

"We're all in the Front Line. " British Society at War : the People's Chronology.

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"We're all in the Front Line."[1] British Society at War : the People's Chronology.

The words of a Paddington bus-driver sum up the feelings of a people at war. A united, spirited and courageous people in the front line, under fire, is a widespread cliché and one of the myths of the war. Amplified by the collective imagination, the myths have engendered lengthy debate (Calder; Harrisson; Ziegler X). The dates of the outbreak and end of the war add a further dimension to this debate. When examining British society at war a discussion of the chronology is thus both a methodological necessity and a heuristic process.

Officially the war began with the expiry of Chamberlain's ultimatum to Hitler on 3rd September 1939 and ended with the surrender of the Japanese troops in South East Asia in Singapore on 12th September 1945.[2] What did these two 'scraps of paper' collecting dust in the diplomatic archives mean to people? The living memory that contemporary witnesses convey[3] is more representative of the real individual beginnings and endings as experienced by the ordinary person and best reveals the multifarious experiences of a society at war.

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1 Quoted by Philip Zeigler (163).

2 Japan surrendered to the United States on 2nd September 1945. An excellent chronology is given by Hélène Fréchet (16-36).

3 Set up in 1937, Mass Observation Archive, now at the University of Sussex, holds a large number of the popular contemporary sources used by historians. Voluntary observers wrote diaries and compiled reports on various topics. Published selections of these manuscript sources can be found in Harrisson [1978]; Angus Calder [1992]; Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan [1984]; Dorothy Sheridan, ed., [1990]. For a commentary on the use of these sources see Norma Denny (90-98).

When did the British really feel at war? Was this feeling stronger or weaker at different moments during the six long years? Did perceptions vary according to one's social position and individual experience? When in fact did the war end in people's minds? How does the chronology of the war contribute to the elaboration of the myth, a unifying banner behind which differences, disagreement and unsavoury facts were unwittingly glossed over and even knowingly hidden. How does the perception of time, dates and duration enter into the myth? How far was British society, the people, in tune with the military, political and diplomatic events, as determined by the leadership?

In diplomatic history and international law, 11 o'clock on 3rd September 1939 is recognised as the official time of Britain's entering the war. At 11.15 Chamberlain announced the news to the public. "The situation in which no word given by Germany's ruler could be trusted and no people or country could feel themselves safe has become intolerable. And now that we have resolved to finish it I know that you will all play your part with calm and courage."[4] His words echoed Nelson's pre-battle message at Trafalgar: "England expects every man to do his duty," and from the outset helped fashion the "confidence" and "resolution" aspects of the myth. For the first time in British history, a radio broadcast of the official announcement of war meant that the whole population felt immediately and directly involved.[5]

If there was no domestic opposition to Britain's declaring war on Nazi Germany, despite the number of different groups opposed to such a war (pacifists, fascists and communists), this was due as much to the grand rehearsal, provided by the Munich crisis, as to the relative weakness of the opposition movements. The gradual path to war goes back even further to the occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. But the active preparation for the possible outbreak of war during the week of Sunday 25th September to Saturday 1st October 1938, and the outcome of the Munich crisis, undoubtedly disarmed any protests one year later at the time of the "real" mobilisation. The numerous preparations noted by

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4 Robert Kee reproduces the whole text (17).

5 Edward VIII's abdication in 1936 was the first civil event thus announced.

the participants, distribution of Air Raid Precaution (A.R.P.) manuals and gas masks, population census, first aid talks, intensive listening to the wireless,[6] evacuation of civilians, were all survival techniques which were to be repeated barely twelve months later, scheduled and planned for by the public authorities since the creation of the Imperial Defence Committee in 1931 (Harrisson I, 'The Expected Holocaust' II, 'Air Raid Precautions').

On that Sunday in 1938, the evacuation of two million London women and children to rural reception areas began (Sheridan 28). The Women's Volunteer Service (W.V.S.) began billeting of evacuees and the A.R.P. was mobilised. On the 27th, Chamberlain warned the country to prepare for the worst, regretting that trenches had to be dug and gas masks handed out for "a country about which we know nothing." The popular rejoicing which welcomed his return from Berchtesgaden is all the more comprehensible. Following the capitulation at Munich, for the people, "resentment that we had to 'give in' to Hitler,"[7] "though thankful, I cannot rejoice,"[8] and for Churchill who spoke of "Peace without honour" on 5th October,[9] the events of 1939 were to become both unavoidable and liberating.

