

# Depression, war and recovery in Wales and England, 1930-1951

## *Life on the Home Front*

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## Why was Germany seen as a threat?

### *Preparing for war*

The majority of historians agree that Germany's threat began by challenging the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty had limited the size of Germany's army to 100,000 men and the country to rearm or have a navy. The treaty had also forbidden Germany to send its troops into the Rhineland, a demilitarised zone, and to unite with German-speaking Austria.

#### **1934-35: CONSCRIPTION AND REARMAMENT**

Hitler's introduction of conscription (calling up men to the army) and his adoption of the policy of rearmament are cited by many historians as the first step to war. This is because Hitler's build-up of Germany's armed forces broke the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and France did not respond.

#### **1935: ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT**

Britain signed an agreement allowing Germany to build a navy. This broke the Treaty of Versailles. The agreement set a limit to the size of Germany's navy to one third the size of Britain's. The French were angry because they had not been consulted.

#### **1936: RHINELAND**

Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland when troops were ordered in to occupy this region of Germany. This broke the Treaty of Versailles. It was a bluff – the German army had orders to retreat if they met any resistance. Britain and France did nothing.

#### **1938: AUSTRIA**

After stirring up trouble in Austria by encouraging the Austrian Nazis to demand union with Germany, Hitler invaded the country. This broke the Treaty of Versailles, but Britain and France did nothing.

#### **1938: SUDETENLAND AND MUNICH**

Hitler next stirred up trouble in Czechoslovakia by encouraging the Sudeten Germans to demand union with Germany. This time Britain and France did something. Hitler made plans to invade Czechoslovakia but was persuaded to meet with the leaders of Britain and France to discuss the situation. At a conference at Munich in September, Britain and France appeased Hitler by giving him the Sudetenland. The Czechs were ignored.

#### **1939: CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

In March Hitler's troops marched into the rest of Czechoslovakia. This broke the agreement signed at Munich six months earlier. The British and French realised that Hitler could not be trusted and they agreed not to give in to him again.

**1939: POLAND AND THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT**

Hitler now demanded the return of a part of Poland known as the Polish Corridor. This region had been taken away from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler encouraged the Germans living in the area, and its chief city of Danzig, to demand union with Germany. Britain and France promised Poland that they would support her if Germany attacked. Hitler shocked the world by signing a treaty with his enemy, communist Russia. He thought this would stop Britain and France helping Poland.

On 1 September 1939 Hitler invaded Poland. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany.

**Why did Britain follow a policy of appeasement?**

Appeasement is the word used to describe British foreign policy under prime ministers Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain between 1935 and 1939. The policy was intended to avoid war and confrontation by discussion, negotiation and compromise. The policy was popular in Britain because the majority of people did not want another war. According to the Liberal MP Charles Masterman in his book *England After War: A Study*, published in 1922:

England is not interested in anything at all. It cares nothing about local, municipal or Parliamentary politics. It is like a sick man resting after a great outletting of blood. [...] The nervous system is dead. It can only respond to the strongest of stimulus.<sup>1</sup>

After two years of observing Hitler's aggressive foreign policy Baldwin was considering whether to abandon pacifism in favour of rearming Britain. He knew that although the British people were slowly beginning to change their views, pacifism was still popular while rearmament was not. Faced with such a decision, Baldwin resigned. He was succeeded as prime minister by Neville Chamberlain who believed that he could maintain peace.

Chamberlain believed that Hitler could be satisfied if he was given certain territories which he claimed as belonging to Germany. Hitler wished to unite all those Germans living in territories taken away by the Treaty of Versailles. Having received these territories, Chamberlain hoped that Hitler would behave reasonably, abide by signed agreements and settle future disputes around the conference table. He was convinced that Hitler did not want war and that he was as eager as he was to keep the peace.

Chamberlain's policy had a great deal of support in the country because of the strong pacifist sympathy. In Parliament he was supported by the Labour Party. A number of politicians even admired Hitler for his work in curing unemployment and for having overcome the economic depression in Germany. In 1936 Lloyd George even went so far as to meet Hitler in Germany, after which he publicly stated that the Chancellor was a man to be trusted. Chamberlain agreed and pointed out that since collective security under the League of Nations had failed, there was no alternative to his policy. Some of Chamberlain's conservative supporters thought that Hitler could be used as a defence against the spread of communism from the USSR. There was still some sympathy for the view that the Germans had been badly treated

<sup>1</sup> Charles Masterman, *England After War: A Study* (London, 1922), pp. 23-4.

at Versailles and that they had the right to be united under one leader. Another important consideration is the fact that Britain was simply not ready for war; she had only begun to rearm and was unable to defend herself from a determined attack. Worse still was the fact that the economic depression had cut the amount of money Britain was able to spend on arms and the army.

