

PENELOPE SUMMERFIELD

## EDUCATION AND POLITICS IN THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR\*

Several eminent Conservatives, including Winston Churchill, believed that wartime schemes of education in the Armed Forces caused servicemen to vote Labour at the Election of 1945. For instance, R. A. Butler wrote: "The Forces' vote in particular had been virtually won over by the left-wing influence of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs."<sup>1</sup> So frequently was this view stated that ABCA became a scapegoat for Tory defeat.<sup>2</sup>

By no means all servicemen voted. 64% put their names on a special Service Register in November 1944, and 37% (just over half of those who registered) actually voted by post or proxy in July 1945, a total of 1,701,000. Research into the Election in the soldiers' home constituencies, where their votes were recorded, suggests that they made little difference to the outcome of the election.<sup>3</sup> But the Tories' assumption that servicemen voted Labour is borne out. McCallum and Readman indicate that their vote confirmed, though it did not cause, the swing to Labour in the constituencies, and those with memories of the separate count made of the servicemen's ballot papers recall that it was overwhelmingly left-wing, e.g., 90% Labour in the case of Reading, where Ian Mikardo was candidate.<sup>4</sup>

\* I should like to thank all those who were kind enough to talk to me about their experiences on active service or in the War Office, some of which have been quoted, but all of which have been helpful in writing this paper. I should also like to thank Stephen Yeo, John Harrison, the History Work in Progress Seminar at Sussex University, and John Walton of Lancaster University for constructive criticisms and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible* (London, 1973), pp. 126-27.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Woolton* (London, 1959), pp. 299ff.

<sup>3</sup> R. B. McCallum and Alison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (Oxford, 1947), p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with I. Mikardo, 1975, kindly made available to the author by P. Young. "What made an enormous difference [...] was the current affairs education programme in the services. ABCA, the Cairo Parliament etc. [...] I saw the separate count in my constituency and it was way over 90% in a marginal seat."

The allegation that ABCA caused this leftward trend merits investigation, even though the small impact of the servicemen's vote makes Army Education an implausible explanation for the result of the 1945 Election. Why did educational provision emanating from the War Office gain such a reputation? Can the history of this education provide insights into how military leaders thought the wartime citizen army should be managed, and can it tell us anything about actual political developments in the ranks of this army in 1939-45?

The War Office was responsible primarily for the administration of the Army, but as the home of the Secretary of State for War it tended to develop policy which was recommended to the Air Ministry and Admiralty. Thus the WO files are a rich source of information on the discussions of the military bureaucrats. Routes to evidence of the mood in the ranks are more tortuous. Some WO material on morale is missing, possibly cut out of the records made public, even though it was clearly collected. For instance there is no trace of WO morale surveys done during January to June 1941 which were referred to in WO discussions. However, sources outside the WO provide some information of this sort. For instance Mass-Observation, an independent organisation launched in 1937, to research public opinion and behaviour,<sup>5</sup> maintained contact with members of the organisation who entered the Forces, and though not officially allowed to "observe" there, that is to ask for "Directives" to be answered and surveys to be organised, M-O collected information through correspondence which was ostensibly personal. Thus the data on the Forces in the M-O Archive are by no means representative in the sense of being the replies of a random sample to value-free questions. On the contrary they are subjective responses by predominantly middle-class individuals, whose keenness to observe for M-O was in part the result of a critical approach towards British social and political life in the 1930's and during the war. Similarly those who responded to a letter in the local press in three different towns in 1975-76 and agreed to be interviewed about Army Education in the Second World War were a self-selected group. It is within the limitations of these sources that the questions posed will be discussed.

Within the WO there was no unanimity among those involved with education as to its purpose. Three different views stand out, and there was opposition to all of them. The power of education to motivate soldiers was stressed, particularly in the early stages of development, though its value as a morale-raiser was returned to many times during the Second World War.

<sup>5</sup> See Mass-Observation, *First Year's Work 1937-38* (London, 1938).

In the middle of the war it was defended in the name of its ability to contain political activity. But simultaneously, from other quarters, it was advocated for the purpose of creating a new sense of citizenship among servicemen.

Education was first used in the Army during the First World War, when the WO encouraged voluntary bodies such as the YMCA to provide for the young recruit whose schooling or apprenticeship had been interrupted. In 1918 education was extended beyond recruits and was provided by a department of the WO itself, the Army Education Corps. It was seen as having a dual function within the overall purpose of raising morale. At an abstract level the AEC was intended to arouse hostility to Germany and encourage patriotism. At a practical level men were to be trained in preparation for returning to civilian life.<sup>6</sup>

The context in which it was implemented was the recent revolution in Russia and those attempted in Germany and Austria, in which the rank and file of defeated armies played key parts. The British Army was not defeated, though it was by many accounts demoralised. Demobilisation mutinies in Calais, Folkestone, Dover and Shoreham suggest that the education scheme was not a strong breakwater against discontent. However, rather than abandoning education as useless post-war reports argued that it was important. The education of men in training was said to make them easier to train, and education of men on active service was said to reduce boredom and apathy.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the AEC was not disbanded after the First World War, although in the shrunken and non-combatant army of the years of appeasement it was an anomaly. A committee was investigating it in 1939 when the Second World War broke out. Discussions, now focusing on its role in war continued during the "Phoney War" period, September 1939 to May 1940. Disagreement centred at this stage on whether education was really necessary for morale in addition to welfare and recreational facilities, which had recently been enlarged. T. J. Cash of the Directorate of Finances (!) was emphatic that it was not.<sup>8</sup> Those who believed in its usefulness and were in favour of making the AEC a permanent part of the army estab-

<sup>6</sup> T. H. Hawkins and L. J. F. Brimble. *Adult Education: The Record of the British Army* (London, 1947), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> T. J. Cash DF to Director of Recruiting and Organisation, 12 February 1940, War Office Papers 32/4725, Public Record Office, London (hereafter WO). Cash wrote that "there is no place for organised 'Army Education' in wartime in an Army composed of all classes, from highly educated to illiterate, engaged in fighting or preparing to fight, and that what is wanted is mainly mental and physical relaxation rather than systematic education."

ishment were backed by pressure from outside. The YMCA, the Workers' Educational Association, and educationalists like H. A. L. Fisher and A. D. Lindsay pressed for adult education as a right of the soldier-civilian.<sup>9</sup> Others looked towards it as a solution to a dangerous lack of interest in the war which appeared to have settled on many soldiers, as evidently it had at the end of the First World War. Bishop Hensley Henson recorded his impression of this mood in his diary in March 1940.

I am distressed to hear from many sides that the prevailing temper of our troops is a half cynical boredom, as remote as possible from the high crusading fervour which their situation authorises and requires. They are not pacifists or disloyal, but "bored stark". [...] They have neither the enthusiasm of youth nor the deliberate purpose of age, but just acquiescence in an absurd and unwelcome necessity.<sup>10</sup>

Education, it was felt, might be a more effective way of countering boredom than the bread of the NAAFI and the circuses of ENSA alone.

