

After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Britain, 1945-68

Review Number:

898

Publish date:

Friday, 30 April, 2010

Author:

Matthew Grant

ISBN:

9780230205420

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£52.00

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Jennifer Cole

After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Britain, 1945–68 provides a fascinating historical study of post-war and Cold War policy on civil defence in the United Kingdom. In particular, it looks at how successive UK administrations sought to ensure both continuity of government in the event of a nuclear strike and the survival of the British public, through such measures as the planned evacuation of major population centres, the proposed building of shelters and public education programmes.

In compiling the book, Matthew Grant has drawn largely on material that has come into the public domain only recently, as a result of the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This ability to draw on documents such as the 1955 Strath Report, which assessed the country's ability to survive a nuclear attack but was not made available to the public until 2002, provides a deeper insight than has previously been possible into the political decisions made during a very sensitive period of history.

Furthermore, the availability of such material has enabled Grant to provide facts and statistics that illustrate the economic as well as moral considerations that led to some planning assumptions being implemented while others were largely ignored – a valuable comparison of which today's emergency planners and resilience practitioners should be mindful. To give just one example, he shows that building shelters for all of the 11 million 'key workers' required to keep Britain running in the event of a nuclear strike would have cost £32 million more than the entire NHS budget for the same period. In this context, it becomes clear why such plans had little chance of being put into practice even though they contained some excellent ideas which might, under different circumstances, have created a real legacy for civil protection in the UK. The tripartite approach of static civilian units, mobile civilian and mobile military volunteers, for example, which could have been moved to wherever the need was greatest, would have benefited the UK during any civil

emergency, not just nuclear defence planning. The programme was never adequately implemented and yet some of its benefits long outlived the policies that spawned them nonetheless: the 'Green Goddess' military fire engines used in the 2002 fire fighters strike for example were the Auxiliary Fire Service vehicles of 1950s civil defence.

The 23 years covered by the book take us from the end of the Second World War, through the drafting and assent of the civil defence Act 1948, the Hall Report of 1953 (which set out what Britain might look like following a nuclear war), the Strath Report of 1955, the Home Defence Reviews of 1960 and 1965–6 and the eventual decision to all but suspend civil defence in 1968. While Grant focuses primarily on policy formation and the economic and political drivers of civil defence policy during this period, he puts them into the context of contemporary events such as the Cuban missile crisis and the Suez Crisis as well as exploring the general and pervasive threat from the Soviet Union. He considers not only the impact of such events on civil defence policy (pointing out for example that the Korean War resulted in a considerable jump in recruitment – the real and present danger providing a more persuasive incitement to sign up than any of the numerous publicity campaigns) but also their impact on UK nuclear policy more widely.

He includes brief comparisons with the situation in the United States, and also takes time to contrast the potential devastation of atomic warfare with the level of damage caused to British cities, and the all-important morale of the British public, during the Blitz.

Quite rightly, much consideration is given to the political stand-off between civil defence policy and the political activists of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), whose supporters saw civil defence activities as nothing more than a cheap trick to convince the public that nuclear war could be survived. Without such reassurance that the nuclear war could be survived, the mere existence of nuclear weapons would have been much less palatable. Grant's research makes it clear that CND were not entirely (if in fact at all) wrong in their assumptions that civil defence was simply a smokescreen to bluff the public into passively accepting the nuclear arms race. Successive governments saw it not so much as a real attempt to ensure survival as a political necessity to prevent the public from thinking atomic war equalled certain death, ultimately failing because politicians knew that no preparations, no matter how costly, would make much difference in the face of an actual attack.

This, as the book makes clear, was the dilemma lying at the heart of all post-war civil defence planning. In simple terms, the civil defence Act of 1948 should have done little more than ensure the mechanisms for the defence of the home front in Britain – namely the Air Raid Wardens, Auxiliary Fire Service and similar home front volunteer groups that had been raised immediately before and during the Second World War – remained in place so that they could be quickly called into service again if and when the situation required it. Unfortunately, such organisations provided scant protection against atomic bombs of the type dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, let alone from the potentially even more destructive thermonuclear and hydrogen bombs developed during the 1950s.

As Grant makes clear, the devastation likely to be caused by these latter weapons in particular was so great that it was hard to envisage what, if any, effect hardy bands of patriotic civilian volunteers could possibly have: the idea of a plucky Brit with a first aid kit and a shovel already belonged to a bygone age. Virtually instantaneously, thermonuclear bombs would cause more casualties than both world wars combined and leave up to 21 million Britons dead. It is in making such points that the book benefits most from access to the recently released archives, as Grant is able to pepper the text with figures and statistics that paint a bleak picture of what the aftermath of a nuclear strike would have looked like.

In the midst of all this, it is not surprising that civil defence policy makers struggled to decide to what extent they were planning the survival of Britain as opposed to the survival of Britons. Was their main aim to ensure continuity of government, so that the economic and political state of Britain might survive to rise from the nuclear ashes or was it primarily about ensuring that the public could be evacuated from target areas, or sheltered within them, and that survivors would have sufficient access to food, shelter and medical care?

