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Luckhurst, Tim (2017) George Orwell Versus Vera Brittain: Obliteration Bombing and the Tolerance in Wartime of Dissent in Weekly Political Publications. *George Orwell Studies*, 2 (1). ISSN 2399-1267.

### DOI

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# George Orwell Versus Vera Brittain: Obliteration Bombing and the Tolerance in Wartime of Dissent in Weekly Political Publications

**Tim Luckhurst and Lesley Phippen**

*In the summer of 1944, George Orwell used his column in Tribune to launch a ferocious assault on arguments advanced by the peace campaigner Vera Brittain in her pamphlet Seed of Chaos, published that year by the Bombing Restriction Committee. By doing so, Orwell raised publicly a topic the wartime coalition sought anxiously to conceal from the public – the deliberate killing of German civilians in RAF bombardment of German cities – and he took advantage of the government's preparedness to tolerate controversy in weekly political publications which it worked carefully to exclude from mass market newspapers and BBC broadcasts. The controversy serves as an excellent example of the way in which weekly political publications were used to burnish Britain's democratic credentials in wartime. It also annoyed Vera Brittain so greatly that she would lie about it after Orwell died.*

Keywords: George Orwell, Vera Brittain, area bombing, newspapers, Second World War

## **Introduction**

Historians have explored extensively the influence and significance of the BBC's broadcast journalism during the Second World War (see, *inter alia*, Calder 1969, 1991, Chignell 2011, Curran and Seaton 2010, McLaine 1979, Nicholas 1996). Newspaper journalism of the era has received relatively scant attention. Bingham (2009: 6) notes: 'Many generalisations have been made about newspapers, but there has been far too little detailed investigation of their contents.' This is regrettable because newspapers mattered greatly in wartime; Britons were, in Angus Calder's words (2008: 504), the world's 'most avid newspaper-readers'. Bingham (2009: 16) shows that, by the outbreak of war in 1939, consumption of national daily newspapers 'had extended beyond the lower-middle classes and become a normal feature of working-class life'. Beers (2010: 13-21) puts flesh on the bones of that assertion, demonstrating that, by 1939, 80 per cent of British families read one of the popular London daily titles, the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald*. Two thirds of middle-class families shared this habit – though many also bought a serious title such as *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Scotsman* or *Yorkshire Post*. Sunday newspapers were also immensely popular. Mass Observation's *Report on the Press*, published early in 1940, looked at the contents of newspapers, who read them and what people thought of them. One of its main conclusions was that 'Almost everybody reads newspapers, whether regularly or irregularly, thoroughly or cursorily' (Mass Observation Archive 1940).

### **The Popular Press**

Plainly, newspapers were selling in large numbers in 1940<sup>1</sup> and their sales would continue growing during the war. Equally plainly, each of the mainstream titles had a political stance and a desire to guide their readers' impressions of political events and issues. In the mass

circulation press much of this steering took readers in one direction: towards belief in it as a people's war and confidence in the central theme that Britons were 'All in it Together'. This myth of equality under bombardment by the Luftwaffe, rationing, conscription and wartime bureaucracy produced some spectacular examples of newspaper propaganda. Examples not of enforced censorship, but of the much more effective version whereby editors did what the Ministry of Information wanted them to do – not because they were obliged to, but because they sincerely believed that they were acting in the national interest.

Among our absolute favourite is a story from the *Daily Mirror* (1940a) of Wednesday, 18 September 1940. Headlined 'Women Say "Let Us Shop"', this tremendous piece of keep-calm-and-carry-on propaganda during an intense part of the Blitz asserts: 'Women's chief grouse about air raids is not about the bombs. They are complaining that it is impossible to get shopping done while raids are in progress.' It quotes one 'woman shopper's' objection: 'It seems all wrong to me that trade should stop dead like that when a warning sounds.'

