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**Constructing Counter-Britishness: The
British Anti-Iraq War Movement, 2001-2003**



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Abbreviations

STWC – Stop the War Coalition

MAB – Muslim Association of Britain

CND – Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

A Note on Terminology

The British anti-Iraq War movement has often been referred to as the ‘Stop the War’ movement, and the mass demonstration of 15 February 2003 as the ‘Stop the War’ protest.¹ Such terminology risks conflating a broad and heterogeneous movement with the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which constituted only one organising body alongside others, including the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). To reflect this distinction, this study refers primarily to the British anti-Iraq War movement, and the mass demonstration simply as ‘15 February 2003’, following the terminology used in Ian Sinclair’s oral history collection.²

¹ Lindsey German and Andrew Murray, *Stop the War: The Story of Britain’s Biggest Mass Movement* (Bookmarks Publications, 2005); London Museum, ‘Stop the War 2003: London’s largest ever protest’, London Museum <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/stop-war-londons-largest-ever-protest/> [accessed 4 April 2026].

² Ian Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair: An Oral History of 15 February 2003* (Peace News Press, 2013), p. 48.

Introduction

‘Saturday [15 February 2003] was a defining moment in contemporary political culture – whatever it achieves in the debate on the war with Iraq...It shifted the tone of what Britain believes itself to be’.³

Madeleine Bunting, *The Guardian* (2003)

On 15 February 2003, two million people took to the streets of London as part of a Global Day of Protest against the Iraq War.⁴ In Britain, demonstrations occurred nationwide, making it the largest mobilisation in modern British history.⁵ Emerging in the aftermath of 9/11 and the declaration of the ‘War on Terror’, the movement brought together a uniquely broad coalition of political organisations, religious groups, and individuals.⁶ The formal alliance between STWC, MAB, and CND provided organisational structure for the mobilisation, but the movement extended far beyond these groups, encompassing what has been repeatedly described as ‘ordinary’ people.⁷ This apparent embodiment of the British people carried particular significance within the post-Cold War political landscape that Francis Fukuyama had termed the ‘end of history’ – the supposed triumph of liberal democracy as the final form of legitimate political organisation – through which Tony Blair’s government justified intervention as ‘a force for good’.⁸ That two million people took to the streets to contest the state’s right to speak for Britain suggests the final form had not, in fact, been reached.

Yet this sits uneasily alongside the movement’s historical neglect, treated as ultimately inconsequential in British histories and reduced to just two sentences in Andrew Marr’s A

³ Madeleine Bunting, ‘We Are the People’, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/feb/17/voterapathy.antiwar> [accessed 3 October 2025].

⁴ UK Parliament, ‘10th Anniversary of the 15 February 2003 Protests against the Iraq War’, Early Day Motion 45213 (2013) <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/45213/10th-anniversary-of-the-15-february-2003-protests-against-the-iraq-war> [accessed 1 April 2026]; We Are Many, dir. by Amir Amirani (Amirani Media, 2016), Global statistic, 00:54:33.

⁵ German and Murray, *Stop the War*, pp. 190-194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-29.

⁷ Stefaan Walgrave and Dieter Rucht, *The World Says No to War: Demonstrations against the War on Iraq* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 25.

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’, *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3-18 (p. 3) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184> [accessed 1 March 2026]; Nyta Mann, ‘Blair says Britain is ‘force for good’’, *BBC News*, 5 January 2002 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1743985.stm [accessed 12 January 2026].

History of Modern Britain.⁹ The movement's failure to prevent the British War in Iraq, which was publicly announced by Tony Blair on 20 March 2003, has led the movement to be remembered primarily in terms of what was not achieved.¹⁰ This dissertation challenges that historical characterisation.

As T.V. Reed argues, protest must be understood not simply as opposition, but as production, and this is where the significance of the British anti-Iraq War movement lies.¹¹ The movement produced a British identity that was plural, understood as the authentic expression of Britishness, and morally and democratically authoritative, defined by the people rather than the state. This dissertation terms that identity *counter-Britishness*. Nancy Fraser's concept of 'subaltern counterpublics' as spaces in which 'subordinated social groups' formulate 'oppositional interpretations of their identities', and Jo Fox's identification of 'public counternarratives of Britishness' in World War Two as contestation to dominant narratives, both illuminate part of what the movement produced.¹² However, these frameworks are insufficient on their own terms. Fraser presupposes subordination as the condition of counterpublic formation, while Fox's counternarrative operated around 'opposition to state interference with the individual'.¹³ The anti-Iraq War movement represented not a minority, nor a battle for the individual, but a movement that considered itself the authentic nation contesting the state's right to speak for Britain. Counter-Britishness acted as a rival collective claim to Britishness, rather than a rejection, extending beyond narrative to encompass embodied and social practices.

This dissertation advances a bottom-up cultural history of the anti-Iraq War movement, drawing on movement-produced sources and centring activists as historical actors engaged in the construction of national identity. It traces how that identity was constructed through social formation, which constituted who Britain was; made visible through embodied and visual practice, which created national space rather than marginal space; and articulated through

⁹ James Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq* (Routledge, 2017), p. 50; Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (Macmillan, 2007), p. 629.

¹⁰ Tony Blair, 'Address to the Nation', 20 March 2003

https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/iraq/library_blairspeech.shtml [accessed 10 December 2025]; Ian Sinclair and Alex Doherty, 'Reconsidering the Failure of the Anti-Iraq War', *openDemocracy*, 15 February 2013 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/reconsidering-failure-of-anti-iraq-war-march/> [accessed 2 April 2026].

¹¹ T.V. Reed, 'Protest as Artistic Expression', in *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, ed. by Kathrin Fahlenbrach (Berghahn Books, 2016), pp. 77-93 (p. 77), doi:10.2307/j.ctvgs0blr.12.

¹² Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), pp. 56-80 (p. 67), doi:10.2307/466240; Jo Fox, 'Careless Talk: Tensions within British Domestic Propaganda during the Second World War', *The Journal of British Studies*, 51.4 (2012), pp. 936-966 (p. 938), doi:10.1086/666741.

¹³ Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 67; Fox, 'Careless Talk', p. 965.

rhetoric, which laid claim to the moral and democratic language of the government. These formed three dimensions in the creation of a coherent rival claim to the nation.

Literature Review

The British anti-Iraq War Movement has received limited historical analysis outside of movement-produced publications, including *Stop the War: A Graphic History* and *Stop the War: The Story of Britain's Biggest Mass Movement*.¹⁴ While valuable as self-referential records of an otherwise under-documented movement, these works remain thematically narrow and largely ahistorical. Where scholarship does exist it takes the form of social movement studies and survey analysis, as with Stevan Walgrave and Dieter Rucht's comparative account of 15 February 2003, which treats the movement as a global political phenomenon rather than a cultural production.¹⁵ More recently, Ian Sinclair's *The March That Shook Blair*, has intervened as the first substantial attempt to historicise both the broader movement and the mass demonstration of 15 February 2003 in the British context.¹⁶ Sinclair directly responds to the protest's marginalisation within broader histories of dissent, exemplified by Clive Bloom's history of London protest, in which 15 February 2003 is covered only in passing.¹⁷ Bloom's later reflection that 'There is no story there. There is nothing you can write about', underscores the extent to which the movement has been dismissed as historically insignificant.¹⁸

In contrast, scholarship on Britain and the Iraq war is extensive, dominated by analyses of foreign policy and political leadership. As David McCourt argues, Iraq was 'the key event in the history of New Labour's efforts to construct Britain's role in the world', while scholars such as Jack Holland emphasise Blair's projection of Britain as 'a force for good' through 'humanitarian intervention'.¹⁹ Within this literature, Jarrod Hayes has identified three core public justifications for war: the threat to British security, maintaining the US-UK special relationship, and a mission of democracy.²⁰ Alongside these public arguments, scholars have

¹⁴ Marie Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War: A Graphic History* (Francis Boutle Publications, 2011); German and Murray, *Stop the War*.

