The pairing ‘war and reconstruction’ is a central idea in the social democratic historiography of Britain between 1939 and 1951. The linking reflects the implicit view that plans for reconstruction were important during the war itself, and indeed that society was being reconstructed before 1945. Reconstruction is taken to be about the building of a society very different from that of 1939, indeed one more like that of 1945. In this story the events of 1939, and especially of 1940, inaugurated a *People’s War*, which put Britain on the *Road to 1945* and thus to the *People’s Peace*, to give the titles of relevant and famous books. It is hardly surprising then that we have ‘the triumph of social democracy’, or the rise of the ‘benign state’ used as chapter headings for periods covering both the war and post-war years. Tellingly, an account of the British state which took seriously the fiscal-military state of the eighteenth century gives Britain a ‘Social-Service State’ between 1880 and 1939, while the period 1939 to 1979 is covered in a chapter on ‘Total War and Cradle-to-Grave Welfare’. Such ideas are of course linked to the suggestion that the 1940 coalition embodied a new consensus which persisted despite party government after the war; it has a political as well as a policy dimension, one in which the Left becomes more important as the welfare state was being forged in a new Britain where the People were central.

1 I am grateful to Waqar Zaidi, the editors, and referees for their perceptive comments on earlier versions. Many thanks also to Adam Tooze.
Although older assessments of the achievements of the welfare state (and of consensus) in this period have been much criticized, the welfare state itself remains central to historical understanding.⁵ Even self-conscious products of the cultural and imperial turns run on the familiar tracks of this welfarism.⁶ Yet there are good reasons to reject welfarism as the central feature of the history of the state and of Britain more generally in this period. Indeed we need to reassess the whole history and historiography of the period. Alan Milward made a powerful and under-appreciated point when he noted a generation ago that his fellow historians of wartime Britain exaggerated domestic social change and downplayed economic change, especially its international aspects.⁷ The same might be said of the post-war period. Among many missing dimensions to the story are two big issues. The first is the transformation of military and military industrial capacities of the British state and nation, not only in war but in peace, in short the rise of the warfare and industrial state. The second is the new importance of economic nationalism, especially from 1945.⁸ By focusing on each, and particularly the latter, I show that there are important but neglected continuities and discontinuities in 1945, as well as 1939/40 and in the early 1950s.⁹ This leads also to the need to distinguish quite radically between the wartime and post-war periods, and thus to rethink not only war but reconstruction.

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⁶ A recent example is James Vernon, Hunger: A Modern History (Cambridge, Mass., 2007)


⁸ Alan Milward and George Brennan, Britain’s Place in the World: A Historical Enquiry into Import Controls, 1945–60 (London, 1996) is a key contribution.

Welfare

There is much to be said for the notion that the British state was a ‘welfare state’, and from well before the Second World War. In the interwar years welfare expenditures were greater than warfare expenditures. There is, however, a poor correlation between historians’ claims for the subsequent rise of the welfare state and changes in welfare spending. Sidney Pollard cautioned long ago that: ‘In spite of a widespread belief to the contrary, Britain did not spend significantly more on the social services after 1948 than she did before 1939 apart from the retirement pension.’10 The growth in welfare spending was hardly enormous, though the figures are unclear. Tomlinson necessarily guesstimates social services expenditure by central government (excluding food subsidies) at £900 million in 1945/46 increasing to £1,265 million in 1950/51 including transfer payments.11 In the totemic case of health expenditure, there are no real-terms cross-war estimates of expenditure, which is in itself interesting. The estimated total public and private health spending is £150 million in the mid-1930s (about 3 per cent of GNP).12 That would have been worth around £300 million in the late 1940s, which suggests, since in the early years the NHS was spending around £400 million, a hardly revolutionary increase of about 25 per cent over a decade. Remarkably, plans for the NHS during the war involved expenditure estimates which were less (even without correction for inflation) than total 1930s health expenditure, and the early post-war plans appeared to envisage real terms expenditure that was just as niggardly.13 As is well known, no hospital was built in the late 1940s, and what expansion in capacity there was during and after the war might not have been enough to raise bed provision per capita.14