Another, published a week earlier (*Daily Mirror* 1940b), depicts an attractive nurse carrying a beautiful baby girl. The headline reads: 'Goering's military objectives'. A sub-head in block capitals below the first paragraph refers to the baby: 'Raids make her laugh,' it declares and the story goes on to explain: 'There was not a whimper from any one of the forty-six little patients when a children's hospital in Central London was struck by a blitzkrieg bomb on Monday night.' It is not entirely clear how the absence of a whimper can be reconciled with the report of a laugh, but the beautiful baby's behaviour offers some help. The *Mirror* explains: 'Flames spurted from the wreckage, clouds of smoke rolled down the stairs, but not

so much as a frown came from Sandra.’ Plainly this was a heroic example of Blitz Spirit in a child too young to be conscious of its existence. A third example deals with the astonishing fortitude under bombardment of disabled children. In October 1940, beneath the headline: ‘My! Isn’t this just like a picnic...’, the *Daily Mirror* (1940c) explained: ‘Peter Pan thought that danger was an awfully big adventure ... and that’s what these brave little crippled children of the Heritage Craft Schools, Challey, Sussex, think too.’ According to the reporter, it was ‘fun to sit cosily in your air raid shelter eating a picnic dinner, while the Luftwaffe marauds overhead and a barrage of anti-aircraft batteries shakes the roof...’.

George Orwell was properly sceptical about the accuracy and authenticity of such reporting. McLaine (1979: 93) notes that he believed newspapers conformed too readily to the wishes of the wartime coalition. Orwell (1944a) would explain his position relatively late in the war in his ‘As I Please’ column for *Tribune*. Here he noted that the Ministry of Information achieved the suppression of ‘undesirable or premature’ news and opinion by what McLaine (1979: 3) summarises as ‘participation in a conspiracy of the governing classes which had always succeeded in preventing public discussion of anything thought to be uncongenial’. Orwell was certainly clear that the problem existed and that it was not restricted to periods of national emergency:

It is not only in wartime that the British press observes this voluntary reticence. One of the most extraordinary things about England is that there is almost no official censorship, and yet nothing that is actually offensive to the governing class gets into print, at least in any place where large numbers of people are likely to read it. If it is ‘not done’ to

mention something or other, it just doesn't get mentioned. ... No bribes, no threats, no penalties – just a nod and a wink and the thing is done. A well-known example was the business of the Abdication. Weeks before the scandal officially broke, tens or hundreds of thousands of people had heard all about Mrs Simpson and yet not a word got into the press, not even into the *Daily Worker*, although the American and European papers were having the time of their lives with the story. Yet I believe there was no definite official ban: just an official 'request' and a general agreement that to break the news prematurely 'would not do'. And I can think of other instances of good news stories failing to see the light although there would have been no penalty for printing them.

In April 1944, Orwell (1944b) wrote damningly about ‘the pre-war silliness’ of newspapers. He identified the *Daily Sketch* as the silliest and ranked the *Daily Mirror* second, noting that in wartime, the newspapers ...

... have not got back their prestige – on the contrary they have steadily lost prestige against the wireless – partly because they have not yet lived down their pre-war frolics, but partly also because all but a few of them retain their ‘stunt’ make-up. ... The belief that what ‘is in the papers’ must be true has been evaporating since Northcliffe set out to vulgarise journalism, and the war has not yet arrested the process.

A fortnight later he revisited the topic of newspapers, describing the BBC as a ‘relatively sound source of news’ and lamenting that popular titles ‘have continued to publish without any query as to their truthfulness the American claims to have sunk the entire Japanese fleet several times over’ (Orwell 1944c). He was right about the mass circulation press. However, his comment about places ‘where large numbers of people are likely to read it’ omits any explanation of the role played by weekly political publications to which the authorities consciously turned a blind eye. This is additionally interesting because he wrote for one and used it as a pulpit from which to address issues of controversy that rarely troubled the pages of the national dailies.

