

War from the warrens

DUNCAN CAMPBELL reveals how war-time Britain would be ruled

BRITISH PLANS for 'civil defence', revealed last week, project a 'stay at home policy for all but a few'. The 'few' of World War III who do not stay at home will include 20,000 civil servants and other administrators who will run a network of more than 36 bunkers which have been constructed throughout Britain during the last 20 years. Recently declassified documents, made available at the Public Records Office, now reveal how, in 1950, the first steps were taken to set up the military committee which will now rule the whole of Britain in crisis.

The Home Office now says there is little call for secrecy over the bunkers or their locations, except for the fear of vandals (who do not read the *New Statesman*). A spokesman declined to provide details of the entire network, but it has been possible, after some years' research, to trace the secret development of the network over 20 years.

The public knew nothing of the plans for government self-protection until 1963, when the 'Spies for Peace', a handful of activists from the Committee of 100, discovered and exposed one of the Regional Seats of Government, No. 6, at the Berkshire hamlet of Warren Row, near Maidenhead. At that time, there were only 12 such centres. Although some of the old RSG's have closed, at least temporarily, many new bunkers have been provided and more are planned. Sites have been taken over from the Royal Air Force, and old wartime underground factories and other disused real estate have been restored to service.

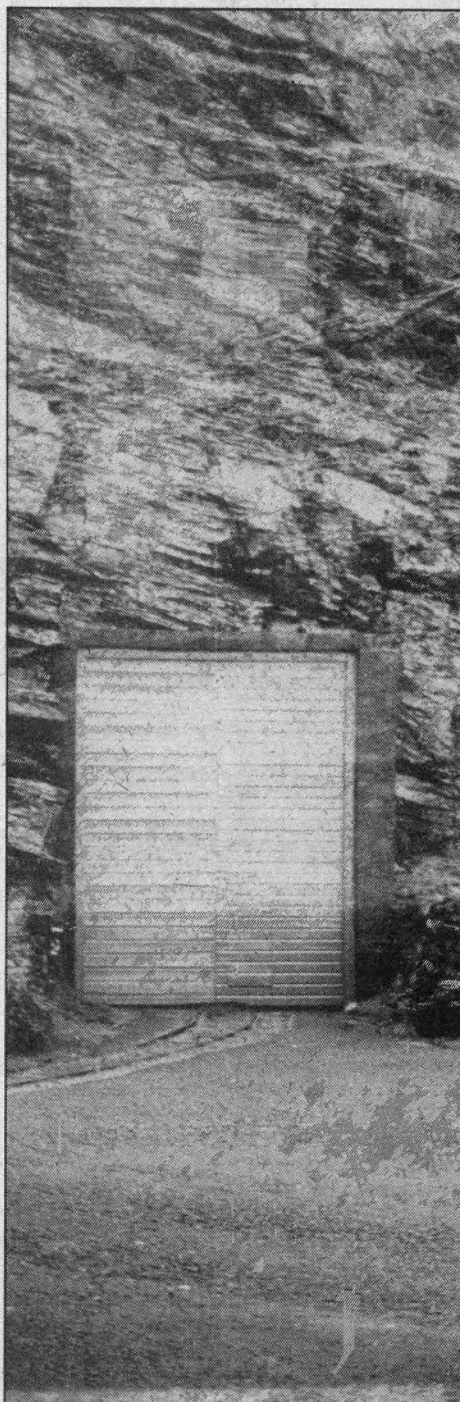
One of the most remarkable bunkers is the Art Treasures bunker, which is now being refurbished near Blaenau Ffestiniog in North Wales. Here, in a disused slate quarry, three employees of the Department of the Environment's Property Services Agency are working continuously on constructing and maintaining concrete storage warehouses, erected inside caverns in the side of the 2,100 foot *Manod Mawr*. The Manod quarry is one of the most remote and desolate sites in Britain, approached only by a four-mile well-metalled private road, which leads up into the mountains east of Blaenau Ffestiniog. Eventually the roadway finishes at a shuttered doorway into the mountainside. Water pipes, electricity supply cables and a diesel generator silencer emerge from the slate beside it.

