

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 448

“Keep Calm and Carry On”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*Potatoes new, potatoes old,
Potatoes in a salad cold,
Potatoes baked or mashed or fried,
Potatoes whole, potatoes pied.
Enjoy them all, including chips;
Remember, spuds don't come in ships.*

Potato Pete.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 448. Keep Calm and Carry On.

In the previous episode, I talked about civilian life in the United States during the war. Today, I want to talk about civilian life in Britain during the war. Here's the short version: take everything I told you about life in the United States and triple it.

I'm kidding of course. It was far worse than triple.

In those first September days after war was declared, Britons carried their gas masks wherever they went. Sandbag barricades were piled on the streets to protect buildings. Antiaircraft gun emplacements surrounded cities and industrial sites, while barrage balloons floated high above them. At night, searchlights probed the skies.

I should explain that barrage balloons are large balloons tethered by steel cables. The principle of the barrage balloon is that the balloon itself or the steel tether beneath it pose hazards to enemy aircraft. There are limits to how high a barrage balloon can fly, due to the weight of the cable, so bombers could fly over them, but even in that case, the balloon blocks the bombardier's view of the ground below.

The BBC shut down its television broadcasts and stopped playing music, at first. Theatres and other entertainment venues were closed down, out of fears that nighttime concentrations of civilians could lead to large numbers of casualties. British beaches were clogged with barbed wire in place of holidaymakers.

When you think of Britain at war, one of your first thoughts will likely be of that oft-quoted statistic that two-thirds of the food consumed in Britain was imported. As in the United States, sugar became the first basic foodstuff to disappear from the shops, soon followed by butter.

The early months of 1941 marked the worst of the food shortages. Meat and sugar rations were miniscule, and hard to find even at that. Butter was limited to two ounces per week per person, which amounts to four tablespoons. Cheese was limited to one ounce per week and tea—yes, I said tea—to two ounces per week. For those of you who don't drink tea, that amount allows you about two cups of tea per day, which in Britain is scarcely enough to get you through the morning. Winston Churchill and the British War Cabinet believed that tea was essential to maintain morale in the uniformed services, so they got all the tea they wanted.

Coffee was much less popular in Britain in those days than it is now and was not rationed, although, as in the US, saying it was not rationed is not meant to suggest it was readily available.

By the time the war began, every household in the UK had received four government pamphlets explaining what to do to prepare for war, and most people dutifully followed the instructions. The first contained general guidelines on what to expect in wartime, including such topics as rationing, how to stretch your food ration, and how to grow your own vegetables on whatever land might be available. It was titled, *Some Things You Should Know If War Should Come*.

In those days, in Britain and in the United States, people were far more deferential to authority figures than they are in our time. They accepted without question the principle that if the government told them to do something, it was because it was in the national interest. The war had to be won, whatever it took, and complaints about having to sacrifice one's afternoon tea seemed churlish when British boys were fighting and dying in France or Egypt.

In the early weeks of the war, the government soon realized that shutting down theatres, cinemas, and dance halls did more harm than good, as it damaged morale, and soon they were reopened. The newspapers shrank, with flagship British papers like *The Times* and the *Daily Mirror* cut back to eight pages per issue. Most of those pages were devoted to the war, along with some cheerful feature stories and reviews of theatre and cinema, which helped keep up morale. And also of course the indispensable football and cricket news.

Gasoline, or *petrol*, as the British say, was rationed immediately. For the first two years of the war, households could get small allotments for the family car, but these ended in the summer of 1942, and personal vehicles had to be stored away "for the duration," as the British also say. That

phrase, “for the duration” came up a lot during the war. Buses and trains were available, but posters everywhere prompted Britons to ask themselves, “Is this trip really necessary?”

Bicycles could make a practical transportation alternative, but the companies that made them were now making aircraft parts for the RAF, so no new ones were coming onto the market. As for tires, the Japanese seized most of the world production of natural rubber in 1941 and early 1942. German chemists had begun experimenting with the production of rubber substitutes even before the last war. In the 1930s, researchers in Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union independently developed neoprene, the first practical synthetic rubber. In the United States, it was first introduced by DuPont under the trade name DuPrene. In the USSR, they called it Sovprene.

When the war began, the Germans were ahead of everyone else in the production of synthetic rubber, while the Allied nations, which had been caught off guard by the Japanese capture of their sources of natural rubber, strove to catch up. The German chemical firm I.G. Farbenindustrie operated a synthetic rubber plant at Auschwitz, staffed with slave laborers.

