

“OUR ISLAND FORTRESS” AND THE SEA:

The threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion and the maritime traditions that helped save Britain, 1940-1941

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ABSTRACT: Britain’s wartime ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda campaign of 1940-1941 projected the language and imagery of a united British people ready to defend their island nation against the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion. Embedded in this patriotic, belligerent, propaganda construct was the insularity and protracted position of ‘Deep England’ that celebrated the rolling hills and British countryside and inspired resistance against advancing Nazi forces. This study shows that the ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda campaign was equally grounded in the language and imagery of Britain’s relationship with the sea, and its long-standing maritime traditions and institutions that commanded its power. However, it does not assume that one or other forces had a particular effect; rather it examines how these factors show a cumulative picture.

KEYWORDS: Britain, island, fortress, home front, propaganda

Introduction

Summer 1940 marked a period of extraordinary drama and anxiety for the British people and across the next twelve months Britain was the target of powerful German land, air and sea offensives, with the palpable threat of invasion of the British Isles looming large. Britain’s wartime Government attempted to mitigate these fears and anxieties with propaganda constructs that emphasised Britain’s insularity as a means of protection and relief from Nazi attacks, including the themes of ‘Island Fortress’ (The National Archive, 1940, June 3). The literature exploring this period suggests that the ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda campaign was primarily communicated through the themes of ‘Deep England’ – Britain’s long and storied relationship with the rural and greens spaces of the British countryside. Central to these narratives are the literary and artistic traditions celebrating these aspects as essentially English, or even the main staples of ‘Britishness’. Yet is there any evidence to suggest that during Britain’s “darkest hour”, and facing the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion, the ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda campaign also emphasised Britain’s geographical advantage as an island nation and its relationship with the sea as a form of protection against advancing enemy forces? If so, to what extent did the British people absorb these themes as the basis of an imagined national community, determined to face the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion head on?

Dettman: “Our Island Fortress”

Britain’s wartime ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda construct was often represented through the language and imagery of ‘Deep England’.¹ Calder (1991, p. 185) proposes that British artists and writers of the interwar period opened an “art-historical dead end” of English landscape tradition, canonising the work of the late 18th century and early 19th century watercolourists by placing the great British landscape at the forefront of these representations. The literary traditions of Auden, Foster and Woodhouse further created the linguistic mechanisms to view ‘Deep England’ as synonymous with British national identity itself. The wartime propaganda posters celebrating this ancient landscape created by officials at the Ministry of Information (MOI), Calder continues, expressed very humane values and collective national aims, thus connecting British wartime culture with the pre-war vision of ‘Deep England’ (Calder, 1991, p. 180). No doubt, Churchill’s celebrated speeches to the House of Commons during summer 1940, the popular broadcasts of JB Priestly and the films created by the Ministry of Information and the Crown Film Unit attempting to draw the British people together through the language and imagery of ‘Deep England’ remain some of Britain’s most effective wartime publicity

Indeed, the literary devices and artistic representations of ‘Deep England’ served as the focal point for the ‘Island Fortress’ propaganda campaign. For evidence, Alan Allport (2020) points to Arthur Bryant’s 1940 publication *English Saga*, which best captures the ‘sentimental historical potboilers’ written for a mass audience:

An island fortress, England is fighting a war of redemption not only for Europe but for her. Facing danger greater than any in her history she has fallen back on the rock of her national character (Bryant, 1940, p. 378)



Figure 1 – Propaganda poster reproduced in BBC (2016).

¹ This study makes no distinction between the major themes of ‘deep England’ and ‘Britishness’. For a more in depth understanding of these two different aspects of British national identity, see Calder, (1991); Rose, (2003, pp. 10-14); Allport (2020, pp. 274-279).



Figure 2 - Newbould, F. (1941). your Britain. fight for it now. Art.IWM PST 14887.

According to Allport (2020, p. 274), *English Saga* is “Shire Folkery” from start to finish, jam-packed with modest everyday British people who, above all, possess “a sense of justice and an invincible love of decent and legalised dealing”. Collectively, their only defect is their parochial roots and lack of interest beyond their island horizon. It was not the outward-looking material wealth of the Empire that the propaganda machine emphasised when the threat of invasion reached Britain in summer 1940, Allport reminds us, but rather the inward-looking tropes of ‘Deep England’ and the “plucky” little people of Britain: “the island fortress, tiny but lion-hearted, alone but undaunted, defiant even in defeat. It was these national characteristics and identity” (2020, p. 274), that carried the British people past the threat of invasion and towards eventual victory. Where the physical and material strength of the Empire had failed, Allport concludes, landscape and national character was mobilised in defence of the British people’s homeland, their ‘Island Fortress’.

Central to Allport’s assessment is the wartime film *Britain at Bay* (Harry Watt, 1940) narrated by J.B. Priestley and released by the Ministry of Information in the immediate aftermath of Dunkirk. Again, the focus falls primarily on the landscape of ‘Deep England’ and the insularity of Britain that would provide much needed defence against advancing Nazi forces and the threat of attack: “for nearly a thousand years, these hills and fields and farmstead of Britain have been free from foreign invasion”. Priestley’s praise for Britain’s “shire folk” is carried across the entire length of the film, arguing that it is this inward-looking, protracted and nationalistic mindset that would protect the British people from the threat of invasion: “it is not the first time she has been at bay against a conquering tyrant, for we were equally alone against the full might of Napoleon” (Allport, 2020, p. 277).

