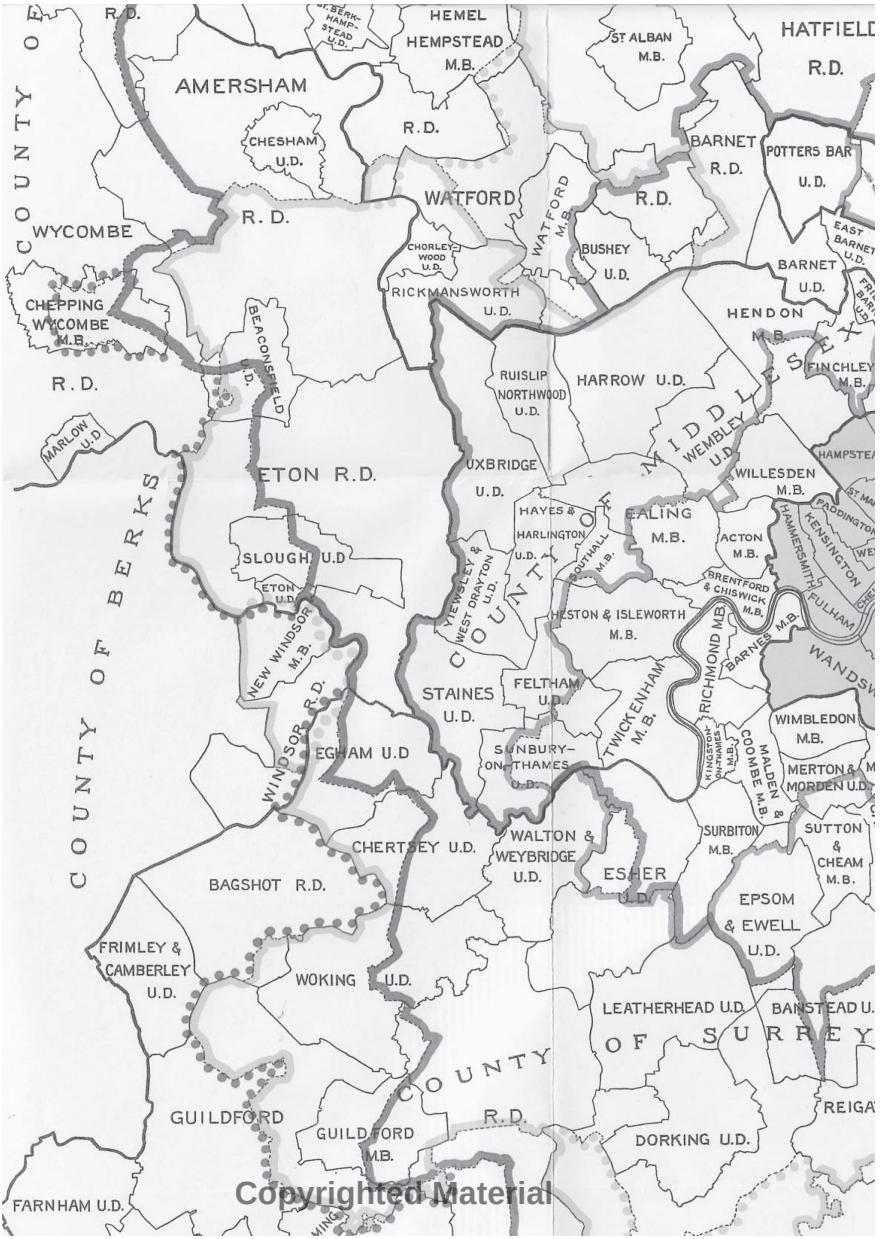

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THE GREATEST TARGET IN THE WORLD: 11 NOVEMBER 1918–31 AUGUST 1939

The September crisis dawned only slowly on most Londoners. True, there had been undertones since German troops began to mass on their eastern borders in August, and at the end of the month Gladys Langford, an elementary school teacher in Hoxton, noted anxiously in her diary how 'Papers, wireless news and every placard full of hints of trouble in Czecho-Slovakia. I do get terrified with all this talk of war.' By 12 September 1938 almost everyone was aware that war of some sort was possible, even likely, in central Europe and that Britain once again might be dragged in. The mood wasn't helped by a heatwave striking London that week. Langford wrote from her bedsit in Highbury to her married sister in rural Essex 'a long screed … saying I was contemplating suicide'; she blamed Hitler for her low state of mind. Tensions eased with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's first flight to see the Nazi leader on Thursday 15 September, which offered fresh hope of a diplomatic settlement: '"Hurrah for Neville,"' Pamela Wilsdon told her fellow Hampstead boarders crowded round the radio for the evening news the night before.[1]

Despite this public optimism, however, plans began to be implemented behind the scenes from 15 September to coordinate the defence of Britain should it come under attack from the air. Wisely so, for on Chamberlain's second flight to Germany, 22 September, he was met by Hitler's fresh demands: not just the self-determination of the German-speaking Sudetenland but the total dissolution of Czechoslovakia as a state. Even for Chamberlain, that was a demand too far. Britain moved rapidly and publicly to protect itself from attack should war be inescapable.

The nation's civil defence centred on London, and Londoners bore the brunt of what by now were frantic measures to protect a population of some 8.75 million citizens. Announcements were made on 22 September that plans were in place to evacuate the London hospitals should hostilities begin, that air raid precautions (ARP) booklets were being posted to every home, and that volunteers were needed in their tens of thousands for the emergency and other services. All these were overshadowed, though, by announcements from local councils that everyone was now to be provided with a gas mask. Measuring and fitting would begin that very day.

From Thursday 22 September to Friday 30 September the huge task of preparing London for war cranked falteringly into gear, but it was the gas mask that brought the perils of modern warfare vividly into every living room. The numbers involved were enormous. The masks were delivered to councils in pieces and had to be assembled by volunteer council staff or in some places 'factory girls' volunteered by their employers. Westminster City Council marshalled 1,900 volunteers to measure and fit 120,000 residents with gas masks, over 324,000 were distributed in Wandsworth, over 115,000 were fitted with masks in Croydon in three days and nearly everyone else in that borough of over 230,000 people by the 30th. In Bethnal Green, one of the smallest metropolitan boroughs, 67,000 masks were issued in just two days, 28 and 29 September, and in suburban Brentford and Chiswick 58,000. Everywhere there were queues outside town halls and other fitting centres of people waiting to be matched to their gas masks, which came in three sizes, small, medium and large. Thousands of home visits were made to arrange fitting and distribution. Pamela Wilsdon's boarding house in Belsize Square was knocked up at 9.30 on a Sunday night by the council's 'chirpy, talkative young man, very matey, lower middle class. Everybody sat on arms of chairs in the lounge, including me in my dressing gown [she had a cold] … I tried on a medium one, which was much too big; the small one was a good fit, except that I couldn't see out of it. "I'd better put you down for a medium one," he said.' The masks were delivered two days later.[2]

