

## **Fields of Battle: UK Government and Public Attitudes to Sport in the Second World War**

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## **Abstract**

The Second World War, according to a British Government report, applied a 'knockout blow' to sport. This, the same Home Intelligence correspondent wrote, was due to lack of preparation by sports bodies for the conflict - an extraordinary example of buck passing in January 1940 considering that the military fiascos looming. This paper will look at Government and public attitudes to sport between 1939 and 1945 by examining Cabinet papers and the Mass Observation and Home Intelligence files at the University of Sussex. These trace the journey from where sport was halted in the earliest days of the war - sometimes at the behest of governing bodies, on other occasions due to lack of resources such as blackout material - to it becoming an 'essential ingredient in bolstering domestic morale'.

## **Key Words**

Sport, Morale, Second World War, Public Opinion

## **Introduction**

The outbreak of the Second World War brought sport in Britain to a halt. The threat of air attacks was considered too high to allow mass-spectator gatherings and, in any case, football, cricket and sport in general, glorious irrelevances at the best of times, seemed particularly trivial when young men were going to die fighting Nazi Germany. The Football Association declared on 8 September 1939 that all football except that organised by the armed forces was suspended until official notice to the contrary; the West Indies cricket team stopped its tour of Britain five matches early and the MCC tour of India scheduled for 1939-40 was cancelled<sup>1</sup>; golf's Ryder Cup, due for November at Ponte Vedra in Jacksonville, Florida, was scrapped; and plans for the 1940 Olympics scheduled for Helsinki were halted.

This blanket curfew was in line with the entertainment industry as a whole in the UK because all cinemas and theatres were closed as soon as war was declared (Mass Observation, FR 24) on 3 September and began to open again only when the authorities quickly realised this was an over-reaction. This rowing back of regulations extended to sport and on 21 September the Home Office agreed to allow a revised programme of regional football as long as it did not interfere with national service or industry. The ban on other sports was also lifted, although many did not have the financial or structural means to resume. Thirty Rugby Union teams, usually based around universities or hospitals, played every week, cricket was reduced to charity and inter-services games and golf, tennis and athletics came to a virtual halt. The All England Club at Wimbledon became a decontamination centre.

This paper will study government and public attitudes to sport in the Second World War, using primary sources to explore the importance of leisure in the British

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<sup>1</sup> The England team toured under the name of MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club) until 1976-77.

fabric, in terms of national and local identity and shared entertainment and experience. It will also investigate the dilemma that faced the authorities, who felt the need to provide an environment where diversions from the fear and tedium of war could be provided, but at a level that was appropriate in the dangerous and stricken circumstances. The lurch from a complete ban on sport and entertainment in the autumn of 1939 to limited access in a matter of days suggests this balance was difficult to achieve and this paper will argue that the public reaction suggests it was permanently elusive.

## **Method**

The role of sport in the Second World War is largely neglected by historians, an omission that is not surprising given the significance of other events, but entertainment was a key element in maintaining morale at home in the UK between 1939 and 1945 and for troops serving overseas. This paper attempts to address this relative lacuna, via the Mass Observation and Home Intelligence files at the University of Sussex. Minutes from the UK Government's War Cabinet meetings at the National Archives are also studied. A search of the Mass Observation archives from 3 September 1939, the day war was declared, and 15 August 1945, VJ Day, using the filters 'sport' and 'file reports', uncovered 126 entries. Most of these contained only passing references, for example statistics regarding use of stadia for non-sporting activity, but it is perhaps an indication of the importance of recreation in the minds of the authorities that Home Intelligence, who monitored morale on the Home Front for the British Government, produced three major reports with 'sport' in their title within the first four months of the war and, in total, five were written between October 1939 and April 1942. These were analysed at length, along with others that dealt comprehensively with sport and leisure, charting a journey from simplistic assessments of the impact of the hostilities on

professional and amateur leisure to the gauging of public attitudes to sport and the implications of the wartime restrictions on the public mood, employment, and the future of recreation in Britain. Complementing these reports were the contributions of Mass Observation's voluntary diarists, which were frequently scant in detail, the 69 entries recovered using the filters 'football', 'cricket', 'rugby' and 'boxing' usually being references to the attending of sporting events. The more opinionated and detailed entries have been included. In addition, the Cabinet papers in the National Archives were studied, using the same dates and the filters, 'sport', 'football', 'cricket', 'rugby', 'golf' and 'racing'. Much of the material referred to employment statistics, but from 1944 attention turned to the challenges of the post-war environment.

