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### **A Domestic Rebellion: The Squatters' Movement of 1946.**

#### **Introduction**

In August 1946, tens of thousands of people, mainly ex-servicemen and their families, moved into empty military camps around Britain. Over the course of the occupations, more than 45,000 people were involved in the takeover of most of the military camps in Britain.<sup>2</sup> By early September the squattings had spread to hotels and flats. The episode achieved its greatest fame in the 'Great Sunday Squat' on 8 September, when around 1,500 people took over flats in Kensington, Pimlico and St John's Wood.<sup>3</sup> The story dominated the newsreels and newspapers for much of August and September 1946. Thousands of squatters stayed on in the camps for years afterwards, but the squatters' movement disappeared from public view as quickly as it had emerged.

This article examines the context of the occupations; notably the housing situation after World War II, their main events, their significance, and why they have been largely lost from view other than in television histories, local websites and folk memory. The occupation of military camps was far more long-lasting and numerically significant, and has been considerably less discussed, than the take-over of flats in central London. Thus

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over* (London: BBC/Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 68; James Hinton, 'Self-help and Socialism: The Squatters' Movement of 1946', *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (Spring 1988), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Thomas, *Villains' Paradise: Britain's Underworld from the Spivs to the Krays* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 44; Susan Cooper, 'Snoek Piquante', in Michael Sissons and Philip French (ed.), *The Age of Austerity 1945-51* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), p. 44.

more attention is given to the camps, with a focus on examples in the London suburbs. For convenience the term ‘squatters’ movement’ is used. But if a political or social movement requires an avowed and shared ideology, and a consciousness on the part of those involved that they belong to a discrete group, the squatters’ movement does not deserve the title. As will be suggested below, one of the key characteristics of the squatters was their eschewing of ideology. In their own minds, and as presented in much of the press, they were just decent people who wanted a home; and the fact that most were service people and their families led to a view among the general public, the press and much of government that this was no more than they were due.

As to secondary sources on the squatters of 1946, town, village and local history websites deal with individual occupations, but treat them as picturesque episodes from the area’s past rather than as part of a national series of events. In general, historians have written little about the subject (although social historians have shown more interest than political). Peter Hennessy’s and Kenneth Morgan’s political histories of the period, for instance, devote only a few lines to them; and while Hennessy wrote that the squatting movement ‘made Bevan’s personal position look very shaky’, he did not explain or enlarge on this.<sup>4</sup>

Paul Addison’s *Now the War is Over* provides a fuller account of the 1946 squatters than any other in book form.<sup>5</sup> But the best and most detailed treatment of all is James Hinton’s ‘Self-help and Socialism’.<sup>6</sup> This article, now more than twenty years old, and Paul Burnham’s 2009 paper ‘The Squatters of 1946’, are apparently the only essays or

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Hennessy, *Never Again – Britain 1945-51* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 174; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-51* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, pp. 65-70.

<sup>6</sup> Hinton, ‘Self-help’, 100.

papers which focus specifically on this subject and which can reasonably be described as academic.<sup>7</sup>

The following discussion suggests that general histories of the period may have neglected the subject in part because the squatters and the government succeeded in playing down its significance as a major act of civil disobedience. 'Popular' history, particularly when linked with television documentaries, has tended to deal with the squatters more fully (Addison's book was written to accompany a television series). This may partly be because, given the surviving newsreel footage and photographs, the occupations have significant visual interest. (It has also been reported of Andrew Marr that 'one of his watershed moments [when working on his book and television series *A History of Modern Britain*] occurred when he stumbled on the great squatting revolt of 1946'.<sup>8</sup>)

### **The Context**

The squatters' movement was a response to the severe, complex and intractable post-war housing crisis – a crisis worse even than that of 1918 – and one of the greatest challenges faced by the new Attlee administration. During both wars, the demands of wartime production meant that house-building was almost halted for the duration while the population needing homes grew; but in World War II there was the additional factor of damage to the housing stock from air raids, which had been minimal in World War I. According to official estimates, enemy action destroyed 218,000 homes and so severely damaged a further 250,000 as to make them uninhabitable.<sup>9</sup> In addition, only around

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Burnham, 'The Squatters of 1946', paper presented on 17 October 2009 to the Leeds Tenants' Federation Conference *Tenants' Movement: a hidden history*. At the time this article was being prepared, the *BBC History Magazine* carried a brief but useful article by Eugene Byrne on the 1946 squatters entitled 'A Very British Uprising' *BBC History Magazine*, 12: 6 (June 2011), 58-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, May 12 2007.