Thus, one year later, on 2nd September 1939, a young woman in Romford noted "Thought for the day : what an anticlimax it would be if there were no war!" (Sheridan 53) while the skies seemed to confirm the presages.[10] The feelings stimulated by the pre-war period, and notably by the Munich crisis, a week during which war, half-expected, half-regretted, did not come, the combination of restrained joy and weakness expressed above, gave way to a relieved sensation when this

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6 Diary of Moyra Charlton, Takely, Essex (Vera Lynn 16).
7 Mrs. Last from Barrow in Furness, 1st October 1938 (Sheridan 41).
8 Mrs. Arnold, same day (Sheridan 34).
9 Was this a reference to Hitler's speech during the Rhineland elections in 1936 which contained the phrase "No peace without honour" noted by Vera Brittain (50).
10 A cataclysmic storm during the night of 2nd-3rd September is mentioned in Kent (Brittain 50), in Dorset (209) and in Birmingham (Sheridan 48).

time brinkmanship was abandoned. "So many of peace's anxieties were eased with war, so many more increased..." comments Harrisson (28).

The war came, coincidentally, at the same hour as the Armistice's resounding date, eleven o'clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1918. The ghost of the First World War was raised. "Fancy, it's the same time Armistice was declared," remarked a Birmingham lady, adding naïvely, "Fancy declaring war on a Sunday" (Sheridan 49). This personal calendar of the declaration of war reveals both historical references and indications of the more intimate occupations and preoccupations of individuals: it was a Sunday the last day of the last weekend of the peace. The official announcement on the 3rd merely confirmed the private feelings and intimations about the inevitability of war ever since the troop concentrations in Central Europe earlier that summer. The radios had been turned on continuously since Thursday 31st August for news of the latest developments in the crisis,[11] and at eleven o'clock on Friday 1st September, spontaneous conclusions flew: "It's war." — "Bloody well stop him?" — "Blooming devil, we can't let him do that, can we?" — "Just heard it on the wireless" (Sheridan 46). The conviction that Hitler had to be faced, announced by Chamberlain with regret on the morrow, came naturally to people in the street. For them this was the heartfelt beginning of the war.

During the week preceding the official announcement of war, the whole country busied itself with organised preparations. Reservists were mobilised on 24th August, the day the Emergency Powers Act was passed. Others spontaneously started their preparations. On Thursday 30th and Friday 1st, many obtained supplies of essential foodstuffs, tea, sugar, cocoa, tinned meat (Sheridan 47-48; Calder and Sheridan 164; Donnelly), and dark material for blackout curtains that each family started putting up that very evening. Others pondered the novelty of the barrage balloons set up to protect targets from air attacks. Others visited pubs to douse the peace and sang on street corners (Sheridan 48). A large number were drawn into the military mobilisation and civilian

11 Witness in Romford (Sheridan 50).

evacuation, officially operational from Friday 1st September (Milburn 14; Calder: 1992 32). In the New Forest, on Monday 28th, Vera Brittain watched the return holiday traffic swollen by the first population movements occasioned by the war: "the main Southampton-Bournemouth road became a study in crisis traffic. . . . Everyone on holiday seemed to be going home, and everyone at home to be migrating somewhere else" (Brittain 208). In Norfolk, Muriel Green started her diary on 30th August worriedly awaiting the billeting of unwanted guests. "Life as usual. Excitement, annoyance and worry in village owing to expected evacuated children tomorrow. We are not having any if possible" (Sheridan 55). Little could she imagine a more troublesome invasion.[12] "The Horrors of War have arrived," reported a lady of the manor, the Norwich Red Cross President, meaning evacuee children whose hygiene was not up to scratch (Mayhew 19).

The non-arrival of these unwanted guests on the expected day marks the beginning of the hazards and hesitations of the first phase of the war. A large section of the population felt the war was a non-event and went back to their old habits. "After a month it was found that many children had returned to Coventry" remarked Mrs. Milburn in February (17).[13] The A.R.P. chorus "Turn that light out" shows the slackening of effort in preparedness for war. The hiatus of the first fortnight brought about by the interruption in normal activities only reinforced the general feeling of the remoteness of any action. "There might be a war on but I'm glad it isn't here," commented a Birmingham resident on 12th September (Calder and Sheridan 165). The first signs of war had all the more impact.

