

**Title: Anarchism and the British Warfare State: The Prosecution of the *War Commentary* anarchists, 1945**

**Abstract**

For the anarchist, the state is most at home when it is at war. So, for anarchist critics of state policy in Britain in World War Two: ‘The issues were sharp, the enemy well defined and anarchist attitudes were clear and uncompromising.’<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there is an established mystery surrounding the home office decision to prosecute the editors of the wartime anarchist newspaper *War Commentary* in 1945 under emergency wartime defence regulations. In fact, the prosecution was out of line with the policy which the government had taken towards anarchist publications and left-wing criticism in general throughout the war. This policy was shaped by the consensus within the home office regarding the generally contrary effects of attempting direct censorship on dissident groups. This mystery is not resolved in the literatures on twentieth century emergency legislation or established social and political accounts of the period, and barely examined in key histories of anarchism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sansom, ‘Revived 45: Anarchists Against the Army’ *The Raven Anarchist Quarterly*, 29, vol. 8, no.1, freedom Press, Spring, 1995pp61-71

<sup>2</sup> Peter Marshall mentions it in his epic history of anarchism, and the more recent survey of the history of British anarchist movements by Ben Franks also makes a passing reference to the incident. Marshall, p.492, Franks, p.52

This paper argues that the home office decision to prosecute the anarchists in 1945 should be understood in relation to the concerns of a militarised state, and suggests that the anarchists were ideologically well-placed to pluck at the raw nerves of the British political elite by addressing tensions around demobilisation. This helps explain the fact that the authorities arrested the editors of *War Commentary* at the end of the war and not the beginning. Drawing on recent re-interpretations of the nature of the British state in the twentieth century and bringing to light relevant home office material, this paper suggests that the answer to the apparent mystery of the high profile trial and prosecution of the Freedom Press anarchists is rooted in the ideological challenge waged by the anarchist group to the official equation of British international policy with the values of order, democracy and peace. As such this paper highlights the attempt by the anarchists to emphasise the militaristic, chaotic, and socially disintegrative nature of both international and domestic policy in Britain during the Second World War. The response to the anarchist paper *War Commentary* by the British government, and the timing of that response, are best conceptualised as part of an understanding of the British warfare state of the period and the unmitigated antimilitarist stance of the anarchists, which brought them into a uniquely threatening position in the eyes of principal staff at the Home Office at the end of the war.

## **Introduction**

The revival of interest in anarchism at the time of the Spanish Civil War led to the publication in Britain of *Spain and the World*, a fortnightly journal produced by the anarchist publishing house. *Spain and the World* changed its name to *Revolt!* in the

period between the war in Spain and the beginning of the Second World War, and *Revolt!* became *War Commentary* early in the Second World War, reverting back to the traditional title *Freedom* in August 1945. *War Commentary* stood outside the pro-war consensus of the Tory, Labour and Liberal parties and consistently opposed the fundamental assumptions of government policy throughout the war. The use of emergency regulations against the Freedom Press publication has hitherto not been examined in detail. This paper will begin by outlining the anarchist position on the war and placing the prosecution within a wider view of the use of emergency powers in Britain in the early twentieth century. The anarchists maintained a consistent opposition to the policies of the wartime state from the outset, in line with traditional anarchist interpretations of the state and its tendency to undermine natural social order. In this context we might ask whether the prosecution of the anarchists was not part of a wider attempt to censor political dissidence. A longer view of the use of emergency regulations in the period would indicate that this is a highly plausible interpretation of the case. However, relevant studies and Home Office files stress that, despite the virulent anti-war stance of *War Commentary*, the government was reluctant to engage in overt censorship of the anarchists until April 1945. It is in the context of official fears about the potential political turmoil associated with the endings of wars in which civilian populations have been mobilised into a military establishment that the decision to prosecute the anarchists should be understood. The period following World War One had demonstrated the potential for social unrest surrounding the management of mass demobilisation to coalesce into mutinous movement. The government was sensitive to this and the anarchists threatened to heighten possible tension by circulating historical accounts of mutiny among serving personnel. It was a militarised

British state that found it expedient to halt the activities of the hitherto relatively minor anarchist group in the incendiary context of demobilising civilian personnel at the end of the war.

What is highlighted by these insights into the challenge to the British state made by the Freedom Press editors is the unique and consistently anarchist position taken and developed by the group towards the state and its relation to war, social order and international democracy. For the anarchist, the war-making tendencies of states are closely related to their socially disintegrative characteristics, war is seen as one of the ways in which the institutions of the state corrode and inhibit spontaneous social cohesion. The traditional anarchist depiction of the state as an inherently militaristic body ensured that the Freedom press anarchists were highly sensitive to the militarised characteristics of British state policy and alert to what they perceived as the falsity of its democratic pretensions. For the anarchist writers of the '40s, the emergence of total war in the twentieth century was seen as closely related to the power-seeking, war-ready organisational and institutional nature of nation states. The experience of war highlighted the pernicious role of the state in undermining human social order. The anarchists presented the wartime militaristic international and domestic policies of the British state as creating chaos, disaster, and 'anarchy' (as the term is pejoratively used). Conversely disobedience to state militaristic policy was equated with natural order and the restitution of human social instincts. It was in the context of tensions intrinsic to the mass militarisation of civilian populations in 'warfare' states that these features of anarchist ideology raised official anxieties in the British context.

## **Anarchist Anti-Militarism: War, disorder and the State**

One of the classic anarchist arguments regarding the state, and reiterated in relation to World War Two, is that 'Governments need wars to survive and without them they would collapse.'<sup>3</sup> The two anarchistic aphorisms 'War is the trade of governments' and 'War is the health of the state' present this case.<sup>4</sup> Cultural commentator and affiliate of the Freedom Press group, Herbert Read, included in his indictment of the state its propensity to undermine human freedom and solidarity via the waging of wars: 'I regard war as the curse of humanity and governments as the instruments of war.'<sup>5</sup> He was resolute in his conviction that 'War will exist as long as the state exists' and that 'There is no problem which leads so inevitably to anarchism.'<sup>6</sup> In 1940 the doctor in the Freedom Press editorial group, John Hewetson, put the case thus: 'Everyone hates war, but almost no-one understands it', except the anarchists, who perceive that war is a 'symptom... of an underlying disease – the contemporary social and economic order'.<sup>7</sup> In the pages of *War Commentary* the war was a 'symptom' of the state in all its 'newest'

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<sup>3</sup> Derrick A. Pike 'Conscientious Objectors in World War Two' in *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly*, 29, Volume 8, Number 1, Spring 1995, 'World War Two', pp.48-9

<sup>4</sup> Colin Ward 'the Awkward Question, quoting Randolph Bourne, *The State* (1917), in *Freedom*, the anarchist weekly, 17<sup>th</sup> August, 1957

<sup>5</sup> Read, 'A statement', p.205

<sup>6</sup> Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p.120, 119

<sup>7</sup> J.H., *War Commentary*, October, 1940

and 'most ghastly' implications.<sup>8</sup> Anarchist writer Colin Ward, and witness during the trial, expressed this sentiment clearly 'War is the expression of the State in its most perfect form: it is its finest hour.'<sup>9</sup> Resistance to the war-making powers of the state is a dominant theme in the anarchist commentary and intellectual output of the late '30s and '40s. 'War is being used as a method of blackmail' argued the Anarchist Federation of Great Britain as early as 1938, 'using the people's natural horror of warfare to intimidate them into accepting tyranny under the cover of defence.'<sup>10</sup> So, according to a 1941 edition of *War Commentary*, the anarchist must 'concentrate all their energies' against war 'in fighting against the State'.<sup>11</sup>

For the anarchist, the war-making tendencies of states are closely related to their socially disintegrative characteristics, war is seen as one of the ways in which the institutions of the state corrode and inhibit spontaneous social cohesion. Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* charted the destruction of the social institutions that embodied the human tendency for mutual aid by the growth of the nation state. The views of the *War Commentary* writers were in line with this position: 'in the destruction of the present form of society, the anarchists envisage not the empire of chaos, but the growth of an integrated society...'<sup>12</sup> The traditional anarchist position is that organic social order and