A committee under Lieutenant General R. H. Haining was set up to consider these arguments on 1st March 1940. But before it reported, it was thought by those who believed in the value of education for morale that the AEC should be put to use. A letter from the Directorate of Military Training to General Officers Commanding in Chief, All Home Commands, on 1st April 1940 recommended a scheme of army education using civilian facilities which the AEC Education Officer would supervise in each Command.<sup>11</sup>

What sort of education was considered conducive to morale at this stage? The main characteristics of the initial scheme of April 1940 were that education was, as in 1918, to be available not just for recruits, but for men training and on active service. The AEC was to provide any type of education for which there was a demand from the troops in as far as resources permitted. Specific subjects suggested by the Directorate of Military Training embraced natural science, literature, and also economics and history "including citizenship and current events". But it was felt that this must not be forced on the soldier, but that he must make his demands known and participate voluntarily.<sup>12</sup>

This scheme was barely under way when the military picture was dramatically transformed. In April-May 1940 German Forces overran Norway, Holland, Belgium and France. The situation as far as morale was

<sup>9</sup> See correspondence in *The Times*, 13 January and 9 February 1940.

<sup>10</sup> H. H. Henson, *Retrospect of an Unimportant Life* (London, 1942-50), III, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> G. W. Lambert to General Officers Commanding in Chief, 1 April 1940, WO 32/4725.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

concerned was considered desperate, especially at the time of the evacuation of Dunkirk. Non-stop food to non-stop films were laid on for returning soldiers, and efforts were made to separate them from men waiting in British camps.

The Haining Committee concluded that the scheme launched in April had shown that education was important for morale, and recommended in May the wartime establishment of the AEC. The Army Council approved this in August and in September 1940 an Army Council Instruction went out to Commanding Officers, restating in more binding terms the April arrangements.<sup>13</sup> It added the requirement that the Commanding Officer appoint a Unit Education Officer from among the officers in each unit, a job which it is generally agreed went to ex-schoolmasters glad to get back to some educational work. A pamphlet was issued to follow the Army Council Instruction called "Education in the War-Time Army". It was written by the new Director of Army Education, an administrator from the Government department responsible for civilian education. He brought together the ideas that education could solve the problem of apathy and that it could supply "high crusading fervour", and suggested the specific direction in which Army Education should go.

There should be constant opportunities of showing to all, the destructive nature, both as regards material and culture, of the forces set against us and of illustrating how the British Empire stands for the essential factors of a new and better life.<sup>14</sup>

The comparison of Germany with Britain had been used in Army Education in 1918, but as a contrast between the destructiveness of Fascism and the promise inherent in British society and government it now acquired a specificity potent in the development of different ideas about the purpose and politics of Army Education.

However, before education could have an effect it had to reach those it was supposed to inspire. In December 1940 a new WO department devoted to the maintenance of morale of all ranks was set up, distinct from the Directorate of Military Training.<sup>15</sup> As head of this new Directorate of Welfare and Education now responsible for the AEC, Major General H. Willans undertook to assess the effectiveness of the existing education scheme. He considered its weakness to be that it touched only a minority

<sup>13</sup> Army Council Instruction 1138, 25 September 1940, WO 32/9429.

<sup>14</sup> Education in the War-Time Army, Army Council Instruction 1415, 21 November 1940, WO 32/9429.

<sup>15</sup> For a record of its establishment see Appendix A to ECAC/P (43) 98, 10 September 1943, WO 32/10462.

who were personally committed to voluntary education. They were most interested in “compensatory” education of a vocational or elementary nature. The other 80% were not interested. They had had no formal education after the age of fourteen and they rejected education because they associated it with restriction. Yet their morale was particularly vulnerable, partly because the dislocation from home to army life produced apathy, and partly because “Their limited education has not, in most cases, left them with that most precious heritage – the ability to make good use of leisure.”<sup>16</sup> The problem from the WO’s point of view was how to interest such soldiers in a voluntary scheme of education.<sup>17</sup>

In the months while it was being discussed the military situation was anything but conducive to optimism in the ranks. Britain was still fighting alone, under threat of invasion, battered by the Blitz and without a military success since the Battle of Britain in September 1940. Italian advances with German support in the Middle East and North Africa required British troops in this theatre, but the Army was also needed at home for British defence. Thus the experience for most of the rank and file was a sedentary one in British army camps, where they received news of military reversal and defeat abroad, and the bombing of British towns at home, and yet were not themselves being deployed in the military effort.<sup>18</sup>

The WO’s concern about morale led to attempts to monitor it in three ways. A sample of letters home was analysed as it passed through the Censor. Commanding Officers were encouraged to obtain information from their officers and to report to the WO. “Spies” were deployed, such as a Lieutenant Colonel, John Sparrow, who, dressed as a private, travelled on troopships and trains, and visited army camps. The conclusion drawn from information from such sources in the months January to June 1941 was, according to the Adjutant General, Ronald Adam, that low morale was widespread.<sup>19</sup>

The correspondence received from the forces by M-O in this period confirms the picture of frustration and despondency. The inadequacy of training, inequity in job allocation and doubt about the objectives of military leaders were key complaints. For instance, an airman wrote on 8 February 1941:

<sup>16</sup> Education in the Army, 13 January 1941, WO 32/9429.

<sup>17</sup> M-O asked its Service contacts for letters about Army Education in April 1941 and had replies from 16, 10 of whom knew of no scheme in their units. Most blamed the Army rather than the soldier for lack of take-up, and some suggested that education on the objects and course of the war would be popular. File 1650, April 1941, Box 214, M-O. M-O material is available at M-O Archive, University of Sussex.

<sup>18</sup> See letters from servicemen in File 1667, 1940-41, Box 214, M-O.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Sir Ronald Adam, June 1975.

The following are sentiments heard at one time or another from nearly everybody. “They don’t train you to fight, they train you for the parade-ground.” “This isn’t the Air Force – this is the Boy Scouts.” “No mate, you’re wrong – it’s the Girl Guides.” “I bet they don’t have all this bullshit in the German Army.” “Silly old bugger, thinks it’s the Boers he’s fighting.”<sup>20</sup>

There was a feeling that “they”, i.e. members of the ruling classes, had reserved all the best jobs, and the rank and file were given inappropriate and useless ones. Other letters mentioned that morale-raising talks were given but not listened to, that military discipline and performance were weak, and that something more than “piss ups” would have to be found to improve morale.<sup>21</sup> A trainee Army officer at an Officer Cadet Training Unit took this further. Morale was low among middle-class volunteers like himself because they distrusted their leaders.

They are profoundly anti-Nazi, but they are equally profoundly anti-imperialist. They see in victory a prospect almost as dark as defeat. And of course when you are faced with having to die in order to achieve the victory of a cause you have every reason to distrust, your morale sinks to a very low level.<sup>22</sup>

Such suspicions were voiced with a sharper political edge outside the Armed Forces, in an upsurge of publishing and activity critical of the handling of the war effort. The common objective was full mobilisation, and the movement, embracing a wide spectrum, became known as “the war to win the War”. It was waged in part against the rump of pre-war politicians in the Cabinet, whose opposition to Fascism was believed to be half-hearted. “Cato” published *Guilty Men* in July 1940. In January 1941 Churchill chastised the *Daily Mirror* (and later threatened to close it down) for its allegations of Government incompetence and lack of purpose, thereby appearing to defend the “guilty men”.<sup>23</sup> In this first “London Letter to *Partisan Review*”, dated 3 January 1941, and in “The Lion and the Unicorn” (February 1941) George Orwell criticised the Government’s leadership and called for radical social and political change as a necessity for the defeat of Nazi Germany.<sup>24</sup> Richard Acland, Tom Wintringham and others broadly committed to restructuring society along the lines of a moral

<sup>20</sup> Airmen, Morale and Attitudes, 8 February 1941, Report 569, M-O.

