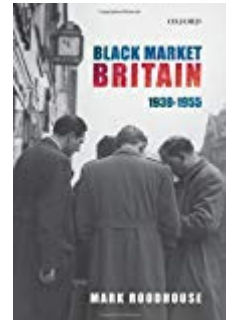


**Mark Roodhouse.** *Black Market Britain, 1939-1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 276 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-958845-9.



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**Published on** H-War (June, 2016)

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According to the neoclassical economic theory of supply and demand, when certain high-demand goods are rationed, or otherwise controlled, individuals will revert to unethical and even illegal means, i.e., noncompliance through the establishment and patronization of black markets, to acquire those underrepresented goods (p. ix). However, during the Second World War, black markets did not proliferate in Great Britain in response to wartime rationing. Even more surprising, black markets remained unpopular despite the continuation of price controls and rationing for nine years after the Second World War, much longer than was the case for Britain's contemporaries—even Germany. It seems as if the British were not bound to the law of supply and demand; what then could account for this inconsistency? Seeking the answer to this, historian Mark Roodhouse, with his monograph *Black Market Britain, 1939-1955*, analyzes both Britons' behaviors as well as their reported motives, deciphering both the moral and the social dimensions of the austerity years—those years in which the British govern-

ment imposed rationing—in order to decode this economic puzzle.

Contemporary explanations of this phenomenon adopted a self-congratulatory tone, asserting that the lack of black markets in Britain was “proof of Whitehall’s administrative genius and the superiority of British national character” and patriotism (p. ix). Economists and economic historians, instead, argued that the circumstances surrounding British rationing, such as “milder shortages limiting demand, tighter controls restricting opportunities for evasion, and tougher enforcement increasing the risk and cost of being caught,” rather than Britons’ “law-abiding character,” restricted the development of black markets (p. ix). For Roodhouse, however, those explanations frustratingly fail to address the entire story.

For Roodhouse, the key to understanding Britons’ lack of noncompliance lies with the internalization of societal norms. Roodhouse contends that the “self-contempt, guilt, shame and regret af-

ter infracting a norm” prevented most from defying governmentally imposed laws (p. 8). Moreover, Roodhouse finds that Britons agreed with and supported price controls as long as they felt that they were receiving their fair share. For instance, if they did not agree with a restriction, most Britons would only react if they felt that their actions were justified, as long as they were not impinging upon their neighbors’ share(s), or if it was socially acceptable to engage in illegal activities. While society disapproved of black market activities, *grey* market activities, such as transferring spare coupons and unwanted rations, were deemed acceptable among Britons.

Roodhouse’s use of the mass-observation collection and other “traditional” social history sources and methodology adds a much-needed dimension to economic history interpretations of Great Britain’s lack of black markets. He brilliantly realizes that in order to properly study the black market, one needs to look past the numbers and analyze human behavior.

*Black Market Britain* is a well-written and well-researched work that successfully meets its overall goal. Roodhouse’s discussion of morality and social pressures proves that Britain’s lack of a black market was not due to the superiority of British governmental planning, but rather due to local, bottom-up influences. Yet, it remains unclear why this was a home island-only phenomenon. Roodhouse fails to address why this ethical dimension was not prevalent in other countries, especially those that were part of the British Empire. Regardless of this omission, Roodhouse offers a much-needed social history of Britons’ relationship with wartime rationing.

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**Citation:** Katie L. Brown. Review of Roodhouse, Mark. *Black Market Britain, 1939-1955*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

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