

1939-1945: The Second World War

Britain declared war on 3 September 1939. The Labour Party refused to join the wartime coalition under Neville Chamberlain who was largely discredited for his earlier appeasement of Adolf Hitler. However, by May 1940, he was gone and the hour had finally arrived for Winston Churchill. He took the reins of power and formed a coalition government which included the leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee.

In June 1940, the British forces were pushed out of Europe as France was invaded. The European war would now be fought in the air and on sea until June 1944, when the massed forces of the Allies: British, Commonwealth and American troops, launched the D-Day landings into Normandy. On 25 August, Paris was liberated and by May 1945 the Germans were defeated. They surrendered on 7 May in the French town of Rheims. The war in the Far East ended in August when Japan surrendered after the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese cities.



The Blitz

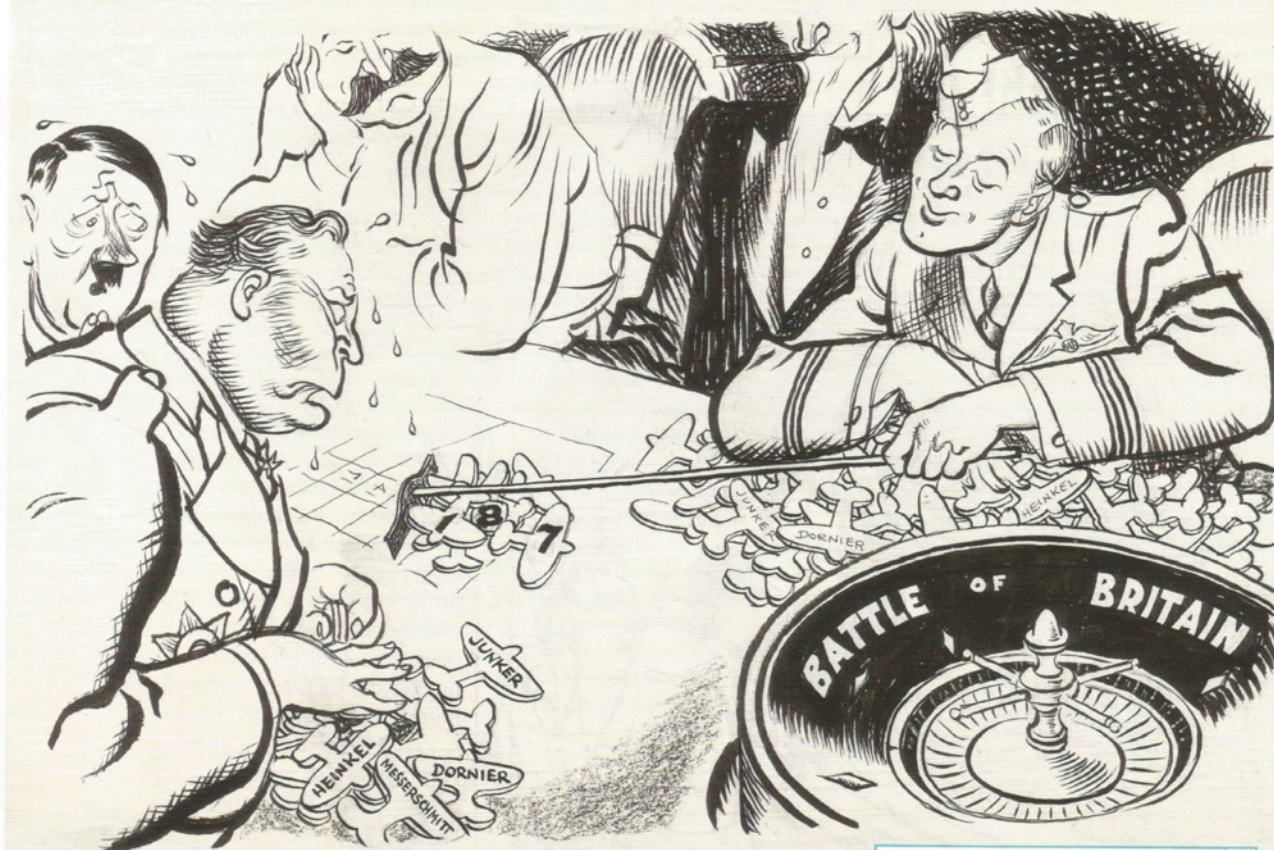
From September 1940 to May 1941, London was bombed on a regular basis. The docklands and the East End suffered most but other districts were also hit. People sought shelter on the platforms of the Underground where a spirit of community and solidarity was born. The "Spirit of the Blitz" has often been invoked in times of trouble since the War. Buckingham Palace was also hit leading Queen Elisabeth to remark: "I'm glad we've been bombed. It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face." London was not the only town to suffer. Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield and many others were also bombed. But the night of 14 November has gone down in infamy and the verb "to coventrate" meaning "destroy totally" entered the English language as the city of Coventry in the Midlands of England was obliterated.

