

## *ATTACK WARNING RED!*

*How Britain Prepared for Nuclear War*

Julie McDowall

London: Vintage Books, 2024, £10.99, p/b

### **Colin Challen**

**C**old War II – The Sequel is now on general release, alternately gripping and horrifying audiences everywhere. Unlike the original Cold War – and any number of James Bond movies – this version has multiple villains each with their own destructive agendas. From the possibly psychotic Putin to the deep mind of Xi Jin Ping, to Kim Jong Un and now maybe even the genocidally– minded Netanyahu, this cold war has potential nuclear dangers in many regions. It may also include India and Pakistan. In the light of this, it would be fair to ask what the UK government is planning to do to protect its population from the consequences of a nuclear attack – that is, apart from the stock answer of deterring one. McDowall's book is a timely reminder that basically there is no conceivable plan that would have any chance of success. It's a view it seems that was shared by Clement Attlee in the post-war years. However, under pressure to be seen to be doing 'something' as Prime Minister, he authorised legislation – the Civil Defence Act of 1948 and its associated activity – anyway. For nearly 40 years civil defence was promoted as a fully structured plan for saving the essentials of life in the UK, even if it meant families having to hide under the dining room table or under the stairs (if they lived in a house). Don't bother if living in a flat.

With a light touch mixed with dark humour, McDowall has comprehensively researched and documented many of the absurdities pedalled to the public and behind the scenes up to the 1980s, when the concept of civil defence was essentially dismissed as futile and was wound up. Her focus dwells largely on the civil defence aspect of the period, rather than the military. It would be interesting to have a companion volume looking at the decline of Britain's military during the same period. Our diminished armed forces might have been expected to play a significant part in assisting the civil authorities in delivering post-apocalypse solutions.

Ironically, the gouging out of the UK's military may have had the effect of removing many suspected Soviet targets. The end of the V-bomber force led to the closure of RAF Finningley. Once home to AWACS

aircraft (Airborne Warning and Control System), RAF Kinloss closed.<sup>1</sup>

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, other military systems, such as the Bloodhound surface to air missile, disappeared along with their bases. The military footprint in the UK shrank in what perhaps some would call the 'peace dividend' and others would describe as a well thought out strategic shift. The prospect of a nuclear war did after all seem remote.

That perception today has changed, but the notion of a functioning form of civil defence is not being revived. The Cabinet Office now has the task of marshalling UK 'resilience' in times of emergency, although that stops short of any responsibility during a nuclear war. This perhaps subliminally relegates that awful prospect to things we just don't want to talk about. What was once the Civil Defence College, based in Easingwold, North Yorkshire, is now run by SERCO on contract to the Cabinet Office. The College website records the transition thus:

Around the end of the Cold War, following a number of serious major incidents such as the Bradford Football Stadium fire, the Lockerbie air disaster and the Hillsborough Football Stadium disaster, the role of the College was again changed from preparing for the aftermath of nuclear attack to preparation for peacetime disasters bringing with it the new title of Emergency Planning College. Machinery of Government changes following the General Election of 2001 found the work of the College being transferred from the Home Office Emergency Planning Division to the Cabinet Office Resilience Directorate.<sup>2</sup>

Under the original civil defence regime, much of the work on the ground would have been carried out by local authorities. Now, however, many councils are strapped for cash – and some are bordering on, if not already in, bankruptcy. It is therefore hard to envisage them being able to play anything more than an advisory role, assisted perhaps by training delivered by SERCO and the like.

With much critical infrastructure now privatised, one wonders what efforts have been made by the privatised companies to plan for what for them must be seen as a totally non-profitable exercise. There has been much media coverage of the private water companies current inability to

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<sup>1</sup> One of the aircraft that flew from Kinloss was the Shackleton, based on an original WW2 Lancaster bomber design – kept on the go till 1991 and fondly known in RAF circles as '40,000 rivets flying in formation' – all rather symbolic of Britain's military decline at the time.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.epcresilience.com/about-us/heritage>>

deal with (relatively simple) excess sewage outflows. We might thus ask what chance they have of providing any workable service, in what would undoubtedly be a more complicated post apocalypse scenario? Having said that, will what remains of the public sector be in any better condition to cope?<sup>3</sup>

Worry not. If there is an 'emergency' you can still take care of yourself. In North Yorkshire, where nuclear targets almost certainly would include the early warning radar station RAF Fylingdales and the U.S listening station at Menwith Hill, and possibly Catterick army base, the local council offers reassuring advice:

Emergency services will always have to prioritise those in greatest need during an emergency, especially where life is in danger.

Communities may therefore need to rely on their own resources to minimise the impact of an emergency before the emergency services arrive. Emergencies can take many forms, from small house fires through to widespread loss of electricity or flooding.

Many communities already help each other in times of need, but experience shows that those who are prepared cope better during an emergency. Communities with local knowledge, enthusiasm and information are a great asset and a community emergency plan can help.<sup>4</sup>

This handy advice goes on 'If your community has a plan, or it is a work in progress, speak to your parish or town council as they may be looking for volunteers to help them.' Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s you could theoretically rely on a professionalised civil defence corps to come to your aid with a stirrup pump or two, it's now in the hands of your parish council to muster the protection needed to ameliorate the impact of Putin's missiles. The result, of course, would be the same.