The "Britain alone" thesis has been the subject of much historical debate.² David Edgerton (2020, p. 1) argues that social and political historians of the immediate post-war period began to deploy the terms "Britain alone" and the "people's war" to develop the concept that wartime events of 1940 acted as the "moment in which a new nation, with progressive politics based on welfare, was created". Edgerton (2020, p. 2) suggests that they were "concepts which barely existed in 1940 or even later in the war", and when these two terms were used by wartime contemporaries, "they had very different meanings to those assumed by post-war historians". When the term "national 'Alone'" was used across the war, he continues, the phrase "usually referred to the British Empire"; and that the phrase "people's war" was a wartime term "not to the actual war of the British people, but to a general understanding of the nature of war, often with an international slant" (2020, p. 2). Although Edgerton (2020, p. 5) notes the lack of contemporary wartime references to both the "national 'Alone'" and the "people's war", he makes a particular point about the prevalence of the 'Island Fortress' language and imagery that was "usually associated with an entity larger than the nation, such as empire, Europe or the realm of freedom, civilisation and indeed sometimes Christian civilisation".

Fundamental to Edgerton's narrow reading of the primary-sourced material is the rejection of wartime interpretations by JB Priestley and other national figures that suggest the "alone" narrative portrayed the "British as an island people" and "self-reliant", and that the "sea was a national seaside rather than the great oceans dominated by British trade". For evidence, Edgerton (2020, p. 5) points to Priestley's *Postscript* radio broadcasts that repeatedly "invoke empire and commonwealth, and the fortress image, but with no assertion of a national". When reviewing Priestley's contribution to the film *Britain at Bay*, Edgerton concedes to the fact that Priestley makes no direct reference to Empire, despite the terms "alone", "at bay", as an "island fortress", but the film does show troops from the dominions and empire. If these assessments are correct, they would profoundly change our understanding of the British Home Front across the years 1940-1945, and their subsequent values.

Toye and Dettman (forthcoming, 2023) agree that when wartime contemporaries spoke of Britain "Alone", they were generally referring to Britain and beyond, but disagree with Edgerton that the concepts "Britain 'Alone'" and "People's War" were not part of the wider wartime socio-political discourse and with progressive, welfarist meaning. They demonstrate that although the progressive version of the term 'people's war' proved most prevalent in the primary-sourced material, there were also conservative, nationalist uses with no radical connotations at all. Moreover, they argue that international use of these terms could sit alongside domestic ones, particularly with regards to expanding the Anglo-American use of these phrases, and their associated values such as the concepts of "freedom", "civilisation" and "welfare", as a means of garnering US sympathy and support for the purpose of increased aid to Britain. Their model demonstrating the national and international use of these terms, and their various meanings, can also be applied to the 'Island Fortress' campaign.³ As we will see, the domestic positioning of the 'Island Fortress' construct carried radical and conservative values alike, while at the same time it was

² For examples on previous major works on the "national 'Alone'" and discussions on national mythmaking, see Calder, (1969); Addison, (1975); Calder, (1991); Cull, (1995); Rose, (2003); Bell, (2008); Field, (2011); Todman, (2017); Fennell, (2019); Wilson, Hammond and Fennell (Eds) (2022).

³ On the British side, see, for instance, *Gloucestershire Echo*, 1940, June 18, p.4); *Western Times*, 1940, June 20, p.8). On the American side, see, for instance, *Post* (1940, June 28, p. 54) and *General Press Releases 2 & 3* (1940, June and July).

exported to the United States to attract military and non-military aid. In both situations – national and international – the language and imagery of the 'Island Fortress' construct projected the picture of a united British people fighting as part of an imagined national community for the purpose of preventing a cross-Channel Nazi invasion, and often sustained by its position as an island nation with references to its long-standing maritime traditions.

The irony is, of course, that islands historically have not been models of resistance against invasion, but rather victims of conquest and occupation. David Cressy (2022, p. 130) argues that although island-based fortifications "in a pinch, could mount some resistance", they were mainly developed as outliers of dynastic and national power, and buffers against the first point of contact by hostile forces. When islands were asked to contribute to Britain's maritime shield, including the Channel Islands, adds Cressy (2020, pp. 133-134), "watchfulness, training, repair and investment" was needed to keep the islands safe from enemies who "long had an envious eye" on the British strongholds. A British staging post that provided a vital supply link between Europe and North Africa, the small island of Malta was subjected to repeated and sustained attacks across the opening years of the war; and although it emerged unconquered and intact, historically this ill-defended island had been exposed to centuries of conquest and defeat, from the Crusades to Napoleon (Holland, 2003; Jacobs, 2016; Hasting, 2021). Likewise, Japanese Imperial forces failed to hold a series of island fortifications spread across the Western Pacific Ocean when US militaries undertook an "island hopping" campaign that ultimately ended with Japan's demise, surrender and occupation (Foot, 2003; Hammel, 2014; Toll, 2015).