¹⁵ Walgrave and Rucht, *The World Says No to War*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*.

¹⁷ Clive Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolt* (Frances Lincoln, 2010), pp. xvii-xxii, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 36.

¹⁸ Clive Bloom, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 37.

¹⁹ David McCourt, 'The New Labour Governments and Britain's Role in the World', in *British Foreign Policy*, ed. by Oliver Daddow and Jamie Gaskarth (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 31-47 (p. 44), doi:10.1057/9780230307315_2; Jack Holland, 'Blair's War on Terror: Selling Intervention to Middle England', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14.1 (2012), pp. 74-95 (p. 78), doi:10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00469.x.

²⁰ Jarrod Hayes, 'Identity, Authority, and the British War in Iraq', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12.3 (2016), pp. 334-353 (p. 339), doi:10.1093/fpa/orw048.

explored a range of underlying possible private motivations, including a perceived decline of traditional British identity, of particular concern in the post-Cold-War new world order, as well as Blair's personal faith.²¹ However, bridging these public and private explanations, there remains a broad academic consensus that the case for war was articulated morally.²² Whether understood as a distinct 'moral turn', or part of a longer-standing framework that Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann identified as 'new global morality', intervention in Iraq as Britain's moral duty emerges as a central organising narrative.²³

In the wake of the Chilcot Report, scholarship has further prioritised evaluating the legitimacy and consequences of intervention, reflecting a wider shift within international relations literature towards the role of domestic politics in global dynamics.²⁴ The diverse criticisms of the war, ranging from anti-imperialism to distrust in government following the 'dodgy dossier', are extensively catalogued in the works of Christopher Bluth and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe.²⁵ James Strong's constructivist approach demonstrates how political authority was constructed rather than derived from popular consent, noting that 'democracies are not supposed to fight unpopular wars. Britain did'.²⁶ Jarrod Hayes developed this further, directly linking rhetoric to identity construction, through the concept of 'democracy' as 'social identity', arguing that the rhetoric used to legitimise the war drew upon British identity markers to construct Iraq as a threat.²⁷ This body of scholarship firmly establishes the Iraq War debate as a struggle over the meaning of Britain's role and identity.

However, it remains largely top-down in its approach, prioritising how identity was articulated for the public rather than how it was produced within it, with both Strong and Hayes prioritising

²¹ Steven Phillip Kramer, 'Blair's Britain after Iraq', *Foreign Affairs*, 82.4 (2003), pp. 90-104 (p. 91) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20033651> [accessed 12 January 2026]; Oliver Daddow, "'Tony's War'? Blair, Kosovo and the Interventionist Impulse in British Foreign Policy', *International Affairs*, 85.3 (2009), pp. 547-560 (p. 551), doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00813.x; Stephen Benedict Dyson, 'Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2.3 (2006), pp. 289-306 (p. 300) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24907291> [accessed 12 January 2026].

²² David Chandler, 'Rhetoric without Responsibility: The Attraction of "Ethical" Foreign Policy', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5.3 (2003), pp. 295-316 (p. 302), doi:10.1111/1467-856X.00108.

²³ Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq*, p. 120; Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 'Human Rights and History', *Past & Present*, 232 (2016), pp. 279-310 (p. 298), doi:10.1093/pastj/gtw013.

²⁴ Joshua D. Kertzer, 'Public Opinion about Foreign Policy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. by Leonie Huddy, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 447-485 (p. 448), doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197541302.013.13.

²⁵ Christopher Bluth, 'The British Road to War: Blair, Bush and the Decision to Invade Iraq', *International Affairs*, 80.5 (2004), pp. 871-892 (p. 871) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3569476> [accessed 14 January 2026]; Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Rhiannon Vickers, 'Blowback for Britain?: Blair, Bush, and the War in Iraq', *Review of International Studies*, 33.2 (2007), pp. 205-221 (p. 212).

²⁶ Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair's War in Iraq*, p. 1.

²⁷ Hayes, 'Identity, Authority, and the British War in Iraq', p. 337.

political action and rhetoric.²⁸ This dissertation builds on these insights but departs from their analytical framing. Rather than disaggregating individual objections to the war, it interprets the collective rejection of intervention as an act of identity expression. It treats ‘the public’ as a constellation of ‘potentially infinite’ competing publics, unified in this moment through a shared rejection of the state’s narrative.²⁹

In addressing identity, this dissertation is situated within a broader historiography on British national identity. Foundational works, such as that of Benedict Anderson, conceptualise the nation as an ‘imagined political community’, while Linda Colley’s *Britons* remains significant in emphasising mass Britishness as transcending traditional social boundaries, despite criticism for its departure from bottom-up histories of E.P. Thompson.³⁰ This study draws on these works in understanding identity as continuously negotiated and constructed, while also drawing on Peter Mandler’s assertion that national identity be understood as a plural category. Rather than defining Britishness in fixed terms, this dissertation examines what Mandler terms as the observable ‘public face’, and the ‘symbolic frameworks’ through which it is constructed, contested, and rearticulated.³¹

James Vernon has noted that the period witnessed the contemporary nadir of ‘voting and belonging to a political party’, meaning that ‘politics was increasingly conducted by other means’.³² This set the stage for the movement, as protest has long been recognised as one of the key sites of identity formation, ‘the political nation without-doors’.³³ Jodi Burkett’s work on CND demonstrates how social movements articulate competing visions of national identity through discourse, allowing protest discourse, symbolism, and cultural production to be read as sites of identity construction rather than merely expressions of political opposition.³⁴ This

²⁸ Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair’s War in Iraq*, p. 4; Hayes, ‘Identity, Authority, and the British War in Iraq’, p. 335.

²⁹ Michael Warner, ‘Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88 (2002), pp. 413-425 (p. 414).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, ‘Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism’, in *The New Social Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 282-288 (p. 283); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 365; Theodore Koditschek, ‘The Making of British Nationality’, *Victorian Studies*, 44.3 (2002), pp. 389-398 (p. 395) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3830026> [accessed 12 December 2025].

³¹ Peter Mandler, ‘What is “National Identity”? Definitions and Applications in Modern British Historiography’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 3.2 (2006), pp. 271-297 (p. 276), doi:10.1017/S1479244306000746.

³² James Vernon, *Modern Britain: 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 509.

³³ George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (Collins, 1970), p. 319, cited in Roland Quinault and John Stevenson, *Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History, 1790-1920* (Routledge, 2021), p. 19, doi:10.4324/9781003186892.

³⁴ Jodi Burkett, ‘Re-defining British Morality: “Britishness” and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament 1958-68’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 21.2 (2010), pp. 184-205 (p. 192), doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwp057.

dissertation develops this analysis further through social movement theory. Frank Parkin's work on CND foregrounded the role of identity and value systems in motivating protest, while new social movement theorists, such as Alberto Melucci, conceptualise identity as a form of resistance.³⁵ Similarly, James Jasper highlights the role of emotion, creativity, and moral expression in shaping protest activity.³⁶ These approaches shift attention from what movements demand to what they create, providing a crucial framework for analysing the anti-Iraq War movement.