On the other hand, there was a growing concern in the country that Britain should have little to do with the likes of Hitler. He was a fascist dictator who held power through fear and repression rather than by fair and democratic means. Chamberlain's own cabinet was split: Lord Halifax supported the policy of appeasement, but the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, believed that a firmer stand should be taken against Hitler. The most outspoken critic of the government's policy of appeasement was Winston Churchill who at this time was a backbench Conservative MP. Few in government listened to him, but he was gaining support in the country for his views that, unless Hitler was stopped, war was inevitable.

In spite of Chamberlain's best efforts, Hitler continued to press ahead with his aggressive foreign policy. In 1938 Hitler forced his way into Austria claiming that his German-speaking fellow countrymen wished to unite with Germany. Chamberlain protested but took no action. This encouraged Hitler to go further and he began to demand self-determination for Germans living in the Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia. Hitler ordered Heinlein, leader of the Czech Germans, to mount marches and demonstrations demanding union with Germany. Chamberlain tried one last effort and persuaded Hitler to attend a four power peace conference (Italy, Germany, France and Britain) in Munich. Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Daladier managed to persuade Hitler to sign an agreement which said that he could only take the Sudetenland. The four powers agreed to guarantee the independence of the rest of Czechoslovakia's territory. Hitler and Chamberlain also signed a declaration, which stated that they did not intend to go to war with one another. Chamberlain returned to Britain victorious and declared, 'I believe it is peace in our time.' There was a general feeling of relief throughout Britain and Chamberlain was regarded as a national hero. On the other hand, the Czech people felt betrayed.

In March 1939 German troops invaded and occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Agreement had lasted barely six months before it collapsed. Chamberlain was genuinely shocked and he needed little persuasion to adopt finally a more militant policy. Like Baldwin before him, he was faced with a choice: to keep giving in to Hitler or to stand up to him; in short, appeasement or rearmament. Chamberlain pressed ahead with rearmament and by 1939 nearly 20% of government expenditure was spent on arms and the armed forces. Some of Chamberlain's cabinet colleagues, like Lord Halifax, still firmly believed that it was possible to reason with Hitler and that war could be avoided; Chamberlain grudgingly disagreed.

The British and French assured Poland of their full support should Hitler demand the return of the Polish Corridor. They promised to declare war if German troops invaded the country. Lloyd George, Churchill and the Labour Party pressed the government for an alliance with Soviet Russia. However, the Conservatives could not set aside their deep distrust of communism and although negotiations were opened with Stalin they never really had much chance of success. Stalin feared a German attack, but he realised that the British

and French could not be trusted, so in August an agreement was reached between him and Hitler. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact shocked the world; few could believe that these two bitter enemies were now friends. An invasion of Poland was inevitable since Hitler was now certain that the USSR would not come to her aid. To the last, Hitler gambled that Chamberlain and the French government would rather talk than fight and that if he invaded Poland they would not declare war. So many times before Hitler had been right, but this time he was wrong.

The Prime Minister explained in a radio broadcast to the German people why he had declared war (4 September 1939):

He [Hitler] gave his word that he would respect the Locarno Treaty; he broke it.  
He gave his word that he neither wished nor intended to annex [take over] Austria; he broke it.  
He declared that he would not incorporate [include] the Czechs in the Reich [Empire]; he did so.  
He gave his word after Munich that he had no further territorial demands in Europe; he broke it.  
He gave his word that he wanted no Polish provinces; he broke it.  
He has sworn to you for years that he was the mortal enemy of Bolshevism [Communist Russia]; he is now its ally.<sup>2</sup>

### *How did Britain prepare for war?*

In short, Britain was almost totally unprepared for war. Although Chamberlain had begun to rearm, it proved to be too little too late. The only part of Britain's armed forces that was ready and able to confront the enemy was the Royal Navy. The Royal Air Force was well trained and supplied with the best aircraft, but it was small. The army too was small, poorly trained and badly equipped. It would take time to ready Britain's armed forces for war. To increase the size of the army as quickly as possible, conscription was introduced. By the end of 1939 more than 1.5 million men had been conscripted to join the British armed forces. Of those, just over 1.1 million went to the British Army and the rest were split between the Royal Navy and the RAF.

