



World War II



The Run up to the War

In 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Reich Chancellor of Germany and one year later he was declared as the Führer, meaning leader, of all Germany. Adolf Hitler was the leader of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi party) and he had big plans for the future of his people.

Hitler wanted Lebensraum (living space) for German people and to unite all German-speaking people in one country. By 1938, plans to expand German territory were underway and a wave of invasions into surrounding countries had begun. In March 1938, Austria was annexed into Nazi Germany and the border between the two countries was removed. This was called the Anschluss. Hitler looked towards the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia next, where many German people lived.

In September 1938, the British, French, Italian and German leaders signed a treaty called 'The Munich Agreement' which gave Hitler the Sudetenland in return for him agreeing not to continue with his military expansion plans.



After the annexation of the Sudetenland, the rest of Czechoslovakia was exposed and vulnerable because its borders

were now almost completely surrounded by German land. Many people in Czechoslovakia felt betrayed by the Munich Agreement because the Czechoslovakian prime minister was not invited to the meeting; the fate of the Sudetenland was decided without Czechoslovakian representation. However, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, Neville Chamberlain, described the agreement as representing 'peace for our time'.

Unfortunately, Hitler did not keep to the terms of the Munich Agreement and in August 1939 he went on to invade and annex more of Czechoslovakia and, in the years to follow, many other countries.



On 1st September 1939, Hitler sent his army into Poland. The United Kingdom and France had agreed to protect Poland if this should happen, and they warned Hitler that if he did not immediately remove his troops they would be forced to go to war. Hitler did not remove his troops, so on 3rd September 1939 the United Kingdom and France officially declared war on Germany.



Allied and Axis Powers

At the start of World War II, the Allies were the United Kingdom, France and Poland. These nations had made a pact to stand together against Hitler and the Axis powers.

The Allies were soon joined by the British Commonwealth (South Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and then the Soviet Union, the United States of America and China. Other Allies included British India, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia. The Allies were officially named as the United Nations in 1942. The Axis powers were Germany, Japan and Italy who made a pact to stand together in opposition to the Allies.

The Phoney War

In the months following the declaration of war, there was no large-scale fighting on the Western Front and this period of World War II came to be known as the Phoney War. Although Poland was completely taken over in a matter of weeks and Denmark and Norway were later occupied by the Nazis in April 1940, to many people in Britain there wasn't much happening that directly affected them. During this time, many children, who had been evacuated to the countryside, returned home to their parents.



The Battle of France

On 10th May 1940 (the same day that Winston Churchill became the new prime minister of Great Britain), Hitler launched a major attack into Western Europe and there was an explosion of fighting action: the Phoney War had come to an end.



However, despite the best efforts of the Allied soldiers, within the next six weeks France, Belgium and the Netherlands were all occupied by Nazi forces. The Allies were overpowered by the German Blitzkrieg technique and many thousands were forced to retreat to the beaches at Dunkirk.

Admiral Ramsey in Britain formulated a rescue plan and from the 26th May until 4th June 1940, the British army managed to rescue over 330,000 Allied soldiers. The men were collected in small boats, which were able to enter the shallow waters along the beach, and then transferred to larger ships to sail to safety.



This mission was code-named Operation Dynamo. The prime minister, Winston Churchill, described the operation at Dunkirk as a 'miracle of deliverance.'



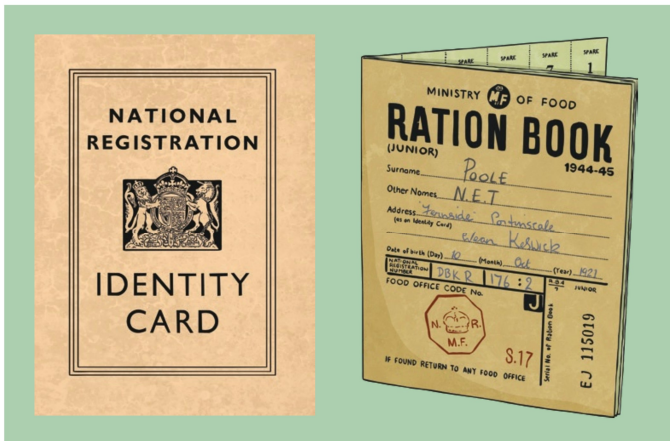
Evacuation

During World War II, many people were evacuated from the cities to the countryside, where it was believed they would be safer from bombing. In total, over 3.5 million people were evacuated during the war.