The second pamphlet contained information on what to do in the event of an air raid or a gas attack and how to use a gas mask. Britain’s elaborate preparations to protect civilians from aerial bombing or gas attack went far beyond those of any other country. The government distributed nearly forty million gas masks. Adult masks came in basic black; children’s masks were red with metallic eye rings and were dubbed “Mickey Mouse” masks. This was an effort to make the mask child friendly, though survivors of the time recall them as terrifying. Gas masks for children under two went around their entire bodies except for their legs, with visors so they could see out and their parents could see their faces. This mask was meant to be kept on the child for long periods of time, so it came with a hand-operated air pump that parents could use to insure the child was getting enough air. These were not popular with parents and some questioned their safety.

Britons were expected to take their masks with them wherever they went, and it was technically a punishable offense to be found in public without one, though it doesn’t seem this was aggressively enforced. The mask came free, but it was considered government property, so if you damaged it or lost it, you had to pay for it.

After the war began, every Briton was issued an identity card, which also had to be carried everywhere and produced at checkpoints. This was originally intended to hamper any spies the Germans might try to slip into the country; later they were used to confirm a person’s identity during distribution of ration books.

Churchill appointed the Canadian-born newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook Minister of Aircraft Production and later Minister of Supply. In the former capacity, he began a campaign to urge Britons to donate their aluminum pots and pans. “Give us your spare pots and pans and we

will turn them into Spitfires...” went the campaign. The public donated over 70,000 tons of aluminum.

In 1941, the government requisitioned every iron gate and railing in the country, excepting only those more than 90 years old or with some historical significance. Over a million tons of iron was collected, though in our time it is widely believed that most of what was collected proved unsuitable for wartime use and was sold for scrap.

In contrast to the United States, where the use of blackouts was negligible, in Britain enemy bombers were a real threat and blackout regulations were comprehensive and strictly enforced. No exterior lighting from sunset to sunrise, and every window had to be sufficiently covered not to allow a speck of light to escape. Air raid wardens patrolled residential streets to enforce the blackout and had the power to refer an uncooperative household to the courts, which had the power to impose stiff fines.

The government offered no subsidies or grants to assist families in blacking out their houses, only the information provided in the pamphlets. You could buy dim blue or violet light bulbs, which helped, but most households relied on blackout drapes or curtains, made of heavy black material, which were hung between the window and the regular curtains. Heavy black cotton fabric made the ideal curtain, although it could be hard to come by. Some bought lighter-colored fabrics and dyed them black.

Some people made shutters out of wooden frames covered with fabric or cardboard and fitted into the window. Homeowners were also advised to apply strips of adhesive tape to their windows. This wouldn't prevent a bomb blast from breaking the window, but it might stop shards of glass from flying into the room.

Many families tried attaching brightly colored fabric or ornaments to the inside of the blackout curtain to make the room a bit less gloomy. A simple solution used by poorer families was to paint the insides of the windows black, which satisfied the wardens but also made the house dark and depressing both night and day.

Small numbers of street lights were allowed in some communities, but in the southeast of England, none within 12 miles of the coast. The headlights of cars and other vehicles were fitted with horizontal slit visors, so they only lit the road and only a short distance ahead. Traffic signals got similar treatment. White lines along the edges of streets and roads helped with visibility.

The interiors of trains and buses were lit with dim blue bulbs and the windows fitted with blinds that could be closed at night. Railway stations were not lit, resulting in passengers on trains frequently getting off at the wrong station. Passengers waiting on the platform sometimes fell onto the tracks.

By some accounts, civilian casualties caused by darkened streets, roads, and railways exceeded those caused by German bombs.

The third pamphlet explained the government plan for mass evacuations, particularly of children. It provided a list of items parents should pack for their child. On August 31, 1939, the day before Germany invaded Poland, the British government issued the order to “evacuate forthwith.” The evacuations began the following day.

Within three days, over two million people, mostly children, left the cities for rural towns and villages. The British government offered an allowance to households in the destination communities that would open their homes to the displaced children, but the allowance was not especially generous: 10/6 for one child, 8/6 for each additional child, in the quaint monetary system of the time. In modern US dollars, I figure that works out to roughly \$3.70 for the first child and \$3.00 for each additional child. Those numbers applied to children 13 years old and under. Children from 14 years old and up qualified for slightly larger payments.

These amounts were per week. Clearly, keeping these children was not exactly lucrative.

