

Preface

It is not the intention of this book to suggest that the heroism or sacrifice of the British people in the Second World War was less than traditionally portrayed. Pitt the Younger's assertion, a century and a half earlier, that England had saved herself by her exertions and would save Europe by her example, was never more true than in the years 1939 to 1945. The purpose of the great majority of her people was to fulfil Pitt's promise.

The aim of the wartime underworld was equally direct, as the gang leader Billy Hill described it. By determined exploitation of shortages, the frontiers of crime would be extended throughout a thriving civilian black market. Men and women who might never have broken a law in peacetime would find themselves linked, distantly but inevitably, to the thief and the racketeer. Much was to be heard of racketeers. Before 1939 some had already acquired the status of gangsters, whilst others were merely envied for their success in business. War was to prove the great leveller of both classes. In many cases, those who had not previously been professional criminals showed themselves a lot brighter and able to do a lot better as wartime law-breakers than the boastful gangsters. For a Liverpool ship repairer to cheat the government of the modern equivalent of £20,000,000 in two years made Billy Hill's smash and grab raids on West End jewellers seem almost paltry.

The activities of its underworld were to feature little in histories of the war but a good deal in its fiction. Basil Seal's evacuee racket in Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* (1942) had its parallel in reality. In Waugh's 'Sword of Honour' trilogy, *Men at Arms* (1952) recalls the sergeant-major's warning to young officers about the frauds practised on the Army by civilian contractors. Meantime, at the castle near Penkirk, the Pioneer Corps has made itself cosy throughout the winter by trading tools and supplies from the company stores for

civilian comforts. *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955) adds a disturbing undertone to the war in the Middle East. An Egyptian taxi driver lies buried under the sand close to the camp with his throat cut. The camp police flush women from the company lines. The medical supplies are stolen by an Arab waiter. The NAAFI till is burgled as a matter of routine and there is news of wholesale pilfering of drink and tobacco on the railways in far-off England.

In *The Third Man*, which appeared in 1950, a year later than the film, Graham Greene's poetic portrayal of the black market in occupied Vienna is a muted echo of reality. In 1946 Fiorella La Guardia, who had been a popular Mayor of New York, was appointed head of the new United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, UNRRA. This organization's first ask was to prevent starvation in the lately defeated or liberated countries of Europe. La Guardia was dismayed to find that a modern equivalent of £80,000,000 of relief supplies every month was being stolen at the port of Trieste alone, for sale on the black market. An entire shipment of penicillin was among the supplies which had disappeared. Nor were such markets dependent solely on professional thieves. A friend of Graham Greene's went with two doctors to see *The Third Man*. The doctors were silent and subdued after the visit, then confessed to having been RAF medical officers in post-war Vienna and having sold penicillin without thinking of the consequences.

Waugh and Greene were giants of the fiction of war. Yet few documentary accounts of the political underworld could match F. L. Green's drama of a wounded IRA gunman on the run in *Odd Man Out* (1945) or John Mair's political thriller *Never Come Back* (1941) with its overtones of John Buchan. Patrick Hamilton's novel *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) is a fine portrayal of wartime shortages and the resentments of residents at a Thames valley boarding-house, a disenchantment on which the black market thrived. To complement these, the short stories of Julian Maclaren Ross in *The Stuff to Give the Troops* (1944) and *Better Than a Kick in the Pants* (1945) form a sharply observed comedy of other ranks' manipulation of army routine.

Of subsequent studies of criminality, Edward Smithies' *Crime in Wartime* (1982) offers a skilful analysis and statistical categorization

of crime, forming a well-documented social history of this aspect of the war. When the conflict ceased to be a British affair and became what Winston Churchill called a ‘Grand Alliance’ with the United States, there was already an American black market, though it had few contacts and much to learn in relation to its longer-established transatlantic cousin. However, M. B. Clinard’s study of the American experience, *The Black Market* (1952), is a densely detailed account of wartime racketeering in the United States, and a reassuring reminder that such racketeering was not the business of any one nation alone.

For those of us to whom the war was a reality, it is increasingly a childhood vision. My earliest recollection is of a formation of grey aircraft, flying so low that the black crosses on their wings were plainly visible. No bombs had yet fallen on Weston-super-Mare and there was no sense that we might be their target. In the sunlit September lunch-time they had re-formed over the Bristol Channel after a low-level flight from northern France. While the RAF was fighting the Battle of Britain elsewhere, this formation was on its way to devastate the Bristol Aeroplane Works at Filton. Later, on a school walk, there was a field-gate, beyond which the long wooden huts of an army camp had sprouted. Some genial soldiers from South Wales presented our group with a technically illegal tin of corned beef. As far as black market groceries were concerned, I believe my parents were once invited to buy an extra pound of jam, because it was my birthday.