In Dagenham, where over 100,000 masks were assembled, fitted and given out, the council's 'Borough Charter celebrations' planned for that week were postponed in the 'feverish feasing work of getting up protection'. There and elsewhere hundreds of thousands of sandbags were filled and piled round vulnerable or important buildings. There was

insufficient sand for all of them so topsoil was often used instead: in the spring of 1939 dormant seeds would germinate and destroy both bags and the walls built with them. Most visible of all was the digging of trenches for air raid shelters for those caught in the open should bombing begin. These were the first public air raid shelters to be built in the capital. No London open space was too sacred for desecration by pick and shovel – in only a few cases were mechanical diggers available. 'Trenches have been dug in Hyde Park, St James's Park, and the Green Park,' *The Times* reported the day after 'A.R.P. Sunday' (25 September), and some were already roofed in with corrugated iron. The same was true of Kensington Gardens and Hampstead Heath, and indeed everywhere from Ravenscourt Park in the west to Hackney Marshes in the east and beyond. Shelters for lawyers were hurriedly dug in Lincoln's Inn Fields, all by volunteers working in their collars and shirtsleeves under the direction of council engineers. Elsewhere the unemployed were hired to work alongside volunteers. Everywhere the numbers were prodigious – 2,500 men in Wandsworth, 1,200 with three mechanical diggers in St Pancras, often working round the clock 'by the light of flares and lorry headlights' – 'like so many grave-diggers,' one observer thought.[3]

Householders too were encouraged to make their homes as safe as possible, by digging trench shelters in their gardens if they had them – 'When I got out of bed,' Pamela Wilsdon recorded on 27 September, 'I saw two people in the next garden digging a trench' – and by constructing gas-proof rooms where they could. These were especially important for families with young children for no gas masks were yet available for babies and toddlers and anxious mothers clamoured for advice at London's town halls. In Belsize Square on Saturday 24 September:

> N.I., (spinster, journalist, aged 40) urged Mrs. Cook, our landlady, to make a gas proof room. It just seemed fantastic to me; whether sensible or not, it would never have occurred to me to do it. We spent much of the day surveying and discussing various rooms, and decided on the basement kitchen. We got hold of a diagram, and sat on the kitchen table, reading it out loud. Mrs. Cook went up to the Hampstead Town Hall on Monday, but everybody there was too busy to pay any attention to her. She went to the local Gas Proof House, where there was a lady who was very nice but who seemed to know nothing. She said: 'Of course, this is considered to be a perfect example of a gas proof room, and ordinary people couldn't be expected to do it.'

> So far, (Sept. 28) we have done nothing about our gas proof room, but I believe a man is coming to put wooden beading round the wainscoting.

Others could fare better: the writer J. B. Priestley, then almost at the apex of his fame, instructed builders to make a bomb-proof (and presumably gas-proof) room in the cellar of his grand London house at 3 The Grove, Highgate.[4]

While police and council officers in loudspeaker vans toured London streets alerting residents to gas mask fitting centres and seeking labour for trench digging, the biggest call-up was for ARP volunteers – as wardens, first aid attendants, stretcher-bearers and rescue parties. The Home Secretary announced that he was seeking no fewer than half a million volunteers nationwide. Thirty thousand men and women were called for to staff London's Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) and tens of thousands of others, even boys as young as fourteen to act as messengers, were asked to enrol at their local town halls. Not all were forthcoming, but in this moment of crisis many were. Before September, Wandsworth had enrolled 3,882 volunteers; by the end of the month the number had jumped to 6,154. In the twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs and the City of London, ARP recruitment almost doubled during the crisis, from 34,000 at the beginning to 65,000 at the end; even so, this was barely 60 per cent of the numbers sought.[5]

The dislocation of daily life in these tempestuous days was immense, and not just the queueing for gas masks, or the unwelcome toil for butter-palmed clerks and shop men of digging trenches, or facing an agonising decision to take on new public duties alongside the burdens of work and home. The journey to work for many was made even more nerve-racking than usual with the closure of eight underground stations for emergency gates or 'plugs' to be fitted to prevent flooding in the event of bombs breaching tunnels under the river. Long queues of City workers formed at south London stations on 28 and 29 September, commuters only vaguely aware of how to work their way round the blockage. And there was the gnawing anxiety deep in the stomach, the wondering whether tonight or tomorrow might bring some devastating aerial attack that would shake London to its core. 'My own condition was deteriorating fast,' wrote Lady Diana Cooper, one of London's leading socialites and a woman not lacking in courage. 'Fear did more harm to my physique than to my morale. Sleep was murdered

for ever. My heart quaked … My hands shook …' 'It still seems "touch and go" for war. I can't get peace of mind,' Gladys Langford, alone in her Highbury bedsit, confided to her diary. 'If only I could summon the courage to gas myself!'[6]

When *The Times* wrote in a leader of London's 'calm but intense activity' in that crisis week of late September calmness was apparent only on the surface. And many abandoned the need for calmness altogether by getting out of London as fast as they could. Evacuation was a recognition that those who stayed in London could not be adequately protected by the authorities. Official plans for the evacuation of London's children had been rushed into place in early September. They were not implemented – thankfully, given their half-baked unreadiness – though children with physical and other disabilities in London County Council (LCC) schools were evacuated to the country on 28 September, some 3,000 of them bussed out of London to a camp in Kent. But it was the voluntary unofficial flight from London that marked the depth of people's fears. They left in uncountable numbers. By that same day a 'great exodus' from London's hotels of people rich enough to live in them all year round had begun – foreigners leaving for the seaports (Americans were formally advised by their ambassador on 27 September to get out of London) and others 'to the country'. On 29 September the exodus reached full flood. The roads were crowded, as many left by car or coach, but it was rail that shouldered the brunt. Trains for the West Country, for Scotland (where four London mothers with their young children joined their friend Naomi Mitchison in her Argyllshire hideaway) and the Irish boat trains had to be duplicated to meet the unparalleled demand. But really it was an escape to anywhere but London: 'A surprisingly large number of people took tickets for small villages in East Anglia.'[7] As *The Times* made plain on 30 September, this was a flight pre-eminently of the well-to-do:

> At all the main line railway termini the scene was much the same – crowded trains, thronged departure platforms, husbands bidding farewell to wives and children, piles of trunks and perambulators, mothers and nurses carrying babies, buffets full to overflowing, hurrying porters and harassed officials, soldiers, sailors and airmen equipped with full packs. Many people took their pets with them. Dogs on leads, cats in baskets and even canaries and parrots were to be seen. As each train steamed out, those left standing on the platforms were mostly men.

Ironically, by the time the newspapers reported on scenes like this the crisis had passed its peak. Neville Chamberlain's third visit to Hitler on 29 September had at last secured something that looked like a promise of peace. Following his return to Heston Aerodrome in west London on the last day of September, the Prime Minister felt able to announce that the Munich Agreement was 'peace for our time'. Relief was felt in almost every home in the land, perhaps especially so in London, where people knew they had been hauled back from the very brink of disaster. Relief was tarnished for many by the feeling that British security had been won at the cost of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and German annexation of the Sudetenland, and by the betrayal of a brave and blameless nation; but it was relief nonetheless. That afternoon of 30 September, in Labour Fulham, just 10 per cent of people surveyed in an opinion poll declared themselves 'Anti-Chamberlain'; 54 per cent were 'Pro' and the rest unsure.[8]

There were two consequences of Munich for London that are worth noting here. First, the exodus of late September led some Londoners to reappraise their connection to the city. This impacted on all classes, though generally it needed a little money to make it happen, and two contrasting instances might be left to represent many. Middle-class V. S. Pritchett, a successful freelance writer, and his wife decided to abandon their flat near Little Venice, Maida Vale: 'Our daughter was a year old; my wife was pregnant again. We wisely went to live in the country,' taking a farmhouse near Newbury, west Berkshire, where they remained till near the end of the war. And Arthur Newens, a small-time haulage contractor from Bethnal Green with a young family, 'frantic with the general talk about air raids,' used his wife's inheritance to build a bungalow at North Weald, near Epping, moving there in April 1939.[9]

Second, even among those who stayed, the feeling that war was increasingly likely in the foreseeable future began to penetrate the thinking of all classes of Londoner. Munich made ARP a living reality. Before Munich, ARP numbers were low and it was only the enthusiast who had volunteered for a service that most people were doubtful would be needed. After, even though the numbers in ARP dropped away somewhat once the crisis had passed, few could doubt that it was something worth putting effort into. Now there was a general realisation that families and individuals needed to consider the consequences for themselves and their loved ones of protection against air raids.