Methodology

This dissertation examines the construction of counter-Britishness within the British anti-Iraq War movement between 21 September 2001 and 15 February 2003. The opening date marks the first coordinated meeting of the Stop the War Coalition at Friends Meeting House, representing the initial moment of organised mobilisation, allowing sources describing the lead-up to the coordinated march to be analysed.³⁷ The closing date, the mass demonstration of 15 February 2003, is treated as the zenith of the movement's activity and its most visible enactment of a rival national identity. Limiting the study to this period allows for focused analysis of identity formation prior to the invasion of Iraq, ensuring that the movement's counter-narrative is not just examined through the lens of failure. Sources produced outside of this timeframe, including retrospective oral histories and written testimonies, are used where they reference activity within it. The analytical frame therefore remains consistent, concerned with how Britain was imagined and contested during protest.

This dissertation is situated within the tradition of history from below, which centres the 'actions, practices, habits, values, mentalities, and feelings' of ordinary people rather than elite actors.³⁸ In keeping with this framework, this dissertation relies exclusively on movement-produced sources. These include oral history testimonies, participant accounts, organisational histories, flyers, protest art, photographs, placards, banners, speeches, and rally footage. The

³⁵ Frank Parkin, *Middle Class Radicalism: The Social Bases of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (Manchester University Press, 1968), p. 30; Peyman Vahabzadeh, 'A Critique of Ultimate Referentiality in the New Social Movement Theory of Alberto Melucci', *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 26.4 (2001), pp. 611-633 (p. 612), doi:10.2307/3341493.

³⁶ James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 5, doi:10.7208/9780226394961.

³⁷ Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War*, p. 153.

³⁸ Andrew I. Port, 'History from Below, The History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory', in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, ed. by James D. Wright, 2nd edn (Elsevier, 2015), pp. 108-113 (p. 108), doi:10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.62156-6.

decision to prioritise activist-generated materials reflects the aim of understanding British identity as articulated from the grassroots.

Newspapers have been used only to provide contextual grounding. Scholarship has extensively documented media distortion during the Iraq War debate, with Strong emphasising that ‘though the British public consistently opposed the use of force in Iraq...the press and parliament all rallied round the flag’.³⁹ David Miller’s *Tell Me Lies* corroborates this portrayal, analysing the mainstream media as ‘ciphers for the powerful’.⁴⁰ As such, incorporating newspaper sources in the analysis of grassroots identity formation would risk reinscribing the top-down analytical framework this dissertation departs from.

This source base carries inevitable limitations that are themselves historically revealing. Protest culture is inherently ephemeral, with many elements existing only ‘in the moment of action’, and the survival of materials has been uneven.⁴¹ While institutions including the London Museum, Imperial War Museum, and Victoria and Albert Museum have preserved several relevant materials, the most comprehensive collections remain those curated by STWC, as a central organising body. This introduces an archival imbalance, as while the STWC collections actively state their design of drawing together ‘different strands of the movement’, STWC is inevitably more thoroughly documented than MAB, CND, and independent protestors.⁴²

A geographical limitation is also present. Anti-war activity is estimated to have occurred across 250 cities and towns in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, but limited evidence has been retained.⁴³ London is the most comprehensively preserved site of protest. Where possible, regional mobilisation is acknowledged and incorporated, but due to this unevenness the London demonstration of 15 February 2003 necessarily serves as the primary site of analysis.

These structural constraints shape each chapter’s source base differently. Chapter One draws primarily on oral history and personal testimony. As only one formal oral history collection exists, which is an edited collection, as well as STWC collected personal testimonies, this dissertation centres the subjectivity of these sources analytically, treating the question of how

³⁹ Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair’s War in Iraq*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ David Miller, *Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq* (Pluto, 2004), p. 6.

⁴¹ Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll, ‘The Art/History of Resistance: Visual Ephemera in Public Space’, *Space and Culture*, 18.4 (2015), pp. 328-357 (p. 331), doi:10.1177/1206331215596490.

⁴² German and Murray, *Stop the War*, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

participants narrated and preserved their involvement as historically significant. Chapter Two engages with visual sources and protest materials. As ephemeral objects produced for immediate use, rarely entering institutional collections systematically, the STWC graphics collection has been used to recover considerable visual material. Chapter Three focuses on speeches delivered at the 15 February 2003 march. These speeches were available primarily only in transcribed form due to archival video footage remaining in formats that are no longer publicly available, and as such are treated largely as textual sources and subjected to rhetorical analysis.

Structure

This dissertation is organised thematically around three mechanisms through which counter-Britishness was produced as a rival claim to national identity.

Chapter One: Social formation

Chapter Two: Embodied and Visual Practice

Chapter Three: Rhetorical Articulation

Together, these processes reveal that the movement did not just oppose Britain going to war but claimed Britishness from the ground up.

Chapter One: Social Formation

The British anti-Iraq War movement has largely been understood in terms of its scale, particularly the 15 February 2003 protest, with its attendance of up to 2 million people.⁴⁴ This scale of public dissent has been central to Britain-Iraq literature, leading scholars such as James Strong to assess how war was possible ‘despite concerted public opposition’, while Jack

⁴⁴ Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War*, p. 10.

Holland has examined the nature of that public through the ‘mass culture of middle England’.⁴⁵ Such approaches reduce composition to a measure of opposition, overlooking what P.G. Klandermans identifies as the ‘crucial role’ of identity processes in protest.⁴⁶ Mass mobilisation must therefore be understood beyond scale as a process through which identity is produced.

This chapter analyses how counter-Britishness was produced through social formation. It draws on oral history testimonies and personal accounts, primarily from Ian Sinclair’s edited collection *The March That Shook Blair*, enabling what Paul Thompson terms ‘a history built around people’.⁴⁷ As these interviews were conducted between January 2009 and September 2012, they are treated as reflective accounts, centred on participants’ personal memory of mobilisation.⁴⁸ Through this material, what emerges is the formulation of a coalition that rendered ideological and cultural difference compatible, and the construction of the movement as representative of ‘ordinary’ people. Together, these processes constituted a rival claim to official Britishness, establishing the movement as the national majority. Social formation, this chapter argues, established who could claim to be Britain.

The coalition of STWC, MAB, and CND that brought together the broader anti-Iraq War movement, culminating in the jointly organised 15 February 2003 march, constituted a political reconfiguration of British identity. The very act of drawing together distinct political traditions established a break from what Geoff Eley identified as the post 1980s focus on the ‘sovereignty of particular selves’.⁴⁹ Difference was the foundation of the movement’s collective identity rather than the obstacle. STWC, founded in 2001 as an umbrella anti-war organisation, drew on the traditions of the British left, with many of its leading organisers emerging from the Socialist Workers Party. Members situated themselves within this lineage explicitly, invoking ‘Vietnam-era’ protest, ‘the 70s left triumph’, and ‘the left in America’.⁵⁰ By contrast, MAB, founded in 1997 to represent British Muslims, articulated a form of political mobilisation grounded in religious identity and ‘community’ representation.⁵¹ Meanwhile CND, established in 1958,

⁴⁵ Strong, *Public Opinion, Legitimacy and Tony Blair’s War in Iraq*, p. 59; Holland, ‘Blair’s War on Terror’, p. 80.