Air raids were synonymous with nights under the stairs. In scenes that might dismay the emergency services of a later age, bomb disposal was sometimes a matter of self-reliance. My father, as a Special Constable, had a couple of unexploded incendiary bombs pointed out to him by an anxious neighbour – a large number of them had failed to go off. He put these in his capacious satchel and wheeled them away to be dealt with at the police station. A Morrison shelter arrived, when it was no longer needed, occupying a third of the living room, its wire-mesh sides like an animal cage. Then, almost at the war’s end, twiddling the radio tuning-knob I heard an English voice, far off among the whoops and gurgles of the airways. It promised us that though ‘Jairmany’ was collapsing, a new war would soon follow, now that Britain had spurned an alliance with the ‘German legions’. It was puzzling to be told we should soon be at the mercy of our friends Uncle

Joe and his gallant Russian troops. This was the last, longest and most drunken of Lord Haw-Haw's harangues, in May 1945.

In describing the activities of a criminal underworld during those years, I have borne in mind that the memoirs of professional robbers should be taken with more than a pinch of salt. The value of stolen gold or gems, fur coats or the contents of post office safes is likely to be exaggerated. Indeed, it may also be exaggerated by the victims, who seldom understate the amount for the purpose of their insurance claims.

However, it seems worthwhile to give an approximate modern equivalent to the sums of money as expressed in thefts and fines, though this is to some extent subjective. Prices of articles do not rise uniformly but a general rate of increase since the war may be said to be by a factor of 35 times. Of course, inflation is not the whole story. The average weekly wage in 1939 was £4.45 and has multiplied a hundred times, though this income is spent on a wider range of modern comforts rather than in simply paying more for them. Allowing some weight to this, I have suggested that a multiple of 40 would give the reader a fair idea of equivalent values. I have included a modern approximation in brackets beside the sums as they were given at the time. Few people would now feel greatly inconvenienced by a fine of £20. They might hesitate to risk conviction if the penalty were £800. In real terms, property is now more expensive, while foreign travel and telephone calls are much cheaper. A commodity like butter, which was a luxury to many families in 1939, is no longer so.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help which I have received in writing this book, involving as it has done a wide variety of sources. Mrs Jenny Collis and her colleagues of the Bodleian Library Map Room have done much to make my work a great deal easier by their patience and helpfulness. The gathering of material has also been greatly assisted through the facilities provided by Professor David Skilton and the Cardiff University School of English, Communications and Philosophy. Ms Sue Anstey, Ms Sue Austin, Ms Sarah Bithell, Ms Helen D'Artillac-Brill, Mr Tom Dawkes, Mrs Chris Hennessy, Ms Nancy Hooper, Mrs Ann Lowery and Mrs Ann Thomas of the Information Services at Cardiff University have between them shortened the writing of the book by many months,

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by bringing to the desktop documents whose originals lay far off. They have, I fear, saved my time at the expense of a good deal of their own. Without the support of Cardiff and the Bodleian, the completion of this book would have been far distant.

To Major Ian Ambrose MBE of the Royal Corps of Military Police and to Mrs Sue Lines, Curator of the Royal Military Police Museum, I am most grateful for their kindness, hospitality, and an insight into the work of the Corps and of its Special Investigation Branch. It is good to be able to record the part played by the Corps and the Branch in final victory.

Friends and colleagues who have supplied me with information and material include Mr and Mrs Ben Bass of Greyne House Books, Mrs Kate Bradbury of the Cardiff Business School, Mrs Marie Elmer of Clifford Elmer Books, Mr Graeme Holmes, Mr and Mrs W. Shakespeare, Dr Linda Shakespeare. To all of them, I record my thanks.

Among libraries and institutions who have supplied material, I should like to acknowledge particularly the Bodleian Law Library and Modern Papers Room; Brighton and Hove Libraries; the British Library Document Supply Centre; the British Library Newspaper Division; Brixton Central Library; Cambridge University Library; Camden Reference Library; the City of Bristol Reference Library; Hackney Reference Library; Kensington Reference Library; Leeds City Libraries; Manchester City Libraries; the Public Record Office; Romford Reference Library; Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives; and the City of Westminster Archives.

I have greatly appreciated the encouragement of Mr Bill Hamilton of A. M. Heath Ltd, Mrs Caroline Knox of John Murray Ltd, and Dr Howard Gotlieb, Director of Special Collections, Boston University, Massachusetts. To them and to Mrs Gail Pirkis, Ms Caroline Westmore and Mr Howard Davies of John Murray I express my thanks. Finally, if this is, indeed, one of the last untold stories of the Second World War, my wife and my family will have done much to aid its telling.

To Mr Eric Zinner and Miss Emily Park, I express my thanks for their work in preparing the American edition of this book. 'Spiv', one of the most evocative English words of the 1940s, never made its way

to the United States and has no easy synonym. However, the men described by it were common to many cultures. The fast-talking racecourse hustler, who became a supplier or curbside dealer in stolen or rationed goods, was an inevitable accompaniment to the age of shortages and austerity.