‘Flying Gas Mains’: Rumour, Secrecy and Morale during the V-2 Bombardment of Britain

ABSTRACT

Britain was the first country to suffer casualties as the result of a ballistic missile attack, when German V-2 rockets began landing in London and the South-East in September 1944. This new menace posed critical challenges, not only to the civilians whose lives were endangered once again, but also to the British government. Policymakers had to decide what, if any, information they released to the public, amid fears of creating panic, providing free propaganda to the Nazis, and helping the V-2 launching units improve their aim. Their commitment to secrecy in this period was both resolute and largely unnecessary, not to mention ineffective. In the absence of official information released from above, the public drew their own conclusions and myriad rumours emerged, many of which were remarkably accurate. This article will explore the ways in which government policy surrounding censorship and publicity changed during the V-2 bombardment and the extent to which this affected those in the firing line. It will also add considerable nuance to our understanding of public morale in this period, which was rather less steadfast than many accounts suggest, and which continued to be a major government preoccupation, despite the diminishing likelihood of a descent into mass panic or defeatism.

KEYWORDS: censorship, missile, home front, bombing, fear

On 11 November 1944, the front page of the *Daily Express* newspaper carried the headline, ‘V-2: The Full Story’, and much of the page was taken up discussing this new weapon, complete with eyewitness accounts of how it appeared in flight, diagrams of its trajectory, and images of destruction wrought by its impact. This major splash was triggered by the announcement, made the previous day in the House of Commons by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, that Britain had been under V-2 bombardment for just over two months. Towards the bottom of the page was a sub-heading, ‘Southern England’s No.1 joke – The

"flying gas mains"', followed by a paragraph which explained: 'The first mysterious V-2 bangs were guessed to be many things – a gas main explosion, a factory explosion, a new gun being tried out. When the truth became generally known, a bang would be greeted with the remark, "Another gas main's gone up." The joke spread like wildfire.'[1] This joke can tell us a remarkable amount about the ways in which the government and the general public reacted to the arrival of the V-2 threat to Britain in September 1944. It sits at the nexus of the three key themes which this article will explore – rumour, secrecy and morale. It began life as a rumour, one of many which arose to explain the mystery explosions; it transformed into a joke, poking fun at the continuing official secrecy in the face of widespread public knowledge; and, more generally, the black humour which such jokes represented suggest a degree of fairly positive morale among the civilian population of London and its environs.[2]

With the exception of a few specific studies, the V-2 bombardment has long been a neglected part of the British home front story during the Second World War.[3] Histories of the home front have tended to afford greater emphasis to the first half of the war, for obvious reasons, and comparatively neglect the latter half, as the severity of the threat to Britain receded. This ignores the fact that, right up until May 1945 (and indeed beyond), life for most Britons remained decisively shaped by the ongoing conflict – the arrival of the V-weapons was only a particularly painful indicator of this. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the V-2 bombardment lacked the dramatic life-and-death struggle of the Blitz, with all its tropes of Britain standing alone and Londoners facing terrible adversity, and it took place at a time

[1] *Daily Express*, 11 November 1944, 1.
[2] Corinna Peniston-Bird & Penny Summerfield, '"Hey, You're Dead!": The Multiple Uses of Humour in Representations of British National Defence in the Second World War', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), 413-435.
[3] Norman Longmate, *Hitler's Rockets: The Story of the V-2s* (London, 1985); Basil Collier, *The Battle of the V-Weapons, 1944-45* (London, 1964); Christy Campbell, *Target London: Under Attack from the V-weapons during WWII* (London, 2012).

when for many the war was already all but won, and the final defeat of Germany merely an imminent formality. Indeed, the Ministry of Information's weekly Home Intelligence Report for the week commencing 12 September 1944 (the week after the first V-2 had landed in Britain) noted that 'the end of the war in Europe is still expected within a week or two.'[4] However, recent scholarship has shown that this optimism did not endure and that morale in the Allied nations, especially Britain and the United States, suffered a serious dip during the autumn and winter of 1944-5 due not only to the arrival of the V-weapons but also the setbacks experienced in the military campaign against German forces in Europe.[5]

Moreover, many histories of the bombing campaigns in the Second World War, or the British experience of the war, dedicate only a relatively tiny portion of their total to the V-2 bombardment. For example, the substantial second volume of Daniel Todman's *Britain's War* covers it in only four pages, Dietmar Süss's *Death from the Skies* gives it only three, and Richard Overy's *The Bombing War* a mere two.[6] Even Terence O'Brien's official history of British civil defence during the war, published in 1955, spends only eight pages specifically on the V-2.[7] This is a disappointing, though perhaps understandable, underrepresentation which fails to acknowledge many of the interesting, and even unique, characteristics of this particular instance of bombing. To begin with, the scale of this attack was actually fairly significant – over seven months, some 1,115 V-2 rockets fell on Britain, killing 2,855 people and seriously injuring more than 6,500, destroying 20,000 houses and damaging a further

[4] The National Archives, Kew [TNA], Cabinet Office [CAB] 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.207', 21 September 1944.
[5] Tami Davis Biddle, 'On the Crest of Fear: V-Weapons, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Last Stages of World War II in Europe', *Journal of Military History*, 83 (2019), 157-194.
[6] Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947*, vol.II (London, 2020), 581-5; Dietmar Süss, *Death from the Skies: How the British and Germans survived Bombing in World War II* (Oxford, 2014); Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (London, 2014).
[7] Terence H. O'Brien, *Civil Defence* (London, 1955), 660-668.

580,000.[8] Perhaps more importantly, the weapons involved were entirely new and posed distinct challenges, not least the fact that they arrived so quickly that no warning could be given, hitting the ground before they could even be heard moving through the air. Moreover, there were no effective countermeasures, short of overrunning the launch sites in the Low Countries. The V-2s also fell on a population which had become used to the dangers and privations of wartime and which had demonstrated its remarkable bravery during the Blitz, but which, by mid-1944, craved a return to a comparatively peaceful existence and believed that the worst was behind them.

These circumstances directly affected the government's response, which had to handle a public which was both accustomed to bombardment but also war-weary, and which had perhaps lost some of the solidarity of the earlier Blitz experience.[9] There were also lessons to be learned, in theory at least, from the Blitz, with regard to secrecy, rumour and morale, as well as to broader civil defence matters, such as evacuation and shelter policy. Censorship measures which prevented the press from revealing which specific areas or towns had been bombed, or giving any details about casualty rates, caused widespread bitterness in the worst-hit regions. Moreover, official silence also allowed grossly inflated death tolls to circulate via word of mouth, and rumours that the government were concealing the real horrors of the Blitz from their citizens were widespread.[10] Rumours abounded in Britain during the Second World War, largely due to the scarcity and perceived unreliability of the news and against the backdrop of 'sustained collective tension', wherein rumours can help to

[8] Jeremy Stocker, *Britain and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1942-2002* (London, 2004), 18-19.
[9] Süss, *Death from the Skies*, 384.
[10] Juliet Gardiner, 'The Blitz Experience in British Society, 1940-1941', in Claudia Baldoli, Andrew Knapp and Richard Overy (eds.), *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940-1945* (London, 2011), 179.

give individuals a sense of agency in the face of widespread uncertainty and powerlessness.[11] Such rumours, especially those inspired by listening to German broadcasts, were seen as a serious risk by the government, as Jo Fox has explored in her work on the Anti-Lies Bureau, which was set up within the Ministry of Information in 1940 to help combat this threat.[12]

Building on these foundations, the first part of this article will explore government policies of censorship and concealment surrounding this new form of attack – including the key decision not to disclose the arrival of the V-2 for the first two months. What rapidly becomes apparent is that the British government's default position in this period was blanket secrecy, with the decision to release even patchy details about the new weapon only made when German propaganda forced their hand, and after much hand-wringing and hesitation. This was indicative of a culture of secrecy which characterised the relationship between government and the public in Britain throughout much of the early twentieth century. Priya Satia has written that 'the inter-war period was a crucial moment in the evolution of the "secret state" of modern Britain', and the government response to the V-2 shows this secret state in full operation.[13] The authorities pursued a 'systematic cultivation of ignorance' about this new weapon, which allowed rumours to flourish, but which also ultimately failed – as this article will show, the British people knew they were under rocket attack (and even used the term 'V-2' to describe it), long before the British government relented in their commitment to total secrecy.