The Munich crisis of September 1938 has often been described since as a 'dress rehearsal' for the real show that would later break on London and the Londoner. Well, this was a dress rehearsal where almost none of the actors had learned their lines and where most of the scenery failed to turn up. This great crisis of unreadiness would need to focus minds wonderfully.[10]

On ARP Sunday, with the Munich crisis in full spate, the East Acton branch of the Association of Old Contemptibles held their annual parade on Shepherd's Bush Green. The irony of these men in their forties and fifties who had fought in one war, while preparations were advancing all around them for their sons and daughters to fight in another, was not lost on their friends and supporters. Now, indeed, these same men were urged by the Mayors of Hammersmith and Acton to 'do their bit' once more, this time by volunteering for the ARP services and other arms of civil defence, and many no doubt did so.[11]

The shadow of one war thus overlay the approach of another. For Londoners who had lived in the capital for thirty years or more, the memories of war and London's place in it were fresh in every mind. Thought of a new war inevitably drew memory back to what the previous conflict had meant on the home front – the endless queues, shortages, rationing, air raids and the perils of the blackout. But the war lay not just in the past. In many ways the First World War had helped make London the extraordinarily thriving city that it had become by 1938. The great manufacturing districts of west London that sprang up to make munitions and aeroplanes from 1915 to 1918 had not lain fallow long after the Armistice. Thousands of new jobs in west London especially, but also in north-east London along the Lea Valley and in south-west London along the Wandle, helped draw labour to London in unprecedented numbers. London in the twenty years before 1938 had been the brightest star in the nation's economic firmament, rivalled (but not matched) only by the West Midlands manufacturing belt centred on Coventry and Birmingham. With the demand for labour came demand for housing, and then the reciprocal requirement for commodities to fit out new homes, most of those consumer durables assembled in London factories. It was a virtuous circle that seemed to know no bounds.

The figures charting London's prosperity in the interwar period were stupendous. In the twenty years from 1918 to 1939 London doubled in size on the ground, the built-up area now thirty-four miles across

from east to west. In these years some 860,000 homes were built in Greater London; in the peak year of 1934 they were being run up at 1,500 every week. The population growth was staggering – double the rate of the rest of the country. London's net increase of 1,228,000 people was equivalent to one third of the growth of the national population as a whole. In suburban London outside the LCC boundary, 810,000 were added in the 1920s (equivalent to the population of Manchester) and 900,000 more in the 1930s (like adding Birmingham's population to London). In 1939 more than one in every five persons resident in England and Wales was a Londoner. In that year the capital's population reached 8,728,000 – a figure not attained again until 2015. Fundamentally this was growth in outer London rather than in London's centre as the capital rapidly became a city of new suburbs. Most Londoners, over 4.7 million people, now lived in suburban London, many in houses less than twenty years old. One effect of this urban expansion was not just to bring people to London but also to draw people away from the older centre, the LCC area, whose population shrank by some 470,000 over the same period.[12]

This extraordinary period of growth would have important consequences for London as it faced the prospect of another war. One was the impact of an inchoate maze of local government bodies whose functions were now transformed and magnified by London's relentless growth, with formerly rural districts becoming urban townships within a decade or two. Greater London (as defined by the Metropolitan Police District) contained ninety-five local authorities responsible for most day-to-day functions safeguarding public health, local roads and lighting, refuse collection and so on. Above them, with some overreaching powers, lay six county councils – London, Middlesex, and parts of Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent and Surrey. Each authority, directly elected by the residents, clung tightly to its own domain. The resulting confusing patchwork was generally acknowledged to be a preposterous and obsolete mess.[13]

Second, there were very few who thought that London's growth was a cause for celebration. On the contrary, this modern megalopolis provoked much wrath, and for many reasons. Its size was a problem, because Londoners had to travel long distances both to work and to open countryside. Its tendency to grow yet further was a problem because its restless appetite for building land meant it would swallow even more rural scenery. Its suburbs were a problem because their terraced houses were repetitive and dull and because the people who

lived in them were thought to be small-minded, materialistic, selfish and unimaginative. Its economic dynamism was a problem because it siphoned industry from other parts of the country and seized more than its fair share of the few new jobs created in these years of general depression; and because it sucked the vitality from more needy parts of Great Britain by encouraging young and talented people of both sexes to abandon their home communities to seek a life of glitter in the metropolis. In all these ways, London was a threat to the nation and – so was the pretty universal consensus in the late 1930s that crossed party-political boundaries but was especially strong on the centre left – it needed to be cut down to size: not just stopped from growing further but actively diminished.[14]

Even worse, London threatened the nation in one more way that might, indeed, prove fatal. Here was London, the seat of government and of the crown and empire, the hub of the nation's rail and road network, the greatest port in Europe if not the world, the prime location of courts and the law, of print media and broadcasting, of the best teaching hospitals in the country and much of the nation's electrical engineering and aircraft production. Yet London was also the biggest bombing target on earth, where air raids would not just distemper the lives of Londoners but might paralyse the nation's capacity to defend itself in war.

This was not just the worry of an overwrought imagination. London had already suffered under bombing and had suffered for a time quite badly. The Zeppelin raids of 1915–16 had been episodically frightening, but most Londoners had taken them in their stride. The daylight raids of the summer of 1917 had been an affront to national pride and caused considerable loss of life, but they were few and daylight eliminated many terrors. But the night raids by huge biplanes in the autumn and winter of 1917–18 had badly shaken Londoners' nerves. Deadly panic around places of shelter, the evacuation from London of those who could afford to leave, with trekking to bed down in forests and open spaces on London's edge for those who could not, the rush to the tube – over 300,000 sheltering underground one night in September 1917, far more than at any time in the war to come – all these raised question marks over how London would react in a new war where modern bombers with greater ordnance might cause catastrophic damage.[15]

These fears of a modern air war were stoked higher and higher during the years that followed the Armistice. There were some notable

contributing factors. First was a forensic analysis in the 1920s and 1930s of the impact of bombing on London in the First World War that measured the grim effectiveness of German high explosives on property and people and calculated what it might do in future. Second, bombing entrenched itself as an alarming feature of modern warfare, especially in the 1930s: Italy used mustard gas and high explosives to overrun Abyssinia in 1936, and German- and Italian-backed rebel forces under General Franco used bombing to devastating effect in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9. Third, a fascination with bombing in fiction and film was an important strand in British popular culture that reached its apogee in H. G. Wells's science fiction novel of 1933, *The Shape of Things to Come*. Filmed unforgettably by Alexander Korda in 1936, it showed great cities laid waste and popularised the notion of mass air attack destroying for ever the fragile trappings of contemporary civilisation.[16]