Nevertheless, the 'Island Fortress' campaign prevailed, relying heavily upon past examples when Britain, united against a common enemy, withstood the threat of invasion. Connecting the past with the present was a key strategy for most MOI-backed propaganda campaigns in the opening months and years of the war. Jo Fox (2007, pp. 224-226) argues that the wartime British Government and the Ministry of Information recognised the significance of propaganda campaigns emphasising historical events as a valuable tool for uniting the British people. More importantly, argues Fox, these wartime publicity campaigns were apolitical, making it much easier for the British people to rally around the national themes of "Britishness". Historians have been sceptical to put much faith in the leitmotifs of national identity and "emotional unity" as sound military strategies, and instead consider them as byproducts of heavily constructed pro-British publicity. Lavery (2009, p. 45) suggests that the approach undertaken by Britain's wartime Government to include the constructs of British national identity as integral to the language and imagery of the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign was not necessarily to guarantee "emotional unity", but rather to ensure that individuals saw themselves as national beings regardless of their other individual political, social or economic loyalties. Sonya Rose's study *Which people's war? National identity and citizenship in wartime Britain 1939-1945* (2003, p. 8) contends that as the British people used the images on offer to serve national interests and reinforce the notion of "Britishness", they began to associate these popular images of national identity and citizenship with their own emotionally charged wartime character. This "one-size-fits-all" image of "Britishness", Rose (2003, pp. 11-12) concludes, reinforced the significance of a nation as a unitary, singular object that served as a personal identification.

More recently, historians have linked Britain's wartime publicity strategies and the themes of 'Britishness' with race. John White (2022, p. 10) claims that although there has been much discussion about the difference between 'Britishness' and race, the narrative of a

people retreating to the safety of their 'Island Fortress' to defend their country against the threat of invasion posed by barbarous hordes on the European coast is not only nationalistic but also racist. There is certainly evidence to support the assessment that the language and imagery of the 'Island Fortress' construct was often presented in terms of race and ethnicity. In mid-June 1940, E.H. Strange of East London stated that if the British people should be "directly assailed in its own island home", Britain's "ancient fortress against the barbarian will not be taken" (1940, p. 9). Other examples, communicated by leading members of Britain's wartime Government and the general public alike, also linked the 'Island Fortress' construct with Britain's status as the last bastion of freedom and civilisation against the degraded savagery of the 'Hun'. Regardless of the outcome, either planned or not, racist or nationalistic, the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign sought to mobilise the popular national image of a united British people, ready to repel any threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion.

The imagined national community that sprung up around the themes of the 'Island Fortress' campaign, forged against the pictures of 'Deep England' and communicated through the historic and nationalistic tones of 'Britishness', must also take into consideration Britain's geographical position as an island nation and its relationship with the sea as a source of strength and protection against the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion. As Robert Coll's *The Identity of England* (2004, p. 239) suggests, the emphasis on landscape and notions of 'Deep England' are not the only representations of 'Britishness'. Coll points out that while 'Deep England' had never been "more mythologised than during summer 1940", it was the balanced "blue-green Island-fortress idea" that "came to order" their understanding of emotional unity and national identity. More recently, Glen O'Hara (2022, p. 14) has put forward the idea that Britain's national identity and its relationship with the sea work "in harness" to comprise the two sides of nation-building, thus freeing historians to view this construct as part of the same experience.

Arguably, the interconnectedness between Britain's imagined national community and the 'Island Fortress' campaign is at its strongest when 'Britishness' and geographical separateness can seem somewhat divinely ordained (Readman, 2014, p. 242). Such was the case in summer 1940, when the British people celebrated their insularity, made safe from continental corruptions by the English Channel, that "wise dispensation of Providence" (Gladstone, 1870, p. 588). Yet while much of the literature focuses on *how* the themes of 'Britishness' and national identity were mobilised by wartime planners to keep the British people fighting in summer 1940, it seldom attempts to explain *why* these decision makers rallied the British people around the themes of islandness with the language and imagery of 'Island Fortress', nor does it address in any real depth the extent to which Britain's maritime traditions and institutions as communicated through the 'Island Fortress' campaign first bolstered, and then sustained the British people during their "darkest hour".

Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign facilitated the concept that the British people were destined to beat back any attempted cross-Channel Nazi invasion in 1940-1941, and the extent to which Government officials set out to achieve these aims and objectives by framing Britain's bid for national survival as an island nation and its relationship with the sea. In doing so, this study looks to demonstrate how the 'Island Fortress' construct not only pulled from the rural tropes of 'Deep England', but also its maritime traditions and institutions. This study achieves this by investigating government documents and contemporary media sources demonstrating the subsequent pace and tone in which the British people assumed these themes as their own. 'Island Fortress'

Dettman: "Our Island Fortress"

The 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign was built on Britain's long-standing traditions and history as an island nation. In summer 1940, the wartime British Government undertook several propaganda campaigns consisting of patriotic, belligerent language aimed at boosting morale and keeping the British people fighting for the purpose of national survival (Todman, 2017, pp. 391-394). Fundamental to this strategy was the language celebrating Britain's geographical advantage as an island nation against the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion. Officials at the Ministry of Information immediately set out to construct a campaign aimed at countering the "chief weakness of home morale" and any popular sentiment of defeatism. In doing so, the MOI argued, the British wartime Government must embed the idea that "a German invasion is doomed to failure" and that even if "the Germans succeed in landing a small force on our shores, it will be annihilated by the largest army we have ever had in this island" (BBC Written Archive Centre, 1940, Summer). Weeks later, the MOI published a confidential memorandum on the need for a sustained propaganda strategy along the lines that "so long as we are fighting for our own island, we need have no fear" (The National Archive, 1940, July 20).