[11] Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966), 46-49.
[12] Jo Fox, 'Confronting Lord Haw-Haw: Rumor and Britain's Wartime Anti-Lies Bureau', *Journal of Modern History*, 91 (2019), 75.
[13] Priya Satia, 'Inter-war agnotology: empire, democracy and the production of ignorance', in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (eds.), *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2011), 210. See also: Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2012); David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain 1832-1998* (Oxford, 1999); Richard C. Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995).

The second part of the article covers the period after Churchill's official announcement, when government policy became one of tightly controlled publicity and close oversight of how the press reported the continuing bombardment. Here again the government made a number of missteps. They ignored advice to appraise the public of the nature of long-range missile attack before it arrived, which would perhaps have minimised the shock factor; they held a poorly-timed press conference announcing the end of the 'Battle of London' one day before the first V-2s arrived, thus raising and dashing hopes in quick succession; and they allowed information about the V-2 to be expressed only in vague or abstract terms, which many members of the public, especially in the worst-hit areas, felt was worse than no information at all, in part because of the rumours it bred. This approach, taken in conjunction with the period of total silence which preceded it, proved both unpopular and ineffective. It shows that, despite having the ample experience of the Blitz to draw on, the government still failed to fully learn lessons about how best to communicate to their people on sensitive and important issues.

All of this had an impact on public morale, a clear assessment of which has proved as challenging to obtain for historians as it was for the contemporary authorities and observers. Air Chief Marshal Philip Joubert de la Ferté, who held a number of senior RAF positions during the war, wrote in 1957 that 'the effects of the V-2 bombardment were purely physical … the moral [sic] effect was very slight'.[14] Even Norman Longmate, the author of perhaps the most detailed account of the V-2 bombardment of Britain, admitted that, as an Army officer stationed in London in 1944-5, he had 'no conception at all of how serious and widespread were the sufferings of other parts of the capital'; something which he attributed to 'the

[14] Philip Joubert de la Ferté, *Rocket* (London, 1957), 111.

success of the censorship in force at the time'.[15] Because of the unfortunately brief coverage of the V-2 bombardment in wider histories of the war, the authors tend towards broad generalisation. In his history of British morale during the war, Robert Mackay says the 'devastating trial' of the V-weapon attacks 'did no discernible damage to the morale of the population living in the target area.'[16] While Todman and Overy share this view of the V-2s as having no meaningful impact on morale, Süss leans in the opposite direction, suggesting that the situation in London deteriorated quite severely during the V-2 attacks.[17] Robin Ranger has argued something similar, noting that 'the adverse psychological effects of the V-2 attacks were much greater [than that of the V-1s] and morale dropped sharply'.[18] In the words of Jeremy Stocker, 'the evidence is inconclusive'.[19]

The aim of the third part of this article is, therefore, to tackle this lack of clarity and to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the impact of the V-2 bombardment on morale. In order to do so, this article draws upon the Ministry of Home Security's weekly Home Intelligence Reports, dedicated morale summaries and collections of letter and telegram extracts pertaining to the rocket attacks, and various material from the Mass Observation Archive. Naturally, this source base cannot provide a comprehensive account of morale, and contemporary analyses can be as problematic as they are instructive, but it is sufficient to allow some meaningful conclusions to be drawn. In particular, it will show that the main threat to public morale from the V-2 missile was not its novelty (though its

[15] Longmate, *Hitler's Rockets*, 12.
[16] Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2002), 134-5.
[17] Overy, *Bombing War*, 194-5; Süss, *Death from the Skies*, 382-4; also Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 134-5.
[18] Robin Ranger, 'The Operational Environment: Lessons from Ballistic and Cruise Missile Attacks since 1944', in Robin Ranger, Jeremy Stocker and David Wiencek (eds.), *Extended Air Defence and the Long-Range Missile Threat* (Lancaster, 1997), 24.
[19] Stocker, *Britain and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 19.

unheralded arrival did fray some nerves) but rather its late arrival, hitting a population tired of war and danger – this marks a significant difference from the morale situation during the Blitz. Similarly, the threat of low morale leading to panic, disorder, and defeatism or a will to surrender, which had been perceived as a serious risk in 1940-41, had all but evaporated by 1944-45, yet this did not stop the government from using these phantom dangers as a justification for continued secrecy.

The overarching goal of this article, therefore, is to understand how Britain coped in the face of this entirely new form of warfare, both in terms of government policy and public reaction. It also serves as an important reminder that the story of the British home front in the Second World War did not end with the petering out of the Blitz in 1941, but that the lives of British people remained subject to the vicissitudes of war (though often in distinctive ways) until a matter of weeks before Germany's capitulation. This episode also speaks to larger themes, such as the emergence of a 'secret state' in twentieth-century Britain, the challenges of mass communication in times of war and emergency, and the changing dynamics between governors and governed; all of which are perhaps more relevant now, in an era of disintegrating trust in public institutions, than ever before.[20] In a similar vein, the ways in which rumour and morale are entangled – as pertinent in today's Internet-warped responses to pandemics, terrorism, and climate change as they were in wartime Britain – are discussed here, though that topic warrants much deeper investigation than this article permits.[21] Ultimately, by examining the British response to the emergence of the ballistic missile threat

[20] Simon Eliot and Marc Wiggam (eds.), *Allied Communication to the Public During the Second World War: National and Transnational Networks* (London, 2019).
[21] See ongoing AHRC project, 'Covid-19 rumours in historical context', led by Prof. Jo Fox, Institute of Historical Research.

in 1944-5, we can learn a lot about the complex and often strained relationships between governments and their citizens at times of crisis.

Secrecy and Censorship

Any society at war, and especially one where the home front faces an almost constant threat from the enemy, requires a degree of secrecy from its government. Concealing certain truths can help avoid mass panic, allow for greater control and motivation of the population, deny hostile propaganda opportunities, and prevent critical intelligence from falling into the hands of the enemy.[22] In Britain in the Second World War, the importance of secrecy was recognised early on and was implemented especially effectively during the Luftwaffe's prolonged aerial bombardment of Britain which began in the late summer of 1940 and continued into the spring of 1941.[23] This secrecy was deemed necessary partly to limit the information which the Luftwaffe could glean about the impact their raids were having, but also to serve British propaganda interests. It was necessary to craft a narrative which depicted those Britons under fire as stoic and courageous (to maintain continued domestic morale and resilience) while also portraying them as noble victims (in an attempt to secure support for the British war effort from overseas, especially the United States).[24] However, mass aerial bombing of this kind had been anticipated before the war and examples of it had been witnessed during the Spanish Civil War and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, albeit on a reduced scale.[25] Therefore, there was no need to disguise the general nature of the attack or its source – the fleets of

[22] Richard Fine, 'Allied War Correspondents' Resistance to Political Censorship in World War II', in Eliot and Wiggam (eds.), *Allied Communication to the Public*, 95.
[23] Süss, *Death from the Skies*, 53-4.
[24] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1992), 209-227.
[25] Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Abingdon, 2014).

German bombers were quite evident in the skies above towns and cities across Britain. The case of the V-2 bombardment was rather different.