Newly arrived children were taken to reception sites, and in many cases local people simply came to the reception site and picked out the child or children they were willing to take, a process that many called “the slave auction.” Generally, younger children were favored over older children because they were assumed to eat less, and girls preferred over boys because girls presumably would help with housework, while boys would only create more housework. Farm families often chose older boys, who could be made into field hands, but were less likely to take an older girl. Overall, the process was akin to children choosing up sides for a sports team, with the same degree of shame and humiliation experienced by those children who were repeatedly passed over.

In most cases, the evacuees were city children sent to the country, and that alone created difficulties. These children were frustrated by the lack of urban amenities such as playgrounds and swimming pools, while their host families often found the city kids noisy and ill-mannered. They spoke with different accents, which caused confusion both ways and tended to create a social barrier between evacuees and local children. Some English children evacuated to Wales were placed in Welsh-speaking homes and were taught Welsh in school.

Most of the children were well treated and some bonded with their host families. On the other hand, there were also instances of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse of evacuee children.

When war came, Britain moved quickly and efficiently to protect the civilian population. And then...nothing happened. The horrific air raids many anticipated didn't come. Not yet, anyway. By January 1940, most people had stopped carrying their gas masks with them and most parents brought their evacuated children back home. Then came the unthinkable: Norway fell, the prime minister resigned, the Germans invaded France, and their panzer units cut through the Belgian,

French and British armies as if they were made of paper. Paris fell. France surrendered. The Luftwaffe began bombing Britain and those terrible German panzers were as close as Calais.

The returned children were re-evacuated. The British government arranged for some children to be sent overseas, to Canada or Australia or the United States. On September 13, the passenger liner *City of Benares* left Liverpool, part of a convoy bound for Montreal. Aboard the ship were 90 evacuee children, plus 14 other children among the ticketed passengers, and 23 members of the crew under the age of 16. Four days later and just after ten o'clock at night, the ship was struck by a torpedo launched from the German submarine *U-48*. Fifteen minutes later, the captain gave the order to abandon ship. Fifteen minutes after that, the liner sank.

Of the 408 people aboard the *City of Benares*, only 150 survived. Of the 127 children aboard, 98 died, 77 of whom were evacuees. By comparison, of the 112 children aboard *Titanic*, 54 died. The subsequent shock and outrage in Britain forced an end to the program of overseas evacuation.

This second evacuation lasted until late 1941, after the German invasion of the USSR and the tapering off of bomb attacks in Britain.

[music: Vaughan Williams, *English Folk Song Suite*.]

The British government also provided bomb shelters you could put together in your back yard, or *garden*, as the British would say. The shelter was made of pieces of corrugated steel—straight pieces for the sides and curved pieces for the roof. The man who devised them was named Paterson, but they were known as Anderson shelters, after the Lord Privy Seal, Sir John Anderson, who was put in charge of air-raid precautions.

Any homeowner whose property had a garden was eligible for one. Those with incomes under a specified amount got theirs free; everyone else had to pay £7, which I reckon is about US\$500 in today's money. More than 3.5 million were distributed. The shelters were 6.5 feet long, 4.5 feet wide, and six feet tall and were meant to hold six people, if they didn't mind getting intimate.

Anderson shelters were meant to be dug four feet into the ground, and the exposed part of the shelter covered with dirt for maximum protection. Some families planted flowers on top of the shelter to make it look nicer. More pragmatic people grew vegetables on them.

Comfort aside, they did a good job of protecting people. The biggest drawback was that interior dirt floor four feet lower than the ground outside, which did an excellent job of collecting water whenever it rained, and let's face it, England isn't exactly a desert. Some people dealt with the flooding by digging drainage trenches or similar measures.

After the war, many Anderson shelters led second lives as garden sheds.

Speaking of gardens, as you well know, nearly two-thirds of the food consumed in Britain before the war was imported, and the German Navy used its U-boats in an effort to starve the British into submission. They never accomplished their goal, but they did impose considerable hardships.

Staple foods such as sugar, fruit, tea, and coffee quickly disappeared from grocers' shelves, until food rationing came to Britain in January 1940, four months into the war, much to the British public's relief. Keep in mind that rationing isn't only about the even distribution of goods in short supply; it's also about curbing the prices of goods in short supply.

The first foods that were rationed were butter, sugar, and bacon. Soon after, meat, tea, jam, biscuits, cereal, lard, milk, and tinned fruit were added to the list. As in the United States, fish and fresh vegetables were never rationed, although again, saying they were not rationed does not mean they were readily available, or that prices were reasonable even when they were.