### **The Role of Low Circulation Weekly Political Publications**

Mass circulation newspapers did on occasion speak truth to power during the Second World War. They did so on topics including air-raid precautions, rationing and the government’s

reluctance to open a second front following the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In doing so they showed that questioning power in a democracy at war could demonstrate that representative democracy was worth fighting to defend. However, such dissent was unusual and it aroused fury in the war cabinet. McLaine (1979: 243) shows that Churchill ‘retained an acute sensitivity to newspaper criticism’. His Labour colleagues in the coalition could be equally thin-skinned, particularly about criticism in the immensely popular *Daily Mirror*, home to wartime Britain’s favourite fantasy woman, ‘Jane’, the gorgeous, nearly naked but always virtuous star of the title’s most successful strip cartoon. As Calder (2008: 288) shows, the home secretary, Herbert Morrison, and his colleague Ernest Bevin, minister of labour, were incensed by the *Mirror’s* publication in March 1942 of Philip Zec’s cartoon depicting a merchant seaman adrift on a raft following a German submarine attack.<sup>2</sup> However, while such challenging writing and reporting in daily newspapers provoked combative responses, including threats from ministers, they tolerated dissent when it appeared in low circulation weekly political publications aimed at intelligent opinion.

Close reading of wartime editions of *Tribune*, the *New Statesman and Nation*, the *Spectator* and the *Economist* suggests that such titles were permitted to question orthodoxy and challenge policy more openly than the daily titles. These publications were read by a span of intelligent opinion that stretched from the left of the Parliamentary Labour Party to the right of the Conservative Party. Readers included MPs, ministers, senior civil servants, diplomats, lawyers, trade unionists, churchmen and leading industrialists. And the war cabinet did more than turn a blind eye to criticism circulated amongst such groups. When distributed to ‘local intellectual leaders ..., teachers, professional men’ (Hyams 1963: 242), they functioned as a useful safety valve. The conspiracy of the governing classes that kept unpalatable news and opinions out of the mass circulation titles plainly – and, on occasion, explicitly – regarded



sporadic demonstrations of intelligent dissent as a valuable way of burnishing Britain's democratic credentials. These credentials were particularly valuable when working to influence American opinion – a crucial aim throughout Churchill's wartime premiership. Indeed, when Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman*, visited America in 1942, he was invited to the White House for an exclusive audience with the President and Mrs Roosevelt (ibid: 234). And we should not underestimate the impact of these concessions. As Schudson (2008: 15) demonstrates, the power of newspapers cannot be assessed by their circulation alone: 'How many readers may not matter as much as which readers they are and how intensely and instrumentally they read.'

And readers of the intelligent wartime weeklies had cause to read closely. These titles were able to dedicate space which national newspapers could not spare to discussion of moral and strategic arguments. Wartime paper rationing affected them too but, while the dailies felt obliged to squeeze as much news as possible into their reduced editions, the weeklies could leave such reporting to the BBC and Fleet Street dailies. They pursued intelligent debate with creativity and passion, and none more enthusiastically than *Tribune*, the weekly newspaper founded in 1937 by two wealthy Labour MPs from the party's socialist left, Sir Stafford Cripps and George Strauss. Hamstrung in the first year of war by its allegiance to Stalin's *diktat* that this was an imperialist war in which the duty of the proletariat was to pursue a policy of revolutionary defeatism, *Tribune* abandoned Stalinism in 1940 following the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland (Jones 1977: 48-9). In 1941 Aneurin Bevan MP, one of the leaders of the pro-war Labour left in the Parliamentary Labour Party, was appointed editor. Together with Jon Kimche, a historian and journalist, Bevan directed *Tribune's* editorial policy between 1941 and 1945.<sup>3</sup>