Indeed in many areas concerned with public services and infrastructure, the war saw a collapse in investment, with slow recuperation in the late 1940s, typically not reaching the levels of the 1930s. It was a case of reconstruction from huge wartime cutbacks, rather than raising the level above the

13 See Webster, Health Services, 133–4, though Webster does not appear to make the crucial correction for wartime inflation.
14 Tomlinson, Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy, 249.
supposedly disastrous 1930s. A key case was housing. Local authority house building at 83,000 in 1947 was less than in 1938/39 though higher than the 1935–38 average; it should be noted that private house building was a small fraction of what it had been in the 1930s (well over 200,000 houses per annum). By 1950 total house building was still one half of the late 1930s average, though state-funded building was now greater. Investment in school buildings did not return to 1938 levels until 1950. As Tomlinson points out, it took a very long time for the provisions of the 1944 Education Act to be felt on the ground. In many important areas, especially those concerned with welfare and infrastructure, the 1940s taken as a whole were an era of disinvestment. In other words, while there is an image of building over and above what was being done in 1939, in some areas it took till the 1950s to get back to what was happening in 1939.

Warfare

The most significant change in public expenditure between the interwar years and the war and post-war years was in defence expenditure. It increased twentyfold from 1938/39 to its wartime peak, while conventional civil expenditure (that undertaken under the usual parliamentary procedure) hardly changed through the war. While there were additional civil expenditures out of wartime votes of credit, they appear to have been limited to measures specific to the war, for example the Emergency Medical Service, the Ministry of Food, and evacuation. There was certainly no general improvement in welfare services. Although defence expenditure fell radically after the war, its level remained very much higher than before the war. In relation to GDP, it was about twice as great in the late 1940s as in 1935, with rearmament in the early 1950s it became three times as great. In 1953 defence took over 30 per cent of public expenditure (net of debt interest), while health and social security took 26 per cent. In the late 1940s, and even more so the early 1950s, the warfareness of state spending had increased compared to the 1930s. The welfare state rose around the war, but the warfare state rose even more. To put it another way, we are apt to forget the deep structural impact of the Cold War on post-war Britain.

One can tell a similar story about state employment. It seemed to be widely believed that it was the welfare state which was behind its rapid growth. Thus a 1950s study of the British civil service claimed that ‘The principal reason for

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17 Tomlinson, Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy, 243.
18 Votes of Credit, 1942–43 Cmd. 6363.
the inability to slash the British Civil Service as drastically as the critics demand is the flood of new responsibilities which have fallen on public offices since the war. The welfare state requires huge staffs of officials.19 Yet the same book provides a table showing that between 1938 and 1954 the non-industrial civil service grew by 292,000, of which 100,000 were due to the defence departments (the service and supply ministries concerned with supplying them with equipment). Only 42,000 went to the social services of all sorts. Of the remainder, 56,000 went to the Post Office, and 40,000 to trade, industry, and transport, leaving 54,000 for all other departments.20 The number of non-industrial civil servants in defence departments had been about 10,000 in 1914; it was 23,040 in 1935 and 135,270 in 1956.21 These figures underestimate the growth of the warfare state because they exclude (and most figures on state employment do) the vast army of industrial civil servants. In 1929 there were 122,000 ‘industrial’ workers in the civil service, a category which excluded the great majority of (‘manipulative’) postal workers.22 During the war half of all civil servants were industrial workers. In 1943 their number peaked at 738,000, with about 650,000 in defence departments.23 In 1957 there were a total of 418,300 industrial civil servants, of which 289,600 were in defence departments, a number which fell steadily to 154,200 by 1971.24 By 1957 40 per cent of all civil servants were in defence departments compared with 20 per cent of non-industrial civil servants; in this year there were about the same number of civil servants in the defence departments (423,000) as in the whole British state in 1929 (434,000).25 Here, again, the warfare state turns out to be by far the most significant area of growth of the civilian state. Yet we should not ignore the military servants of the state. By 1945 there were 4.5 million men in the armed services, and 0.4 million women.26 After the war force levels fell to 689,000 in 1950, and were