<sup>9</sup> A. E. Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain: a History* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 91, citing Ministry of Reconstruction, *Housing* (Cmd 6609, 1945), para 34.

190,000 houses were completed during the war, probably around a tenth of what might otherwise have been built.<sup>10</sup> Alan Holmans has estimated that the number of useable houses, taking account of enemy action and change of use for wartime purposes, fell by 400,000 between 1939 and 1945,<sup>11</sup> against a rise in the housing stock of nearly two million in the six years before the war.<sup>12</sup>

As to the demand for housing, Holmans estimated that the number of 'potential households' rose from approximately 12 million to approximately 13.2 million during the war.<sup>13</sup> He also estimated that while there were 500,000 more potential households than houses in 1939, this gap had grown to 2.1 million by the end of the war.<sup>14</sup> Holmans concluded that the housing shortage had never been as acute as in 1945 – the previous peak, after World War I, was 1.5 million.<sup>15</sup>

The political pressures were equally compelling. In his biography of Aneurin Bevan (who as Minister of Health was also responsible for housing), Michael Foot wrote that 'the housing shortages caused more anguish and frustration than any other of the nation's manifold post-war problems'.<sup>16</sup> The Labour government inherited the hugely ambitious commitment of its coalition predecessor to provide 'a separate dwelling for every family that wishes to have one'.<sup>17</sup> And despite the scale and urgency of the issue, Bevan required post-war council houses to be larger, and better built and equipped, than 1930s houses (a

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<sup>10</sup> A. E. Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain: a History* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from Marion Bowley, *Housing and the State 1919-44* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945), Table 2, p. 271.

<sup>13</sup> Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain*, pp. 92-3. Holmans' concept of 'potential households' - actual households plus married couples living in someone else's household - is a measure of housing demand; see Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain*, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-3 and Table IV.1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 2 – 1945-60* (London: Granada Paladin, 1975), p.59.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Reconstruction: Housing (Cmd 6609, 1945), cited in Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain*, p. 93; though Holmans does not record that this was a commitment of the coalition government.

requirement which did not survive Bevan's time as Minister), with both an upstairs and a downstairs toilet.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Labour's overall housing aspirations and Bevan's required high building standards were in conflict with other government priorities – illustrated in this statement of Sir Stafford Cripps, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the 1949 Labour Party conference: 'First are exports ..., second is capital investment in industry, and last are the needs, comforts and amenities of the family'.<sup>19</sup>

Almost from the start Bevan was attacked by the Conservative opposition for a housing shortage which was clearly a legacy of the war.<sup>20</sup> If only as a stopgap before new and better council houses were built, a way was needed to produce hundreds of thousands of homes quickly and with a very limited skilled workforce. The obvious answer was pre-fabricated houses – more commonly known as 'prefabs'.

The prefab programme had begun in October 1944, when the Churchill administration allocated £150 million for the building of temporary houses – temporary because the government wished to reassure building workers that their skills in building permanent homes would be needed after the war, and because public house-building was a local government function, and central government wished to make it clear that this was an exceptional programme.<sup>21</sup> The programme continued after the war, but Bevan regarded prefabs as a necessary and short term evil: the government intended to return to normal housing policy as soon as possible.<sup>22</sup> In any case, while prefabs were highly popular in practice, they proved expensive to build – in some cases, more expensive than permanent

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<sup>18</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Holmans, *Housing Policy in Britain*, p. 94, though he does not record the date.