The new editorial team's enthusiasm for controversy was, in the words of a 1941 *Tribune* promotional slogan: 'Fresh and Fearless' (Tribune 1941). Bevan frequently used his own wartime columns in the title to criticise ministers and policy. But, as George Orwell prepared to join the title as literary editor in the autumn of 1943, *Tribune* relished the recruitment of a truly expert controversialist. An early September issue, No. 350 (*Tribune* 1943a), advertised its pride and excitement about Orwell's involvement. It sported a bright pink glossy band stapled to the cover,<sup>4</sup> declaring: 'CONTRIBUTIONS BY J. B. PRIESTLEY, GEORGE ORWELL, ETHEL MANNIN, RHYS DAVIES.' The colour alone was a rare and cheering contrast to drab wartime monotony. An editorial alerting readers to the formal recruitment of 'the well-known writer and critic' appeared in late November (*Tribune* 1943c). Orwell relished the opportunity too and his 'As I Please' columns for *Tribune* have been the subject of scholarly attention. Paul Anderson's (2006) edited collection, 'Orwell in *Tribune*', is particularly helpful. But one argument in which Orwell engaged as a *Tribune* columnist has received less attention than it deserves. This is surprising because it advertised a controversy the government was determined to disguise and illustrates admirably the extent to which dissenting opinion in a title such as *Tribune* was tolerated, despite the threat it posed to government policy and even to relations with a crucial ally.

### **The Morality and Practicality of Area Bombing**

The subject Orwell chose was the purpose, morality and effectiveness of the RAF's area bombing of German cities. *Tribune* took an interesting line on this topic. While its fellow left-of-centre weekly, the *New Statesman and Nation*, confirmed its reputation for moral hand-wringing, giving substantial backing to George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, and the

small group of Labour MPs who joined him in the Bombing Restriction Committee,<sup>5</sup> *Tribune* criticised area bombing as inefficient and wasteful of RAF lives. Thus, in an editorial comment published just before Orwell joined the staff, it explained: ‘Casualties in German cities have been about twenty times greater than all the British casualties in air raids here. ... The sufferers in these raids are not, of course, the Nazis but, to a large extent, the Nazi war machine and, to a new and greater extent, the civilian population’ (*Tribune* 1943b). *Tribune* was not persuaded that such bombing could end the war. It argued that only the defeat of the Nazi land armies could do that. It believed the RAF should be diverted from area raids to attacks intended to support Allied troops. Just weeks later in early 1944, very shortly after Orwell joined *Tribune*, Vera Brittain, the eloquent feminist and pacifist who had served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse during the First World War, published *Seed of Chaos* (1944a), a pungent denunciation of the Allied policy of destroying German industrial cities in massive round-the-clock raids. Reprinted in the United States as *Massacre by Bombing* (Brittain 1944b: 49-64), her eloquent polemic offered eye-witness accounts of the consequences of RAF raids extracted from neutral Swiss and Swedish newspaper reports and from German sources. One extract from the Stockholm newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, quoted a Danish consular official who had survived the ferocious bombardment of Hamburg in the final week of July 1943: ‘Hamburg has ceased to exist. I can only tell what I saw with my own eyes – district after district razed to the ground. When you drive through Hamburg you drive through corpses. They are all over the streets and even in the tree-tops’ (Brittain 1944b: 58). Another, from the Swiss *St Gallen Tagblatt* described the aftermath of devastating raids on Berlin: ‘It was nerve shattering to see women, demented after the raids, crying continuously for their lost children, or wandering speechless through the streets with dead babies in their arms’ (Brittain 1944b: 55).