On the other hand, preparations had been made to prepare the British people for war. The Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1939 gave the British government the power to take certain measures to defend the nation and to maintain public order. An organisation, Air Raid Precautions or ARP, was created as a response to the fears about the development of bomber aircraft and their threat. In 1938 the Air Ministry advised Chamberlain that in the event of war the country could expect to suffer 65,000 casualties a week from German bombing. In 1939 the Air Ministry revised its figures, suggesting that in the first month of war the government could expect a million casualties, three million refugees, and the destruction of over half of Britain's cities. Measures to control this devastation were largely limited to

<sup>2</sup> Historical Resources – <http://goo.gl/IleBlt>

practical discussions about body disposal and the distribution of over a million burial forms to local authorities. At the outbreak of the war the British government ordered a million coffins.

To protect the people from bombing, the government ordered the construction of air-raid shelters or bomb shelters. During the Munich crisis, local authorities dug trenches to provide shelter. After the crisis, the British government decided to make these permanent, using a standard design of precast concrete trench lining. Individual families were advised to erect their own shelters, so the government supplied over a two million householders with Anderson shelters. Wardens were recruited and given the task of enforcing strict rules, such as the blackout, in the event of enemy bombing. It has been estimated that about half a million people volunteered to join the ARP. ARP wardens were to patrol the streets and warn householders against showing any lights. ARP wardens were also expected to advise householders and co-ordinate the emergency services – police, fire and ambulance.

The government also turned to new technology to help the country prepare for war. The development of radar became an important weapon in the nation's defence from German bombers. It was an object-detection system that used radio waves to determine the range, altitude, direction and speed of objects. It was used to detect aircraft by transmitting pulses of radio waves from a radar dish that bounced off any object in their path. It did not stop German bombers getting through, but it did help the small and heavily outnumbered RAF make their attacks more effective by targeting the largest concentration of enemy bombers. For those bombers that got through the RAF's fighters, the government deployed barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns. Large barrage balloons were lifted and secured above the city of London to deter German bombers from coming in too low on their bombing runs. This affected the accuracy of German bombing, making it less effective. The deployment of thousands of anti-aircraft guns, backed with powerful searchlights for attacks during the hours of darkness, was another method devised by the government to defend the British people and the towns and cities in which they lived.

War came in September 1939. Germany invaded Poland and when Hitler refused to pull his troops out, Britain and France declared war. After four weeks the Poles surrendered. There was no bombing of Britain or fighting between Britain and Germany. The period between October 1939 and April 1940 is known as the phoney war. However, in April the war resumed when Germany attacked Norway and Denmark. In May the Germans attacked Holland, Belgium and France. The British army in France (British Expeditionary Force) fought alongside the French and Belgians, but after six weeks of fighting, the allies were defeated. France surrendered and the remains of the British army were evacuated home from Dunkirk. The British people now prepared for what they believed would be the invasion of Britain. To help defend the country, the government established the Home Guard which was made up of volunteers who were armed and trained to resist invasion.



The following people were interviewed for a television programme called *The Day War Broke Out* (1989) and were asked to recall their memories of the time:

Mr McCrowarty of Glasgow:

The Second World War was brought to the people. They didn't anticipate that, not at all. Although they knew that air raids would come. But the ordinary people, their attitude was: oh let these statesmen sort it out, you know. I don't think it will affect the ordinary man in the street. But they didn't know what was ahead of them.

Mrs Buckland of London:

They had said that war had been declared, and then the sirens went. We were petrified. Anyhow, sometime afterwards, we were waiting for the guns to go, but we didn't hear anything, so that was the first day of the war. It was quite an exciting morning really, but it was sad to think that we were now at war.

Mr Barsley of Oxford:

Well, September 3 1939, I looked up my diaries that I was still a pacifist then, at the outbreak of war, and I noted that when I heard the tired voice of Chamberlain announcing that we were at war, I thought, this is it, this is the end of a long journey, which has taken the wrong turning – and I am dead against it.

Mrs Barnicott of Plymouth:

We had planned a family party but of course it was cancelled. My husband to be and my father spent the day digging a hole in the garden to put an Anderson shelter in. My parents were more upset than we were, because they had come through the last war, so they weren't so ignorant about it as we were.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ITV documentary, *The Day War Broke Out* (1989).

## How did people manage during the war?

### *The Blitz*

After the fall of France in June 1940, the British government warned its people to expect the worst: a massive bombing campaign against the ports and cities. Initially they were wrong. Although Hitler gave the order for a massed air offensive against Britain on 31 July, to be followed by an invasion in September, the Luftwaffe's main targets were the airfields of the RAF's fighter command and British shipping in the English Channel. Clearing the Channel of British warships, followed by control of the air above it, would enable the German invasion force to carry out its task unhindered. The Battle of Britain had begun.

