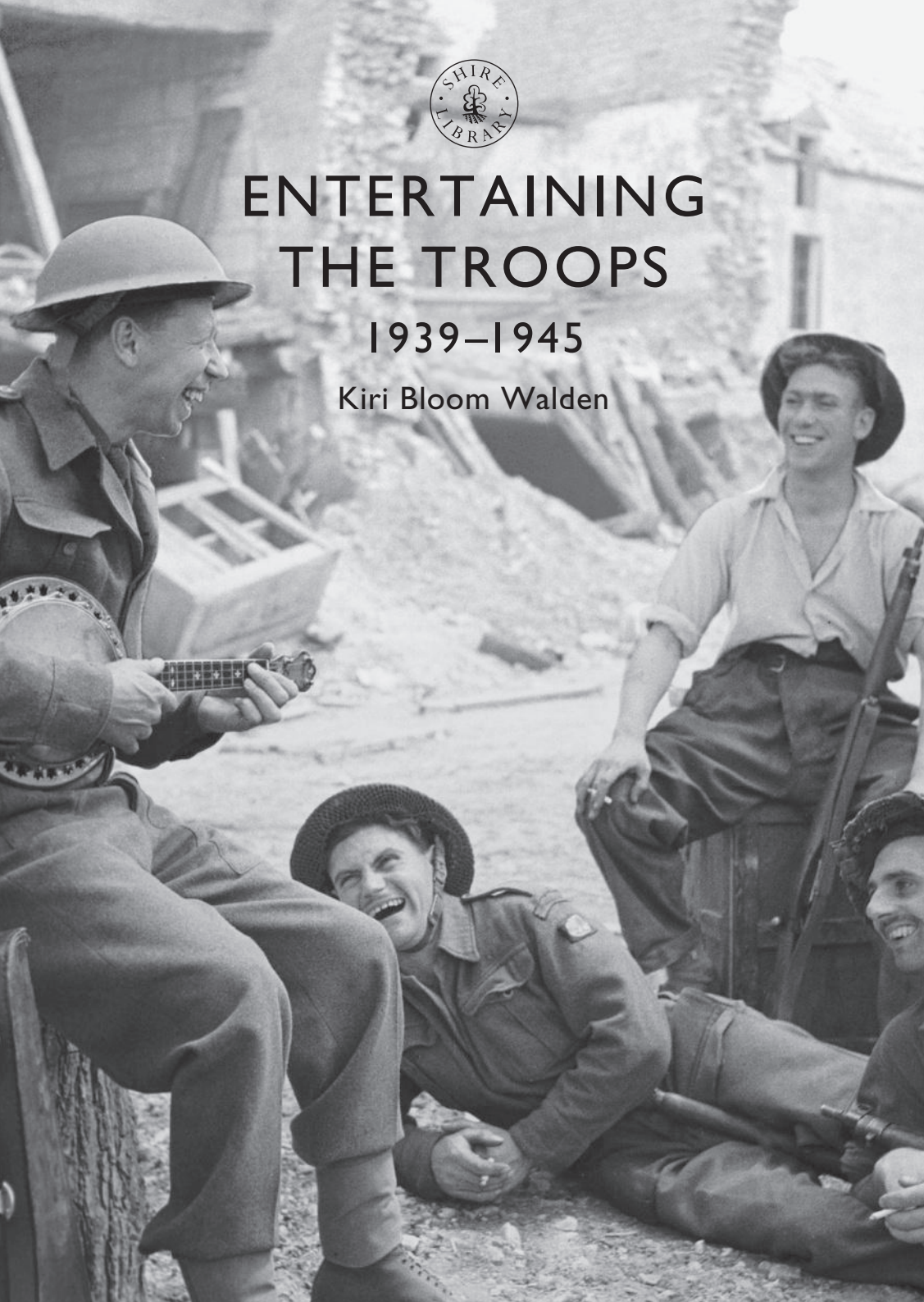




ENTERTAINING THE TROOPS

1939-1945

Kiri Bloom Walden





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ENSA AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

ENSA

Like so many elements of the ‘war machine’, the early development of the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) actually began well before war was declared in September 1939. Basil Dean began his career in the theatre, working in the Manchester repertory company before becoming the first director of Liverpool Repertory Theatre in 1911. He became a powerful figure in Edwardian theatre and he was awarded an MBE for his services to national entertainment as the head of War Office theatres during the First World War. From the late 1920s onwards Dean’s attention switched to the film industry. As a film producer he made huge stars of George Formby and Gracie Fields in some of the most successful British films of the 1930s.

As the political situation in Europe changed through the late 1930s Basil Dean realised both that war was inevitable, and that in that situation entertaining the troops would become important.

The First World War had been the first real modern war: one that had gone on for longer, and killed in greater numbers, than had ever been imagined at the outbreak of hostilities. Entertaining the troops had helped improve morale at times of desperate hardship and danger. Whether formally arranged through the War Office (through men like Basil Dean) or informally by the men themselves – for example in the satirical newspaper *The Wipers Times* or in prisoner-of-war camps –

OPPOSITE
George Formby.



Basil Dean, the founder of ENSA, wearing his ENSA uniform with pride.

these experiences on both sides of the front line would provide a template for military entertainment in the Second World War.

Having seen how important entertainment became in times of war, Dean's personal mission was to make sure that when war began, an organisation providing entertainment for the troops should be in place. He struggled to convince those in positions of authority of this, but he got ministerial approval for his proposed organisation in May 1939 and then by August had formed an alliance with the Navy, Army and Airforce Institutes (NAAFI), who would

undertake financial responsibility for the new organisation. Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) was just about up and running by the time war was declared.

The first ENSA concert in France took place in November of 1939 and featured Gracie Fields. Fields had worked in films with Basil Dean, and her cheerful working-class persona made her accessible and popular. Throughout the war the entertainment provided by ENSA was hugely varied, in scale and in quality. Artistes were most often put into teams (companies) to create variety shows – the aim presumably being that if a variety were offered there would be something to please everyone. It often led to quite a list of different performers being brought together, however: for example, writing for the BBC WW2 People's War project, Catherine Lovatt, a pianist with ENSA, recalls:

Ours was a Welsh show called 'Taffy's Twelve'. The manager was a magician and weight lifter called 'Maskar'



A full house at the Criterion Theatre in London. Despite the dangers of the Blitz, London remained an important centre for entertainment.

and his brother Nat was the butt of his gags and told the old chestnuts! We had a father and son who were ex miners from the Rhondda Valley and played the bones, a tenor from Swansea, a soprano from Blaenau Ffestiniog. We had three dancers including my sister Joan and a whistler from Holyhead and a Londoner who played the accordion and sang.

Basil Dean received criticism (from audiences) throughout the war about the inconsistent quality of ENSA entertainers, and from the entertainers themselves about the badly organised logistics of their tours. But when you look at the huge scope and reach of ENSA during the war you can't help but admire Dean's vision, even if things didn't always come off as he'd planned. When it came to quality, he was doing his best with what he had.

ENSA often struggled to recruit enough performers to meet the huge demand for entertainment from the military forces (IWM HU 90866).