### **'Undesired and inappropriate'**

The importance of sport in the national consciousness in the 1930s was demonstrated by Hill and Williams (1996) in a painstaking analysis of leisure statistics in the north of England. They found that on the eve of the Second World War the Lancashire town of Bolton had 155 cricket teams and 127 football teams (63 of which were church or chapel based) while Sunderland, in the north east had 121 cricket clubs and 142 football teams. These numbers were compiled from English regions, but were indicative, local and regional sporting preferences notwithstanding, of cities, towns and villages across Britain and the sudden withdrawal of these avenues of diversion by the government in September 1939 had a profound effect. Rippon (2007) wrote that the Football Association's eagerness to halt matches had its roots in the First World War when the game continued for a season and provoked accusations that 'everyone connected to the game had been denounced as both unpatriotic and unproductive' (pp. 15-16). The government later criticised this decision, as will be shown below, but in September 1939 it matched the prevailing mood. The *Daily Mail*, for example, stated on the day

after war was declared: 'For the moment all sport has been brought to a halt. The concentration of Britain's whole effort on winning the war makes its continuance undesired and inappropriate' (Freeman, 1939, p. 10). This soon changed, as Kendall (1972, p. 52), observed, writing that when no bombs fell and there was no news of military action 'it became clear, even to government officials, that the needless tension might quickly destroy national morale' and leisure activities resumed, albeit a long way short of pre-war levels.

Freethy (2006, p. 168) asserted that 'professional soccer and cricket teams soon faded into memory', which was over emphatic particularly in regards to the former. Association football proved to be surprisingly resilient, overcoming initial relative indifference from the public – which is dealt with at length in the Home Intelligence reports – and logistical problems, but by 1944 a crowd of 85,000 watched a southern cup final between Charlton Athletic and Chelsea at Wembley (Rippon, 2007). Many football grounds were commandeered by the Home Office, including Arsenal's Highbury, which was turned into a first aid post and Air Raid Precaution Centre, Bolton Wanderers' Burnden Park, which became a store for rations, and Preston North End's Deepdale pitch, which became a holding camp for German prisoners of war. Some grounds suffered bomb damage, most seriously Old Trafford where the main stand and much of the terracing were destroyed by bombs, and Manchester United had to play at Manchester City's Maine Road stadium until August 1949 (Hodgson, 1977).

Players were unavailable due to military call-ups, travel was restricted and the falls in attendance meant that, for some clubs, continuing to play was financially unviable. Football was played in eight regional leagues by players whose weekly wages were reduced from £8 to 30 shillings (£1.50, C\$ 2.52) and, initially, before crowds limited to 8,000 (15,000, where there was a capacity of 60,000) (Mass Observaton, FR

13). The risk of air raids also had unfortunate consequences, Longmate (2002) writing that some matches started two hours late, had a prolonged break in the middle or were brought to a premature halt, the score at the time being recorded as the result. He continued:

Even worse for the soccer enthusiast was the unpredictable behaviour of his favourite team. The places of called-up players were filled by anyone available, including spectators. This produced such strange results as 'Brighton and Hove Albion 0 – Norwich City 18'. The Brighton team consisted of five of its own players, the two Norwich reserves and five soldiers recruited from the crowd (p. 463).

All clubs had to rely on 'guest' players and clubs close to military bases had an unprecedented choice, including Aldershot who, according to Holt (Addison and Jones, 2007, p. 111), 'never had another team like the wartime side'. The internationals borrowed from the nearby army camp included England's centre-forward Tommy Lawton, who scored six goals in a memorable 9-1 beating of Luton Town. The fall of Singapore in February 1942 also caused a shortage of rubber that had a knock-on effect on football bladders, which were considered non-essential. Goal nets were also in short supply (Rippon, 2007).

