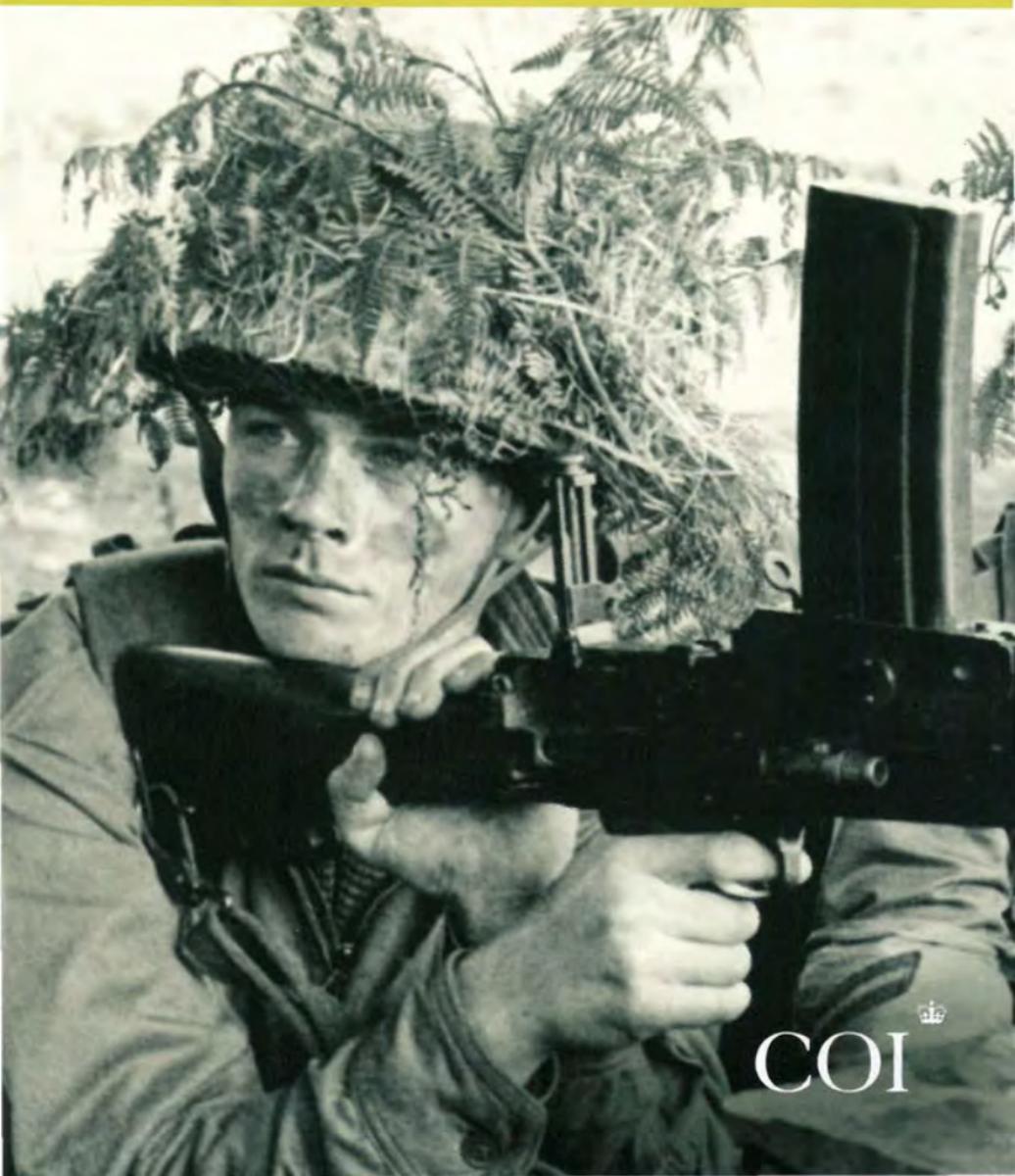


THE COI COLLECTION VOLUME THREE



They Stand Ready



COI 

DISC 1:



Victory Parade

UK | 1946 | black and white | 20 mins

As with much public sector filmmaking in the mid-twentieth century, *Victory Parade* is probably more significant for what it doesn't show than for what it does. On first glance, this filmed record of the celebration held in London on 8 July 1946 to mark the end of the war in Europe (the fact that it was held over a year after the event being an intuitive demonstration of the pace of life before mass telecommunications and air travel) amounts to an uncomplicated affirmation of the Allied victory over Nazism. But post-war tensions were already evident – in both the staging of the event itself and the film's projection of ideological unity between Britain and her colonies.

The parade became bogged down in the origins of the Cold War. Poland, having been liberated by Russian forces in the spring of 1945, had fallen under communist control, with the result that her troops were initially not invited to take part in the parade. This decision was partially reversed following a high

profile media campaign (Poles who had served in the RAF were invited), but the eventual absence of any representatives of the 250,000 or so Polish troops who had fought with the British forces in exile, along with those of the USSR, undermined any attempt to portray the parade as a simple statement of international solidarity against totalitarianism. Only the previous summer Winston Churchill, shortly after leaving office, gave a lecture in which he characterised the growing Soviet influence in eastern Europe as an 'iron curtain' – a new political reality that prevented an unproblematic restoration of the old European order.