Official views of the likely casualties per ton of bombs dropped grew more and more pessimistic in the interwar period. In 1924 Whitehall estimated that the first week of bombing would produce 55,000 casualties of which one third would be fatal; but in 1937 a week's likely casualties were now estimated to be 200,000 of whom 66,000 would die.[17] Added to this were fears of a great super-raid at the beginning of an air war in which the aggressor threw everything at the target, aiming for a 'knockout blow'. Official casualty estimates were kept secret. But well-informed anxieties were brought home to the public by commentators who had long been trusted as experts on warfare, chief among them Basil Liddell Hart, a Great War army officer critical of Allied frontal attacks on the Western Front. Hart was a man of his class and expected the worst of those beneath him. He kept pulses racing with forecasts of the effects of attacks on London: 'Business localities and Fleet Street wrecked, Whitehall a heap of ruins, the slum districts maddened into the impulse to break loose and maraud, the railways cut, factories destroyed.' That was in 1924. Nine years later, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, he predicted that four out of ten Londoners would flee the city after a gas attack and eight out of ten within a week. And in 1935, amid much more of the same, Tom Wintringham, a communist and Spanish Civil War veteran, wrote that under air attack 'massive fires would render London uninhabitable and result in the deaths of several hundred thousand citizens'.[18]

Hindsight allows us to see these forecasts as grossly exaggerated, but who could think so at the time? Winston Churchill for one was haunted

from 1933 on by fears of what might happen to his beloved London, should standing up to Hitler's aggression actually lead to war. This is how he saw London, and its position as the strategic weakness for the nation in the event of war from the air, in speeches in the House of Commons in February and July 1934:

> This cursed, hellish invention and development of war from the air has revolutionised our position. We are not the same kind of country we used to be when we were an island, only twenty years ago … We are a rich and easy prey. No country is so vulnerable and no country would repay better pillage than our own. With our enormous Metropolis here, the greatest target in the world, a kind of tremendous fat cow, a valuable fat cow tied up to attract the beasts of prey, we are in a position in which we have never been before, and in which no other country in the world is at the present time.[19]

It is worth stressing at this point that for Churchill, as for others, it was the sheer size of London that was considered its greatest vulnerability. London was the unmissable bullseye.

The 'passive defence' of Britain's cities and ports had been a matter of concern in Whitehall since the early 1920s. Of all the nation's defensive difficulties, though, London was the most intractable: that enormous size for one thing and its keystone position in the national arch for another, which meant that London's vulnerability undermined national security as a whole. London's defence was made most difficult of all by the confusing plethora of local authorities who would be called on as London's front line in the event of bombardment, and so the problem of coordination and leadership was in the front of defence planners' minds from the beginning.

In fact, there was an apparent solution to the coordination problem ready to hand. The fraught years of civil and industrial unrest after the First World War had spawned a Civil Emergency Organisation, which divided the country into regions to coordinate civilian and military responses to a national emergency. It had been blooded in the General Strike of May 1926 and was thought to have worked well. Greater London, as defined by the Metropolitan Police District, would become Civil Defence Region No. 5 in an eventual twelve-region structure for Great Britain. London Civil Defence Region (LCDR) would be led by

one senior 'regional commissioner' with two more regional commissioners to assist.[20]

The arduous task of readying the country for civilian defence against an air war proceeded by way of a Whitehall steering group, the Air Raid Protection Committee, set up under the chairmanship of the country's most brilliant civil servant, Sir John Anderson, in 1924. The rise of Hitler to power in Germany during 1933 heightened the urgency with which the committee began to address its work. The first public step to define the responsibilities of local government – the front line of ARP – was a Home Office circular issued in July 1935 which told councils what would be expected of them but failed to indicate who would pay for the work to be done. In these early years the government's major achievement was the design and production of gas masks from 1936 to 1937. Though the programme was incomplete for young children, here was tangible evidence of at least some state of readiness when the Munich crisis hit home.[21]

An Air Raid Precautions Act of 1937 put local authorities under the statutory obligation to prepare and implement ARP schemes from 1 January 1938. The content of the schemes depended on the services which each of the ninety-five lower-tier councils and the six counties were already running. London's county councils included the LCC, the premier local government organisation in the country, with the spending power and bureaucratic expertise of a small European country. Its political leader was Herbert Morrison, not just a councillor on the LCC but MP for Hackney South, a key figure in the Parliamentary Labour Party and an ex-Minister of Transport.[22] The council governed what would later be known as inner London with a population in 1939 of just over 4 million, including many of the country's richest, and not a few of its poorest, among its citizens. The LCC, Middlesex County Council (whose area north of the Thames was wholly within Greater London) and the remaining four counties which governed far wider areas than the London authorities within their remit, all provided major services needed in the event of an air attack.

The most important of all was the LCC. It was the fire authority for its area in charge of the London Fire Brigade (LFB), once again the most prestigious firefighting organisation in the country, perhaps the world. The LCC also ran the ambulance service for inner London and, with the other counties, was a major provider of hospitals and social welfare, including subsistence payments for the very poor. And

the council had responsibility for schools and children's welfare, including planning for the evacuation of children from London should that become necessary. Now, from New Year 1938, the LCC was given the additional tasks of providing rescue services (including shoring up and demolishing buildings damaged beyond repair by bombing) and establishing 'rest centres' for people made temporarily homeless by air attack; as plans developed some counties, notably Middlesex, devolved rest centre provision to local boroughs while paying the costs involved.

The ninety-five remaining London councils were not all equally constituted. Three county borough councils – West Ham and East Ham in the Essex portion of outer east London, and Croydon in outer south London, in the county of Surrey – were stand-alone authorities carrying out all local government functions. They ran their own fire brigades, ambulance services, hospitals, schools and so on and thus were given total responsibility for ARP functions normally split between counties and the lower tier. To make matters even more complicated, the lower tier itself was as variegated as rainforest foliage. First among equals were the twenty-eight metropolitan borough councils and the City Corporation, some governing populations that would dwarf many British cities: Wandsworth was home to 50,000 more people than Bradford, for instance, and Islington's population was greater than that of Huddersfield, Halifax and Doncaster put together. Although complicated hugely by the size of their populations, these boroughs had similar functional responsibilities to the smaller semi-rural authorities on London's outer edge, like Sunbury-on-Thames (Middlesex, 16,000) or Chigwell (Essex, 23,000). But in Middlesex and the other county areas, large urban authorities, like Ealing and Tottenham, ran their own fire services – there were some sixty-six fire brigades in London Region outside the LCC area, some covering more than one local authority's district; they also ran ambulance services, primarily for casualties of street accidents. On all of these authorities fell the new responsibilities of providing air raid wardens, stretcher parties, first aid posts, the distribution of gas masks and decontamination after gas or chemical attack, the billeting of homeless persons in local housing, the repair of bomb-damaged dwellings and the salvaging and storing of property of those who had lost their homes. And they were also given the most contentious and difficult responsibility of all: to provide shelter from air raids for their residents.[23]

The manpower and other resources for all these requirements had now, from 1938, to be detailed in a local ARP scheme submitted to the Home Office. Not all of London's 101 councils needed to make schemes – just forty had to do so, some submitting on behalf of others. But each submission would then be the subject of negotiations over the financial aid that would be forthcoming from central government. The submission process proved grindingly slow, the recruitment of ARP volunteers and their training haphazard and costly, and the arguments over what type of public shelter would be adequate in the circumstances of war unending. Everything was bedevilled too by politics. London's Labour authorities (which included seventeen of the twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs) were all in some way out of sympathy with Chamberlain's National Government and many were unwilling readily to do its bidding, offering numerous excuses for foot-dragging. Even boroughs with Conservative (Municipal Reform as they were known at the time) majorities had to contend with the general apathy of residents unwilling to convince themselves that air raid protection was either necessary or capable of implementation. Thus things stood at the Munich crisis of September 1938, when the country's – especially London's – unpreparedness was exposed for all to see.

