

Don't let Colonel Blimp ruin the Home Guard

By GEORGE ORWELL

It seems a long time—actually it is a mere seven months—since the million-and-a-quarter men who rushed to enrol themselves in the Local Defence Volunteers, some day, there might be rifles for a few of them. But that is the rest a long time—always supposing that the rifles were produced.

By the late autumn those Local Defence Volunteers (now the Home Guard) had developed into a formidable army, well equipped with rifles, machine guns, anti-tank bombs and gas masks, and above all with a firm organisation calculated to get the best out of its numbers.

How came it that the Home Guard will actually be, of course, depends on what form the invasion takes. Against a heavy mechanised attack, concentrated on a single area, a poorly trained force may be comparatively ineffective. On the other hand, against a more diffused kind of invasion, with parachute troops and air-borne infantry and light tanks, the Home Guard may play a part almost as important as that of the Regular Army itself.

Growing up in a hurry, with, at first, not much help from above, the Home Guard had to develop its own organisation, and naturally it did so on a very local basis.

Its essential tactical unit is a group of ten or twenty men, well known to one another and all of them intimately acquainted with a small area of town or country—exactly the right unit for guerrilla or street fighting or dealing with Fifth Columnists.

But the greatest importance of the Home Guard hitherto has been as a political symbol. By coming into existence and still more by holding together, it has demonstrated what the common people of this island feel about Nazism.

During an harassing month the Home Guard has not diminished greatly in numbers, except through the loss of young volunteers.

Men already working long hours in offices or factories have given up nothing up to twenty hours a week of their spare time, unpaid except for the "subsistence money" of three shillings which they receive when they spend a night out of town.

They have passed their nights on sentry-box, their Saturday afternoons on the drill-ground or the rifle-range, their evenings dismantling machine guns in draughty halls—and they have done this without any form of compulsion whatever.

The Home Guard is a purely voluntary organisation. No kind of punishment exists in it, except dismissal—which, as everyone is well enough known, is practically never necessary.

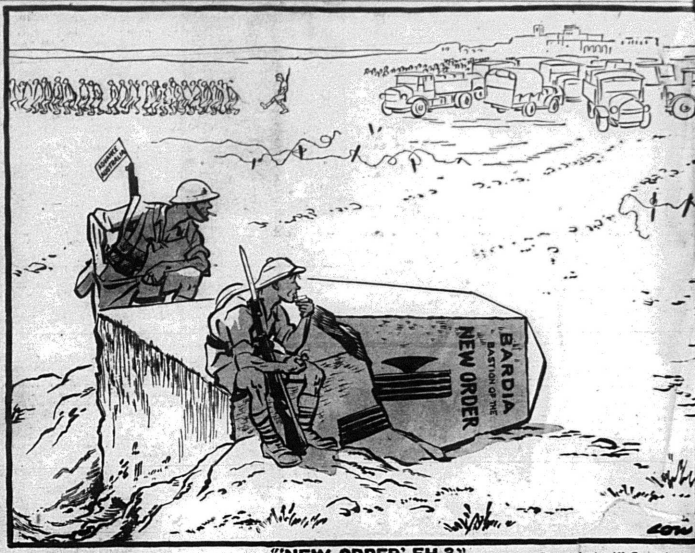
EVEN if immediate danger of invasion reaches the Home Guard it is likely to continue in existence. There is every talk of retaining it as a post-war formation. Its political development is therefore its greatest importance. For no army is ever really non-political.

The driving force behind the Home Guard has been the common man's perception that British democracy is very far from being a sham. It came into existence because the common man is still a democrat.

It is therefore the greatest pity that the country has been led to believe democratic than the spirit of its rank and file. The Home Guard is almost entirely in the hands of richer members, all too often retired, whose main military experience was gained before machine guns were developed in the least of any position above the rank of platoon commander.

It is not, indeed, a purely full-time job, and can therefore only be done, unpaid, by someone with a little spare time. This inevitable, perhaps the retired colonels into the high command.

Perhaps in the last few months there has been a little too much of the spirit of Colonel Blimp and the old soldier who has been used in the past to lead a regiment of riflemen, but who are a positive danger to an irregular force engaged for guerrilla fighting.



"NEW ORDER, EH?"

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WITH the onset of winter and the failure of the invasion to materialise, more and more time has been devoted to parade-ground drill and more and more stress laid on boot-cleaning and boot-shipping.

Precious evenings which could have been spent in learning to use rifles scientifically have been spent in sloping and ordering them. And the olive-leaf-bayonet view of war, excellent enough as practised by regular troops in Albania or Egypt against Italians, has gained ground to some extent at the expense of national better suited to volunteers acting on their own ground (for such are the Home Guard) which a few enlightened soldiers have tried so valiantly to disseminate at the Home Guard training schools at Hurlingham and Osterley Park.

The rank and file have not missed the significance of this, nor of the tendency to give all commands to the middle and upper classes.

It is not that they grumble—at any rate they don't do so more than Englishmen, in the Army or out of it, always grumble. But they know, especially the old soldiers among them, that a part-time force cannot emulate the regulars in parade-ground smartness, and ought not to try, since it needs all the time it can get for the more important arts of shooting, bomb-throwing, map reading, distance-judging, taking cover and building slit-trenches and fortifications.

These old soldiers do not question the value of drill. They know that a soldier's first job is to obey and that, on the whole, the regiments which are best on the parade-ground are best in the field.

Even irregular troops suffer in moral unless they march in step, carry their bodies smartly and keep their equipment as well as their weapons clean. But that does not mean that a working-man with two or three medals on his chest wants to spend his evenings in dressing by the right or fixing bayonets by numbers.

IN any army the spirit of Colonel Blimp and the spirit of Osterley Park must struggle together to some extent. The danger of letting Colonel Blimp have too much the better of it is that he may end by driving working-class volunteers away.

It would be hard from every point of view a disaster if the Home Guard lost its all-national, anti-Fascist character, and developed into a sort of Conservative Party militia, like a middle-section of a public-school O.T.C.

The working classes flocked into its ranks at the beginning, and still greatly predominate there. They saw in it the possibility of a democratic People's Army in which they could take a crack at the Nazis without being bawled at by the sergeant-major in the old-fashioned style. And let there be no mistake about it, the Home Guard is much nearer to being that than to being the other thing. The men who are in it are proud to be there, they have done their job willingly and they are conscious of having learnt a lot. But if they had the chance to speak there are three or four criticisms they would make.

They would like to spend more time in training for war and less in training to do guard duty. They would like more—much more—ammunition and bombs to practice with.

They would like to be a little surer that promotion is on merit and has nothing to do with social rank. They would like a whole-time, paid personnel for some of the key jobs.

And they would appreciate it if rather more of their officers were under 30. Even as it stands, the Home Guard could only exist in a country where men feel themselves free.

The historian states can do great things, but there is one thing they cannot do, they cannot give. They can take a rifle and tell him to take it home and keep it in his bed like a wall of the working-class flat or the labourer's cottage. It is the symbol of duty.

IT IS OUR JOB TO SEE THAT IT STAYS THERE.



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