Making sense of nuclear war: narratives of voluntary civil defence and the memory of Britain’s Cold War

Matthew Grant
University of Essex

ABSTRACT
In interviews with members of Britain’s Civil Defence Services, experiences of Cold War voluntarism are recalled in different ways. Some remembered their desire to help defend their nation and local community. Others remembered making a leisure choice that had little connection to the potential nuclear war the organization was ostensibly preparing for. No one provided a well-developed account of civil defence’s ability to provide a defence against the effects of a nuclear war. Popular memory theorists suggest cultural discourse limits the ability of individuals to narrate stories that do not align with culturally valued frameworks: in this case, dominant understandings of civil defence as at best ridiculous or at worst dangerous were established in the 1980s. This article argues that memories of civil defence voluntarism in the 1950-60s have been shaped by these discourses, but that individuals were able to express the different meanings civil defence had in their lives in ways that provide a more nuanced and holistic picture of the intersections of leisure, service and sociability that made up civil defence. As such, it argues that oral history allows us to understand the various ‘horizons of possibility’ that made up individual experiences of the Cold War.

KEYWORDS
Cultural memory; deterrence; oral history; nuclear weapons; leisure

The threat of nuclear war defined the Cold War as much as the ideological contest between capitalism and communism. It shaped diplomatic and political discussions between and within countries, inspired waves of mass activism to promote peace and underpinned arguments for the nuclear deterrent. At a basic level, responses to the threat of nuclear war involved constructing imaginary futures which structured how people understood the world around them. Indeed, the very possibility of an imaginable future seemed beyond the reach of some. However, there was an alternative way of imagining nuclear war, one that emphasized the chances of survival and the ability of civil defence to save lives. Since the end of the Cold War, civil defence and the prospect of nuclear survival...
have been absent from British popular culture, or reduced to a curiosity, as in the ‘dark tourism’ phenomenon of opening former nuclear bunkers as attractions. Instead, the Cold War is represented within popular culture through stories of spies and depictions of nuclear confrontation that emphasize its end-of-the-world nature. The history of civil defence volunteers, who numbered around 500,000 at their mid-1950s peak, has been largely forgotten. The fundamental reason for their service – to save lives in a nuclear war – has been subject to open ridicule since at least the 1980s. The different nuclear future they imagined has been written out of history. This article explores the changing memory of threatened nuclear war via the recalled experiences of people who worked in the government-sponsored Civil Defence Services. It argues that individuals struggle to recall the imaginary nuclear futures that motivated them to serve in civil defence, and suggests that this struggle results from the impact of the dominant cultural discourse surrounding Britain’s Cold War. What they do remember, however, is highly revealing about the meaning that civil defence voluntarism retains in individuals’ lives.

The memory of the Cold War is complex. There was not a single monolithic ‘Cold War’ experience, and the meaning of ‘civil defence’ in particular was transformed during the period. In the 1980s, civil defence was viewed much less positively within popular culture than it had been two decades before. The ‘cultural memory’ of Cold War civil defence – how narratives surrounding it were formed and circulated within popular culture – owes considerably more to this later period. The dominant cultural memory of how civil defence had operated in the 1950s and 1960s was formed in large part during the debates of the 1980s. Historians have long argued that the circulation of dominant cultural discourses within popular culture in the years between the events remembered and the act of remembering shapes individual memory. The memories of individual civil defence volunteers therefore allow us to explore the changing memory of the Cold War. These individual memories reveal the meaning of civil

---

2See I. Hermann, ‘Cold War heritage (and) tourism: exploring heritage processes within Cold War sites in Britain’ (Ph.D. thesis, Bedfordshire, 2012).

3The recent wave of literature of Britain’s cultural experience of nuclear weapons has emphasized the cultural history of the technology, rather than the prospect of nuclear war. See J. Hogg, British Nuclear Culture. Official and unofficial narratives in the long 20th century (London, 2016); C. Laucht, Elemental Germans. Klaus Fuchs, Rudolf Peierls, and the making of British nuclear culture 1939–59 (Basingstoke & New York, 2012); J. Hughes, ‘What is British nuclear culture? Understanding Uranium 235’, British Journal for the History of Science, 45, 4 (2012), 495–518. Several historians, have, however, written on the history of civil defence: M. Smith, “Architects of Armageddon”: the Home Office Scientific Advisers Branch and civil defence in Britain, 1945–68, British Journal for the History of Science, 43, 2 (2010), 149–80; J. Stafford, “Stay at home”: the politics of nuclear civil defence, 1968–1983, Twentieth Century British History, 23, 3 (2012), 383–407, 385; N. Barnett, “No protection against the H-Bomb”: press and popular reactions to the Coventry civil defence controversy, 1954, Cold War History, 15, 3 (2015), 277–300; J. Preston, ‘The strange death of UK civil defence education in the 1980s’, History of Education, 44, 2 (2015), 225–42.

4For the most sustained analyses of cultural memory, see A. Assman, Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, media, archives (Cambridge, 2011); A. Confino, ‘Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method’, American Historical Review, 102, 5 (1997), 1386–403.

5For a useful overview, see L. Abrams, Oral History Theory (London, 2010).
defence service in people’s lives, suggesting how the neglected culture of the Civil Defence Service in the Cold War might be reconstructed.6

Individual memory cannot be entirely separated from the narratives circulating within popular culture either at the time of the events experienced, or in the time separating those events and the interview encounter in which they are recalled. Scholars working on ‘popular memory’ have long argued that individual memory is indelibly shaped by intervening cultural narratives,7 arguing that for memory to be formed, retained and recalled, the ‘conditions for its expression’ need to exist.8 ‘Popular memory’ can be defined as an attempt to understand how cultural discourses shape the content and form of what is recalled by individuals, the meanings individuals attach to their own memories, and the emotions these memories provoke in them. Central to understanding the impact of culture on individual memory is the influential concept of ‘composure’ developed by Graham Dawson to mean both the ability to recount personal experience in ways that ensure a degree of psychic ease and the processes by which personal narratives are ‘composed’ in a literary sense.9 As Penny Summerfield puts it, individuals make sense of their experiences by drawing on generalized, public versions of the aspects of the lives that they are talking about to construct their own particular, personal accounts. This process of life-story telling is crucial to the construction of the subject – in reproducing the self as a social identity, we necessarily draw upon public renderings.10

In this way, ‘composure’ is achieved. If no relevant cultural framework is readily available, individual memory breaks down into narrative incoherence or a lack of remembering.11 Summerfield’s popular memory approach is particularly important for understanding the interrelationship between cultural narratives and individual life circumstances.12

---

6 One model for such research is Frank Biess’s pioneering work on the emotional consequences of nuclear armaments on the population of West Germany: F. Biess, “Everybody has a chance”: civil defense, nuclear angst, and the history of emotions in postwar Germany, German History, 27 (2009), 215–43.

7 For its earliest formation, see CCCS Popular Memory Group, ‘What do we mean by popular memory?’, CCCS Stencilled Occasional Papers, Number 67 (Birmingham, 1982), http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/history/cccs/stencilled-occasional-papers/56to87/SOP67.pdf (accessed 9 Feb. 2017). Graham Dawson, a key member of the group, developed the theoretical framework of the relationship between popular culture and individual memory further in Soldier Heroes. British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities (London, 1994). For a thorough overview of this issue in relation to war, see T.G. Ashplant, G. Dawson and M. Roper, ‘The politics of war memory and commemoration: contexts, structures and dynamics’ in Ashplant, Dawson and Roper (eds), The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration (London, 2000).

8 L. Passerini, ‘Memories between silence and oblivion’ in K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (eds), Contested Pasts. The politics of memory (London, 2003), 238.

9 ‘Composure’ in this sense was theorized by Dawson, Soldier Heroes; see also P. Summerfield, Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives (Manchester, 1998); A. Thomson, Anzac Memories. Living with the legend (2nd edn, Melbourne, 2013).

10 P. Summerfield, ‘Culture and composure: creating narratives of the gendered self in oral history interviews’, Cultural and Social History, 1, 1 (2004), 65–93, 68.