20 Campbell, Civil Service, 100.
22 Royal Commission on the Civil Service, Introductory factual memorandum relating to the Civil Service submitted by the Treasury, 1930.
23 Central Statistical Office, Statistical Digest of the War, (London, 1951), Table 32.
26 Statistical Digest of the War, Table, 9.
then pushed up to a peacetime peak of 872,000, before falling below 500,000 only in 1960. In the early 1930s the figure was around 320,000. Peacetime conscription had been introduced in 1939; after the war peacetime service remained, *increasing* from one year in 1947, to eighteen months from 1948 and to two years from 1950. No men were conscripted from the end of 1960, and the last conscripts left in 1963.\(^{27}\) It was not for nothing that for the twenty years between 1939 and 1959 the Ministry of Labour became the Ministry of Labour and National Service. By peacetime precedents, post-1945 Britain was extraordinarily militarized.

To the extent that high levels of post-war defence expenditures were noted in the standard history they were put down to an imperial hangover and/or the result of subservience to the USA in its new role as global policeman for capitalism. Such an interpretation went along with a picture of British forces being equipped with left-over material from the war. In fact British forces were re-equipped after the war and wartime levels of development and research expenditures kept up, with many new laboratories being built. One could get post-war investment in centres for the development of weapons of mass destruction, but not for new hospitals. The reason for the re-equipment was that the new modernized and large forces were kept in being to deal mainly with the Soviet Union in Europe, not for imperial policing purposes, or minor British operations overseas. The great rearmament programme of the early 1950s often misleadingly called ‘Korean War rearmament’, should be recognized as what it was: a building up the capacities of British forces in Britain and Europe, not those of the small numbers who fought in Korea.

**Economic nationalism**

Older approaches, as well as the recent imperial view, are apt to overstress the significance of empire to British history in both foreign relations and domestic history. Yet for the war and reconstruction eras empire is in some significant respects understated. The role of empire (formal and informal) in providing troops, military equipment, and general supplies, often for deferred payment (the sterling balances) is underplayed compared with relations with the USA. For the post-war years the proportion of British trade with empire was higher than in the age of high imperialism. The colonial empire became particularly important—Malaya for dollar exports and Africa as a potential source of many materials. There was a second very technically

\(^{27}\) On the internal politics of getting rid of conscription see, Martin S. Navias, ‘Terminating Conscription? The British National Service Controversy, 1955–1956’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24 (1989), 195–208. In the initial 1947 bill conscription was set at 18 months, but was reduced to one year.
oriented imperial occupation of Africa after the war, which went much fur-
ther than the Ministry of Food’s well-known ground-nut scheme. 28 But a
focus on empire can too easily disconnect Britain from the rest of the world,
and lead to a neglect of a supremely important change, the rise of economic
and political nationalism.

The import of any sort of manufactured goods was exceedingly difficult.
Very powerful import quotas, brought to light by Brennan and Milward, were
used with other tools to discriminate in favour of ‘strategic’ and modern
industries. 29 Through these and other measures industries Britain hardly
had before appeared, such as oil-refining. Before and during the war
Britain was the world’s largest importer of petroleum but it typically came
in refined. After the war big refineries were built by 1956 in Isle of Grain (BP),
Shell Haven (Shell), Stanlow (Shell), Fawley (Esso), Llandarcy (BP),
Heysham (Shell) and Grangemouth (BP). 30 Other examples abound: three
new plants making sulphuric acid (a hugely important chemical intermedi-
ate) from domestic anhydrite were built, to add to the one existing one; 31
watch-making and alarm-clock-making were established on a large scale, as
were the manufacture of photographic film base, and new kinds of colour
photographic film. 32 A heavy tractor industry was established, with first the
conversion of Sherman tanks into tractors called ‘Sherviks’ for the African
groundnut scheme, then the design and manufacture of Vickers Vigor trac-
tors, a case of tanks into tractors rather than swords into ploughshares. 33