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12 The invasion of American airforce bases concentrated in East Anglia came three years later and was certainly not so unwelcome (see Reynolds 292 *et passim*).

13 The expense of the billeting having been transferred to parents by the government, it may well be that the former quite simply did not have the wherewithal to keep their children away from home. On the question of evacuee children see Veronica Laider, "Evacuees and their schooling: the grass-roots experience of government policy" (Frison 28-37).

With nothing happening on the home front, overcome by the unreal feeling of being "at war" without war, people found the cancellation of leisure activities and holidays, even eerier. The patriotic nostalgia of the poet Betjeman at Margate in 1940,

> Beside the Queen's Highcliffe now rank grows the vetch,
> Now dark is the terrace, a storm-battered stretch;
> And I think, as the fairy-lit sights I recall,
> It is those we are fighting for, foremost of all.

is reinforced by the novelist and broadcaster, Priestley, who visited the resort in July. "The few signs of life only made the whole place seem more unreal and spectral" (Betjeman; Priestley quoted by Calder: 1992 128). The lack of action led to sluggishness. "Nothing worth reporting . . . seems to happen in the country. We receive no air raid warnings and would not know there was a war on apart from radio, newspaper and people's conversations and continuous filling of ration coupons for petrol," wrote Muriel Green on 29 October 1939 two months after the outbreak of war. A year later further afield in Ayrshire, the feeling was still rife. "We wouldn't know there was a war on if we were not told except for hearing the siren thirteen times." In April 1941 Muriel Green recorded the same impression in Dorset (Sheridan 57; Clader: 1992 136; Calder and Sheridan 169). Both seem to be answering the catchphrase "Don't you know there's a war on?" used to criticise slackers, wasters and happy-go-luckies. The war had effectively not reached them yet.

The first scares (siren, enemy plane, dogfight, bomb, air raid) were religiously noted down as as many individual baptisms of fire and an opportunity to instance one's direct participation in collective action. They sometimes led to cathartic diary writing. Vere Hodgson began hers on 25th June 1940, the day after the first raid on London (Calder: 1991 31; Harrisson IV "The First Bombs" note 1 30), Muriel Green, as we have seen, on August 30th 1939, and Mrs. Milburn in February 1940 after her son's departure as a British Expeditionary Force member. For each of them, personal involvement marked the beginning of their war. The "*Sitzkrieg*" or "Bore War" (a facetious reminder of colonial

history)[14] is dotted with similar individual events. The variety of different personal baptismal experiences is obvious. A large proportion of the population in the South East heard their first siren late on the morning of 3rd September 1939 while listening to Chamberlain's speech, a symbolic coincidence. The siren itself heralded the war for others (Harrison 50). This first alert was neither heard everywhere (for example in Birmingham)[15] nor by everyone.[16] In Suffolk, it was not before 17th October 1939 that the strident sounds which were to become so familiar later, were heard, whereas in neighbouring Norfolk, one village had its first alert as early as 6th September (Croall; Sheridan 56). Enemy planes did not always appear following the "take cover" signal. One lost French plane[17] had scared the whole of South East England on 3rd September. In Norfolk Muriel Green saw her first on 27th December 1939. "I did not feel in the least afraid but rather excited to think that I had seen a Nasty."[18] Some did not see a single enemy plane until the dogfights and air raids of Summer 1940. A map of the various incidences of the irruption of war into people's lives would illustrate the successive waves of awareness as they broke over British society, signalling the Front line's domestic arrival in people's minds.

The remoteness of the war came to an end in Spring 1940. In a few weeks the successive events of the invasion of Holland and Belgium, the defeat of the armies (French and British) at Dunkirk, and the capitulation of France, brought the war back to the forefront in people's minds. On 10th May, commentators note not so much the change of government as the fall of Belgium and expectations of a real assault shortly. "I expect we shall have them over tonight," noted one woman, meaning enemy planes but letting one think the worst.[19] "Our time is

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14 The term 'Phoney War' is an anachronistic Americanism (Calder: 1992 57).

15 (Sheridan 49-50) 'Extracts from the diary of a Suffolk teacher' (Croall).