County cricket came to a halt. Lancashire suggested a regional league including the minor counties, but, according to Birley (1999, p. 265), 'the MCC declined to take the matter further'. In any case, Old Trafford, Lancashire's principal venue, was incapacitated by bombs (Searle, Edwards, Lorimer & Hardcastle) in 1940 and 1941. The Oval in Kennington, London, was commandeered for use as a prisoner of war camp 'awaiting prisoners who never came' (Birley, 1999, p. 263) while *Wisden* (Whitaker, 1940) observed a Lord's brimming with sandbags and a Long Room stripped bare. One Northampton player recalled his horror at seeing: 'Cricket pitches bulldozed to make way for air raid shelters. To me, a cricketer, it seemed at the time to be a gigantic act of vandalism' (Longmate, 2002, p. 464).

Golf was restricted as many courses were used by the military and fairways were littered with pill boxes, trenches, minefields and anti-aircraft batteries. Turnberry, now an Open Championship course on the Firth of Clyde in south-west Scotland, was turned into an airfield, while Flotta, an 18-hole course built in the First World War by Royal Navy sailors in Scapa Flow, was revived briefly before becoming among the many that became abandoned never to emerge again (BBC, 2014). Even where golf continued special laws had to be introduced, Richmond Golf Club, for example, introducing seven temporary rules after the course was bombed in 1940 including: 'A player whose stroke is affected by the simultaneous explosion of a bomb may play another ball from the same place with a one stroke penalty.' This attracted worldwide attention, including that of William Joyce, Lord Haw-Haw, who broadcast to Britain from Berlin: 'By means of these ridiculous reforms the English snobs try to impress the people with a kind of pretended heroism. They can do so without danger, because, as everyone knows, the German Air Force devotes itself only to the destruction of military targets and objectives of importance to the war effort.' (Richmond Golf Club, 2018). Garfield (1998, p. 263)), citing a Glaswegian, Pam Ashford, who visited Renfrewshire, wrote: 'The golf course... is covered with trenches for the paratroopers to do their practising. The golfers continue golfing and don't half fume when their balls fall into the trenches.'

Rugby League players had their wages cut by more than 80 per cent and sports that usually took place in the evening, such as speedway and greyhound racing, had to switch to Saturday afternoons, with dire financial consequences. Kendall (1972, p. 55) wrote that horse racing meetings were particularly handicapped by a Saturday-only allowance that extended to the end of 1941, noting that the National Hunt meeting at Cheltenham, 'which normally would last two days, was thus spread over two weeks'.



Starved of a regular diet of sport, the public turned to other pursuits. Clarke, 1997) recorded that book sales, particularly paperbacks, rose and borrowing from libraries increased, going from 247 million in 1939 to 359 million in 1953 (Butler and Sloman, 1975). The *Manchester Guardian* (1940) reported that the number of books borrowed by young people in Manchester in November 1940 rose to 79,020, an increase of 25,790 compared to November 1939. The total number of books issued in the city was 422,113, a rise of 49,150 on the previous year and a record for any November. Newspaper circulations rose – the daily figure for the national press from 9.9 million in 1937 to 15.4 million 10 years later ((HMSO, 1949) – and cinema audiences grew 58 per cent from 19 million in 1939 to more than 30 million in 1945 (Aldgate and Richards, 1994). The most significant increase, however, came in the radio audience. The BBC, the only home-based broadcaster in Britain during the war, expanded its staff from 4,800 in September 1939 to 11,663 in March 1944, trebled its output in terms of hours, increased its transmitter power five times, and expanded its foreign language services from 10 to 45 in 1943 (Briggs, 1985). By 1944 the BBC's 9 pm news programme was estimated to reach 43 to 50 per cent of the population and the BBC recorded its audience at 34 million (out of a population of 48 million).<sup>2</sup> Less cerebrally, the sense of living for today in case there was no tomorrow, was marked by an increase in sexual activity (Hylton, 2001) and an uptake in sales of alcohol and tobacco. Home Intelligence quoted a 'a young middle-class man': 'Years ago I used to run but I had to give up when I started smoking a lot,' (Mass Observation, FR 698) and his route of escape from the tedium of war was not isolated one. The War Cabinet minutes of 31 July 1944 stated that consumption of tobacco rose 17 per cent in the United Kingdom

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<sup>2</sup> The scale of licence evasion meant the true figure could have been as high as 40 million (Nicholas, 1996).

from 1939 despite a rise in price from one shilling (5 UK pence or 8.4 Canadian cents) per packet of 20 cigarettes to two shillings and four pence (12 pence/20 cents).