28 Imperialism was, furthermore, forward looking. For a recent study following up on the
idea of a second imperial occupation after the war, one of technicians and researchers see
Sabine Clarke, ‘A Technocratic Imperial State? The Colonial Office and Scientific
Hodge, Triumph of the Expert—Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of
British Colonialism (Ohio, 2007).
29 Milward and Brennan, Britain’s Place in the World, 190–4.
30 Duncan Burn, ‘The Oil Industry’, in Duncan Burn (ed.), The Structure of British Industry,
31 In 1950 in Britain there was one anhydrite sulphuric acid plant (ICI Billingham). Of the
three new ones, one was built by ICI, and another was connected with ICI. W. B.
Reddaway ‘The Chemical Industry’ in Duncan Burn (ed.), The Structure of British
32 C. Glatt, ‘Reparations and the Transfer of Scientific and Industrial Technology from
Germany’, dissertation (European University Institute, 1994), vol. 3, 904–15. See also
(University of Cambridge, 1982),173–82.
And of course, huge efforts were made in civil aviation, deemed by many to be the key industry of the future. State purchases of manufactures were highly nationalistic: the purchase of non-British equipment was not only rare but controversial. More than this, state agencies were keen to support national technical development with public money to supply new British machines to British nationalized and national industries. Great techno-national initiatives led to new aero-engines and aircraft, both civil and military. In terms of manufactures continued high levels of defence spending were obviously important, but the nationalization of utilities in particular created large single state buyers. Thus the Ministry of Transport through its ownership of the railways, and the Ministry of Health through its ownership of hospitals, and the Ministry of Fuel and Power, through its ownership of electrical systems, the gas works, and the coal mines had a crucial say in what was bought. Government ministries were major buyers in the domestic market, indeed sometimes monopoly buyers.34

The move away from internationalism and indeed imperialism towards nationalism was particularly evident in the case of food. Indeed one of the best known features uniting the war and reconstruction periods is the continuation of wartime food rationing into the 1950s, with a tightening after the war in some respects, notably in the rationing of bread for a period. The questions of rationing and domestic supply need to be kept separate: most domestically produced food was not rationed whereas most imported food was. Rationing (apart from bread after the war), was confined to relatively expensive goods of which much or all the supply was imported, in war as in peace, such as meat, butter, cheese, bacon, tea, sugar. In some cases, for example meat, wartime imports were higher than pre-war, while in other cases, such as sugar, they were considerably lower.

Diets in the war and reconstruction period were distinctive. The mid-1950s saw a temporary return, in some respects, to pre-war diets. The British diet changed at the beginning of the war as some supplies became short and others more plentiful. The diet stayed essentially the same through the end of the war into the late 1940s. There is no 1945 break in the statistics—levels of vegetables, bread and cereals, meat and fat consumption remained much the same per person, while there were steady increases through the period in the availability of milk and fruit. After 1950 there was a marked change as consumption of vegetables per capita fell, along with that of bread and cereals, while

meat consumption increased. The case of meat illustrates the depth of the control. Before the war most imported beef was chilled, but from 1939 until the early 1950s only lower quality frozen beef was acquired. Chilled beef exports from New Zealand resumed only in 1952; it was agreed that Argentina would export chilled beef again in 1951, but it was not till 1953 that experimental exports began.

But the pre-war pattern of food supply would not return; national self-sufficiency and radical increases in productivity would be the aim, for all kinds of food, from wheat to meat. It is one of the few cases that corresponds to a progressive ‘war and reconstruction story’ of wartime development exceeding that of the 1930s, and exceeded again in the 1940s. Food was one of Britain’s most important imports. The permanent and serious move significantly to increase domestic production was a radical break with one hundred years of free trade and fewer of imperial preference in food supply. The break happened in 1939/40 with the beginning of a huge increase in domestic production, with no return to pre-war levels of imports. The essential story is of the ploughing up of grassland to plant much larger quantities of cereals and vegetables. This was bulky but cheap food that saved on shipping, which could be efficiently produced in relation to land and labour. The nationalization of food supply and its scientization went hand in glove.