The image of the British people fighting with home field advantage, and encouraged by its geographical position as an island, was reproduced in various forms across the political spectrum. In mid-June 1940, the Labour MP for Stoke, Ellis Smith, told the House of Commons that the task before the British people to turn "this island of ours" into "a mighty and formidable fortress" would quite possibly be Britain's greatest achievement of the war (*Hansard*, 1940, June 12). At the same time, King George V publicly pledged Britain's "resolve to continue the struggle at all cost... in this Island" (The National Archive, 1940, June 13). Determined not to let a sense of defeatism establish itself amongst the British people, the Home Secretary, John Anderson, told his colleagues in the War Cabinet that "[t]here was no room for retreat in these islands, and nothing short of the most vigorous and sustained resistance should be suggested or countenanced in any instruction" (The National Archive, 1940, August 5). In fact, the War Cabinet minutes during this period are littered with references regarding "the defence of this island" and the need to resist any attempts made by Nazi Germany "to try and smash this island".⁴

However, it was Winston Churchill who best facilitated the image of a fighting-mad British people ready to defend their 'Island Fortress' against the threat of invasion. Over the course of summer 1940, Churchill delivered a series of 'do-or-die' speeches that insisted Britain's greatest asset against the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion was its history and traditions as an island nation (Toye, 2013). On 4 June, Churchill told the House of Commons, as well as the millions of British people listening across the country, that Britain "will never surrender". Two weeks later, on 18 June, he informed the British people that this would be their "finest hour". Across the two occasions, Churchill referred to Britain as an island nation no less than fifteen times, mostly emphasising that the defence of Britain depended on the "exertions which we make in this island". The question of "home defence against invasion", he insisted, "is, of course, powerfully affected by the fact that we have for the time being in this island incomparably more powerful military forces than we have ever had" in Britain's long history (*Hansard*, 1940, June 4). Churchill repeated a version of these words in his 'Finest Hour' speech: "Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war". He repeated to his colleagues in Government and the British people at home that in "the defence of this island the advantages to the defenders will be very great",

⁴ See, for instance, The National Archive, CAB 66/8, 1940, June 12, p. 4; The National Archive, CAB 66/12, 1940 September 2, p. 8; The National Archive, CAB 66/8, 1940 October 4, p. 158.

Dettman: "Our Island Fortress"

and that the British people, he concluded, "will have the glory of saving their native land, their island home" (*Hansard*, 1940, June 18).

In July 1940, British Pathe released a series of newsreels focusing explicitly on the main themes and images of the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign. The first of these 90 second newsreels was *Our Island Fortress - There's a land, a dear land*. With scenes of the British countryside and coastal defences, set against the background of patriotic singing, the celebrated broadcaster Bob Danvers-Walker rallies the British people to the common cause of saving civilisation from encroaching Nazi forces (British Pathe, 1940, July 4). Pathe also released a newsreel entitled *Our island fortress wants*, often drawing from the tropes of 'Deep England' but also the need for the British people to come together in defence of their historic island. It ends with the voiceover telling the audience to "Offer your services NOW" and "Go to it!" (British Pathe, 1940, July 8). In addition, the MOI Planning Committee suggested that the 'Island Fortress' campaign include publishing "feature articles" in local, regional and national newspapers and periodicals on "subjects that we recommend", and broadcasts "on home propaganda subjects arranged or actually prepared in co-operation" with officials at the BBC and MOI (BBC Written Archive Centre, 1940, Summer). The coordination and distribution of the 'Island Fortress' materials by officials at the BBC and MOI was a major contributing factor of the campaign's effectiveness. Within days, the BBC had featured an original radio programme entitled 'This Island Fortress' (BBC Written Archive Centre, 1940, July 5), coinciding with the release of the "Our Island Fortress" campaign posters disseminated by the MOI (The National Archive, 1940, Summer).



Figure 3 - Propaganda poster (1940) (The National Archive, INF 3/127).

The main themes distilled into the 'Island Fortress' campaign were immediately deployed by media agencies and absorbed by the bulk of the British people. In early June, the *Echo*

Dettman: “Our Island Fortress”

ran an article entitled ‘The Nazi Gambler’ (1940) that insisted that “Britain’s resolution to persist to the end” was based on the belief that “this attempted invasion will fail. Our island is a fortress which cannot be reduced”. Two weeks later, the *Gloucester Citizen* (1940, p.4) again rallied its readership around the significance of national security: “Great Britain is now a fortress which is going from greater-to-greater strength. Our island is becoming an armed camp to resist the invader”, and the “civilian population is getting ready for anything it might be called to face”. On 27 June 1940, the *Nottingham Evening Post* (1940, p. 6) wrote that the “organised plan to convert Great Britain into an island fortress” will be the deciding factor in any attempt of a Nazi invasion. Equally, *The Times* (1940, p.7) was doing its part to bolster British resolve and resistance, vowing that the British people “will help turn this island into an impregnable fortress capable of resisting all of the assault of the enemy”. The *Dundee Courier & Advertiser* (1940, 2A) agreed that Britain’s task was “to turn our island into a fortress” as the best way to “guard Britain against attack from across the sea and from the air”.