11 Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure’, op. cit.; L. Abrams, ‘Liberating the female self: epiphanies, conflict and coherence in the life-stories of post-war British women’, Social History, 39, 1 (2014), 14–35.

12 Summerfield, Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives, op. cit.
This is not to say that cultural narratives always determine, rather than merely shape, recollections. Individuals always retain agency over how they tell their stories. Michael Roper argues that historical work emphasizing the structuring power of culture and language ‘has little to say about the range of possible personal motivations for remembering’. While public languages provide an influential ‘overlay’ of memory, there is an also an ‘underlay’ structured by experience itself that exists beyond the ‘mere surface content’ of public language. Alessandro Portelli argues that oral history is both a highly individual expression and a manifestation of social discourse, and must be understood as an interplay between the ‘personal and social, of individual expression and social praxis’. Likewise, the memories of civil defence volunteers reflect both the cultural memory of the Cold War and their own attempts to make sense of their experiences and to convey that meaning within the interview encounter. As such, the varied ways these volunteers convey their service is itself illustrative.

The first section of the article introduces the Civil Defence Services, and its contested and sometimes controversial place in public discussions in the 1950s and 1960s. Although many people enjoyed their service, the controversy surrounding government policy on the issue influenced public perceptions of the volunteers’ actions. The second section shows how the popular memory of civil defence was transformed in the 1980s through extensive political criticism and cultural ridicule, highlighting the lack of a positive memory of civil defence within British culture. Finally, the third section examines the testimony of volunteers. Their recollections were shaped by political and cultural contests over the possibility of nuclear defence in both the period of their service and the years that followed. In recalling the Civil Defence Services’ role in ‘fighting’ a nuclear war, interviewees struggled to achieve narrative composure: they had difficulty formulating coherent narratives which aligned their personal experiences with culturally dominant ways of viewing civil defence. Instead, their memories reveal personal understandings of civil defence defined within the context of debates on nuclear deterrence but also by notions of leisure, duty and usefulness. Portelli argues that oral history offers less a grid of standard experience than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined. The fact that these possibilities, are hardly ever organised in tight, coherent patterns, indicates that each person entertains, in each moment, multiple possible destinies.
This article is an attempt to excavate these imagined possibilities of the Cold War and to understand the limits to memory and the difficulties of recalling the anticipated horror of nuclear war, but to do so without filling in the clear gaps within this memory with speculation. Instead, it focuses on individual recollections to understand both how individuals make sense of the imagined possibilities of nuclear war, and the meaning the Cold War conflict has in these individuals’ lives and memories.

**Civil defence in the 1950s and 1960s**

Civil defence activism was integral to the idea of the ‘People’s War’ which flourished in Britain during the 1940s: a site of citizens’ commitment to the war effort, patriotic service to the nation and community, and bravery in the face of enemy bombardment. Crucially, it was a way in which those who remained on the home front, including women, older men, and men in reserved occupations, could contribute to ‘fighting’ the war. Voluntary civil defence services were disbanded after the war, but the shock of the Berlin Airlift, and the fears of future Soviet aggression it created, led to their resuscitation. Planned in late 1948 and formally instituted in 1949, the new Cold War organization was designed to meet an attack with conventional warfare, although the development of the Soviet atomic bomb in 1949 meant that the organization and role of the Civil Defence Services was in some respects outmoded from the beginning. Volunteer participation was central to the new service. The umbrella term ‘Civil Defence Services’ covered different organizations such as the Civil Defence Corps, Auxiliary Fire Service, and the National Hospital Reserve Service. Volunteers were trained to provide rescue, fire-fighting and welfare services for the public, as they had during the Second World War. They were recruited and trained locally under the aegis of local councils, and, after initial training, met every week for further training, lectures and practice, with regular exercises taking place on local and regional levels.

Although recruitment was initially slow in 1949, the outbreak of the Korean War and associated fears of a possible Third World War led to a sustained increased in membership. At its mid-1950s peak over half a million volunteers signed up, revealing the scale of voluntary action which underpinned the British Cold War state. Recruitment messages mixed patriotism, memories of the Second World War, community spirit and the ability of the services to provide a fulfilling site of leisure for volunteers. The membership was largely a mixture of the skilled working- and lower-middle class. Women made up

18. S. Spender, *Citizens in War – and After* (London, 1945).
19. M. Grant, *After the Bomb. Civil defence and nuclear war in Britain, 1945–68* (Basingstoke, 2010).
20. M. Grant, ‘Civil defence gives meaning to your leisure: citizenship, participation, and cultural change in Cold War recruitment propaganda, 1949–54’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, 1 (2011), 52–78.
slightly more than half of the members, but the overall culture of the Civil Defence Services was resolutely masculine.\textsuperscript{21} There was disproportionate representation of elderly male civil defence volunteers in the 1950s, whereas there was a more even age spread among female members. Men under 40 were barred from joining until 1955, as they would be liable for call-up to the armed forces. From the early 1960s, the authorities deliberately targeted a younger generation of recruits, but it is clear that middle-aged or ‘elderly’ members remained a large part of the services until the very end. Finally, the Civil Defence Services were also largely a phenomenon of rural areas and smaller towns.\textsuperscript{22} There was difficulty in recruiting volunteers in the major cities, suggesting a lack of public faith that such ‘target areas’ could be protected, and rural areas always recruited a far higher proportion of citizens than urban ones.

The Civil Defence Services were a remarkable and significant site of voluntary activity, but the entire policy of civil defence was consistently criticized throughout this period. Quite simply, neither the government nor volunteers in the service were ever able to fully convince the media of its usefulness. It was evident that the ability of men and women to do anything in the face of such vast destructive power would be severely limited. In its early years, there was widespread faith in the value of civil defence, but even its supporters criticized preparations as inadequate to the task of fighting a nuclear war.\textsuperscript{23} In many ways, the key turning point was the testing of the American hydrogen bomb in 1954. This led to increased popular awareness of the immense, city-destroying power of thermonuclear weapons and the effects of nuclear radiation spread by ‘fallout’. The possibility of civil defence now appeared much less tenable.\textsuperscript{24} The thermonuclear moment led to disagreements within the British government. While the Home Office continued to believe the Civil Defence Services had the potential to save millions of lives, the Ministry of Defence firmly believed that civil defence would be next to useless in the event of an attack, and that Britain’s only defence was a robust policy of nuclear deterrence.\textsuperscript{25} By the 1960s, even the Home Office had abandoned its optimism and admitted that civil defence’s usefulness would be confined to the very margins of any damaged area or the countryside.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} For a discussion of how a masculine ethos was promoted in civil defence during the Second World War, see L. Noakes, “Serve to save”: gender, citizenship and civil defence in Britain, 1937–1941’, Journal of Contemporary History, 47, 4 (2012), 734–53.
\textsuperscript{22} See Grant, After the Bomb, op. cit., 58–76.
\textsuperscript{23} From the Select Committee on Estimates, Session 1953–54: Civil Defence’, Reports from Committees. Session 3 November 1953–25 November 1954 (HMSO, London, 1953); for a flavour of the press reaction, see ‘The C. D. muddlers shock MPs’, Daily Mirror, 23 Dec. 1953, 4.
\textsuperscript{24} A. Bingham, “’The monster’? The British popular press and nuclear culture, 1945–early 1960s’, British Journal of the History of Science, 45, 2 (2012), 609–25.
\textsuperscript{25} M. Grant, ‘Home defence and the Sandys White Paper, 1957’, Journal of Strategic Studies, 31, 6 (2008), 925–49.
\textsuperscript{26} Grant, After the Bomb, op cit.
In fact, the prime strategic purpose of civil defence in the 1960s was not to save lives at all, but to ensure that people felt comforted enough to support the government in any major Cold War crisis. As such, civil defence could be seen as built on a government lie.