<sup>20</sup> Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 2*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Colin Davies, *The Prefabricated Home* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

homes; they were also slow to appear, with fewer than 125,000 assembled by as late as 1948.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, building materials were in short supply; and the execution of Bevan's plans for social housing was delegated to the 1,470 local authorities in England and Wales, competing for builders as well as materials. The result, according to Paul Addison, was that by August 1946 'the majority of local authorities had not completed a single house'.<sup>24</sup>

The housing shortage, competing demands for resources, and slow progress with house-building, had predictable consequences. Addison quoted the then housing manager of the London County Council: '... the average time on the waiting list for a London family in those days ... was something between seven and eight years ... So we had to impress upon everybody the need for very strict fairness and honesty in the allocation of houses ... It wasn't easy ...'.<sup>25</sup>

There was also a combination of more subjective factors which made squatting a relatively natural and acceptable response to the housing crisis. These included a sense which had grown since early in the war of the need for fairness and 'a new deal for the working class'; a decline in deference; and a frustration that the promised 'New Jerusalem' of the post-1945 world seemed so slow in arriving, particularly for those who had served in the armed forces.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, there was the view that economic controls and rationing were needed to correct the deficiencies of the market; but also a sneaking

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<sup>23</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 57; Davies, *The Prefabricated Home*, p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> See, generally, Addison, *Now the War is Over*, Chapter 1, and his *The Road to 1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), Chapter 8.

fondness for ‘that other popular institution, the black market’, in case rationing was seen as ‘too fair’.<sup>27</sup>

There was a further factor which increased the demand for housing in 1945. 160,000 Polish servicemen (many with families) who had fought with the Allies were allowed to remain in Britain rather than return to Poland under its new Communist regime.<sup>28</sup> The Polish presence in Britain was significant in the story beyond their numbers alone. The government planned that many would be housed in the disused military camps which became the focus of the squatters. The hostility of the Communist Party to the policy of allowing Polish anti-Communists to stay in Britain was a factor in its support of the squatters.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the 1946 squatters had the example of a smaller-scale squat, from July 1945, before the war had ended and while votes from the general election were being counted. This was the episode of the so-called Brighton Vigilantes. They attracted the attention of the American magazine *Time*, which reported:

A bowler-hatted chimney sweep, Harry Cowley, 60, called “The Guv’nor”, blew the lid off Britain’s housing problem. In Brighton ... a posse of 400 self-styled Vigilantes (all local war veterans), headed by Cowley, took the law into their own hands. Into three empty, habitable houses, they moved the families of servicemen ... Last week, the Guv’nor traveled to “Spouter’s Corner” in Hyde Park to explain the theory and practice of house snatching

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<sup>27</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Cooper, ‘Snoek Picante’, in Sissons and French (eds), *The Age of Austerity*, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Hinton, ‘Self-help’, 122, citing Communist Party archive material.

... The spread of the Vigilante idea among law-abiding Britons was symptomatic of their fast-ebbing patience with continuing war restrictions.<sup>30</sup>

Two weeks later, *Time* reported that 'Britain's Vigilantes ... won a notable victory last week ... In one of the caretaker Government's last acts, the Ministry of Health gave local authorities full power to requisition unused residences'. But, as the article continued: 'Ill-housed Britons knew full well that the success was only a scratch on the surface of the housing problem. In the next ten years, Britain will need five million new houses.'<sup>31</sup> The Vigilantes faded away; the problem remained.

### **The Main Events of the Squatters' Movement**

Thus by 1946 conditions were propitious for a mass initiative of self-help or popular action to draw attention to the housing shortage and to do something about it. But the squatting of that summer began spontaneously and in a small way.<sup>32</sup> On 8 May, a cinema projectionist, his wife and four children, moving to Scunthorpe for his new job and unable to find accommodation, took over the officers' mess of an abandoned anti-aircraft gunsite. It was two months later, in early July, that twenty families joined them in the camp, followed by takeovers of further camps in Scunthorpe, Sheffield and Doncaster. According to James Hinton, citing a memo to Attlee, the government blamed newsreel coverage for spreading news of the occupations and encouraging further such action.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, during that summer there were several newsreel films which featured

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<sup>30</sup> *Time*, July 23 1945, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), accessed 17 June 2011.