Vera Brittain (1944b: 50) argued that the saturation bombing of cities such as Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin – and the fire storms that often ensued as the RAF became expert in combined high explosive and incendiary attacks – meant Britain was inflicting upon innocent German civilians ‘agonising forms of death and injury comparable to the worst tortures of the Middle Ages’. She warned that the action by RAF Bomber Command ‘morally damages the soul of a nation’ (1944b: 51) and detected ‘irrefutable evidence of the moral and spiritual abyss into which we have descended’ (1944b: 57). She quoted extensively from an account of the consequences of firestorm in Hamburg written by the editor of the *Baseler Nachrichten* (*Basle News*). He described tens of thousands of German civilians in bomb shelters being ‘suffocated, charred and reduced to ashes’ (Brittain 1944b: 53). Contemplating British newspaper reports of an RAF raid on Remscheid on the night of 30-31 July 1943, Brittain conjured her own vision of ‘frantic children pinned beneath the burning wreckage, screaming to their trapped mothers for help as the uncontrollable fires come nearer’ (1944b: 60). She was appalled by a Swiss correspondent’s account for *Das Volksrecht* of an RAF raid on Wuppertal during which, ‘Numerous victims ran around aimlessly like burning torches until they died’ (1944b: 61). For Brittain, area bombing invited vicious reprisal attacks and caused ‘moral deterioration which displays itself in a loss of sensitivity and callous indifference to suffering’ (1944b: 62).

Vera Brittain’s stance attracted support and respect in the *New Statesman*, the *Guardian* and the *Spectator*. *Tribune* made little effort to lament German suffering. It preferred to praise the courage and expertise of RAF air crews and to challenge the practical value of area bombing. It was conscious that ‘air bombardment has become a terrible weapon – far worse than anything experienced in this country, and there is no doubt widespread and silent gratitude to the RAF and the Red Army for having saved this island greater ordeal’ (*Tribune* 1943d). But

the policy promoted a ‘dangerous fallacy’. Air Marshall Arthur Harris’s colossal, four-engine heavy bombers were ‘ill-suited to tactical work with land forces’ which might hasten the end of the war – hence they had to be used for bombing cities (*Tribune* 1944a). This, *Tribune* insisted, would not hasten the war’s end. Indeed, it appeared to be provoking the same stubborn resistance that German bombing of British cities had caused.

George Orwell’s review of *Seed of Chaos* appeared in May 1944. He acknowledged it as ‘an eloquent attack on indiscriminate or “obliteration” bombing’, before advising readers that:

No one in his senses regards bombing, or any other operation of war, with anything but disgust. On the other hand, no decent person cares tuppence for the opinion of posterity. And there is something very distasteful in accepting war as an instrument and at the same time wanting to dodge responsibility for its more obviously barbarous features. Pacifism is a tenable position, provided you are willing to take the consequences, but all talk of limiting or humanising war is sheer humbug. ... Why is it worse to kill civilians than soldiers? Heaven knows how many people our blitz on Germany has killed and will kill, but you can be quite certain it will never come anywhere near the slaughter that has happened on the Russian front (Orwell 1944d).

*Tribune* readers immediately made it plain that they were not united in support for their columnist. Several wrote to contest what they considered to be his relativism and aggression. In July, the literary editor came out fighting: ‘It was the fascist states who started this practice,’ he reminded them, ‘and as long as the air war went in their favour they avowed

their aims quite clearly.’ Warming to his theme, he insisted on ‘dealing with’ the ‘parrot cry’ against ‘killing women and children’. For Orwell:

It is probably somewhat better to kill a cross section of the population than to kill only the young men. If the figures published by the Germans are true and we have really killed 1,200,000 civilians in our raids, that loss of life has probably harmed the German race somewhat less than a corresponding loss on the Russian front or in Africa and Italy (1944e).

Those who opposed the killing of German women were guilty of ‘sheer sentimentality’ and Orwell thought child casualties were probably exaggerated. ‘Contrary to what some of my correspondents seem to think, I have no enthusiasm for air raids, either ours or the enemy’s’, but he believed that ‘objections to the use of force in a total war are utterly hypocritical’ (1944f). Readers’ letters objecting strenuously to his stance continued to arrive. So, in early August, Orwell returned to the topic of saturation bombing, noting that:

A correspondent who disagreed with me very strongly added that he was by no means a pacifist. He recognised, he said, that ‘the Hun had got to be beaten’. He merely objected to the barbarous methods that we are now using. Now, it seems to me that you do less harm by dropping bombs on people than by calling them ‘Huns’. Obviously, one does not want to inflict death and wounds if it can be avoided, but I cannot feel that mere killing is all-important. We shall all be dead in less than a hundred years, and most of us by the sordid horror known as ‘natural death’ (1944g).