This week, the Department of the Environment acknowledged that it maintained the site on behalf of the Department of Education and Science, who would select the works of art for salvation from a nuclear

war. This week, the Office of Arts and Libraries acknowledged evasively that 'items of importance from certain public collections' would be protected 'in the event of circumstances which could threaten the safety of the collections in general' (i.e. a nuclear holocaust). But it wouldn't be in the public interest, they said, to say which art treasures had been selected.

When I visited the Manod quarry last week, it was clear that the site was being well maintained for its emergency use. It had just been repainted. Although it was shut, a description of the inside was recently

Entrance to the Arts Bunker, 1500 feet up the side of a Welsh slate mountain, Manod Mawr near Blaenau Ffestiniog.



provided to Frank Allaun MP, who complained to the Home Office about priority being given to works of art when there are no shelters available for members of the civilian population. Inside, arc lights illuminate the caverns in which the stores are constructed. The first stores for art treasures were actually constructed at Manod during the early 1940s, when it accommodated art treasures evacuated from central London.

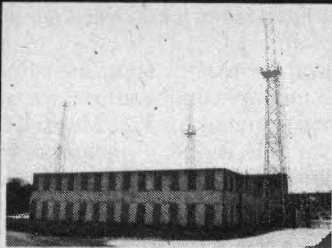
According to plans obtained by the *New Statesman* during last year's *Square Leg* civil defence exercise, national art treasures will be evacuated from cities and vulnerable areas as soon as the government decides to activate its war plans—early in the exercise, some three weeks before the actual (projected) attack. Manod is probably the only Arts Bunker, although other works of art will be dispersed from major museums to lesser provincial centres.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CONCERN for art treasures is matched only by its concern that a nucleus of civil servants should have protected accommodation in order to rule over survivors. In the early 1950s, with Britain menaced initially only by the Soviet A-Bomb, rudimentary provision was made—concrete-and-brick Regional War Rooms, which were built at government regional offices in each of the 12 regions (nine in England, plus Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). As early as January 1950, however, Chiefs of Staff anticipated the destruction of London as a centre of administration during a general war, and the decentralisation of government to regional offices and military commanders. Their objective was to plan how the UK could then remain 'a main offensive base for as long as possible, and an advanced air base (for the US) in all circumstances'.

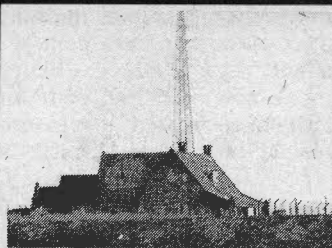
The Chiefs of Staff then created a new body, called the United Kingdom Commanders-in-Chief Committee (UKCICC, pronounced 'UK-chick'), which would administer home-based military forces. Initially, UKCICC was given underground headquarters at Bentley Priory, in Stanmore, Middlesex. Subordinate centres were built at Wilton Park, an army base at Beaconsfield, and at Fort Southwick, a remnant of the Napoleonic era overlooking Portsmouth Harbour.

Thirty years later, UKCICC, with substantial and secret new premises near Salisbury, has become the effective wartime or crisis military *junta* to rule the UK. It would, in crisis, be the only centre in Britain with access to national communications. Its powers would, in theory, be delegated from the Cabinet and Prime Minister, themselves securely accommodated in a further and more secret bunker.

The exact location of the Central Government War Headquarters is a matter of some speculation, but one site always has been very obvious—the Bath stone quarries



Eastern Zone Control (Scot):
Kirknewton, Midlothian



Northern Zone Control (Scot):
Anstruther, Fife



Scottish Central Control:
Barnton Quarry, Edinburgh



SRHQ 21:
New Parks, Shipton, Yorks



SRHQ 101: Dukes House,
Hoghton St, Southport

Western Zone Control (Scot):
East Kilbride, Strathclyde



SRHQ 92: Drakelow,
Kinver, Hereford/Worcs

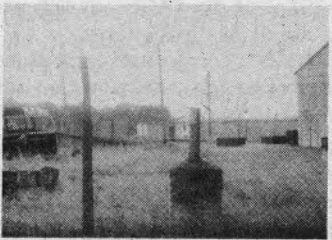
Northern Ireland HQ:
Gough Barracks, Armagh