Consumption of beer, described as ‘depreciated in quality’, had risen seven per cent. It also noted that the total expenditure on alcohol and tobacco exceeded £1 billion, which was only slightly less than the UK’s total food bill (CAB/66/53/19).

### **Government Opinion: ‘The entertainment of millions’**

Carruthers (2000, p. 55) stated that ‘munitions of the mind’ were an integral part of total war – where civilians were brought into the front line along with military personnel – and a pre-requisite for this was good morale. The War Cabinet (CAB/65/25/26) emphasised that ‘recreation was essential for those taking their share in the war effort’ and it is an indicator of the priority placed on sport that the first Home Intelligence report on it was written on 29 October 1939 (Mass Observation, FR 6), only eight weeks after the declaration of war and with the British Expeditionary Force still being shipped to and deployed in France. The report comprised six A4 pages and the author was indicated only by the initials H. J. N. It underlined the importance of sport stating that it ‘played a tremendous part in the stabilization of English social life’, and that it was ‘the entertainment of millions’. It also conceded that war had ‘brought darkness and bewilderment’ to every part of the sports world, listing eight causes for the disorganisation including fear of bombardment, requisition of sports grounds, the calling up of ‘well-known stars’, small crowds leading to ‘insufficient funds to pay salaries’ and the cancellation of ‘ordinary fixtures’. The actions of the Football Association were singled out for criticism, in particular the decisions (described as ‘sometimes judged rash’) to suppress all contracts between players and to cut wages from £8 a week to £1.50. The author demonstrated the impact of this and the lack of

finance generally by citing the example of a footballer, Bryn Jones, who cost Arsenal £14,500 (a British record), but who had been forced to leave the club – described as ‘the richest in the world’ – and return to Wales because it could not afford his expenses.

Sports were addressed individually beginning with football. It was noted that England had been divided into eight leagues: South A (North London), South B (South London to the South Coast), Midland (Luton to Leicester), East Midland (Nottingham to Sheffield), Western, North West, South West, North East. These comprised 80 clubs, a reduction of 16 on the pre-war number in the professional English leagues. Rugby Union was described as being ‘in full swing’ and quoted J. P. Jordan of the *Sunday Despatch*. ‘Wartime rugby has got into its stride and in London a large crowd at Old Deer Park on Saturday emphasised the public demand for the game.’ The *Sunday Despatch* was also cited regarding horse racing:

For the past six weeks racing has been forgotten... Stables occupied by famous racehorses have been emptied for other purposes; employees have had to turn their hands to sterner labour; large numbers of young thoroughbreds have been painlessly put to death; stagnation has reigned everywhere.

Snooker and billiards received a mention as the only sports ‘untouched’ by war. ‘No fixture was changed and Joe Davis is still making century breaks’.

That first Home Intelligence report was a taster for a more comprehensive 30-page review, also by H. J. N., six weeks later on 13 December 1939 (Mass Observation, FR 13), which also began by stressing the importance of sport, describing it as the biggest English industry. ‘The amount of money spent in betting alone each year is more than the amount of money spent in the largest staple industry, building, and much larger than the nation’s milk bill.’ It added:

Sports like football have an absolute major effect on the morale of the people, and one Saturday afternoon of League matches could probably do more to affect people’s spirits than the recent £50,000 government poster campaign urging for cheerfulness, even if it were repeated six times over and six times better.

The role of football as a diversion explained why the report was so concerned about falling attendances, issuing statistics (Table 1) that showed an 80 per cent fall on peacetime gates:

**Table 1: Total attendances at all First, Second and Third Division football matches**

It listed a number of reasons for this fall, including: men had been called up; overtime in important industries such as munitions; Home Defence duties; unemployment and falls in wages; weekend visits to evacuated families; worry and stress; and travel and attendance restrictions. This analysis was informed by a survey taken in November 1939 that revealed 43 per cent of habitual sports goers or players no longer had Saturday afternoons free and 25 per cent who were deterred by the logistical problems and family and financial worries. A football supporter described as ‘middle-aged and working class’ was quoted in response to the question ‘why didn’t you go this week?’: ‘I didn’t feel like it. I don’t take any interest now. There’s too much to occupy one’s mind – family affairs, increased work, blackout, different conditions altogether.’ The report also stated:

The war broke the spell of sport... The magic habit of recurring matches and pools and all the other elaborate weekly cycle brought out in the press, was broken. As anthropologists know, the breaking of an established habit which recurs at regular intervals can have deep repercussions.