Two major films were produced of the event, neither of which betrays any of this tension. Gaumont British News, under its showman producer L. Castleton Knight, released an extended newsreel in Technicolor, *The Victory Parade*, with the emphasis firmly on pageantry, the royal family and the British forces. It was considered by some to be overly jingoistic. A cinema owner in a nationalist area of east Belfast told the trade press that after an intertitle invited the audience to participate in singing 'There'll Always be an England', they responded by starting a riot and burning the place down. 'There'll always be a Sodom and a Gomorrah, too, but that doesn't mean we have to sing about it,' he commented.

Victory Parade was made by the Colonial Film Unit (CFU), an offshoot of the Ministry of ('Central Office of' from 1946) Information which operated from 1939 to 1955. Like its domestic counterpart,

the Crown Film Unit, the CFU had emerged from a number of embryonic organisations in the 1930s, its principal objective being to encourage support for the war effort in the colonies. Much of its output during the war sought to persuade the indigenous populations of the empire both to volunteer to fight and to support the war economically, through food and industrial exports. It is in this context that *Victory Parade* seeks to acknowledge the colonies' contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Yet the film that sought to portray an empire united in victory was produced less than three weeks before the event regarded by many as marking the start of its dissolution: the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by terrorists on 22 July 1946. The collapse of the British mandate in Palestine had all the ingredients of the political process that would precipitate the end of the wider empire: the weight of government

debt (most of it accrued fighting the war and owed to the United States) making the colonies economically unsustainable; the Attlee government's 1945 electoral pledge to prioritise the establishment of the welfare state and domestic reconstruction; sustained insurrections among the empire's indigenous populations and the United States' policy of using its newly acquired superpower status to force the dismantling of the old European empires by economic means.

When Clement Attlee's Labour Party left office in 1951, only 70 million people outside the United Kingdom were governed by it, compared to 457 million when Labour was elected in 1945. *Victory Parade*, therefore, could be said to mark the downfall of one empire and an origin of the downfall of another.

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They Stand Ready

UK | 1955 | black and white | 19 mins

One of the many remarkable legacies of the Second World War is the extent to which the political and economic measures borne of necessity, and justified with promises that they would be temporary, survived with an unwelcome and seemingly permanent transition into peacetime. The rationing of food, fuel and clothing, most public sector filmmaking and a seemingly perpetual state of economic crisis were three prominent examples. Compulsory military service for men (women were not required to undertake any form of National Service) was arguably the longest survivor: it was introduced shortly after the outbreak of the war, but the final recruits were not discharged until the summer of 1963.

Conscription was not popular, even in the darkest days of the war, hence the MOI sanctioned big budget feature film *The Way Ahead* (1944, dir. Carol Reed), portraying the infantry as levelling social barriers in the name of defeating a common enemy. While the wartime arrangement continued by default in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, an internal battle raged within Clement Attlee's Labour government as to the nature and extent of Britain's post-war Armed Forces. The historian Correlli Barnett argues that in spite of compelling economic arguments for a radical contraction, the belief held sway that Britain should maintain its military capacity to preserve its international political prestige. The result was the National Service Act 1948, requiring all males to serve 18

months in the Armed Services (two years from 1950) and a further four in the reserves.

They Stand Ready, commissioned by the COI for screening to imminent conscripts and their families, is at pains to stress the distinction between National Service during the Second World War and in its aftermath. 'It's no new thing for Britain, this sending of men to the far corners of the Earth... what is new is the kind of force she's sending,' the commentator argues, against shots of a troopship leaving with a contingent of teenage recruits. 'The heavy commitments laid on British arms throughout the world' is a line that is continually stressed throughout the film, implicitly arguing that from Korea to the Middle East, the UK's peacekeeping responsibilities that come with its participation in the United Nations are a necessary evil in order to prevent another world war. The conflicts referenced include those in Malaya, Malta, Gibraltar and Hong Kong during the immediate post-war period: in short, the troublespots that arose from managing the fall of the British Empire and the rise of the Cold War.

In a prophetic tempting of fate, the film's introductory section closes with the commentator asserting that 'without liking it, the British have accepted compulsory National Service in peacetime for as long as man has known it.' That acceptance did not last for much longer. The year after *They Stand Ready* was made came the incident which probably did more than any other to turn public opinion against widespread British military engagement overseas: the Suez crisis of 1956. The political fallout from Suez

largely discredited the justification of a public service military carrying out depoliticised peacekeeping (hence the Conservatives' pledge in their 1959 election manifesto to 'see that the facts are known, and that misrepresentation about British "colonialism" does not go unchallenged'), and by that stage it was only a matter of time before pledging to end National Service was a prerequisite for electoral success.

The consensus politics and public duty image of National Service promoted by *They Stand Ready* certainly communicates the broad political justification for deciding to retain it in the late 1940s. However, the film also

makes an intriguing counterpoint to *These Dangerous Years* (1957, dir. Herbert Wilcox: the title refers to the period in a teenager's life between leaving school and being called up), in which the looming spectre of conscription is not met with anything like the same enthusiasm by a group of Liverpool adolescents. As with so many British government shorts made between 1946 and the early 1960s, by dogmatically promoting a rapidly evaporating status quo, *They Stand Ready* paradoxically shows us just how profound the political, cultural and economic changes Britain was going through actually were.

Leo Enticknap