Certainly, critics of civil defence took this view. In 1954, Coventry City Council refused to fulfil its statutory commitments, arguing that nuclear defence was a sham. This led to a pro-civil defence display by volunteers on the city streets.\(^27\) Ritchie Calder, Vice-Chairman of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) argued that civil defence was in fact ‘civil deception’, and others sought to expose it as a lie perpetuated to fool people into supporting the deterrent.\(^28\) Throughout the 1960s, attempts to ‘expose’ civil defence continued. Detailed discussions of what would happen if nuclear war came were published in *Peace News*’s ‘Defence Black Paper’, *H-Bomb War. What it would be like* (1963), and a group calling themselves the ‘Spies for Peace’ published details of the government’s plans for a post-attack system of regional government underpinned by martial law.\(^29\) These activities were part of the peace movement’s sustained attack on civil defence’s role as a plank of the deterrent strategy. The apogee of such criticism came with Peter Watkins’s film *The War Game* (1965). Although kept off British television screens, the media furore surrounding its non-transmission merely emphasized its critique of the inadequacies of civil defence, especially the volunteer groups.\(^30\)

Scholars of the United States have argued that civil defence policy was largely, if not purely, symbolic: its central lie was its purpose, part of a regime designed to condition the public into believing that a nuclear war could be survived and therefore ensuring quiescence towards the nuclear state.\(^31\) This led to the militarization of educational and domestic spaces which reached its apogee in the ‘shelter panic’ of the early 1960s.\(^32\) In Britain, there was no equivalent panic and, although in the context of the government’s nuclear policies civil defence was undoubtedly important as a symbol of nuclear survival, it is equally important to move beyond the symbolic in order to understand the lived experience of volunteers who often fervently believed in the value of civil defence. To put it another way: in government propaganda and through exercises and activities on a local level, civil defence was symbolically important in its projection of nuclear...
survival; but historians need to understand the social role and political meaning of civil defence for the hundreds of thousands of people who served in it, as well as its wider discursive and performative role within British nuclear history.

Those in the Civil Defence Services remained committed to the idea that they could make a difference throughout the 1960s: not in major cities, which would be instantly destroyed by the thermonuclear blast, but on the edges of such areas, where people would survive but would need rescuing, emergency housing and food. Readers who wrote in to the magazine for volunteers, Civil Defence, seemed to take solace in the fact that although the organization was smaller than it should be, many innocent people would be glad of the volunteers if war broke out. The pages of Civil Defence showed a community that believed civil defence was urgent and necessary, and that those who refused to prepare were guilty of ‘defeatism’. As a poem submitted by a reader in 1966 put it, the problem of nuclear war must be solved ‘Not by sitting down with folded arms foretelling certain death,/But with learning, striving, seeking, as long as you have breath’. This is a useful summary of how Civil Defence saw the voluntary services: as a patriotic and community-spirited group under attack from the ‘gutless’ proponents of nuclear disarmament. Moreover, the magazine was not an entirely lone voice in the period. There were occasionally supportive stories about civil defence in the popular media.

When the voluntary services were scrapped in March 1968 (as part of the Wilson Government’s post-devaluation budget cuts), its axing was vociferously criticized in the pages of the right-wing press and by some Conservative backbenchers for leaving Britain vulnerable to attack. While it was scrapped for economic reasons (in official terms, placed on a ‘care-and-maintenance’ basis), the Civil Defence Services had also outlived their usefulness to the Government. There can be little doubt that they only continued that long because axing them earlier would have been controversial. The peace movement argued that civil defence was a sham, and could never make an impact. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, at least, volunteers had the cultural space, albeit contested, in which to argue that civil defence – and by extension their activities as volunteers – was worthwhile. This was far from the case in 1980s.

Civil defence in the 1980s and after

Twelve years after the mothballing of civil defence preparations, the return of Cold War hostilities and tensions saw defence against nuclear

33M. Grant, ‘The imaginative landscape of nuclear war in Britain, 1945–65’ in Grant and Ziemann, op. cit., 92–115.
34‘C.S.L.’, ‘Survival’, Civil Defence, 18, 4 (April 1966), 10.
35For example, see ‘A feeling of sanity comes to civil defence’, Sunday Times, 22 Sep. 1963, 6.
36See W.F.K. Thompson, ‘Defence: the cost of the cuts’, Daily Telegraph, 17 Jan. 1968, 16; also, ‘March of the thousands’, Daily Express, 26 Feb. 1968, 5.
weapons become a much more important political and cultural issue than in the pre-1968 era. At the heart of debates about 1980s civil defence was the obvious failings of the few measures that existed, specifically the widely criticized Protect and Survive pamphlet and series of animated broadcasts. As James Stafford has shown, this initiative was produced in the mid-1970s as the government updated its nuclear planning. The disbanding of the voluntary services meant that planned advice for the public in the event of an emergency was now out of date: there was now no organization dedicated to helping the public. Instead, Protect and Survive was developed as ‘the most cost-effective preparatory measure’ available: a set of publicity materials designed to show what individuals could do to protect themselves in an attack. Protect and Survive was drafted to meet irreconcilable aims: it was to simultaneously influence public behaviour (asking people to stay at home and prepare for war without government aid), reassure and calm the public about the prospect of nuclear death, and maintain credibility as a plausible depiction of nuclear war. It signally failed to do this.

The details of Protect and Survive were made public in January 1980, in a critical exposé in the Times based on leaked material. In mid-March, the animations were broadcast during an episode of the BBC’s Panorama titled ‘If the bomb drops’. The leaks forced the Government into placing the booklet on general sale in May, leading to further publicity and criticism. In a short space of time, civil defence had become a major issue, with the paucity of defence arrangements the overriding theme of criticisms. The timing was not arbitrary: in December 1979, the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan, definitively ending the détente process that had been under strain throughout the late 1970s, increasing international antagonism and raising fears of a future war. The invasion came a matter of weeks after NATO had agreed its new ‘dual-track’ strategy of continuing disarmament negotiations whilst deploying new Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe. As John W. Young puts it, détente was seen as a ‘life-and-death issue’ by many in Western Europe, and its collapse was understood as a complex process in which Europe was caught between renewed Soviet aggression and an increasingly belligerent United States planning to deploy new weapons in Western Europe.

37 Staffor, op. cit., 385.
38 See ‘A lethal failure of duty’, The Times, 19 Jan. 1980, 3; for a flavour of contemporary attitudes to civil defence also D. Campbell, War Plan UK. The truth about civil defence in Britain (London, 1982).
39 O. Njolstad, ‘The collapse of superpower détente, 1975–1980’ in M.P. Leffler and O.A. Westad (eds), The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Volume III. Endings (Cambridge, 2010), 135–55.
40 K.S. Readman, ‘Conflict and cooperation in intra-alliance nuclear politics: western Europe, the United States, and the genesis of NATO’s dual-track decision, 1977–79’, Journal of Cold War Studies, 13, 2 (2011), 39–89.
41 J.W. Young, ‘Western Europe and the end of the Cold War, 1979–1989’ in Leffler and Westad, op. cit., 291; H. Nehring and B. Ziemann, ‘Do all paths lead to Moscow? The NATO dual-track decision and the peace movement – a critique’, Cold War History, 12, 1 (2011), 1–24.
Civil defence, therefore, was a hot issue at the very beginning of the ‘Second Cold War’. The sudden resurgence of debate about Cold War tensions, the possibility of nuclear attack and the government’s ability to save citizens’ lives had an immediate and important cultural impact.\textsuperscript{42} There was a sharp increase of activity by CND, and an even sharper increase in exposure and public support for a peace movement which had spent the previous decade-and-a-half in the doldrums.\textsuperscript{43} As the Second Cold War intensified in the early 1980s, exacerbated by the election of the hawkish Ronald Reagan as US President in November 1980, the organized peace movement used civil defence to illustrate its critique of contemporary nuclear politics. The shortcomings of civil defence were particularly used to critique the idea that a ‘limited’ nuclear war might be fought in Europe, an idea discussed throughout the 1980s and given credence by both the decision to deploy Cruise and Pershing in Britain, and the aggressive rhetoric emanating from the US. Reagan’s remarks in October 1981 that he could foresee a scenario where a limited nuclear war in Europe might not escalate to nuclear war between the superpowers contributed to widespread anxiety about the United States’s willingness to fight a nuclear war in Europe.\textsuperscript{44} The prospective deployment of Cruise and Pershing gave the movement a focused, potentially achievable political aim. The peace camps aimed at preventing Cruise being deployed at RAF Greenham Common generated the most powerful imagery of the 1980s peace movement.\textsuperscript{45} Civil defence was deemed to be part of this renewed nuclear apparatus, and the peace movement used the failings of Protect and Survive to critique the Government. In fact, it was E.P. Thompson’s sustained attack on civil defence, published as Protest and Survive which helped relaunch CND in 1980. Civil defence’s symbolic importance was criticized, with it held up as a government lie designed to fool people into acquiescing in the flawed logic of deterrence. More than in the 1960s, civil defence was attacked for being part of the nuclear state. The obvious inadequacies of the scheme were highlighted and attacked, and this allowed the movement to argue that the Government’s whole nuclear posture was based on lies.