16 It is so etched in people's minds that some historians devote a whole chapter to it. Zeigler and Harrisson, it is true, do consider the war essentially from London's viewpoint where the alert was general that day.

17 "Off-schedule," says Harrisson diplomatically (51).

18 Pun prompted by the Churchillian pronunciation of Nazi.

19 Mass Observation Report No. 520 "Women and morale," December 1940 (Sheridan).

coming near," wrote a Suffolk teacher the following day. Her first alert during a Hull raid six months earlier had been less doom-laden.[20] On 14th May, Eden called for the formation of Local Defence Volunteers, or Home Guards, to step in and make up for the lack of invasion preparation. The urgency of the military situation led to a radio broadcast by Morrisson, the new Minister of Supply, hammering home the need to show courage and pull together. "We have our backs to the wall surely enough . . . we are fighting against the odds at this moment . . . At this hour of all hours, we at home cannot take things easy . . . We are going to cut down our leisure, cut down our comfort, blot out of our thought every private and sectional aim. We must."[21] The tone is striking. At the end of the month, the shock wrought by the military defeat at Dunkirk, transformed into a triumph of 'muddling through' and civilian self-sacrifice,[22] reinforced the impression of imminence and deliverance. The war had arrived at last. "Dunkirk brought it home dramatically that the war for survival had really begun," concluded Marwick (Marwick, author's translation). Holidays were suspended (Whitsun Bank holiday was cut short), and working hours lengthened. The Dunkirk spirit was justified in people's minds by the Fall of France. "I don't think France will give in, but neither did I think Belgium would. We must win — we must win, I could not live beneath a brutal power," wrote a Birmingham housewife. In his memorable speech 'Their Finest Hour' on 18th June, the Prime Minister expressed the imperious necessity. "The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us," predicted Churchill. "Surely invasion will be within the next few days," repeated a Welsh observer on 15th July.[23]

Whereas for some, the whole country was about to undergo Nazi attack, for others, "our turn" meant hope of sublimation into the

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20 17 October 1939 (both in Croall).

21 Speech on 22 May, the same day as the extension of the Emergency Powers (could this have been an attempt to justify it, if justification was needed?) Document in Kee (89).

22 The use of pleasure craft only helped take a small percentage of troops off the beaches and was conducted under military leadership and requisitioning (see Calder: 1992 108).

23 Mass Observation Report No. 520 (Sheridan; Calder and Sheridan 78).

national entity. "Many people in Scotland are now awaiting impatiently 'for their turn to come' and a first glimpse of a Spitfire chasing a Dormier," reported one person on 16th August 1940.[24] As long as they had not personally witnessed an air raid, an attack or a bombing, a vague feeling of exclusion hovered over civilians. That is why the first baptismal experience of fire held such importance. It gave the impression of participating in combat. Feelings of transcendence, deliverance and excitement abound in the accounts of people's first bombing. "I lay there feeling indescribably happy and triumphant. 'I've been *bombed!*' I kept on saying to myself, over and over again — trying the phrase on, like a new dress, to see how it fitted, 'I've been *bombed*'...'*I've* been bombed — *me*!'" (Young woman in South London, 7th September 1940 in Harrisson 82). On this, the first night of the London Blitz, how many other people were wondering how it suited them to be victims and participants, 'at war' at last? One is reminded of the Queen's reaction when Buckingham Palace was hit the following week. "I'm glad we've been bombed. It makes me feel I can look the East End in the face."[25] People joined the nation's moral élite once they had been knighted from the skies, however terrifying and apocalyptic the experience. Churchill himself spoke of this feeling on 27th April 1941 on the BBC World Service. "I felt encompassed by an exaltation of spirit in the people which seemed to lift mankind and its troubles above the level of material facts."[26] National unity was being forged by equality under fire. J. B. Priestley translated this development. "We lived at last in a community with a noble purpose, the experience was not only novel but exhilarating."[27] It was the bombs that endowed this experience of communion. Although some historians denounce the myth of the Blitz, "At no time in the Second World War generally and in the Blitz particularly were British civilians united on anything though they might be ready to appear so in public on certain issues" (Harrisson 17), there is one way in which there was a national fellowship. The experience of bombing was never simultaneous nor total, but it bestowed on witnesses the feeling of

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24 Ministry of Information report (quoted by Calder: 1992 124).