We may summarize the story by looking at the tractorization of British agriculture. This was very radically speeded up from the beginning of the war, overwhelmingly with Fordson N tractors made by Ford in Dagenham, one of the largest factories in Britain, indeed Europe. Tractor production was roughly the same as before the war; the great difference was that the majority of tractors had previously been exported. By 1947 tractor production was many times larger than it had been pre-war, while motor car production was only getting back to pre-war levels. From 1945 Ford at Dagenham was producing

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36 The Times, 6 Jan. 1951, report from Buenos Aires correspondent.
38 The years after the war saw an extraordinary leap in productivity levels, of land and labour, in agriculture, which was greater than that in industry. The number of agricultural workers fell, but output increased enormously.
a new model, the Fordson Major, while a second major producer started up in 1946. Standard Motors built the Ferguson TE20 from 1946 at Banner Lane, Coventry. The Banner Lane factory was an aero-engine ‘shadow’ factory, which Standard had managed and now took over.

It may seem surprising that wartime Britain could afford to extend and mechanize domestic agriculture, and that after the war it could devote so much more effort to it. It does not fit with the image of a weak pre-war industrial base, and industry left clapped out by the war effort. That image was powerful after the war: it was held that British industry sacrificed itself by giving up its overseas markets and as the future Prime Minister Harold Wilson was to put it, the ‘failure to make good the wear and tear of machinery overworked in war production’. The idea has been influential since. Yet sectors engaged in war production received huge amounts of investment; those not deemed essential suffered from lack of investment and maintenance backlogs. A huge proportion, perhaps half, of all armaments were (in my estimate) produced not in existing facilities, but in newly built, government-owned arms plants, or on specialist machines supplied by government. The Banner Lane aero-engine factory was just one instance. The overall investment was enormous: between 1936 and 1945 the state invested around £1bn in armament capacity. Its comparative scale may be gauged from looking at the compensation paid for industries which were nationalized in the 1940s: £927m for the railways, £392m for the coal mines, and £246m for the iron and steel industry. A. J. P. Taylor was partly right when in the penultimate paragraph of his English History he stated that

the second war, unlike the first, stimulated or created new industries which could hold their own in peacetime. During the second world war, and not before, Great Britain took the decisive step into the twentieth century. Before the war Great Britain was still trying to revive the old staples. After it, she relied on new developing industries. Electricity, motor cars, iron and steel, machine tools, nylon,

40 An earlier Ferguson model, built by Ford in the USA, the famous Ford Ferguson, had not been built in Britain
43 Edgerton, Warfare State, chapter 3.
and chemicals were all set for expansion, and in all of them output per head was steadily increasing. The very spirit of the nation had changed.45

What Taylor inevitably missed was the key role of (hidden) public investment in certain sectors.

**Turning to the nation**

Within the ‘war and reconstruction’ frame an implicit national and nationalist rebirth is central, for it is this which brings together the wartime nation in a way which leads to reconstruction. It is indeed easy to find a nationalist moment in 1940, with talk of the being ‘alone’, the ‘island fortress’ the ‘impregnable citadel of free people’, and various forms of native genius, notably from the previously non-patriotic Left.46 Yet there were other stories in play—those of imperial unity, the unity of English-speaking peoples, and also British solidarity with those under Nazi oppression. From January 1942 British propaganda makes great play of the ‘United Nations’, and especially but not only the ‘Big Four’, fighting to extirpate barbarian, nationalist, militarism. Indeed internationalism was important and an underrated and revitalized feature of wartime political/intellectual activity.47 Internationalism was central to the British conduct of the war from 1942, both in military terms (think of the combined chiefs of staff, the supreme commanders of mixed nationality forces in various theatres) but also in supply terms. For example, through Lend-Lease Britain got nearly all its oil from refineries in the USA, whereas at the beginning of the war Britain had sought to avoid the neutral US as a source at all. Another example would be the fact that the great majority of tanks in British armoured formations were US-built Shermans. Indeed wartime saw an unprecedented level of imports of manufactures into Britain, a point not generally noted because munitions were often excluded from import statistics. This was not a straightforward matter of subservience

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45 At a conference of the Institute for Contemporary British History in the early 1990s Eric Hobsbawm quoted this passage as an example of complacency about the state of British industry after the war.

46 Quotations from the film, *Britain at Bay*, by J. B. Priestley, Ministry of Information/GPO film unit, 1940.

to a greater power, but an attempt through a division of labour to maximize the exploitation of common resources.  