<sup>31</sup> *Time*, August 6 1945, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), accessed 17 June 2011.

<sup>32</sup> This chronology is derived from James Hinton's 'Self-help and Socialism', which is the most detailed account to date of the squattings. Other sources are cited as appropriate.

<sup>33</sup> James Hinton, 'Self-help', 104, 106.

interviews with squatters,<sup>34</sup> and most statements from participants cite the example of others as a major factor in their decision to take part in the occupations.<sup>35</sup>

By 6 August, many more camps in the north of England were occupied. On 10 August, the *Daily Mail* commented on the squatters' 'robust common sense...[in taking] matters quietly but firmly into their own hands';<sup>36</sup> even the prospect of allying itself with the Communist Party, which was also a vocal supporter of the squatters,<sup>37</sup> did not deter the *Daily Mail* from using this stick with which to beat the Labour government. Over the following week the occupation of military camps spread to most parts of the country.<sup>38</sup>

Hinton focused on occupations in Bristol and Birmingham, but the pattern was similar elsewhere – particularly as to the squatters' motivation and self-image, and their insistence on respectability and good order. A spokesman for the Bristol squatters was concerned about the education and religious training of the squatters' children; and a letter to the *Bristol Evening Post* from a local vicar argued that 'Their action was unusual, unconstitutional, but let no one think they are ruffians. They are ordinary people, they shave every day, eat at tables, go off to earn their own living'.<sup>39</sup>

The squatters were commonly described as if they were all men, but the Bristol squatters were untypical in two respects: first, in the lack of official support from the local council; and second, by contrast, in the leadership given by a dissident councillor. According to *The Times*: 'Last night [August 13] Bristol Housing Committee issued a statement

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<sup>34</sup> There is, for instance, a Pathe News film, *Squatters in Chalfont St Giles*, available at [www.chalfontstgiles.org.uk](http://www.chalfontstgiles.org.uk) accessed 17 June 2011.

<sup>35</sup> As in the material from the Sussex University Mass Observation archive file cited below.

<sup>36</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 116, quoting the *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1946.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>39</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 107, quoting *Bristol Evening Post*, 14 August 1946.

accepting no responsibility for the comfort and convenience of the “squatters” and warning them that they were trespassers. A Labour member of the Housing Committee, Alderman W H Hennessy, addressed a crowd of “squatters” at the camp later. Ignoring the Housing Committee’s statement he said: “Sit tight. Carry on. Take no notice of rumours. The police cannot touch you ... I am satisfied that the Minister will not give the police power to enter this estate and turn the people out”.<sup>40</sup> There are three significant points implicit in this quotation: the lack of clarity as to the legal position; the implied ambivalence of central government; and the use of quotation marks around ‘squatters’. All three are discussed below.

The scale of the occupations continued to grow, and reporting of them became rather routine. By 17 August, for instance, *The Times*, alongside ‘human interest’ stories from two camps, merely recorded:

Among the camps occupied in England yesterday were Malvern Link, Perdiswell, and Frankley in Worcestershire; Tipton, Staffordshire; Lambridge, Somerset; Swindon, Wiltshire; Waltham Abbey and Seven Kings Park, Essex; Grove Park, Kent; Stratford, E; and two in the Wrekin area of Salop. A number of families have staked a claim on an anti-aircraft gunsite in Barking Park, E, but have not yet moved in.<sup>41</sup>

What changed this mood of almost casual acceptance by public and press was the extension of squatting to empty flats and houses. This had begun in a small way during late August, in Birmingham for example,<sup>42</sup> but it was the occupation of luxury flats in

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<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 14 August 1946, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, 17 August 1946, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Hinton, ‘Self-help’, 109-10, and *The Times*, 23 August 1946, p. 2.