<sup>21</sup> Files 1664 and 1660, letters dated 1 March, 31 March and 12 June 1941, Box 214, M-O.

<sup>22</sup> Report dated 15 March 1941, Box 214, M-O.

<sup>23</sup> M. Edelman, *The Mirror: A Political History* (London, 1966), pp. 103-08.

<sup>24</sup> George Orwell, “London Letter to *Partisan Review*” and “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius”, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, ed. by S. Orwell and I. Angus (London, 1968), II, pp. 49-109.

and humane form of socialism formed the 1941 Committee and Forward March, which later merged to form the Common Wealth Party.<sup>25</sup> When Russia entered the war in June 1941, this movement gained both an ally which was believed to be putting socialism into practice, and another scourge for the British Government, which was believed to be reluctant to help a nation which it had erstwhile regarded with deep suspicion.

Also important in the “war to win the War” was criticism of incompetence in the military hierarchy, and particularly ignorance of the best ways to deploy men and machines to combat *Blitzkrieg*. Two publicists from quite different backgrounds, B. H. Liddell-Hart, a regular Army Captain, and Tom Wintringham, who had fought in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, made similar criticisms and recommendations, particularly about the need to motivate the rank-and-file soldier. Liddell-Hart wrote that the men’s leaders

must provide creative ideas from which a positive faith can be generated. To get the best out of men it is not enough to tell them that they must be ready to die in the last ditch. They must be given a new vision of the future and a new hope.<sup>26</sup>

Wintringham, with Cromwell’s New Model Army in mind, a model which occurred to others later in the development of Army Education, wrote:

Men must be persuaded, made to understand, given the enthusiasm that will change their discipline from an acceptance of orders to an eager use of all their powers in pursuit of a common aim. They must be made to feel that their own contribution has value — is accepted, that the war is their war.<sup>27</sup>

It was just such a feeling that many observers in the WO and outside felt was lacking in the ranks of British servicemen.

Thus the decisions taken in the WO in June 1941 about re-directing Army Education so that it reached more soldiers were informed by evidence of low morale on the one hand and a broad movement critical of political and military leadership on the other. In this context a radical departure took place in views of what should be done and why.

Major General H. Willans, Director General of Welfare and Education, set out an entirely new scheme in a report of 4th June 1941. There were three vital departures. First, in the interests of morale, this education was

<sup>25</sup> A. Calder, “The Common Wealth Party 1942-5” (D.Phil. thesis, Sussex University, 1967), pp. 42-64.

<sup>26</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *Dynamic Defence* (London, 1940), p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> T. Wintringham, *New Ways of War* (London, 1940), p. 5.



not to be scholastic, but was to concentrate entirely on current affairs.

It cannot be disputed that if we can employ men's minds and stimulate their interests by promoting knowledge, discussion and thought about the affairs of the world in which they live, we go far to maintain their morale and thus to make them better soldiers.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, in order to reach all soldiers this education in current affairs was to be compulsory and take place in duty hours, and thirdly, to economise on manpower and draw officers and men together classes were not to be given by "experts" from AEC, but by every Regimental Officer.

The officer must supply his men with information and must encourage them to think and he must regard this as an integral part of his task. It must become part of the soldier's life like his dinner or his sport or his route march.<sup>29</sup>

A department of Willans's Directorate, distinct from the AEC, was to supply material and guidance. It came to be called the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and the classes arranged under the scheme became known as ABCA sessions.

Immediately there was opposition. The Secretary of State for War at the time, Captain H. D. R. Margesson, said the scheme would "lay the door open to political agitation within the army" and the full Army Council agreed, on 17 June 1941, that "it would be most undesirable if party politics were allowed to enter into the discussions".<sup>30</sup> Major General Willans's defence merits scrutiny. His first claim was that political discussion was already encouraged by the scheme launched in April 1940. His own investigation early in 1941 suggests that this was improbable since he had found only elementary and vocational classes running, for all the suggestions of the Director of Military Training and the Director of Army Education that "current affairs and citizenship" and comparisons of Britain and Nazi Germany be encouraged. The next stage of his argument indicates why he may have used licence in claiming that the April scheme encouraged politics. He wanted to emphasise his belief that discussion of a sort unacceptable to Commanding Officers, because critical of Army leadership and that of the Government, and thus defined as "political", was already taking place. He could then build a case for ABCA on the grounds that it would contain and control such activity. Evidence from elsewhere confirms the idea of spontaneous discussion, and that

<sup>28</sup> Education in the Wartime Army, Memorandum by Major General H. Willans, DGWE, 4 June 1941, WO 32/9735.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Minute, 4 June 1941, and AC/M (41), 8th Meeting, 17 June 1941, WO 32/9735.

Commanding Officers were keen to repress it. For instance an RAF contact implored M-O not to publicise the fact that he and others like him had started their own current-affairs group, for fear of reprisals, and an airman training at Cranwell was arrested for taking part in a discussion group and jailed for three days for refusing to divulge the names of the others.<sup>31</sup>

Willans's argument to the Secretary of State and the Army Council was:

men who wish to discuss politics will discuss them, and it is far better that they should do so openly in the light of facts which have been intelligently and convincingly presented to them, than that they should do so in ignorance or behind doors. Indeed I strongly suggest the scheme will, in fact, militate against political agitation. The agitator invariably thrives where he is dealing with ignorant men or working in secret and fails when brought into open contact with facts and knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

The Army Council remained sceptical. Even though they accepted the scheme as one for "The Maintenance of Morale in the Wartime Army by means of instruction given by Unit Officers", they reserved two sorts of control. The material supplied for the classes was to be edited by the Directorate of Military Intelligence, a move to impose an internal check on the Bureau. And it was the Commanding Officer's responsibility to ensure that "no subjects touching upon party politics be permitted at Unit discussions".<sup>33</sup> Willans's plan to serve up current affairs "like the rations" might not be enough to keep the kind of "party politics" unacceptable to the WO out of the ranks.

The reservation of these powers was by no means a token gesture. Internal control was exercised frequently, especially as "current affairs" was increasingly redefined as "citizenship". Of great importance to this tension and this trend were the personnel recruited to run ABCA in the WO. Not only were they non-military, but by virtue of the interests and experience in adult education and in current affairs which qualified them to work in ABCA they regarded such education as inevitably and rightly stimulating critical awareness of Government and society, the better to create informed and responsible citizens.

Mr W. E. Williams, made Director of ABCA in June 1941, and not to be confused with Major General H. Willans, Director General of Welfare and Education, is a case in point. He had been head of the British Institute of Adult Education, an organisation implicitly critical of the shortcomings of

<sup>31</sup> Report 686, Appendix 1, 5 May 1941. M-O: interview with G.G., ex-Leading Aircraftman RAF, May 1975.

<sup>32</sup> Minute, 4 June 1941, WO 32/9735.