The DIY approach to dealing with the effects of a nuclear 'incident' (the word 'war' is never used) is detailed in a Cabinet Office document 'What to do in a radiation emergency'. In a curious coincidence (for me at least) this document was updated on 10 September 2024 – the

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<sup>3</sup> 'Research carried out by The Kings Fund has shown how the volume of hospital beds within the NHS have varied over time. The findings are that the total number of NHS hospital beds In England has more than halved between 1987/88 and 2019/20, going from 299,000 to 141,000.'

<<https://www.nationalhealthexecutive.com/articles/nhs-hospital-beds>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://shorturl.at/XHCSM>> or <<https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/north-yorkshire-local-resilience-forum/protect-your-community-emergency>>

day after I purchased *Attack Warning Red!* The Cabinet Office document, despite such a recent updating, contains little that differs from the advice given back in the days of the Cold War:

### **Go in**

The most important thing to do if you are told you are near a radiation emergency is go indoors as soon as you can and stay there. Close the doors and windows and stay as far away from external walls as possible.

### **Stay in**

Staying indoors reduces your exposure to any radiation outside. You will be given advice on what to do next. Turn off all fans and air conditioning and close all external doors, windows and vents where possible. You will be given advice on what to do next. You may need to stay indoors for one to two days.<sup>5</sup>

This time, there is no mention of building your own indoor shelter, something which was much derided as utterly impractical by anti-nuclear activists during the Cold War. However, it must be said that the guidance is only drafted with a localised radiation emergency in mind. There is no mention of a 'wartime' emergency. It's as if the possibility of such an emergency no longer exists. The BBC reported that nuclear war is no longer on the UK's 'National Risk Register'<sup>6</sup> – although the likelihood of a nuclear bomb being detonated by a terrorist group is thought to be 'low but not negligible.'<sup>7</sup>

McDowall spends some time exploring what measures were in place to protect, for want of a better expression, the ruling class – on both a national and a local level. While the general public are expected to simply stay indoors (a lock-in of maybe two weeks duration might be welcome, should you happen to be caught in a pub at the time), proper underground shelter arrangements will be made for the likes of the monarchy, government, civil servants. Despite some of its space being sold off (including for a rather large wine cellar), the caverns underneath MoD

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<sup>5</sup> 'What to do in a radiation emergency' <<https://shorturl.at/626ly>> or <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/radiation-emergencies-information-for-the-public/what-to-do-in-a-radiation-emergency>>

<sup>6</sup> <<https://shorturl.at/c5MSt>> or <<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170821-how-prepared-are-we-for-the-impact-of-a-nuclear-war>>

<sup>7</sup> <<https://shorturl.at/rNWuD>> or <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/419549/20150331\\_2015-NRR-WA\\_Final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419549/20150331_2015-NRR-WA_Final.pdf)>

Corsham, near Bath must remain a possible refuge even though the existence of this secret underground alternative government HQ has long been known.<sup>8</sup>

That site could accommodate 4,000 people. It might still be of some use, given the central role MoD Corsham still plays in UK defence systems. It's unlikely the general plan to protect the Royal Family will have changed much – e.g. which circumstances would dictate whether they'd remain in London, or leave. However, their new underground home(s), so far as I can tell, remain a mystery; although McDowall mentions there was a plan to park them on a ship in a Scottish sea loch. Indeed, a ship (whose day job was as a ferry and is now the Hebridean Princess) was specially adapted with airtight doors, etc, for the purpose. (p. 69) Not much use for salmon fishing then.

Apart from government parsimony, the death knell for civil defence was undoubtedly hastened by the hostile attention it received from its detractors. An avalanche of exposure showed its futility, and the evidence of this was to be found in every region. For my part, in 1981 I published a booklet *Civil Defence in Humberside*. One aspect of civil defence I alighted on then, which was never publicly spoken of was

There is still a war on. Little attention – at least in the public source material – seems to be paid to the fact that after a nuclear attack, a war may still continue. The more damage a side suffers – as has been the experience in many cases in the past – the more may the will stiffen in favour of pursuing some form of aggression. Emergency planners, who spend some of their time dwelling on natural disasters, seem to think of nuclear war in the same 'one off' terms. They think as most people wish to believe which is that common sense will prevail. However, those responsible for a nuclear war may not ordinarily be classed, surely as having 'common sense.' Although the belligerent powers may have expended their nuclear arsenals, they may consider [continuing] a war on more conventional terms. Thus any recovery plans which the government may have could become irrelevant in the face of foreign intervention. In that case, they would in all likelihood drive themselves deeper underground to save themselves for some kind of counter offensive.

Buried somewhere deep in Whitehall (perhaps literally) there may be

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<sup>8</sup> It was mentioned, e.g., in Peter Laurie's *Beneath The City Streets* and Duncan Campbell's *War Plan UK*.

documents and plans which address all of this. Before our government send missiles to Ukraine for attacks on Russia, perhaps we could see them?

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