25 She is said to have been booed on a visit to bomb sites according to Harold Nicholson (Taylor).

26 Churchill, *War Speeches*, vol. I (quoted by Calder: 1992 215).

27 BBC, 17th May 1945 (Croall, Introduction).

participating in a national entity. As one "initiation" through action followed another, public opinion was buoyed up through the crises from the Summer of 1940 to that of 1941.

The waiting and the "initiation" were followed by an acclimatisation to war during these months. Action followed inaction and people settled in for the duration. It took fifteen months to adjust (two and a half years if Munich's general rehearsal is included). By October 1940, after a month of the Blitz, some people were already used to air raids (Fyfe quoted by Marwick 59). Life went on, new habits were adopted, setting the meal on a tray for instance, in case you had to go down the shelter.[28] On the eve of a new year of war, Muriel Green took stock.

> The end of 1940. . . . I'll admit I thought the war was practically done, with us the vanquished when France went under. For a little while I even felt glad that the war was going to be over sooner that we hoped. It was the feeling as on Munich night at which the folly and reality of the situation came back next day. . . . I really feel we have turned the corner and can really win but we must not be impatient. We have got used to being at war now, and the inconveniences of the petty annoyances such as the blackout and rations have become a habit. We don't stir at night when we hear the guns and Nasties now, we have got used to them (Sheridan 92).

This extract reveals both resignation and prudent optimism. Long in coming, the real and effective beginning of the war had been awful. Even those who had not undergone air raids had learnt of them in the press, although publication of photographs showing corpses was forbidden. The surrounding districts had heard the attacks, seen towns alight and welcomed the homeless, like Mrs Milburn living near Coventry, or the town of Oxford which, twelve days after the beginning of the London Blitz, was sheltering over 20 000 refugees.[29]

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28 Alice Bridges in Birmingham, October 1940 (Sheridan 93-94).

29 Mass Observation Report RF412 "Evacuees in Oxford," (quoted by Calder: 1992 133).

Settling into the war also meant not only getting used to major events but also to the lesser problems such as the blackout and rationing cited by Muriel Green. The most frequently mentioned changes in a survey evaluating the impact of the war in December 1940 were precisely these two restrictions.[30] Progressive rationing of a whole series of products made it routine but the problem should be considered in proportion. Whereas Mrs Milburn, wife of a local dignitary, notes their last non-rationed Sunday joint in her diary on 30th March 1940, others felt on the contrary better off with vitamins and milk supplements for schoolchildren and the 'fair share for all' system of rationing. "Having been brought up in a depressed area, we never had much, so we didn't miss a great deal when war started. In fact, many children were slightly better off," comments one Welsh mining valley inhabitant (Croall 22; see also Clader: 1992 351-53). The myth of the "marvellous resistance and courage" of people should be reappraised in this light.[31] People settled down to a war whose end one no longer dared foresee, accepting daily difficulties. It took more than discomfort to shake families.

For Mrs Milburn the war had only begun at the end of 1939 with her son's mobilisation. Already on 3rd September 1939 one man in six was in uniform in Romford (Sheridan 54). In December 1939 there were one and a half million men mobilised in the armed forces. For volunteers, numbering more than three million in all (Calder: 1992 54; 68; 193), Home Guard, auxiliary firemen, ARP wardens, women in the W.V.S, Land Army and Red Cross, or the protected workers, and Bevin boys sent down the mines, the war began in earnest with their call-up and ended with their demobilisation. London firemen for instance could consider themselves inured from 7th September 1940, the opening raid of the Blitz. The mobilisation of women in 1941, "one of the most revolutionary changes of the past eighteen months" as it was called at the time (Harrisson 128), had by 1943 enrolled 90% of unmarried women and 80% of married women in warwork of all kinds (Croall 59),

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30 Mass Observation Report no 520 (Sheridan 110-11).

31 With employment, guaranteed wages, double salaried households and collective catering improving living conditions the war was not all bad. Social improvement was intimately linked to the war effort. See the excellent article by Paul Brennan, "Total war and social change" (Frison, ed. 64-76).

multiplying the number of those who, henceforth, considered themselves to be directly involved in the war. So many popular and individual wars labelled 'my war' denote its mass appropriation.