Walzer (1971: 17-18) reminds us that Orwell even asserted a moral case for killing German civilians: ‘Bombing, suggested Orwell, ... brought the true character of modern warfare home to the civilian population, to all those people who supported the war, even enjoyed it, only because they did not feel its effects; now they felt them and so war was less likely in the future.’ Though, the philosopher notes: ‘I doubt there is enough evidence for this argument to actually lead anybody to begin bombing cities; it is an apology after the fact, and not a very convincing one.’

### **Confronting Government Policy**

His criticism of Vera Brittain is not atypical Orwell. His case is blunt, uncompromising and occasionally dismissive. He recognises the sheer nastiness of area bombing. He harbours no delusions that it is aimed at exclusively military targets. He knows civilians are dying in colossal numbers and that this is entirely deliberate. He is only wrong about the child casualties. They were not exaggerated. Deep shelters offered no protection against fire storm. But his stance put him directly at odds with government policy – which was to pretend that civilian lives were, to use a modern term, collateral damage in raids carefully planned to hit industrial and military infrastructure. Indeed, the argument with which Orwell defended area bombing challenged British government policy as directly as Vera Brittain’s moral fury did. Why? Because it recognised that area bombing caused mass civilian casualties and, crucially, that it intended to do so. This the government had worked very hard to disguise. Middlebrook (1980: 343-344) describes the British government’s official utterings about area bombing between 1942 and 1945 as:

... a three-year period of deceit on the British public and world opinion. It was felt to be necessary that the exact nature of RAF bombing should not be revealed. ... The deceit lay in the concealment of the fact that the areas being most heavily bombed were nearly always city centres or densely populated residential areas, which rarely contained any industry.

It was this deceit that Orwell confronted and exposed, not in a pamphlet for a much disparaged, fringe campaign group, the Bombing Restriction Committee, but in a national weekly newspaper freely available throughout the United Kingdom and widely read by opinion formers.

Air Marshall Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris' strategy saw RAF Bomber Command launch thousand-bomber raids against cities including Cologne, Essen, Bremen and Hamburg. Harris pleaded with the Prime Minister and his air minister, Sir Archibald Sinclair, to acknowledge plainly that these attacks involved the deliberate murder of civilians. In October 1943, he wrote to Sinclair demanding that the tactics pursued by British and American bombers be 'unambiguously and publicly stated. That aim is the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers and the disruption of civilised community life throughout Germany'. Harris asked, in particular, that the air minister tell the British public that the killing of German civilians by RAF Lancaster bombers was not a 'by-product of attempts to hit factories'. Rather, such slaughter was among the 'accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy' (TNA 1943).



Plainly, Harris took a view almost indistinguishable from the one Orwell articulated in his critique of Vera Brittain. The Air Marshall knew that true precision bombing was beyond the competence of RAF heavy bombers and their brave, vulnerable crews. He developed his policy of area bombing specifically to kill and de-house German workers. Choosing to identify any enemy civilian engaged in economic activity as a contributor to the Nazi war effort, he ensured the RAF heavies always attacked either city centres or densely populated residential areas. Harris knew this meant the deliberate and systematic killing of women, children and old men. Ministers knew it too, but they were determined to disguise the brutal truth. They used a series of euphemisms to describe area bombing raids. Grayling (2006: 183) recalls that these included ‘blanketing an industrial district’, ‘neutralising the target’ and ‘softening up an area’. Connelly (2002:42) has demonstrated that: ‘The government was extremely worried about this aspect of the war, fearing that the strategy gave the Germans a propaganda weapon that might affect Britain’s position as the power occupying the “moral high ground” in the conflict.’ And disguising the brutal reality was not only intended to shield ministers from domestic controversy. It was also necessary to avoid tension with Britain’s American ally.