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<sup>8</sup> Reg Reynolds, June 1941, *War Commentary*

<sup>9</sup> Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, p.25

<sup>10</sup> Issued by the Anarchist Federation of Britain, printed in *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1938

<sup>11</sup> *War Commentary* July 1941

<sup>12</sup> George Woodcock, 'What is Anarchism?' *War Commentary* Vol.4, No.13, May 1943

hierarchical state authority are antithetical. It equates self-government and spontaneous order with equity and freedom, and state control with violence and injustice. Deploying the anarchist argument regarding spontaneous human order in critical responses to the twentieth-century war-making state, anarchist commentators associated with the Freedom Press challenged conventional beliefs in the socially-oriented and democratic functions of World War Two. They were unique on the left in their comprehensive criticism of the militaristic policies of the state. The *War Commentary* anarchists in particular linked international state policy with dysfunction, chaos and harm; and rebellion, non-compliance, and disobedience with peace and ordered human relationships. The anarchists were unrelenting in their challenge to the government claims to be pursuing a war for democracy and international order: 'The possibilities are that war will ravage the face of the earth' they argued, and when it does 'The uncontrollable and lowest passions in man will be let loose in blind fury; fury against an enemy towards whom he bears no malice, for a 'cause' which is not his.'<sup>13</sup> Children would be 'the cannon fodder of tomorrow... butchered in the front line trenches in the name of a 'democracy' whose benefits they have never experienced.'<sup>14</sup> The disorder, chaos and war hysteria would accompany 'death to hundreds of thousands of homes and widespread misery throughout the world.'<sup>15</sup> If war is statehood and peace is anarchism then rebellion and resistance to the state furthers the cause of peace and natural order. Herbert Read, prominent cultural commentator and anarchist

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<sup>13</sup> Editorial, *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1938

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1938

<sup>15</sup> Editorial, *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1938

writer, argued this case in his assertion that: 'There is no problem which leads so inevitably to anarchism. Peace is anarchy. Government is force... which in turn involves the individual in destructive impulses and the nations in war.'<sup>16</sup> The answer, according also to the Freedom Press writers, was disobedience: 'refuse to serve 'your' country!', and 'refuse to assist the state in its manoeuvres for murder!'<sup>17</sup> In order to resist the war, they claimed, it was necessary to resist the militaristic policies of national service, conscription, and the ARP, regardless of 'the fall of France', 'Dunkirk', or the 'Stalinist switchover'.<sup>18</sup>

Against official claims to be waging war in the name of democracy or international justice, the anarchists urged their readers to '... just pause to think of the fate of Spain...'<sup>19</sup> 'As we have not been paralysed by recent political events', claimed the Freedom Press writers, 'we can still think'. Thus armed, and reflecting on 'the events and British policy during these last few years', they argued 'the next war will be no more a war for Czechoslovakian democracy than the last war was one for Belgian independence.'<sup>20</sup> The anarchists were primed for their critical stance towards government claims to be pursuing democracy by their experience of British international policy towards the Spanish republic in the 1930s: 'let us look at more

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<sup>16</sup> Read, 'The Prerequisite of Peace', p.29

<sup>17</sup> *Revolt!*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1939

<sup>18</sup> War Commentary Vol.4, No.13, May 1943

<sup>19</sup> editorial in *Revolt!*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1939

<sup>20</sup> Editorial in *Spain and the World*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1938

recent times' they pointed out 'and we discover that the policy of the present government has in every respect been one of active support for fascism', and further 'not once was it suggested that we should go to defend Spanish democracy.'<sup>21</sup> Equating fascism with centralised, militarised, authoritarian state government, the anarchists argued that it was 'just as rampant here as abroad' and 'the enemy is on your own country!'<sup>22</sup> Alongside the *War Commentary* anarchists, Alex Comfort argued that fascism was a characteristic of militarised German and British states alike, which are 'sitting on the Press "because this is Total War"' and 'making our soldiers jab blood bladders while loudspeakers howl propaganda at them'.<sup>23</sup> 'Our own government', added Comfort, 'if it wants to make butchers or bomber pilots of our children, is as much our enemy as the Germans ever were.'<sup>24</sup>

The anarchist perception of the state as an inherently militaristic institution rendered *War Commentary* writers highly sensitive to the 'mechanised, highly organised, technical' characteristics of the British state policy, under which 'millions of men are concentrated and drafted'.<sup>25</sup> The anarchists beseeched the readers of *Spain and the World*: 'Do not accept the usual pro-militarist ballyhoo.'<sup>26</sup> 'Being obstinate people', they

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<sup>21</sup> Editorial *Spain and the World*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1938

<sup>22</sup> *Revolt!*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1939

<sup>23</sup> Alex Comfort, in D.S. Savage et al, 'Pacifism and the War. A Controversy', p.417

<sup>24</sup> Comfort, *Art and Social Responsibility*, (London: Falcon Press, 1946), p.83

<sup>25</sup> Ridel, mid-January, 1942, *War Commentary*

<sup>26</sup> Issued by the Anarchist Federation of Britain, printed in *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1938

argued in *War Commentary* in 1942 'we refuse to believe that there is the slightest trace of human emancipation in the fact of working at maximum output, consuming as little as possible and leaving the daily lives of millions of people in the hands of a state power over which they have no control whatever.'<sup>27</sup> Anarchist anti-militarism in the 1940s was particularly hostile towards the policy of conscription, as a 'tremendous weapon in the hands of reaction'<sup>28</sup> and, under capitalism, 'simply a reversion to chattel slavery'.<sup>29</sup> The anti-militarism of the Freedom Press anarchists was a clearly identifiable feature of their publications, campaigns and public meetings throughout the 1930s and '40s. Police Special Branch recorded the clear policy of the Freedom Press as 'opposition to militarism' and 'opposition to the war'.<sup>30</sup> Their reports record public events such as a meeting at Hyde Park on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1941 as attacking military and political policy.<sup>31</sup> A Special Branch report dated November 1941 underlines that the sentiments expressed at this event were that 'Churchill is as much a brigand as Hitler'.<sup>32</sup> In a detailed report of one London meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> July 1942, Special Branch noted that 400 people

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<sup>27</sup> Ridel, mid-January, 1942, *War Commentary*

<sup>28</sup> Issued by the Anarchist Federation of Britain, printed in *Spain and the World*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1938

<sup>29</sup> Reg Reynolds, June 1941, *War Commentary*

<sup>30</sup> H045/25553 833412/8, Extract from Special Branch Fortnightly Summary No.23, Dated 15<sup>th</sup> October 1941

<sup>31</sup> H045/25553 833412/8, Extract from Special Branch Fortnightly Summary No.23, Dated 15<sup>th</sup> October 1941

<sup>32</sup> H045/25553 833412/8, Extract from Special Branch Fortnightly Summary No.25, Dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 1941

attended, including servicemen and three American soldiers. The police report noted 'loud applause' when one speaker said he considered that there was no enthusiasm for the war, especially in the services, and another speaker drew attention to the 'thousands of deserters.'<sup>33</sup> In January 1944, Special Branch reported that 'The contents of *War Commentary* are extremely anti-war, and condemn British bombing.'<sup>34</sup> The anarchist campaign against the allied bombing policies is particularly indicative of their equation of wartime state policy with violence and disorder. As the anarchist paper argued:

How many times in the past have we heard that Anarchism means bombs, that Anarchists work for wholesale destruction? How many times has ruling class police repression been instituted because an anarchist has attempted to assassinate a single ruler or reactionary politician? But one single Hamburgizing raid kills more men and women and children than have ever been killed in the whole history, true or faked, of anarchist bombs. The difference is that anarchists wished to destroy men like Mussolini who were responsible for the misery of millions; ruling class bombs just kill thousands of workers indiscriminately... reduce whole populations to starvation, bring epidemics and disease all over the world. This is the peace and order