The inner strength promoted through the ‘Island Fortress’ campaign drew heavily upon the themes of courage and resilience (Todman, 2017, pp. 391-394; Allport, 2020, pp. 284-286). An editorial in the *North Devon Journal* (1940, 3) suggested that the British people “have not only endured in our island fortress” but that the language and imagery was the source of “our own personal strength, resolution and courage” that would see them through the days, weeks and months ahead. Embedded in the MOI’s strategy to boost morale and popular public resistance to the threat of a Nazi invasion was that the island’s “resources were piling up” behind its fortified walls, and that these resources would soon allow the British army to “hit the Germans back” which they “will not be able to withstand” (BBC Written Archive Centre, Home Morale Campaign, 1940, Summer). Once more, *The Times* (1940, June 18, p. 6) was a leading organ in guiding British thinking on these matters, conveying in mid-June that:

Great Britain has resources to command in plenty. She has unbound courage. While developing her resources she will fight on, an island rapidly becoming a fortress.

The sacrifice and courage displayed in these popular public statements offers a glimpse into the role the ‘Island Fortress’ construct played in boosting morale. Home Intelligence Reports advised that although some “defeatism is reported”, many British people “are prepared to ‘turn this island into a fortress’ and with “determination to carry on fighting with the war to the finish” (The National Archive, 1940, July 1).⁵

The ‘Island Fortress’ campaign was equally instrumental in fostering the imagined national wartime national concepts of unity and sacrifice. According to Noel Thompson (1940, p. 402), “June has seen Britain at the zenith of her effort to turn the island into a fortress”, including the “strengthening of coastal and inland defences, together with the greatest number of men under arms ever in this country”. Yet central to Thompson’s ‘Island Fortress’ thesis was the perception of British people acting as a ‘country united’, confident to move together against the threat of invasion as never before. The picture painted by Thompson and others of a united British people rallying to the historic cause behind the safety of their ‘Island Fortress’ was a strong one. In late July, *The Times* (1940, July 22, p.5)

⁵ See also, for instance, BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/473/2. (1940). Public Opinion of the Present Crisis, Tuesday, SECRET; The National Archive, INF 1/264. (1940). Points from Regions.

Dettman: “Our Island Fortress”

buoyed these popular sentiments by insisting that the “British people are today united as never before in their history” and brought together through:

unrivalled brilliance and courage... The Germans have not won the war by any means until they have overcome the main allied force, entrenched as it is in the island fortress of Britain.

The role of individual sacrifice as it related to the national community of ‘Island Fortress’ was celebrated as a uniquely British phenomenon. Again, *The Times* (1940, July 18, p. 5) rallied the British people to these causes, “Britain might well be called an island fortress; we are happily reaching a point at which every individual in it knows his place in a state of siege”.

The role the individual played within the language and imagery of the ‘Island Fortress’ construct was, at times, linked explicitly to the wider socio-political wartime discourse of ‘equality of sacrifice’. In most instances, working class men and women were drafted into the wartime economy, while special deferment schemes were in place for those in the higher echelons of society, thus drawing out these discrepancies within the context of the ‘Island Fortress’ narrative (Fennel, 2019, pp. 88-89). In July 1940, an editorial in *The Field* (1940, p.8) suggested that, “England is a fortress, the last strong point of freedom, in all this continent of Europe”. And although the British people were united in the “historic” task that lie ahead of them:

*We have not yet achieved equality of sacrifice, though we have got much nearer to it. We know that everyone within our fortress cannot fight; we know that everyone must work; we know that every citizen should have instructions and a place in the common effort. We know these things. We are still without them. Though we hear much talk about ‘effort’, about everyone having a job, about fortresses and sieges, about equality of sacrifice, about this and that and the other, about ‘will’ and ‘organisation’ and ‘drive’ we still worship at the altar of *laissez-faire*, we still lisp the precious word ‘voluntary’.*

According to the editorial, it was the responsibility of this armed national community to “remove from this fortress those who might hinder its defence” and to “make this island of ours – a fortress truly”.

The concept of ‘equality of sacrifice’ as it related to the ‘Island Fortress’ construct was equally mapped against the progressive, welfarist meanings of the ‘People’s War’ narrative. Labour stalwart Aneurin Bevan (1940, p. 12) took full advantage of Britain acting as “An Island Fortress” to reinforce the image of how “the old conceptions, the old values, the conventions of the former days have lost their inspiration” and that those who rallied the British people to the decadence of the “social and political forms of the old order” and the “conventions of former days” had “lost their inspiration”. According to Bevan, the concept of ‘Island Fortress’ fostered the “new principles” of “arming the people, trusting the people, mobilising the people” yet at the same time “provide the inspiration which will cause the people to use the arms we put in their hands” to defend Britain as part of an organised national community for the purpose “of democracy” and to “win the world to freedom”.