From 1945, rather than 1939 or 1940, ‘national’ and ‘nation’ enter the language to an extraordinary extent, and to a considerable degree the British nation is separated from Empire and Commonwealth. In the Labour manifesto, Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation, the attention given to foreign affairs and trade was negligible; the word ‘empire’ does not figure. There is a partial contrast to be made with the language of other parties at least in the 1945 manifestos. ‘Mr Churchill’s declaration of policy to the electors’, the Conservative manifesto of 1945, gave much attention to imperial trade, but used a national rather than imperial ‘we’: it spoke of the ‘Mother Country’ and its relation to Commonwealth and Empire noting that ‘We shall never forget their love and steadfastness when we stood alone against the German Terror’ [emphasis added], noting also that ‘During a whole year of this great war Britain bore the burden of the struggle alone’. The free-trading Liberal manifesto, which spoke out against imperial preference, was much more generous in alluding to empire as a unit in 1940: it noted that the ‘sacrifice and steadfastness of the people of these Islands, the British Commonwealth and Empire—standing alone for a whole year against the insolent might of Germany and her allies—have saved the world’.  

The Liberal manifesto’s invocation of the whole empire as the unit that stood alone, or indeed fought, was not as common as might be thought. Indeed it is remarkable how empire and allies were removed from what became by 1945 a profoundly national story of the war. A 1945 government document called What Britain has Done, 1939–1945: A Selection of Outstanding Facts and Figures is a powerful case in point. The imperial contribution to the war was radically downplayed, as was, less surprisingly, that of the USA and other allies—the stress is on British help to these allies. A profoundly national bias is also very evident in the official Statistical Digest of the War published in 1951. For example, only in sub-categorizations of


trade did the Empire appear (as in trade with ‘British countries’ as opposed to ‘foreign countries’). Otherwise the figures presented are for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Thus the armed forces are the British ones (though a footnote recognizes there were some foreigners in them) while the very closely allied Commonwealth forces, not to mention colonial ones, or allied ones, do not figure. There is no Indian Army, no Royal Canadian Air Force, no Polish Armoured Division, or Free French, and so on, even it seemed when stationed in the United Kingdom. The figures for arms production are those for production within the borders of the United Kingdom, not those for either British or Imperial forces. The result is, for example, a serious misrepresentation of rifle production for British and Imperial forces. The only movements of goods recorded (apart from Lend-Lease, and these inadequately) are those in and out of the United Kingdom, with the crucial exception of munitions, which lived in a different statistical world. Thus the very statistical picture that was produced is shot through with a particular nationalist way of understanding, and it should be noted this would become standard in nearly all the histories of war production, and subsequent accounts of the economics of the war.53

Post-war nationalist feeling is evident in propaganda documentaries concerned with agriculture and industry. United Harvest (Greenpark Productions, 1947) focused on the wartime extension and modernization of British agriculture, stressing its new found vitality. But the film struck a decidedly nationalist tone, with a strong line against importing from foreign producers (Argentina, Holland, and Spain are mentioned). Crucially there was no mention of imperial food suppliers, so the national is contrasted with the foreign only, without the slightest hint that imperial producers—Canada, Australia, and New Zealand being the main ones—were a vital part of the issue. Interestingly enough other propaganda documentaries which do mention the Empire/Commonwealth as food suppliers treat them on a par with foreign countries. An example is The Balance, which shows just how much of Britain’s food was imported, but makes no distinction between Empire/Commonwealth and the rest of the world. Britain needed to export to all parts of the world, in order to import from them.54 Humphrey Jennings’ Portrait of a Family of 1951 where the family is the British nation, notes as one


54 The Balance, Paul Rotha (COI 1947). In relation to exports and imports it dealt with New Zealand, South America, Canada, West Africa, and Sweden. Canada was as foreign as Sweden.
of its features that half the family lived on food from abroad, but again does not discriminate between imperial and foreign supplies. \textsuperscript{55} The need for the nation to export so that the nation could import in order to eat and to get raw materials was a powerful theme of post-war economic propaganda. \textsuperscript{56}