The Battle of Britain was fought high above the countryside of southern England, watched by the British public. The RAF was heavily outnumbered having just 2,915 planes, of which a little over 1,200 were fighters, to combat 4,550 Luftwaffe aircraft. In the first five weeks of the battle, up to 6 September, the RAF lost nearly 20% of its strength; in one week alone 185 Spitfires and Hurricanes had been shot down.

The German losses were just as heavy, but they pressed ahead in the belief that the RAF could not hold out much longer. They were right but they did not know it. The RAF was saved from total destruction when the Germans changed their tactics to bombing cities instead of airfields. On 7 September a furious Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to bomb London in retaliation for the RAF bombing of Berlin. The Blitz, the German word for 'lightning', had begun. The term 'Blitz' was coined and applied by the British press to describe the heavy and frequent bombing raids carried out over Britain in 1940 and 1941.

Hitler ordered his bombers to concentrate their efforts on destroying Britain's industry and her towns and cities, of which London was the main target. He hoped to force the British government into surrendering by continuously bombing civilians and thereby damaging their morale. London was bombed every night from 7 September to 2 November; in all some 13,500 tons of high-explosive bombs were dropped in fifty-seven raids. Soon other cities were suffering mass bombing. On 14 November 1940 Coventry was raided for the first time. In that one night 554 people were killed, 50,000 houses and 400 shops were destroyed. Over the next two days German bombers returned to bomb what was left of the city.



In the face of mounting losses, the Germans switched to night bombing. This resulted in the dropping of new incendiary bombs which caused massive fires. On one night alone – 29 December 1940 – fire bombs caused over 1,300 fires to break out in the in the centre of London. In 1941 the Germans began to range further afield, bombing Belfast, Glasgow, Swansea, Cardiff and Liverpool (which was hit for eight nights in May causing the deaths of 2,000 civilians). The Blitz lasted from September 1940 until May 1941, during which 45,000 civilians were killed and three and a half million houses were either damaged or destroyed. For every civilian killed, thirty-five were made homeless.



**Source B:** A child made homeless by bombing. Coventry 1940.

### *Coping with the Blitz*

From the very first day of the war, the government had planned for the expected mass bombing. It set up Civilian Defence units like the ARP wardens, the Auxiliary Fire Service, the First Aid posts and the Auxiliary Ambulance Service. The civilian population had been issued with instructions on how to protect themselves by using air raid shelters. The two most famous were the Anderson shelter, which consisted of sheets of metal set in earth and covered by soil, and the Morrison shelter which was a large steel box to be set up in the home, usually under the stairs. There were also communal shelters for large numbers of people, while Londoners were fortunate enough to be able to use the Underground. The *Daily Mirror* newspaper reported on the Blitz in daily bulletins. For example, on 9 September 1940 the paper reported two stories of bombing raids on London:

#### **Fires Their Guide**

Some of the German machines appeared to turn over another district owing to the fierce A.A. [ack-ack from anti-aircraft guns] gunfire and flew back toward the coast without, apparently, reaching their main objective.

It was evident that the German airmen had used the smouldering fires of Saturday's raids to guide them, for the attacks were directed at the same area – London's dockland.

The first hour of the attack was considerably less formidable than Saturday's raid – fewer enemy planes were penetrating the intense defensive barrage from the coast to London. At the end of an hour there was a hushed lull.

Ten minutes passed – then, "like all hell let loose," the whole of London's defence barrage roared and crashed into action, heralding the return of the raiders.

Dull menacing crunches, whining and quivering reverberations were heard. Livid flashes leapt across the darkened sky as the planes dropped their bombs.

### **A.A.'s 3 In Minute**

The London area's first warning sounded as formations of raiders attempted a daylight attack.

As one big formation emerged from clouds over a south-east area, three Dorniers [German bombers] were blown to pieces within a minute by A.A. fire. The brilliant marksman was a gunner aged twenty-two.

When the planes were hit their bombs were released and fell over a wide area. Shops and cottages were badly damaged, but all the occupants escaped injury.

The bombs set light to a schoolroom at a boys' home and the matron's house. A master gave the alarm and the elder boys fought the flames.

Members of the Home Guard, disbanding after a church parade, captured one of the airmen who had baled out. He told them that four others were close.<sup>4</sup>

At first, the continuous night-time bombardment of Britain's cities and the resulting heavy casualties damaged morale. In England, one of the worst hit cities was Coventry. The infamous raid of 14 November 1940 brought the city to a standstill. 500 German bombers dropped 500 tons of explosives and nearly 900 incendiary bombs on the city in ten hours of unrelenting bombardment.