The Battle of El Alamein

Dunkirk evacuation: with the British army trapped at Dunkirk in France in May 1940, while churchgoers held a day of prayer for calm seas, an armada of volunteers – fishing boats, yachts, paddle steamers – sailed across the Channel to pick up soldiers from the beaches. It was a propaganda triumph – Churchill called it ‘a miracle of deliverance’.

Enigma: working in Bletchley Park, Alan Turing and his team invented Enigma (this would later be called the computer) to decode the Nazis’ radio communications. The Nazis never realised their code was broken, and it has been suggested that Turing’s work shortened the war by two years.

C



↑ This cartoon by Leslie Gilbert Illingworth was published in the *Daily Mail* on 17 September 1940 – two days after a huge daytime attack by the Nazi Luftwaffe had failed (the RAF claimed it had shot down 187 German planes).

Battle of Britain: during 1940–41 – the years when Britain alone was fighting the Nazis, the Spitfires and Hurricanes of the RAF – together with the newly developed radar stations – defeated the German Luftwaffe. Without air superiority, the Nazis dared not launch an invasion across the English Channel. In August 1940, Churchill claimed the fighter pilots were ‘turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.’

HF/DF: ‘Huff-duff’ was the technique of using radio waves and a double antenna to triangulate the location of the sender. During the war it was improved and, after 1942, the Admiralty Signal Establishment worked out how to use it on ships – a development which helped The Royal Navy to find and destroy the Nazi U-Boats.

Think

- 1 Study Cartoon C and make a list of the significant elements of the scene.
- 2 Use your list to explain the message of the cartoon.
- 3 What might someone seeing this cartoon think was the main factor in Germany’s eventual defeat?

ARP: the British reaction to the Blitz was not just a man shouting 'Put that light out'. It involved:

- 38 million gas masks
- Anderson and Morrison bomb shelters
- sleeping in the Tube
- the Auxiliary Fire and Ambulance Services
- 27,000 volunteers in the Royal Observer Corps who stayed up all night listening for German planes;
- the Women's Voluntary Service who set up tea canteens, looked after victims, helped with First Aid and manned Incident Enquiry posts.

The British did not behave as wonderfully as the propaganda suggested, but they 'kept calm and carried on'.

Home Guard: was not as chaotic as the 1970s TV series *Dad's Army* portrayed. Numbering 1.5 million men, they guarded the coast, and defended strategic military sites. Some manned anti-aircraft guns, and elite Auxiliary Units were trained to carry on a guerrilla resistance if the Nazis invaded.

The **Political Warfare Executive:** carried out 'black propaganda' designed to damage German morale, dropping anti-Nazi leaflets, and running a bogus 'German' radio programme criticising Hitler.

Government propaganda: all the media were strictly censored. Newspapers were carefully controlled and did not carry any news or photographs which would damage morale. Posters carried government messages. The writer J.B. Priestley gave his motivational 'Postscripts' talks on the radio. The film of Shakespeare's *Henry V* reminded people of the heroism of the 'happy few' who fought at Agincourt in 1415.

Britain's Women: from 1941, single women aged 20–30 could be **conscripted** into the armed forces or into industry. Some women – such as the 'Aycliffe Angels' of County Durham – did hugely dangerous work filling shells in the Royal Ordnance Factories. About 80,000 girls joined the Women's Land Army to help farmers.

Military service: nearly 3.5 million men and 487,000 women were conscripted or volunteered to serve in the armed forces during the war; 383,700 were killed. Others suffered horrific wounds or conditions (such as those who were captured by the Japanese, or were on the Arctic convoys).

Internment: by the summer of 1940, the 60,000 Germans and Austrians who lived in Britain (including, ironically, both Nazis and Jews fleeing the Nazis) had been interned (rounded up and imprisoned) because they were felt to be a security risk. When Italy entered the war, all 15,000 Italians living in Britain were arrested.



↑ This cartoon by the British cartoonist Leslie Gilbert Mlingworth appeared in the *Daily Mail* on 28 August 1944, and shows the story of the war from the British point of view, 1940–44. Can you spot: trying on gas masks, Dunkirk, the Home Guard, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, evacuation, rationing and war work?

New Bloxy Books Publishing Ltd