SRHQ 82: Brackla Hill,
Bridgend, Mid-Glamorgan

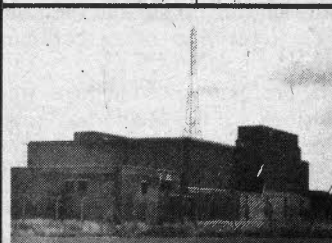
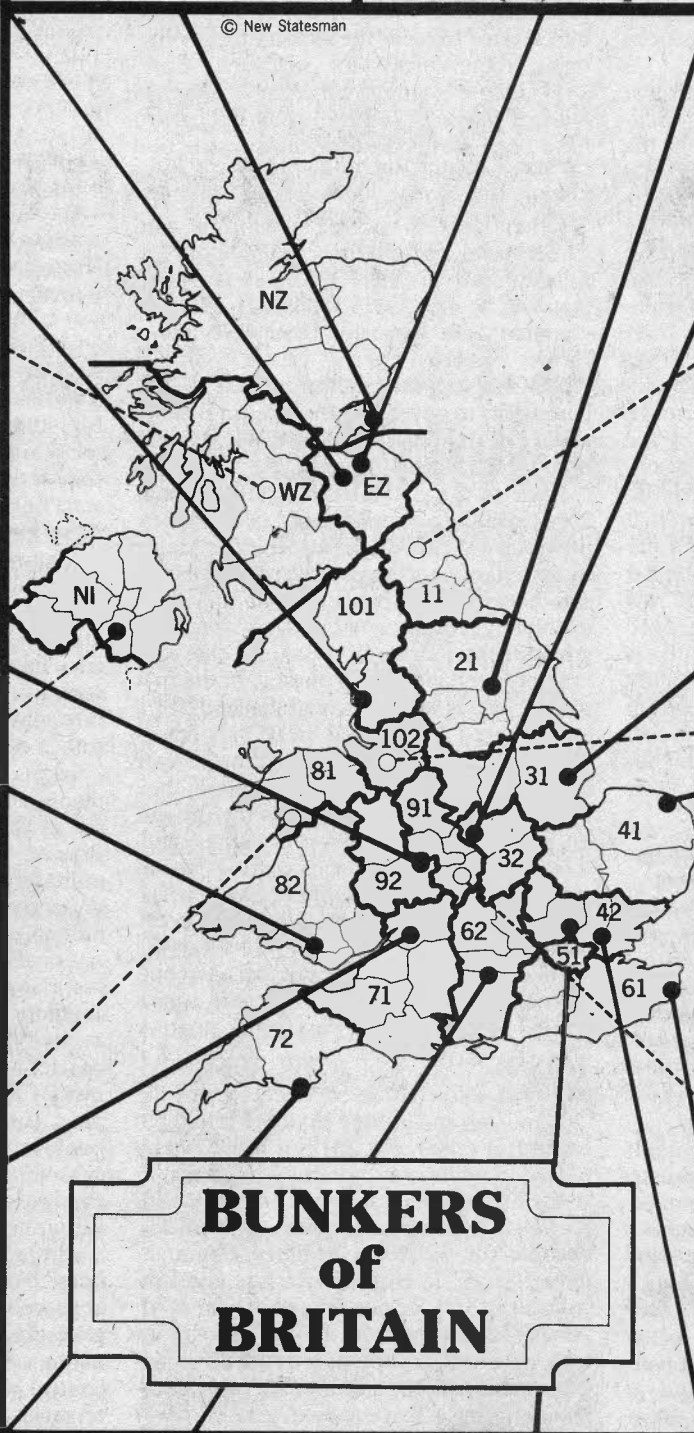


SRHQ 81:
NOT BUILT (1981)

SRHQ 71:
Ullenwood, Glos



SRHQ 72:
Bolt Head, Devon



SRHQ 32:
Burder St, Loughborough, Leics

SRHQ 11:
NOT BUILT (1981)