Bomber Command knew that the USAAF’s policy of bombing in daylight was producing casualty rates among air crew even more catastrophic than those endured by RAF crews on night-time missions. But the Americans maintained the fiction that their daylight raids allowed them to conduct real precision bombing. In all their public rhetoric, the commanders of the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe remained stubbornly committed to the pretence that American bomber crews were not simply aiming at military targets, they were hitting them. In fact, as Biddle (2004: 243) demonstrates, in combat conditions US Eight Air Force crews attacking Germany during the winter of 1944-45 dropped 42 per cent of their

bombs more than five miles off-target. Even for those projectiles that fell within the five-mile radius, the average circular error was 2.48 miles. Nevertheless, the American public was led to believe that no American boys were engaged in murdering German civilians. To admit that the RAF was doing so deliberately and to devastating effect would have undermined the message – and British ministers were determined not to do that. Until the end of the war, Archibald Sinclair stuck to the official line. He did so even after Howard Cowan, an Associated Press war correspondent based at the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, reported that the allies were now engaged in deliberate ‘terror bombing’. Cowan’s report appeared following the Dresden raids of February 1945 (*Sunday Star* 1945). Biddle (2006: 112) explains that the American military was seriously embarrassed, but Sinclair maintained the pretence that every target attacked by RAF bombers was a target of military importance and that any civilian deaths they might cause were regrettable (*Hansard* 1945).

So, by defending area bombing on the grounds that killing civilians in a total war was entirely sensible, George Orwell was playing with fire. It helped that *Tribune* itself regarded area bombing as an expensive distraction from the duty to fight an effective ground campaign. But this was Orwell at his best: determined to confront consensus and utterly contemptuous of moral relativism. We disagree with him. We think the killing of German women and children probably encouraged German soldiers to fight on when victory was no longer possible and unconditional surrender their only option (Luckhurst 2015). But we respect Orwell’s instinct. Consensus is the enemy of justice. It narrows the frame of debate and conceals plausible alternatives to current orthodoxy. Orwell’s wartime work for *Tribune* reveals that he often played this crucial role of challenging the dominant consensus.

His arguments against Vera Brittain and in support of area bombing offer an excellent and often overlooked case study. And Brittain certainly considered them significant. Westwood (2011) has shown that, in her autobiography (Brittain 1957), written after Orwell's death in 1950, Brittain would concoct a narrative to suggest that Orwell had reversed his opinion of area bombing and that he had reached the conclusion that she was right. Westwood argues persuasively that Brittain 'decided to quote selectively' from an article Orwell (1945) wrote from Germany for the *Observer* in April 1945 'in order to "win" her argument with Orwell in retrospect and when he could not respond'.

### **Brittain's Lies and their Significance**

Richard Westwood (2011) demonstrates clearly that Vera Brittain deliberately misrepresented Orwell in a manner that her contemporaries would have found very hard to detect, quoting selectively from his work and omitting words and phrases to distort his meaning. He notes that her mendacity allowed her to imply that, 'On the "moral touchstone" question of the bombing of civilians she ... had been right and the great George Orwell wrong'. He further notes that Brittain's distortion has been amplified by her biographers, Berry and Bostridge (2008). They repeated, simplified and strengthened it by writing: 'Orwell would undergo something of a change of heart after visiting Germany as a war correspondent...' (Westwood 2011). Westwood also argues that A. C. Grayling compounded the offence by choosing 'to rely on the Berry and Bostridge book's account' when compiling his *Among the Dead Cities* (2006), his critical study of the Allied bombing of civilians. Westwood's detective work is laudable, and the misrepresentation of Orwell is more than a literary offence. It risks diluting the significance of a fine example of dissenting wartime

journalism which demonstrates exactly why intelligent publications such as *Tribune* played an important part in upholding Britain's democratic tradition.