The nation and the national interest became key terms of political discourse. For example in the Labour Party election manifesto of 1945, ‘Socialism’ appears once, whereas ‘nation’, and ‘people’ appear repeatedly, more so than Britain or British; by contrast the 1935 manifesto hardly invoked Britain/British or nation. The 1945 manifesto called coal ‘Britain’s most precious national raw material’. It is not surprising then that a National Coal Board would appear. Alongside it came a National Health Service (though a British Transport Commission and a British Electricity Authority). \textsuperscript{57} It is interesting too that while the 1945 Labour Party manifesto called for ‘public ownership’ or ‘socialization’ of industries, ‘nationalization’ would become the standard term. But ‘nation’, and ‘national’ are terms that recur well outside the domain of what we now think of as nationalization, that is state ownership. Harold Wilson claimed in an important internal document ‘the Government had asserted its right to ensure that there is a duty on private industry, no less than on socialised industries, to conform to the national interest . . . private ownership of industry does not of itself give any guarantee that national considerations will prevail in industrial policy’, which is precisely what he wanted to ensure. \textsuperscript{58}

We should note too the importance of the national for technocrats in the 1940s, even those of the Left. The leftist Association of Scientific Workers published a well-known manifesto called \textit{Science and the Nation} though it was not quite as nationalistic as the title implies. \textsuperscript{59} Figures from the Right also

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Family Portrait}, written and directed by Humphrey Jennings 1951. The film was made for the Festival of Britain 1951. The themes were the unity of old and new, poetry and prose, science and literature.

\textsuperscript{56} As Jim Tomlinson has noted the export drive propaganda of the time, and historical commentary since, has underplayed two crucial ways, other than exporting more, which would have reduced the balance of payments deficit: the cutting of military expenditure overseas and the control of the deliberately unrestricted investment in the overseas sterling area. See Tomlinson, \textit{Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy}, chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{57} To be sure, there had long been national trade unions, and national associations of one sort or another, not to mention many British and Imperial bodies, but after the war the term ‘national’ and formulas such as ‘the national interest’ became commonplace as never before.

\textsuperscript{58} ‘The State and Private Industry: Memorandum by the President of the Board of Trade’ PREM 8/1183, PRO.

\textsuperscript{59} Penguin, 1947.
embraced and noted the rise of the national. Take for example the reflections of Sir John Lennard-Jones, a senior wartime government scientist from Cambridge University. In 1947 he noted that the scientist was becoming more nationally minded as his relation to the State became closer and while there still were some of the traditionally absent minded types there were scientists who were politically and nationally conscious. At first sight he thought, the outlook for the scientist in a planned society seemed bleak—not the view of the scientific Left of course—but he thought there was a positive side, drawing positive analogies with the army as a planned organization in which spirit and enterprise had also been developed. There had to be planning for the development of new ideas and their application to national needs.\(^\text{60}\) Indeed as is becoming clearer, the politics of British technocrats were far from exclusively of the Left.\(^\text{61}\)

**Reflections**

One can find prognostications in the 1930s of a nationalist British future, but hardly any recognition in the historical literature that something like this did come to pass. ‘One begins by “buying British”: one ends by shouting for a colossal air-fleet’ lamented H. N. Brailsford in the early 1930s.\(^\text{62}\) Elie Halevy, the great French student of British liberalism was brutally frank in his defence of the true liberal political-economic faith, speculating, in 1934, about where the ideological transformation he saw underway would end:

> It is queer in England to observe how the free-trade spirit, with its pacifist implications, has survived the introduction of protection. But you have to recognise that you have become a protectionist nation, and, having become protectionist, you have become nationalistic at the same time. I know several socialist intellectuals who profess to be at the same time radical protectionists and radical pacifists. I do not understand how you can be both at the same time . . . As soon as you have begun to accept protectionism, you are bound to accept something like nationalism, and can you have nationalism without something like militarism? I was struck last


winter in reading a speech made at a public meeting by Sir Stafford Cripps in which he declared that he was not ‘an out and out pacifist’. I know that just now he is delivering highly pacifist speeches in Canada, but I cannot forget how struck I was by this former declaration of his. I am making a bold, perhaps an absurd forecast. But who knows? Sir Stafford Cripps’ father, after being a Conservative, went over to Labour because he was a pacifist. Who knows whether Sir Stafford Cripps himself will not find himself going over to patriotism and perhaps something like militarism because he is a socialist? . . . [Herbert Spencer argued that] the world was evolving towards what he called new toryism—protective, socialistic and militaristic . . . who knows whether the prophecy is not going to be true? 63