Most of the evacuees were children but other evacuees included mothers with very young children, pregnant women, disabled people and teachers and helpers to look after the children.

Evacuation happened in distinct waves, with the first wave of evacuations beginning on the 1st September 1939, two days before Britain officially declared war on Germany. Other waves were at the start of the Battle of Britain in June 1940 and at the start of the Blitz in September 1940.

On evacuation day, children travelled with their teacher or helper by train to their destination. They had to wear an identity label and take their gas mask, ration book, identity card and food for the journey. Many children also took a suitcase containing clothes and other personal items.



When they reached their destination, billeting officers were responsible for arranging for children to stay with host families. For many children, this involved being selected from a line by their host. This was an upsetting experience for some children, who felt unwanted or rejected.

Many children were evacuated to countryside towns and villages in Britain but some were evacuated overseas and lived with host families in places as far away as Australia and Canada.





Rationing

Food rationing began in Britain in January 1940, starting with butter, bacon and sugar. Over the course of the war, other items were added to the rationing list and quantities available varied depending on availability.

In order to ensure that everybody got their fair share of available foods, ration books were issued to everybody.

There were three types of ration books which had slightly different allowances:

- a buff book for adults;
- a blue book for children aged five to sixteen – children got extra eggs and milk but half the allowance of meat;
- a green book for children under five and pregnant or nursing mothers who also got extra eggs and milk and the first pick of fruit.

Coupons in the ration book showed people how much of each item they were allowed and the shopkeepers would remove or stamp the coupons when they were used.

Everybody had to register with certain shops, where they could go each week to purchase their allowance. As there were no large supermarkets in Britain during the war, this meant that people had to travel to different shops to purchase their goods, e.g. the baker for bread and greengrocer for vegetables. Often, long queues formed outside the shops when stocks of certain foods became available and shopkeepers would put up signs when they had run out of things, e.g. 'No tomatoes today'. Having a ration book was not a guarantee that you could get the items, but it was a fair way to ensure that everybody had equal access to available goods.

During the war, the government appointed a minister of food to help control and regulate food supplies available. From April 1940 until November 1943 the Minister of Food was Frederick Marquis, Lord Woolton.



Lord Woolton was responsible for organising the rationing system and encouraging people to grow their own food. He worked closely with the Ministry of Agriculture which established the Dig for Victory propaganda campaign.

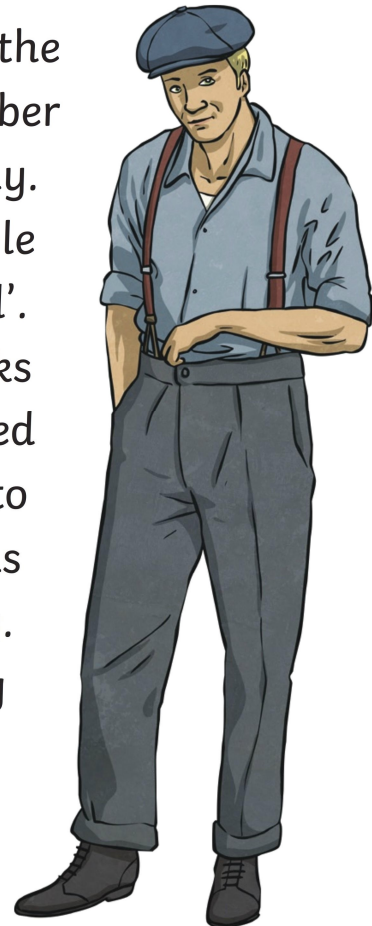
Surprisingly, some foods which were never rationed during the war were rationed after it. Bread was rationed in 1946 and potatoes in 1947 when the weather affected crops and stores. Rationing continued until 1954 when the final restrictions on the purchase of meat ended.