**Source C:** People in Coventry walk to work past smouldering piles of rubble after a bombing raid in 1940.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 9 September 1940, p.1.

Winston Churchill, who had replaced Chamberlain as prime minister, did what he could to raise people's morale by his stirring speeches, patriotic radio broadcasts and by touring the damaged areas. On the other hand, government censorship ensured that newspapers were not allowed to show pictures of damaged houses or mutilated corpses. Radio and cinema were told to concentrate on stories about the heroism of the rescue services. Fear, hate, destruction and government propaganda all contributed to an increased community spirit, a feeling of togetherness. The British people were determined to show Hitler that they could not be beaten and they tried to carry on their daily lives as normally as possible.

### The Myth of the Blitz

Some historians have questioned this 'community spirit' and sense of 'fellowship' during the Blitz. In his article 'The Blitz: Sorting the Myth from Reality', James Richards acknowledges that the view of Britain as a nation that 'pulled together under the Blitz' is a compelling (and popular) one, but he suggests that the reality is rather different from the heroic image:

The account of the Blitz – as Britain's major cities experienced a sustained and unrelenting bombardment by Nazi Germany – has been etched into our country's conscience ever since the war years. The question has to be asked, however, as to whether the subsequent victory in the war, and the following 60 years, have coloured the way in which it is now generally seen?

Our heritage industry has encouraged a 'Myth of the Blitz', that differs from the reality of wartime experience. The myth is that we all pulled together, that spirits were up as young and old, upper and lower classes muddled through together with high morale under the onslaught of the Nazis.

But the 'Myth of the Blitz' is just that – a myth. As members of the establishment were able to take refuge in country houses, in comfort and out of the way of the bombs, or in expensive basement clubs in the city, the lower-middle and working classes were forced to stay in the cities and face up to the deadly raids with inadequate provision for shelter.

It was a time of terror, confusion and anger. Government incompetence – almost criminal in its extent – displayed what was almost a contempt for ordinary people. It was time for the people to help themselves to the shelter they needed. It was a time of class war.<sup>5</sup>

The 'Myth of the Blitz' was promoted by the government which used its control over the media to present a picture of life going on as normal despite the constant bombing raids. The newspapers did not show photos of people known as 'trekkers' – the families who would spend the night away from their homes, preferably in local woodland or a park where they felt safer from attack. Such photos were censored. An American film, entitled *London can take it*, presented the image of a city devastated by bombs but one that carried on as normal. The narrator makes the point, 'Bombs can only kill people, they cannot destroy the indomitable

<sup>5</sup> J. Richards, 'The Blitz: Sorting the Myth from Reality' *BBC History* online edn. 17 February 2011  
<http://goo.gl/JC01cf>.

spirit of a nation.' Of course, life was not quite as easy as propaganda suggested – London could take it but only because there was little else Londoners could do.

In Wales the most heavily bombed town was Swansea. For three nights in February 1941, 250 German aircraft raided Swansea dropping 1,320 high explosive bombs and around 56,000 incendiaries. The aim of the raid had been to destroy the town's docks and heavy industrial plants, but the Germans missed their targets and they bombed the centre of Swansea instead. The incendiaries caused fires to break out that could be seen more than fifty miles away. Civilian casualties were high, around 387, and the destruction to the town's buildings was great. Cardiff too had suffered, and in one raid alone, on 2 January 1941, 151 men, 147 women and 47 children were killed while some 600 houses were destroyed.



**Source D:** The impact of bombing on the centre of Swansea in 1941.

The following extracts were published by the *South Wales Evening Post* in an article entitled 'Memories of Swansea at War', published in 1988:

Mr Fifield:

We lived in Greenfield Street throughout the war and we were right in the middle of it all. My family spent night after night in the concrete shelter opposite our house. I remember going up to St. Mary's to try and get the candlesticks and other articles out of the church. We went through it all and never had a cracked window in the house. We also had laughter at different things that happened . . . one night the warning went and the warden shouted 'Take cover'. One man dived under a van in Wassall Square. After it was all over, we saw the van on top of the Square and the man still on the road quite safe. I am now 80 years of age and I don't think that we will ever experience another time like that again. Not five minutes walk from our house they flattened everything.

Mr Mansell:

I was one of the first twenty ARP wardens in Swansea. My ARP post was in Pottery Street that was bombed and then in Powell Street. One of the raids came when a messenger lad and I were on patrol, and bombs dropped . . . hitting a house in Cwm Terrace and Philaparts Lodging House. I sent my messenger lad to the post and started to get some of the men out. My messenger came back and helped until the rescue team arrived. Out of the 48 we managed to get 42 out alive. The messenger lad, Jack Evans, was awarded the Boy Scout's highest award for bravery.