<sup>33</sup> AC/M (41), 8th Meeting.

British elementary education to the age of fourteen, which was all that 75% of the population received.<sup>34</sup> He was also an editor of Penguin Books, which published cheap copies of books of “topical importance” as *Penguin Specials*, including many which belonged within “the war to win the War”. The movement from the narrower concept of morale to the larger one of citizenship as the purpose of Army Education is visible in the first document explaining ABCA to the Forces.

lack of knowledge about national and international issues is a chronic condition among the citizens of this country; and it does not disappear because a man changes his dungarees or his pin-stripe trousers for a khaki battledress. But if an ill-informed or indifferent electorate is a menace to our national safety so, too, is an Army which neither knows nor cares why it is in arms.<sup>35</sup>

Thus at the outset the desirable targets of current-affairs teaching were defined as all citizens, not just those who were temporarily in uniform. And the purpose was to produce informed and committed voting as well as fighting.

Williams succeeded in enlarging ABCA’s staff and range of activities, so that by 1945 ABCA contained three separate departments. One dealt with three publications, *War*, a newsheet of latest events, *Current Affairs*, a discussion of broader topical issues (e.g., to name but a few, “Our Ally Russia”, “The British Empire”, “Town Planning”, “The Development of Nazism” and “Woman’s Place”<sup>36</sup>), and *Soldier*, on the serviceman’s job and prospects. Another department produced maps and posters. The third ran a Play Unit, the purpose of which was to present current affairs in dramatised form.

The Play Unit is a further illustration of the gulf between the members of the WO who had set up ABCA and the personnel who actually ran it. Several of those involved, such as the playwrights and actors Ted Willis and Jack Lindsay, had experience of political theatre through activity in the Unity Theatre, a Popular Front product of the ’thirties. They were avowedly committed to left-labour or communist politics. Their plays, such as *Where do we go from here?*, aimed to stimulate discussion on current social and political issues, in this case Post-War Reconstruction, by dramatising its impact on the lives of ordinary people. The circumstances in which they were performed, in nissen huts, or barracks with no stage, or

<sup>34</sup> Board of Education Consultative Committee, Report on Secondary Education (London, 1938), p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> Current Affairs in the Army: The Outline of a New Plan, 21 July 1941, WO 32/9735.

<sup>36</sup> Current Affairs. No 2 (11 October 1941); No 23 (1 August 1942); No 27 (26 September 1942); No 29 (24 October 1942); No 61 (29 January 1944).

out of doors, reinforced their message by involving the audience.<sup>37</sup>

However, it was the ABCA departments responsible for posters and publications to which the heavy hand of WO censorship was applied. For instance a poster by Abram Games entitled “Your Britain Fight for it Now” was withdrawn at Churchill’s insistence, and the series of which it was intended to be the first discontinued.<sup>38</sup> It depicted a rickety child playing in a dank yard. The words “disease” and “neglect” were scrawled graffiti-like on crumbling walls. Death was symbolised by a crooked gravestone in a corner. Superimposed on this image of the squalor and poverty of the pre-war years were the clean fresh lines of a Health Centre, representing preventative care in a reconstructed Britain.<sup>39</sup> The most celebrated occasion of this sort was the withdrawal by the Secretary of State for War, P. J. Grigg, of an issue of *Current Affairs* on social insurance, by William Beveridge. It was a summary of his report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, which the Coalition Government, particularly Churchill, had received without enthusiasm. The pamphlet was issued to the Forces on 19 December 1942, but was recalled a few days later. Grigg defended his action in the House of Commons in January 1943 on the grounds that Beveridge’s recommendations were not official Government policy.<sup>40</sup>

However, such grounds were weak, for they applied to much of topical interest. Were servicemen to be prevented from discussing current affairs whenever it embraced or illustrated issues which were not part of a political programme that Churchill and Grigg wished to see implemented? Such public rows did much to identify ABCA with the Beveridge-Welfare-State-planned-economy vision of the future, to which, as R. A. Butler put it, Conservatives “had no authoritative answer or articulated alternative”.<sup>41</sup> It was less exposing to constrain ABCA by depriving it of resources, as Churchill tried to do several times.<sup>42</sup> But under pressure in the House of Commons Grigg had to promise re Beveridge that “the ordinary Army Education scheme” would “provide lectures on the subject”.<sup>43</sup> The “ordinary” scheme was, however, developing in the same direction as

<sup>37</sup> A Theatre at War, Transcript of BBC Radio 3 broadcast, 13 March 1975, researched and kindly made available by Professor Arnold Goldman.

<sup>38</sup> Prime Minister to Secretary of State for War, 17 April 1943, in W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (London, 1948-54), IV, p. 847.

<sup>39</sup> J. Derracot and B. Loftus, *Second World War Posters* (London, 1972), pp. 30-31.

<sup>40</sup> House of Commons Debates, Fifth Series, CCCLXXXVI, cc. 10-14 (19 January 1943).

<sup>41</sup> Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, op. cit., pp. 126-27.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., Prime Minister to Lord President of the Council, 2 August 1943, in Churchill, *The Second World War*, V, p. 581: “Every effort should be used to prevent extra time, money, and military personnel being absorbed in these activities”.

<sup>43</sup> See note 40.

ABCA, towards the teaching of “citizenship”. It too was subject to the contradictory pressures of those with different interpretations of the purpose of Army Education.

A year after the establishment of ABCA the AEC took a new initiative, whose origins were similar to those of ABCA. The military situation in 1942, though transformed by the entry of Russia and the USA, was still depressing. The British record on the extended battle-fronts was one of “alternating defeat and stagnation”, punctuated by the loss of Singapore and Tobruk.<sup>44</sup> With an eye on morale, especially during the coming months, the Winter Scheme of Education was introduced.

Like ABCA this education was to be compulsory. One hour each week was to be devoted to the man as soldier (an extension of training). One was to be devoted to the man as an individual (which would be vocational and related to demobilisation). A third hour was to be spent on the man as citizen. It came to be known by the booklets accompanying it entitled *The British Way and Purpose* or BWP.<sup>45</sup> While ABCA attempted to draw the soldier’s attention to the object for which the war was being fought through discussion of current events, BWP concentrated on aspects of British society itself for which it was worth fighting.

The Army Council accepted only hesitantly both the scheme itself, and a proposal to extend BWP, considered to have been the most successful part of it, beyond the winter of 1942-43.<sup>46</sup> The backing of the Adjutant General and of his powerful ally, the new Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, Sir Bernard C. T. Paget, appear to have been vital.<sup>47</sup> They referred to the importance of education for morale, specifically for removing “apathy and complacency”, just as those arguing for the wartime establishment of the AEC in 1940 and ABCA in 1941 had done. But now it was neither education in general nor education in current affairs, but “educating the soldier in those principles of citizenship for which he is fighting” that was stressed.<sup>48</sup> And citizenship was not, as current affairs had been, seen as an entirely male preserve. In August 1943 the Army Council decided that the morale of the women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service was as important as that of men in the Army and included them in the scheme.

Once again the meaning given to citizenship was related to responsible

<sup>44</sup> P. J. Grigg, *Prejudice and Judgement* (London, 1948), p. 325.

<sup>45</sup> The Winter Scheme of Education, 7 September 1942, WO 32/10455. References 46-65 are from this piece unless otherwise stated.