⁴⁶ P.G. Klandermans, ‘Identity Politics and Politicized Identities: Identity Processes and the Dynamics of Protest’, *Political Psychology*, 35 (2014), pp. 1-22 (p. 1), doi:10.1111/pops.12167.

⁴⁷ Paul Thompson, ‘The Voice of the Past: Oral History’, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edn (Routledge, 2016), pp. 33-40 (p. 39), doi:10.4324/9781315671833-2.

⁴⁸ Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Geoff Eley, ‘The Center and the Margins: Decline or Renewal?’, in *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 470-490 (p. 472).

⁵⁰ ‘About the Stop the War Coalition’, Stop the War Coalition <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/about/> [accessed 21 March 2026]; Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, pp. 52, 57, 90.

⁵¹ ‘History of MAB’, Muslim Association of Britain <https://www.mabonline.net/about-us/history-mab> [accessed 21 March 2026]; Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 80.

brought with it the institutional legacy of the British peace movement, with participants invoking its recognisable ‘symbol of peace’ and its ‘historical role’ in anti-nuclear campaigning, associated with an older and often more middle-class culture of protest.⁵² These differences represented competing social, cultural, and generational models of political engagement. The significance of the coalition was thus not just breadth, but its demonstration that British values could be articulated and shared across divisions rather than through their exclusion.

These differences were articulated in participant accounts, where coalition was experienced as a process of defining and negotiating the limits of inclusion. Lindsey German, then STWC Convenor, emphasised how ‘the real jihadi, extreme fundamentalists don’t come anywhere near Stop the War’.⁵³ This statement did more than describe composition. It performed a boundary-making act, retrospectively shaping what kind of ideological community the movement represented and justifying alignment with MAB. In the post-9/11 context, where, as Nicole Martin identifies, Muslims faced acute ‘political alienation’ from mainstream political culture, such statements worked to position the coalition as distinct from the forms of extremism through which anxieties surrounding Muslim identity were articulated.⁵⁴

This could be read as evidence that the coalition’s unity was limited or fragile, as tensions within the coalition were similarly articulated through accounts of internal disagreement. Anas Altikriti, a prominent figure within MAB, recalled ‘hearing that some within CND had reservations’ about partnering with MAB, due to CND being ‘a liberal movement, including the gay movement’.⁵⁵ That Tony Myers, CND’s Campaign Officer, stated that he ‘did not remember such concerns being raised’, is less significant than the anxiety expressed by Altikriti itself.⁵⁶ As Alessandro Portelli argues, oral testimonies reveal what participants ‘believed they were doing’ rather than factual record.⁵⁷ Altikriti’s account therefore captures the coalition through his personal memory as an ongoing negotiation of difference. Rather than undermining unity, these accounts suggest that it was not a stable or pre-existing condition, but something actively

⁵² ‘Who We Are’, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament <https://cnduk.org/who/> [accessed 21 March 2026]; Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 112.

⁵³ Lindsey German, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 90.

⁵⁴ Nicole Martin, ‘Are British Muslims Alienated from Mainstream Politics by Islamophobia and British Foreign Policy?’, *Ethnicities*, 17.3 (2017), pp. 350-370 (p. 368), doi:10.1177/1468796816656674.

⁵⁵ Anas Altikriti, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ Tony Myers, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 111.

⁵⁷ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 50.

produced through negotiation, making coalition a site in which political identity was actively constructed rather than assumed.

It was precisely this negotiated difficulty that gave the eventual unity, slowly building across smaller protests from 2001 onwards until 2003, its political and symbolic force. As Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani's collective identity theory suggests, shared mobilisation can create a sense of common purpose among actors who may otherwise be 'not necessarily identical, but surely compatible'.⁵⁸ Here, compatibility was produced through the process of coalition. Activists narrated the act of coming together as the movement's central achievement, through which cooperation became an expression of collective identity. Andrew Murray, chair of STWC, captured this dynamic explicitly, with his declaration that 'each organisation brought unique contributions...without the support [of each] the overall movement could not have reached as far as it did'.⁵⁹ This reach was made tangible in the immense mobilisation from local branches of STWC, CND, and MAB to London for 15 February 2003, recalled as amassing '200 coaches' from Birmingham alone, '24 coaches' from Nottingham, and comparable figures nationwide.⁶⁰ Through this coordination, the coalition transcended fragmented political cultures that had previously characterised British protest. In doing so, the coalition redefined plurality as a credible form of national representation, asserting a counter-Britishness that existed within difference.

If the coalition established a reconfiguration of identity at the organisational level, participant testimonies suggest that this identity was grounded and made meaningful at the level of everyday experience. Claire Langhamer argues that the category of 'ordinary' has historically functioned as a powerful site of social identity through which legitimacy and moral authority can be claimed, defining who represents the authentic voice of the nation.⁶¹ Accounts of the anti-Iraq War movement drew on this language of the 'ordinary', describing the movement's make-up as 'not the usual people, but ordinary punters'.⁶² Opposition to the war was thereby framed not as a minority political act but as an expression of the majority, transforming dissent into a claim about who constituted Britain.

⁵⁸ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2006), p. 21.

⁵⁹ Andrew Murray, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, pp. 170-180.

⁶¹ Claire Langhamer, "Who the Hell Are Ordinary People?" Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), pp. 175-195 (p. 178), doi:10.1017/S0080440118000099.

⁶² Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 167.

Ian Sinclair's oral history collection, which deliberately foregrounded voices 'hidden from history', further established the 'ordinary' as a category.⁶³ Alongside prominent organisers, the collection recorded the voices of individuals whose participation would otherwise be considered ordinary, integrating community figures like Ruhul Tarafder, students, individual participants like Ellie Mae O'Hagan and Gabriel Carlyle, and collecting written testimonials from local marchers.⁶⁴ As an edited collection, this curation actively constructs the movement as grounded in everyday experience, showing how the 'ordinary' operated as a structuring principle through which the movement remains understood and articulated.

This construction of ordinariness was further embedded in the practices through which participation was enacted. Testimonies collected by STWC situated protest within the routines of everyday life, presenting political action as accessible to all. Participant Ann Fannin recalled that, 'Joyce and I, two elderly lesbians in our sixties...printed out a petition and stood outside Safeways in the small town of New Milton'.⁶⁵ The testimony is striking, offering age, sexuality and locality not as political identities but as markers of ordinariness, with emphasis falling on the smallness of the town, the domesticity of the setting, and modesty of the act. Opposition to the war was thus located within the fabric of daily life, rather than positioned as exceptional or radical. Such an account being submitted by an individual to the STWC collection shows how the 'ordinary' was experienced and claimed, with participants viewing their own stories as significant to the broader national narrative. As such, the movement did more than include 'ordinary' people but transformed the ordinary into a legitimate basis for national political expression.

This connection between the 'ordinary' and the nation was most powerfully articulated through participant accounts of collective experience during the 15 February 2003 march. Iraqi writer and activist Haifa Zangana recalled that the march was 'one of the few times I have felt at home in Britain. I thought this is the kind of people I belong to.'⁶⁶ This testimony is particularly revealing, as a sense of belonging was not tied to legal citizenship or state recognition, but to the collective presence of the protestors themselves. Similarly, Mundher al-Adhami, an Iraqi living in the UK, described the demonstration as 'the real Britain', reframing the nation as something located in the people rather than the state.⁶⁷ That these claims were made by Iraqi participants – those whose country was the object of British military intervention – gives these testimonies

⁶³ Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 43.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 12, 82, 122, 123, 352.