The importance of civil defence to the lexicon and strategy of the resurgent peace movement arose partly because of the role civil defence was assumed to play in the ‘limited war’ scenarios of planners. Thompson’s pamphlet began by quoting an entire letter to the Times by military historian Michael Howard. Howard outlined the classic, deterrence-focused argument for civil defence: that it would lend credence to the

\textsuperscript{42}See J. Arnold, ‘British civil defence policy in response to the threat of nuclear attack, 1972–1986’ (Ph.D., London Metropolitan University, 2014).
\textsuperscript{43}M. Phythian, ‘CND’s Cold War’, Contemporary British History, 15, 3 (2001), 133–56.
\textsuperscript{44}J. Dickie, ‘Reagan sets off Euro war scare’, Daily Mail, 22 Oct. 1981, 4; D. Shears, ‘How a nuclear storm broke over Reagan’, Daily Telegraph, 21 Oct. 1981, 5.
\textsuperscript{45}S. Roseneil, Disarming Patriarchy. Feminism and political action at Greenham (Buckingham, 2006).
idea that a nation could suffer a first nuclear strike and survive to launch a second, retaliatory, strike. This was, of course, the real reason why *Protect and Survive* existed at all. For Thompson, civil defence was both impossible and mendacious. No measures could protect against the sheer scale of nuclear destruction that would be unleashed, but civil defence existed as a fig leaf for a government determined to pursue a dangerous policy of nuclear deterrence and to give a veneer of justification to those who believed a limited nuclear war was possible. For Thompson, the solution was obvious. He ended the original pamphlet by arguing ‘it would be nicer to have a quiet life. But they are not going to let us have that. If we wish to survive, we must protest.’ When a revised version of the essay was published in a book of the same name later in the 1980s, it finished with Thompson noting that:

When I first sat down to write this essay, in February 1980, it seemed to the handful of us . . . who were then discussing such a campaign that we were only whistling in the dark . . .. Now we know differently. The movement has taken off.

Civil defence, therefore, was central to nuclear politics in 1980s Britain. As James Hinton put it, the movement’s activism aimed at exposing civil defence was ‘one of the few issues over which it seemed to put the regime on the defence’.

Central to the campaign against civil defence was the use of ridicule and irony to undermine the idea of nuclear survival. *Protect and Survive* became a shorthand for inadequacy, as CND attacks on civil defence combined the ‘rituals of protest and ridicule’, particularly in its 1982 ‘Hard Luck’ campaign, a parody of the planned NATO ‘Hard Rock’ Exercise. Historians have argued that civil defence ‘induced both fear and ridicule’, and that *Protect and Survive*’s ‘comically ineffective measures’ became ‘an icon of nuclear madness’. Civil defence was totally undermined in print and broadcast media, local politics and popular culture. Radical local authorities put enormous efforts into countering the government’s views, publishing pamphlets criticizing civil defence and funding a wide range of peace initiatives from theatrical performances to the construction of peace murals or gardens. Local context was important in this, as Daisy Payling has shown in her discussion of Sheffield City Council’s distinctive opposition to both nuclear weapons and nuclear power. Peter Kennard, commissioned by the Greater London Council, produced a series of images of

---

46 E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive* (CND, London, 1980), 3.
47 Ibid., 32.
48 E.P. Thompson, ‘Protest and survive’ in E.P. Thompson and D. Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive* (Penguin, 1980), 60.
49 J. Hinton, *Protests and Visions. Peace politics in 20th Century Britain* (London, 1989), 184.
50 Stafford, *op. cit.*, 402.
51 Hinton, *op. cit.*, 184; D. Cordle, *Late Cold War Literature and Culture. The nuclear 1980s* (London, 2017), 12; J. Hogg, ‘Cultures of nuclear resistance in 1980s Liverpool’, *Urban History*, 42, 4 (2015), 584–602, 591.
52 D. Payling, “Socialist republic of South Yorkshire”: grassroots activism and left-wing solidarity in 1980s Sheffield’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, 4 (2014), 602–27, 615–16.
a skeleton reading the *Protect and Survive* pamphlet. Raymond Briggs’s powerful anti-nuclear graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* (1982) derives much of its poignancy from the faith its doomed central characters place in simplistic government advice that proves useless in protecting them from death by radiation. Most graphically, the Mike Jackson and Barry Hines collaboration *Threads* (1984) showed the social collapse caused by nuclear war, with the authorities failing to ameliorate the suffering of the public.

Ridicule of civil defence became pervasive in popular culture in the early 1980s, as shown by its treatment in three different BBC popular situation comedies. In the 1981 *Only Fools and Horses* episode ‘The Russians are Coming’, the Trotter family find themselves in possession of a fallout shelter, but struggle to find a location where it could be reached from their inner London home within the ‘four-minute warning’. The final shot of the programme, showing the shelter placed on top of the family’s tower block, neatly shows the impossibility of their survival in wartime. A 1982 episode of *Yes, Minister* focused on the ludicrousness of both the very idea of civil defence and the way it was politicized by left-wing councils, a clear indicator that civil defence could be mocked without taking the show into too-contentious a political field. In the surreal *Young Ones* episode ‘Bomb’, also from 1982, one of the student characters sarcastically reads aloud from ‘the incredibly helpful and informative *Protect and Survive* manual’, and later paints himself with whitewash to deflect the blast from a nuclear weapon that has been dropped into their shared kitchen. Whereas in the 1960s civil defence had a contentious but still respectable place within British culture, by the 1980s it was overwhelmingly a source of ridicule or unambiguously perceived as a government lie. All three comedies continue to be repeated on television today, and can be seen as among the many vectors which communicate the memory of the nuclear politics of the 1980s into the post-Cold War era.

The cultural narrative of civil defence established in the 1980s has largely stayed fixed within the popular memory of the Cold War in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, popular memory of the Cold War is still ill-established. The commemorative cultures surrounding the two World Wars, and especially the pervasive focus on the Second World War in British popular culture, has crowded out the Cold War. The latter conflict lacks a coherent narrative of sacrifice or even victory: for example, Grace Huxford has argued that a coherent popular memory of the Korean War has never become fully established, as it is overshadowed by the memory of the Second World War. Moreover, the increased emphasis on military commemoration

---

53R. Briggs, *When the Wind Blows* (London, 1982).
54On ‘vectors of memory’, see G. Eley, ‘Finding the people’s war: film, British collective memory and World War II’, *American Historical Review*, 105 (2001), 818–38.
55G. Huxford, ‘The Korean War never happened: forgetting a conflict in British culture and society’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, 2 (2016), 195–219.
in twenty-first-century Britain saw a discursive link established between the experiences of contemporary military personnel and the experience of soldiers in the two World Wars. Recently, David Reynolds has argued that the memory of these wars has hindered the development of a more positive picture of twentieth-century history from developing within British culture, contributing in part to British distrust of European integration. The difficulty in establishing a coherent memory of the Cold War compared to the memories of the two World Wars is vividly illustrated by the 2014 decision to move the Lutyens-designed Great War memorial in St Peter’s Square, Manchester, as part of the redevelopment of the square. Previously hemmed in between tram-lines, the war memorial was cleaned and moved to a more open aspect, providing a greater commemorative spectacle. A consequence of the move, however, was the destruction of the Manchester Peace Garden, installed in the mid-1980s as part of the City Council’s anti-nuclear stance. Although the impetus for the move was economic, care was taken to enhance Manchester’s primary memory site for the First World War, at the expense of eradicating its primary symbol of its Cold War engagement. When the Cold War debate about nuclear weapons has been recalled within popular culture, it largely replicates the debates of the 1980s, with less attention to the earlier period. In recent years, the Imperial War Museum has staged exhibitions about Cold War protest and the work of Peter Kennard. The possibility of survival, and the activism of the civil defence volunteers in the 1950s and 1960s, has been largely forgotten beyond the tourist narratives of ‘secret’ bunkers, which also often replicate narratives of government lies and total destruction.

