors. If floors are carefully swept and the dust burnt, there should be no trouble and the regular scrubbing of floors with hot water and soap, with 2% of cresol added to the water, will make sure of this.

Beetles, cockroaches and woodlice may be met with in cellars but they are not harmful to man, so it is unnecessary to take any active steps other than reassurance.

d. Mice and Rats.

If the presence of mice in a shelter has been proved, active steps should be taken to get rid of them, if only on the grounds that the presence of a mouse has been known to throw women into hysterics. The presence of rats in a shelter should be reported through the usual channels to the Medical Officer of Health.

e. Litter (London Region Circular 319 XVI. Public Shelter Regulation 3 (e)).

Untidiness should not be tolerated in a shelter. Shelter Wardens should insist upon all litter being placed in the receptacles provided for the purpose.

f. Sprays and Disinfectants.

Sprays and disinfectants should be kept in good order and used regularly in accordance with instructions.
(Shelter Superintendent should state here any local instructions for the use of disinfectants).

2. Sanitation. (London Region Circular 319 IX, XI, XII, Public Shelter Regulations (c) and (d)

a. Sanitary Conveniences.

Shelter Wardens must make themselves conversant with the methods used by the Local Authority for cleansing sanitary conveniences and should report if the work is not satisfactory. Closets should be well lighted at all times, and the lighting arrangements should be arranged so that when lights are dimmed in the dormitory portion of a shelter it is possible for the sanitary conveniences to remain fully lighted.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were the principal challenges faced in public air raid shelters and why were they considered so problematic?

2. What can this source tell us about the understanding of group psychology which informed much civil defence policy during the Blitz?

3. What can we learn about the social and cultural norms of the period by studying a source such as this? To what extent does it give us an insight into wartime British society at large?

SOURCE THREE

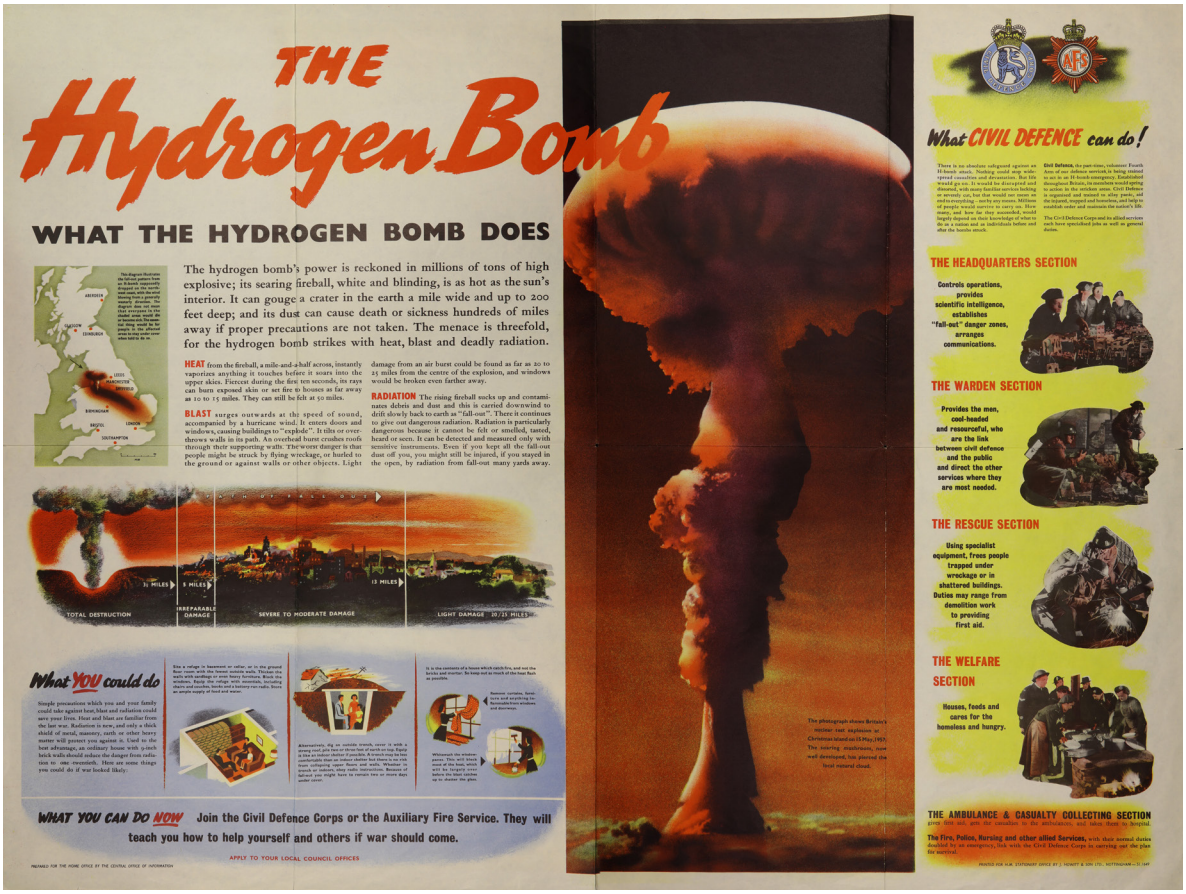
Source Intro

One of the main features of the Cold War was the nuclear arms race between East and West, each side hoping that a sufficiently powerful arsenal would serve to deter their opponent from military action. During the early 1950s, this yielded the development of thermonuclear weapons, often known as hydrogen bombs. These were significantly more powerful than conventional atomic weapons and, as a result, vastly increased the level of destruction which Britain would face in the event of nuclear conflict. This poster was part of a wider propaganda campaign by civil defence authorities to prepare the wider public for this new menace.

Source

"The Hydrogen Bomb", 1957.

INF 13/281, image 21.



Questions for Discussion

1. What techniques have the civil defence authorities used in this poster to convey the severity of the hydrogen bomb threat, and how effective do you think they would have been?

2. Beyond merely raising awareness of this new threat, what are the principal objectives of this poster? What can that tell us about civil defence policy in the 1950s?

3. How do you imagine the public would have reacted to this type of messaging? How might it have affected attitudes towards Britain's place in the wider Cold War?

Questions for General Discussion

The following questions are designed to prompt a wider discussion on the events, issues, and themes highlighted in the sources.

1. How did British civil defence policy change throughout the twentieth century?

2. How important was civil defence to Britain's survival, and ultimate victory, in the Second World War?

3. During the Cold War, some anti-war campaigners argued that civil defence legitimised nuclear warfare and therefore made it likely. How convincing do you find this claim?

4. How much can civil defence strategies tell us about the society which they were designed to protect?

5. What can we learn about the relationship between the British government and its citizens by studying civil defence materials?

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