Neither were bread or potatoes ever rationed, as domestic production was sufficient to keep everyone supplied, and these two foods became the principal ingredient in every British meal. Apart from potatoes, other root vegetables were available, such as turnips, parsnips, and carrots; they also became common sights on the dinner table. The government began an advertising campaign encouraging the use of these foods and suggesting new ways to prepare them. The faces of this campaign were two cartoon characters, Potato Pete and Doctor Carrot, who recited poems like the one I read at the top of the episode. Doctor Carrot suggested making carrot jam, carrot cookies, or carrot fudge. Potato Pete also offered this little ditty to encourage the public to cook and eat potatoes without peeling them:

*Those who have the will to win
Cook potatoes in their skin,
Knowing that the sight of peelings
Deeply hurts Lord Woolton's feelings.*

Lord Woolton being the Minister of Food and therefore the person who oversaw all of this.

Fresh fruits such as grapes, peaches, lemons, or bananas had completely disappeared for the duration. In fact, British bandleader Harry Roy had a hit song in 1943 titled "When Can I Have a Banana Again?"

Am I the only one who thinks that during the war, with so many young men conscripted and taken away from their wives and girlfriends, this song lamenting the absence of bananas might not really be about bananas? Harry Roy was noted for lyrics that contained double entendres, such as his 1939 hit, "She Had to Go and Lose It at the Astor," which the BBC refused to play on the wireless.

But I digress. When some hard-to-get food did appear in a shop, grocers would limit purchase quantities and long lines, or *queues*, as the British say, would quickly form, with no guarantee there would be anything left when it was your turn. In fact, it became common for British people who spotted a queue to join it first, and then ask around to learn what it was for.

There is no question that British rationing was tight and meals dull during the war, but neither is there any question that the British public's health improved. Britons became accustomed to consuming less fat and sugar and more vegetables.

Gardening has always been a popular pastime in the UK, although the British did not typically grow vegetables in their gardens. This changed when the war broke out and the government encouraged everyone to aid in the war effort by growing vegetables, for themselves or to share with neighbors. Those who didn't have a garden, that is a yard, could apply to their local council for an allotment. That meant you and your family would be assigned a piece of public land to use to grow food. Across Britain, public parks and gardens were parceled off to grow vegetables. Even cricket and football pitches, tennis courts, and the moat around the Tower of London were plowed and planted, though the authorities drew the line at digging up the tennis grounds at Wimbledon.

Food supplies hit rock bottom in 1941. After the United States entered the war, American Lend-Lease aid to Britain included food supplies; things that were easy to ship in large quantities. Those would typically be powdered milk and eggs, cheese, and canned meats such as corned beef and the inevitable Spam. Items like powdered eggs and Spam were unfamiliar to members of the British public, who were often uncertain how best to use them. Also, since the arrival of ships carrying these foods was erratic, it was difficult for the authorities to distribute them fairly.

Food served in restaurants was not rationed, but for the sake of fairness, restaurants were prohibited from offering meals priced at more than 5/.

In October 1939, all British men between the ages of 18 and 41 were conscripted, except for men who worked in certain critical areas: mining, farming, merchant seamen, dock workers, scientists, and railway and utility workers. For this reason, by spring of 1940, Britain was facing a severe labor shortage.

The British government took the unprecedented decision to put out a call for women to take some of these jobs. Many did, but it wasn't enough. In early 1941, British women aged 18 to 60 had to register for the Ministry of Labor, and in December, Parliament took the extraordinary step of authorizing the conscription of women. Women conscripts could choose between joining the military and taking a civilian job in an essential industry.

The first to be conscripted were single women in their twenties, but by mid-1943, 90% of single women and 80% of married women in Britain were working outside the home. Also, men aged from 41-50 were called up.

Women who joined the Army, Navy, or RAF mostly did the same work as the men, but only in safer, non-combat roles. They received two-thirds the pay that a man doing the same job could expect. Members of the Women's Royal Naval Service did not go to sea in warships, but took jobs on naval bases like cooks, clerks, or electricians, freeing up male sailors to serve at sea.

In the Army Territorial Service or the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, women could expect similar jobs. Later in the war, women were admitted into more responsible roles, such as radar operation or code breaking. Air Force women could not fly planes in combat, but eventually took non-combat flying roles, such as moving aircraft from place to place.

Women who took jobs in industry usually did that work in addition to the same old domestic chores they had always been doing, as well as the household jobs normally assigned to men, such as changing light bulbs, fixing leaky faucets, and paying the bills.