The V-2 was the world's first operational long-range ballistic missile. It had been under development in the Third Reich in one form or another since 1934, though it was still in fairly rudimentary experimental stages when the war broke out in 1939. It made its first successful flight in October 1942, and Adolf Hitler signed an order for mass production two months later.[26] British intelligence had been monitoring this progress from a distance, especially through the use of aerial photo-reconnaissance, and its fears were confirmed when German generals in a British prisoner-of-war holding centre were overheard expressing surprise that the long-range missile bombardment of Britain had not yet begun.[27] As such, a special committee was established (codenamed 'Crossbow') which was tasked with gathering and collating all intelligence on the German rocket threat and preparing defensive measures. On the night of 17 August 1943, the Royal Air Force conducted a major bombing raid against the main German rocket research and development facility at Peenemünde, on the Baltic coast.[28]

At the same time as these attempts were being made to prevent or limit Germany's ability to wage rocket warfare against Britain, other bodies were devising plans for the British government's response if the missile bombardment began. Under the leadership of Sir Samuel Findlater Stewart – a renowned civil service trouble-shooter, who had overseen censorship issues at the Ministry of Information at the start of the war, and who had been chair of the Home Defence Executive since 1941 – an inter-departmental committee

[26] Michael J. Neufeld, *The Rocket and the Reich: Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).
[27] Helen Fry, *The Walls Have Ears: The Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II* (New Haven, CT, 2019), 151-2.
[28] Martin Middlebrook, *The Peenemünde Raid: The Night of 17/18 August 1943* (London, 1982).

considered various secrecy and censorship measures to be implemented if a rocket attack seemed imminent. These were contemplated alongside drastic plans to move the seat of government out of London and clear hospitals of all but essential cases, as the scale of rocket attack was feared to be enormous – 100,000 killed and as many seriously injured in just one month.[29] This echoes some of the serious fears about a 'knock-out blow' from the air, which were commonplace in British government circles as war drew nearer during the late 1930s.[30] In addition, the government opted to replicate several Blitz-era tactics in response to missile attack, especially regarding official secrecy. One key principle was that 'the Press will be told that, for at any rate 48 hours, no mention must be made of the fall of a rocket, or anything relating to it, except the Government communiques.'[31] It was felt that this 48-hour information blackout would give the authorities enough time to 'set in operation a deception scheme which would make subsequent observations by reconnaissance aircraft ineffective', as well as allowing the RAF the opportunity to take counter-measures.[32] This proposal, first suggested in June 1943, more than a year before the first V-2 arrived, became a cornerstone of British security policy on this issue.

Plans changed somewhat once the first German V-weapon arrived in Britain. The V-1 was a jet-powered pilotless aircraft, or flying bomb, the precursor to modern-day cruise missiles, which had been developed in parallel with the V-2 and was brought into service sooner. The first V-1 struck Britain on 13 June 1944, earning its designation as a 'vengeance

[29] Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (London, 1990), 180.
[30] Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 23-4; Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge, 2012).
[31] TNA, Central Office of Information [INF] 1/967, 'German long-range rocket development and pilotless aircraft: censorship and security measures', 11 June 1943.
[32] TNA, AIR 20/3439, Findlater Stewart to Norman Bottomley, 2 December 1943.

weapon' as it was deployed just a week after the Allied landings in Normandy.[33] Firstly, the government decided that 'no public statement should be made about the new form of attack until the enemy made it public, or until the weight or extent of the attack made a statement desirable', which set an important precedent that was to be repeated when the V-2 attacks began.[34] Secondly, more specific measures were implemented such as 'limiting the obituary notices of people killed by flying bombs to three from the same postal district in any one issue of a [news]paper', and also keeping addresses and the dates of death deliberately vague, so as to minimise the information which the enemy could obtain from such open sources.[35] This mirrored a similar tactic deployed during the Blitz.[36] While these decisions did influence the V-2 response, Findlater Stewart noted that a different policy would be necessary if rockets were used against Britain. As Germany would likely fire far fewer V-2s than V-1s, it would be easier for their intelligence officials to ascertain where they had landed, and thus gradually improve their accuracy. This meant that the standard censorship arrangements would no longer be sufficient and special measures would need to be brought in, not least the 48-hour blackout which had first been discussed a year previously.[37]

In reality, this proposed two-day period of secrecy ended up lasting for two months. The first V-2 fired against Britain landed in Chiswick, west London, on the evening of 8 September 1944, causing considerable damage and claiming three lives.[38] While the worst-case scenario in terms of mass casualty rates, as predicted by the Findlater Stewart committee, did not materialise, a complete blanket of secrecy on everything related to the

[33] Todman, *Britain's War*, vol.II, 581-5; Overy, *Bombing War*, 192-5; Norman Longmate, *The Doodlebugs: The Story of the Flying-Bombs* (London, 1981).
[34] TNA, INF 1/968, 'Conclusions of 77th (44) Meeting of War Cabinet', 13 June 1944.
[35] TNA, INF 1/968, G.P. Thomson to D.L. Stewart, 30 June 1944.
[36] Gardiner, 'Blitz Experience in British Society', 179.
[37] TNA, CAB 80/85/41, 'Special Measures for "Big Ben"', 12 July 1944.
[38] Longmate, *Hitler's Rockets*, 162-9.

rocket attacks had been established within a week. No public statement was to be made, lest it help the German launch teams improve their accuracy and remedy technical faults or gift the Nazis a major propaganda coup, and a tight leash was applied to the press to ensure 'a complete silence … about rocket attacks' was maintained.[39] It would be unfair to claim that this decision was taken entirely lightly. In discussions at the War Cabinet, it was noted that 'it was a serious matter for the Government to suppress the publication of news'.[40] That said, this was hardly an unprecedented move – in the late 1930s, Neville Chamberlain's government had strongly encouraged the BBC and others to take a largely pro-appeasement line, while in 1940, directly after Churchill became Prime Minister, he argued with members of the Cabinet and newspaper executives about the need to restrict potentially defeatist sentiments appearing in the press.[41] Nonetheless, in the face of strong arguments against any public statement, it was decided to postpone a decision in the hope that 'the position might well be changed by developments in the military situation', that is the overrunning of the launch sites in the Low Countries by Allied forces.[42]

Contextual factors also played a role in decision-making. The rockets arrived amid a nationwide easing of civil defence measures, including the shift from full blackout to a so-called 'dim out' and reductions in the number of civil defence personnel.[43] This sense of an impending return to normality was reflected in a major press conference held by Duncan Sandys, MP and chair of the Crossbow Committee, on 7 September 1944, claiming that the flying bomb menace had now been defeated. His opening line, which would prove premature

[39] TNA, AIR 20/3439, Claude Pelly to Douglas Evill, 16 September 1944.
[40] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 123rd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 18 September 1944.
[41] Anthony Adamthwaite, 'The British Government and the Media', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18 (1983), 281-297; Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937-1941*, vol.I (London, 2017), 495-6.
[42] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 123rd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 18 September 1944.
[43] Overy, *Bombing War*, 194-5; Marc Wiggam, *The Blackout in Britain and Germany, 1939-1945* (Basingstoke, 2018).

just one day later when the first rocket landed in Chiswick, was: 'Except possibly for a few last shots, the Battle of London is over.' Unsurprisingly, newspapers across the country, and around the world, picked up on this line and ran with it. When asked about the V-2, Sandys confessed to being 'a little chary about talking about the V-2', but reassured the assembled journalists that they would soon be walking over the launch sites in France.[44] His comments were received with 'widespread satisfaction', and 'both the "promptness" and the honesty of the report are praised'.[45]

The desire to preserve this more upbeat and relaxed mood was yet another reason why a policy of secrecy proved so appealing to the British government. Moreover, it was not deemed sufficient for this ban on publicity to extend only to the United Kingdom. On 26 September 1944, the Joint Staff Mission in Washington, DC, were asked to convey a message from the British Chiefs of Staff to their US counterparts, asking them to ensure that the American press also observed a ban on reporting anything about the nascent V-2 bombardment. The argument advanced for this policy by the British authorities was that 'any reference to the attack would be seized upon by the Germans, and magnified so as to provide sorely needed encouragement for their people'.[46] The US Chiefs of Staff agreed a week later, but within three days an article had appeared in the *New York Times* which described 'rocket bombs', distinct from the 'jet-propelled robots' (V-1s), that had fallen 'outside London' and which had 'considerable' explosive force.[47]

This prompted the War Cabinet to return to discussions over the policy of total secrecy and silence around the V-2 campaign, and whether or not it should be revised. It was noted

[44] Longmate, *Hitler's Rockets*, 151-3.
[45] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.206', 14 September 1944.
[46] TNA, AIR 20/2652, AMSSO to Joint Staff Mission, 26 September 1944.
[47] *New York Times*, 6 October 1944, 5.

that 'the publication of information about the rocket attacks in the American Press had placed the Government in a difficult situation', and the Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, made the case that 'it was wrong in principle for the Government to use its powers of censorship unless security was involved'. However, the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, offered the counter-argument that, if even a very basic announcement was made, it would make it very difficult for the government to control what information appeared in the press. Ultimately, the Cabinet decided to maintain the status quo and, in essence, defer to public opinion on the matter – as Morrison put it, 'in the absence of any evidence of a strong public demand for the release of information, the balance of advantage lay in continuing the ban'.[48] This exact sentiment was echoed by Churchill two weeks later, despite some pressure from Members of Parliament.[49] It is rather revealing that, despite reservations about the propriety and even morality of excessive government censorship, the default position of the British authorities was secrecy rather than openness, and that this was to remain the case unless major public opposition was mounted to the official position or until the German press finally began reporting their country's use of V-2s against Britain.[50]