Kensington and elsewhere in London on Sunday 8 September – the Great Sunday Squat – which became the dominant, best remembered and most discussed image of the squatters’ movement. It was also the occupation of private property that finally led central government to act. The Sunday squat resulted in five of the Communist organisers being charged on 14 September with ‘conspiring to incite and direct trespass’; the orderly departure of the squatters from the Duchess of Bedford House flats – the focus of the Sunday squat – on 20 September; and their being bussed around London before being given temporary accommodation at an ‘Old Ladies’ Home’ in Hampstead.<sup>43</sup>

When the organisers’ case came to trial, they were merely bound over to be of good behaviour. The judge observed: ‘I am satisfied the motive was primarily to find homes for these unfortunate people’, and he almost advised counsel for the defence to appeal the verdict.<sup>44</sup> The Great Sunday Squat is not the focus of this article, but it is worth noting the rather arcane offence with which the organisers were charged: trespass was not a criminal offence, but conspiracy to incite and direct it was. Apart from that, the law – civil as well as criminal - was involved only in rather obscure and tangential ways. At Duchess of Bedford House, for instance, a squatter reported to a Mass Observation investigator that ‘We were given notice to quit because we put a lock on the door’.<sup>45</sup>

### **Life in the Occupied Military Camps**

The occupation of central London flats had begun and ended in less than two weeks. Meanwhile, in the suburbs and beyond, the number of squatters in military camps continued to grow. Paul Addison wrote that ‘by the end of September the majority of

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<sup>43</sup> Hinton, ‘Self-help’, 114-5.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 1 November 1946, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Mass Observation archive at Sussex University, file TC48 – Squatting 1946.

camps had been occupied; in Scotland, only nine out of 152 remained empty'.<sup>46</sup> On 10 October Aneurin Bevan reported to the House of Commons that 1,038 camps in England and Wales alone were occupied by 39,535 people.<sup>47</sup> The Mass Observation archive at Sussex University has detailed accounts of several camps, particularly in the London suburbs, which provide an insight into their organisation, how the squatters regarded themselves, and how they were regarded by their neighbours and the authorities. The following examples draw from reports on three camps – Eastcote near Harrow, Watford, and Gladstone Park in Cricklewood.<sup>48</sup>

Visiting an ex-US army camp in Eastcote on 25 August 1946, the investigator found that 'the squatters are half middle and half artisan class ... One man is a master builder, another a schoolmaster and another a factory worker. All are ex-servicemen ... 2 of them have cars and some could afford to buy a house but have been unable to do so ... They live the typical middle class suburban life as far as they are able ... There is no sign of any violent political enthusiasm amongst them.'

The Eastcote occupation had begun when an ex-pilot officer and family, living in furnished rooms opposite the camp, were inspired to occupy the camp's officers' quarters by news of camps taken over in the Midlands. 'The news was passed from friend to friend and at once people arrived until the camp was full ... It only needed someone to start it ...'. They were well organised: 'They would like an electricity meter in each hut, but at present pay about 2/6d a week each to the family with the 1/- in the slot meter. They have a common rent pool, paying 10/- a week to the ex-pilot officer, who will pay the authorities if rent is demanded'. As for those outside the camp: 'The police have been

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<sup>46</sup> Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> *Hansard* House of Commons Debates, 10 October 1946 volume 427, col. 339.

<sup>48</sup> Comments and quotations on these three camps come from file TC48 in the Sussex University Mass Observation archive.

friendly, coming to see that they were free from interference from the nearby gypsy encampment. The Sunday after they moved in, they had to post a man at the gate to keep sightseers away’.

In Watford, both squatters and local dignitaries showed a thirst for publicity. In a visit on 18 August, the investigator ‘finds a press photographer helping a family to arrange furniture for a series of pictures ... A group of three walk into the room looking rather embarrassed ... [One of the three says]: “I am the mayor. This is the mayoress. This is my son-in-law ... Pity we haven’t got our medallions if we’re going to be photographed” ... The neighbour, the law, the mayoral group – all wander in as if into a sideshow.’

In Gladstone Park, Cricklewood, the camp remained occupied into the 1950s. The investigator made several visits over this period. By her visit in October 1946, less than two months after the occupation began, she noted the smart appearance of the camp – the cretonne curtains, brightly painted doors, and waste ground converted into gardens: “The coalman is paying his weekly visit ... The Express Dairy roundsman is delivering the daily milkround ... [Mrs C says] “The Kilburn Branch of the British Legion fixed those shelves. They were ever so good” ... [Her next door neighbour says] “Come and see our hut. You won’t recognise it there’s so many changes. We’ve called our hut THISLLDO””.

