

Students' Podcast Transcript: Marginalisation and alienation during the Blitz

Jake: Good day, I'm Jacob Williams. We're here today to discuss the alienation of minority groups in London during the Blitz. I'm joined by four University of York students; Lucy Crowther and Theo Hall have focused on the Jewish community in East London, whereas Darcie Rayner and Fred Ashberry have focused on the Black community in East London.

Jake: So Theo, could you tell us what Angus Calder meant when he talked about a 'myth of the Blitz'?

Theo: Sure, so Angus Calder's 'myth of the Blitz' challenges the traditional narrative of a national unity and resilience during the Blitz. Calder reveals the presence of underlying social tensions and divisions that persisted during this period, in particular he highlights the experience of Jewish people in Britain who faced and interplay of societal and economic challenges exacerbated by wartime conditions.

Jake: So Lucy, Theo's just talked there about some of the marginalisation that Jewish people faced during the Blitz, but could you give a bit more detail about how Jewish people were framed as 'alien' during the 1940s.

Lucy: Yes, so in the 1940s Jews were framed as 'the other' in popular sentiment. So Sonia Rose references negative stereotypes given to Jews. For example, having a self-elevated self-interest, being cowardly and lacking in stoicism. And these negative characteristics were framed against British values of self-sacrifice and being more community-orientated.

Jake: Was this characterisation of Jews as aliens a new phenomenon of this period?

Lucy: No, definitely not. Anti-Semitism has had a very long history. However, during the war, the discourse surrounding it was re-articulated to sort of encompass the new

cultural concerns of the time, mainly increased levels of immigration. I think the Bethnal Green Disaster, or more precisely, the rumours around it shows how Jews were, again, constructed to be alien.

Jake: So you've just mentioned the Bethnal Green Disaster as a case study of how Jewish people were marginalised. Could you give a quick overview of that disaster for listeners at home who might not be fully aware of it?

Lucy: Yes. So the Bethnal Green Disaster was the worst British civilian disaster during World War Two. It occurred the evening of the 3rd of March, 1943, when a test alarm sounded, causing people to rush into the station. Sadly, that evening, 173 people died in the crush and Jews were blamed for the disaster, mainly based on the notion of their cowardice and selfishness. They were blamed for creating panic in the crowds and were alleged to have packed into the shelter first.

Jake: So Jewish people were characterised as selfish due to this disaster. How did the government react to this? Did they try and quash these rumours or did they allow them to flourish?

Lucy: So, the government commissioned an inquiry report in 1943 to investigate the incident. So, the Dunn Report states "there was no evidence whatever for the suggestion that the disaster was due to Jewish elements". Therefore, they clearly didn't support these rumours. However, because of wartime censorship, the report wasn't actually released to the public until 1945, after the war had ended. So, in my opinion, that's a little too late.

Jake: So, how did the marginalisation of Jewish people relate to the 'myth of the Blitz' overall?

Lucy: So, the alienation of Jews demonstrates the British attempt to strengthen their own national identity. This sort of debunks the 'myth of the Blitz' as it shows this so-called unified front was created by creating a sense of otherness from within and marginalising and alienating communities.

Jake: So, Darcie, we've just heard from Lucy and Theo about how Jewish people were marginalised during World War II. But could you quickly overview how black people were marginalised during World War II, and in particular, how they were viewed during this period?

Darcie: Yes, definitely. So I think the best way to look at this is from a legal perspective because it can show us how even the most basic of human rights were not afforded to black Brits at the time. So it wasn't until after the war, until 1948, that the British Nationality Act was passed and this afforded official British citizenship to members living in the colonies and peoples living in the remnants of the British Empire. And now they were finally being considered British subjects even though they'd lived under British rule for quite some time.

Jake: So could you provide an example of a black individual who faced marginalisation during World War II?

Darcie: Yes, so there is a really interesting story about a lady called Amelia King and on the onset of war, she attempted to join the Women's Land Army to do her bit for the war effort. But because of the colour of her skin, the fact that she was black, she was refused entry. But it didn't stop there. She put up a fight and this fight actually ended up in the House of Commons, and because of this she received a lot of media attention from newspapers and such. And there was a general feeling of sympathy and outrage that she was not allowed to join the Women's Land Army. And I think that's because obviously Britain was fighting Nazis at the time, and some people did feel it was hypocritical to be fighting Nazism and Fascism and all their racial policies when sort of a similar thing was happening at home.