⁶⁵ Ann Fannin, personal testimony, in German and Murray, *Stop the War*, p. 96.

⁶⁶ Haifa Zangana, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ Mundher al-Adhami, interview, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 197.

particular analytical weight. The Britain recognised in the protest is explicitly contrasted with that enacted through foreign policy, exposing a disjunction between state action and popular identification.

This dynamic directly challenges Frank Parkin's characterisation of social movements as 'emerging from alienation from the dominant values' of society.⁶⁸ Rather than positioning themselves outside the national community or 'dominant values', participants recalled their dissent as an expression of a more authentic version of the nation. What was constructed was a reclaiming of Britishness itself, located in the people and not the state.

Overall, the social formation of the British anti-Iraq War movement demonstrates that its significance lay beyond its scale. The coalition between STWC, MAB, and CND reconfigured the terms through which collective identity could be articulated, rendering difference compatible within a shared national framework. The category of the 'ordinary' extended this transformation into lived experience, positioning dissent as an expression of the nation at large and not the activity of a minority. These processes constituted counter-Britishness as a rival claim to the authentic national majority of Britain. The body that would occupy national space and speak with democratic authority in the chapters to follow, was here assembled.

Chapter Two: Embodied and Visual Practice

This chapter turns to how the counter-Britishness constituted through social formation was materialised. The 15 February 2003 march, while often described as a 'highly visual affair', has yet to be fully analysed in relation to identity.⁶⁹ Drawing on visual protest materials and footage from the demonstration, this chapter argues that counter-Britishness was produced through practices of visibility and spatial occupation, transforming the majority constituted in Chapter One into a materially enacted national presence. Following Judith Butler's argument that 'forms of assembly already signify' prior to and apart from any verbal demands of protest, the

⁶⁸ Parkin, *Middle Class Radicalism*, p. 30.

⁶⁹ Liz McQuiston, *Protest and the Visual: Creative Dissent in the 21st Century* (Phaidon, 2019), p. 106.

occupation of London is independently treated as an identity claim.⁷⁰ At the same time, Jennifer Evans' understanding of visual culture as something that 'not only reflects but actively constructs' social realities, allows these materials to be read not as records of dissent but as sites in which meanings of national identity were produced.⁷¹ Where Chapter One established who could claim to speak for Britain, this chapter establishes where Britain existed.

It was through the physical occupation of London on 15 February 2003 that counter-Britishness asserted itself as a claim to national space. Katrina Navickas has identified London as Britain's 'heart of power'.⁷² Occupation of this space therefore carried significance beyond geographical location. In the period post devolution, which from 1997 renegotiated the territorial boundaries of the nation, and rising regional inequality, the convergence of marchers from across Britain onto London collapsed regional difference, enacting unity in the symbolic heart of the nation.⁷³

The organisation of the march route sought to contain this presence within controlled boundaries, with official starting points at Embankment and Gower Street, moving through Westminster before converging at Hyde Park.⁷⁴ However, the scale of participation exceeded these constraints, as vast crowds filled and at times 'gridlocked' central London.⁷⁵ This was not only a logistical issue but a spatial transformation, as the lived reality of the march disrupted the controlled spatial framework imposed upon it, turning London into a space in which the protestors constituted the dominant presence.

This reworking of London as a site of national meaning is captured in activist photographer Kristian Buus' image of protestors gathered near the Cenotaph, where the inscription 'the Glorious Dead' forms the backdrop to the demonstration.

⁷⁰ Judith E
doi:10.415

⁷¹ Jennifer
<https://www>

⁷² Katrina
2025), p. 1

⁷³ Jon Lav
2019), p. 2

⁷⁴ 'The Of

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Kristian Buus, *The Glorious Dead*, 15 February 2003, photograph, in Marie Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War: A Graphic History* (Francis Boutle Publications, 2011), p. 55.

The image aligned protest with what has been referred to in memory scholarship as a core site of British ‘national memory’.⁷⁶ By occupying a space which commemorates those who died for the nation, protestors implicitly claimed that memorial logic as their own. Through their physical presence, opposition to military violence was positioned not as a departure from national tradition, but as its most authentic continuation. In Rigney and Merrill’s terms, this constitutes ‘memory in activism’, in which memory is mobilised within contemporary political action.⁷⁷ The Cenotaph embodies a state-sanctioned account of nation, while the protestors, mobile and collectively assembled, appropriated and rearticulated that authority. Through Buus’ photograph, this moment was made durable, transforming a transient occupation into a lasting visual claim that the movement asserted control over the symbolic meaning of national space.

This dynamic was reinforced in an official STWC video compilation from the march, in which marchers were asked mid-procession where they had travelled from, with responses ranging across Birmingham, Bedford, North Wales, and as far as Indonesia.⁷⁸ As a form of self-presentation of the movement, the video makes visible both the scale of protest and the diverse composition, assembling a geographically and socially diverse body of protestors into a single

⁷⁶ Jenny Edkins, ‘War Memorials and Remembrance: The London Cenotaph and the Vietnam Wall’, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 57-110 (p. 60), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511840470.004.

⁷⁷ Ann Rigney and Sam Merrill, ‘Remembering Activism: Means and Ends’, *Memory Studies*, 17.5 (2024), pp. 997-1003 (p. 999), doi:10.1177/17506980241262390.

⁷⁸ ‘Historical Anti-War Protest in London: 15 February 2003’, Stop the War Coalition, YouTube, 22 February 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go0B-2_7pDo [accessed 12 January 2026].

frame. By capturing this composition through London, STWC staged a claim on behalf of the movement: look how many, look who they are, and crucially, look where they are. The movement's embodied practice materialised the plural composition it claimed as the real Britain, asserting that Britain existed in the assembled crowd at the centre of the nation.

It was this embodied nature of protest that gave the movement's visual culture its force. Counter-Britishness was made recognisable through visual practices that transformed plural dissent into a coherent and intelligible national form. As Sarah Awad and Brady Wagoner note, 'powerful protest symbols condense multiple meanings and feelings of a group', and the movement's visual forms operated in precisely this way.⁷⁹ This was particularly significant in a cultural context Lawrence identifies as marked, from the Thatcher era, by a 'shift from community to individualism', making the reconciliation of personal autonomy with collective solidarity 'increasingly difficult'.⁸⁰ The movement's collective imagery overcame this, creating a collective identity out of individual rejection.

This is most clear in David Gentleman's 2003 'NO' poster, designed specifically for 15 February 2003.



⁷⁹ Sarah Awad and Brady Wagoner, 'Protest Symbols,' *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35 (2020), pp. 98-102 (p. 99), doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.007.

⁸⁰ Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, pp. 240-241.

David Gentleman, NO (2003), poster, issued by Stop the War Coalition, Prints, Drawings & Paintings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Prints & Drawings Study Room, South Kensington), accession no. E.376-2015.