It was as the crisis emerged on 15 September that the Senior Regional Commissioner for Greater London (Civil Defence Region No. 5) was established in post. This was the ubiquitous Sir John Anderson, drafted in at every crisis but specially qualified for this as having previously led ARP work in Whitehall. He was no longer a civil servant but a National Independent MP for the Scottish Universities, though his knowledge of government machinery remained unrivalled; in the months before Munich he had been dusting off evacuation plans for London. His appointment was testimony to the alarm felt in Cabinet over the chaos laid bare by Munich and the need for an urgent overhaul of ARP in London. Anderson helped set up an invigorated machinery to manage the interface between Whitehall and London's crazy-paving government. Within a month or two he found himself with new duties for ARP nationwide that would land him a seat in the Cabinet, leaving the senior regional commissioner's post vacant. But progress in coordinating key London services moved apace again once two new regional commissioners (the senior post remaining vacant) were installed in April 1939. These were Sir Ernest Gowers, a brilliant and experienced civil servant in the Anderson mould, and Admiral Sir Edward Evans,

compact and charismatic, a household name as a hero in arms in the First World War.[24]

Progress was fastest where services could be centrally led and where the fractured nature of London government had least effect. The LFB, under the aptly named Aylmer Firebrace, shouldered the burden of coordinating all brigades in London Region and of recruiting the 30,000 AFS men and women needed in London County alone. Each of the sixty London County fire stations identified six substations for AFS pumps and crews and similar arrangements were made in the rest of the London fire services. Other chief officers of the LCC were given the task of coordinating rescue and demolition squads, all locally based and so in close contact with borough ARP services. From this time too, the recruitment of a Metropolitan Police War Reserve of 20,000 officers would more than double the normal strength of London's police force. Among the new intake was War Reserve PC John Reginald Halliday Christie, stationed at Harrow from early 1939; he would begin his murderous career against women in Notting Hill while still in uniform.[25]

Integration of the new civil defence services with existing arrangements proved difficult, none more so than in London's fire brigades. The AFS were set apart from the regular London brigade. They had grey Home Office tenders, not the well-known red fire engines, and hoses which would connect to LFB hoses only by an adaptor. AFS men – AFS women were employed in fire stations only and not on pumps and ladders – were further distinguished from their regular colleagues by being issued with only one uniform (a problem when wet) and rubber wellington boots rather than the 'lovely leather boots' of the LFB. The AFS men complained they had lower pay and 'no conditions of service … No sick leave. No annual holidays'. Injuries on duty entitled men to two weeks' pay only. 'Many of the old professional firemen were bitterly opposed to the Auxiliary Fire Service. The newcomers were snubbed. The regulars were loath to take on the responsibility of instructing them.' All these obstacles would take time and shared danger to overcome. There was also work to be done in coordinating the sixty-six fire brigades in outer London. These were now to be grouped in five districts managed by an Assistant Regional Fire Officer; rivalries between the old brigades would have to be overcome here too.[26]

There were similar difficulties of rivalry and mutual distrust in the arrangements made for London's hospital services from 1938. Hospital

planning for war in the LCDR was based on sector arrangements, with London as a cake and ten slices meeting at the centre. Each slice was based on a London voluntary teaching hospital which took on responsibilities for hospital facilities in the rest of the sector. So Sector VIII, for instance, was based on St Thomas's Hospital on the south bank of the river in north Lambeth and included fifty-eight local authority and voluntary hospitals and nursing homes in south-west London and adjoining parts of Surrey and even Hampshire. This nominal unification had somehow to cope with different traditions, cultures, training methods, pay and conditions, all with the need to transfer staff, often urgently, between one institution and another.[27] No doubt similar difficulties on a smaller scale were experienced when the Port of London Authority (PLA) put together a River Emergency Service in the months after Munich. Seven Thames pleasure steamers were fitted out as 'ambulance ships' to rescue casualties from wharves and rivercraft, and private boat owners and their craft were enlisted to assist. The service set up a medical team of doctors and nurses – the latter famed for their good looks, according to the writer Anthony Powell, whose wife, Violet, was one of them.[28]

All these tasks of central coordination and leadership paled to nothing, however, before the difficulties of herding 101 local authorities to face the same way and move at the same pace in planning and implementing an ARP programme for London. Munich had given Londoners a great fright and, although the immediate danger of attack had receded, probably most now thought that war was likely in the short or medium term. As a consequence, the ARP took its place alongside the actively rearming navy, army and air force as the fourth arm of national defence. That alone had unblocked recruitment to the local ARP services run by both the boroughs and the counties, and although they were still 40 per cent under strength in October 1938 it seemed clear that the numbers and training would both be forthcoming.[29]

Shelters of the right type and in the right place presented a more intractable problem. Even here, though, there was one rapid step forward. A month or so after Munich, Sir John Anderson commissioned a design for a cheap but effective domestic shelter that could be installed in back gardens. The Anderson shelter, as it became generally christened, was the brainchild of an old friend of his, a Scottish engineer called William Paterson. He designed and patented the structure in three weeks, it took another three weeks to test the prototype and it was then rapidly

put into production. The first shelters were installed from February 1939, six curved steel sheets providing a tunnel some six and a half feet long by four and a half feet wide and capable of sheltering six people; they had to be dug two or three feet into the ground and then covered with soil. Provided by local councils, they were free to all households where the main breadwinner earned less than £5 a week (so free to the large majority of working-class families) and available to buy for £7 for those who were better off.[30]

If, however, where you lived had no garden – the case for most residents of Holborn, south Finsbury, south Shoreditch and other congested parts of inner London – then the Anderson was irrelevant and shelter needs had to be met in other ways. Many houses in such areas and elsewhere had basements and these, perhaps strengthened with timber beams, might be able to provide reasonable shelter. But if not then people had to rely on a public shelter of one sort or another. These proved generally problematic. Local authorities who had dug trenches in parks and open spaces during the Munich crisis were encouraged to complete the deepest of them and were given government aid to line and roof them in concrete; they were not, though, to be provided with duckboards (to keep shelterers off the wet floors) or with seating and were to be sealed until needed in wartime. In fact, progress in London was slow and many of the Munich trenches were abandoned and backfilled. So the trench programme was supplemented by strengthening the basements of public buildings – these years coincided with a flurry of town hall building in London, so shelters could be incorporated into the new structures, as at Barking, for instance – and some steel-framed industrial and commercial buildings were earmarked for use as public shelters, as had happened in the First World War.[31]

