

June 1940: A Month as Any Other for the British Home Front?

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June 1940 is considered to be one of the most significant months of the Second World War, ‘the next phase of the war for Britain’ as maintained by historian Robert Mackay.² Given the situation in Europe, this phase was far from bright. June 1940 was the month of the fall of France and the suffering of French cities like Le Havre, discussed by Rebecca Shtasel elsewhere in this special issue, and gave Britons a foretaste of what was potentially coming: bombing, invasion and what seemed to be the beginning of the end.³ This paper, resulting from a curiosity about the perception of such a significant moment of the war by those living it day by day, offers an insight into the contemporary everyday lives of ordinary civilians and gives a voice to their testimonies. It also offers new and unique material as well as combining individual statements with grand history; including micro perspectives in the macro approach of the Second World War in Britain. Doing so, it demonstrates the importance of a history from below in the comprehension of historical phenomena as personal and emotional experiences influence the shaping of collective memories, as other papers of this publication discuss.

Based on the Mass-Observation archive and published wartime diaries, this article presents the intimate lives of a dozen ordinary civilians, through the feelings, worries, and the priorities they expressed in the narration of ‘their’ June 1940. These diarists, except for Robert (electrician, married, and father of two) and Edna (single and working as a secretary) were middle-class housewives and mothers aged from their late twenties to their mid-fifties. They lived in London, Glasgow, Newcastle, Leeds and Barrow-in-Furness. Some had young children while others had sons in the Forces, and most had vivid memories of the Great War, and therefore reasons to feel anxious as the war intensified.

It is clear that the particular demography of the diarists influenced their narration. The excitement felt by some members of the British Civil Defence longing for action after months of ‘phoney war’ presented by

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2 Mackay, R., *The Test of War: Inside Britain, 1939–45* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 8.

3 Smith, M., *Britain and 1940: History, Myth, and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 52.

Jessica Hammett was hardly shared by mothers fearing for their son in the Army, or the security of their children in case of bombing. However, the analysis of these narratives echoes the impact of June 1940 on the personal lives discussed by other papers in this journal. The diarists were not involved in Civil Defence and none were involved in any form of resistance, like the sisters Vallotton presented by Sally Palmer. Nonetheless, a peculiar significance is noticeable in the diaries examined. The war became notably more 'present' and more 'real' for their writers. Its incorporation in trivial everyday issues as well as the emotions expressed in their narrations denotes an omnipresence in the life and mind of the diarists, indicating that they were living, consciously or not, influenced on an everyday intimate level by their wartime experience.

Naturally, despite the detailed information they provide to researchers, a dozen diarists cannot be representative of the population. Therefore, in order to give a more general perspective of the Home Front at the time, this article begins with a summary of the information found in the published reports of the Home Intelligence Service.

MORALE AND ATTITUDES OF THE POPULATION

These reports, especially made for the Ministry of Information, were written between May and September 1940. They provide, from the editors' point of view: 'a unique window into the attitudes and behaviours of the British people during what Churchill described as their finest hours'.⁴ Week by week these reports give an account of the morale and opinions of the population. At the end of May for instance, people felt betrayed by the Belgian capitulation, and were very anxious about the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF). A German invasion was a strong possibility for most, and a certainty for many. The first week of June was especially emotional due to the relief of the British Expeditionary Forces' return and anxiety after the bombing of Paris as well as the 'fighting alone' discourse of Churchill. According to the report, the accumulation of bad news provoked a kind of 'detachment' in the general populace due 'to an emotional weariness of perpetual crises'. The collapse of France and the Italian declaration of war were responsible for a levelling down of morale during the second week of June, but also caused anger, bitterness and mixed feelings about France. Women were said to be 'increasingly more anxious and depressed than men' due maybe to the potential evacuation

4 Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour, May to September 1940* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), p. xi.