Ironically, food rationing actually made people healthier overall. Infant deaths decreased and life expectancy increased during this time (except those who lost their lives due to the fighting of course).

Other Rationing

Food was not the only thing rationed during the war. Petrol, soap, clothing, paper and timber were also only available in limited supply. Clothes rationing began in 1941 and people were encouraged to 'make-do and mend'. Like food ration books, clothing ration books contained coupons, which could be exchanged for different items of clothing. People had to hand over the correct number of coupons and money for the items they wished to buy. Initially, adults received sixty-six clothing coupons and children received ten more.





Women during the War

Life for most women before the war was quite different than it is today. Typically, most women stayed at home and did not go out to work. Some younger women did go out to work, but if they married they had to give up their job.

Women were paid less than men and they

were generally only employed to do 'women's jobs', such as nursing or working as a shop assistant.

Men and women's roles were very stereotypical from a young age, boys and girls were brought up quite differently.

With men called up for active service during the war, there was a great need for women to undertake the jobs the men had previously done. Suddenly, women became more than just homemakers and were given the opportunity to become patriotic



Lessons in school taught girls how to cook and sew and look after the home while boys were taught woodwork and other practical skills to equip them for the workplace.



heroines, contributing significantly to the war effort in a variety of ways.

During the war, women were employed in a wide range of jobs. Some became munition factory workers (making weapons); others joined the armed forces (army, navy and air force); many worked as Land Girls; women drove buses and trains and worked on the canals; they worked as nurses or ambulance drivers; women were employed to build ships and worked in other engineering industries; they worked as searchlight operators and some became air raid wardens.

The Women's Voluntary Service also employed women, who assisted with a wide range of duties.

At the start of the war, the government relied on women to volunteer for work. However, by late 1941 it became necessary to introduce conscription (making working compulsory). Initially, this only applied to single





women between the ages of 20 and 30 but later in the war this was extended to women between the ages of 18 and 50.

