



## Britain Under Threat: Civil Defence in the Era of Total War, 1914–1989

Collection Summary

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One of the defining characteristics of total war is the erosion of the distinction between the home front and the frontline. During the twentieth century, when total war reached its zenith, civilians became direct targets and new technologies threatened enormous destruction, not just on the conventional battlefield, but in Britain itself. As a result, **an entirely new wing of government was brought into being, responsible for civil defence**, and tasked with protecting Britain and its citizens from these new and terrifying threats.

Drawing on hundreds of underused government files at The National Archives (UK), this collection explores civil defence in Britain from 1914 to 1989. This period **spans the two world wars, the increasingly fraught interwar years, and the Cold War**. It also covers the advent of new technologies—chemical weapons, bomber aircraft, ballistic missiles, and the atomic bomb—which changed the face of warfare and which posed a particular risk to civilian lives. In responding to these dangers, civil defence took **on a broad and diverse remit, encompassing everything from building air raid shelters and distributing gas masks to stockpiling medical supplies and issuing propaganda**.

The files here are drawn from a number of government departments—the **Home Office, the Ministry of Information, the Air Ministry, and many others**—but it is not only official voices which can be heard within the sources. The responses of ordinary members of the public to the threat of attack, and to the measures put in place to protect them, come across strongly throughout. The material also reveals **the true diversity of twentieth-century British society, exploring how civil defence was experienced differently along lines of social class, gender, religious identity, ethnic background, age, and disability**.

As a result, this collection goes far beyond the confines of traditional military history. In fact, studying civil defence **offers a unique window into many aspects of British life between 1914 and 1989**. It sheds light on social dynamics, group psychology, design and mass production, concepts of home and family, public relations and propaganda, and government intervention. It likewise facilitates exploration of discourses of citizen

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-ship, fear, and other emotional responses, as well as the history of everyday life. In these ways, and in many others besides, **this collection offers students and researchers a major insight into the changing social, political, cultural and, ethical landscapes of modern Britain.**

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