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<sup>33</sup> H045/25553 833412/8, Extract from Special Branch Fortnightly Summary No.41, Dated 15<sup>th</sup> July 1942

<sup>34</sup> H045/25553 833412/8, Extract from Special Branch Fortnightly Summary No.77, Dated 15<sup>th</sup> January 1944

that they want to bring with the aid of their bombs, to the workers of the world.<sup>35</sup>

As well as condemning conscription and bombing policy, the anarchists paid particular attention to the wartime experiences of serving personnel, the 'workers in arms'. In the spring of 1944 this focus particularly concerned the prospect of demobilisation. In May 1944, an article entitled 'Mutiny in the British Army' appeared in *War Commentary* which argued that 'Present discussion of post war demobilization should naturally recall the discussion of the subject in 1918'<sup>36</sup> when 'The soldiers' movement proved to be one of the most successful strikes ever attempted.' A subsequent edition of *War Commentary* concerned the 'British Mutinies in France', claiming that 'Everywhere such organisations were victorious. Briefly, the fruits of victory were: 1. Rapid demobilization of millions of soldiers 2. Pay was doubled 3. Food, shelter and other conditions were improved 4. Stupid parades and discipline were relaxed.'<sup>37</sup> In June 1944, the paper reported an apparent 'sinking of the level of "hope" and "expectation" during the last three years' and a 'Fear of the future', 'each man's fear' they claimed to observe 'is that National Victory means Personal Defeat'.<sup>38</sup> The July 1944 feature, 'How Wars End' argued that revolutionary and mutinous sentiment accompanies the ending

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<sup>35</sup> War Commentary, Vol. 4, No. 21 September 1943

<sup>36</sup> 'Mutiny in the British Army' *War Commentary*, Vol 5. No.13, May 1944

<sup>37</sup> 'British Mutinies in France' *War Commentary*, Mid-May 1944, vol.5 No14

<sup>38</sup> 'After the War' *War Commentary* Vol.5, No.15, June 1944

of wars, and more so with those that have engaged a civilian army.<sup>39</sup> In August 1944 the paper ran an advertisement for special subscription rates for soldiers. These features accompanied articles attacking proposed social insurance schemes, and expressing doubts about post-war conditions especially regarding employment, housing, health and civil liberties.<sup>40</sup> In November 1944 the paper adopted a large format newspaper style, a more accessible and immediate form which the anarchists claimed was necessary in order to report effectively on the fast pace of events in the months approaching the end of the war. It is evident that the Freedom Press anarchists had clear ideas about the opportunities presented by the imminent end of the war and clear doubts about the post-war settlement that was being shaped. The social rupture and anticipated tensions associated with the ending of mass-conscripted warfare was apparently seen as an opportunity to express these doubts and possibly even to affect social relations after the war.

### **'The Strange Case of the Three Anarchists Jailed at the Old Bailey, April 1945'<sup>41</sup>**

The Freedom Press group denounced the war from the outset and persistently exposed the continued existence of class privilege in wartime Britain. It was thus, according to

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<sup>39</sup> 'How War End' *War Commentary* Vol.5 No.17, July 1944

<sup>40</sup> *War Commentary* Vol.5 No.19, August 1944

<sup>41</sup> 'Freedom, Is it a Crime: The Strange Case of the Three Anarchists Jailed at the Old Bailey, April 1945. Two Speeches by Herbert Read.' (Freedom Press Defence Committee, London, April 1945)

Colin Ward 'an obvious candidate for the attentions of the Special Branch'.<sup>42</sup> But, it is curiously late in the war that overt interference with, and then prosecution of, the anarchists began. In fact, the Freedom Press anarchists enjoyed what Stammers terms the 'dubious distinction' of being involved in one of the last 'political prosecutions' of the war.<sup>43</sup> In December 1944 officers of the Special Branch raided the Freedom Press Office and the private houses of four editors and sympathisers. Search warrants were issued under Defence Regulation 39b which declared that no person should seduce members of the armed forces from their duty, and regulation 88a which enabled articles to be seized if they were evidence of the commission of such an offence. Large quantities of documents were seized in these raids.<sup>44</sup> At the end of December, Special Branch officers led by Detective inspector Whitehead, searched the belongings of soldiers in various parts of the country, including Colin Ward at Stromness in Orkney. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1945 Marie Louise Bernari, Vernon Richards and John Hewetson were arrested at 7.30 in the morning, they were joined at the court by Philip Sansom who was brought from Brixton Prison, and the four were charged with the dissemination of three seditious issues of *War Commentary* under Defence Regulation 39a. They appeared four times at Marylebone Magistrates Court and their trial took four days at the Old Bailey. The evidence used in the Trial included articles from *War Commentary* dated 1<sup>st</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November 1944 covering spontaneous councils or soviets in post first world war Germany and Russia and soldiers councils in the French Revolution, the British rail

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<sup>42</sup> Colin Ward, 'Witness for the Prosecution'

<sup>43</sup> Stammers, p.88

<sup>44</sup> See 'New Statesman and the Nation' 3 March 1945 and v. 408 H.C. DEB 5s cols. 1561-1

strike of 1919, unrest in British industry, and bad conditions in military training camps. Central to the prosecution case was a Freedom Press circular letter dated 25th October sent to subscribers in the military, asking contacts to introduce 'new comrades' to the publication. Also presented at the trial were lists of subscribers in the forces found at the offices of Freedom Press, a manuscript signed by a number of soldiers disapproving of the Government's policy on Greece, and a leaflet containing the following poem, entitled 'Fight! What For?':

You are wanted for the Army,  
Do you know what you'll have to do?  
They will tell you to murder your brothers,  
As they have been told to kill you,

You are wanted for the Army,  
Do you know what you'll have to do?  
Just murder to save your country  
From men who are workers, like You.

You country! Who says you've a country?  
You live in another man's flat,  
You haven't even a back yard,  
So why should you murder for THAT?

You haven't a hut or a building,

No flower, no garden, it's true,  
The landlords have grabbed all the country,  
Let THEM do the fighting - NOT YOU.

On 26<sup>th</sup> April Richards, Hewetson and Sansom were found guilty and sentenced. The judge was Normal Birkett and the prosecution was conducted by the Attorney General, Sir Donald Somerville. A Freedom Press Defence Committee was organised to raise funds for the defence and this won the support of many public figures including George Orwell, Herbert Read, Harold Laski, Kingsley Martin, Benjamin Britten, Augustus John, and Bertrand Russell.

Ewing and Gearty emphasise 'the degree to which emergency rather than ordinary law was the normal state of affairs' between 1914-1945.<sup>45</sup> We might then highlight the degree to which the *War Commentary* case illustrates the encroaching use of emergency powers by governments in the first half of the twentieth century as an 'iron heel' for the purposes of 'taming of the franchise'.<sup>46</sup> Studies such as Ewing and Gearty's argue that emergency powers, as a means of legally restricting liberties, were used during this period to temper political democratisation. This includes the attempt to dilute the impact of full adult suffrage on the old order, which had suffered the 'triple shock' of the First World War, the Irish secession and the Russian Revolution as evidence of what it

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<sup>45</sup> Ewing and Gearty, 2000, p.415

<sup>46</sup> Jack London, *The Iron Heel*, C.B. Macpherson *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 1977, p.64-9

might expect from the democratic transformation of society.<sup>47</sup> As the authors note, both wars involved 'the effective suspension of large tracts of the rule of Law.'<sup>48</sup> In fact, they point out the 'startling' degree to which emergency law was employed and the extent to which emergency powers became normalised within a 'greatly expanded' body of statute and common law.<sup>49</sup> However, despite the fact that 'the government were involved in a process designed to stifle forms of political opposition more or less continuously throughout the war...', the case of the Freedom Press sedition trial is still perceived as 'rather curious' and 'difficult to understand'.<sup>50</sup> This is because throughout the war both the Chamberlain and the Churchill governments were careful to employ quasi-covert or informal tactics rather than public policy methods to marginalise and censor dissident political organisation, precisely in order to 'maintain a democratic image' and avoid publicising undesirable views and organisations.<sup>51</sup> Indeed 'the government were concerned, in terms of public policy, to stress a liberal approach in so far as this was compatible with the success of the war effort.'<sup>52</sup> Avoiding the use of emergency powers by using ordinary law or other, more informal methods meant that the government did not need to acknowledge that such actions were deliberate attempts to impede political activities. In a Cabinet memo concerning anti-war