Why, then, did the British government decide to pursue a policy of total secrecy during the first two months of the V-2 bombardment when, as has been discussed, many senior figures felt genuine discomfort about the continued suppression of the press? As the above point makes clear, one of the main factors was the desire to deny a potentially major propaganda coup to the Germans – after all, it was acknowledged that 'the main advantage to the enemy of the V-2 lies in its propaganda value'.[51] The British government had no desire

[48] TNA, AIR 20/2652, 'Conclusions of 137th (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 16 October 1944.
[49] TNA, AIR 20/2652, 'Conclusions of 142nd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 30 October 1944.
[50] Aaron L. Goldman, 'Press Freedom in Britain during World War II', *Journalism History*, 22 (1997), 146-155.
[51] TNA, AIR 20/3439, Claude Pelly to Douglas Evill, 16 September 1944.

to 'bring to the German people the encouragement that they so much required'.[52] In addition, there were concerns that any information about the V-2 attacks on London which reached the German authorities might allow them to improve their aim or rectify technical faults. Indeed, more than a year before the first rocket arrived, Ministry of Home Security officials noted that 'the enemy will be very anxious to obtain such information as a guide to the range and accuracy of his weapon, and even quite general statements, if they fall into his hands may assist him'.[53] Once the rockets began arriving, the British authorities noted that 'the weapon itself seems to be technically unreliable', including 'several instances of air bursts', and they felt that 'knowledge of such details would help the enemy diagnose his technical troubles'.[54]

Alongside the possible leakage of information to the Germans, there were other secondary reasons why a prolonged official silence was deemed the most appropriate policy. One was the concern that if even a small amount of information was issued, it would open the floodgates and result in demands for all manner of additional details to be made public as well. In October 1944, Herbert Morrison had argued that 'if the fact that rocket attacks had been made on this country were published in the Press, the Government might have considerable difficulty in refusing to divulge additional information regarding the fall of the rockets and the casualties and damage caused by them.'[55] Such information could have a deleterious effect on British morale and prove very useful to the Germans. Moreover, the government worried that if they made an official announcement, the public might expect warning to be 'given of impending attacks', which was not a realistic possibility.[56] For many in

[52] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 123rd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 18 September 1944.
[53] TNA, INF 1/967, Francis Williams to Samuel Hoare, 17 August 1943.
[54] TNA, AIR 20/3439, Claude Pelly to Douglas Evill, 16 September 1944.
[55] TNA, AIR 20/2652, 'Conclusions of 137th (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 16 October 1944.
[56] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 123rd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 18 September 1944.

the government, they simply hoped that they could postpone the release of information until the military situation allowed them to 'definitely say that no further threat existed'.[57]

The second major question to address in this regard is whether or not the secrecy measures worked. It would certainly be fair to say that, on a domestic level, people in Britain (especially in the target areas of the South-East) were not really deceived. The day after the first rocket landed in Chiswick, the Ministry of Home Security reported that 'there are strong rumours that a rocket was responsible', though other theories, including a thunderbolt, gunfire, and a gas main exploding, were also noted.[58] Within a few days, it was confirmed that, among the public, 'the prevailing idea at present seems to be that V-2 has arrived'.[59] This use of the official German designation, V-2, was not just by officials – on 17 September, a member of the public submitted an eyewitness report to the Ministry of Home Security, describing a rocket in flight, and referring to it as a V-2.[60] Less than a week after the impact at Chiswick, it was confirmed that, within the London region, 'rockets are generally accepted as the cause of the explosions', though other rumours did still abound, especially outside of London.[61] It is fair to surmise, then, that the government's secrecy measures did not prevent the British public from ascertaining what was really going on, though this was not necessarily their main purpose. There was precedent for this – following the surprise flight to Britain of Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, in May 1941, British propaganda agencies, unsure of how best to frame this peculiar development, released only the most basic details and chose to let the public 'interpret the facts for themselves'.[62] Such an approach, while risky in terms of

[57] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 127th (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 25 September 1944.
[58] TNA, HO 262/15, 'State of public feeling in London up to 11.15am September 9th' 9 September 1944.
[59] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Report by Regional Information Officer, London & S.E. Region', 13 September 1944.
[60] TNA, HO 199/376, W.A. Anderson to Ministry of Home Security, 17 September 1944.
[61] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 16 September 1944.
[62] Jo Fox, 'Propaganda and the Flight of Rudolf Hess, 1941–45', *Journal of Modern History*, 83 (2011), 95.

fostering rumour, did prevent potentially significant information from falling into German hands.

It is certainly possible that this same logic applied during the V-2 bombardment, but it is hard to assess whether British tactics to deny key information to the Germans actually made much difference. The V-2 was a deeply inaccurate weapon which was only able to achieve any success in the Second World War because its targets (cities like London and Antwerp) were so massive.[63] Had the German rocket teams been in receipt of detailed information about where their rockets were landing, it is still highly unlikely that they would have been able to improve their aim – the guidance and targeting technology just did not exist yet.[64] It was partly for this reason that British intelligence did not make any serious efforts to deliver misinformation to the German authorities through their network of double agents – the most they did was to try and induce the Germans to shorten their range so that the V-2s would not even reach London (even without this deception effort, fewer than 10 per cent of rockets were landing west of London Bridge).[65] In terms of denying the Germans a propaganda coup, British actions had little influence on this. As discussed below, Goebbels chose to publicise the V-2 campaign at what he judged to be the optimal moment, when he was certain that the rockets had claimed lives and wrought destruction in London, and when he felt the German population and armed forces were most in need of a morale boost.

The final question to address is how the government's policy of secrecy was perceived by the British public. Initially, in the immediate aftermath of the first attacks, there was much demand for a statement, especially in London. On 12 September, the Ministry of Home

[63] Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 57.
[64] Heinz Dieter Hölsken, *Die V-Waffen: Entstehung-Propaganda-Kriegseinsatz* (Stuttgart, 1984).
[65] Howard, *Strategic Deception*, 182.

Security reported that a 'majority ask for a Government Statement, because (i) lack of information is worrying [and] (ii) it would help to keep the evacuees away', though they also noted that a 'considerable minority are against a statement, because (i) the fly-bombs [V-1s] got worse after Mr Churchill made his statement [and] (ii) it might give information to the enemy.'[66] Within three days, the balance had shifted in the opposite direction, wherein 'some continue to ask for a statement but the majority are now said to appreciate the need for silence'.[67] One reason given by those who were still in favour of a statement was that it would 'counteract the rumours'.[68] It also became a subject of some ridicule among local people – one Londoner, whose telephone call was intercepted by the Postal and Telegraph Censorship Department, mentioned 'being bothered by other things that are not mentioned in the papers; call them Gas Explosions'.[69] The nationwide attitude was much the same as that in the capital. By the end of September, the Ministry of Information reported: 'Whereas, however, last week most people outside London wanted an official statement to be made, opinion is now fairly evenly divided, and many appreciate the need for security silence.'[70] Government ministers drew directly on this appraisal of the national mood and used it to justify the prolonged absence of an official statement. Herbert Morrison told the War Cabinet that 'the general view of the public, as ascertained by the Ministry of Information, was now in favour of a continuance of the ban.'[71] This allowed them to maintain their policy of silence until the German propaganda announcement in November made it entirely untenable.

[66] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 12 September 1944.
[67] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 15 September 1944.
[68] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 16 September 1944.
[69] TNA, HO 199/467, 'Some Reactions to V-Weapons', 4 November 1944.
[70] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.208', 18 September 1944.
[71] TNA, INF 1/969, 'Conclusions of 123rd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 18 September 1944.