Mrs Jenkins:

My brother's wife lost three members of her family by a direct hit on their shelter in Bryn-Syfi Terrace in the February Blitz. After the burial, we went to the cemetery to see the grave. I was amazed to see five or six open graves, and soldiers still digging other graves. On asking one of the soldiers who all the graves were for, he replied: 'They are ready for the next Blitz.'<sup>6</sup>

## Evacuation

When war was declared the government put its plan for evacuation into action. Evacuation was not made compulsory by the government because it feared that people might protest at being forced to leave their homes or their children. Therefore, from the very beginning of the war evacuation was always voluntary but very much encouraged. The government wanted to avoid women and children being killed because this would affect morale. The plan was for all women and children to be evacuated from likely targets like London to safe areas such as Wales. Wales was thought to be safe because it was mainly rural and it had fewer military targets than England. Some children were even sent abroad to Canada and the USA. In a number of cases, only children were evacuated since their parents had important city jobs which were vital for the war effort. Although most of the evacuees who came to Wales came from London and Birmingham, many Welsh women and children from Swansea and Cardiff

<sup>6</sup> 'Memories of Swansea at War' in the *South Wales Evening Post* (1988).

were also evacuated to towns and villages in the country. In other cases, those who refused to be evacuated tended to leave the city at night before the bombing started and then return again in the morning when the bombers had gone. During the Blitz of Plymouth in 1940, over 50,000 people – ‘trekkers’ – left the city each night.

In all, around one and a half million people moved around the country in search of safety. In the Rhondda valley alone, some 33,500 evacuees from London, Cardiff and Bristol were found temporary shelter in the homes of local people. This sometimes led to problems, and it was the job of the local billeting officers to try to help the evacuees and their host families to get on together. It was not unusual to find whole schools being taken over by families for whom accommodation could not be found in local homes. Life for the evacuees varied. A great deal depended on how well they got on with their host families and the local community. Since the majority of evacuees came from large towns and cities, they were not used to living in the country. Many city children, particularly those who came from the slums of the east end of London, found life in the country healthier and more exciting.

## Rationing

The British government knew that the Germans would follow the same plan that they had used in World War One which was to starve Britain into surrendering. The Germans knew that Britain had to import nearly 40% of its food from abroad, so Hitler built up a large U-boat submarine fleet which he used to sink British merchant ships. For the first three years of the war the U-boats were very successful. In April 1941 alone over 700,000 tons of British shipping was sunk. On the Home Front the people were expected to make sacrifices in order to help beat the U-boat threat. The government set up the Ministry of Food and in January 1940 it introduced food rationing quickly, followed by clothes, petrol and coal rationing. By 1942 even water was being rationed and people were only allowed 13 cm of water in their weekly bath! Ration books were issued to everyone and the ration coupons could only be exchanged for goods like meat, eggs, butter and sugar at shops where people had registered. Some foods such as bread, most vegetables and potatoes were not rationed. But it was almost impossible to get hold of fruits like bananas, oranges and lemons, except on the black market where most rationed items could be bought illegally, but only for a high price.

One woman recalls how the shortage of food drove her to desperate measures:

[She] saw a dog dashing out of a butcher's shop with a large piece of suet in his mouth, followed him on her bicycle and watched him bury the suet. 'When the dog was safely away I went to the spot ... and confiscated the hidden treasure ... I took that suet home, cut out the mauled part and then made suet pudding.'<sup>7</sup>

The Ministry of Food's Dig For Victory campaign encouraged self-sufficiency; the number of allotment (pieces of land allocated to each family to grow food) rose from 815,000 to 1.4 million. Pigs, chickens and rabbits were reared domestically for meat, while vegetables were grown anywhere that could be cultivated. By 1940 wasting food became a criminal offence. One person's typical weekly allowance would be: one fresh egg; 4oz each of margarine

<sup>7</sup> N. Longmate, *How We Lived Then* (London, 2002), p.149.

and bacon (about four rashers); 2oz butter and tea; 1oz cheese; and 8oz sugar. Meat was allocated by price, so cheaper cuts became popular. Points could be pooled or saved to buy cereals, tinned goods, dried fruit, biscuits and jam. Rationing of some foodstuffs continued after the war and it did not end until 1955.