## **Conclusion**

Connelly shows that German bombing of Britain spawned popular demand for harsh revenge and that this was vividly expressed in popular titles; the *Daily Mirror* would demand a 'gloves off' policy and describe the area bombing of Berlin as: 'The only effective method available to us in self-defence' (Connelly 2002: 47). This leading popular left-wing title treated critics of area bombing with contempt, insisting: 'The air war is no time for lecturers and gloved persons wishing to live up to a high standard of ancient chivalry' (Connelly 2002: 48). On the right, the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* were equally pugnacious. Knapp (2013: 51) argues that British newspapers did not celebrate the agonies of German civilians but notes that 'triumphalism over the scale of the bombing was routine'. But this mass market journalism did not address, still less concede, the central truth that RAF Bomber Command set out to kill civilians as a conscious act of policy.

Orwell may have been right to argue that this was a perfectly sensible policy. Crucially, *Tribune* allowed him to do so with crystal clarity, so enabling its famous wartime contributor to make maximum use of the freedom afforded weekly political publications with thoughtful subscribers. It was also an example of his editor's determination to nurture and sustain honest dissent in wartime, a strategy Aneurin Bevan pursued both in his work in the House of Commons and in the pages of *Tribune* (Foot 1962). For this, Bevan too deserves recognition. Orwell regarded freedom of speech as a distinctive and precious British asset and he recognised *Tribune's* contribution to promoting it. In late July 1944 he explained this

explicitly in a column defending the title's publication of an anti-war poem, 'The Little Apocalypse of Obadiah Hornbrook': 'Even in the blackest patches of the British Empire, in India, say, there is much more freedom of expression than in a totalitarian country. I want that to remain true, and by sometimes giving a hearing to unpopular opinions, I think we help it to do so' (Orwell 1944h). The candour with which *Tribune* published and debated dissenting ideas did not simply give sanctuary to a writer of Orwell's stature, it helped freedom of speech to endure the test of total war and showed that Britain's defence of democracy was more than a slogan.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Illustrative newspaper circulation figures are available in the last complete pre-war survey by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) completed in 1939. These show that the largest selling popular title, the Daily Express, had a daily circulation of 2,510,019 copies. Its Conservative rival, the Daily Mail, trailed behind with approximately 1,500,000 daily sales. On the left, the Daily Mirror sold approximately 2,500,000 copies (according to figures compiled by its proprietors) and the ABC survey shows the Liberal News Chronicle sold 1,298,757. Precise figures for the Daily Herald are not available, but ABC figures show that it achieved a daily sale of 2,113,856 copies in the first post-war survey compiled in 1948

<sup>2</sup> Zec's drawing was accompanied by a caption declaring: 'The Price of Petrol Has Been Increased by One Penny – Official.' It was intended to remind readers that they should not complain too much about rationing and rising prices. Morrison and Bevin interpreted it as a criticism of government for allowing sailors to suffer in the interests of profiteers. Calder (2008: 288) offers a complete account of the controversy which included threats to suspend publication of the newspaper

<sup>3</sup> Bevan was officially editor, but lacked the technical skill and time required to perform the role full time. This Kimche did

<sup>4</sup> In September 2016, I (Tim Luckhurst) was able to inspect a pristine copy of this shiny band in the Cambridge University Library which keeps a complete run of wartime editions of

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Tribune. It is the only example of such promotion I have found in a wartime edition of Tribune

<sup>5</sup> The Bombing Restriction Committee was formed in May 1942 by a group including Bishop George Bell, Corder Catchpool, a First World War conscientious objector and member of the Peace Pledge Union, non-pacifist Professor Stanley Jevons and others. It called on the British government to cease bombing German civilians and to target only military sites

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