By March 1947, ‘once a month [there is] a meeting of camp reps and the Housing Manager of Willesden Council ... Mrs L says “He’s ever such a nice man and ever so helpful ... The council man calls to collect the rent every week. The huts without WCs are fixed at 8/- a week, and those with WCs 10/-”’. But public acceptance was not universal: “We’re thinking of having the Camp address renamed the ‘DRIVE’,

Gladstone Park, because a few of the tenants went after jobs and when they gave their address they were asked, ‘Are you the Squatters?’ Well they never heard any more.”.

By the investigator’s final visit, in April 1950, the spirit of self-help seems to have evolved into a sense of entitlement. The camp spokesman, an interviewee since 1946, told her: ‘We’re likely to be here for another 5-10 years, but we’re perfectly happy. We’ll move only when they make it worth our while. And if the huts won’t stand up to it – they’ll have to make it right. That’s their look-out, not ours.’

### **The Government’s Response to the Squatters**

The other major actor in the squatters’ movement was the Labour government. Its position until the Great Sunday squat is difficult to disentangle. Michael Foot suggested that Aneurin Bevan ‘sympathised with the squatters but could not let them take command’.<sup>49</sup> But Bevan coped better than many of his colleagues: his concept of socialism allowed for dissatisfaction with the government, which he called ‘the real dynamic of democracy, the elemental force of political action. How on earth can people be satisfied when the lack of houses is such a fertile source of human misery?’<sup>50</sup>

The government as a whole was initially pragmatic – or inert – about the take-over of military camps. This may have been due partly to the lack of Cabinet meetings between 26 July and 4 September;<sup>51</sup> for whatever reason there was no clear government policy during August. On 15 August *The Times* reported that: ‘Decisions whether the “squatters” in military camps are to be allowed to remain ... will be made through the regional offices of the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with local authorities ... Evictions will

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<sup>49</sup> Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 2*, p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> In an interview at the end of 1946, quoted in Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, Volume 2*, p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> The National Archives (hereafter TNA) CAB/195/4, Information derived from the transcribed Cabinet notebooks of Sir Norman Brook, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary.

be necessary in some cases because camps have been occupied before being declared redundant to service needs. Other evictions may be necessary because accommodation is unsuitable ... The spokesman added that no hard and fast rule could be laid down ... He agreed that the action of the “squatters” had emphasised the urgency of conversion of camps into temporary homes.<sup>52</sup>

The Ministry’s position was rethought by 19 August, but became no clearer. According to *The Times*, the Ministry of Health ‘announced that most of the camps which had been occupied were not spare, even though they were vacant. The Government had a number of urgent requirements to meet, not only for British troops, but also for the housing of Polish soldiers, prisoners of war, teachers in training and building craftsmen ... In any case the camps were seldom very suitable for housing.’<sup>53</sup> The report continued: “The entry of the “squatters” was threatening reconstruction plans in a number of directions ... In these circumstances local authorities had been told by the Ministry of Health, at once ..., to ensure proper sanitary arrangements ... Wherever possible, camps which had been occupied in considerable numbers, and which were suitable for housing, would be taken over by the local authority for that purpose.”<sup>54</sup>

The occupation of London flats made the government’s position more difficult, and required a clearer response. According to *The Times*, Ministers might have to deal with a situation ‘where no empty private house would be safe. They also had to consider the embarrassing position of the police and troops who on Sunday helped to arrange for the feeding of the new arrivals. And ... there was the fact that this move was organized by

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<sup>52</sup> *The Times*, 15 August 1946, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> *The Times*, 19 August 1946, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

the Communist Party'.<sup>55</sup> Nor was this all: the government also had to uphold its policy of fair shares for all with no queue-jumping, at the same time showing sympathy for 'ordinary people' seeking to put a roof over their head in order to avoid the danger of creating Communist martyrs.<sup>56</sup>