Though the eleven months between Munich and the declaration of war offered a 'breathing space', the result, in terms of shelter accommodation available to the public, seemed inadequate to most Londoners. Even before Munich, campaigns in London were under way to produce 'bomb-proof' shelters dug deep underground, and after the crisis there was a clamour that proved almost impossible to resist. The deep-shelter campaign had much popular support and was loudly voiced by a broad coalition of forces that included the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury, architectural firms with designs to sell, the crypto-communist scientist J. B. S. Haldane in his best-selling book of 1938, *A.R.P.* (he advocated 1,000 miles of brick-built tunnels seven feet wide, buried sixty feet deep

under London), and the Communist Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Party. But deep shelters were rejected by the government following advice from an expert committee reporting in February 1939. The practical difficulties of such a programme were immense – not just the formidable cost in money or the time they would take to excavate, but their inexhaustible demand for concrete, steel and labour at the expense of rearmament and other vital building programmes. There was also the class-based fear that the London worker, once safe underground, would not be tempted up again to keep the city running. This argument also militated against the use of London's underground railways as a deep shelter network, as they would be needed to transport people safely to and from work and also, it was thought, for the movement of casualties. Even so, the popular desire for deep shelters in London would not go away.[32]

With the difficulty of keeping Londoners safe from air attack only too evident, attention was turned to the parallel policy of evacuation as a means of removing Londoners from danger altogether. Evacuation plans had been in place at the time of Munich, but they were rushed, not thought through and luckily not tried out. The crisis over, however, new efforts, again led by Anderson, were made to perfect the means by which children and others thought to be a burden during attack could be removed. Greater London was divided into 'evacuation areas', including the whole of London County and all inner suburbs north and south of the river, and 'neutral areas' in the outer suburbs. Vulnerable people – children, mothers with young children and pregnant women, the frail elderly and people with disabilities – would be encouraged to leave the evacuation areas voluntarily, with transport laid on by the local authorities and the state taking responsibility for their billeting in the 'reception areas' beyond Greater London. The evacuation areas in London were home to nearly 7 million people. Dagenham Urban District, with a population of over 100,000 clustered around the giant Ford Motor Works, was unaccountably missed off the list of evacuation areas but was added after 'a vigorous protest'. The neutral areas (including, for instance, Wembley and Southgate in Middlesex, Chigwell in Essex, Bromley in Kent and Carshalton in Surrey) had a total population of 1.8 million. These districts were not officially to receive people evacuated from the centre, but neither would evacuation from them be assisted by the state, other than in exceptional cases.[33]

The main principles of evacuation – voluntary not compulsory, billeting in private homes in the reception areas enforced by law, the costs of billeting (rent and board) to be borne by the government but with parents and others who could afford it having to pay a contribution – were all in place before Munich. But the practical means of making possible this great movement of people (500,000 children in Greater London alone) were not in place when the September crisis struck. Now, during the months till August 1939, the finishing touches were put to the complex arrangements for transport by rail, road and riverboat; to the planning and publicity needed by schools, parents and health services; and to the reception of town children and their mothers in quiet country districts up and down the land. Matters were eased in London by the LCC taking responsibility for the transport arrangements of all evacuees in Greater London. Even so, the planning was fraught with fears, made worse by the sort of gloomy prognostications in respect of casualties that had bedevilled ARP planning throughout: in January 1939 it was confidently forecast that 3,000 children would be injured or killed – 'run over' or 'get wet through and die from pneumonia' – when being evacuated from London, even without an air raid in progress. In the spring and summer of 1939, school planning and training became almost non-stop. 'Air Raid Precautions swamped me,' Gladys Langford wrote in April, fretting nervously over her prospects at Hamond Square School, Hoxton: 'I'm almost distraught at the thought of being sent anywhere from "The Wash to Land's End" with children from whom I might not escape for years.'[34]

It wasn't just the schools who were planning for evacuation in the months following Munich. The London hospitals made plans to move all but critically ill patients away from London. Many government departments worked up arrangements to shift staff to safe country berths in the event of war. So too did London businesses, faced not just with the uncertain risk of destruction by bombing but, if they employed more than fifty people, with the certain costs if they stayed put of providing safe shelter for staff. Some were too big to move – Standard Telephones and Cables at New Southgate, for instance, had to provide shelter for 5,000 staff, driving concrete tunnels seven feet wide into an embankment at one end of the works. But for those more flexible, the *Estates Gazette* noted a huge demand for country houses from the middle of 1939: 'The list of historic mansions that have found a use by banks, insurance companies, shipping companies, and official

bodies is an incredibly long one.' Similarly, when London industries vital to rearmament sought to expand to meet government requirements they did so far from London: Napiers of Acton, in the process of developing a new aero engine in early 1939, moved its production to a site near Liverpool, Greater London's vulnerability as a target putting it wholly out of bounds. This followed a well-worn pattern of 'shadow factories' emerging from 1935 on, where London engineering firms identified plant in the countryside to enlarge production in the event of war: Fairey Aviation (Hayes) developed a shadow near Stockport, Ford (Dagenham) assembled Merlin engines at Trafford Park near Manchester, Handley Page (Cricklewood) built Halifax bombers outside York and so on. All this was the reverse of tendencies in the First World War, when munitions industries had flocked to London to be close to labour supplies and communications networks.[35]

In March 1939 Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, ripping up the agreement he had made with Chamberlain just six months before. He looked unlikely to stop there. A war waged by Britain and France to stop Germany's ruthless ambitions appeared to many as both necessary and inevitable. For the next five months the work of constructing – it would be an exaggeration to say perfecting – air raid precautions in London quickened noticeably. How did things stand in London's localities by the end of the summer of 1939?

The first thing to note is that everywhere was at a different stage. Some (including Labour boroughs like Finsbury and Bermondsey) had embraced the need for ARP only reluctantly, either through disagreement with the National Government's defence policies or through a latent pacifism. Others (like Labour Hackney and Conservative Kensington, for instance) had been energetic from the start. Residents in some boroughs (Finsbury, Holborn, parts of Westminster and Southwark) had only a restricted ability to take advantage of the Anderson shelter. The tube network, out of bounds at this stage to ARP planners, still gave some comfort to Londoners with sharp memories of 1917–18, but it was of little help to the millions living south of the Thames. All this meant that where in London you lived and worked was critical in determining how safe you might feel should the air war eventually come, and these local differences could not be overcome by even the most energetic central coordination from London's regional commissioners.

Even so, progress had been made everywhere since Munich, though nowhere could it be said to be complete.

