

The need to make and grow things at home – national resilience

The UK fought two massive and bruising wars in the last century. On both occasions the UK state declared war on Germany without having the military resources in place to be able to defeat German armies on the continent. The story of each war was the same. Initial disasters for the expeditionary forces, skilled and brave but outnumbered, had to be followed by a massive scaling up of commitment. Vast citizens armies had to be recruited and trained. The UK had to rely on and build alliances to assist in victory. On both occasions getting the USA involved was particularly important. On both occasions the government had to transform our economy, turning much production over to a war footing, to make sure we could produce the guns, ships and planes needed to sustain major conflict from our own resources in our own factories, and growing enough food to avoid starvation. In each war the German strategy of trying to cut off our overseas trade by lethal submarine and surface raider attacks proved difficult to contain and threw us back on to more and more domestic self reliance.

The fact that we started each war with a professional military which could expand and change under the need to build a citizen army helped. We could also create, train and equip a much larger airforce, from scratch in 1914 and from a small one in 1939. The fertility and relatively clement climate for growing temperate foods also helped, with flower gardens and parks being tilled for vegetables. The excellence of UK technology, with leads in several fields for both wars also assisted. As we study those events today we should of course redouble our efforts to make sure we do not need to plunge into such vast conflict again. We should also learn the crucial lesson, that you cannot defend your country unless you have sufficient production capacity to supply and replenish a war machine in wartime conditions. It is no good relying on imports, licensed technology controlled by others and basic foods from abroad if you need to win a serious war.

In 1914 and 1939 we had our own coking coal, steel furnaces, tank, gun and ship designs and chemical factories to make explosives. In 1939 we had some great private sector aircraft designs which could be built at speed and scale. Many factories making discretionary consumer items could be flipped to war production. Furniture factories could even make the wooden Mosquito plane to add additional numbers to the airforce capability. In a remarkable drive the UK reached output of 26,000 planes a year in 1943 and outproduced Germany in planes over the war as a whole, whilst the US ramped up from 2141 planes in 1939 to a massive 96,318 in 1944.

Today when planes and ships are more complex and expensive than in the 1940s we struggle to produce more than a handful. Procurement is very dependent on overseas supplies, and NATO action rests on interoperability and shared capacity with allies. The UK needs to have plans for how it would cope were one or more of our allies to fall into hostile or unfriendly hands, and have plans on how the UK would sustain herself in war conditions. That requires

ensuring we have control of the main technologies which we could use for ourselves if needed, and control over sufficient production capacity with raw materials or access to them. It also means remembering it is good to be able to feed yourself to a sufficient standard as part of national resilience.

Having sufficient control over wider technologies, raw materials and skilled labour is also helpful in less stressful times, when the wars are fought with words and laws over trade issues with tariffs, export bans and the like. As the world trends towards more national self reliance, the UK should look more to herself in important areas so we can cope in adverse circumstances.