to manage, but also because of food supplies and high prices, a constant source of worry. Keeping busy appeared to make a difference: 'women who have to work do get along alright, those who sit at home and listen to the news all day are decidedly jittery' said the report.⁵ Anxiety increased by the end of the week, along with dissatisfaction towards the government. The fall of Paris on the 14th of June, fulfilling Hitler's prophecy, provoked questions about the date of the invasion of London. The capitulation of France the next week was not a surprise, but still a shock. Dissatisfaction with the government became a significant issue. Anxiety and resentment increased, as did demand for a stronger leadership. Air raids were said to be taken calmly and philosophically. Acclimatisation to the situation and the expression of the determination to fight became apparent during the last week of the month. However, confusion and suspicion resulting from the war situation as well as the lack of information were still important and the demand for a stronger leadership persisted.⁶

These reports aimed to be representative of the whole population and in consequence, despite some regional precisions, they are very general. The agenda of their authors was essentially to observe the morale of the civilians and their attitude to the war events and the government. As a result, only a few comments were made about everyday life issues. In contrast, the testimonies of the Mass-Observation diarists reveal the importance taken by such issues and make obvious the significance of personal priorities in their wartime experience.

JUNE 1940: WAR AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Roberts for instance, wrote mostly about the air raids, as his family lived in a bombed area. Father of a young boy, he focused more on the well-being and security of his family than on the war news. In addition, he was facing an important personal issue: 'Strained relations at home,' he stated, 'L [his wife] has fear of another child coming.'⁷ As indicated by his other comments, Roberts did not mind another child. Nonetheless, he found the conditions far from ideal.

Another diarist, Norma, was pregnant in June. It was a difficult pregnancy, but she focused on the war rather than her health that month. Still, everyday life matters kept their importance, the weather in particular, mainly in relation to her farm, but also because the heat was

5 Addison and Crang, *Listening*, pp. 49, 53–4, 63, 71, 75–6, 88–9.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 123–6, 133–4, 138–9, 142, 149, 154, 157–7, 161, 164–5.

7 Mass-Observation Archives (henceforth MOA) D 5201, June 1940.

difficult to take in her condition.⁸ She was not the only one to write about the weather. This topic is a constant in the diaries and the diarists wrote about it regularly. However, regarding this specific month, they did not just describe and comment on the weather as usual, but specifically drew attention on the contrast between the climate and the war events. 'The lovely weather is a mockery' stated one, referring to the warm and sunny days of June contrasting with the dark clouds of war stretching out upon Europe.⁹ Expressing the same feeling, another one observed: 'This queer unreal world, carrying on in some ways here just as before, with this glorious weather and summer heat hearting us, and yet most other things so sombre and heartbreaking'¹⁰

The anxiety felt regarding the future is perceptible in some of these comments: 'The weather continues beautiful and one cannot help thinking what a lovely Derby Day we should have had this year. I wonder what we should have next year, if there is indeed a next year for us.'¹¹ Remarks could be surprising, though, as for Edna, expressing a peculiar ordering of priorities in such circumstances: 'The wonderful weather goes on' she wrote, 'I could have had the first fortnight of June for my holiday, but thought the risk of being cold was too great. Also the risk of invasion, etc...'¹² Such unexpected comments are not unusual in the diaries. The diarists frequently display a curious combination of war events and everyday life worries in their writing. For instance, a couple of remarks made on the same day by two different diarists, demonstrate the tension between intense war concerns and trivial everyday issues: 'Kitten are scampering now all over the place, and I hope I find a home for them' wrote the first one continuing, 'I cannot believe that the possibilities which are threatening us are true, that the Germans may conquer France and attack us without mercy, or that we may submit to humiliating defeat'.¹³ While the other noted:

Some people are getting frightened... some are feeling ill, can't eat, have diarrhoea, can't settle to work etc... I myself feel, very strangely, that I can't wonder about what may happen. I can't worry over possible dangers or horrors, or plan what to do... To some extent I feel so "dead", so "battered" mentally, that I don't care.

8 MOA D 5378, June 1940.

9 Purcell, J., *Domestic Soldiers* (London: Constable, 2011), p. 37.

10 Milburn, C., *Mrs Milburn's Diaries: An Englishwoman's Day-to-Day Reflections 1939–1945* (London: Futura, 1989), p. 43.