The record of Cabinet discussions in September 1946 shows an evolution of its thinking from complacency before the Sunday squat, to a punitive approach, to a broader view of the situation. Its discussion on 4 September was without clear outcome; the discussion on 9 September was focused entirely on the legal position, with the Attorney General instructed to consult the DPP as to possibly charging the organisers of the Sunday squat with criminal conspiracy or conduct likely to lead to a breach of the peace. But by 12 September, Bevan was arguing for the 'need for publicity – to get it across that squatters are jumping the claim & doing down those higher on the list'. And five days later, on 17 September, the discussion went well beyond this, covering the need to provide alternative accommodation for those leaving the London flats; for local authorities not to punish squatters by putting them to the bottom of the housing list; for the police not to use force against the squatters, which would increase sympathy for them; and for the service departments to be clearer about their accommodation needs and to make space available for housing wherever possible.<sup>57</sup>

Once the squatters left the London flats, on 20 September, the subject of squatting rapidly left the headlines, despite the fact that most of the camps remained occupied.

There was one significant subsequent airing of the subject in Parliament, on 10 October

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<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 10 September 1946, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 116.

<sup>57</sup> The source for this paragraph, including the quotations, is from the notebooks of Sir Norman Brook; see TNA CAB 195/4, Cabinet meetings on 4, 9 12 and 17 September, C79-82(46).

1946.<sup>58</sup> By that time Bevan was clearly in control of the subject, and his statement made the occupation of more than a thousand military camps in England and Wales seem almost humdrum.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Significance of the Squatters' Movement**

It is worth considering not only why such a large-scale act of mass law-breaking has received relatively little academic attention, but also the linked question why the terms 'squatters' movement' and 'rebellion' seem curiously inappropriate to the events of summer 1946.

A key reason, the almost self-conscious respectability of the squatters, was described above. All those interviewed by Mass Observation investigators were insistent that they were not politically motivated. And while the Communist Party organised the Great Sunday Squat,<sup>60</sup> even many of the 'Sunday squatters' distanced themselves from the party. A Mass Observation investigator recorded from a blackboard outside an occupied block of flats: 'There is no truth in the statements given by certain newspapers that the "squatters"' movement has a political motive. Our fight is to secure homes for the homeless'.<sup>61</sup> As Susan Cooper commented: 'the Communists, for [the squatters] were little more than the means of at least drawing attention to their plight'.<sup>62</sup>

The point was clearer still in the military camps, where the squatters made much of the fact that they were not occupying private property. In her visit to the Cricklewood camp in October 1946, the Mass Observation investigator found the squatters strongly

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<sup>58</sup> *Hansard* House of Commons Debates, 10 October 1946 volume 427, cols. 337-43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, cols. 338-9.

<sup>60</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 110-116.

<sup>61</sup> File TC48 in the Sussex University Mass Observation archive, report dated 13 September 1946.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, 'Snoek Picante', in Sissons and French, *The Age of Austerity*, p. 44.

opposed to the take-over of private flats. This comment was typical: 'I thought it very silly of them to move into such expensive places ... It's one thing to move into army huts which were going to rack and ruin and another thing taking things that belonged to somebody else'. The squatters were also sensitive to accusations of queue jumping. One commented: 'Had people originally been offered these huts, they'd have turned them down. The truth is that people are prefab mad'.<sup>63</sup> These were no social revolutionaries; and it is clear that they were a movement only in the sense that they were inspired by the example of others and that, as the Mass Observation investigator found in the Eastcote camp, 'they feel a fellowship with squatters all over the country'.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside this, the squatters were largely drawn from those who had helped win the war. They were almost the last people whom the government or press could reasonably accuse of selfishness or a lack of patriotism. The anti-Labour press presented the squatters not as radicals but as exemplifying an English tradition of self-help made necessary by the government's failings – a view which the squatters were happy to share. The government itself could have publicly contested this positive image of the squatters only at considerable political risk to itself. And so the key parties tacitly accepted the benefit of playing down this major act of civil disobedience.