Poplar, for instance, a working-class borough with deep Labour and pacifist roots, might have been thought a likely laggard in response to ARP propaganda. Not so. In unpromising terrain, vulnerable to mass bombing because of its proximity to the docks and with parts of the borough easily cut off should roads and bridges be destroyed, Poplar had provided shelter for 80,000 in trenches or Andersons (for a peacetime population of some 140,000) and had all its thirty-five wardens' posts staffed, by paid wardens and volunteers. Next-door Stepney, covering much of the politically turbulent Jewish East End and some disorderly riverside districts around Cable Street, had rejected LCDR's advice that the borough ARP controller should be a council officer like the town clerk. Instead it had put a councillor into the position, the leader of the Labour group, M. H. 'Morrie' Davis. That would eventually prove problematic, but by July 1939, after a door to door canvass, some 89 per cent of an ARP establishment of 6,559 paid staff and volunteers had been enrolled; even so, only 53 per cent of wardens, the council's front line, were at their scheduled posts.[36]

Indeed, wardens' posts were cropping up all over London and in the unlikeliest places. There were 117 in Wandsworth, including a concrete blockhouse on a Streatham roundabout; others were made of prefabricated sheet steel, mass-produced as a commercial venture and sold to local authorities in Middlesex and Essex; others were more homely – Dickens House Museum at 48 Doughty Street was Post No. 36 for St Pancras Metropolitan Borough Council, with the Dickens Fellowship's assistant secretary, Miss Minards, as post warden. Bethnal Green's warden service could do with just eleven posts staffed by 239 paid workers and 300 part-time volunteer wardens, many women among them – its stretcher parties comprised 241 men and 142 women. Paddington had enrolled an ARP staff of 2,140 of whom 342 were paid full-timers, in twenty wardens' posts; 31 per cent of the staff were women, a typical proportion, with women frequently in senior positions as post wardens. As for shelters, at this point the Anderson played a big part. One third of Fulham's houses had them, for instance, and they were ubiquitous in the suburbs – there were some 30,000 Andersons in Lewisham for a peacetime population of around 230,000, a fair proportion of the borough if each could fit six persons. Even

so, public confidence in the availability and suitability of air raid shelters remained low. Gallup public opinion surveys in the first half of 1939 found that 72 per cent could not reach a shelter within seven minutes of a warning, and a majority (53 per cent) continued to call for the deep shelters that the government had said it would not provide.[37]

ARP in London was still very much work in progress as the final days of peace began to give out. Improvisation, quick thinking, making do with what came to hand and making the best of a bad job were still the watchwords of the hour. Because of London's size and administrative complexity, the twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs and the City were divided into five groups for purposes of mutual assistance and coordination, providing a subregional structure on top of the local warden arrangements. In Group 3 (the City, Holborn, Finsbury, Bethnal Green, Shoreditch, Stepney, Hackney and Poplar) – home between them to some 750,000 in peacetime – the scratch headquarters were not set up till mid-August 1939, in a basement office behind Shoreditch parish church used by the LCC's Weights and Measures Department. Group ARP staff 'cleared aside the packing-cases filled with glasses, mugs and measures sent for testing, scales and instruments undergoing examination, and a variety of general stores. Within that little space they disentangled from their trailing wires, and arranged in order the dusty, newly installed telephone instruments, and laid out maps, tally-boards and message pads … Then, for over an hour, the new London operational network was tried for the first time. It worked successfully.' There was no canteen in the building but there were compensations because the local pub provided beer and sandwiches, served by 'a big, blonde barmaid, who must surely have been on the music-hall stage in an earlier life' if her wit and good cheer were anything to go by.[38]

Who were these people in ARP? Many were local government staff, especially those working in the ARP control rooms in town hall basements and annexes; the rest were a more or less representative cross-section of Londoners. Mass Observation, the social survey organisation established in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, a South African-born poet and journalist, interviewed a thousand ARP volunteers in Fulham in April 1939. The proportion of men (69 per cent) and women (31 per cent) was precisely the same as Paddington's but Mass Observation was interested in class too: 13 per cent, they concluded, were upper class, 23 per cent middle class,

54 per cent 'artisan' or upper working class and just 10 per cent unskilled working class. This was skewed towards the better-off and better-educated – perhaps the bossier classes – but it is important to remember that the rescue and demolition squads employed by the LCC, counties and county boroughs were of a different class altogether. Joan Wyndham, firmly one of the 13 per cent, was a student actress at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in Bloomsbury and about eighteen years old in 1939. She lived with her divorced mother and her mother's female companion in South Kensington. All three joined up to serve at the local first aid post. At an ARP concert later that year, 'My mother was down with the nobs, I was in the gallery with Decontamination and Demolition – the most awful collection of toughs and villains.'[39]

Besides all these advances in the boroughs, progress had been made in other directions too. The London fire services had geared up since Munich. The London AFS had received 2,000 extra pumps by the autumn of 1939, many drawn by 2,381 adapted London taxicabs, their tight turning-circle thought to be especially handy; thirty extra fire boats for the river were delivered or commissioned, the LCC now made responsible for fire services to the mouth of the Thames at Holehaven; and many water mains had been uprated to twenty-four-inch diameter and connected to the river and the Grand Union Canal.[40]

How to build esprit de corps in these variegated ARP services in London, around some 200,000 strong in all, was a puzzle. Uniforms and specialist equipment would eventually help, but they were in short supply in the summer and autumn of 1939. One way was to organise public exercises and reviews – bringing home to Londoners the value and civic status of services still seeking volunteers. The LFB and London AFS organised a review in Hyde Park before the Duke and Duchess of Kent on Saturday 3 June, with 20,000 men and women on parade in front of a vast crowd, many relatives and friends no doubt among them. The spectacular show included a 'turntable ladder drill in which three steel ladders shot 100 ft. into the air with firemen at their heads, making an arch of water high above'. And in early July the King and Queen reviewed a march past of 20,000 ARP men and women: when the Lambeth contingent passed, a crowd of onlookers 'broke spontaneously into laughing cries of "Oi" and hummed the "Lambeth Walk"', from *Me and My Gal*, the West End stage hit of that year. A month later there would be a trial blackout in the early morning of 10 August, its usefulness dented by the numbers of car drivers coming into central

London to see the effects, and there were local dry runs, imagining bombing raids with casualties caught in the open. Frances Faviell, a thirty-four-year-old painter, was an ARP volunteer in Chelsea, a mixed borough but one boasting many artists in residence. Chelsea organised a full-scale public exercise on 19 June 1939, ARP workers dressed in a uniform of local Chelsea design, where the official wailing air raid siren sounded for the first time in London. Frances was a casualty and spent much time lying down until eventually comprehensively bandaged. The longueurs got the better of some:

> Old Granny from Paradise Row left her allotted place and started away determinedly in the direction of her home. 'Raid's still on, come back!' shouted a warden at her. 'Call of nature, can't do nothing about that, raid or no raid,' she retorted, and marched resolutely away … Next day we read in the Press that it had been an unqualified success.

And a month later, on 19 July, an evacuation rehearsal of 5,000 schoolchildren and their teachers took place, also in Chelsea.[41]

By the middle of August it became apparent that the 'breathing space' won by the shabby capitulation at Munich was at last running out of puff. As Hitler had long planned, German claims for a land passage across the Danzig corridor separating East Prussia from the rest of 'the Reich' were now escalated into demands to recover all territory lost to Poland at Versailles in 1919. The British and French governments reiterated their commitment to defend Polish independence. After days of ever-tightening tension and escalating border clashes, Neville Chamberlain returned to London from his holidays on Monday 21 August.