11 Quoted by Garfield, S., *We Are at War: The Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London: Ebury, 2006), pp. 248–9.

12 MOA D 5390, June 1940.

13 Quoted by Garfield, *We Are*, p. 252.

Then she added, rather lively, ‘The quality of meat we have since the rationing began was splendid. There has been only one poor joint of mutton. And hams too have been a joy to eat.’¹⁴ Such remarks show the focus of the diarists on what could be considered a minor issue in such circumstances; however, they also reveal the distress experienced by a population looking at the days coming with a legitimate apprehension. The importance taken by the war in summer 1940 in comparison with more personal topics is evident in the diaries. A quantitative analysis of the number of mentions made by diarists about work, family, or health in comparison to those related to the war shows this clearly.¹⁵ The number of personal mentions decreased drastically, while those related to the war reached their highest level, indicating a shift of priority and a focus on the conflict and its possible consequences.

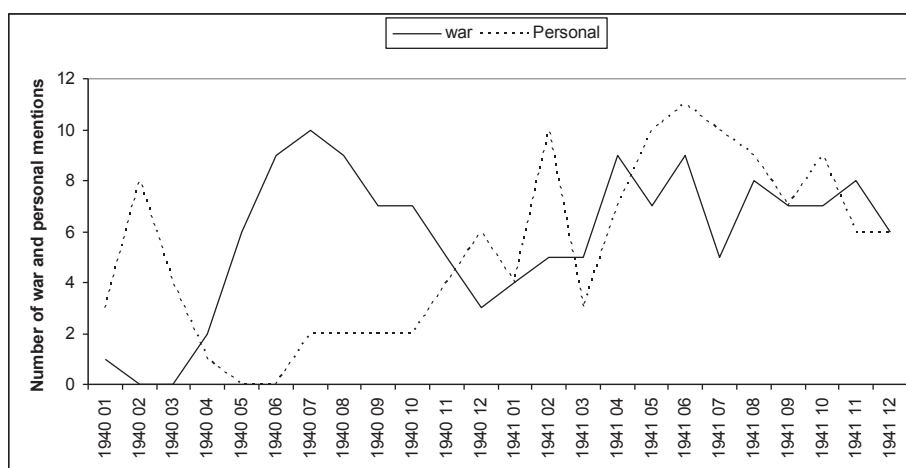


Figure 1 — Number of war and personal mentions between 1940 and 1941
Source: quantitative analysis of eight diarists examined for my thesis

Edna noticed this change of focus through a quite morbid affair: ‘How much has our point of view changed in two months’, she remarked, ‘On 4th of April I nearly collapsed to read that one of our customers... had been charged with murder... Well, the trial began yesterday and I cannot be bothered to read the papers.’¹⁶

Related to everyday life, food, in contrast with other personal concerns, became more important in the diaries. Mentions of food during

14 MOA D 5240, June 1940.

15 This is related to the eight diaries examined and analyzed for my thesis, including five of the diarists discussed in this paper.

16 Quoted (under the name Pam Ashton) by Garfield, *We Are*, p. 243.

June 1940 were related to increasing prices, shortages and restrictions as in the previous months. However, worries about the future food situation were significantly more present. Nathalie for instance expressed her apprehensions, wondering if she would be able to feed her family.¹⁷ Edna shared the same concern about a potential food crisis coming: 'I don't think anyone reading this diary needs to be told that food shortage at some future date is never far from my thoughts.'¹⁸ As previously remarked, some comments could be surprising with their combination of significant war events and what could seem a minor detail: 'I bought a few toffees at the village shop' wrote Mrs Milburn, 'but on hearing the sad news of Belgium's capitulation... I forgot to eat them.'¹⁹