Publicity and the Press

As the initial public reactions to the mysterious explosions show, the threat of a German rocket weapon occupied a place in the popular consciousness long before September 1944. For a start, Churchill had alluded to it in a number of speeches in the House of Commons. In September 1943, he made an oblique reference about possible new threats – 'It may be that the Germans are developing other weapons on novel lines with which they may hope to do us damage and to compensate to some extent for the injury which they are daily receiving from us' – but it was the following February before he was more specific.[72] On that occasion, he stated that 'there is no doubt that the Germans are preparing … new means of attack on this country, either by pilotless aircraft or possibly rockets, or both, on a considerable scale', but reassured the public of the government's continued vigilance.[73] Then, on 2 August 1944, Churchill went into slightly more detail. He explained that the rocket was 'intended to produce a great deal more mischief' than the flying bomb, and that London would likely be the primary target due to issues of inaccuracy. He also encouraged those who were eligible to begin evacuating the capital and ended on a realistic but generally positive note: 'It is by no means certain that the enemy has solved the difficult technical problems connected with the aiming of the rockets, but none the less I do not wish to minimise the ordeal to which we may be subjected, except to say that I am sure it is not one we will not be able to bear.'[74]

The press were even more open and detailed about what shape future German attacks might take. In June 1944, the *Manchester Dispatch* published a lengthy article entitled 'Hitler's Next Secret Weapon', which described the rocket as 'purely a terrorist weapon', but explained

[72] Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 392, 21 September 1943, 74.
[73] Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 397, 22 February 1944, 683.
[74] Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 402, 4 August 1944, 1477-8.

how it worked in surprising detail.[75] A month later, the London evening paper *Star* published an article written by General Sir Robert Gordon-Finlayson, the Colonel Commandant of the Royal Artillery, under the title, 'V-2 – what is the truth?', in which he concluded that the V-2 was likely to be small and rather ineffective; in his words, 'not pleasant, but, at any rate, no novelty'.[76] There were, perhaps unsurprisingly, also a fair amount of inaccuracies and unfounded claims in the press predictions. The *News Chronicle* described the V-2 as a 'rocket gun' which required the use of 'permanent structures' (in reality, the rockets were highly mobile and could be launched from almost any area of clear, flat ground), while the *Daily Telegraph* called it 'a glacial bomb which freezes everything within 200 yards' (a rumour which proved oddly persistent even once the rockets began arriving).[77]

The combined effect of Churchill's speeches and the speculative press coverage meant that most British people had a general sense of a rocket weapon and how it might be employed against them. In November 1943, a Gallup poll reported that 59 per cent of respondents thought the German talk of a secret weapon was a bluff, while 21 per cent believed it.[78] Less than a year later, in the same week that the first V-2s arrived, the Ministry of Information reported that the majority of people expected the Germans to unleash 'some "final viciousness", in the form of gas, bacteria, "pick-a-back" planes, rockets, or a "spite-blitz" from the Luftwaffe'.[79] This was in spite of efforts made by the government to avoid a fear of rockets building up among the populace. In September 1943, the Ministry of Information had proposed censoring these speculative stories about the V-2, on the grounds that 'frequent

[75] *Manchester Dispatch*, 29 June 1944.
[76] *Star*, 28 July 1944.
[77] *News Chronicle*, 4 September 1944; *Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 1944.
[78] Robert J. Wybrow, *Britain Speaks Out, 1937–87: A social history as seen through the Gallup data* (Basingstoke, 1989), 15.
[79] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.206', 14 September 1944.

articles on the subject might, with the help of rumour, build up a certain amount of public apprehension on the subject; and this, if the attack did come, might add to the danger of panic'.[80]

On the other hand, Findlater Stewart's Home Defence Committee had initially felt that a pre-emptive public announcement about the rocket threat would be 'advisable … in the interests of morale, since the shock of a new and terrifying attack is likely to be greater the more unexpected it is [and] the inference might well be drawn that we were helpless against it.'[81] However, by July 1944, Findlater Stewart had made an about-turn on this policy, deciding against an official announcement, and urging all departments to 'avoid at this stage any steps likely to alarm the general public about the long-range rocket'.[82] Then, in August, the Ministry of Home Security informed the Chiefs of Staff Committee that, if 'evacuation plans are revealed piecemeal … set against German propaganda writing up the Rocket attacks, there is a risk of undesirable consequences including some loss of public morale'.[83] Ultimately, the government had to walk a fine line between ensuring the public were prepared for this new threat, while also avoiding a descent into panic.

Understandably, the government were also very keen to deliver good news when they could. This was likely the drive behind Duncan Sandys' premature press conference on 7 September 1944, in which he claimed that the Battle of London was over. This made the public especially frustrated when the V-2 arrived in London the very next day. A Ministry of Home Security report a week later noted: 'Some are confused at being told the Battle of London was over but that people should still stay evacuated. It is thought unfortunate that the first

[80] TNA, INF 1/967, L. Petch to Samuel Hoare, 29 September 1943.
[81] TNA, AIR 20/4371, 'Long Range Rocket Development', 26 June 1943.
[82] TNA, AIR 20/4371, 'Crossbow Security – Special Measures for "Big Ben"', 29 July 1944.
[83] TNA, CAB 80/86/91, 'Crossbow', 22 August 1944.

explosion came the evening after Mr Duncan Sandys' speech was published.'[84] Indeed, evacuees returned to London in increasing numbers throughout the V-2 bombardment – by January 1945, 10,000 a week were pouring back into the city.[85]

Incredibly, even after the V-2s arrived, the continuing censorship and lack of an official announcement meant that the press could only publish speculative stories about the rocket threat, as if it was still a vague possibility for the future. On 23 September, the *Daily Herald* reported that 'the Germans are working frantically to perfect V-2, the rocket-bomb, before the Allied advance into the Reich robs them of the opportunity of using it'.[86] Two weeks later, the *Daily Mail* quoted a source from neutral Sweden who said that the V-2 had been in operation but had 'proved a complete failure', and would be abandoned so the Germans could direct all their energies into their atomic bomb project.[87] Then, on 8 November, the German High Command issued a communique which contained the news that the V-1 bombardment of Greater London, which had been in almost constant action since 15 June, 'has been supplemented for the last few weeks by another and far more effective explosive missile, the V-2.'[88] It is likely that Goebbels chose this date to release the news as it was the first time since the Nazi seizure of power that the anniversary of Hitler's failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 had not been marked by a speech from the Führer, who was increasingly unwell and still recovering from the assassination attempt of 20 July, and it was hoped that this absence could be hidden among this missile-related morale boost.[89]

[84] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 16 September 1944.
[85] Todman, *Britain's War,* vol.II, 635.
[86] *Daily Herald*, 23 September 1944, 1.
[87] *Daily Mail*, 5 October 1944, 1.
[88] Longmate, *Hitler's Rockets*, 201.
[89] *Daily Herald*, 9 November 1944, 1.

Practically all British newspapers picked this up the next day, and the headlines on 9 November included: 'Berlin: V-2 Terror in London' (*Daily Mail*), 'Berlin Plugs V-2 to Hide Hitler Silence' (*Daily Herald*) and 'Nazis go all out on "V-2 terror in London" stories' (*Daily Mirror*).[90] At this point, still with no official announcement from the British government, the press focused more on Hitler's absence, and what this implied, rather than the nature of the V-2 rockets. Finally though, the mutual silence between Britain and Germany about the attacks was broken. Churchill issued a statement on 10 December in the House of Commons, which began thus: 'For the last few weeks the enemy has been using his new weapon, the long-range rocket, and a number have landed at widely scattered points in this country.' He discussed the nature of the weapon, where it was being fired from, and assured the nation that the launching sites would soon be in Allied hands. He concluded with the following:

> The use of this weapon is another attempt by the enemy to attack the morale of our civil population in the vain hope that he may somehow by this means stave off the defeat which faces him in the field. Doubtless the enemy has hoped by his announcement to induce us to give him information which he has failed to get otherwise. I am sure that this House, the Press and the public will refuse to oblige him in this respect.[91]

It is noteworthy that even in this long-awaited official announcement, Churchill emphasised the need for continued restrictions on the amount of information released.