Jake: Does this present a point at which the perceptions of black people were changed? Or does it present a point at which they were challenged, in your view?

Darcie: I think it's definitely fair to say that perceptions of black Brits living in Britain at the time, were challenged. I don't think it's fair to say they were changed just yet at this time. I think during the war we see sort of the embryonic stages of some kind of civil rights movement in Britain. But I don't think it was until sort of the 50s, maybe even the 60s and beyond that we see a real change happen within Britain.

Jake: Fred, could you tell me about the life of a Caribbean immigrant who might have grown up during the interwar period? I mean, Darcie's just given us a really great case study about how a black individual who was born in the UK faced discrimination during the war period. But how did a Caribbean immigrant who might have moved here when they were younger, how did they face marginalisation?

Fred: So, for an example, Fernando Henriquez, he was born to a middle-class Jamaican family and moved to London in 1919 when he was just three years old. His family had placed a high importance on his education, which was a very common trait amongst

immigrant families in Britain, with Fernando attending a Catholic grammar school before studying at LSE just prior to the outbreak of the war.

Jake: How did Fernando respond to the outbreak of the war?

Fred: When war broke out in September 1939, Fernando attempted to join the RAF. However, he was refused due to the government-imposed colour bar.

Jake: How, in your opinion, did the RAF's colour bar contribute to the marginalisation of black people during this period?

Fred: It had a relatively high contribution as, due to the lack of black role models seen on the front line defending the country, it allowed the media to contribute to some preconceived ideas that black British were not real British and did not care about the country, therefore causing levels of division amongst society.

Jake: In spite of these clear marginalisations due to the colour bar, were there ways for men such as Fernando to get around this marginalisation and contribute to the war effort?

Fred: Yes, definitely. Especially on a much more local level. Fernando himself, after being denied entry into the RAF, joined the Auxiliary Fire Brigade at the outbreak of the war. And when he was working for the AFS, he befriended the likes of poet Steven Spender and novelist William Sampson, who described the AFS as a refuge for intellectuals.

Jake: So in your opinion, Fred, whilst there was a strong marginalisation of the African community, on a personal level, there were ways for men such as Fernando to get around marginalisation.

Fred: Yes, completely. In my opinion, alienation in London during this period was very top-down, imposed by media such as the Daily Express, who attempted to push certain narratives to drive apart multiracial communities. And also, this was contributed by government legislation, such as the colour bar, which was very discriminatory towards black people. Whereas on a personal level, in East London especially, black individuals were in some cases able to avoid marginalisation, as shown by Fernando's friendship with Steven Spender, which exhibited a level of acceptance and community amongst society.

Jake: So Darcie, we've just heard from Fred there, but how did the marginalisation of black people throughout this period relate to the 'myth of the Blitz'?

Darcie: Really good question. I think the 'myth of the Blitz' leads us to believe that everyone was doing their bit. You know, there was this collective coming together of British people to boost morale during the war, particularly during the Blitz. But I just don't think that's the case. You know, we've heard a couple of stories about people who faced quite severe and really quite nasty discrimination and adversity at the time. And I think by believing in the 'myth of the Blitz', we bury their stories under the rubble and we don't do them justice. And so, I think it's really important that we highlight the stories of these marginalised groups during the Blitz.

Jake: Thank you for listening. We hope this podcast has highlighted the ways in which minority groups are marginalised during the interwar period. Moreover, we hope we've given some insight into the ways in which that marginalisation was resisted, both on the local level, such as in the case of Fernando Henriquez, and on the national level, such as in the case of Amelia King. Moreover, we hope we've shown that the 'myth of the Blitz' was just that, a myth. That the British spirit that we often think about when we talk about the 'myth of the Blitz' was created through the marginalisation of minority groups, such as Jewish and black communities. We really do want to stress, however, that this marginalisation was not limited to these two groups and affected several other minority groups that we simply did not have time to talk about on this podcast.

Jake: Overall, we hope we've allowed you to re-evaluate your beliefs about the Blitz, and hopefully you'll be able to take that re-evaluation and apply it to your classroom. When you teach your students about the Blitz, you hopefully will also be able to teach them about the ways in which the Blitz spirit was created through the marginalisation of minority groups, and in doing so, diversify the way that you teach history. Thank you.