Policy and strategy was always impossibly split between the two, leading to a situation which Grant sums up at the end of chapter five as resulting in: '[N]o agreement over what civil defence was actually for' (p. 122) and, more harshly, in his overall conclusion on as 'a rational and understandable sham ... in terms of the government's overall defence policy, a necessary facade' (p. 198). Successive UK Cold War governments were dependent on civil defence policy assuring the general public that nuclear war was survivable in order to ensure that the same public accepted the UK's participation in a nuclear arms race. No-one, however, truly believed in it.

The book is an historical work that draws a line under the proceedings with the decision, in 1968, to put the civil defence Corps and the Auxiliary Fire Service on a care and maintenance only basis, essentially sounding its death knell. Grant does not attempt to use the past as a tool with which to analyse the political decisions of today but his work is extremely valuable to current resilient practitioners, offering an opportunity to learn lessons from the past and thereby to guard against repeating them. He provides a fascinating history of civil defence policy not only for students of cold war politics, but also for current emergency planners, especially in the insights he gives into the relationship between planning, planning assumptions, and the planners' and the public's ability to believe that those plans might actually work.

Equally, the study offers lessons for those concerned with protection of Critical National Infrastructure, particularly on the thorny topic of redundancy versus efficiency. Grant explores, for example, the decision to deliberately disperse the UK's reliance on just a few ports across a larger number of locations, to prevent port activity from being crippled in a single strike, and also to locate some of the hardest working ports away from major urban centres. Considerations for oil distribution and communications utilities also echo the issues facing critical infrastructure protection today.

Another interesting thread running through the study is the relationship of civil defence to both military planning and international security. The decision to place civil defence under the Home Office rather than the Ministry of Defence, where it sat during the War years, is perhaps a bigger mistake than could ever have been foreseen at the time. In doing so, civil defence activities became entwined more with the spy and counter-spy connotations of the Cold War's international politics than with the more straightforward home front defence role it might have had as an adjunct to the Territorial Army. As a result, preparations and budgets lagged behind military ones, ultimately damaging preparations, training and resources. As an extension to defence rather than something separate from it, civil defence might have been much more effective.

In this regard, however, it is somewhat disappointing that Grant devotes little more than a sentence to the Civil Defence Corps' considerable contribution to emergency response during the 1950s and 1960s, and does not explore the impact this had on both policy decisions and public perception of the organisation. The contribution of well-trained and exercised volunteers to events such as the severe flooding at Linton and Lynmouth in 1952, the East Coast floods of 1953, train crashes at Sutton Coldfield in 1955 and Lewisham in 1957, and the mudslide at Aberfan in 1966 cannot be underestimated. It would have been interesting to speculate on why such events were not used to improve support for the organisation, as this perhaps marks the biggest failing of the period: by not recognising and supporting the value of the civil defence volunteers to hazards other than nuclear obliteration, the UK lost a foothold in the very type of community resilience the Civil Contingencies Secretariat seeks to champion today. The organisation could have provided much needed additional capacity to deal with many of the threats and hazards on the National Risk Register, from flooding and severe snow to the recent foot-and-mouth epidemics and pandemic flu.

Grant does on the other hand spend time analysing why volunteers signed up for civil defence activities more readily in some areas than others, offering glimpses into the mindsets of both the volunteers and the bureaucracies needed to back them up. He shows, for instance, that civil defence recruitment was highest in Coventry, at its peak reaching 95 per cent of the set target whereas other cities, such as Sheffield, barely managed 30 per cent. The difference, he speculates, was most likely due to the memory of wartime need: heavily-bombed Coventry knew the benefit of such volunteers much more than other cities. Yet even this could not save policies built on unstable foundations, nor prevent Coventry's local authority from stating that civil defence expenditure was a waste of time and money against the damage a hydrogen bomb would cause.

Such historical facts could have benefited from a little more reflection and analysis of the impact they had not only at the time, but on civil defence and civil contingency policy today. In particular, more could have been made of the relationship between the government and the public and to what extent the two were prepared to trust one another. In particular, the book shows how information not shared gave fuel to the anti-nuclear protestors who eventually destroyed and undermined civil defence. Nuclear policy at this time revolved around military and economic survival, not about saving the lives of the population, and it didn't take long for the general public, nor the local authorities whose budgets were strained by civil defence spending, to see through the smoke.

Of course, the period is a fascinating one and there is far more to report, analyse and speculate upon than could ever be fitted into a single book, particularly one that spans only 198 pages. With 30 pages of notes and references, ten of bibliography and a further ten of references, *After the Bomb* at least ensures that interested students and analysts know where else to turn. The length cannot hide that this is an academic research project repackaged as a book, but that is far from a criticism and it will make a valuable addition to the library of any civil defence historian.

The author would like to thank the reviewer for her positive, intelligent and thoughtful comments.

Other reviews:

oxford journals

<http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXVII/524/246.full> [2]

oxford journals 2

<http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/3/429.full> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/898>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4684>

[2] <http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/CXXVII/524/246.full>

[3] <http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/content/21/3/429.full>