<sup>46</sup> ECAC/P (42) 101, 24 July 1942.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Paget to the Executive Committee of the Army Council, 17 August 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Minute to Secretary of State, 25 August 1942.

participation in democracy. Even more emphatically than ABCA, BWP focused on the social objectives of the war.

This period should be devoted to talks and discussions on the British Way of Life, the British Empire and the United Nations. These talks should have the vitally important aim of driving home what we and our allies are fighting for, as well as our responsibilities as citizens of a democratic country and members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.<sup>49</sup>

However, the concepts “British Way of Life” and “British Empire” were by no means unproblematic. Was the British way of life as lived in the 1930’s, with its dole-queues, its slums, its either inadequate or expensive medical care and schooling, and above all its class divisions, worth preserving? What was the record of the British Empire? Had it been a force for development and democratisation or a source of oppression and exploitation? BWP was bound to be contentious because of the deeply political nature of decisions about “our responsibilities as citizens of a democratic country”.

Not surprisingly BWP literature was scrutinised carefully within the WO. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary for War, Brigadier General Lord Croft, recommended agreement to the extension of BWP, “subject always to the most careful examination and elimination of all controversial matter”. He set an example by going through BWP 2, *Britain in Action* (December 1942), with a blue pencil. His note to the Secretary of State, Grigg, explained: “the passages marked blue are definite propaganda wholly of ‘left wing’ character”. They included all the passages in a section on “Work” concerning worker participation in industry and trade-union participation in government. Also marked were discussions of the unequal distribution of wealth and income in British society and the possibilities of full employment and growing equality in post-war society. In chapter II on “The Social Services” Croft struck at sections on abolishing the means test, the extension of the social services to cover industrial insurance, and the recommendations of the Beveridge Committee. The author of the chapter is unnamed. Grigg was of course currently defending his withdrawal of the Beveridge pamphlet from ABCA. Croft pencilled across the end: “Did Beveridge write this?” The chapter on “Education” received similar treatment. It raised the question of the abolition of the public schools.

It is now widely felt, even by the schools themselves that such privileged places do not fit into a democracy; that by their exclusiveness which depends on wealth rather than ability they preserve and intensify the division of social classes.

<sup>49</sup> The Winter Scheme of Education.

Croft's blue pencil slashed through the paragraph.<sup>50</sup>

Henceforward BWP booklets were censored before they were published. For example BWP 5 had a section on the British Empire entitled "Do We Exploit the Colonies?" The following was removed before publication.

There is no doubt that the development of the Colonial Empire was left at one time largely to private enterprise. And it would be strange if, on some occasions and in some places, individuals had not taken advantage of the abundance of native labour to impose pretty hard conditions. What is more certain is that private enterprise has not provided all the capital necessary for development preferring naturally enough more profitable spheres, such as Argentina, where there is more British money invested than in all the colonies put together.

It was replaced by

Most of the recent criticism of our Colonial policy is not that there has been exploitation by the British Government but that our intervention has not been active enough. Accordingly there has been an increasing tendency to take the initiative in Colonial development.<sup>51</sup>

The point that the colonies were originally developed not by the state at all but by relatively unscrupulous businessmen with more interest in profit than development was heavily veiled under a defence of the good work the British Government had done, and the better work it was going to do. Thus lay the shadow of the new BWP free from "any propagandist or political tendencies".<sup>52</sup>

Many such excisions were made and there was close monitoring of topics and authorship. For instance, Grigg wanted an issue on taxation to replace one on the social services,<sup>53</sup> and the Empire to be dealt with by a series of historical-geography books "to eradicate the idea that our Imperial record is something to go into sackcloth and ashes about".<sup>54</sup> He wanted "some non-political economist like H. D. Henderson" to vet a booklet called *Work*,<sup>55</sup> and insisted that the Foreign Office investigate whether the author of *Britain and the Peace* had "views critical of H.M. Government".<sup>56</sup> "Non-political" was the keynote of the thinking of both Grigg and Croft on

<sup>50</sup> Under-Secretary of State to Secretary of State, 5 January 1943, enclosing proofs of BWP 2. For the BWP booklets see Directorate of Army Education, *The British Way and Purpose*, Consolidated Edition (1944).

<sup>51</sup> Permanent Under-Secretary to Director of Army Education, 20 February 1943.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of Executive Committee of the Army Council meeting, 5 February 1943.

<sup>53</sup> Minute, 28 January 1943.

<sup>54</sup> Secretary of State to Adjutant General, 21 May 1943.

<sup>55</sup> Minute by Secretary of State, 30 January 1943.

<sup>56</sup> Minute, 18 March 1944.

Army Education. Croft wrote: "I foresee much trouble in days to come unless we insist on the hitherto unchallenged view of the fighting services that politics as far as they relate to controversial topics are barred".<sup>57</sup> It meant that BWP pamphlets should deal with subjects only from the "official" perspective, assumed not to be "political". They should not be on subjects on which Government policy was in the process of formation. Essentially if citizenship involved being well-informed on the issues on which elected representatives were taking decisions, soldiers ought not to be encouraged to think of themselves as citizens. In May 1943 Grigg wrote: "Citizenship has been a bit overdone and so have the David Owen-Barbara Ward kind of author."<sup>58</sup>

David Owen and Barbara Ward had written BWP 7, *The Responsible Citizen*, which advocated active participation in political processes, especially the use of the vote. The "war to win the War" had been a critical part of the background to setting up ABCA. Ward and Owen pointed through BWP towards the "war to win the Peace".

Mr Churchill offered us "blood, toil, tears and sweat" for the winning of the war. We shall need the toil and sweat – perhaps the tears as well – for the task of winning a democratic peace.<sup>59</sup>

It was a line which the *Daily Mirror*, the Common Wealth Party and others within the earlier movement for the efficient prosecution of war were currently pushing. Wartime experiments such as the Emergency Hospital Service, the milk scheme, rationing, joint-production committees, wartime nurseries and many others, must be built upon in peacetime. Half-made promises arising from numerous Government Reports on reconstruction, of which Beveridge was only one, must be fulfilled. And as the *Mirror* urged, it lay in the citizen's power to make these things happen by electing the right sort of Government to "win the Peace" at the end of the war.<sup>60</sup>

The attention of the Secretary of State and his Under-Secretary to the details of the production of the BWP pamphlets, which were the responsibility of the Director of Army Education, betrays a deep lack of confidence in Army Education, based on anxiety that it would stimulate interest in these kinds of change. Others in the WO such as Sir Bernard Paget stated, possibly in good faith, that education could only have good results. "I attach great importance to 'The British Way and Purpose' as a

<sup>57</sup> Under-Secretary of State to Secretary of State, 5 January 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Secretary of State to Adjutant General, 21 May 1943.

<sup>59</sup> *The British Way and Purpose*, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>60</sup> A. C. H. Smith et al., *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965* (London, 1975), pp. 114-42.



means of developing a sense of citizenship in the Army which will pay a high dividend after the war.”<sup>61</sup> But Grigg and Croft feared that the development of political ideas which were to Conservatives radical would not, as Willans had promised in 1941, be “contained” by arranging for servicemen to be “brought into open contact with facts and knowledge”. Croft wrote of BWP 2 on education and the social services: “whatever the merits of the proposals it is not our business to create a demand for them by the troops.”<sup>62</sup> Grigg argued for further pamphlets on these subjects to be dropped with the words: “we need give no further hostages to fortune.”<sup>63</sup> What from one (political) point of view were “dividends” were from another “hostages”.