Many older women joined the Women's Volunteer Service, or WVS, and took on volunteer work for the war effort, jobs such as air raid warden. They assisted in the evacuations, and during the Blitz they distributed tea and snacks to fire fighters and civilians sheltering in tube stations. The slogan of the organization proudly declared that "the WVS never says no."

The Women's Land Army, formed in 1939, took women volunteers and later conscripts to work on farms. They were known as "Land Girls." Their jobs were advertised as fun and healthy, but in reality they involved backbreaking work and the women lived in dormitories, often in primitive conditions. Most of the Land Girls came from London or the industrial cities of the north, and life on rural farms took quite an adjustment.

Women eventually numbered one out of three factory workers, and shifts of 12 hours per day, seven days a week were not unusual, especially in aircraft factories, and yet women earned less than their male colleagues, typically two-thirds to one-half as much. It was wartime, so most women repeated the slogan to each other: "Remember, there's always someone worse off than you." The government warned them that German workers were also working long hours, and we didn't want to lose the war because the Germans worked harder, now did we?

But you can only push people so far. In 1943, women working at the Rolls Royce factory in Glasgow went on strike, much to the nation's shock. Public opinion was solidly against the strikers, but the women went back to work after being offered a small increase, albeit one that still left them paid less than the men. That same year, *Good Housekeeping* magazine ran a tongue-in-cheek article titled "Danger—Men at Work," which described how men still living at home or those who came home on leave from the war struggled to adjust to the new reality, in which the women of the household now held paying jobs and did the handyman stuff at home, while these men were relegated to cleaning and washing the dishes. Horrors!

Before the war, in April 1939, the Ministry of Information designed and printed three posters to be used to help public morale, should the worst happen. The three posters were all done up in

bright colors with an image of King George's crown at the top, and below it a slogan presenting bit of motivation in san serif type. Millions of copies of each were printed.

The first one read, *YOUR COURAGE, YOUR CHEERFULNESS, YOUR RESOLUTION WILL BRING US VICTORY*. This poster was not popular with the British public, who read it as saying they were expected to struggle and sacrifice so the government could claim a victory. The second read, *FREEDOM IS IN PERIL, DEFEND IT WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT*. This one went over somewhat better, but the ministry soon gave up on both of them.

The third poster was never used. It read *KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON*. This one was not immediately distributed. It was intended to be released in the aftermath of the heavy bombing raids everyone assumed would come soon after war was declared. But as you know, that didn't happen. Instead, Britons got the Phony War, at least for the first seven months. By the time the German bombers did come, in August 1940, the first two posters had proved resounding flops, so the ministry never put the third one into widespread use, although a few popped up here and there. After the war, the ministry's stocks of all three posters were destroyed.

In the year 2000, a couple who owned a bookshop in Northumberland bought a box of used books at an auction. When they sorted through the contents of the box, they came upon one of the *KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON* posters. They had it framed and hung it by the till. It attracted so much attention that the bookshop owners began printing and selling copies.

You know what happened. There was something about the slogan that epitomized the Dunkirk spirit and the stiff upper lip. The popularity of the poster soared and soon it was appearing everywhere, and in innumerable variations. *KEEP CALM AND DRINK TEA. KEEP CALM AND CANDY ON. KEEP CALM AND CALL BATMAN*.

I guess the Ministry of Information should have led with that one.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Zoran for his kind donation, and thank you to Robert for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Zoran and Robert help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*; as we take a look at wartime life in the USSR. All for the Front, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. These episodes I'm doing on life in the major Allied nations during the war spend a good portion of their time on civilians and their role in war production. This reflects the fact that the twentieth century was the century of total war, in which the civilian workforce played a crucial role.

The crucial role of civilian work back in the home country in the national war effort is summed up in the expression "the home front." The expression "home front" suggests that civilian contributions to the war effort are just as important as the military front lines where the soldiers are.

The first known appearance of the expression "the home front" in an English-language publication was in an issue of *The Times* of London in April 1917. The words appeared in a piece headlined "Through German Eyes," which provided English translations of a sampling of news articles published in Germany. "Home front" was *The Times*' translation of the German word, *Heimatfront*, used in the same way as the English form of the expression.

The United States entered the First World War that same month, April 1917, and though it was a British publication that first introduced the term, it was quickly embraced by the United States government, which used it to rally civilians, as in "There is a home front, and our people at home should be as patriotic as our men in uniform in foreign lands." That language comes from a 1918 advertisement encouraging the public to buy US government Liberty Bonds to help finance the war.

By the Second World War, the expression "the home front" was in common use across the English-speaking world.

[music: Closing War Theme]