Was Halevy right? Only a decade or so later, and for years afterward, Britain had, as we have seen, a highly protected economy, it was socialistic, and had very high defence spending and conscription. This is not to say that this was by conscious choice, much less that it was the product of overt campaigns to bring it about. Yet it was in line with important ideological changes that made such developments seem normal, necessary and indeed in many respects beneficial, so much so they elicited little adverse comment. Halevy’s position was a distinctly marginal one after the war. Post-war intellectual culture was itself profoundly nationalistic and militaristic, but only implicitly so. 64

One particular reason for the neglect was that there was no overt political or intellectual embrace of militarism and nationalism. There was no British Friedrich List of the mid-twentieth century. Economic nationalism was a matter of lower-level politics, policy, national security, business lobbies, rather than the economics seminar. 65 Furthermore, the language of post-war economics was not suited to highlighting these changes. It is significant that terms like protection, autarky, or state trading, hardly figure in discussion of the post-war British economy. In the language of economics and party political economic discourse the key issue was the role of the state, through


64 In Warfare State I discuss this also in relation to historiography in the 1960s, noting the importance of critiques of liberalism from the Left and Right, and the common insistence, which persists to this day, that post-war Britain was never national or nationalistic enough. See Edgerton, Warfare State, chapter 7.

65 Similarly wartime and post-war planning had really no connection to the in any case very limited British economic or political thinking about planning.
Keynesian demand management, inflation, deflation, and nationalization, with a dash of planning and industrial policy. Also centre stage were moves to liberalize international trade and British governments did essentially reject alternatives to Atlanticist multilateralism.\textsuperscript{66} And, in discussion of the state in general, a social democratic tradition emphasized the rise of the welfare state, as did critics. Yet all these concepts were inadequate for describing some of the key new developments, like the much larger warfare state, but also the exceptionally intense economic nationalism of the post-war years. There were also great difficulties in grasping, in the light of British intellectual traditions, the precise nature of British post-war militarism.\textsuperscript{67} Within post-war thought Halevy’s prophecy that a New Toryism ‘protective, socialistic and militaristic’ would arrive, made no sense.

Historians of the period have been strongly affected not only by contemporary reflections on these years, but also later forms of analysis. The dominant social-democratic view of mid-century history told a very particular national, nationalist, and welfarist story in which neither militarism nor nationalism were central. Conservative historians, focused on international and military history, complained that Britain had not been, and remained, insufficiently committed to armed forces, the army in particular. Post-war Britain invested, by peacetime standards, unprecedented amounts in warlike capacity, and as an economy it was, by modern standards, unprecedentedly nationalistic, yet its intellectuals, at least many of them, chided Britain for not being nationalistic or militaristic enough.

The ‘war and reconstruction’ pairing is a useful one for some aspects of British history. In the case of agriculture and food supply 1939/40 saw a major change not reversed after the war and the whole period to the early 1950s was one of very significant stability of patterns of food consumption, which were different from what had happened and was to happen. Generally though, both the beginning and the end of the war were major break points. The specificities of the war period, not least the obvious importance of the scale of the armed services and the arms industry, need much greater recognition, as does the internationalism of the war years. From 1945, we need to recognise, much effort was made to get back to the situation of 1939—to increase exports, house-building, and much else besides to pre-war levels. In that sense a


\textsuperscript{67} On this see Edgerton, \textit{Warfare State}, chapters 7 and 8.
straightforward literal meaning of reconstruction—repairing and replacing the damage and loss of war, is appropriate. But that has not been the main sense in which the term has been used. If we were to ask the question what world did British elites want to build from 1945, and how did the experience of the war affect it, we would want to say something about the building of a new kind of universalistic welfare state, but we would also need to point to what to a majority of the elite was the pressing need to deploy military power on a greater scale than in 1939. It was not just a question of building a new Jerusalem, but also a new Sparta.