Grigg and Croft did not entirely get their way. Against their arguments for “non-controversial” subjects and the dropping of citizenship the Adjutant General offered evidence of the men’s preferences<sup>64</sup> and of the usefulness of the citizenship classes for morale.<sup>65</sup> The conflict of ideas within the WO over the purpose of Army Education reached a climax in the summer of 1943 when Churchill ordered a Cabinet Enquiry, headed by Sir John Anderson, to investigate it for political bias.<sup>66</sup> Anderson found none.<sup>67</sup> But this did not prevent the higher echelon in the WO putting a proposal before the Executive Committee of the Army Council that it

is not a proper charge upon Army votes to educate the Army beyond the standard requisite for its success as a *military* machine.<sup>68</sup>

The Haining Committee, it was said, had stated that education was important “to sustain the soldier’s morale”, but since then education had gone beyond its brief. The emphasis had shifted from wartime require-

<sup>61</sup> Commander-in-Chief Home Forces to all Army Commanders, 28 March 1943.

<sup>62</sup> See note 57.

<sup>63</sup> See note 55.

<sup>64</sup> Adjutant General to Secretary of State, 18 August 1943.

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum about Winter Scheme 1943-4, Adjutant General for the Executive Committee of the Army Council, 17 August 1943. In the end the social services were dealt with in an ABCA pamphlet and not by the “ordinary Army Education scheme”.

<sup>66</sup> Adam alleged that Churchill tried direct suppression at about this time. “The Secretary of State P. J. Grigg sent for me and showed me a slip from the P.M. in which Sir Winston Churchill stated ‘Stop all this ABCA nonsense at once’. P.J. put it in his drawer and said ‘I wonder if the Old Man remembers all the slips he sends out. Let’s forget about it.’” Letter from Sir Ronald Adam to the author, 26 May 1975.

<sup>67</sup> Prime Minister to Lord President of the Council, 2 August 1943, loc. cit. See also Sir W. E. Williams, “The truth about ABCA”, in: *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 October 1970.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum for the Executive Committee of the Army Council, 10 September 1943. WO 32/10462. Emphasis in original.

ments to the “different and wider needs of the post-war period”, from the education of the soldier to that of the citizen.<sup>69</sup>

In reply the Adjutant General quoted Army Commanders in North Africa, the Middle East, Persia and Iraq, India, and the Commander-in-Chief 21st Army Group (preparing for D Day) to the effect that “education was extremely popular in the Army particularly the hours devoted to instruction in citizenship”, and the “experiment was worth the results in terms of morale and contentment”. He strongly deprecated “any reduction in the increasing volume of its activities, or any attempt to narrow its scope”,<sup>70</sup> and with the backing of the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff he won his case. Thus was Army Education the arena for a curious reversal. The military leaders in the WO protected an essentially political form of education, while the political leaders attacked it for its irrelevance to military efficiency.

But were there grounds for the fears of the Secretary of State? Is there evidence to suggest that ABCA and BWP “contained” politics, or did they spill over the boundaries of organised discussion and take “hostages to fortune”?

An initial question must be whether the ABCA and BWP schemes devised in the WO took place in practice at all. As we have seen, the Adjutant General’s evidence to the Executive Committee of the Army Council in September 1943 was that an impressive array of Army Commanders believed not only that they did take place, but that they were useful. Further to this, the Adjutant General recorded re ABCA:

In 1944 we carried out a survey amongst 5000 soldiers in convalescent depots and transit camps, where soldiers could speak their minds as they could not in their Units. The results showed that in 60% of Army Units the discussion group was well done, in another 10% it was sufficiently well done to have some good effect and in 30% it was not carried out as effectively as we hoped.<sup>71</sup>

Otherwise evidence of occurrence is anecdotal and tends to encourage the idea of a high level of activity. For instance, Angus Calder quotes an officer in North-West Europe after D Day who, taking shelter from German mortaring in a barn, found “a corporal and twelve men earnestly discussing ‘What shall we do with the Germans after the war?’ ”,<sup>72</sup> the subject of BWP

<sup>69</sup> Executive Committee of the Army Council minutes, 10 September 1943, WO 32/10462.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Sir Ronald Adam to the author, 26 May 1975.

<sup>72</sup> Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-45* (London, 1969), p. 251.

## 15. E. P. Thompson records:

everywhere across Italy, on wall newspapers, in bivvies around our tanks, in supply depots, the argument was going on. This curious half-chauvinist, half-anti-fa[s]cist, deeply anti-militarist and yet militarily competent army debated the principles out of which the National Health Service came.<sup>73</sup>

There were, however, some aspects of conditions in the Forces that limited the schemes, notably the supply of manpower and the attitudes of Commanding Officers and other officers. There were shortages of individuals skilled in leading discussion groups. For instance it was claimed that in 1944 the AEC personnel available to the British Liberation Army of 250,000 servicemen were one captain, two lieutenants and seven sergeant instructors.<sup>74</sup> ABCA tried to get round the difficulty by using junior regimental officers, and the Director of Army Education ran courses for discussion leaders. But evidence does exist of the most perfunctory performance of an unwelcome duty by some officers, and lack of interest on the part of the troops.<sup>75</sup>

The opposition of Commanding Officers was also a serious factor. It particularly affected servicewomen, to whom the Winter Scheme applied.<sup>76</sup> They numbered 470,000 at the peak of recruitment in September 1943, about 9% of the total strength of the Forces.<sup>77</sup> Some officers refused to allow citizenship classes to take place during their duty hours, and many of those who did allow women to participate encouraged only the vocational part of the scheme, under which women were taught cookery, needlework, household repairs and other domestic subjects.<sup>78</sup> There is evidence that servicewomen were worrying about their future after the war, for instance whether their training in the Services would be any use, and whether men would give all the available jobs.<sup>79</sup> The assumption that a domestic role was the only appropriate one for women appears to have informed the decision to use the Winter Scheme to teach women domestic skills.

As far as servicemen's officers were concerned, the Adjutant General and the Director of Army Education maintained contact by letter and by

<sup>73</sup> E. P. Thompson, "A question of manners", in: *New Society*, XXIX (1974), p. 92.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Sir Ronald Adam, June 1975.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from J.S.M. to the author, 25 May 1976; Report 963 ABCA scheme, 16 November 1941, M-O.

<sup>76</sup> See Memorandum about Winter Scheme 1943-4.

<sup>77</sup> Central Statistical Office, *Statistical Digest of the War* (London, 1951), p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Hawkins and Brimble, *Adult Education*, op. cit., pp. 152-53.