Memories of civil defence

The popular narrative of civil defence established in the 1980s has never been subject to major challenge. There has been no glut of memoirs ‘correcting’ myths of civil defence, in contrast to the spate of books published by men who were conscripted into the British armed forces during the same period. As John Wiener put it when writing about the United States, whereas ‘most historians’ work on memory deals with the past people can’t forget, work on the Cold War ‘deals with a past people seem to have trouble remembering.’ In order to understand the place of civil defence within popular memory, I conducted an oral history project between 2010 and 2012 with people who had served in the Civil Defence Services in various capacities during the 1950s and 1960s. Letters

---

56 D. Reynolds, ‘Britain, the Two World Wars, and the problem of narrative’, Historical Journal, 60, 1 (2017), 197–231.
57 D. Linton, ‘Workmen start on cenotaph relocation’, Manchester Evening News, 25 Jan. 2014, https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/manchesters-cenotaph-move-side-st-6559512 (accessed 19 April 2018).
58 P. Kennard, Unofficial War Artist (London, 2015).
59 R. Vinen, National Service. Conscription in Britain, 1945–1963 (London, 2014), 30–33.
60 J. Wiener, How We Forgot the Cold War. A history journey across America (Berkeley, 2012), 287.
were sent to local newspapers in three areas: South Wales, Coventry and Teesside. Recruitment was slow and difficult, in part because the distance between the disbanding of the Civil Defence Services in 1968 and the start of the project meant that most older volunteers, those who served in the 1950s while in their 40s or 50s, were no longer alive. A research assistant, Lindsey Dodd, and I conducted in-depth interviews with 11 participants either on their own or in small groups (see Table 1). They were, in civil defence services terms at least, a relatively diverse group. There were seven men and four women, they were mainly younger recruits who had served in the late 1950s and 1960s and they provided a mixture of experiences from within civil defence: members of the Civil Defence Corps, the Auxiliary Fire Service, and administrative staff employed by a local council. The semi-structured interview schedule asked them to reflect on their reasons for joining civil defence, their experiences within the organization, their thoughts about the role of civil defence in a war and why they left the service. A central part of the interview was about the ability of civil defence to save lives in a nuclear war. The interviewees were also asked directly about their emotional responses to the threat of nuclear war. The purpose of these questions was to explore in greater detail how the volunteers experienced the nuclear threat, in particular how the competing notions of survival and destruction influenced their opinions and memories.

In general, the interviewees often, but not always, struggled to remember the details of their service. In particular, questions concerning the prospect of nuclear war elicited few in-depth responses. The participants’ struggles to compose coherent narratives about civil defence’s role were most pronounced when they were asked questions about its possible usefulness and the emotional impact of the potential nuclear confrontation. This could take the form of lack of memory of the actual ‘civil defence’ part of their service. Wally, a man living in North East England, served in the Civil Defence Corps in the early 1950s, but struggled to provide coherent memories of his service. This was in stark contrast to his clear and fluent recollection of the army service that pre-dated his involvement in civil defence and the

Table 1. Oral history participants.

| Name   | Year of Birth | Service type                        | Dates of Service |
|--------|---------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Robert | 1936          | Auxiliary Fire Service             | 1954–1968        |
| Julian | 1930          | Civil Defence Corps                | 1963–1968        |
| Doris  | 1923          | Civil Defence Administration       | 1951–1965        |
| Barbara| 1939          | Civil Defence Administration       | 1955–1964        |
| Pamela | 1942          | Civil Defence Corps and Civil Defence Administration | 1958–1960 |
| David  | 1936          | Civil Defence Corps                | 1961–68          |
| Shirley| 1939          | Civil Defence Corps                | 1961–65          |
| Ludwik | 1929          | Civil Defence Corps (and later Home Office Scientist) | 1952–68 |
| Frank  | 1948          | Auxiliary Fire Service             | 1965–68          |
| Ian    | 1948          | Civil Defence Corps                | 1964–68          |
| Wally  | 1920          | Civil Defence Corps                | 1952–55          |
organization of social activities for his veterans group that occurred after he left the military. Barbara and Pamela were interviewed together in Coventry, alongside Doris. All three had worked for Coventry Council’s civil defence organization, and Pamela had also briefly volunteered for the Ambulance Section of the Civil Defence Corps when she had joined the Council as a 16-year-old. Pamela had no memory of thinking about civil defence’s role in a nuclear war. Nor did Barbara, who remembered very little beyond the basic details of civil defence, and when asked whether she was scared by the thought of nuclear war replied, ‘No, I can’t remember being scared, no’. More vividly, she remembered office life, the people she worked with and, in rich detail, the bath housed in civil defence’s administrative buildings. Wally, Pamela and Barbara all had civil defence experience but none could discuss the Cold War threat of nuclear war, the role of the Civil Defence Services in tackling it, or remember what they might have felt about it. It was as if they had all joined in a fit of absent-mindedness. There were episodes of discomposure, as people struggled to remember details, thoughts and feelings when prompted. Certainly, there was no sense of ‘psychic ease’ being developed through the process of recollection. Rather, it seemed clear that volunteering in civil defence had held a marginal place in their lives, particularly when compared to other life events. Equally, however, the criticism of civil defence in popular memory could have contributed to this sense of forgetting, as the lack of social and cultural value associated with their service made their experiences more readily forgettable.

The other participants had much clearer memories about civil defence’s nuclear role. Doris, speaking alongside Barbara and Pamela, remembered civil defence as urgent, important and something everyone needed to know about. She consistently argued that civil defence was important, and said that the early 1960s was a time when I was getting upset about what could happen, and trying to tell people what, you know, what could happen … I remember being quite concerned about the fact that they were feeling this and not realizing what, what could happen and how they could help themselves. Probably not very much, you know, but I used to try and get neighbours and my parents to take me seriously but nobody ever did.

Doris’s discussion of the fact that she, and civil defence more generally, were not taken seriously is revealing. Doris remembered this as an

---

61 Interview with Wally (in Teesside, 2011).
62 Interview with Barbara, Doris and Pamela (in Coventry, 2010).
63 Ibid.
64 Summerfield, ‘Culture and composure’, op. cit., 69–70.
65 Ibid.
emotional moment, when her own anxiety and desire to help were rejected by others. In the context of the interview, Doris was speaking after Barbara and Pamela had stated their lack of memory. As such, Doris’s urgency was both a recollection of her anxiety of the early 1960s and a current desire to ensure those memories were heard. Of course, her memories also revealed an awareness of the limits of civil defence, but Doris’s commitment highlights the possible meaning of civil defence for those volunteers who were fearful and anxious about the prospect of nuclear war. Although the other participants did not share Doris’s remembered anxiety, or at least did not communicate that anxiety, her testimony highlights that some, at least, remember civil defence within a Cold War context of potential nuclear war that necessitated imagining a future nuclear war.