The author noted that some sports had been affected directly by the blackout. Bright lights, necessary for evening fixtures, could not be countenanced and many sports had to be switched to Saturday afternoons, providing rival attractions to the normal sporting fixtures. Speedway, described as a ‘primary working-class sport’, had been ‘killed stone dead’ by its inability to move indoors while a lack of money – and demand for cloth – had brought table-tennis to a near complete halt. ‘Many table-tennis clubs, with their big areas of window lighting,’ it read, ‘cannot afford a proper blackout and have simply

closed down for lack of blackout material.’ Some sports, it commented bleakly, were keeping going only because they believe that if they stopped ‘other sports will claim their adherents’.

There were no answers to combat the fall in interest, and another report (this time anonymous) that appeared a month later also lacked solutions (Mass Observation, FR 18). Instead, the anonymous author criticised sports bodies and organisers:

The general effect of the war on sport was a knock-out blow, a complete scattering of the sport world to a standstill... There are many reasons why the war knocked sport out, but the most conspicuous one was that people did not prepare for war, did not in fact realise fully the possibility of war till it came.

Given that Winston Churchill had been berating the government since 1933 for its lack of preparations for war (Gilbert, 2011), that historians such as Adamthwaite (1983) have argued that the British public had been bracing for war since 1938, and that the ill-fated Norwegian campaign that would bring down Neville Chamberlain’s premiership was a matter of weeks away, this was hypocritical and unfair. The report, like the previous one, looked at the more popular sports individually, beginning with football. The new regional football competitions, it reported, ‘utterly failed to attract a crowd’ before adding ‘one is amazed at the low crowds, sometimes as low as 2,000 a match’. The report also concluded that footballers were insufficiently paid: ‘They can no longer live on their earnings and therefore have to take on other work.’ This was a theme that also touched upon in the section on Rugby League that acknowledged that players had been ‘severely hit’ by a pay cut from an average of £6 a week to £1 a match. George Sinfield of the *Daily Worker* was quoted: ‘From what I gather round and about the Rugby League world, the war-time game is branded as sissy stuff. And the players hate the sight of it.’ The ‘sissy stuff’ remark indicated a lack of robustness, but as the fall in wages required players to be physically fit to earn money elsewhere, a decline in

intensity was probably inevitable. If a reference to League as ‘the other rugby’ suggested the author had prejudices, the section on Rugby Union reinforced it:

It must be remembered that Rugby [Union] appeals to a section of the community which is likely to become war-minded, and to scrap everything to show some spirit of sacrifice. As a result most of the clubs closed down, players joined up and Rugby was shelved.”

It noted that, however, that while many clubs were running at a loss, the sport was thriving at university level and in hospitals. ‘So great a success was the unofficial Varsity Rugby match it has been decided to hold a return game at Oxford.’

No sport tested the government’s need to find an appropriate level for professional sporting events more than horse racing. It was the leisure activity that provoked most opposition from the public (Mass Observation, FR 1229) and was the subject of a memorandum presented by Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, to the War Cabinet on 9 June 1944, three days after D Day (CAB 66/51/12). It was reported that the Flat had been reduced from 330 days pre-war, to 152 in 1940 and 67 in 1943, while steeplechases, 270 days in the year before the war, had stopped all together. Morrison said that racing had ‘suffered greater reductions than any other comparable sports’ because of the problems of transporting horses and spectators and recommended no further restrictions even though this might cause ‘a minor Parliamentary storm’. As an aside, he added that, according to the Press, horse racing had resumed in Moscow, an indicator of turned events in the war as the German army had got within 20 kilometres of the Russian capital in 1941.

Restrictions to leisure activities such as horse racing inevitably meant that there were fewer jobs in the entertainment and sport sectors. The decision to make military service compulsory for every fit man between the ages of 18 and 41 meant that virtually every professional sportsman was called up, but many ancillary workers, particularly women, lost jobs. This was of concern to a government aware that morale would waver

if people were out of work and the War Cabinet of 7 December 1939 heard that unemployment on 15 November had fallen by 28,050 compared with 16 October, but this positive figure had been dragged down by entertainment and sport. Employment in these industries, it read, 'continues heavy', recording that the London area was 'suffering severely' (CAB/68/3/24). A report submitted to the Cabinet two months later (CAB/68/5/2) was more upbeat. London, it read, was showing renewed activity in the film industry and in the north-west 'girls' who had been discharged from the football pools companies 'seem to be finding fairly permanent employment'.