<sup>79</sup> Mass-Observation, *The Journey Home* (London, 1944), pp. 59-61.

sending round AEC representatives to encourage implementation of the schemes. But many contacts spoke of latent or open hostility not just from Commanding Officers, but from many senior officers. A Sergeant in Signals and subsequently in the AEC in India and Burma said that education started there in 1944 amidst concern about morale. But

The middle range in the hierarchy, majors and colonels who were often Regular Army, were mostly against education, news-sheets etc. They were opposed to free thinking, let alone radical thinking. At the top, and below, the lieutenants (mostly recruited from civvy street) were often for it.<sup>80</sup>

#### E. P. Thompson remembered:

The Beveridge Plan came to me, in the form of an Army Bureau Current Affairs pamphlet, three or four weeks before the final battle of Cassino. The squadron leader came out of his tent with it in his hand, spotted me, and said: "Oh, Thompson! HQ insists that we get all the men together and run discussions on this. Do you mind taking it on? I'd do it myself, but it's rather difficult to argue *against* a thing when you don't know anything about it."<sup>81</sup>

Registration for voting in the General Election to follow the end of the war is itself indicative of the different attitudes towards citizenship in the Army which jostled within the hierarchy. It was organised in November 1944, when the end of the war seemed to be in sight, though of course no date could be put on it. A collection of M-O letters shows that where senior officers believed in active citizenship, the proxy vote was explained, and cards were handed out and collected on parade. Where they did not, information was merely posted on the Unit Order Board (beside fatigues) or men were advised to report to the Orderly Room (associated with discipline).<sup>82</sup>

There were, however, aspects of life in the Forces which were conducive to the development of ABCA and BWP. The tension between Regular Army officers and both privates and junior officers doing war service only could represent in microcosm the social and political conflicts of civilian life in the 1930's, and so stimulate interest. For instance a Sergeant in the Royal Tank Regiment in North Africa recalled how he was invited to talk on the Russian campaigns to another squadron in the desert. He experienced a stream of barracking from the squadron leader, a Major, which was hard for him, as a Sergeant, to deal with without appearing insubordinate. At the end the men expressed the resentment they felt for such officers, and their support for the Sergeant's pro-Russian message, in a

<sup>80</sup> Interview with W.A.E., ex-Officer AEC, February 1976.

<sup>81</sup> Thompson, "A question of manners", loc. cit.

<sup>82</sup> Electoral Register and Forces, File 1636, July-November 1944, Box 215, M-O.

gusty rendering of *The Red Flag*, to the apoplectic but impotent rage of the Major. The Major turned to one of the other officers, and said:

“My goodness I seem to have got the Bolshie squadron in this battalion.”  
The captain cheerfully replied, “it isn’t just this battalion, Sir, the whole of the Eighth Army thinks the same way.”<sup>83</sup>

The “mental furniture” of many of those who were “in for the duration” was also important. In part it was provided by the newspaper they read, and the most popular in the Forces was the *Daily Mirror*. 30.3% of servicemen and 32.4% of servicewomen read it in 1941, compared with 26.5% and 13.6% who read the conservative *Daily Express*.<sup>84</sup> But the *Mirror*’s influence was greater than the margin between the two readerships suggests, since the *Mirror* published various papers produced specially for the Forces such as *Good Morning*, edited by the *Mirror*’s Henry Bartholomew, and *Union Jack*, edited by Hugh Cudlipp. The *Mirror*’s satirist Cassandra (William Connor) contributed to Forces’ papers in his distinctive style after his call-up in 1942. The *Mirror*’s part in the “war to win the War” and the “war to win the Peace”, and their relationship to ABCA and BWP, has already been discussed. A. C. H. Smith *et al.*, in their excellent analysis of the wartime *Mirror*, suggest that the *Mirror* appealed particularly to servicemen because it had “the feeling of democracy, of people talking straight to each other in ‘real’ language about their lives and hopes, and by the same token an anti-authoritarian feeling: we, the people, can get things moving and done — anyone who directs us can do so only with our consent.”<sup>85</sup> In addition, many servicemen brought with them well-formed leftward political views, from Liberal, Labour and ILP to Common Wealth and CP. For these individuals ABCA and BWP provided a useful focus for discussion and activity, but could no more “contain” them than a bag could contain a cat.

King’s Regulations did not permit them to be card-carrying members or to organise in the Forces. They were not in receipt of instructions from HQ (with the possible exception of Common Wealth, which had a Forces’ Department). But in the case of some their political background taught them that useful political work could be done anywhere. Their vocabulary (or their *clichés*) identified them to each other. For instance the RTR Sergeant quoted above described activities in his Brigade’s marshalling base, Beni Yusef, nine miles from Cairo, at the beginning of 1942.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with R.D.Mc., ex-Sergeant RTR, April 1975.

<sup>84</sup> P. Kimble, *Newspaper Reading in the Third Year of the War* (London, 1942).

<sup>85</sup> Smith *et al.*, *Paper Voices*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

There were a number of us who were CP members or very close to the CP. We got together and decided to initiate some political activity, and started discussion groups in one of the canteens. Here we had discussions and debates on a variety of topics, for example we had one on the Atlantic Charter, one on Nationalisation, Britain after the War, and then we had some lighter topics like should women be nationalised. These attracted audiences in the canteen of 3 to 4 hundred – very large audiences for this kind of activity.<sup>86</sup>

Some such contacts suggested that the absence of newspapers and information particularly in remote corners of for instance North Africa, India and Burma, made Army Education a popular draw, though equally there must have been places it never reached. An AEC officer in Burma gave the example of a ship's company near Rangoon, whose Commanding Officer had assembled the entire company to get the educational requirement over in one go.

The men grouped themselves on deck. They were people starved of knowledge and information. They had a vague idea of the progress of the War, They had been in the War a long time. They were turning their minds to what lay ahead – six, eight, eighteen months ahead. Their interest suddenly came alive.<sup>87</sup>

The RTR Sergeant and an RTR Corporal in North Africa experienced the same sort of thing.

You've got to bear in mind that the only recreational area was these canteens. There was not a great deal for them to do and we had in this sense a captive audience. But they did prefer to come in and hear these discussions rather than go in the wet canteen and drink beer.<sup>88</sup>

As far as the desert was concerned there wasn't anything else to do except have political discussions. There was no alternative. We were stuck out in the desert. You either read a book or you slept or you took part in a discussion. And the fact that there were a lot of politically conscious people made it possible to have these discussions. It was interesting that if we had a political discussion it was very hard to find a conservative to tackle us. On many occasions we had I know a Labour councillor who said he was willing to put the case for the Tories in order to make a discussion. He didn't try very hard but at least it made a discussion.<sup>89</sup>

These and other comments contribute to a durable image of enthusiastic take-up of the opportunities offered by ABCA and BWP to discuss the past

<sup>86</sup> Interview with R.D.Mc.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with W.A.E.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with R.D.Mc.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with N.K., ex-Corporal RTR, January 1976.

and contrast it with the desirable future, to ask where responsibility lay and what the citizen could do about it. To some, comparisons with Cromwell's army of the mid seventeenth century sprang to mind. W. E. Williams, in his official outline of ABCA in July 1941, suggested that the soldier "should match up to Cromwell's famous definition of the citizen-soldier, as one who 'must know what he fights for and love what he knows'".<sup>90</sup> A. D. Lindsay wrote in the *Times Educational Supplement* in 1941: "I got the impression that there had not been an Army in England which discussed like this one since that famous Puritan Army which produced the Putney Debates and laid the foundation of modern democracy." But what had happened at the Putney Debates? Cromwell's soldiers had expressed themselves in ever more radical terms, until their interests and those of the gentry represented by Ireton revealed themselves incompatibly antagonistic, at which point the experiment was terminated, the Levellers were persecuted, and the Army mutinied.