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<sup>47</sup> Ewing and Gearty, pp. 415-416

<sup>48</sup> Ewing and Gearty, p. 394

<sup>49</sup> Ewing and Gearty, p. 415

<sup>50</sup> Stammers, p.86, Stammers, p. 123, p.124

<sup>51</sup> Stammers, p.125

<sup>52</sup> Stammers, p.86

propaganda it was argued that if prosecutions were brought against anti-war groups those groups might attract more sympathy than they would otherwise have done.<sup>53</sup> In March 1940 the Civil Defence Committee considered a memorandum from the Minister of Information dealing with those organisations which were pursuing an anti-war line, and what action could be taken against them. It expressed a clear desire both to control anti-war propaganda and, importantly, to use covert policy methods for the purpose in order not to make martyrs out of dissidents.<sup>54</sup> Sir John Anderson, regarding the use of the law in this context, explicitly stated that 'it was contrary to our traditions to use this method against a purely political organisation'.<sup>55</sup> Instead, it was recommended that a policy of covert action and normal law was employed to control anti-war and anti-government propaganda, such as the use of section 5 of the Public Order Act, regarding behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace.<sup>56</sup> The Public Order Act was used as a political weapon to suppress the Communist Party leaflet 'The People Must Act' and the *Daily Worker* under instructions to chief constables from the War Cabinet.<sup>57</sup> It is clear that the government was keen to maintain effective control over anti-war material whilst avoiding using defence regulations for political means.<sup>58</sup> In line with this policy, *War Commentary* was published throughout most of the war, without attracting overt

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<sup>53</sup> PRO CAB 67/1, WP (G) (39) 36

<sup>54</sup> PRO CAB 73/2, CDC (40) 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 6 March 1940 and Memo PRO CAB 73/3, CDC (40) 8

<sup>55</sup> PRO CAB 73/2, CDC (40) 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 6 March 1940

<sup>56</sup> PRO MEPOL 2/6260, confidential memo from the Commissioner dated 14 May 1940

<sup>57</sup> PRO HO 158/32, Circular to Chief Constables, No. 832463/105

<sup>58</sup> PRO CAB 65/8, WM 193 and WM 194

editorship. This is despite the widespread opinion, expressed for example by George Thomson of the Ministry of Information in a letter to George Griffith of the Ministry of Home Security in relation to the anarchist attacks on the allied bombing campaigns: 'it does seem to me extraordinary that this sort of disgusting material is allowed to be published in this country.'<sup>59</sup> This careful approach to their publication was recognised by the anarchists, in a letter included with the dispatch of Freedom Press publications by post in 1942 editor John Hewetson wrote that the 'Home Secretary does not think ours and a number of other periodicals of sufficient influence to justify any drastic action on his part, more so as he is so unpopular, and presumably does not want to be even more so.'<sup>60</sup>

The reluctance of the Home Office to prosecute the anarchists until 1944 is indeed a marked feature of the Home Office files on the matter and of their responses to pressure from other departments, institutions and individuals to pursue a prosecution. Although it was noted by Special Branch that *War Commentary* was overtly 'obstructionist in its attitude to the present war effort'<sup>61</sup>, until 1944 senior staff at the Home Office took the position that 'poisonous as it is it can perhaps be safely ignored.'<sup>62</sup> Notes on the Home

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<sup>59</sup> HO45/25553 83342/3 letter from George Thomson, Ministry of Information, to George Griffith, Ministry of Home Security, dated 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1943

<sup>60</sup> HO45/25553 833412/5, Ministry of Information, Postal Censorship from Freedom Press N.W.6 to Dr. A. L. Goldwater, New York, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1942

<sup>61</sup> HO45/25553 833412/3, Metropolitan Police Special Branch report on *War Commentary*, dated 25<sup>th</sup> April 1941

<sup>62</sup> HO45/25553 833412/1 circulated note initialled M.S.W. 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1942

Office file for this period regard the publication as ‘rather academic’ and ‘confined mainly to pacifists’.<sup>63</sup> Opinion at the Home Office seems to have been that whilst ‘This group has a violently revolutionary programme’, ‘it is too detached from real life to cause much trouble’.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, in response to concerns from employers’ organisations concerning *War Commentary*’s celebration of Railway strikes in 1943, the Home Secretary replied that: ‘This publication is in fact known to the Department, but no action against it under the Defence Regulations has as yet seemed called for.’<sup>65</sup> On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1943 attention was drawn by the Scrutiny Censor to staff at the Home Office to an article in *War Commentary* entitled ‘Democracy in the Army’ which focused on class inequalities in the military and ‘the abuse of power by officers’.<sup>66</sup> The Scrutiny Censor was reassured by the Home Office that that they saw the paper ‘from time to time’.<sup>67</sup> Even Special Branch reports of a Huddersfield meeting in which anarchist Tom Brown apparently told the audience that ‘they were all capable of doing sabotage’<sup>68</sup> did not

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<sup>63</sup> HO45/25553 833412/3, Home Office circulation notes, initialled M.S.W., dated 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1942

<sup>64</sup> HO45/25553 833412/8, Home Office circulation notes, initialled T.H.M., dated 25<sup>th</sup> October 1941

<sup>65</sup> HO45/25553 83342/3 letter from W.Goody, Secretary Carlisle Railwaymen’s Joint Committee, to Herbert Morrison, dates 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1943, HO45/25553 83342/3, letter from J.J. Nunn to W.Goody, dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1943

<sup>66</sup> *War Commentary*, Vol.4 No.8 Mid February 1943

<sup>67</sup> HO45/25553 83342/3, note attached to copy of *War Commentary*, Vol.4 No.8 Mid February 1943, initialled G.G., dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1943

<sup>68</sup> HO45/25553 833412/9 Extract from regional summary (special Branch Security work) for region no.2 for fortnight ended 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1942

sway official opinion that 'It is often undesirable to prosecute a propagandist for expressions of opinion which may technically offend the law, as it only gives him the advertisement he desires'.<sup>69</sup> In early 1944 members of the Home Office were still responding to employers' concerns about the inflammatory and 'deliberately mischievous' material in *War Commentary* with the argument that 'the act of suppression lends encouragement to the propaganda effects of attacks on the Government.'<sup>70</sup> The view at the Home office, as expressed in a letter to Sir Alexander Ramsay of the Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation from Mr Emmerson at the Ministry of Labour and National Service, was that 'Apart from the undesirability of attracting attention and sympathy to an obscure paper, an attempt to prevent expressions of opinions such as appear in *War Commentary* could very effectively be used to reinforce the argument that the Government is hostile to the working-class and so both to increase the prestige of the extremist groups among their existing supporters and to introduce among other working people a frame of mind in which they become susceptible to extremist influence'.<sup>71</sup> In April 1944, the Home Office position towards *War Commentary* was still consistent with its earlier view: 'it would appear undesirable to take any steps against it for the following reasons: 1) It would

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<sup>69</sup> HO45/25553 833412/9 Home office notes for circulation, signed J.M. Ross, dated 13<sup>th</sup> February 1942

<sup>70</sup> HO45/25553 833412/13, draft letter to Sir Alexander Ramsay, Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, from Mr Emmerson, Ministry of Labour and National Service, dated 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1944

