



Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War, 1939–1945 by Alan Allport.

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Browned Off and Bloody-Minded, by historian Alan Allport (Syracuse Univ.), is a compelling, painstakingly sourced inquiry into the British Army during the Second World War. Specifically, Allport studies how 3.5 million “ordinary Britons, ... the unlikeliest of citizen-soldiers, ... responded to, and were shaped by, their years of encounter with the Army, ... an institution with practices, assumptions, and an ethical code utterly different from that which the majority of them had ever known before” (xviii). He intends to bridge what he identifies as a gap between the social and military histories of Britain’s experience of the Second World War, and “to engage the two in a productive way” (xvi–xvii).

With this analytical focus, Allport argues that “the whole story of the British Army from Dunkirk till V-J Day was ... its grappling with its own Browned-Offness” (xxiv), that is, the frustration felt toward the Army’s apparently hidebound institutional practices and cultural norms. His book comprises four thematic parts within a chronological framework that traces the British Army’s transformation from a small imperial constabulary of long-service professionals to a massive, conscript-based force that helped ensure the Allies’ victory over the Axis powers.

Part I, “Regulars,” outlines the intellectual climate and institutional culture of the prewar Army and its doctrinal, technological, and attitudinal unreadiness to fight the Second World War. Wary, in the traumatic aftermath of the Great War, of making another “continental commitment,” the Army mutated in the 1920s and 1930s into a force dedicated largely to colonial policing. The expertise accumulated in 1914–18 in combined arms warfare atrophied and died out. Doctrinal backwardness went hand-in-hand with retrogressive sociocultural norms and worldviews. In a country rapidly shedding the last vestiges of Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities, the Army remained an island of traditional values and attitudes ill-suited to a Britain characterized by a burgeoning mass consumer culture and major improvements in health and educational standards.

The Army’s paradigm of paternalistic relations between officers and enlisted men and stress on “tribal” regimental loyalties were alien to Britons coming of age after World War I. Unlike their fathers, who had so willingly bled and died for “King and Country,” young British men often questioned “the verities of traditional patriotism” embodied in Church, Crown, and Parliament, and lacked automatic deference to authority.

The gulf between military life and civil society went beyond matters of training, equipping, arming, feeding, housing, and clothing a mass of citizen-soldiers to the greater challenge of getting conscripts to conform to the Army’s ways, the subject of Part II, “Civvies.” The men who flooded Army personnel depots after the introduction of conscription in April 1939

were not the kind of soldiers who [sic] the Army traditionally relied on in peacetime at all—the eighteen- or nineteen-year-old semi-literate boys from the social margins, habituated to institutional discipline, pathetically loyal to anyone who showed them the slightest kindness or affection,

long inured to hardship.... [T]he wartime Army volunteers and conscripts were ... generally far better educated and from more socially respectable backgrounds than regulars. (75)

They bristled at the Army's "enduring obsession with drill and spit-and-polish to the neglect of other duties" (92) and resented the officially-sanctioned, conventional techniques that long-service NCOs, many of them jumped-up privates from the peacetime Army, used during weapons training and tactical instruction (94). Exacerbating the antagonism between the Army and its new soldiers, Allport argues, was its institutional image, which could not compete with that of its sister services in the popular imagination:

The Army had always been the wooden spoon service so far as the public was concerned. The Navy had centuries of victorious tradition to play on: Jack Tar—that "apogee of national virility"—had always been regarded by civilians as a more wholesome fellow than his disreputable cousin Tommy Atkins. As for the RAF, before the war the newest of the three service branches had cleverly fostered a "highly self-conscious aura of modernity" about itself which gave it special glamor and sophistication. Its officer pilots were known for their noisy, swaggering braggadocio and well-cut azure uniforms. Its ground crewmen received higher wages, smarter kit and better prospects for post-service employment than soldiers. The RAF seemed to embrace an altogether more democratic attitude towards promotion and rewards than the Army, one in which mechanical competence mattered a lot more than the school you had gone to or whether you could recite a litany of regimental honours. (71-72)

Fortunately not all British senior officers clung to the past: Gen. Sir Ronald Forbes Adam, for example, emerges as an unlikely hero in Allport's narrative. Physically the epitome of a stodgy "Colonel Blimp," Adam served as the Army's adjutant-general from 1941 until 1946. Appearances notwithstanding, he understood what many of his peers did not, namely, that an army of citizen-soldiers could not be trained, commanded, and managed in the same fashion as a force of long-term peacetime volunteers. Adapting the methods of civilian social reformers to the Army's cultural milieu, Adam made an array of changes "to shake up Army personnel selection, promotion, welfare arrangements and current affairs education" (113). Despite the opposition of traditionally-minded officers, he reduced desertion rates, streamlined training, and increased the quality of newly commissioned officers while "broadening the social pool of [officer] candidates" (112).

As important as Adam's reforms were, "change and adaptation within the Army was not just a story of diktats handed down from Whitehall" (113). Soldiers reached their own accommodations with Army culture within the disciplinary confines of military service. Army life "was not just about confrontation and submission" (118). Many civilians in uniform discovered they not only enjoyed soldiering but were good at it. They also valued the compensations of army life, from the acquisition of practical skills to the camaraderie of one's platoon- or squad-mates. Most importantly, by late 1942, many British soldiers were receiving orders to do what they had either volunteered or been conscripted to do: serve in combat overseas. Despite "no end of privations, regrets, terrors, ... it at least it felt like real soldiering" (127).

Allport explores the varieties of overseas duty and combat in Parts III, "Crusaders," and IV, "Killers." His discussion of British troops' response to the stresses of combat reflects the work of many other scholars on soldiers' motivations and tactical-level leadership. But his exploration of these issues, in the context specifically of the British Army of the Second World War evinces an unprecedented degree of analytical nuance and empirical detail.

The author concludes by considering changes in soldiers' complex relationship with the Army following their return home and reintegration into civilian life, a subject that he has masterfully

examined elsewhere.¹ Ironically for a generation of men who had bridled at their initial encounters with military culture, World War II veterans found that demobilization did not mean personal liberation from the Army's clutches. Rather, it was "the point at which it all started to go wrong, the moment at which the confidence and satisfaction that had welled up inside them during the war years would begin to hemorrhage out, never to be replaced" (314). By the 1960s, as Britain underwent intense social and cultural changes, "ageing ex-soldiers ... concluded that it was the absence of those same military virtues which they had so heartily disliked during war ... that was causing the country to go to the dogs" (320).

Alan Allport has certainly met his two principal objectives in writing *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded*. By contextualizing military service in the broader framework of the Second World War's impact on British society and culture, he highlights the porous barriers between home front and battle front, and makes a compelling case for a closer integration of these two analytical categories. One hopes historians will adopt his fruitful methodology in their studies of other nations' experiences of societal and military mobilization.

1. Viz., *Demobbed: Coming Home after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2010).