There was a danger that public sympathy would diminish with the more visible law-breaking of the Great Sunday Squat. At that stage, most Mass Observation interviewees among the general public were critical of the squatters or at best ambivalent – such as this: 'I'm in sympathy with the homeless folk, but it will upset the Council's arrangements ... You can't just take people's property - it upsets everything ... Of course, I think it's

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<sup>63</sup> File TC48 in the Sussex University Mass Observation archive, report dated 2 October 1946, for both quotations in this paragraph.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, report dated 25 August 1946.

legitimate if it wakes people up'. Others were clearer: 'If we allow people to do this sort of thing and get away with it, life won't be worth living'.<sup>65</sup>

But in general, controversy about the very word 'squatters' suggests considerable support for them, on a range of sometimes inconsistent grounds: as class warriors; as victims of the Labour government, fighting for their rights; as respectable people doing what any young families would in their situation; and as English patriots, preventing Polish ex-servicemen and German prisoners of war from stealing accommodation from them. It was such attitudes which led to pro-squatter alliances by interests as diverse as the *Daily Mail* and the Communist Party. And, returning to the word itself, Clementine Churchill, wife of the ex-Prime Minister, used the official opening, on 17 August 1946, of the first council houses built since the war in Woodford, Essex, to say: 'These people are referred to by the ungraceful term "squatters", and I wish the press would not use this word about respectable citizens whose only desire is to have a home'.<sup>66</sup>

Peter Hennessy's view that the squatters' movement made Bevan's position look rather shaky is debateable. The occupation of flats in London was dealt with in less than two weeks, with both the government and the Communist Party anxious to avoid a stand-off.<sup>67</sup> From Bevan's point of view, the resolution was a welcome anticlimax, and involved no Communist martyrs. The whole episode may even have been helpful to Bevan. Aside from the fact that 45,000 people were housed who might otherwise have waited years for a home of their own, the 1946 occupations may have been a factor making resolution of the housing crisis a higher priority for the government.

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<sup>65</sup> File TC48 in the Sussex University Mass Observation archive, reports dated 9 and 13 September 1946, for the quotations in this paragraph.

<sup>66</sup> See *The Times*, 19 August 1946, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 116 and 119.

The squatters' movement apparently had no major lasting political consequences. This is one of its most remarkable features, and probably helps explain its neglect by historians. But it is this very lack of consequences which gives the episode much of its political interest: how and why the movement was 'absorbed' so easily, and so generally forgotten, are questions deserving of study.

In November 1940, Lord Woolton, wartime Minister of Food, wrote in his diary about the stoical, indeed heroic, way people had dealt with being bombed out of their homes, but noted: 'the danger is that if the machine of government which can spend money so recklessly in engaging in war, fails to be equally reckless in rebuilding, there will be both the tendency and the excuse for revolution'.<sup>68</sup> The government was not so reckless in its rebuilding, but after the war, the acts of the squatters were as close as Britain came to revolution.

For James Hinton, the squatters' action and the response to it were an example of how 'the Right were able to direct popular rejection of Labour's bureaucratic paternalism into a massive re-endorsement of ... individualist values'.<sup>69</sup> Susan Cooper's account was more prosaic: 'The homeless families of 1946 saw around them ... walls, roofs, shelter going to waste ... These camps had been built for wartime, hadn't they? It wasn't as if they belonged to anyone – only to the Government, who ought to be providing homes in any case ... It was only an extension of that accepted tradition of Service life, the scrounge ... As the egg-and-stockings-starved housewife was vulnerable to the spiv, so the homeless, especially in an atmosphere of mild defiance, were easy meat for political agitators.'<sup>70</sup> Both views seem reasonable. But the most remarkable features of the

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<sup>68</sup> 1 November 1940; quoted in Addison, *Now the War is Over*, p. 55.

<sup>69</sup> Hinton, 'Self-help', 120.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, 'Snoek Picante', in Sissons and French, *The Age of Austerity*, pp. 43-4.

squatters' movement may be that this communal act of law-breaking by more than 45,000 people could appear so tame; that government and participants in effect colluded to deny it political significance; and that this fascinating episode in post-war British history has received so little subsequent attention.

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