For several other volunteers, the belief in the value of the nuclear deterrent can explain the absence of the intense anxiety experienced by Doris. Ian, a man from Middlesbrough who served as a teenager during the final four years of the Civil Defence Corps’ existence, remembered civil defence alongside the nuclear deterrent, which made war unlikely: ‘obviously the nuclear threat was the last resort really. So I didn’t necessarily expect it to happen tomorrow.’ Civil defence was important, however, because ‘it was perhaps better to be prepared than just think, well, we’re all dead … I mean that would’ve been defeatist really’.66 Ian’s memory of the rationale for the existence of the Civil Defence Services was close to that put forward by the government in the 1960s: that they were there ‘just in case’, even though their services would not be needed. Julian and Robert, both long-serving members of Civil Defence Services living in South Wales, and interviewed together, explained their lack of ‘conscious’ fear because of a combination of faith in the nuclear deterrent and their ‘active’ work within civil defence. Robert, a committed member of the Auxiliary Fire Service, remembered that the existence of the British nuclear deterrent was central to his own sense of ease in the Cold War: ‘there was a consciousness that it could possibly happen, but on the other hand then logic comes into play and you think, well, is anyone going to risk that and lose their own society and country as a consequence.’67 Julian added, ‘Well that’s right’.

This deterrent ‘logic’ was deeply embedded in the Cold War. In Britain, political arguments for the possession of nuclear weapons centred on this idea of strength,68 and leant heavily on historical assumptions about the lessons to be learned from the failed policy of appeasement in the 1930s.69 Julian argued that:

---

66Interview with Ian (in Teesside, 2012).
67Interview with Julian and Robert (in Cardiff, 2010).
68See for example L. Freedman, The Evolution of British Nuclear Strategy (Basingstoke, 1983).
69R.G. Hughes, The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement. British foreign policy since 1945 (London, 2014).
It never consciously worried me about what might happen. Of course, when you do the training and you see what could happen and it frightened the life out of you but, it was sort of rather low-key, and it never worried me particularly.\textsuperscript{70}

There is an obvious and revealing tension between Julian’s memory of what ‘consciously worried’ him and the fact that aspects of training ‘frightened the life’ out of him. Robert articulated a similar memory:

When I joined, the way it was put to us, it, it was a concern. I don’t say I’d lie awake at night worrying about it but you did feel, if things went wrong, there would be a hell of a lot to do.\textsuperscript{71}

The logic of deterrence meant that the horrifying prospect of nuclear war did not have to be confronted, but deterrence only retained its logic if the realities of nuclear war were occasionally glimpsed. To understand deterrence was to understand that no society could avoid destruction. This peek behind the curtain of deterrence was required to in order to rationalize nuclear danger.\textsuperscript{72}

The Civil Defence Services, however, were designed to do more than peek behind the curtain. Their purpose was to confront the reality of a potential nuclear war. Out of all the interviewees, only Julian and Robert were able to clearly articulate what positive role the Civil Defence Services might have had in a nuclear war. Neither man’s examples provided compelling evidence for civil defence’s usefulness, but clearly held important positions in their memories. Julian recalled first-hand experience of the Aberfan disaster in 1966 as evidence that his service would be valuable in a future war. Julian’s civil defence unit was sent to help the rescue effort when Aberfan experienced the catastrophic collapse of a coal tip, inundating the village and causing the loss of 144 lives. Aberfan was one of the worst civil disasters of postwar British history and was clearly a life-changing event for Julian.\textsuperscript{73} His recollections of his experiences were long, detailed and very composed – the rhythm of the storytelling suggested his narrative had been told many times before I heard it. Whereas the sense of shock and desolation was profound, Julian actually argued Aberfan was ‘a shambles civil defence-wise’, because his signals unit had been sent there rather than the rescue unit.\textsuperscript{74} Nevertheless, Julian believed the Civil Defence Services did valuable work on the logistical side, in terms of providing communications and feeding the miners who were attempting to rescue any survivors, and this suggested they would have played a similar role in wartime.

Like Julian, Robert’s composed narrative appeared to be the product of repeated telling. Robert’s understanding of the utility of civil defence was shaped by his experience in the AFS and his close association with the fire

\textsuperscript{70}Interview with Julian and Robert.
\textsuperscript{71}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72}M. Kaldor, \textit{The Imaginary War. Understanding the East–West conflict} (Oxford, 1990).
\textsuperscript{73}I. McLean and M. Johnes, \textit{Aberfan. Government and disasters} (Cardiff, 2000).
\textsuperscript{74}Interview with Julian and Robert.
service more generally. For Robert, reflection on the Cold War nuclear threat brought him close to the official strategy of civil defence, but also to the limits of composure:

People were talking about cities being obliterated and enormous fire storms and so on. And really, thinking back to it, the AFS wouldn’t have been able to do very much. Not really. You could’ve contained the fire around the edge but there’s no way you could’ve...  

At this point, Robert changed the subject away from nuclear war to deliver a long and detailed anecdote about his AFS unit extinguishing a fire in Ludlow on its route back from a training exercise. The story of defeating a barn fire allowed Robert to regain the composure lost when explaining the difficulties that the AFS would have faced in a nuclear war. It was a well-told story that had clearly been aired regularly. It also helped explain that the AFS was an effective organization. After he had cast doubt on the usefulness of the AFS in the context of nuclear war, Robert’s story highlighted circumstances where it, and his own service within it, had been effective and worthwhile. Later in the interview, Robert was able to return to the issue of usefulness with more confidence, arguing that ‘I think we felt, yes, that we would be able to help, maybe perhaps only on the periphery of something, but we did have the equipment’. Both Julian’s experience at Aberfan and Robert’s Ludlow story might struggle to convince civil defence’s critics of its utility, but they allowed the two men to articulate that the voluntary services would have been of ‘some’ use, through providing ‘real life’ examples of usefulness with which they clearly felt comfortable. These memories were part of both men’s very positive experiences of civil defence. They suggest that concrete, real life examples were required for the development of ‘composed’ narratives of civil defence in the face of the antagonistic cultural discourse, but also the deep meaning both men attached to the stories. Julian said of Aberfan, that ‘even now, if I drive up that way, if I pass Aberfan I get cold chills up the back of my neck’. For Robert, the happier memory of the Ludlow fire was concluded with the words ‘we had a wonderful time. We were very late getting back to Cardiff but we, it was a great, a great Sunday.’

Participants were much more confident in discussing their reasons for joining and remaining in the service. These usually rested on a sense of altruistic duty mixed with the importance of leisure. Almost every interview participant discussed leisure as a key basis of their involvement in the Civil Defence Services. This is unsurprising, as the voluntary services were marketed in the 1950s and 1960s as site of leisure that was fun, a place to gain skills and a way to help the community. As such, a combination of fun, leisure and altruistic service was central to representations of the Civil Defence Services in the 1950s and 1960s.

75Ibid.
76Ibid.
77Grant, ‘Civil defence gives meaning’, op. cit.
The concept of leisure apparent in the voluntary organizations was highly structured, hierarchical and uniformed. It operated on quasi-militarized lines and offered set social opportunities that may have suited shyer, less confident young people. Certainly, an internal government report commissioned from an advertising agency in 1960 suggested that the primary reason people joined was the need for structured leisure (rather than opportunities to spontaneously talk to people) and the feeling of worth that came from a pursuit explicitly set up to ‘serve the community’. Leisure and altruism were therefore not separate, but rather a positive mixture of motives which combined in civil defence activism.

This combination was highlighted when Shirley and David, a married couple from South Wales who joined together, spoke about signing up. David recalled his motivation as squarely related to civil defence, telling me: ‘somebody’s got to be there to help the ones who have got nothing to do with it’. David presented the self-image of a committed, altruistic volunteer (after civil defence he served in both the St John’s Ambulance and in the Royal Observer Corps). This self-image was undercut rather by Shirley’s interjection that ‘it was, as well as a social thing, there was this thought that you were, you were doing something that was important at the time’. Shirley’s phrasing may have suggested she considered the ‘social thing’ only as secondary to service, but it was an element of civil defence she returned to (‘Well we used to enjoy going to the pub after, didn’t we?’) suggesting it was of personal importance to her. Her comment appeared to serve as a subtle correction to David’s own memory of his motivations. The distinction between altruistic service and leisure was highly gendered in the 1950s and 1960s recruitment literature, with patriotism and service associated with male volunteers, and leisure and caring roles associated with women. Shirley and David’s recollections appeared to replicate this division. Ian was more ambiguous about his reasons for joining but remembered a mixture of altruism and fun as central to the message of the volunteer who recruited him: ‘he said it was, it would be good fun and you’ll be do something worthwhile etcetera.’ Ian himself would later recruit people in same way: ‘I persuaded others to join, just said, oh it’s going to be good fun this etcetera.’ The repeated ‘etcetera’ in this memory appears to be more than just a turn of phrase, and a sense is created that Ian also used the ‘something worthwhile’ argument while recruiting but chose not to say it in the interview, instead concentrating on his own leisure.