In the Channel Islands, however, an entirely different type of ‘Island Fortress’ experience was unfolding. Far from Britain’s ‘Finest Hour’, Channel Islanders awaited the choices that occupation created as the archipelago was demilitarised and left to surrender to the

advancing Nazi forces (Carr, Sanders and Wilmot, 2014). In June, the War Cabinet decided that although the "Islands might be of operational value to us", the cost to British forces "would hardly be sufficient" to justify any effort to "capture and use them properly for the purpose of this battle" (The National Archive, 1940, June 11). The British people responded to the surrender of the Channel Islands with sympathy and support, but also anxiety. Home Intelligence Reports suggested that in some areas, London in particular, evacuees from the Channel Islands "have created a situation of disquiet" as they "arrived before the announcement of demilitarisation of the islands have been made and arrangements were not made to receive them" (The National Archive, 1940, 5 July). Officials in Southampton and Portsmouth identified a "general level of anxiety" as reports of the evacuation of the Channel Islands was learned, leading businesses and citizens alike to ask for weapons and defence measures to be put in place (The National Archive, 1940, July 8). One report suggested that the evacuation of the Channel Islands:

now becoming more widely known by the distribution of refugees, is the subject of critical and anxious comment. It is even referred to as 'The beginning of the end'; 'inefficient and disheartening'; 'it has smell of defeat.'
(The National Archive, 1940, July 6).

Only days later, the Jersey born Lord Portsea addressed the House of Lords about the extent to which the islands had "always defended themselves, and have done so for centuries". With direct reference to his home island, Lord Portsea stated that although "very frequent attacks have been made on them", Jersey had never been occupied, giving "the islanders an idea, which is one, fortunately, difficult to shake, that they could, with assistance, at any rate, defend their island" (*Hansard*, 1940, July 9). While such claims have since been debated and rejected, in summer 1940, these anxieties and sentiments challenged the emerging 'Island Fortress' construct, while undermining its ability to rally the British people to its cause.

Nevertheless, the 'Island Fortress' campaign was first and foremost a roadmap to victory; a slogan and mindset that would not only help the British people withstand the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion, but also provide inspiration for total victory (Allport, 2020, p. 274). On 16 July, *The Times* ran a quarter page announcement stating that there were "two gigantic tasks before us - to defend our Island Fortress and to prepare the great counterstrokes with which we shall finally win victory". By August, *The Times* (1940, August 29, p. 2) was reporting that Britain's position "as an island fortress" was not a defensive strategy, but rather an "island base preparing for the day when the Army as well as the Royal Air Force will carry the fight to Germany". At the same time, Home Intelligence Reports signalled that there was a "growing confidence in the defences of 'our island fortress'" to prevent an invasion and take the fight to Nazi Germany on the continent (The National Archive, 1940, August 3). In September 1940, War Cabinet Secretary E.E. Bridges reported that there was "complete confidence in ultimate victory" and "a national pride at the thought that this one, small island now faces all comers alone and unaided". According to the report, popular references to "'our island' are startlingly frequent" and that "the phrase 'Our Island Fortress' is used more often and with more gusto than any other" propaganda campaign (The National Archive, 1940, September 5).

'Island Fortress' and the Sea

Britain's eventual victory as it related to the 'Island Fortress' concept was often linked to its relationship with the sea, expressly how it served as a natural barrier against the threat of invasion. Central to this concept was that it was Britain's sea power that was "holding our island safe" (We're Only Beginning to Fight, 1940). In June, the *Western Daily Press* (1940, June 18 p.4) wrote that "we confront our enemy erect and strong, with courage undaunted and in the firm conviction on this island fortress", underpinned by Britain's "command of the sea". Shortly after, the *Western Daily Press* (1940, July 15, p. 4) added that Britain was "being rapidly transformed into a powerful fortress guarded in the first place by its sea power". Britain's natural sea defences as part of the 'Island Fortress' construct was not only celebrated as a means of preventing invasion but often identified as the defining characteristic against its impossibility. As the situation grew more acute and the threat of attack increased, *The Times* (1940, June 18, p.6) insisted that by "trusting to sea-power" the British people would be well-placed to "resist invasion".

The characterisation of Britain's sea defences as a natural barrier against the improbability, or even the impossibility of invasion, was bolstered by the international political community and military personnel alike. In late May 1940, Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon (1940, p. 900) wrote that, "We are strong on the sea. The enemy isn't". Other military personnel and strategists agreed. Weeks later, Major General J.F.C. Fuller (1940, p. 1002) wrote that, "We are now an island fortress, the moat of which is the sea". On the question of direct invasion, Fuller continued, "I consider (it) unlikely, because a decisive landing on our shore cannot be attempted until the command of the sea is wrested from our hands". General Jan Smuts, South African prime minister and British stalwart, wrote to Churchill assessing the impact a cross-Channel invasion would have on Britain's "vast fortress". According to Smuts, it was not Britain's insularity or its deep countryside that would provide the necessary security against Nazi attacks, but rather "her sea power" (The National Archive, 1940, June 28). The analysis of these assessments suggests that the organising principle of the 'Island Fortress' construct, at least in military terms, was not necessarily dependent on Britain's insularity or the traditions of 'Deep England' as the best way to combat invasion, but also its natural sea defences.

The interplay between the 'Island Fortress' campaign and Britain's relationship with the sea was repeatedly linked to the strength of the British Navy. As the Chiefs of Staff were contemplating "an occupation by invasion of these islands", they argued that the German High Command, "flushed with the fall of Paris and their rapid unbroken series of victories" would be "prepared to take any risk and accept any sacrifices to defeat this country this summer", and that it would fall to the British Navy to act as the nation's first line of defence (The National Archive, 1940, June 19). Churchill, a two-time former First Lord of the Admiralty, and strong supporter of British naval power, stated explicitly in his 'Finest Hour' speech before Parliament in June 1940 that Britain's sea power, commanded by the Royal Navy, would have little problem intercepting any attempt of a Nazi invasion "long before it reached our coast" (Hansard, 1940, June 4). The MOI Planning Committee agreed that the "power of our Navy should be emphasised" as the most "positive means to combat the threat of invasion", and that all measures should be taken to distribute literature suggesting the same (The National Archive, 1940, June 4). Within weeks, the MOI commissioned a poster design bearing a photograph of battleships with the slogan "Mightier Yet", detailing the force of the Navy and the British people's storied relationship with the Sea (BBC Written Archive Centre, 1940, June 14-26).