### Women and the War

An historian once said, 'It took a world war to give women freedom but two world wars to give them equality.' During the First World War, women were given the opportunity to prove their worth as industrial and agricultural workers and their contribution to the war effort was praised by contemporaries. However, once the war came to an end, so did their contribution to the industrial prosperity of Britain. Returning soldiers were given the jobs once done by women.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the political leaders of Britain were in no doubt that they would be needed again. Thousands more women were recruited or conscripted for the war effort. They worked in factories making war materials, on the land growing food to feed the nation and in the hospitals tending to the sick and injured. In one munitions factory alone at Bridgend, some 7,000 people were employed and over 65% of them were women. In 1942 Clement Attlee, Deputy Prime Minister, issued the following statement:

The work the women are performing in munitions factories has to be seen to be believed. Precision engineering jobs which a few years ago would have made a skilled [technician's] hair stand on end are performed with dead accuracy by girls who had no industrial experience.<sup>8</sup>

In 1942 Churchill was sent a report by the government's Labour Research Department which stated:

Thousands of women who want to volunteer find it difficult or impossible for them to undertake a war job. The most important reasons are: low wages, insufficient day nurseries, long working hours and consequent shopping difficulties and inadequate transport.<sup>9</sup>

Churchill ordered a review and reform of the system and a year later, in 1943, the government published a report entitled *Women in War Work*. Below is an extract:

In one factory the women are working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is a waiting list of nearly 300 and in ten weeks the bonus payment has increased, absenteeism has dropped and there are no fatigue, shopping or transport problems, even though wages [£2.20 weekly] are ridiculously low.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to work in factories and engineering, many women signed up to the Women's Land Army which was given the task of increasing food production. The work on the farms

<sup>8</sup> Clement Attlee cited in N. Longmate, *How We Lived Then* (London, 2002), p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Harris, *Women at War, 1939-45* (Stroud, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women's Lives During the Second World War* (London, 2011).

was hard and poorly paid, but it proved vital in beating the losses from German U-boat attacks. The military too encouraged women to join – in the army, women joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), while those destined for the Air Force joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

The Women's Voluntary Service also contributed to the war effort. The WVS had one million members by 1943 and although the majority of them were elderly, they did whatever was needed. When the government called for scrap metal to be donated for the war effort, the Portsmouth WVS collected in four weeks enough scrap metal to fill four railway carriages. The government used this to encourage other women to do their bit for the war effort, and in a series of propaganda campaigns the key message was 'There's Not Much Women Can't Do'. The contribution of women to the war effort was immense. By the end of the war in 1945, there were 450,000 women in the military and over 6 million in civilian war work.



### Keeping up morale

#### *The media and propaganda*

During times of war all governments try to control the news in order to conceal the truth; this is called censorship. In Britain as in Germany, every form of mass-media – radio, newspapers, magazines, cinema films and newsreels – were censored. The Ministry of Information was set up and given the task of managing the rules on censorship and propaganda. The aim was to ensure that the people only got to know what the government wanted them to know or what it thought they should know. Bad news was kept to a minimum so that information on military disasters and defeats was suppressed or kept secret.

The government claimed that the censorship laws were there to protect the people from lies, rumours and from German propaganda. William Joyce, nicknamed Lord Haw-Haw because of his posh voice, was a pro-Nazi Irish American. During the war he regularly broadcast to the British people from a radio station in Germany. His aim was to destroy British morale. The government indeed considered censoring his broadcasts until they discovered that most people treated him as a joke. On the other hand, the *Daily Worker*, a pro-communist newspaper, was banned because it criticised the government and the war effort. Of course, good news like military victories and other successes were not censored, but the truth of them was often exaggerated to make them look more than they were. This was propaganda. Both sides made great use of propaganda and this ‘war of words’ became an important weapon during the war because it helped to keep up people’s morale.

The most effective weapon the British had was the BBC. It broadcast in Britain and abroad so that the people of the occupied countries too would be able to listen to the news. The BBC was so powerful because it was heard in the home via the radio. Radio broadcasts were the single most listened to form of news and entertainment. One of the most popular radio programmes was Tommy Handley’s *It’s That Man Again*. To ensure that everyone was subjected to government controlled news and propaganda, posters were put up everywhere, ranging from motivational images to simple information exchange. The cinema was subjected to government regulation. The news was controlled as was the film industry which was used by the government to produce patriotic films. Some of the most popular and powerful films about the war were *Went the Day Well?*; *The Day Will Dawn*; *Tomorrow We Live*; and *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*. Between them, radio and the cinema did much to mould the attitudes and opinions of the British people. It was an essential tool in the government’s drive to shape and control public opinion.



Source E: A propaganda poster.

