



Peter Thorsheim. *Waste into Weapons: Recycling in Britain during the Second World War.* Cambridge University Press, 2015. xiii + 289 pages. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-09935-7.



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Voluntary Salvage and Criminalized Waste in WWII Britain

The history of trash and recycling is a relatively new subject of historical inquiry. Indeed, the term “recycling” was first used in the 1960s. Before that decade items were “salvaged.” Recent studies that examine the connections between war and the environment have influenced the study of recycling, as Peter Thorsheim’s *Waste into Weapons* demonstrates. While WWII was the most devastating in history, Thorsheim argues, it also “inspired people to conserve and recycle resources to an extent never seen before or since” (p. 1). This is the basis for the highly readable and welcome study of British wartime campaigns to recycle “useless” objects and turn them into “useful” weapons to wage war. Drives to reduce waste came through rationing; and the urge to recycle came from both persuasion and coercion. Regulations made “waste” a crime and “salvage” drives persuaded Britons to contribute items that would never be given in peacetime. The government did this by arguing that to “preserve” items was to “waste” them. Women were in the forefront as salvage was seen as women’s work. Thus, Thorsheim contends, women became com-

batants and the domestic sphere part of the war machine.

The volume is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Beating Plowshares into Swords,” chronicles the shift in attitudes to waste that began in the Great War, when scrap metal was salvaged in a national efficiency campaign. Civilians were not encouraged to recycle until 1917 and once the war ended so did recycling. Interwar Britain exported scrap metal to Germany and Japan until 1937. At the outbreak of war, Britain was dependent on imports of food and raw materials but, unlike Italy and Germany, did not establish recycling. Food, however, was immediately rationed and wasting food was criminalized. The invasion of Finland and Norway disrupted Britain’s sources of wood pulp and steel and initiated sweeping recycling programs. The defeat of France made recycling more important and an advisory committee on salvage made up entirely of women organized women volunteers to spearhead the recycling campaign.

Food waste caused unexpected problems—foul odors and the outbreak of foot and mouth disease among live-

stock further threatened food supplies. Recycling also took away the livelihood of many rag and bone collectors as local authorities, charged with collecting salvage, relied on large-scale scrap merchants. Central collection points created opportunities for theft and black marketeering. Additionally, recycled items often cost more to collect than they were worth. Nevertheless, the campaign encouraged even children to help as a cog in the great wheel working for victory (p. 86). This often meant stealing salvage during school lunchtimes.

Part 2, "Alliances," examines the wartime relationship between Britain and the United States. The United States demanded that Britain demonstrate that they were using money and materials as efficiently as possible or funds would be withdrawn (p. 107). The German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor intensified salvage collection, as now Britain received no scrap metal from the United States. Efforts to make munitions from recycled materials increased and burning paper, throwing it away, or mixing paper and cardboard with other waste became a crime. When nonferrous metals were scarce, citizens and subjects all over the empire donated brass candlesticks, door handles, and copper kettles.

Part 3, "History, Culture, and Civic Liberties," reveals that salvage campaigns destroyed many historical cultural artifacts. Buildings like the Crystal Palace were salvaged and iron railings from homes and parks disappeared into scrap piles, to the dismay of historians. Rubble from bomb sites was recycled into airfields and landfills. Individuals and organizations attempted to prevent the indiscriminate destruction of manuscripts and rare books as paper became an essential commodity. Nevertheless, many public libraries lost both their buildings and the contents during bombing raids, and homes and businesses emptied their attics. Thorsheim concludes,

Wartime paper salvage contributed a great deal to the nation in material terms, but in terms of Britain's history and culture, the cost was high (p. 201). Requisitioning railings and metal gates met with protests from thousands of citizens claiming their property to have artistic merit or historical significance. Despite the establishment of a panel of architects to decide what should be preserved, items of great historic and artistic value were salvaged and with a huge disparity in compensation given.

As the war continued, so did piles of salvage, particularly tin cans which, at the time, could not be recycled. When the collection of tin cans ceased, recycling of all items decreased. Britons were tired of war and the mandatory recycling associated with it. When Lend Lease ended abruptly, Britain turned to salvage from Germany to rebuild. Recycling in Britain remained firmly associated with WWII and only returned as a counter-cultural movement in the 1970s.

Waste into Weapons is a timely and insightful addition to the growing literature on waste and recycling. Thorsheim's meticulous research has amply demonstrated the paradox of the Second World War—that Britons were encouraged and ordered to conserve and recycle in order that the war effort could destroy. *Waste into Weapons* reveals the militarization of everyday life that redefined rubbish and that destroyed historical artifacts, buildings, and manuscripts. It speaks to the power of propaganda but also to the limits of coercion. This is a must-read for historians of war, the environment, consumption, and waste. Thorsheim's work is a valuable addition to the literature and is also evidence that the Second World War remains a fruitful field of study.

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