Figures 4a & 4b Wartime naval propaganda posters – (a) The National Archive, INF EDW. (1940). General Productions Division and (b) BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/473/2. (1940). Planning Committee.

Indeed, it was the long history and traditions of the British Navy that most aptly established the link between 'Island Fortress' discourse and the British people, or what the *Gloucester Journal* (1940, June 29, p.6.) described as "the great tradition of a glorious past". In June, the *Evening Telegraph* (1940, June 27, p. 2) asserted that "Our Navy still holds the seas (and) until it has been beaten no invasion of these islands has a chance of success", and that "We have no doubt whatever of our ability to defend our island fortress". In early July, *The Observer* published a short pamphlet entitled *How To Fight*, reminding the British people that:

Our sea power to-day is the mightiest agency of its kind ever wielded by man. In one sense, Britain is still an island. The sea forbids military invasion on the continental scale. (Garvin, 1940, p.6.)

Declaring that it was the patrolling of British vessels in the English Channel that served as "an invaluable safeguard against effective surprise by sea", the pamphlet concludes that, "[n]ever since the war began has the enemy got the better of the spirit of the Navy". Other viewpoints boasted that, "The British Navy is still supreme at sea, and well able to deal with any large attempt at invasion across the North Sea or the Channel" (*Dundee Courier & Advertiser*, 1940, 2A). In late August, Commander H. Pursey (1940) offered his thoughts on why Nazi forces had yet to undertake a full-scale cross-Channel invasion:

The navy stands intact as the surest shield against Nazi invasion of our island fortress. We will continue on an ever-increasing scale to exert the

Dettman: "Our Island Fortress"

fullest extent of our naval power, which during twelve months of war has denied the use of the sea to our enemy while ensuring it for ourselves.

The nature of these comments suggests that the image of a strong British navy was integral to the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign, and when these views were mobilised for the purpose of national security, the British people agreed that Britain's relationship with the sea and its long-standing maritime traditions and institutions were a powerful force.

American reportage of the 'Island Fortress' construct reinforced the assessment that it was Britain's position as an island nation and its command of the sea that would ultimately repel any attempt of a cross-Channel invasion. US broadcaster Ed Murrow (1941, p. 130) told the American and British people in July 1940:

The task of this nation is clear and simple. It is to transform this country into a single fortress. The sea, it says, is still our strength. This island which floats upon it must become a vast battleship, thickly armoured and hugely gunned. If the last fortress holds, mankind is saved.

Reporting for the *New York Times*, Raymond Daniell (1940, July 21, p. E4) wrote that the "bolstering of the morale of the people in this island" came from their "belief in the invincibility of the British Navy and the proved value of sea power". No doubt, it was the direct and indirect access to domestic conversations that influenced American journalists' reporting of the 'Island Fortress' campaign.

Often, these representations by Murrow and his colleagues working from London slotted into a wider propaganda strategy aimed at influencing the American people away from the position of strict neutralism and towards a policy of aiding Britain. Only days before the fall of France, Murrow (1941, pp. 107-108) reported that:

many Britishers believe that these islands could be turned into a fortress off the coast of Europe, that it could hold out as long as the Navy is afloat and ships continue to arrive. Increased help from America is hoped for an expected.

Murrow's reliance on the language and imagery of the 'Island Fortress' campaign and its relationship with the sea for the purpose of increased aid to Britain was by no means unique (Post, 1940, p.54; Middleton, 1940, p.22). In June, Daniell (1940, June 20, p.4) cabled that "Defended by her mighty fleet and with the largest force of trained and experience troops in her history concentrated in this island", the British people "are nearly all inside the fortress now, and the fortress, well defended" would continue to hold out but only with help from the United States as the "greatest source of supplies in the whole world". In the US, these types of accounts were having a positive effect on the aid to Britain debate. An editorial in the *New York Times* (1940, p. 14), stated that "in their island fortress, the British people are girding to meet any enemy", comforted by "British control" of the English Channel and its long history of national survival.

The reporting of the 'Island Fortress' campaign in both Britain and the United States based on the popular imagination of these maritime institutions and a 'glorious past' offers new opportunities to view the 'Island Fortress' construct as an effective force to manage the threat of invasion. *The Sphere* (1940, p. 406) ran a double page article highlighting the fact that although Britain had not been successfully invaded since William the Conqueror in

1066, "it has been the constant ambition of succeeding Great Powers in Europe to cross the protective moat and bring the island kingdom to her knees". Producing a list of would-be invaders dating back to the Spanish Armada of the late 16th Century and working forward to 1940, complete with maps and visual aids, the article concludes that no European army would ever be able to successfully land an invasion force on British soil because they "could not control the wind and the waves of the sea that surrounded this island nation". *The Sphere* article further developed these representations by proudly proclaiming that Britain was "an island kingdom worth fighting for", and, quoting Shakespeare in the process, proclaimed that, "this England never shall, lie at the proud foot of a conqueror". In early June, the *North Devon Journal* (1940, p.2) also communicated Britain's current national emergency in similar, historical language: "we of these islands have now become a citadel, and island fortress, or, in the words of Shakespeare: 'This precious stone set in a silver sea, a fortress made by Nature for herself'".