### *Churchill's leadership*

Winston Churchill was born into a life of wealth and privilege in 1874. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was a respected Conservative politician. Winston became a soldier and then a journalist. It was as a war correspondent covering the Boer War 1899-1902, that he earned his reputation for courage and daring. In 1902 he entered politics as a Conservative MP but he later changed sides and joined the Liberals. He became friendly with Lloyd George and together they piloted many social reforms through Parliament. When the Great War broke out, Churchill was put in charge of the Royal Navy as First Lord of the Admiralty. He proved to be an energetic and efficient First Lord, but his plans for an attack on Turkey at Gallipoli ended in disaster. Churchill was blamed and he was forced to resign. Two years later, in 1917, the new prime minister, Lloyd George, brought Churchill back into the government as Minister of Munitions. Again he proved a worthy choice, working hard to speed up the supply of munitions to the front.

When Lloyd George fell from power in 1922, Churchill stayed on in the government once more joining the Conservatives. In Parliament, Churchill was treated with suspicion by many fellow Conservatives because he had once been a Liberal; he was distrusted by the Liberals because he had defected to the Tories; he was positively hated by Labour because of his order to send in the troops to break the miners' strike at Tonypandy in 1910. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1924, he faced the almost impossible task of dealing with the economic depression. His cuts in government spending and his calls for reduction in wages made him unpopular. He remained as Chancellor until 1929; during this time he earned the hatred of the miners and the TUC for his efforts to break the General Strike in 1926. By 1929 he had quarrelled with many members of his own party and had become an outspoken critic of government policy.

He was particularly keen to persuade the government and the people of Britain not to trust Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. He believed that the policy of appeasement was a mistake that would eventually lead to war. However few listened to his warnings about the dangers of communism, fascism and Nazism. The general public did not care to listen to him: they were afraid of the prospect of another war, so they preferred to believe in the peaceful foreign policy followed by Baldwin and Chamberlain. Churchill's way of dealing with the likes of Hitler seemed to them aggressive and therefore bound to lead to war.



### *What role did Winston Churchill play in World War Two?*

Churchill had been out of power for over ten years by the time war broke out in September 1939. Churchill's warnings had proved correct, which persuaded an embittered Chamberlain to refuse him a role in the government. However, the mood in the country and in Parliament had changed and MPs were now in favour of Churchill becoming First Lord of the Admiralty. Chamberlain reluctantly agreed.

As the war progressed Churchill gained in confidence and prestige. With the attack on France in May 1940, and after a powerful speech by Lloyd George telling him he should go, Chamberlain resigned. Some MPs were in favour of Chamberlain's deputy, Lord Halifax, becoming prime minister but it was finally agreed that Churchill was probably best suited to lead the new coalition government.

Churchill proved to be an outstanding wartime leader. He set about restoring the battered morale of the British people by giving stirring speeches and by making personal appearances in various parts of the country. Churchill toured the bombed cities to offer moral support when the Blitz was at its worst. Even when Britain suffered serious setbacks such as at Dunkirk in May 1940, the defeat in the desert war in January 1941 and the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942, Churchill lifted the spirits of his fellow countrymen by appearing firm in the belief that they would win the war. Churchill's first speech as prime minister (13 May 1940) stated:



Source F: Churchill, an outstanding wartime leader.

You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.<sup>11</sup>

Churchill's 'Drive to Victory' began at the battle of El Alamein in October 1942. Churchill's choice of general, Montgomery, to lead the British army in North Africa proved successful. The Germans were decisively defeated at El Alamein and again in Tunisia and Sicily. Churchill encouraged the allied generals to invade Italy in July 1943 and France (D-Day) in June 1944. His hard work ensured that the allied war leaders, Roosevelt of the USA and Stalin of the USSR, set aside their differences in order to defeat Hitler and Germany.

<sup>11</sup> 'Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat', *The Churchill Centre*, online edn. can be seen at <http://goo.gl/OPV0wA>.

To the majority of the British people, the allied victory in 1945 was due largely to Churchill's inspired leadership. Yet he had his enemies. The Labour politician Aneurin Bevan criticised Churchill's leadership throughout the war. In July 1942 he criticised Churchill's failure to achieve success in the war; he even called for a 'No Confidence' debate. Churchill won. Churchill also made mistakes. In an attempt to cash in on his popularity, he called an election in July 1945. He lost. He had badly misjudged the mood of the people. This did not damage his personal reputation. Most people rejected his politics rather than the man who, they agreed, had won the war.

For many people, his stubborn refusal to admit defeat during World War Two has given him a reputation few other politicians have ever achieved. After a brief period as prime minister, 1951-55, Churchill retired. He died in 1965.



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