<sup>71</sup> HO45/25553 833412/13, letter drafted by J.J.Nunn, Home Office, to Sir Alexander Ramsay, Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, from Mr Emmerson, Ministry of Labour and National Service, dated 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1944

afford publicity for an obscure publication which by reason of its small circulation is unlikely to have much influence. 2) Any attempt to suppress it could be represented as an attack on a) democratic liberties b) the working classes.’<sup>72</sup> In response to an article in *War Commentary* that caused particular concern at the Ministry of Labour and National Service in May 1944 entitled ‘Bevin Declares War on Miners’<sup>73</sup>, the Home Office again argued against proceedings on the grounds that they ‘would provide an opportunity for the Anarchists to try to justify their statements in Court and to repeat their misrepresentations with a chance of reaching a very much wider public than they otherwise reach.’<sup>74</sup> In light of this argument, Home Office staff regarded action against *War Commentary* under the Defence Regulations as ‘wholly out of the question’ almost throughout the war.<sup>75</sup>

In the event, when prosecution was evidently no longer ‘out of the question’, the trial publicised the anarchist case in exactly the way the government had been trying to avoid. Coming right at the end of the war, the use of emergency defence regulations caused a public controversy and a number of prominent individuals made public protests about it. A letter condemning the impending charge and the police raids which preceded it was published in the *New Statesman* of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1945, and included the

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<sup>72</sup> HO45/25553 833412/13, Home Office circulation notes, dated 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1944

<sup>73</sup> Mid-April issue of *War Commentary* (volume 5 No.12)

<sup>74</sup> HO45 833412/20, letter from J.J. Nunn, Home Office, to Mr. Emmerson, Ministry of Labour and National Service, dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 1944

<sup>75</sup> HO45 833412/20, file circulation minutes, initialled J.A.N., dated 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1944

signatures of T.S.Eliot, E.M.Forster and Stephen Spender. On 31 March the *New Statesman* published a further letter which announced that the Freedom Defence Committee had been set up to organise and fund the defence of the anarchists. The officers of the Committee included Herbert Read and Fenner Brockway and the list of sponsors included Aneurin Bevan, Gerald Brenan, Vera Brittain, Alex Comfort, Cyril Connolly, Clifford Curzon, Victor Gollancz, Laurence Houseman, Dr. C.E.M. Joad, Augustus John, Prof. H.J.Laski, J. Middleton Murry, George Orwell, George Padmore, J.B. Priestley, Reginald Reynolds, D.S. Savage, and George Woodcock. The committee was also broadly concerned to guard free speech and went on to oppose the continuance of military and industrial conscription after the war.<sup>76</sup> The anarchists found that their profile was raised from magazines of very low circulation to representation in the high distribution daily tabloids in which the case was publicised. The public benches were filled with a wide and varied cross section of bohemian and intellectual British society. Herbert Read noted that 'A certain weight of opinion has formed behind [the anarchists] particularly among members of the younger generation.'<sup>77</sup> It was significant to the defence that the editors were being charged under special wartime regulations in 1944

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<sup>76</sup> Ruth Kinna has recently noted that in the post-war period British anarchists associated with the Freedom Press paid particular attention to resisting the censorship of the press, especially on the grounds of indecency, defending the publication of D.H.Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginners Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), p.37

<sup>77</sup> Herbert Read, 'Before the Trial' (1945), speech before the trial of the editors of *War Commentary*, printed in *War Commentary*, (21<sup>st</sup> April 1945), and in *Freedom: Is it a Crime?* (London: Freedom Defence Committee, 1945), reprinted in Goodway (ed.), *Herbert Read. A One-Man Manifesto and Other Writings for Freedom Press*, p. 97

when it was clear that the war was nearing its end. This indicated to concerned intellectuals the scope of state ambition to regulate printed opinion after the war. A significant feature of the Freedom Press trial was the breadth of intellectual opinion it mobilised in support of the anarchists. This pointed to the libertarian sympathies of British literary opinion and raised the profile of the anarchist group. In April 1945 *Common Wealth* printed an article on the state of political censorship in Britain which was fiercely critical of the *War Commentary* prosecution, which it saw as 'a test case' in the use of emergency legislation to 'crush political opposition' and evidence that 'the Government could easily stifle all opposition together.' Also, it was noted in *Common Wealth*, 'there is every sign of terror at the prospect of a political awakening in the Services'. If the prosecution was successful, it was argued, 'the way will be clear for the Government to make further and wider application of its powers to suppress opinion and to imprison its political opponents.'<sup>78</sup>

Herbert Read addressed the public protests about the prosecution with sweeping condemnations of the government, and the class oppression underpinning the trial. 'Our statesmen have made a chaos and call it victory' he charged, 'Millions of men are dead, and their silence is called peace.'<sup>79</sup> 'Is it to be seriously contended' he asked 'that at this twelfth hour any words of theirs could so disaffect members of His Majesty's Forces that the outcome of the war would be in doubt?'. That, he noted 'would be the biggest compliment ever paid to the philosophy of anarchism'. Read claimed that 'It is a small

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<sup>78</sup> Reprinted in *War Commentary*, 21st April, 1945

<sup>79</sup> Report of Herbert Read's speech to the London protest meeting, *War Commentary* 21st April 1945

group of anarchists whose freedom is threatened, but, comrades, I do not speak to you now as an anarchist: I speak to you as an Englishman, as one proud to follow in the tradition of Milton and Shelley.’<sup>80</sup> The trial of the anarchists had implications for anyone, he argued, who valued their native rights of free speech, and anyone who sought to resist the growth of ‘that foul and un-English institution, the political police.’<sup>81</sup> The invocation of war regulations at such a late stage in the war was interpreted as a warning of the authoritarian shape that the post-war state would take and Read claimed that the use of Defence Regulation 39A was being prolonged into peacetime in a covert spirit of increasing censorship.<sup>82</sup> The prosecution caused just the kind of *cause célèbre* that the government had been carefully trying to avoid throughout the war by refraining from formal and direct censorship. The trial publicised the anarchist cause and drew support from a number of high-profile intellectuals. Thus, out of line with the careful approach to anti-war opinion taken by the government for most of the war, the case of the anarchists came to be presented as one of traditional British liberties under siege, even by the anarchists themselves.

### **The British Warfare State**

A particular historiographical problem contributes to the relative current obscurity of this case and to the difficulty commentators have in conceptualising the prosecution

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<sup>80</sup> Read, ‘Before the Trial’, p. 98

<sup>81</sup> Read, ‘Before the Trial’, p. 99

<sup>82</sup> Read, ‘After the Trial’, p. 103

within mainstream understandings of British social and political history. Anti-militaristic challenges to the policies of the British state in the early and mid twentieth century, such as that presented by *War Commentary*, are not easy to identify or comprehend unless proper account is made of the twentieth century British 'warfare' state. Standard interpretations overlook the significance of 'readiness for international war' for the nature and activities of the British state, even during the period of the Second World War.<sup>83</sup> However, is in relation to 'warfare' state anxieties concerning serving personnel that the prosecution of the anarchists begins to make sense. David Edgerton and other historians, such as Paul Addison, Rex Pope, point to the gap in British social history regarding the experience of militarised civilians. 'Much has been written about civilian life in Wartime' notes Addison, 'but the social history of the armed forces has yet to be written in depth.'<sup>84</sup> Edgerton also comments that 'The great majority of texts on the British state, even in wartime, and even the more recent ones, have little or nothing to say about the military.' As he writes: 'Very little has been written on British soldiers, sailors and airmen in the Second World War, compared with factory workers, despite the fact that one obvious effect of the war was the conscription of millions for service in Britain as well as abroad.'<sup>85</sup> Recent revisions of established historiographies of the twentieth century British State focus on its readiness for international war, including the development, acceleration and entrenchment of military industries, technologies and infrastructure, as a defining characteristic.

