

Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds), *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour – May to September 1940* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), ISBN: 9781847921420.

The publication of *Listening to Britain* by two of the leading historians of twentieth-century British history coincides with the seventieth anniversary of the events described in the book. Our 'Finest Hour', the summer of 1940, has traditionally been represented in the media and popular consciousness as a period when the people united against an unprecedented threat of invasion from Nazi Germany. Britain stood alone as France capitulated, defending democracy and common decency, with the public solidly behind the war effort. Drawing upon the Ministry of Information's (MOI) Home Intelligence daily/weekly regional reports, the University of Edinburgh historians have produced a compendium of the revelatory, interesting and mundane thoughts and beliefs of the British public in this first social history to focus on MOI reports to various government departments. The tone of the reports support the traditional Churchillian image of 1940, whilst also displaying the private concerns and criticisms of people, highlighted in many revisionist histories.

On a path first taken by Angus Calder's *The People's War*, published in 1969 and followed up by an increasing number of historians, such as Juliet Gardiner and Simon Garfield, British social history of the Second World War era has become an important and mainstream area for study. It can even be said to rival the more traditional areas of historical investigation such as political and military fields that long held sway after 1945. Social historians have been able to take advantage of the cataloguing of the Mass Observation archives (MO) at the University of Sussex, the release of National Archive documents and the interest generated publically by a series of major anniversaries in the 1980s and 1990s. *Listening to Britain* by Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang is not just the latest in this long procession of volumes mined from the MO archive, it is a book with a differing perspective, coming from a government organisation. The reports, which date from the 18th May to the 27th September 1940, are 'impressionistic' conclusions drawn from a network of contacts with staff at Home Intelligence, who similarly were drawing impressions of what they heard, read or discussed concerning the war and

everyday life. Just like MO, the reports contain a synthesis of peoples' concerns, fears, attitudes and opinions on all matters related to themselves and the wider events going on around them. However, what is important to remember is that these reports were 'official' and informed the government on the state of the nation. To others of the day, such as the *Daily Herald*, *Daily Sketch* and the *Observer*, Home Intelligence informants threw 'the shadow of the Gestapo over honest and loyal creatures' (p. xv) and were referred to as 'Cooper's Snoopers' (the Minister of Information was Churchill's friend, Duff Cooper).

Addison and Crang have based the book on two particular surviving archive deposits, being file INF 1/264 at the National Archives and the Mary Adams Collection at the University of Sussex (Adams was the Director of Home Intelligence). These have provided an extensive run of consecutively dated material and thus enabled the reader to observe the day-to-day thoughts and reactions to some of the most dramatic events to threaten Britain's safety and subsequently be seen as a pivotal moment in the course of the war. As the debacle of Dunkirk, the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, the start of the Blitz and the ever-present fear of invasion impacted upon the country, so the reader observes the rational and irrational thoughts of the people under strain. As editors, Addison and Crang have presented these generalised 'impressions' without comment apart from the introduction. Therefore, to understand the significance of the material, *Listening to Britain* should be read after having examined the context of 1939/40 in such works as Angus Calder's *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* and *The Myth of the Blitz*, Juliet Gardiner's *Wartime: Britain 1939-1945*, Norman Longmate's *How we Lived Then* and Philip Ziegler's *London at War 1939-1945*. To fully understand and appreciate the book, it is essential to have at least a working knowledge of the context surrounding the events of 1940, despite having a glossary of key people and organisations of the period at the end of the text. *Listening to Britain* is not a 'stand alone' book, which could be a significant drawback.

The value of the book lies in the perceptions of the ordinary people to the dramatic events of 1940, ranging from how they reacted, to the rumours that circulated and the concerns of simply existing from day to day. One learns of the very real ‘belief’ concerning Nazi spies disguised as nuns being parachuted into Britain, recognition of which may be partly ascertained from the possession of suspiciously hairy hands. An invasion of North Wales was believed at one point to be likely from Eire. Going against the propaganda of a united war effort and the ‘spirit of the Blitz’, it was widely believed that Jews were taking advantage of the war to profiteer from rationed goods, were cowardly by nature and fled the cities at the first sign of bombing. The government was greatly alarmed by the rise in anti-Semitic activity in the bombed areas of the East End. Tea rationing also concerned the government, particularly its impact upon civilian morale. One may also sense the socialist/communist background of the Director of Home Intelligence coming to the fore by the number of class-based entries in reports, indicating social divisions, the selfishness of the wealthy complaining over the lack of sugar in the Harrods restaurant and in some regions, a greater desire for cooperation with Russia rather than America. The latter provokes the reader to question the political awareness of some civilians concerning events in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, besides Russia’s relationship with Germany. Finally, it is also interesting to see the bizarre nature of what was felt to be important by Mary Adams to report to the various government departments, such as the entry for the 13th June, South Eastern Region: ‘Evangelical old ladies of Tunbridge Wells satisfied at bombing of Italian Catholics’ (p. 111). One is immediately transported to Ealing Studios and *Passport to Pimlico*.

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