The verdict on Churchill's statement was mostly positive – 'the Prime Minister's statement was welcomed and has been well received on the whole, both in the areas affected and elsewhere.' That said, it was not viewed so favourably by 'those who say that it was long

[90] *Daily Mail*, 9 November 1944, 1; *Daily Herald*, 9 November 1944, 1; *Daily Mirror*, 9 November 1944, 1.
[91] Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 404, 10 November 1944, 1653-4.

overdue and merely confirmed what was already known or suspected' and 'those who had not heard the rumours and to whom the news came as a great shock – in Northern Ireland, particularly, it made a very deep impression and "came near to unsteadying the public".' It certainly provoked much discussion and speculation about the true potentialities of the weapon, as well as consternation about the standing down of civil defence services, increasing hostility towards Germany, and concern about the lack of counter-measures.[92] The press reaction was also extensive, as they made the most of the fact that they could now discuss the V-2 in unprecedented detail. The front page of the *Daily Mail* on 10 November carried the headline, 'V-2: The Full Dramatic Story', and on 11 November, 'Hitler's V-2 Hits England: The Whole Story Told', both of which were accompanied by a series of lavish illustrations and diagrams.[93]

Despite this, the press were still subject to a number of restrictions as to what they could and could not publish, a fact at which Churchill had hinted in his statement. In particular, they could not disclose details about where rockets had landed, how much damage they had inflicted, or how many casualties they had caused. This even extended to an inability to counter outright Nazi lies about the V-2's effect, such as the claim that they had destroyed the House of Commons or Euston station.[94] This continuing censorship caused growing 'resentment and uneasiness' among the public, for a number of reasons. For one, there was a sense that the areas affected (primarily the poorer regions of London's East End and Essex) were small, and that therefore the government was indifferent to what was happening – 'if

[92] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.215', 16 November 1944. Concerns about citizens of Northern Ireland being less able to take the strain of bombardment dated back to the Blitz; see: Brian Barton, 'The Belfast Blitz, April-May 1941', *History Ireland*, 5 (1997), 52-57.
[93] *Daily Mail*, 10 November 1944, 1; *Daily Mail*, 11 November 1944, 1.
[94] TNA, HO 199/374, 'German radio and press propaganda: effects of long range rockets', 9 November 1944, 20 November 1944.

Whitehall were in Essex these incidents would cease', was one opinion.[95] Similarly, many in the firing line felt it was important that 'the provinces should realise what London is suffering'.[96] This perceived inequality of sacrifice was not new; it had been present during the Blitz and gave rise to considerable frustration among the worst-hit communities.[97] Furthermore, rumour also came into play again here. Some wondered whether, 'as deaths due to rockets are not signed up as due to enemy action', 'pensions and War Damage Compensation are going to be paid'.[98] These reactions suggest that the population were more prepared to accept a total silence, without any mention of the V-2 bombardment whatsoever, than a partial silence, in which the bombing was acknowledged but only in abstract terms. It is also clear that a general sense of 'war weariness' pervaded British society by 1944, and that the public's tolerance for government interference was not unlimited.

Another problem facing the British government concerned the way in which a popular desire to minimise or stop the V-2 bombardment led to public criticism of their own bombing policy. In particular, a rumour took hold in early 1945 that the RAF was refraining from bombing V-2 launch sites in Holland out of 'undue consideration for the Dutch population', or even to avoid hitting the 'Royal Palace of Queen Wilhelmina'.[99] The Secretary of State for Air, Archibald Sinclair, among others, acted quickly to dispel these rumours by arguing that while Bomber Command could devastate The Hague in a single night, with a death toll 'many times the total number killed in this country by V-2 … no decisive result would be obtained'.[100] Nevertheless, it was clear that public opinion in Britain in the face of the continuing V-2

[95] TNA, AIR 20/2652, Geoffrey Hutchinson to Archibald Sinclair, 24 February 1945.
[96] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.214', 9 November 1945
[97] Alan Allport, *Britain at Bay: The Epic Story of the Second World War, 1938-1941* (London, 2020), 359-61.
[98] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.214', 9 November 1945.
[99] TNA, AIR 20/2652, Geoffrey Hutchinson to Archibald Sinclair, 24 February 1945.
[100] TNA, AIR 20/2652, Archibald Sinclair to Geoffrey Hutchinson, 2 March 1945.

bombardment was a major issue which threatened to have a disruptive influence on government policy.

Morale and Public Reaction

Civilian wartime morale is notoriously difficult to measure. In particular, it cannot be inextricably linked to one factor, such as the psychological effect of bombing, but is instead representative of societal circumstances as a whole, including elements like the availability of food, the cost of living, the progress of the war, and the provision of health and welfare services.[101] Nevertheless, it was a major preoccupation for the British government during the Blitz, as they genuinely feared the war could be lost at home if the civilian population proved unable to stand up to the horrors of aerial bombardment.[102] This proved a recurring theme when the threat of the V-2 began to loom large in the minds of government planners. Certainly in the months preceding the bombardment, some government ministers had real concerns about how the population would cope with this new form of warfare. In June 1944, shortly after the V-1 raids had begun, Herbert Morrison told his colleagues in the War Cabinet of his anxiety on this matter.[103] He said:

> After five years of war the civil populations were not as capable of standing the strain of attack as they had been during the winter of 1940-41. If flying bomb attacks were supplemented by rocket attacks … there might be serious deterioration in the morale of the civil population.[104]

[101] Edgar Jones, Robin Woolven, Bill Durodie and Simon Wessely, 'Civilian Morale during the Second World War: Responses to Air Raids Re-examined', *Social History of Medicine*, 17 (2004), 464.
[102] Gardiner, 'Blitz Experience in British Society', 172-5.
[103] Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 134.
[104] TNA, CAB 65/42, 'Conclusions of 72nd (44) War Cabinet Meeting', 16 June 1944.

Morrison is not explicit as to how this 'deterioration in morale' would manifest itself, but it is likely that the old Blitz-era spectres of mass panic, civil disobedience, and potentially even defeatism were at the forefront of his mind. However, the Britain which faced the V-2 threat was a very different country to that which had faced the full force of the Luftwaffe – most urban residents had become accustomed to aerial bombardment (and the rigours of life in the target zone more generally) and thus the formerly feared consequences of plummeting morale were now largely illusory. It is more likely that, by this late stage in the war, with victory almost in sight and Britain's survival no longer in question, a decent level of morale among the population was simply sought in order to avoid any last-minute disruption to the home stretch of the conflict.

It is certainly true that the public were disturbed by the V-1 attacks, with Gallup reporting that half of respondents felt that they were more trying than the Blitz, while only 31 per cent thought that they were less trying.[105] The reasons for this are many, not least the sense that there was even less equality of sacrifice in the V-1 campaign than during the Blitz, with the vast majority falling in the south and east of London (a pattern replicated by the V-2). In the case of the V-2, a critical element affecting morale was the timing, with the attacks beginning at a time when many felt the war was drawing to a close and that the British home front was no longer directly in the firing line; indeed, Sandys had said so himself in his press conference of 7 September 1944.

A week later, once the V-2s had begun falling, the Ministry of Home Security reported that anxiety had slightly increased, with 'a few saying "we could not stand anything more at

[105] Wybrow, *Britain Speaks Out*, 16.

this stage of the war"'.[106] This chimed with the experiences of frontline soldiers as well. The British and Commonwealth armed forces faced a major morale crisis in the autumn and early winter of 1944, as evidenced by a steep rise in convictions for desertions and AWOL, as well as a multitude of hospital admissions for battle exhaustion.[107] Nonetheless there was still a desire to put a brave face on the situation. Despite his personal misgivings, in January 1944, Morrison gave an address to newspaper editors, updating them on the likelihood of the long-range rocket threat, which he concluded: 'The ordeal, if it comes, will no doubt be great, but the spirit and determination of Britain to overcome it will be equal to the occasion.'[108] In any case, the government were deeply sensitive to the impact the V-2 might have on civilian morale.

First, it is worth addressing the issue of rumour, which ran fairly rampant during the initial phase of the V-2 campaign (certainly before Churchill's official statement), even if a good majority of those in the affected areas understood the true nature of the threat. These rumours were a key factor in morale as they tended to present an overly negative or exaggerated picture of the V-2 which, combined with the general absence of any official information, could easily result in an enhanced atmosphere of fear and despondency. One of the simplest misunderstandings in circulation concerned gross overestimations of the scale of the explosion caused – 'It is rumoured that the explosions are terrific and cause enormous damage, e.g. craters larger than the Houses of Parliament; blast carrying debris back across the Channel; everyone and everything blown to dust; one explosion killing 5,000 people.'[109]

[106] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 13 September 1944.
[107] Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2019), 567-70.
[108] TNA, AIR 20/3439, Oswald Allen to Norman Bottomley, 5 January 1944.
[109] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.207', 21 September 1944.