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<sup>83</sup> David Edgerton, *Warfare State. Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.1

<sup>84</sup> Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over* (Pimlico, Random House: London, 1995)p.4

<sup>85</sup> Edgerton, p. 292

Edgerton highlights the 'military-industrial-scientific' complex underpinning the development of the British state in the twentieth century and depicts it as the 'pioneer' of modern, 'technologically focused' warfare and arms exporting, with a state machine operated by militarily oriented bureaucrats and technicians.<sup>86</sup> According to Edgerton, recognition of the 'warfare' nature of the British state in the period has been obscured by 'near impregnable thickets of historical accounts and other accounts which camouflage it'.<sup>87</sup> He writes that the failure or refusal to recognise the British warfare state was 'longstanding', 'systematic' and 'deeply entrenched' in political commentary and historical writing, and he argues that 'by contrast the welfare state loomed large'.<sup>88</sup> As he argues, 'we have had a very particular and very partial account of modern warfare which has systematically downplayed, without this being evident, the role of the military.'<sup>89</sup>

Edgerton contrasts his image of a 'British military-industrial complex' with the dominant 'welfare state' image found in the majority of economic histories, social histories, labour histories and cultural histories: 'the welfare state has come to define the British state as a whole even for the most ideologically discerning of historians.' As he notes, 'In these histories the warfare state does not appear to exist, even in wartime'. The overwhelmingly 'welfarist' image of the twentieth-century British state makes it

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<sup>86</sup> Edgerton, p.1

<sup>87</sup> Edgerton, p.13

<sup>88</sup> Edgerton, p.287

<sup>89</sup> Edgerton, p.13

difficult to contextualise and understand the stance of dedicated anti-militarist groups on the left in Britain during this period and explains the 'jarring effect that contemporary dissident views still have today.'<sup>90</sup> This is especially true of the challenge offered by the '40s anarchist paper *War Commentary*, which focused on the military experience of conscripted civilians, the technologies of war, and the relationship between the social and military activities of government. The revisions of writers like Edgerton give a greater scope for conceptualising submerged or difficult to understand challenges to the militarist policies of the wartime establishment, such as those raised by the *War Commentary* anarchists. The fact that the warfare dimensions of the British state have been overlooked or submerged by intellectuals and commentators of both the right and left also highlights the singularity of the anarchist anti-militarist challenge and its extension into the policies of the post-war British state.

Revisions of the exclusively 'welfarist' image of the British state in the twentieth-century resonates with challenges posed by Angus Calder to the political mythologies associated with the Second World War. Re-examinations such as these significantly widen the scope for a greater awareness of anarchist challenges to the political establishment in Britain during the war. Calder notes that left-wing mythologies around the welfarist consequences of the war and the consensus over public policy worked to 'divert attention from the continuing need for radical change in British society.'<sup>91</sup>

Edgerton also notes the social democratic view of the war as 'vitaly important for the

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<sup>90</sup> Edgerton, p.4, p.290, p.292

<sup>91</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991) p.15

creation of a welfare state'. As he observes: '...the view that the war turned out to be good for Britain has been a historiographical staple since the Second World War.'<sup>92</sup> It is this historiographical orthodoxy which has helped to veil the anarchist challenge to the wartime state. Unlike the mainstream left, who as Calder notes, believed they had 'captured History'<sup>93</sup>, the anarchists in Britain never did align themselves with the left-wing policy consensus surrounding the extended social welfare role of the state. They not only recognised the extent to which the Second World War was strengthening the warfare state, but they were also acutely attuned to the warfare dimensions of the interventionist and directive nationalistic economic policies pursued by the British state after the war. 'In post-war Britain' Edgerton observes, 'both the left and right, for different reasons, were to complain of the weakness of the state', and 'both the left and right underplayed the significance of the military'.<sup>94</sup> In this context, wartime and post-war anarchist challenges to the state which focused on the militarised features of the British establishment have been difficult to incorporate into accepted histories.

### **'Spectres of Mutiny'**

'There is no more promising material for revolution', writes David Lamb, 'than soldiers returning from wars, careless to danger and accustomed to risks and to taking collective

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<sup>92</sup> Edgerton, p.270, p.290, p.13

<sup>93</sup> Calder, p.15

<sup>94</sup> Edgerton, p.13 p.270

action.<sup>95</sup> The end of a mass conscript war is a particularly dangerous time for governments. As Stephen Graubard has commented, ‘The conscriptive method’ addressed the manpower problem associated with modern warfare, but ‘created other new and difficult problems’. As he notes, a conscript army will only accept military rule for a temporary period to secure a specific objective, after that ‘his first thought is to his immediate release.’<sup>96</sup> One of the convicted Freedom Press editors, Philip Sansom, imprisoned after the trial, recorded his impressions of the tense atmosphere surrounding demobilisation and the acute official anxieties around slipping military discipline: ‘Once we got inside’, he recalled ‘we found the nicks full to overflowing’ with soldiers sentenced to long terms of imprisonment by military courts for desertion and related offences. ‘None of this was known to the people at home’, writes Richards, adding, with significant emphasis, ‘*But the government knew it!*’<sup>97</sup> Rex Pope observes that ‘relatively little’ has been written about the planning of demobilisation and the resettlement of military personnel after the Second World War. Yet, as he argues, these arrangements reflected policies which were ‘the product of the moment’, and as such reflect ‘wartime and immediate post-war attitudes’ more directly than longer-term

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<sup>95</sup> Dave Lamb *Mutinies: 1917-1920* (Published jointly by Solidarity (Oxford) and Solidarity (London), Leeds Community Press, 1978)

p.9

<sup>96</sup> Stephen Graubard, *Demobilization in Great Britain Following the First World War*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 19, No.4, (Dec., 1947), pp.297-311, p.297

<sup>97</sup> Philip Sansom, ‘Revived 45: Anarchists Against the Army’ *The Raven Anarchist Quarterly*, 29, vol. 8, no.1, Freedom Press, Spring, 1995 pp61-71

policy objectives relating to education or health.<sup>98</sup> Standard 'welfarist' accounts of the Second World War focus exclusively on the civilian social experience. As a result, the impact of military life on a conscripted population that nonetheless saw itself as predominantly civilian remains largely unwritten.<sup>99</sup> A focus on the social history of conscripted armed forces, particularly in relation to the ending of wars, most notably demobilisation, provides a key context for conceptualising the nature of the challenge posed by the *War Commentary* anarchists, and the dramatic reaction to it which came from the government ministries and security services at the end of the war. Indeed, the Home office files on the matter make it clear that it was the particular 'forward policy' of the Freedom Press regarding access to the armed services that made the critical difference and finally broke the government resolve not to overtly impede the activities of the anarchists.

Following both World Wars, demobilisation was 'a delicate and potentially explosive affair' in Britain.<sup>100</sup> Accounts of soldier's strikes in 1919, such as those by Andrew Rothstein, David Mitchell and David Lamb, suggest that the possibility of internal revolution became a distinctly pressing anxiety after World War One. Beatrice Webb wrote about these official fears in her diary on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918: 'How soon will the tide of revolution catch up with the tide of victory...That is the question which is

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<sup>98</sup> Pope (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.66

<sup>99</sup> Rex Pope, *War and Society in Britain, 1899-1948* (Longman: Essex, 1991) 'Second World War, the volunteer and conscript army never ceased to see itself as one of civilians temporarily in uniform.' (p.27)

<sup>100</sup> Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over* (Pimlico, Random House: London, 1995)p.19

exercising Whitehall and Buckingham palace and causing anxiety even among the more thoughtful democrats.’<sup>101</sup> Government fears about the mutinous behaviour of British troops after the First World War significantly curtailed post-war British foreign policy ambitions in 1919. Rothstein argues that British soldiers’ strikes in 1919 in fact ‘prevented the despatch of huge armed forces against the Soviet Republic at a critical moment of its existence.’<sup>102</sup> Further, Lamb suggests that ‘That winter of 1918-1919 was the nearest Britain ever came to social revolution’.<sup>103</sup> Memories of the widespread dissatisfaction and mutiny among conscripted troops across Europe and Britain after the First World War played an important role in government decision-making as the Second World War drew to a close. ‘The spectres of mutiny and social unrest, vividly recalled from 1919’, writes Addison, ‘were never far from the minds of the authorities.’<sup>104</sup> That there was a pervasive fear of mutiny after World War Two is not in doubt. Lord Woolton’s diary entry for 1<sup>st</sup> November 1940 attests to this anxiety: ‘I think there is going to be grave trouble’, he fretted, ‘and the danger is that if the machine of