SRHQ 31:
Skendelby, Lincs

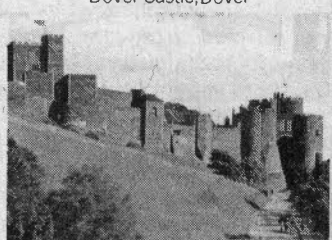
SRHQ 102:
NOT BUILT (1981)

SRHQ 41:
Bawburgh, Norfolk



SRHQ 91:
SITE UNKNOWN

SRHQ 61:
Dover Castle, Dover



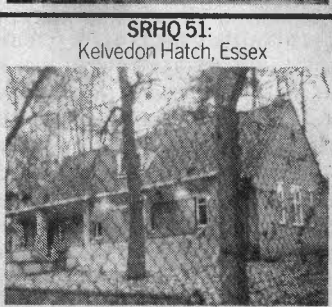
SRHQ 51:
Kelvedon Hatch, Essex



SRHQ 62:
Alencon Link, Basingstoke



SRHQ 42:
Sovereign House, Hertford



at Corsham, northeast of Bath itself, where a series of underground stores and factories were built in World War 2. In 1976, details of two of these stores were revealed when they were sold. Each had many acres of accommodation, up to one hundred feet underground. But at least three stores, including one with its own underground railway sidings (now disused), remain in government hands. In 1962 the Post Office spent over £1 million running new telephone cables through the site, and installed a radio station linking it to the London Post Office tower and other communications centres.

The best known of the government's war provisions are the Regional Seats of Government. These were first planned in the late 1950s, after the Soviet Union had exploded its first H-Bomb, and it gradually became clear that civil defence on the World War 2 model could no longer protect the population. The RSGs, holding between 200-400 people, were largely completed by 1963. And that same year, their locations – Edinburgh, Catterick, York, Cambridge, Preston, Brecon, Bolt Head, Dover, Warren Row, Nottingham, Armagh and Kidderminster – were exposed by the *Spies for Peace*. Newspaper editorials contemplated execution for the miscreants who exposed the centres, despite the fact that the centres had no overseas military role.

Since the RSGs were built, even though there has been no comparable public row over bunkers, the network has changed considerably, with many more bunkers coming into use. The most significant feature has been the transfer of power from civil to military commanders, with a civil administration not taking over the higher echelons of command until long after a war has begun (if at all).

THE HIGH COMMAND of civil wartime control now percolates down from Central Government through the UKCICC committee to a new network of military-only bunkers, called AFHQs – Armed Forces Headquarters. These are joint services centres, and many of them have taken over the former Regional Seats of Government, supplanting the civilian controllers. These AFHQs are the only regional centres in the new system of government bunkers.

For civilian control, the Home Office has built a network of Sub-Regional Headquarters, each to be commanded by a Commissioner selected from the government's available junior ministers. In England and Wales, there should be 17 such bunkers – but to date, only 14 have been built (see map). The unconstructed bunkers cover Sub-Regions 81 (North Wales), 102 (Liverpool, Manchester, and Cheshire) and 11 (Northumberland and Durham and Newcastle).

The network began to be expanded in the mid-60s, almost as soon as the Regional Seats of Government scheme was completed. To provide the necessary number of bunkers, many old RAF sites were taken over. Through disastrous and costly mis-planning, the RAF had previously constructed over 50 large underground centres, most of which it didn't need after three years. The RAF bunkers had been intended as centres for a radar network, codenamed ROTOR, in the mid 50s. But no sooner had

the stations concerned 'gone underground' than dramatic (and foreseeable) changes in technology resulted in most of the stations soon being quite redundant. As a result, many of the Home Office's new SRHQs bear a remarkable similarity to each other, being entered by identical RAF-built bungalows whose back extensions top a shaft leading 30 feet or more below ground. These bungalows, officially known as 'R3s' feature prominently in the network (see illustrations). Even now, more of the redundant RAF structures may be pressed into service to meet the expanding government requirement for shelters. Chief among these is a huge concrete blockhouse at Hack Green, Cheshire, which appears to have been earmarked for the construction of the Manchester and Liverpool area bunker, SRHQ101.