The visual force of Gentleman's design lay in its compression of complexity into a single, immediately legible form. While the stark 'NO' appears to function as a simple expression of rejection, this overlooks the work the image performs. By absorbing multiple critiques of the war, listed within the 'O', into a single visual field, the design accommodated divergent positions, allowing individuals with differing objections to recognise themselves within the same symbol. Rejection becomes productive, as the shared 'NO' transforms dissent into a collectively recognisable presence. This logic mirrors that of the coalition, with distinct political traditions absorbed into a single form, rendering plurality legible as unity. As the 'NO' image was formally reproduced across placards, banners, badges, it was designed to circulate at scale, enabling this plurality to cohere visually.⁸¹

This dynamic becomes fully visible in Guy Smallman's photograph of the march, in which the 'NO' image appears en masse across the crowd.



Guy Smallman, Don't Attack Iraq, 15 February 2003, photograph, in Marie Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War: A Graphic History* (Francis Boutle Publications, 2011), p. 1.

⁸¹ German and Murray, *Stop the War*, p. 157.

As Gillian Rose argues, the conditions of image production, including the social identity and intentions of the producer, shape meaning.⁸² Smallman's dual position as photographer and participant is therefore central to how this image functions as a historical source.⁸³ Smallman was an active participant rendering the movement visible for an audience beyond the march, making what the image produces as significant as what it captures. Where Anderson explores national identity as connected through the shared belief that dispersed, unknown individuals belong to the same community, Smallman's photograph materialises that abstraction, with strangers who have never met, unified within a single visual field through a shared symbol.⁸⁴ The 'NO' symbol circulating through the heart of London, carried by a body that exceeded the boundaries imposed upon it, transformed Anderson's imagined community into something more rivalrous – enacting in national space the claim that the people holding these placards were Britain, and the state was not.

While the first visual strategy created symbols through which a plural Britain could recognise itself, the second reworked the established symbols of Britain to ground dissent within the national image. As Eric Kaufmann notes in exploring the emphasis placed on symbols when constructing 'personal national identity', national identities are 'vernacular and everyday in texture, featuring conflicting versions,' meaning that symbols of nation are not fixed with universally shared meanings. However, it was precisely this instability that the movement's visual culture exploited.⁸⁵ Rather than rejecting national symbolism, activists intervened within it, transforming familiar imagery into sites of critique and ethical redefinition.

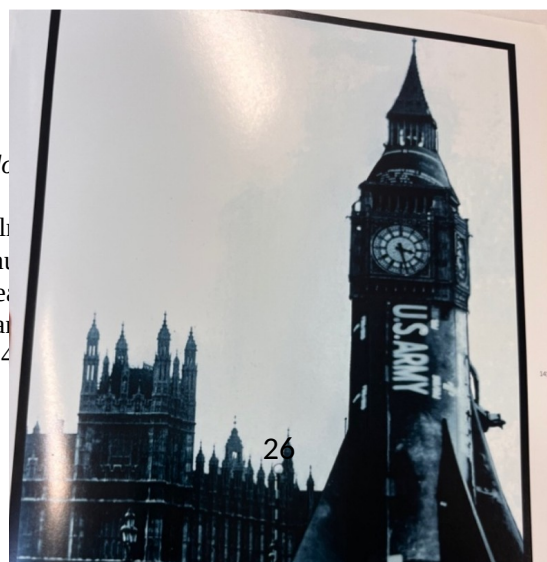
This contestation operated through both subversion and reclamation. At its most subversive, Leon Kuhn's *US Parliament* reimagined Big Ben, one of the most dominant symbols of British political authority, as a missile with 'US ARMY' printed along its base.

⁸² Gillian Rose, *Visual Method* (London: Routledge Publications, 2007), p. 17.

⁸³ 'Guy Smallman', Guy Smallman.

⁸⁴ Anderson, 'Imagined Community'.

⁸⁵ Eric Kaufmann, David L. Leary, and How This Shapes Voting at the 2019 Election, doi:10.1017/S10490965230004



Visual Materials, 2nd edn (SAGE

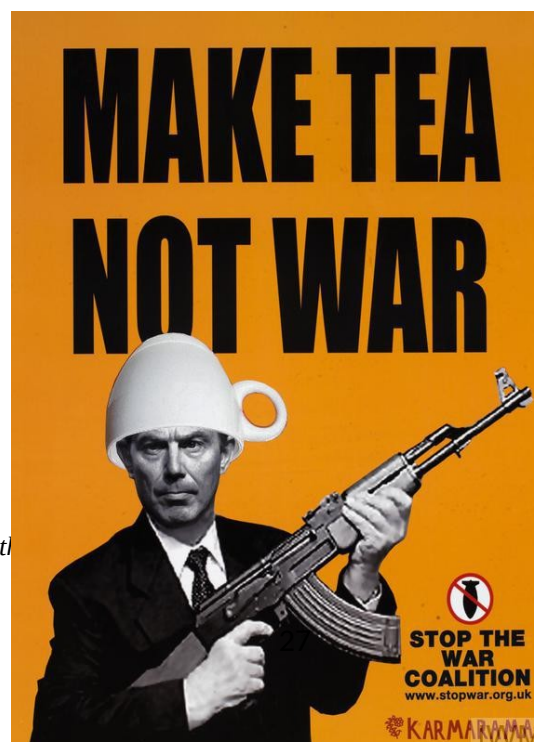
[accessed 6 February 2026].

English Perceive Nationhood (2023), pp. 579-589 (p. 581),

Leon Kuhn, *US Parliament* (2003), in Marie Gollentz and Stop the War Coalition, *Stop the War: A Graphic History* (Francis Boutle Publications, 2011), p. 141.

This acted as a visual argument that the symbol of British sovereignty had been emptied of its authority, now signifying complicity rather than independence. Kuhn's image articulated a perceived disjunction between the state and the people. If Westminster now appeared as an American missile, symbolising British complicity in an American war, the nation required a different voice. The image therefore exposed the fragility of the state's claim to represent Britain, using its own recognisable icon to undermine it. While originating as an individual artistic intervention, the image was produced as a postcard for Artists Against the War and subsequently reproduced as a placard for 15 February 2003, designed for mass circulation within protest spaces and enabling this critique to move with the crowd.⁸⁶

This national subversive, but also This is most clearly 'Tea Not War' poster, advertising agency across 15 February



symbolism was not only ethically constitutive. articulated by the 'Make produced by the Karmarama and present 2003.

⁸⁶ German and Murray, *Stop the War*

Karmarama (Scott Leonard and David Buonaguidi), *Make Tea Not War* (2003), lithograph, Stop the War Coalition poster, Imperial War Museum, Art.IWM PST
8815 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/14563> [accessed 3 December 2025].

By juxtaposing Blair and his Kalashnikov rifle with tea, a symbol through which, as Julie Fromer demonstrates, British culture historically attributed both ‘individual and national wellbeing’, the image situates opposition within a familiar domestic and ethical register.⁸⁷ The image repossesses Britishness, asserting the ethical commitment of opposition as superior to the government’s military ambition. While, as Syska cautions, the ‘appearance of visual codes and symbols’ cannot guarantee reception, the design reveals how the movement understood its own position as authentic British representation.⁸⁸ Across these visual strategies, whether condensing plural dissent into shared symbols or utilising national symbols, the movement’s rival vision of Britain was made both visible and legible, asserting a collective identity grounded in popular participation rather than state authority.