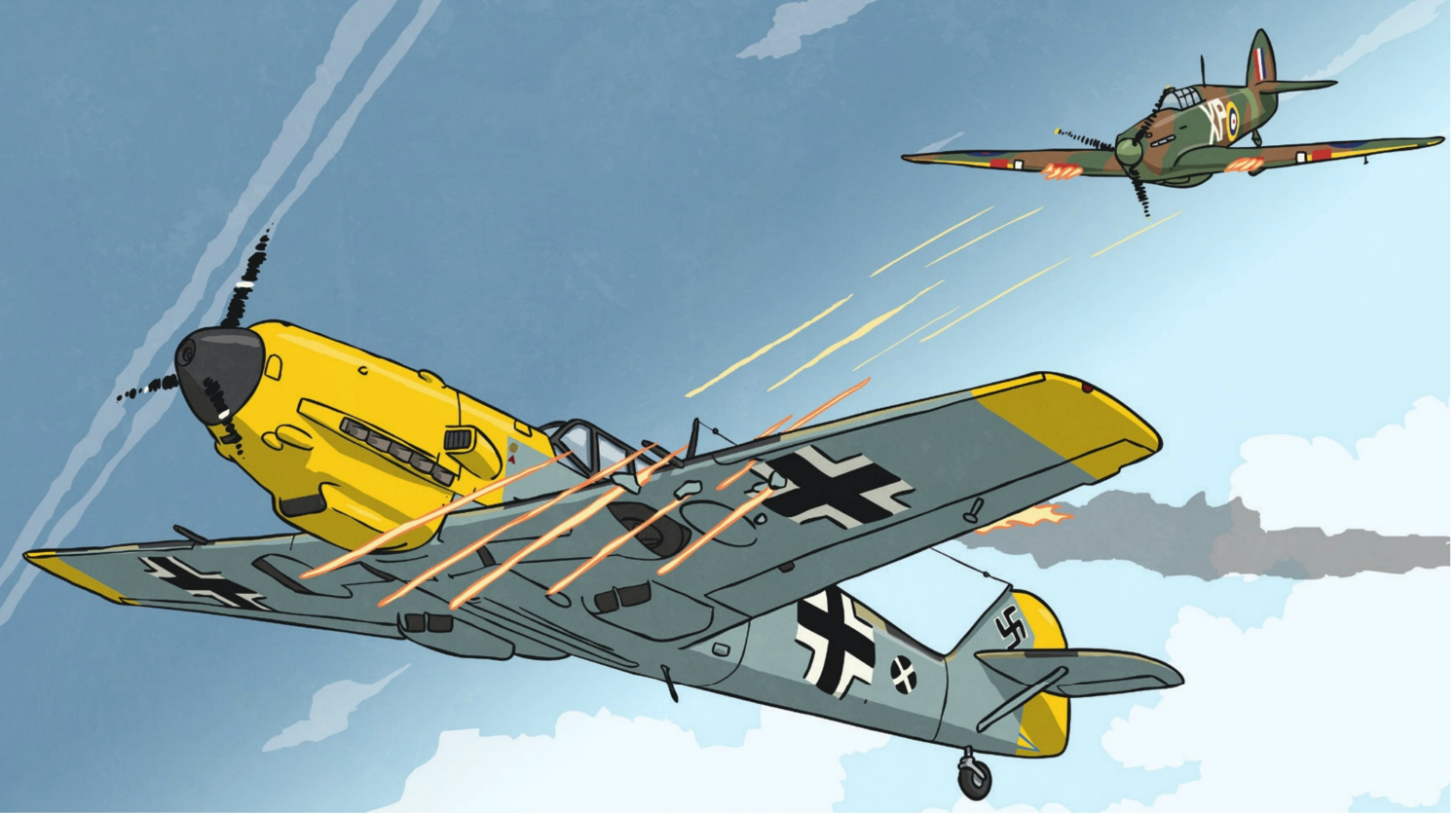
In 1943, almost 90% of single women and 80% of married women were in employment.

When the war finished, many women lost their jobs as men returned to the positions they had left. Other jobs, which were specific to the war effort, were simply not necessary any longer. For lots of women, going back to the way they were before the war was quite difficult. They had got used to working and leading more independent lives and they were keen for the liberation of women to continue.

The Battle of Britain

On 10th July 1940, the period of World War II known as the Battle of Britain began.





The Battle of Britain was an intense period of aerial warfare between the RAF and the German Luftwaffe which lasted from July 1940 to September 1940.

The Battle of Britain was the attempt of the German Luftwaffe to destroy the RAF of the United Kingdom so that German soldiers could then invade by sea in Hitler's secret mission, code-named Operation Sea Lion.

The Battle of Britain began on 10th July 1940 when British ships in the English Channel were bombed by the German Luftwaffe. The Luftwaffe had a distinct advantage over the RAF as they had 2,600 aircraft compared to Britain's 640; they continued their offensive with the mass bombing of airfields, harbours, radar stations and aircraft factories in August 1940.

Despite their inferior numbers, the RAF defences were incredibly well organised and efficient. Britain was split into groups and sectors with a main fighter airfield in each, which organised and deployed the fighter planes in response to the intelligence they received from radar operatives.

The most popular British aeroplanes to fight in the Battle of Britain were the Supermarine Spitfire Mark 1 and the Hawker Hurricane. The Spitfires battled with the German fighter planes while the Hurricanes targeted the bombers.