JUNE 1940: WAR AT THE DOOR

These details are of importance, as they indicate the permanent weight of the war on the population's life and reveal the impact of the bad news on their intimate thoughts and feelings. 'My head felt as if it was full of broken glass instead of thoughts' wrote Nella Last, describing the shock she felt at the announcement of the fall of France.²⁰ Indeed, the upcoming times seemed quite hopeless: 'I asked Mr. Mitchell [her superior at work] if he thought we would be invaded' reported Edna, 'and he said emphatically, "Yes I do".'²¹ 'We are alone in Europe' wrote another diarist, 'an incredible situation. The French have been outwitted in a very new kind of warfare. And as we are now I don't think that we stand a better chance.'²² A few days later she added, 'The end seems near and inevitable.'²³

Speculations of a German invasion could sometimes provoke unexpected reactions. For Edna's colleagues, for instance, being Scottish would make a crucial difference. Believing Lord Haw Haw's propaganda, these women maintained that the Germans would not attack Scotland, but send many Germans instead, in order 'to marry Gaelic women and fund a healthy German stock'. This perspective was regarded as pure fantasy by Edna, but taken seriously by her colleagues, one gloomily commenting: 'Oh yes, when the Germans come here, we shall all marry Germans.'²⁴

17 Purcell, *Domestic*, p. 41.

18 Garfield, *We Are*, p. 269.

19 Milburn, *Mrs Milburn's Diaries*, p. 39.

20 Purcell, *Domestic*, p. 47.

21 Quoted by Garfield, *We Are*, p. 238.

22 Quoted by Garfield, *We Are*, p. 266.

23 Quoted by Garfield, *We Are*, p. 281–2.

24 MOA D 5390, June 1940.

Having victorious Germans at the door seemed both inevitable and at the same time a great source of concern, especially for women: 'The doctor's wife is very worried over the war' wrote Amelia, 'She is afraid that Hitler has some secret weapon which he is keeping specially for Britain. She is also afraid of being molested by Germans if they should occupy our country.'

The situation could be treated more lightly, though. Displaying her sense of humour, Edna recounted her management of priorities:

This morning I went to the dentist. Mrs. O. as soon as I got there said, "What do you think about the dreadful news this morning?" I said, "I have not read the papers. And she thrust me one into my hands. I said, "I have enough to go through with my teeth without further unnerving myself beforehand".²⁵

In contrast with such predictions about invasion, some real experiences described by the diarists show how disturbing the interaction between war and everyday life could be. The war required people to make unusual decisions and provoked reactions which could be confused. A good example of such testimony is the account of the quite chaotic management of an air raid given by Eileen, who had been woken up by the sirens in the middle of the night:

I run upstairs for some cushions to take down to the Anderson, and to let out the cat. We put on his harness, and decided to take him to the shelter with us. At last we are ready and set out across the garden to the shelter... The cat begins to struggle, so we decide to take him back to the house and shut him up on the ground floor. We settled down in the shelter, with cushions, rugs, etc.... Brenda is just sitting down when she notices a spider, and gives a little scream: 'I would much rather be bombed than having to sit on a spider!' she says.²⁶

The humorous side of such an account can be appreciated, because the faith of these people is known. They were not bombed and no one, including the cat, was harmed. But the degree of fear present in the diaries must not be under-estimated. Some diarists wrote about being terrified, because of the dark, or the noises.²⁷ Others prepared themselves for the worst, indicating their awareness of the possible dramatic outcome of the war, as revealed by a young diarist reporting a missive from her parents:

I've just had a letter from mother telling me all arrangements they have made with the neighbours in case of they being killed or seriously injured in an air-raid. It is very sensible of them. They are not

25 MOA D 5390, June 1940.

26 Quoted by Garfield, *We Are*, pp. 282–3.

27 Purcell, *Domestic*, p. 47; Garfield, *We Are*, pp. 286, 303.

getting worried about it, but are just trying to make things as simple as possible in case of an emergency. I am sure that that is the right attitude to take.²⁸

JUNE 1940: WAR AT HOME

The various diary extracts presented indicate the convergence of war and everyday life issues in the diarists' lives and minds. They also show how the personality of each of these individuals influenced their perspective on current events. However, one factor eclipsed any other issue: having a beloved one somewhere in France.²⁹ Ms Millbury, a middle-class housewife whose only son, Alan, was in the Forces, was one of them. She expressed quite poignantly the dark days of June and her anguish during Dunkirk:

The longest day ever! Every time the telephone rang one expected news. Mrs Carter came in at 10am to say that she heard through Major Cox that two days before our men of the 1/7th Battalion Royal Warwickshire were safe. We were so happy to hear that, but later, on rigging one and another, we found each had heard something of the kind and no-one seemed to set great store by it. So our spirit went down and down and the day wore slowly on.³⁰

Without news for days she tried to go on, until she received the telegram informing her that her son was missing. She shared her feelings with her diary, writing: 'One's mind seems numbed, and the last day or two, I go on keeping on the surface of things as it were, lest I go down and be drowned. Alan is in my thoughts, every hour I send out my love to him — and wonder and wonder'.³¹ From that moment, her diary, reflecting her intimate thoughts, mainly focused on her son and her feelings about his disappearance: 'It is strange indeed not to know where he is — or whether he is and always one wants to write and tell him things and cannot',³² adding the next day, 'This waiting for news is the most wearing, trying time and we — or I — find it hard to be patient and courageous'.³³ Life went on for days, and Mrs Millburn's diary reflects her continual focus on the whereabouts and wellbeing of her son. Then on the 16th of July, while she was out for a walk with her dog, she heard her husband calling from the house. She recounted:

28 MOA D 5239, June 1940.

29 Purcell, *Domestic*, pp. 44–50.

30 Milburn, *Mrs Milburn's Diaries*, p. 40.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

We met in the middle of the field. “Kate has just had a telegram over the phone for us from the war office, Alan is prisoner of war” he said. There and then, saying “Thank God” we embraced each other. Oh delighted we were to hear at last that he is alive — and apparently unwounded.³⁴

This news changed everything: ‘How different was this morning’s awaking! No dead weight of woe hanging over one, such as we had the past six or eight weeks. The war? Yes, but not the war and the anxiety about Alan in the same way.’³⁵ The feeling expressed by this mother is a demonstration of the variability of civilians’ testimony. For Mrs Milburn and others in the same situation, June 1940 was maybe the worst month of their life, while it could be less disturbing for those not directly affected.

CONCLUSION

The examination of the testimonies of a dozen British diarists shows that most of the narratives examined corroborate the Home Intelligence reports. A potential German invasion was an expected reality as demonstrated by the reported discussions the diarists had with colleagues or friends. They expressed anger and anxiety, and sometime a kind of detachment too. However, the diaries also reveal the importance of the management of the day-to-day life, a detail that would not appear in official or general reports, and above all the significance of personal circumstances on the experience of the war. Having children to care for or having a son or a husband in the Forces influenced greatly the perspectives, feelings, and priorities as well as the narration of the diarists, a point of importance as it nuances and could even challenge our comprehension of the reality of the Home Front. While the war at this moment caused a sense of ‘anxiety’ common to many, we must acknowledge the various forms a single emotion can take, the different ways in which it can be experienced and the diverse effects it can have, all rooted in the everyday life of individuals, in order to fully understand what these emotions meant.

The main purposes of this paper has been to share the intimate experiences of those who witnessed June 1940 and to reveal testimonies until now hidden in the archives. However, it has also aimed to add everyday wartime reality to our vision of the Second World War, illustrating the importance of considering individual experiences and feelings in our understanding of events usually viewed from a macro perspective. There is no doubt that this particular moment of the war had a tremendous

34 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

impact on these people and in all likelihood, the whole population. The picture formed by these individual pieces of narrative all put together is one of people living on a day-to-day basis, in a kind of unreal juxtaposition of the worst expectations of war, mixed with the usual concerns of everyday life. The unprecedented level of war mentions in the diaries at that time, the omnipresence of the conflict and its interweaving with the small and apparently insignificant facts of life, as well as the feelings expressed by the diarists make clear that June 1940 was by no means a month as any other for a British Home Front. It was a moment of unusual concentration of intense emotions reflecting the significance of major global circumstances on individual lives and it is my belief that such emotional experiences are of great significance in the shaping of the narrative of the war.