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<sup>101</sup> Beatrice Webb, quoted in David Mitchell, 1919: Red Mirage (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) p.45

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Rothstein *The Soldiers’ Strikes of 1919* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1980), p.105

<sup>103</sup> Lamb, p.9

<sup>104</sup> Addison, p.19

government which can spend money so recklessly in engaging in war, fails to be equally reckless in rebuilding, there will be both the tendency and the excuse for revolution.’<sup>105</sup>

What is also clear is that the fear of mutiny which marked government policy-making after the First World War also significantly shaped official decisions towards the end of the Second World War. Rex Pope has stressed recall of the 1918-20 experience in preparing for the end of the war in Britain from 1941.<sup>106</sup> He highlights the very careful management of demobilisation, and shows how, again, the potential volatility of demobilisation thwarted wider government aims in the immediate post-war situation, in this case maintaining a centrally planned labour force for controlled economic reconstruction.<sup>107</sup> The issue was so ‘politically sensitive’ observes Pope, that the management of demobilisation ‘tended to subordinate economic requirements to those of the military or of public opinion.’<sup>108</sup> ‘Government recognized the need for wide

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<sup>105</sup> Quote from Lord Woolton, diary entry for 1 November 1940, Woolton MS 2, Department of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford, quoted in Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London: Jonathan Cape 1992, Penguin, 2006)p.163

<sup>106</sup> R.Pope, ‘Looking Back: The Experience of 1917-20 and the Planning of British Demobilisation, Decontrol and Reconstruction after World War II’, *Northwest Journal of Historical Studies*, II, 2 (1992)] (p.65), and also Rex Pope British Demobilization after the Second World War *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.66

<sup>107</sup> Rex Pope British Demobilization after the Second World War *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.67

<sup>108</sup> Pope, (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.67-68

popular acquiescence in policy during and immediately after the war'.<sup>109</sup> 'Thus examination of the British demobilization of 1945 and after reveals an attention to the popular mood that necessarily accompanies a major war and its aftermath.'<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the chorus of an anti-war song popular in the First World War bears a striking resemblance in tone to the anti-war poem (quoted above) which was used as evidence against the anarchists in 1945: 'Go to the war, go to the war/Heed not the Socialists, but wallow in gore;/ Shoulder you rifle, worker, don't ask what it's for/Let your wife and children starve, and go to the war.'<sup>111</sup>

### **The 'forward policy' of the Freedom Press**

It was in relation to contact with serving troops towards the end of the Second World War that more serious Home Office interest was aroused in the activities of the Freedom Press. On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1943, the Postal and Telegraph Censor intercepted a multigraphed circular letter to 'Friends of the Freedom Press'. In the circulation notes attached to the intercepted material at the Home office, it was noted that 'it appears that special efforts are being made to keep in contact with members of the 'Friends of the Freedom Press' who are serving in the armed forces'.<sup>112</sup> The letter in question was explicitly directed to members of the forces sympathetic to the Freedom Press and

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<sup>109</sup> Pope, (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.78

<sup>110</sup> Pope, (Jan., 1995), pp.65-81, p.79

<sup>111</sup> William Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (London:1936), p.197, quoted in Rothstein, p.105

<sup>112</sup> HO45/25553 833412/5, Postal and Telegraph Censorship dated 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1943

pointed to 'a more alert critical mood' and even 'justified aggressive cynicism' among 'workers in uniform'. It went on to state that 'the spirit of liberty of men and women in uniform is developing.' The Freedom Press anarchists claimed that 'Discontent grows with the increase of hardships and will grow with the coming intensive suffering of the next phase of war.'<sup>113</sup> Home Office circulation notes record the increasing government awareness of the Freedom Press activities: 'In view of the fact that Friends of Freedom Press think that they are gaining increasing support in the forces, it may be worth watching to see what line *War Commentary* follows.'<sup>114</sup> From February 1944 to January 1945 the Home Office regularly scrutinised *War Commentary*. Particular attention is paid to criticisms of military policy, industrial strikes, and material relating to discontent and radicalism among serving troops. In February 1944 for example, Home Office notes record: 'This number contains a mischievous leading article on the folly of bombing.'<sup>115</sup> In Mid-April 1944 it is noted that '*War Commentary* is very much in favour of recent strikes'<sup>116</sup> In May 1944 staff at the Home Office note that *War Commentary* 'describes mutinies in the British Army in 1919' which, the anarchists claim, 'are recalled by the present discussions about demobilisation.'<sup>117</sup> These articles, alongside the circular letter were seen at the Home Office as 'indicative of the interest which the

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<sup>113</sup> HO45/25553 833412/5, Letter from 'Publishers of "War Commentary"' dated 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1943

<sup>114</sup> HO45/25553 833412/5, Home Office circulation notes, initialled S.C.S.R, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1943

<sup>115</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15, circulation notes, dates 11<sup>th</sup> March 1944

<sup>116</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15, circulation notes, initialled J.M.P, dates 28<sup>th</sup> April 1944

<sup>117</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15 7<sup>th</sup> July 1944

anarchist movement is taking in the Forces.’<sup>118</sup> Related to this, in July 1944, ‘Excerpts from soldier’s letters commenting on alleged unrest in the forces’ is observed, as well as ‘an article on mutinies which points out that mutinies cannot be organised but arise from minor discontents continued over a period, plus frustration and disillusion.’ ‘One gathers’ commented Home Office staff ‘that the mutinies which will occur at the end of this war will have a better chance of success than their predecessors’.<sup>119</sup> In August 1944, Home Office notes record that ‘An article signed “from the ranks” purports to show that the British army is ripe for revolution and says that the officers are the counter revolutionaries.’ It is also noted at the Home Office that the opinion of *War commentary* is that ‘Fascism is in the making unless the soldiers set up their own councils and unite with the workers for the defence of the revolution.’<sup>120</sup> In September, Home Office staff commented with concern on a *War Commentary* review of a book on the revolts in the German Navy in 1918 and quotes from the review itself: ‘such knowledge we must all have for the coming stormy days that are ahead. For all who are weather-wise can see that the storm clouds are gathering.’<sup>121</sup> Despite official concerns about this material, it was in conjunction with the further Freedom press attempts to communicate with the forces that the anti-war material precipitated concerns at MI5 and within the service departments, police searches, and eventually prosecution. In the event, the case made by the prosecution was to connect a circular letter sent to the members of the forces

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<sup>118</sup> JMP, minutes, 24th May, 1944, HO45 833412/21

<sup>119</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15 7<sup>th</sup> July 1944

<sup>120</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15, J.M.P. 28<sup>th</sup> August 1944

<sup>121</sup> HO45/25553 833412/15, J.M.P. 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1944

who were subscribers to *War Commentary* with articles on the history of Soldiers' Councils in Germany and Russia in 1917 and 1918, and on the European resistance movements which, as the Allied armies advancing in 1944, were being urged to hand over their arms to the governments then being set up under military auspices. One of the headlines in *War Commentary* urged resistance movements in Europe to 'Hang onto your arms!' and this was used by the prosecution to show that the paper was telling British soldiers to keep their rifles for revolutionary action.