In terms of the location of the impacts, while most accepted that they were limited to London and the South East, there were rumours of V-2s falling in such far-flung spots as Belfast, Newcastle and Yorkshire.[110]

The contents of the rocket were also the subject of great speculation. In one telephone intercept report from November 1944, members of the public were cited as saying: 'these rockets are full of acid you know', '3 gas bombs dropped in London' and 'I hear these loud ones are full of ice or something'.[111] This last assertion proved particularly persistent, perhaps building on the aforementioned *Daily Telegraph* article from August which had theorised about a so-called 'glacial bomb'.[112] Even two weeks after the V-2 campaign began, a report noted that some 'say the rocket is covered in ice or that there is ice in the crater after the explosion'.[113] Other rumours ranged from the largely credible – 'the present shots are range-finding, to be followed by heavier missiles' – to the truly ludicrous – 'the Government is sending the rockets to deter evacuees from returning'.[114]

Turning now to a more general picture of morale, initial signs were positive. Despite this environment of speculation and wild guesses, the government consistently reported 'no undue alarm' among the population of affected areas.[115] After the first full week of rocket attacks, it was reported that 'spirits remain at the same high level' as the previous week, though they had taken a slight dent in London due to 'the explosions, which are the subject of widespread rumours all over the country'.[116] In a November report by the Information and

[110] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 16 September 1944.
[111] TNA, HO 199/467, 'Some Reactions to V-Weapons', 4 November 1944.
[112] *Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 1944.
[113] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.207', 21 September 1944.
[114] TNA, CAB 121/107, Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.213', 2 November 1944; TNA, HO 262/15, 'Daily Report on London Opinion', 16 September 1944.
[115] TNA, HO 262/15, 'Report by Regional Information Officer, London & S.E. Region', 13 September 1944.
[116] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.207', 21 September 1944.

Records Branch, some extracts from intercepted letters were cited which give an insight into a particular defiant frame of mind: 'we have stuck bombardment now for 4½ years and it is not likely that we will get excited by any new device of the devil, we are too used to it all', 'the Hun is just wasting time and fuel on us needlessly. He'd do far better to concentrate on military targets', and 'even if he bumped off all us Civies [sic] he has definitely lost the war'.[117] More generally, one opinion poll found that as many as 61 per cent claimed not to be affected by the rockets.[118] Mass Observation even recorded asking a 90-year-old woman what she thought of the rockets, to which she replied, 'the rockets, dearie? I can't say I've ever noticed them.'[119]

However, the very same report also offered accounts from the opposing perspective. One writer felt that 'just when we seem to be going on quite nicely the threat of new terrible weapons comes to crush all the enthusiasm out of our lives', while another was even more despondent: 'London is not freed of this new terror and it does not seem as if anything is done for us. And all this on top of the strain and terror, day and night, of 5 years of war. There is a lot of great bitterness about this by the London people. … When they fall on you direct you're done for. You are just a piece of rubble like the house.'[120] These were not isolated remarks and telephone intercepts throughout the period recorded similar sentiments – 'I'm terrified, it's awful, I must come away from here', 'it was genuinely a rocket, it put the breeze up me' and 'I can't stand it, my nerves has [sic] completely gone. I haven't slept for nights. It's much worse than before; they are coming over all the time.'[121] The Ministry of Information's reports

[117] TNA, HO 199/467, 'The Rocket Bomb', 21 November 1944.
[118] Overy, *Bombing War*, 194.
[119] Mass Observation Archive [MOA], File Report [FR] 2207, 19 February 1945, 5.
[120] TNA, HO 199/467, 'The Rocket Bomb', 21 November 1944.
[121] TNA, HO 199/467, 'Some Reactions to V-Weapons', 4 November 1944.

offer a broader picture, wherein they described those who lived near the scene of incidents as 'nervy' and noted that 'more people are again sleeping in shelters'.[122] During the Blitz, mass shelter usage had given the authorities cause for concern, raising fears of the population developing a 'shelter mentality', which was damaging to morale and possibly defeatist, but by 1944, sheltering had been normalised and these official anxieties had largely abated.[123]

The prevalence of fear and nervousness are perhaps to be expected, considering the shock value of this new weapon, immune to defences, which arrived when Germany's defeat seemed almost imminent and much of the British population were preparing to return to a semblance of peacetime normality. In her work on fear, Joanna Bourke has suggested that, among soldiers at least, fear of a certain weapon was not rational (i.e. not linked to the likelihood of being injured or killed by that particular weapon), but rather dictated by whether or not the enemy was felt to have an unfair advantage in the use of that weapon. Key reasons why soldiers were afraid of certain weapons were the 'inability to retaliate', the 'feeling of vulnerability' and the 'speed and surprise of the attack', much more than notions of effectiveness and accuracy.[124] These factors match up almost exactly with the threat of the V-2, but for the civilians living in target areas, the most important factor was the lack of warning. As a supersonic rocket, the V-2 arrived and exploded before it could even be heard travelling through the air; this meant that there was no scope for any public warning system and people had no chance to take shelter. Unsurprisingly, this played a major role in shaping public perceptions of the V-2 and, by extension, morale during the bombardment.

[122] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.213', 2 November 1944.
[123] Joseph S. Meisel, 'Air Raid Shelter Policy and its Critics in Britain before the Second World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), 318.
[124] Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London, 2005), 210.

The population's reaction to the lack of warning can be divided into roughly two camps, as a Ministry of Information report from early November 1944 surmised: 'On the effect of absence of warning, opinion is fairly evenly divided. While some are glad to think that "it's all over before you know about it", others dislike the lack of warnings, and think the Government ought to do something.'[125] Turning first to the former group, who we might designate as fatalists, for their acceptance that there was no defence against death by rocket and treating this uncertain fate with relative equanimity. The Ministry of Information described them as 'philosophical', those who 'find comfort in the absence of alerts'.[126] One such individual was the London-based American war correspondent W.A.S. Douglas, who wrote in the *Philadelphia Record* in early 1945, under the heading, 'Complete Lack of Warning Saves Londoners' Nerves', that 'what we like about the V-2 is its complete lack of warning – and warning in the form of terrorising and devastating weapons does something more than just shake morale'.[127] Some put things a little more straightforwardly. One man cited by Mass Observation said, 'They don't really worry me. Not that I want to appear to put on any false bravado but just that I'm convinced that if my ticket's on it, I'll get it, and if isn't, what's the good of worrying?'[128] Fatalism was not always an ideal attitude, and it has been identified as having a negative long-term effect on morale, though this was perhaps more the case among fighting men than civilians.[129]

The alternative perspective – perpetual fear – was little better. One woman told Mass Observation, 'It's awful isn't it. You never know whether you're going to be here from one

[125] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.213', 2 November 1944.
[126] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.214', 9 November 1944.
[127] TNA, INF 1/969, G.P. Thomson to Francis Williams, 30 January 1945.
[128] MOA, FR 2207, 19 February 1945, 3.
[129] Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2008), 92.

moment to the next.'[130] In addition, the Postal and Telegraph Censorship Department picked up sentiments such as 'we had no warning till we heard the bang … with these devils we have no chance' and 'you can't help yourself at all … there is no protection against them'.[131] German propaganda also seized on the lack of warning to emphasise the horrors of their new weapon. The German Telegraph Service stated that 'a period of horrible and silent death has begun for Britain', while the German Home Service told its listeners that 'life in London … is definitely exposed to greater dangers than in our bombed towns, as no warning can be given of the approaching V-2, nor is there any effective protection against it.'[132] Indeed, aside from the effect that the absence of any warning had on morale, it also had a very real impact on casualties. The Ministry of Home Security calculated that each V-2 caused casualties in a much larger area around the point of impact than each V-1, but as the area of damage was much the same, 'it must be that the lack of warning of the rockets' approach is the main contributory factor'.[133]

Fear and fatalism alone do not capture the full range of reactions displayed by the British public to the V-2 campaign. There were a number of other responses on show too, which are worth briefly documenting. For a start, and perhaps understandably, there was widespread anger and a thirst for vengeance. After Churchill's announcement about the V-2s in November, the Ministry of Information recorded 'still further hardening of feeling against Germany; a desire for even harder peace terms and heavier bombing. Some resentment is reported in Scotland that we have not used similar weapons; our "kid glove methods" are

[130] MOA, FR 2207, 19 February 1945, 1.
[131] TNA, HO 199/467, 'Some Reactions to V-Weapons', 4 November 1944, 21 November 1944.
[132] TNA, HO 199/374, 'German radio and press propaganda: effects of long range rockets', 11 November 194, 8 January 1945.
[133] TNA, HO 199/467, 'General Description of the German Long-Range Rocket A-4', 21 November 1944.