That evening the staggering news broke that Hitler and Stalin had agreed a mutual non-aggression pact. Rhona Little, a shorthand typist at the Euston Tax District in Bloomsbury, saw the news on a paper-seller's placard on her way into work next morning and the day after signed on for ARP duties. Training began that same day: 'I had a headache on the way back to 22 [Canonbury Park North, Highbury, where she lodged] from taking sniffs of phosgene, mustard and lewisite gases.' On Thursday 24 August Parliament was recalled and an Emergency Powers Act giving the crown draconian powers over property and people passed all its stages that same day. At the Nag's Head Corner, Holloway, that evening Rhona watched 'a lot of men busy painting the

kerbs black and white'. Senior civil servants were summoned to London from their holidays and all leave was cancelled at the BBC, where the entrance hall of Broadcasting House in Portland Place 'looked like King's Cross on Christmas Eve' as staff packed for evacuation to the country. Air raid drills were becoming commonplace everywhere. At the Euston tax office it took just three minutes for everyone to be hustled into the basement shelter; Mr Bartlett, the office air raid warden, declared himself 'very pleased'. In the streets, sandbags were again piled in great walls round government buildings and more trenches were dug by day and night in the parks. Blackout shades were fitted to traffic lights, blinds to shop windows and brown paper pasted over fanlights. The trams ran with shaded light bulbs. Treasures were being moved by pantechnicon from the British Museum, which buried the Elgin Marbles and more in the disused Aldwych tube tunnels, and from the National Gallery, which closed on 24 August as staff evacuated pictures to deepest Wales. Those who could afford it stocked their larders with dried foods and tins, and the prudent bought lots of candles because 'when the bombing starts … the lights will all fail'. Trenches were being dug in back gardens as Anderson shelters were now hastily installed at what seemed like the last minute. Great silver barrage balloons, tethered in the gardens of squares and any other available open space, floated in the bright sunshine. Gas masks were issued to those without them and for the first time these were available for babies – toddlers still had to go without. For many, though, all this seemed less of a shock to the system compared to Munich. Virginia Woolf, removing her things from one Bloomsbury house to another, thought London responded with 'indifference almost', Londoners adapting to a fatalistic feeling that this time there was no escape from war. Others felt the tension more acutely: at the Euston tax office Rhona Little, still in her teens, a newcomer to London and perhaps missing her family in Northern Ireland, thought, 'Everyone felt out of sorts. Two were feeling physically sick and I didn't feel quite A1 myself, so there was deep gloom.'[42] On Monday 28 August, the London schools were opened for an evacuation practice on a mass scale, the children armed with gas masks, luggage and a packed lunch; they were reported to have had great fun, the teachers one imagines less so – Gladys Langford was one of those who had already (on 25 August) been temporarily signed off work with nervous ill health. Perhaps there should have been a practice in Whitehall, for Wednesday 30 August proved a day of confusion in government as the order to

trigger the evacuation of London was given by the Prime Minister but then retracted with some difficulty; fortunately, the perplexed Minister of Transport noted, the confusion was kept from the press. Then, on Thursday 31 August, the order to evacuate Greater London's school-children, mothers with young children and pregnant women was finally passed by the Ministry of Health to the LCC for implementation on the following day. The London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) announced that all London's rail network, above ground and below, would be needed for evacuation on Friday and some days after and most Green Line suburban coaches stopped running at 7 p.m. on Thursday evening to help with evacuation next day. That day too Scotland Yard announced emergency changes to the London road network next morning to give those wishing to leave London by car a clear run. Nine main routes were made one-way out of London and sealed to incoming traffic, including Western Avenue, Finchley Road and Hendon Way to the north and west, Clapham Road to the south, King's Road in Chelsea to the south-west and dozens more.[43]

It was all just in time. Without warning, in the early hours of Friday 1 September, Germany invaded Poland by land and by air.

2

OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR: 1 SEPTEMBER 1939–9 APRIL 1940

London was on a war footing from Friday 1 September, two days before Britain declared war on Germany. The great movement of people fleeing 'the greatest target in the world' was under way from early morning. The official evacuation overseen by the LCC had to deal with astonishing numbers: 393,700 unaccompanied children in school parties; 257,000 mothers and their children under five years old; 5,600 pregnant women; 2,400 'Blind persons, cripples and other special classes'; and around 48,250 teachers and helpers – over 700,000 people from Greater London. Nearly 6,000 London buses and Green Line coaches moved the children from 1,600 assembly points to 172 tube stations and then ninety-eight London railway stations, including all the main termini and many in the suburbs. Some journeys proved more exciting than others. From the Ford jetty at Dagenham nearly 17,000 were lifted off by pleasure steamer from 8 o'clock on a beautiful morning to the East Anglian ports of Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Felixstowe.[1]

The original plan had been to move these huge numbers in four days, but at the last minute it was decided to complete the exercise in three. Whatever the justification, the outcome was dire, for rather than keep school parties together it became vital to fill every train as it stood on the platform irrespective of destination. Euan Wallace, the Minister of Transport, watched the 9.27 a.m. leave Hornsey station, in his constituency: 'Everyone seemed cheerful and even the effort of pushing 825 people into a train only scheduled for 800 at the rate of 14 per compartment did not unduly depress them.' The task was made easier by the numbers transported being well short of what had been expected. Despite schools' best efforts to enlist parental support over many months

just 49 per cent of London County's schoolchildren turned up at the assembly points compared to the 80 per cent expected. On the Ford jetty, 'Many changed their minds even on the point of embarkation', and no doubt similar stories played out at every one of the LCC's gathering points and on station platforms.[2]

The task of getting the children and those adults identified as vulnerable out of London was generally thought to have gone 'without a hitch'. 'This Evacuation Business Has Shown the World' what a free people might achieve when they put their mind to it, enthused the *Daily Herald* on 4 September, and indeed in those early days there seemed much to crow about. It was an even more impressive achievement given the uncountable private evacuations of children from London going on in these same three hectic days. There were whole schools, from the grandest, like Westminster School, which removed to Lancing College in Sussex and later to Exeter – there would be no boys' voices in the Abbey choir for the duration – to the humblest, like a small Orthodox Jewish day school in West Hampstead, shipped out to 'sleepy' Little Houghton near Northampton, where 'The villagers had never set eyes on Jews before' and were astonished to find that 'the children wouldn't eat' until kosher meals were sent from London. And there was a host of individual migrations of children of all classes: Maurice Goymer, his father a motor engineer with a business in East Ham, was sent to a farming uncle in rural Essex; Dolly Scannell left Goodmayes, Ilford, with her sister and her children to stay in Wales with a relative; and Bryan Magee, his father a gent's outfitter in Hoxton Street, Shoreditch, was dispatched to his grandmother in Worth, Sussex, though his school had moved to Market Harborough, Leicestershire. There were untold moves of this kind, some purely temporary and others lasting till the war's end.[3]

The London diaspora beginning from 1 September had numerous other components, as we shall see, but one of the features of that day and the next was the evacuation of the central London hospitals. All patients fit enough to move and many staff clambered aboard Green Line coaches, specially fitted to receive stretcher cases, and travelled out to the receiving hospitals in their sectors. The policy imperative was to free up as many beds as possible in central London for the casualties expected from bombing and to adapt the hospitals for use in air raids. St Thomas's, for instance, had installed emergency operating theatres in the hospital's basement and transformed itself into a 'casualty