Discussion in the Army of 1939-45 went beyond what the military hierarchy could tolerate at times. On several occasions (further research may reveal more) activity that grew out of Army Education was directly "contained". An RAF fitter on a large Maintenance Unit at Kasfareet near the Bitter Lakes, about three days' journey from Cairo, recorded that once the Germans had retreated from Africa, by the middle of 1943, thinking in the unit turned to what would happen when hostilities ceased.

This led to the formation of a political discussion group in September 1943. The originator was a catering officer, and it took the inspired form of a camp "House of Commons" which met weekly at the YMCA on Sunday evenings. It gave a tremendous boost to the political thought which was taking shape in men's minds as the question of winning the peace began to loom, and it was a first class discussion group while it lasted.<sup>91</sup>

The *Air Force News* covered a report on its opening session on 21st September 1943. The "King's Speech" promised "the feeding and re-equipping of countries devastated by the war", the implementation of the proposals of the Beveridge Report and reductions in tariffs.

Leading the debate on the speech, Sgt. Taylor (Com) urged much stronger measures. He was supported by L. A. C. Hartley (Com) (who hoped the life of the present Liberal-Common Wealth Government would be mercifully brief), and by F/O Gullard (Lab).<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Current Affairs in the Army, 21 July 1941, WO 32/9735.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with R.H.H., ex-fitter RAF, January 1976.

<sup>92</sup> Air Force News, 21 September 1943.

The comment of the fitter, who was a Liberal Party supporter, on the Communists, was that they had the greatest influence among the men, earned by their hard work and their conviction. However, the Catering Officer, Flying Officer Goldstone, also a Liberal, who had initiated the parliament and acted as “Prime Minister”, was suddenly posted to Cairo, and the Kasfareet parliament was closed.

It seems that Goldstone was not to be deterred from political activity even after his posting. In mid 1943 political discussions started to be held regularly at a recreational centre for all servicemen, called “Music for All”, in Cairo. The AEC gave its general approval. A mock parliament in the form of “government” and “opposition” was set up and bills on Nationalisation and Inheritance Restriction were discussed. The Area Education Officer led the opposition on the latter. As a result of doubts expressed about fair play, a mock general election was held. Again the AEC gave its approval. About 350 men voted. The result was as follows:

Lance-Corporal F. Hunt (Labour) 119  
Flight-Sergeant J. Taylor (Common Wealth) 55  
Flying Officer B. Goldstone (Liberal) 38  
Lieut. W. Glen (Conservative) 17<sup>93</sup>

In the new “parliament” the Labour Party formed a “government” in which Aircraftman Leo Abse was Chancellor of the Exchequer. A bill to establish a National Banking Corporation was to be discussed at the next meeting, to which 600 Army and Air Force servicemen came. So, however, did a group of Brigadiers, accompanying the Education Officer, who had to read out an order that the procedure of the Oxford Union must be used and the group must meet in army barracks, not in town, the name “parliament” must be dropped, no civilians or press were to attend, no publicity must be given, “nothing must be said in contravention of King’s Regulations forbidding servicemen to take any active part in the affairs of a political party”, and subjects for discussion must be passed by Army Education authorities. All candidates in the election, including the Conservative, gave a three-minute speech of protest, insisting “that the work they were doing was educational, an aid to the war effort and the right of a citizen army”.<sup>94</sup> A vote was taken opposing the order to close the parliament and was carried 600 to 1. The “speaker” ruled that this order applied to future meetings so this one should continue. The “Chancellor of the Exchequer” led the debate and it was decided to take the banks under public control.

<sup>93</sup> Coventry Evening Telegraph. 29 April 1944.

<sup>94</sup> D. N. Pritt, *Brasshats and Bureaucrats* (London, 1966), pp. 116-17.



At this point the parliament was forcibly closed, its leading members posted, and press and mail censorship imposed. The *Egyptian Mail's* comments sum up the dilemma which faced the authorities. They wanted soldiers to “study and discuss political problems and equip themselves for their duties as citizens”, so the mock parliament was a good idea. But if that parliament went as far as to “demand the resignation of the Government”, it would be tantamount to mutiny.<sup>95</sup> Too much citizenship in the Army was bad. In fact the Cairo parliament (unlike a discussion group later in Germany) had not demanded the Government's resignation. The servicemen had conducted the parliament under the pretence that it was happening after the war. But their activities were sufficiently oppositional to be intolerable to some of those in authority.

In contrast, stationed on the Rhine in the spring of 1945, the RTR Corporal whose views on the success of discussion groups in the desert have been quoted, organised a debate on the following proposition: “Government of the People, by the People, for the People, has vanished from this earth.” The text came from chapter headings in the BWP 5 booklet of November 1943, “Government of the People”, “Government by the People”, and “Government for the People”.

I made a really fighting speech. I was amazed at myself. And the people rose from their seats and banged on the floor because I have put forward that *you* must build a new Britain, *you* the people must do this and *you* mustn't be prepared to accept what they accepted after the last war. I remember moving a resolution saying that the Third RTR has no confidence in the present government and this was passed by the people, practically unanimously. I was taken up on this by Brigade. They were worried that I would send the resolution to the newspaper being run for the whole of the Rhine Army, which was in the hands of Left Wingers, and they took steps at Brigade HQ to make sure it didn't get out.<sup>96</sup>

The “containment” of the Forces' parliaments and individuals such as the RTR Corporal emphasises the Army's ambivalence about education. Classes in citizenship were acceptable in as far as they aroused the interest of the soldier in upholding the existing system. They became intolerable when they encouraged the “active citizen” to reshape his world.

Army Education in the years 1939-45 was founded on a belief in the power of ideas to motivate people, specifically, though unspokenly, to persuade the soldier to co-operate willingly with the wartime leadership within the Forces and the Government. But Army Education's development was

<sup>95</sup> *Egyptian Mail*, 29 April 1944.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with N.K.

shaped by the struggle within the WO over the direction in which it should go. In 1941 the purpose was said to be to contain and control the politics already going on by sanctioning discussion of current affairs. But others believed that, in the interests of morale, such education should be developed to focus on the social objectives of the war, and many, in the WO and in the Forces, believed in using this type of Army Education to stimulate a feeling of commitment not just to winning the war for its own sake, but also for the opportunity it offered to reconstruct the post-war world. Though literature was censored in the WO and activities were constrained in the Forces, the very existence of ABCA and BWP constituted a focus and catalyst for these ideas against those of "containment".

This history provides insight into a relationship of great importance in the Second World War, which could be investigated and elaborated upon in many other spheres, for instance industrial relations and social policy. One side of this relationship was the feeling common to many individuals and diverse political groupings that the war constituted an opportunity profoundly to change society, whose realisation was dependent above all on the conversion of the energy and responsibility of wartime citizens into a peacetime force. On the other side, represented by the eagerness of the WO to snatch back the "hostages to fortune" which were captured from the service it had itself provided, was the desire to return the post-war world to the familiar patterns of pre-war, which, ultimately, was what cost the Tories the Election of 1945.