criticised.'[134] Tottenham council, responsible for an area which suffered many raids, called on the government to continue the heavy bombardment of German cities until Londoners could live in peace again.[135] The Chiefs of Staff even contemplated the use of gas against German targets in reprisal, feeling secure in support from 'that section of the public which favours retaliation against secret weapons' (though aware that others 'would regard the use of gas as prohibited by the laws of war').[136] Some of the comments recorded in a Home Opinion report are especially telling – 'since the new weapon I have lost all sympathy for German women and children', and 'we ought to send something just as cruel over on them, they deserve everything they get, bomb them to Hell, until they are paid back in their own coin they will not understand'.[137] This reflected a desire for reprisals which was widespread during the Blitz, wherein many found it easier to cope with being in the firing line if they thought Britain was at least giving as good as it was getting.[138]

Another slightly surprising reaction, usually only expressed by those who enjoyed a degree of immunity from the rockets, was awe at this new weapon and what it perhaps heralded for the future. For example, an ARP warden in Woodbridge, Suffolk, described to his supervisor in great detail a rocket he had seen in the sky in the early hours of the morning on 13 March 1945. He ended his report by saying: 'Setting aside the character and possible results of the missile, I do not think I have ever seen a more magnificent sight in the sky.'[139] Those in the firing line tended to be less poetic in their descriptions, but, even in London,

[134] TNA, CAB 121/107, 'Home Intelligence Weekly Report no.215', 16 November 1944.
[135] Süss, *Death from the Skies*, 384.
[136] TNA, CAB 121/101, 'Military Considerations affecting the Initiation of Chemical and Other Special Forms of Warfare', 26 July 1944.
[137] TNA, HO 199/467, 'The Rocket Bomb', 21 November 1944.
[138] Allport, *Britain at Bay*, 365; Mark Connelly, 'The British People, the Press and the Strategic Air Campaign against Germany, 1939-45', *Contemporary British History*, 16 (2002), 47-49.
[139] TNA, HO 199/467, 'Report by Maj. A.D.G. Drayton, Chief Warden, Section 16', 13 March 1945.

rocket impact sites brought sightseers, driven more by curiosity than by fear.[140] One individual even grasped the future potentialities of this technology – 'I expect further expansion to this weapon very shortly, I predict England to America by rocket in about two hours or less…'[141] One other response from the public is worth noting, not because it is surprising in its own right, but because of the way it was interpreted by the authorities. When it was reported that employees at an aircraft factory had 'appeared to be increasingly anxious to leave the works to reassure themselves of the safety of their families' after a rocket impact, officials from the Ministry of Aircraft Production questioned 'whether there was any possibility that the requests were made as a result of agitation to slow down production'. While this idea was considered unlikely, the very fact that it was raised at all suggests a remarkable lack of trust in ordinary workers and a striking lack of empathy for their very real concerns.[142]

On the whole, attempting to assess the morale of the British population in the face of the V-2 bombardment is a deeply challenging task. For a start, the public do not present one homogeneous mass and the diversity of opinions and reactions given here suggests that there is no singular overriding narrative to be identified. People reacted differently to this new threat depending on where they lived, the extent of their direct experience with the V-2s, their memories of the Blitz period, and their individual personality traits. Certainly it seems that, while the conventional bombardment of 1940-41 had inured some to this new weapon, and perhaps built stronger trust between governors and governed, many citizens had lost the resilience of the early part of the war and saw the rockets as an unwelcome delay in the return to peace. That said, in a summary report of public opinion on the V-2, prepared in late

[140] Overy, *Bombing War*, 194.
[141] TNA, HO 199/467, 'The Rocket Bomb', 21 November 1944.
[142] TNA, CAB 21/744, 'Minutes of 253rd meeting of the Liaison Officers Conference', 28 November 1944.

November 1944, a substantial majority seemed to be coping fairly well. According to the Ministry of Home Security, out of 475 letter and telegram extracts examined, 352 (74 per cent) could be considered to demonstrate 'good morale, 105 (22 per cent) 'bad morale' and 18 (4 per cent) 'non-committal'.[143] While this is hardly a representative sample, and the logic behind the Ministry's categorisations is unclear, it seems fair to conclude that the British people stood up to the threat of the V-2s rather better than the Germans had hoped and some members of the British government had expected.

Conclusion

Even after the end of the war in Europe, censorship continued. While the press were eager to be able to say more about Britain's experience on the receiving end of these innovative new weapons, including 'stories showing how various towns and boroughs had suffered from enemy attacks', the censors only permitted such stories if they were 'so framed that specific information regarding flying bomb and rocket attacks was not given away.'[144] This approach was driven by concerns that the rocket was 'a weapon which might have great possibilities for the future', and therefore detailed information about its accuracy and operational performance should not be allowed to fall into the hands of potentially hostile states (such as the Soviet Union).[145] Indeed, there was also an appetite for stories about how the ballistic missile might shape future warfare – in July, the *Daily Mail* reported comments made by the former Minister for Aircraft Production, Lord Brabazon, that 'on the day the first V-2 rocket

[143] TNA, HO 199/467, 'The Rocket Bomb', 21 November 1944.
[144] TNA, CAB 122/338, 'Details of Rocket and Flying Bomb Attacks', 22 May 1945.
[145] TNA, CAB 122/338, 'Details of Rocket and Flying Bomb Attacks', 22 May 1945.

was launched against Britain every other form of war weapon was rendered obsolescent'.[146] Certain agencies of the British government certainly shared this sentiment and they moved quickly to seize samples of German rockets after the war, with a view to adding this technology to their own arsenal.[147]

To conclude, it is worth trying to offer an appraisal of the British government's handling of the V-2 campaign, with regard to secrecy, publicity, and civilian morale. Clearly, the decision to not only abstain from making any official statement about the arrival of the rockets, but to refuse to acknowledge them altogether, including through censorship of the press, was a controversial one. That said, it was not particularly innovative and merely reflected the general approach to secrecy and censorship adopted by the government during the Blitz, which had its roots in the pre-war period. The motivations behind the censorship were ultimately about the protection of the public – by limiting the accuracy of the weapons and minimising Nazi propaganda – but their cost was continuing insecurity among the public and a feeling of being lied to, as well as the risk of evacuees returning. This was, however, not uncommon for wartime, when the public expected some degree of official secrecy as part of measures to help keep them safe. Moreover, throughout the two months of silence, the government carefully watched the barometer of public opinion and it seems likely that they would have made a statement had the pressure from below reached a certain critical mass.

In terms of the impact which the government's policies of secrecy and (limited) publicity had, the verdict is not entirely positive. While it is true that the Germans received minimal intelligence about where their rockets fell from British channels, there was little they

[146] *Daily Mail*, 13 July 1945, 4.
[147] Charlie Hall, '"The Other End of a Trajectory": Operation Backfire and the German Origins of Britain's Ballistic Missile Programme', *The International History Review*, 42 (2020).

could have done with such information to make the V-2 more accurate. It is also true that the outbreak of major panic was avoided but this cannot really be attributed to government secrecy, given that most Londoners were quite aware of the arrival of rockets, but rather to a population which had grown accustomed to hardship and danger. The official silence did allow for the flourishing of rumour but this too was not unusual in wartime British society, and to some extent persisted after the formal announcement anyway, at least with respect to specific details. At best, the policy of secrecy can be seen as well-intentioned but largely futile; at worst, it was indicative of a government accustomed to having full control over public access to information, and reluctant to relinquish it unless forced to.

More broadly, the experience of the British public (especially in London and the South East) under V-2 bombardment was a mixed one. As the first ever victims of ballistic missile attack, there were certain elements which unsurprisingly provoked terror and unhappiness, not least the lack of warning associated with this supersonic weapon. Nonetheless, the good humour demonstrated by jokes about 'flying gas mains' suggests that, on the whole, the public's morale was sturdy enough to accept this new menace, and the government silence which accompanied it. Whether we acknowledge the existence of a genuine 'Blitz spirit' or not, it is clear that sufficient reserves of the stoicism and resilience which saw Britons through the heavy aerial bombardment of 1940-41 still remained by 1944 to ensure that British society did not collapse in the face of Germany's final blow against it.