The historical link connecting 'Island Fortress' with Britain's wartime imagined community as a proud nation of sea-faring peoples, and thus destined to repel any threat of a Nazi invasion, was maximised across summer and autumn 1940. During his address to the House of Commons on 18 June, Churchill reminded the nation that when "Napoleon lay at Boulogne for a year with his flat-bottomed boats and his grand army, he was told by someone 'There are bitter weeds in England'". In the days of Napoleon, Churchill continued, "the same wind which would have carried his transports across the Channel might have driven away the blockading fleet" (*Hansard*, 1940, June 18). British media agencies quickly took hold of this language and internalised it for their own use. The *Dundee Courier* (1940, June 25, p.24) wrote that "for a people defending themselves in an island fortress we are the most comfortable in all history", and that Nazi propaganda could never sow the seeds of mistrust amongst the seafaring people of the British Isles.

Britain's standing as the 'island fortress in the sea' was at its strongest when demonstrating its control of the English Channel. In mid-June, the Chiefs of Staff Committee outlined Britain's defence strategy against the threat of invasion, proposing that "every effort should be made to man the coast defences" in attempt to establish "sea-control". Concluding that the English Channel can only be "successfully crossed if the sea is smooth", the report states that rough seas and strong winds would be an "advantage to Britain", therefore it would be unlikely for Nazi forces to undertake a successful cross-Channel invasion (The National Archive, 1940, May 29). Indeed, the logistics of successfully crossing the twenty-two miles of sea was at the forefront of Britain's 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign. *The Sphere* (1940, July 13, pp.50-51) emphasised the dual strategy of Britain's coastal defences and the complexities of Nazi landing craft effectively navigating the treacherous stretch of sea. Although these forces might be successful under favourable conditions, the editorial argued, any flotilla facing adverse circumstances "might meet grave disaster".

By autumn 1940, the difficulties of mounting a cross-Channel invasion had become clearer to both military experts and the British people. At the height of invasion fears in September, war correspondent Walter Whitman (1940) insisted that "the heavy tides and difficult opposing currents" would spell disaster for Nazi forces. The continuous stream of publicity demonstrating the "dangerous moods" of the English Channel prompted editors at *The Sphere* (1940, September 28, p. 406) to argue that the unpredictable "change in the wind" that would certainly "not be kind to the unstable flat bottomed craft, heavily laden with men and equipment, which the Germans intend to use for invasion" bolstered British resolve and resilience. According to experts, the editorial concluded, the many "moods of the English Channel when it is whipped up into an angry motion by the wind and the tide" illustrate "the problems to be faced by an invader by sea".

Conclusion

What impact, if any, did the language and imagery of the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign have on Britain's ability to mitigate the threat of advancing Nazi forces? When the Chiefs of Staff Committee paused in June 1941 to reflect on Britain's ability to withstand the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion, they demonstrated (whether inadvertently or purposely) that it was the main themes of the 'Island Fortress' propaganda construct that broke Hitler's will and saved Britain from conquest:

In June last year our outlook was far from bright; France had been crushed, and although we had succeeded in withdrawing our armies, their equipment was lost with the result that we were then compelled to rely upon our Navy and Air Force for the defence of these islands. Our confidence in our Navy and Air Force did not prove misplaced, and when the German High Command found that they could not operate their aircraft over the Channel and south coast by day... the attempt at invasion was abandoned and with bitter disappointment Hitler followed the example of Napoleon and turned his armies to the East (The National Archive, 1941, June 4).

Summer 1940 marked a period of uncertainty and extreme anxiety for the British people, who were subjected to intense German attacks, while constantly fearing the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion. The 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign helped rally the British people around the themes of courage, resistance and heritage to bolster national morale and individual steadfastness. At the heart of these representations was Britain's long-standing maritime traditions and institutions. Yet the current body of literature examining Britain's 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign tends to focus on the language and imagery of 'Deep England' to explain how Britain's wartime planners rallied the British people against the threat of a cross-Channel Nazi invasion. However, evidence gathered for the purpose of this study demonstrates why it is also important to consider Britain's geographical advantage as an island nation and its relationship with the sea to fully understand the nature of Britain's wartime imagined national community. The analysis of this conclusion is the result of three key findings when examining the effect the 'Island Fortress' construct had on repelling the threat of invasion. First, wartime planners and officers at the MOI and BBC immediately recognised the value of these types of representations and deployed them as part of the wider wartime national narrative. Second, media sources disseminated these representations and accounts in newspapers across the country. Last, these images were absorbed by the British people and reproduced as their own, thus providing new ways to examine Britain's 'Island Fortress' campaign outside the framework of 'Deep England'. Taken together, the 'Island Fortress' propaganda campaign played a major role in shaping Britain's wartime culture and contributed greatly to its position as an island nation that boasts a long and storied relationship with the sea.

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Dettman: "Our Island Fortress"

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