Early in November, 1944, it became known to Police that a circular letter, dated 25<sup>th</sup> October 1944, had been distributed by the Freedom Press to its members serving in the forces. 'It is apparent from the circular letter' notes the police report written by Chief Inspector Whitehead 'that *War Commentary* is widely circulated among members of the Forces'. The report draws attention to key passages in this letter which urge readers to circulate their copies of *War Commentary* among their units and pass names and addresses of potential sympathisers to the Freedom Press. The report quotes the letter in detail on the subject of discussion groups in the military and their potential to become embryonic 'Soldiers' Councils'. 'In view of the seemingly dangerous material from a security angle, contained in this circular letter,' wrote Whitehead, 'a special watch was kept on the subsequent editions of "War Commentary".<sup>122</sup> Particular issues of *War Commentary* were highlighted for special attention by Whitehead. This included Vol. 6 No. 1 dated 1.11.44, notably the feature 'All Power to the Soviets', which concerned revolutionary action. He notes in particular those articles in *War*

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<sup>122</sup> Police Report of 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1945, including discussion of the circular letter and searches carried out on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1944 [H045 25554 8333412/27], Written by Chief Inspector Whitehead

*Commentary* which provide historical surveys of post-war insurrectionary activities in Germany, France and Russia, entitled 'Spontaneous insurrections', 'Soldiers' Councils during the French Revolution' and 'Councils as instruments of politics'. Whitehead's extensive quotes from *War Commentary* in his report includes the following, which featured in the paper under a sub-heading referring to the 'Lessons of 1917': 'the decline of Army discipline was a sort of natural process, long before the revolutionary left began to take a hand. Wholesale desertions, complete disregard of orders, attacks upon and even murders of unpopular officers, fraternization with the German troops, blank refusal to go into attack; these were spontaneous manifestations of revolutionary feeling.' Whitehead also drew attention to *War Commentary* Vol. 6 No.2 dated 11.11.44 which leads with the article "People in Arms", and refers to the situation in France when armed bands of maquis seized control in the provinces. In this article, under the sub-heading 'Similar conditions elsewhere' which addressed the relationship between allied liberation forces and popular movements in Greece and Belgium, the anarchists expressed a sentiment which was to be highly significant for prosecution of the Freedom press editors. Whitehead drew particular attention to the anarchist view of 'the revolutionary potentialities inherent in the closing period of the war' and in particular the assertion in *War Commentary* that 'It is the duty of Anarchists to urge the workers everywhere, as Connolly did the Irish workers of the Citizen Army to hold onto your arms.' As Whitehead noted, the sentiment was reiterated in the subsequent issue of *War Commentary*, Vol. 6 No. 3, dated 25.11.44, in an article entitled 'The Workers Struggle in Belgium': We are emphatically on the other side, that of the armed workers. And we repeat again what we said in our last issue – "Hold on to your rifles!" The same issue included further discussion of the 1917 Wilhelmshaven mutiny in the German

Navy and the 1918 Kiel Naval Mutiny. Whitehead concludes with the conviction that ‘the reading by Service men, of the circular letter dated 25.10.44, taken in conjunction with the articles appearing in the War commentary dated 1.11.44 and 25.11.44, would amount to “An incitement to mutiny.”’<sup>123</sup> In line with Whitehead’s conclusion, in November 1944 M.I.5 also raised concerns about the content of *War Commentary* and forwarded what it considered to be mutinous material to the Service Departments. This included ‘Pages of Revolutionary History’ by Tom Brown, published in the May and Mid-May 1944 issues of *War Commentary*, ‘How Wars End’ from the July 1944 edition, ‘Revolution – Europe’s Hope’ published in Mid-July 1944, ‘The Wilhelmshaven Revolt’ by Mat Kavanagh, from Mid-September 1944, and ‘Truth in History’ by Marcus Graham, from the Mid-September 1944 issue of the paper. In a letter concerning this material written by G.R. Mitchell, on behalf of M.I.5, to J.J. Nunn at the Home Office, Mitchell stated ‘We [MI5] feel it our duty to bring the articles in *War Commentary* which appear to have as their main or sole purpose the presentation of mutiny in a favourable light, to the notice of the Service Departments.’<sup>124</sup> This material, in conjunction with the changed layout of the publication to a more accessible newspaper style, and particularly in relation to the letter circulated in the forces, convinced Home Office staff that the anarchist publication was pursuing ‘what might be described as a forward policy.’<sup>125</sup> ‘There is a prima facie’ observed staff at the Home Office, ‘that copies of the circular

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<sup>123</sup> Police Report of 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1945, including discussion of the circular letter and searches carried out on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1944 [H045 25554 8333412/27], Written by Chief Inspector Whitehead

<sup>124</sup> H045 833412/20, letter from G.R. Mitchell to J.J. Nunn Home Office, dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 1944

<sup>125</sup> JMP, 11th December, 1944, Home Office minutes, H045 25554 833412/27

issues by the Freedom Press on the 25th Oct have been distributed to serving soldiers and there is reasonable cause to suspect that the object of such distribution is not to enlighten H.M.'s forces on the causes of past mutinies and revolutions but to encourage them to prepare themselves to take similar action when the right moment comes.'<sup>126</sup>

'Considered in the light of this letter', noted the Home Office, 'these articles on mutinies and revolutions assume a new complexion' and were considered 'a more direct incitement to mutiny'. It was decided, in light of this 'forward policy' to 'nip these people's activities in the bud before the end of the war with Germany.' 'Otherwise' argued Home Office staff in the following significant observation 'they might have a dangerous influence after the armistice when men in the forces were weary of military life and were perhaps not particularly eager to police Germany, or to fight in more distant theatres of war, and had more time at their disposal for reading and discussion.'<sup>127</sup> This comment encapsulates the anxieties underpinning the decision to prosecute the anarchists so late in the war. The decision was made in light of anticipated tensions concerning the demobilisation of conscripted civilian personnel. This reflects well-entrenched fears concerning post-war dissent and mutiny. Prosecution became desirable because of official concerns about the possibly of the unmanageability of social tensions precipitated by large-scale demobilisation, in the eyes of the government, the police, G.2. and M.I.5 the concern was this: 'if no action is taken now it will be more difficult to take action later on when the position may have

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<sup>126</sup> JAN, 11th December, 1944, Home Office minutes, HO45 25554 833412/27

<sup>127</sup> JMP, 11th December, 1944, Home Office minutes, HO45 25554 833412/27

seriously deteriorated.'<sup>128</sup> The final decision was expressed in a letter from the Director of Public Prosecution to Sir Alexander Maxwell at the Home Office, dated 7th February 1945: 'After consultation with the Law Officers it has been decided to prosecute in this matter... [the Freedom Press material] is clearly intended to be subversive and may be potentially dangerous.'<sup>129</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Anarchist sensitivity to the militarised features of the British state in the 1940s meant that they were primed and ready to pluck at the raw nerves of the political elite regarding the contentious process of large-scale demobilisation. What this episode shows is a more domestically-rooted picture of anarchism in Britain in the period. The challenge posed by the Freedom Press group was embedded in British social experience and directed to the specific characteristics of the British state. The anarchists were responding to British popular concerns of the period, and attuned to the raw nerves of the British elite concerning the ends of wars. A militaristic state has reason to be particularly concerned about the end of wars, especially when they involve conscripted personnel. The focus of concern is on the breakdown of military regulation and official sources of authority. Similarly, for the anarchists, the emerging prospect of demobilisation was the precipitous moment for accelerating their challenge to the 'warfare' state, and for an intensification of their activities in relation to troops serving

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<sup>128</sup> JAN, 11th December, 1944, Home Office minutes, HO45 25554 833412/27

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Director of Public Prosecution, Theobald Matthews (?) to Sir Alexander Maxwell at the Home office, dated 7th February 1945, HO45 25554 833412/27

abroad. Both the government and the anarchists were drawing on lessons of history for their assessment of the likelihood of rebellion and mutiny within serving forces. It is at this moment that the seemingly insignificant group, hitherto regarded as unthreatening, become a serious enough concern for the Home Office to take action. What is significant here for the history of anarchist ideas in the twentieth century is that their insights and challenges relate to the specific British context and were precipitated by the features of key anarchist ideological commitments concerning militarism and the state, and also rebellion and social order. They were well-placed ideologically to address the anxiety around these issues because they consistently associated government military policy with violence and dislocation, and disobedience with spontaneous social order. At this moment in modern British history, anarchist ideological commitments to anti-militarism and philosophies of natural cohesion challenged the confidence of the British State. In terms of British social history, the trial of the anarchists invites us to re-examine the impact of military experience on the civilian population in Britain and widen the 'welfarist', 'consensus' paradigm, by which relations between society and government of the period has traditionally been viewed, to include an understanding of the impact of war on British society as chaotic and radicalising.

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