Other bunkers include a wartime cold store above ground near Loughborough railway station (SRHQ32), underground factories at Bridgend (SRHQ82) and Kinver near Kidderminster (SRHQ92 and a former RSG), Dover Castle's citadel (SRHQ61) and three recently built bunker basements to government offices in Basingstoke (SRHQ62), Hertford (SRHQ42) and Southport (SRHQ102).

Each of the SRHQs has staff of about 200, including clerks and telephonists, provided by the Civil Service. But many more civil servants have been provided with safe evacuation refuges so that they may eventually form a network of regional governments. Broadly speaking, the government anticipates two phases. In the first phase, lasting weeks or months, only the embunkered AFHQ and SRHQ staffs will have any communications or control over the outside world. In the second phase, they will emerge from their holes in the ground to join a larger number of other civil servants who have been waiting above ground in remote and (they hope) safe areas to form a dozen postwar regional governments.

Of course, there may not be a second phase. There may be no one left above ground in any state to rule or be ruled.

THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE between the old civil defence schemes of the '50s and '60s and today's situation is that the control of crises and war has largely been passed to military authorities – in particular to the Major-Generals who command each Region in peacetime, and who would in war become the Regional Military Commanders. (Except in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, Sub Region 31, where an RAF Air Marshal would do the job.) Together with a minister appointed as Regional Commissioner, and a Regional Police Commander, these three would rule each region.

That is the theory. The practice is different, since only the military commander, and to a lesser extent the police commander, have been provided with accommodation and communications. The 'Regional Group Locations' – the towns believed to be safe where the Regional Commissioners and most of their staff will be waiting out an attack – will form no part of the government chain of command during the first phase. Thus, despite pretensions of civilian control, the effect of

handing over many of the RSG bunkers to the military has been to hand over complete control as well.

I put this problem of the complete lack of restraint on military commanders once war measures had begun to Air Vice Marshal Sir Leslie Mavor, the former Principal of the Home Defence College which now spearheads the Home Office's drive to co-ordinate voluntary Civil Defence organisations. He agreed that arrangements were as above, with civilian control indeed cut off. His comment on the situation was, however, blackly humorous:

We just have to ask the Generals to be good boys . . .

THE ARMY HAD STARTED to go underground too in the early 1950s, and erected its own chain of concrete blockhouses at training camps up and down Britain, comparable to the RAF's ROTOR scheme. A few of these survive, one of them – at Ullenwood, just south of Cheltenham – an SRHQ (No. 72). Others have been handed over for other authorities to use. Two near London, at Lippettshill, Essex and Merstham, Surrey, have become northern and southern emergency control centres for the Metropolitan Police if circumstances of war, flood or revolution were ever to force them from New Scotland Yard.

Many of the RSGs of the late '50s were in fact built at existing Army District HQs, such as York, Catterick, Fulwood Barracks at Preston, and HQ Wales in Brecon. New sites have been found for other AF-HQs, such as one discovered three years ago by northeastern peace campaigners, at Ouston, a disused airfield near Newcastle.

In all, the chains of AFHQs and SRHQs amount to some 36 bunkers planned or built for civilian administrators of post-attack Britain; to these may be added orthodox military control centres also placed deep underground, of which there are more than half a dozen of some substance. Other national authorities have their own bunkers. Besides specialties like the Arts Bunker; there is the BBC's Broadcasting Bunker at their Wood Norton, Evesham, training centre; a British Telecom Bunker at Brogyntyn Hall, Oswestry; a Ports and Shipping Bunker; British Gas and Electric bunkers, and so on. Each authority is as evasive about the nature and scope of its emergency plans as the Office of Arts and Libraries is about Manod quarry.

The structures of regional control for home defence arrangements have also now absorbed much less cataclysmic forms of government planning, including strikes and major accidents or disasters. Under the control of a cabinet emergency Civil Contingencies Committee, the same basic liaison arrangements between police, military and civil authorities can be used to beat a transport strike or face a war.

It is of course unlikely that the Home Office would take to the bunkers to face the full might of the TGWU. The significance of the government bunkers, now in their third generation, is that they offer decision-takers at least the prospect of being insulated – psychologically, if in no other way – from the consequences of the decisions they may take to use nuclear weapons, or otherwise to conduct a war. □