Taken together, the embodied and visual practices of 15 February 2003 demonstrate how the rival national subject constituted in Chapter One was materialised into a claim that could be seen, inhabited, and experienced as the nation. The occupation of London seized the centre of

⁸⁷ Julie Fromer, “‘Deeply Indebted to the Tea Plant’: Representations of English National Identity in Victorian Histories of Tea”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), pp. 531-547 (p. 532) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40347203> [accessed 12 March 2026].

⁸⁸ A. Syska, ‘Posters as Primary Source Documents: Analysing a Twentieth-Century Public Health Poster’, 10 November 2021, p. 4, doi:10.47594/rmps_0122.

the nation, repossessing the monuments and geography of British national life for the people assembled within it. The visual culture carried within that space made the embodied community recognisable and nationally authoritative. This was not a rejection of war that ran alongside official Britishness but a displacement of it. Through practices of embodiment and visibility, counter-Britishness established where Britain existed: in the people occupying national space rather than the state administering it.

Chapter Three: Rhetorical Articulation

This chapter examines how the counter-Britishness constituted through social formation and materialised through embodied protest was spoken into authority. The body assembled in Chapter One and given presence in Chapter Two required a voice through which it could claim to speak as Britain. Focusing on the speeches delivered at Hyde Park at the culmination of 15 February 2003, it analyses how the movement did precisely that. As Roland Quinault observes, British popular protest has long operated ‘in the full conscious awareness that public opinion can be won or lost’, with language deployed to do more than describe a position, but to claim it and consolidate a public.⁸⁹ These speeches are therefore approached as political action in themselves, analysed both for their rhetorical content through which counter-Britishness was articulated, and the material conditions of their delivery, through which articulation was given authority.

While the rhetoric of Blair’s government has been extensively analysed, particularly its use of moral and democratic language to justify intervention in Iraq, the movement’s own rhetorical response has received no such attention.⁹⁰ The speeches examined here must be understood in direct relation to that government case for war, operating as identity claims rather than policy arguments. The movement did not offer an ideological alternative to the liberal democracy underpinning the government’s case for war. It contested ownership of it. In reworking the moral and democratic language of the state, the movement displaced democratic authority, asserting what the movement stood for as what Britain stood for, and declaring the government the aberration.

Central to the speeches was the reworking of moral language into a framework through which Britain could be judged. The war was consistently framed as ethically incorrect, engaging directly with government discourse that had defined Britain’s role in terms of ‘ethical responsibility’.⁹¹ This reworking is most clearly visible in the repeated designation across speeches of the war as ‘wrong’, which functions as an absolute boundary rather than a contingent critique. Jeremy Corbyn, speaking as Labour MP for Islington North, rejected the legitimacy of military action outright, declaring that even if international institutions were pressured into supporting intervention, ‘It would be wrong. I would be against it; we would be

⁸⁹ Quinault, *Popular Protest and Public Order*, p. 20.

⁹⁰ Chandler, ‘Rhetoric without Responsibility’, p. 296.

⁹¹ Holland, ‘Blair’s War on Terror’, p. 78.

against it'.⁹² The force of this statement lies in its refusal of qualification, grounded in a position that cannot be negotiated. Crucially, the shift from the singular 'I' to the collective 'we' transforms this moral judgement into a shared position, performed through the speech itself. Articulated across divergent political and rhetorical styles, including Charles Kennedy's speech as Leader of the Liberal Democrats which found 'no just, no moral case' for war, this language established a shared discursive position in which morality was no longer used to justify British action, but to elevate and contest it.⁹³

This moral framework was reinforced through the repeated invocation of 'humanity' across the speeches. While 'wrong' established an internal ethical boundary, 'humanity' situated Britain within a moral framework extending beyond the nation. Where Blair had grounded Britain's global role as ethical intervention, embodied by the Doctrine for the International Community's 'future built on peace', the movement reframed it as global accountability.⁹⁴ As James Vernon notes, the new media technologies and porous national borders of the turn of the Millennium meant that 'Britons increasingly saw themselves as part of a broader global public'.⁹⁵ Jesse Jackson's speech offered the clearest articulation of this shift, in which he called upon the global struggle for justice with 'One world, One Love!...One people, this world is our world!', locating the demonstration within a transnational moral community rather than national interest.⁹⁶ Jackson being selected to speak is significant. As a figure of the American Civil Rights struggle, Jackson embodied the principle of global accountability, demonstrating the movement's vision of Britain's role as accepted by a global figure. This framing was reinforced by the context of 15 February 2003 as a Global Day of Action, in which speeches and rally footage circulated internationally, through which the protest itself was embedded in a wider ethical public.

Across the speeches, a shared vocabulary emerged in which global human life and dignity became the central measures of legitimacy. From Ms Dynamite's assertion that 'I believe in humanity', which was placed in contrast to 'war and destruction', to Adrian Mitchell's poem reading that deemed war as the distortion of the 'human being', diverse speech forms

⁹² Jeremy Corbyn, 'Speech at Stop the War demonstration - 15 February 2003', Stop the War Coalition, YouTube, 20 August 2015, 1:47 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs9NfhmfQLc> [accessed 12 March 2026].

⁹³ Charles Kennedy, 'Speech 15 February 2003', in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 205.

⁹⁴ Tony Blair, 'The Blair Doctrine', April 1999 <https://ir101.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The-Blair-Docctrine.pdf> [accessed 12 April 2026].

⁹⁵ Vernon, *Modern Britain*, p. 511.

⁹⁶ Jesse Jackson, 'Speech 15 February demonstration', in German and Murray, *Stop the War*, pp. 164-165.

converged on a common ethical register.⁹⁷ By making the human body the measure of the war's wrongness, both Ms Dynamite and Mitchell grounded counter-Britishness in a moral claim available to every person present. The overall moral framework of the speeches completed the ethical dimension of counter-Britishness, turning the government's own claims to humanitarian purpose against it, and rearticulating Britain as accountable to humanity.

The speeches at Hyde Park on 15 February 2003 further consolidated counter-Britishness through the reworking of democracy, emphasising the government as a failure of democratic identity, and relocating that authority in the people. As Jarrod Hayes has shown, the triggering of British 'democratic identity' functioned as a key element of the government's justification for war.⁹⁸ This vocabulary had shaped New Labour's vision for the nation from 1995, when Blair called for 'One Britain', of 'democracy', 'based on working together, unity, solidarity, partnership'.⁹⁹ The anti-Iraq War movement engaged directly with this language by exposing the central contradiction that a leadership which had invoked national unity, claiming to act in the name of British democracy, now proposed to go to war against the will of its people.

This reconfiguration is evident in the repeated invocation of 'democracy' across the speeches, framed as something being denied, rather than guaranteed, by the government. Tony Benn, then President of STWC, emphasised this through repetition, insisting that the movement 'must be about democracy', while contrasting Britain's professed 'democracy' with its reality.¹⁰⁰ As Szymon Wróbel notes, repetition functions as a means of 'encouragement and incentive'. Through this repetition, Benn both centred democracy as a defining criterion of British identity and 'encouraged' identification with the movement as speaking for democracy.¹⁰¹ By framing the proposed war as a violation of democratic rights, speakers recast the government as obstruction, opening the question of where democratic authority properly resided.

It is precisely this question that activist rhetoric answered by relocating democratic legitimacy in 'the people'. Repeated appeals to 'the British people' functioned as active claims about where national authority resided, with Bianca Jagger's speech directly posing the question to

⁹⁷ Ms Dynamite, 'Speech 15 February 2003', in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 211; Adrian Mitchell, 'Speaking on 15 February 2003', in German and Murray, *Stop the War*, p. 114.