### **Public Opinion: 'An insult to the British worker'**

The British Government monitored domestic morale consistently throughout the war and sport was no exception. A report on newspaper readership in April 1941, (Mass Observation, 1941, FR682) that found that only four per cent of the 236 London respondents expressed an interest in sport, compared to 35 per cent in news and these findings were confirmed by a concurrent survey undertaken in north-west London in March and April 1941, the results of which formed a report on 15 May (Mass Observation, FR 698). It revealed that 69 per cent of respondents went to fewer sporting events than before the war; 26 per cent going the same amount; and five per cent went more. The anonymous author concluded that those going more than before the war were middle class people with the time and money to indulge in their favourite pastimes, while those attending the same were people whose jobs did not entail many extra hours. Participation was often restricted because of the closure of amateur sports clubs made homeless by the requisitioning of grounds, buildings and village halls. Conversely, only 11 per cent of those interviewed said they were less interested in sport than before the war compared to 48 per cent in November 1939. This allowed the author to conclude:

‘It is probably safe to suggest that the inactive sporting interests of a large section of the community remain only temporarily and often compulsorily in absence.’

The lingering wartime antipathy towards sport was confirmed in April 1942 with the publication of another survey (Mass Observation, FR 1229). It was taken earlier in the month with 50 men and 50 women being asked whether sport should be halted in wartime. The responses, in percentages, were:

**Table 2: Response to survey (percentages):**

Surprisingly given the priority the government had placed on leisure and entertainment, 75 per cent of interviewees (Men 68, Women 82) felt sport should be curtailed in some way, with women significantly anti-sport. Only 19 per cent of both sexes gave unqualified support. When this was broken down into individual sports, football was the most popular with a 14 per cent approval, while horse racing was most disapproved at 20 per cent. The report took these ratings and, converting football and racing to 100 for approval and disapproval respectively, compiled the following tables by applying the same multiple to other sports.

**Tables 3 and 4: Approval and Disapproval Ratings for Individual Sports**

The report stated that many people felt football should continue as a form of relaxation for the masses, but did not specify the ‘many’ as a figure and added the rider that matches should be played in the evening or at weekends to reduce the possibility of it affecting industrial efficiency. Horse racing was particularly unpopular because, according to the report, it was seen as the province of the rich, an opinion that could have also weighed against hunting and car racing. There were other subsidiary complaints against horse racing on the grounds of using petrol, food for the horses and the fact the sport was run principally for gambling purposes, sentiments that were



echoed in the reasons for disapproval of greyhound racing. The report quoted one interviewee: 'I think it's an insult to the British worker and to the British soldier to allow such events as horse racing, dog racing or any professional or so called sporting event. Stop them right away.'

The issue of fuel consumption in connection with sport was a recurring one, understandably when posters on railway stations were asking 'Is your journey really necessary?' (McKay, 2009). Herbert Morrison told the War Cabinet that public opinion was particularly offended by 'the large assemblies of motor cars at sports gatherings' (CAB/65/25/26), and the Home Secretary's opinion was not an isolated one. A reader's letter from P. Gardner Smith in *The Times* (1941, p. 5) bemoaned a cut in the petrol allowance as a hardship to country dwellers and those who needed their car for work. He/she called for a check on waste, adding:

Yesterday there was a race meeting at Newmarket and those of us who live in the district were edified by the spectacle of roads crowded by hundreds of motor-omnibuses and cars converging on Newmarket from a wide area. Many of the cars were of high power and thousands of gallons must have been consumed. To what end?

A year later an editorial in *The Times* (1942, p. 5) said that further restrictions on the private use of petrol 'will be warmly welcomed by public opinion', while recording the 'distaste' at the sight of a large number of cars being used for non-war activities. It continued: 'There is a sense of guilt about pleasures and luxuries in wartime that shows itself in attitudes to sporting events.' The April Home Intelligence report agreed that wastage of petrol was a key driver in those people wanting sport to be stopped, but also acknowledged a 'significant counter-trend' articulated by one interviewee: 'If the government can afford to issue it why should they quibble about its usage?' The report concluded that there was a widespread feeling that sport was necessary for relaxation, but called for greater clarity about what was acceptable.