A common sight during the Battle of Britain were 'dogfights' between enemy planes. This term describes the intense in-air battle between small groups of aircraft fighting at close range.



**Supermarine
Spitfire**



Hawker Hurricane

Strategic maneuvering was key to winning a dogfight battle. A pilot who destroyed five enemy planes was known as a fighter ace.

Due to their small numbers (in comparison with the enemy), the RAF pilots who flew in the Battle of Britain came to be

regarded as 'the few'. This name came from Winston Churchill's speech to parliament on 20th August 1940:

'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'

However, Britain's eventual success in the Battle of Britain was a collaborative effort between the RAF pilots and a wide range of ground workers who supported them: factory men and women worked tirelessly building new aircraft and weapons; radar operatives scanned the skies and gave advance warning of incoming enemy planes; anti-aircraft command helped shoot down enemy planes from the ground.

On the 7th September 1940, the Germans suddenly moved on to bombing London instead as they believed enough damage had been caused to the RAF stations. Despite causing considerable damage in the capital, this actually gave the RAF time to recover their defenses. On 15th September 1940, the Germans launched another massive attack but the British fighters hit back hard and gained the advantage. The tide had turned in Britain's favour and it became clear that the Germans could not achieve their goal of controlling British airspace. 15th September is officially regarded as the end of the Battle of Britain and this day is commemorated each year.

The Blitz

The period in the war known as the Blitz began on 7th September



1940, when the Luftwaffe turned their attention to the bombing of cities rather than the military targets they had previously focused on. Bombing during the Blitz usually happened at night as the Luftwaffe had been losing too many bombers during the raids of the Battle of Britain. The word blitz comes from the German word for lightning.

To avoid being bombed, people were encouraged to put up blackouts to stop any chink of light from within the home escaping after dark. Street lamps were also extinguished and car headlights covered and dimmed. Taking such measures would make it more difficult for enemy bombers to hit their targets. ARP Wardens worked tirelessly to ensure people were adhering to the guidelines. They also directed people to public shelters, administered first aid to those in need and put out small fires.

Bombing during the Blitz was intense and devastating,

causing extensive damage to homes, public buildings and claiming the loss of 43,000 lives. During a bombing raid, an air-raid siren would sound, warning people to take cover and try to protect themselves.



Air-Raid Shelters

The safest place during a bombing raid was underground. People who had enough space in their gardens might have an Anderson Shelter, which was made from two sheets of curved, corrugated steel sunk partly into the ground. Although they were not the most comfortable places, they did offer good protection. Morrison Shelters were an indoor alternative to the Anderson; these were steel cages that could accommodate up to four people. They were not as good as Anderson Shelters but they had the added benefit of being used as a table during the daytime.



People without their own shelter, or those caught up in a raid while away from home, might choose to use a public shelter. The London Underground stations were used as effective shelters and were able to accommodate large numbers of people. Purpose-built public air-raid shelters, such as the ones still open in Stockport, Greater Manchester, were very popular and people also utilised natural underground shelters, such as caves, where possible.

The End of the War

Adolf Hitler committed suicide on 30th April 1945 when it became clear that Germany could not win the war. Germany officially surrendered on 7th May 1945 and this marked the end of the war in Europe. 8th May was officially recognized as VE Day (Victory in Europe Day) and this day each year is commemorated with special events and remembrance services taking place.



However, the war did not end with Germany's surrender and fighting continued in the Pacific. In an attempt to end the war as quickly as possible, the American president, Harry Truman, sanctioned the dropping of atomic bombs on two Japanese cities: Hiroshima on the 6th August 1945 and Nagasaki three days later. On 14th August 1945, Japan surrendered to the West, bringing the fighting to a close.

The official end of the war was on the 2nd September 1945, when Japan signed formal surrender. More than 50 million people died during World War II, including 20 million Russian civilians and 6 million Jews, the majority of whom had been mercilessly killed in the Holocaust.