⁹⁸ Hayes, 'Identity, Authority, and the British War in Iraq', p. 337.

⁹⁹ Tony Blair, 'British Labour Party Conference 1995', C-SPAN, 3 October 1995, 57:40-1:05:06 <https://www.c-span.org/program/international-telecasts/british-labour-party-conference/52614> [accessed 2 February 2026].

¹⁰⁰ Tony Benn, 'Speech 15 February 2003', in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 204.

¹⁰¹ Szymon Wróbel, 'Logos, Ethos, Pathos: Classical Rhetoric Revisited', *Polish Sociological Review*, 191 (2015), pp. 401-421 (p. 417).

Blair, why follow international allies ‘rather than the voices of the British people?’.¹⁰² Through this rhetorical question, Jagger was not seeking a response from Blair, but rather affirming that authority lay with those gathered in Hyde Park. The assembled crowd, her audience, was therefore positioned as the embodiment of the collective national voice, ‘the British people’.

Forms of direct address reinforced this claim by drawing listeners into that identity. While Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding/decoding’ model suggests such appeals cannot guarantee their reception, the speeches actively created the conditions for identification.¹⁰³ Speakers such as Michael Foot, Tony Benn, and Tariq Ali each opened their speeches by addressing the audience as ‘friends’, while Jesse Jackson opened with, ‘Brothers and sisters’, establishing an immediate register of intimacy and collective belonging.¹⁰⁴ This language meant that ‘the people’ were not just described but enacted, inviting audiences to recognise themselves within the speeches. As Salma Yaqoob insisted, ‘you cannot dismiss us all...United we stand, divided we fall’, reinforcing this call for audience identification and emphasising that the strength of the people lay in their collective unity.¹⁰⁵

The composition of the platform extended this process of identification into the conditions of the speech. Bringing together a list of roughly thirty-five people, including politicians such as Jeremy Corbyn, trade unionists from the International Longshore Workers Union, Mayor of London Ken Livingstone, and international figures such as Ahmed Ben Bella, former president of Algeria, speakers were deliberately chosen by the organising coalition to reflect the breadth and inclusivity of the movement.¹⁰⁶ In doing so, the platform actively curated itself as ‘the people’.

Moreover, as Richard Toye notes, the ‘meaning’ of speech cannot be derived ‘in isolation from an examination of the circumstances in which that text was delivered’.¹⁰⁷ Behind the speakers, an electronic counter displayed the number of demonstrators in attendance, registering the scale of the participation in real time.¹⁰⁸ As audiences watched and listened, this quantification

¹⁰² Bianca Jagger, ‘Bianca Jagger: Anti Iraq War rally (London Hyde Park 2003)’, *C-SPAN*, 15 February 2003, 4:16 <https://www.c-span.org/clip/international-telecasts/user-clip-bianca-jagger---anti-iraq-war-rally-london-hyde-park-2003/5052949> [accessed 20 February 2026].

¹⁰³ Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (Routledge, 2003), pp. 117-127 (p. 125), doi:10.4324/9780203381182.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Foot, ‘Speech 15 February 2003’, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 202; Benn, ‘Speech 15 February 2003’, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 204; Tariq Ali, ‘Speech 15 February 2003’, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 203; Jackson, ‘Speech 15 February demonstration’, in German and Murray, *Stop the War*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁵ Salma Yaqoob, ‘Speech 15 February 2003’, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Speakers at the Rally in Hyde Park on 15 February 2003’, in Sinclair, *The March That Shook Blair*, p. 339.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford Academic, 2013), p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ We Are Many, Amirani, footage of Hyde Park rally, 43:44.

became part of the rhetorical environment, situating each individual demonstrator within a visibly expanding collective. In this way, 'the people' articulated in speech were materially staged. As the speeches operated across the two distinct audiences of those present in Hyde Park and the wider public reached through broadcast media, this process of collectivisation extended beyond the immediate crowd, projecting the image of a unified public as the legitimate site of democracy. Embodied practice and rhetorical claim were mutually constitutive, with the speeches requiring the crowd as evidence, and the crowd requiring the speeches to speak as Britain.

The rhetoric of the Hyde Park speeches completed what social formation had constituted and embodied protest had materialised. By engaging directly with the moral and democratic vocabularies of Blair's government, activists exposed the contradiction between what Britain claimed to be and what its government proposed to do in its name. Through moral language, Britain was rendered accountable to a standard of humanity that the state had invoked but failed to uphold. Through democratic language, authority was displaced from government to 'the people', constituted as a collective political subject through the act of address. This was not a minority petitioning for recognition, but a rival claim spoken into legitimacy, asserting what Britain stood for.

Conclusion

The British anti-Iraq War movement of 2001-2003 did not stop Britain from going to war in Iraq. British forces remained in Iraq from March 2003 until the final naval training team departed in May 2011.¹⁰⁹ The movement that had mobilised two million people onto the streets of London one month prior to the invasion was unable to change the course of this conflict. By this measure, the movement failed. This cannot be avoided. However, this dissertation has argued that failure cannot be the only lens through which the movement is analysed.

The significance lies in the movement's production of counter-Britishness, a rival collective claim to national identity. This Britain did not exist alongside the official one but asserted that the people were Britain and the state was not. The claim was made through three dimensions of a single process. Social formation constituted who could speak for Britain, establishing a plural majority assembled through coalition and grounded in the ordinary. Embodied and visual practice established where Britain existed through occupation of national space and visual unity. Rhetoric determined what Britain stood for, displacing moral and democratic authority from the government, and entrusting it to the people.

Counter-Britishness was produced with force, even if it did not fundamentally reshape British political culture or permanently dislodge the state's authority to speak for the nation. Moreover, while it does not capture the private identity of every individual that marched, it traces the public identity that the movement produced. In doing so, it reveals that the Iraq War debate was not simply a political contest over war, but a struggle over what Britain was, and that the public was not a passive audience, but an active producer.

The concept of counter-Britishness matters for how the war's legacy is understood. Britain continues to reckon with the Iraq War 'as one of the most controversial events of the post-Cold War period', and its impact on public trust in government, the legitimacy of military intervention, and the meaning of British democracy.¹¹⁰ The movement that formulated a rival claim to what Britain was needs to be a part of the reckoning, forcing history to take seriously what two million people claimed about themselves and their country, and asking what it means that this claim was ultimately overridden.

¹⁰⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, HC (2016), p. 145 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80f42ced915d74e6231626/The_Report_of_the_Iraq_Inquiry_-_Executive_Summary.pdf [accessed 15 April 2026].

¹¹⁰ Louise Fawcett, 'The Iraq War Ten Years on: Assessing the Fallout', *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 89 (2013), pp. 325-343 (p. 341), doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12020.

The ‘end of history’ did not come to pass. Fukuyama himself conceded in 2007 that his optimism had been misplaced amid the War on Terror and challenges of democracy.¹¹¹ Counter-Britishness is part of that story. Two million people took to the streets of London, constituting a rival Britain, and yet it is remembered for what it failed to stop. This is not evidence that nothing happened, but evidence of how important it is to recover the moments, however ephemeral, when people claim the nation for themselves.

¹¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History Revisited’, *The Long Now Foundation*, 28 June 2007 <https://longnow.org/talks/02007-fukuyama/> [accessed 1 March 2026].

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