The sense of guilt about pleasures and luxuries in wartime that shows itself in attitudes to sporting events... People are more and more wanting to be told quite definitely that they must not do certain things which they feel are incompatible with total war.

This sense of unease manifested itself in a reticence to gamble generally, but on the football pools in particular. Postal difficulties at the start of the war proved a deterrent to participation in the pools, as did the unheralded changes to the teams football clubs were fielding, but there was also a degree of 'war puritanism' (Mass Observation, FR 13) that precluded people's willingness to fill in a coupon. Why gamble on the pools when, for so many, continuing to live was a gamble in itself? Participation rates fell to 10 per cent of the pre-war level, bringing a further deterrent with reduced dividends. Littlewoods, Vernons and the other firms that formed the six biggest companies got together to form the Unity Pools, but even then the first prizes averaged £893 in the first four weeks of their existence compared to £17,334 in the first three weeks of November 1938 (Mass Observation, FR 13). Pools companies had to 'clear a considerable part of their staff' (Mass Observation, FR 6) and it was also noted that elsewhere in the gambling industry 'wealthy' bookmakers were left with 'no money at all'. The author had little sympathy for the latter, describing them as 'parasites'.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that the British government, after an initial ban, showed a level of interest in leisure that is perhaps surprising given its other priorities between 1939 and 1945. Analysis of the various documents reveals that ministers devoted substantial resources into monitoring sport because they and their advisors considered leisure to be a vital element in maintaining morale. It was, as the Home Intelligence report in October 1939 (Mass Observation, FR 6) summed up, the 'entertainment of millions' and there was anxiety in Whitehall that there was a resistance by those millions to

attending some of the matches. 'It has always been proved,' another report (Mass Observation, FR 18) read, 'that in war the public must have an outlet for their feelings, something to take their minds off the subject.' It described sport as 'a safety valve'.

Except, as this article has shown, there was a reluctance to use that safety valve. It was a Home Intelligence report that used the expression 'war puritanism', which it identified as a sense of guilt (although Durkheim would have attributed it to the *conscious collective* and Marx, probably, to a form of wartime socialism). This manifested as a 'wish for self-sacrifice and discomfort' (Mass Observation, FR 13) and the same report recorded the comments: 'There is a war on'; 'Why do you bother with sport?'; and 'This is no time for this sort of nonsense'. Another report on leisure (Mass Observation, FR 1632) reported that there was an extensive feeling that sport should not be available during the war. This reluctance was understandable given the anxieties nagging a British people fearing the bombs of the Blitz and worrying about the welfare of relatives enlisted in the armed forces. Newspapers, particularly those described as 'upper class', recognised this and sharply reduced its coverage of sports events, the *Sunday Times* cutting its coverage by 85 per cent and the *Observer* 84 per cent. Even the *News of the World*, which had a predominantly working class audience and the largest sports section, cut its coverage by 65 per cent. This lack of coverage in the press, which was the main source of news during the war, had an 'out of sight, out of mind' effect and in turn depressed the interest in sport.

Despite the public's reticence to embrace sport during the conflict, all the government reports expected a change of mood after the war. In July 1944 the War Cabinet heard that the number of jobs in the entertainment and sports industries would rise from 10,000 to 132,000 (CAB/66/52/12) and this proved to be prescient. Even in May 1941 a young motor-cyclist bemoaned his inability to practise his hobby, saying 'It

makes me long for peace so... I can enjoy myself again' (Mass Observation FR 698) and the ceasefire in 1945 was the uncorking of a bottle. Sport enjoyed an unprecedented boom in the post-war years, cricket, boxing, horse racing, greyhounds, speedway and ice hockey enjoying hugely increasing audiences, along with theatres and cinemas. By 1948 23 per cent of the British population were playing sport and 53 per cent were watching it (Mass Observation, FR 3045). Football, however, had the biggest gains and nine of the 10 best total attendances for the Football League occurred between the 1946-47 and 1954-55 seasons, the pinnacle being 1948-9 with 41.2 million (Taylor, 2013). As Rippon (2007, p. 230) wrote 'The thirst for a return to normality provided football with the perfect opportunity to cash in'.

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