---

78 The National Archives, UK, CAB 21/4762, ‘Motivational factors and recruitment to the Civil Defence Corps’, report by Market Research Department, F.C. Pritchard, Wood & Partners Ltd, October 1960.
79 Interview with David and Shirley (in Abergavenny, 2010).
80 Ibid.
81 Grant, ‘Civil defence gives meaning’, op. cit.
82 Interview with Ian.
Ludwik, a retired senior academic, also believed he was doing something important. He joined in 1952, after an extraordinary early life that saw him arrive in London from Eastern Poland via the Soviet Union and Iran, because ‘I had from my father this feeling that you cannot be a citizen of a country unless you actually have served in its defence.’\(^{83}\) He doubted whether his Polish origin would have allowed him to serve in the army, and the Civil Defence Services enabled him, as a recent physics graduate, to use his technical skills. He treated it seriously and stated that civil defence provided an opportunity for him to fulfil a sense of duty: ‘I really liked it. I liked the feeling of belonging.’\(^{84}\) It was also, he said, enjoyable: ‘playing soldiers was fun.’\(^{85}\) Ludwik served in the Civil Defence Corps from 1952 until its end, and afterwards worked in the Home Office as a scientific advisor on civil defence. He remembered that it ‘slowly became obvious that [it was] very inadequately resourced’, and that ‘eventually I really felt I wasn’t 100 per cent sure that what we were doing was adequate or good’, but that ‘I felt that to leave in a dramatical way, or complain, wasn’t a good thing to do and I stayed to the very end’.\(^{86}\) Although he doubted the efficacy of civil defence policy and the voluntary service’s ability to do what it was meant to, Ludwik’s continued service clearly stemmed from a desire for belonging and a belief in the necessity of service and patriotism as part of his life in Britain. His humorous stories of various exercises, and his evident pride in the honours he received because of his later career with the Home Office, suggests he found this sense of belonging in the Civil Defence Services.

Other participants remembered their service as stemming from the social side of voluntary service rather than from any altruistic motive. Frank, who like Ian lived in the North East and was involved in civil defence towards the end of the organization’s life, joined the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) as a 17-year-old in 1965 because, he recalls, he was ‘motorbike daft’ and the AFS was an opportunity to ride his motorbike, with the AFS paying for petrol. That was one reason, ‘and the girls were the other.’\(^{87}\) Pamela joined the voluntary ambulance section at 16 while working for the local council in 1958 because ‘they were quite a young set of people . . . it was just more of a social thing.’\(^{88}\) For Julian, older on enrolling than either Pamela or Frank, joining up was prompted by a change of job. He recalled ‘I was a single man in digs, away from home . . . so it was, as much as anything else, something to keep me occupied at night’, as his work colleagues all had families.\(^{89}\) In fact, Pamela seemed at a loss to remember why anyone would join: ‘I mean there were other things they could join, like St John’s Ambulance or whatever, didn’t they, so I don’t know why they would join civil defence. That’s

\(^{83}\)Interview with Ludwik (in London, 2011).
\(^{84}\)Ibid.
\(^{85}\)Ibid.
\(^{86}\)Ibid.
\(^{87}\)Interview with Frank (in Teesside, 2011).
\(^{88}\)Interview with Barbara, Doris and Pamela.
\(^{89}\)Interview with Julian and Robert.
what I can’t quite get my head around.\textsuperscript{90} This suggested that the service played very little meaningful part in her life, to the extent that she had forgotten any appeal it could conceivably have had. As we have seen, Julian went on to remember a deep commitment to the Civil Defence Corps and its usefulness, but neither Pamela nor Frank gave any other reason for joining, nor remembered thinking about civil defence’s Cold War role while in the service. It is clear, however, that the ability of civil defence to provide a certain type of leisure was key to its success in attracting recruits. Pamela and Frank’s involvement in voluntary civil defence was part of a wider story of uniformed service. Pamela served in the police force on leaving civil defence, while Frank joined the Territorial Army. In fact, 7 of the 11 participants served in one uniformed capacity or another following their civil defence service. Moreover, for both David and Ian, civil defence had followed rejection by the military on medical grounds. Civil defence voluntarism appeared to meet the need for a desired sort of leisure; or perhaps it created the desire for structured, uniformed sociability that participants needed to fulfil once they had left the services.

Clues to the importance of the Civil Defence Services’ quasi-military uniformed status can be found by returning to Frank’s memories. Frank remained in the service until its disbandment in 1968, although he seemed much more comfortable remembering the leisure aspects of voluntary civil defence than any other part of his service, which he was unwilling or unable to describe. When asked if the threat of war had any impact at all in his service, he insisted: ‘Oh no, it was just for fun.’\textsuperscript{91} He clearly valued his time in the AFS, however. He spoke about, and showed Lindsey, his carefully preserved letter from the Lord Mayor of York thanking him for his service to the city, demonstrating the meaning that such acknowledgment of civil defence’s value retained for Frank.\textsuperscript{92} Frank resisted explaining his service as arising from any direct commitment to civil defence’s Cold War aims, but this does not mean it is possible to separate the social motive from a sense of uniformed contribution in his testimony. In much the same way, Ian was keen to place limits on his commitment, stressing that ‘It wasn’t anything like me having any deep-held political convictions about it.’\textsuperscript{93} It is possible that while the importance of leisure as a motivation for civil defence activism is obvious, participants also used it in the interview as a culturally relevant framework to explain their service in such a way that they could downplay ‘civil defence’ or ‘Cold War’ motivations. The Civil Defence Services’ actual Cold War role could not provide a culturally valid frame in which to justify voluntary action and the

\textsuperscript{90}Interview with Barbara, Doris and Pamela.
\textsuperscript{91}Interview with Frank.
\textsuperscript{92}\textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{93}Interview with Ian.
commitment of time their service represented. Leisure, whether defined by sociability or altruism, could. Voluntarism, structured around key motives of both altruism and self-fulfilment, was a readily available framework for those seeking to align their past voluntary service with cultural understandings of social utility. Leisure and service were intertwined, and it is unsurprising that the memory of voluntary civil defence’s social dimension, whether that be training alongside other activities and exercises, or evenings in the pub, have stayed in the mind longer than rather more abstract notions of nuclear war. Perhaps more importantly, it is impossible to separate motives of leisure or duty, as it was the everyday activity of civil defence voluntarism that helped to embed a sense of utility in its members.

The attitudes of participants towards its disbandment and the opposition it received highlight that Cold War duty and leisure existed side by side, and illustrate both the deep value these men and women placed on their civil defence service and their understanding of civil defence’s place within the nation. For those who remained in the Civil Defence Services until the scrapping of the voluntary force in 1968, the end was sudden and unwelcome. Frank’s well-cared-for letter of thanks was accompanied by a remembered sense of the personal shock of disbandment:

I’d been working away for my company and came home, and then two firemen turned up at the door, and said, we’re sorry, we’ve got to have your kit back. I said, what for? They said, well you’re being disbanded. I couldn’t believe it. Yeah, it was a sad time.94

For Julian, the ending of civil defence was remembered with similar, and very real, frustration: ‘it just disappeared. Nothing happened. One week we were there, the next week we weren’t’.95 At the root of Julian’s feelings was a lack of appreciation. He said that ‘it seemed, after all the time and effort gone in, it seemed a bit ungracious to me’. Ludwik, too, was noticeably angered by the lack of appreciation: ‘they removed my uniform, I really resented that. I thought it was a nasty experience’, adding, ‘it was not graciously done’.96

In these memories, the suddenness of dissolution is accompanied by the stripping of their quasi-military civil defence identity, a symbol of their status as useful citizens and a sense of being betrayed by the Government.

The end of voluntary civil defence allowed the volunteers to narrate their service in such a way that the Cold War battle about the utility of civil defence in general and the quality of the voluntary service in particular is absent. This was helped by the fact that in the memory of the volunteers, there was no strategic basis for the decision. Instead, several participants point to the economic crisis that precipitated the decision. When the Wilson Government disbanded the

94 Interview with Frank.
95 Interview with Julian and Robert.
96 Interview with Ludwik.
Civil Defence Services, it was part of a wider series of cuts made in response to the economic crisis which began with the devaluation of the pound from $2.80 to $2.40 the previous November. As such, civil defence was one of a number of other activities sacrificed in order to balance the British economy. For Robert, this fact made him relatively sanguine about the end of civil defence, reflecting that ‘it was all finance, all to do with money. Saving money. It was a budget thing.’ For Frank, the scrapping of civil defence was part of a broader crisis, and he misremembered the cuts as being part of the later 1974 crisis that led to the brief introduction of the three-day week. In recalling the crisis in this way, Frank unwittingly exaggerates the importance of the crisis that necessitated the ending of civil defence. It removed responsibility for the end of the Civil Defence Service from both the organization itself and the wider strategic landscape.

Another cause of the demise of voluntary civil defence, as it was remembered, was the opposition of CND. As David put it, ‘there were lots of CNDers getting into the government ranks. Fanatical types.’ Ian also suggested that ideological motivations were important: ‘it fitted in with the political agenda of the time, that the Labour Government didn’t really have much sympathy for civil defence so they found a reason for disbanding it and saving some measly amount really.’ Whether individuals explained the demise of civil defence in ideological or economic terms, these memories appeared to serve the same purpose: they preserved the idea that serving within civil defence was important or valuable, therefore justifying the time spent volunteering, without individuals having to probe civil defence’s place in the Cold War. More generally, individuals’ own sense of the value of their civil defence activities was revealed by the opposition of some participants towards CND. Generally, this could be summed up with Robert’s phrase that ‘I think history has taught us, you’re no good being weak.’ He perceived CND as wanting to undermine Britain’s military strength, something which it can be assumed that Robert believed was supported by the existence of civil defence. David, however, expressed deep and abiding antipathy, remembering CND’s own low opinion of civil defence: ‘they, [laughs] they seemed to believe that because we had defence against possible attack, then that would make the attack more possible.’ David’s derisive dismissal of what he remembered as CND’s argument appeared central to his sense of confidence in the worth of his service. Earlier in the interview, I had asked David about civil defence...
defence’s usefulness. In answering, the fluidity which marked most of his testimony was absent. He recalled that ‘although the basic thing about civil defence was against, or, the possibility of nuclear, I mean, uh, the skills were there for everything … Uh, even for, um, uh, well, even for the, the worst attack sort of thing’. The difficulty David had in articulating a coherent account of civil defence’s utility demonstrates his discomposure. When David was asked about CND, however, his fluency returned, as we can see from his bitter humour about the flawed logic of disarmer. Criticizing CND’s position allowed him to convey that civil defence policy provided, after all, ‘defence against possible attack’. David’s anti-CND posture seemed long-standing and deeply held, and it allowed him to achieve composure via comparison between his ‘correct’ service and their misguided opposition.

Clear memories of the concrete ending of the Civil Defence Services contrasted with vague recollections of the more abstract notions of civil defence’s nuclear role: the physical realities of the loss of uniform and status being more tangible than the imagined possibilities of the nuclear future. Most importantly these memories allow us to note how volunteers’ civil defence identity was valued at the moment it was removed, highlighting how their personal testimony reveals things that might have otherwise be clouded by the participants’ difficulties in constructing narratives in the face of a complex and hostile popular memory. Although they consistently struggled to provide a coherent sense of what the Civil Defence Services would do in an attack, they clearly felt the lack of recognition of their active citizenship within civil defence, suggesting that their voluntary service had a personal meaning that punctured the prevailing popular memory. As with the participants’ use of leisure to explain their service, discussions of the end of the services highlight that participants had clearer memories of aspects of civil defence that did not relate explicitly to its Cold War role. Equally, we can use this discussion to understand the value of voluntary civil defence to their lives and their commitment to the organization and its aims. As highlighted above, decades of criticism and ridicule from the popular media and CND have devalued civil defence and by extension these volunteers’ service within it. Both leisure and the Wilson Government, however, provided the participants with an alternative frame in which to compose their narratives. Likewise, stories which detailed the Civil Defence Services’ usefulness enabled Robert and Julian to defend both civil defence policy more generally and their part within it, while simultaneously shifting the narrative ground away from difficult discussions of nuclear war.

105 Ibid.
Conclusion

Images of nuclear war as a world-ending calamity are integral to the popular memory of Britain’s Cold War. Integral to these images is the view of civil defence as a laughable, hypocritical and perhaps mendacious response to the threat of annihilation. In the interviews, Doris recalled her desire to tell people that civil defence policy and the Civil Defence Services were more than this. She was the only participant who really confronted the central issue for Cold War civil defence: to imagine the destruction that war would bring, and in response to plan how to save lives. This should not be surprising. As Summerfield has suggested, popular memory shapes the ability of participants to confidently compose stories.¹⁰⁶ In the context of Britain’s Cold War, I argue that popular memory contains such a relentlessly negative image of civil defence that oral history participants struggle to narrate unambiguously positive memories concerning the Civil Defence Services’ potential role in a nuclear war. The stories they do tell, however, reveal the meaning civil defence had in their lives and the value they placed on it as part of Britain’s wider Cold War history. They do this not by acting out cultural scripts, but by telling stories that have meaning to their past and their sense of self. As such the popular memory of civil defence, as revealed by the recollections of the individual participants discussed here, presents a more nuanced and positive picture of civil defence voluntarism.

Much like Portelli’s vision of oral history, Cold War nuclear civil defence was always about the ‘horizon of possibilities’. If participants struggled to achieve narrative composure when discussing civil defence, it was perhaps because imagining nuclear war is a distressing activity. Quite simply, the volunteers within the Civil Defence Services would have struggled, to say the least, in any nuclear confrontation. Yet it is important that we understand both the work of imagining nuclear war that volunteers did or did not do, and the extensive social activity involved in training to fight a nuclear war. This article suggests that there is a lack of remembering how nuclear war was imagined in the 1950s and 1960s. It may be that many volunteers did not undertake this imaginative work at the time. We can with more confidence argue that the popular memory of the Cold War would have made the process of remembering this imaginative work extremely difficult, as it limited the cultural frames within which such individual memories can be articulated. From the oral history evidence, we can see that individuals instead understood and rationalized their service in different ways. By understanding how the Civil Defence Services combined leisure and duty, the narrative techniques that volunteers used to convey its collective usefulness within the framework of deterrence and the anger they felt towards political decisions, we can begin to recapture the horizon of possibilities that made up the mindset of civil defence volunteers. In doing so, we can better comprehend how

¹⁰⁶Summerfield, ‘Culture and composure’, op. cit.
and why hundreds of thousands of individuals participated in what now appears a hopeless task. This article has highlighted the ways in which individual and collective experiences of civil defence are perhaps hidden by the operation of popular memory. Yet it has also, I hope, pointed to the ways in which civil defence did play an important part in the lives of the individuals who participated in this oral history project.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Lindsey Dodd for conducting some of the interviews discussed in this article; Tracey Loughran, Lucy Noakes and Andrew Priest for reading this article in draft; and the audiences at the Social History Society conference and North American Conference on British Studies for their feedback on early iterations of the argument.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

The oral history interviews discussed in this article were able to be conducted because of two funding sources: an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship [PTA-026-27-2060] and a British Academy Small Grant.

**ORCID**

Matthew Grant [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7064-0618](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7064-0618)