With every single person becoming in turn a member of the mobilised forces, combatant, victim and participant in the national entity at war at different moments, it is difficult to date precisely the moment when British society as a whole entered the war. From New Year 1941 a feeling of belonging, participation and even diffuse optimism appears in popular records, witness Muriel Green's diary extract above. "The end of the war is in sight," confided a member at the People's Convention on 21 January 1941 (Calder and Sheridan 202). Although the crisis continued, the emergency was over. Difficult moments were to come, the highest number of victims in one raid on London were recorded on 10th May 1941. Six weeks later, the attack on the USSR ended the period of Britain's international isolation and British communists, for whom, until then, it had been an imperialist war, returned to the fold. The American lease-loan in March led to the arrival of foodstuffs from 31st May, and in spite of the loss of Crete (June 1941) and the fall of Singapore (15th February 1942), the arrival of the United States as an ally at the end of 1941 (the progressive installation of American bases throughout the country from 1942 on, brought the reality of war nearer to neighbouring country villages, as yet spared the horrors) reinforced the people's feeling that the worst was behind them. "Now we might get something done," commented a NAAFI canteen customer in Yorkshire on 8th December (Calder and Sheridan 140). It was no longer a question of survival. Now the people only needed to endure to win through.

A time-scale of public opinion thus seems to echo the war's events. If we adopt Calder's periodisation (Calder: 1991), it can be seen that during the "strangest of war" up to April 1940, the population kept watch holding its breath. When the danger came during the "Spitfire summer," the initiation of the moral (those who witnessed the fighting) and social (pilots were recruited essentially from the middle classes) élite took place. Finally the Blitz encompassed the whole population in the war. Each important moment is marked by a communion of spirit

during the six years of war when the people's voice "rejoined" that of its leaders in both senses of the word.

In 1942 the feeling that one could now look back over the distance covered and forward to that to come was widespread. The turning point seemed to have been reached, even though the end of the "tunnel" (Calder) or the "long haul" (Zeigler) was not yet in sight. On 27th June 1942, Mrs Milburn began the ninth volume of her war diary.

> The Battle of Britain stands out as one of the incredible things and the bombing of Coventry as one of the awful things, just as the little ships going across the Channel to bring our men home was a wonderful thing, and the bravery of those who bore the bombing, who lost their homes, and often some of their family, and still work and hope on, is an amazing thing. And now Alan has been a prisoner for over two years and we haven't seen him for two years-and-a-half. So many things that one cannot pretend to prophesy or imagine when the end of war will come. It looks as if it could go on for years yet.

She drew strength by settling in for the duration while lamenting her only son's long absence and reproducing *in extenso* the myths concerning Dunkirk and the people holding up under the Blitz. On 15th November 1942 church bells rang for the first time on a Sunday since the war began to celebrate the North African victories.[32] Around the same time Churchill expressed the common if vague feeling of change in the fortunes of war. "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps, the end of the beginning."[33] By Christmas, George Orwell could write for a World Service broadcast "we can see now with certainty that the tide has turned" (Orwell 197).

The light at the end of the tunnel had not yet been seen when wishes and hypotheses for the post-war period were first made. The

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32 This was a major event for Mrs Milburn, a regular churchgoer and can only have been accentuated by the accidental closeness of Armistice Day, Diary 11 and 15 November 1942. London peals were restricted by safety concerns about the bell tower structures after months of bombing (Zeigler 233).

33 Quoted by Calder (Calder: 1992 305) who uses the phrase as a section heading.

reconstruction efforts undertaken immediately after the first destruction of towns were initiated both for obvious material reasons and to sustain morale, helping people to endure for the duration. Thus, in a report to the Ministry of Information on 27th May 1941, a hypothetical list of post-war priorities was suggested to maintain morale (Barnett I "The Dream of a New Jerusalem;" Harrisson 43). The first raids immediately posed material problems. "Already talk of rebuilding the city is in the air," noted Mrs Milburn on 21st November 1940, one week after the Coventry raid: phoenix rising from the still warm ashes. To make up for the general disorganisation, planning and the necessary co-ordination of means led to new entities which prefigured a rationalised society. The creation of a national fire service, for example, comprising all municipal services which existed in August 1941, was thus described one year later: "Its formation is both the concluding episode in the battle of the flames of 1940-1941 and also the opening chapter of another and different story, not yet enacted" (H.M.S.O., *Front Line 1940-1941*, London, 1942). Janus-like, a critical but proud gaze was turned towards both desperate past and promising future.

The end of the war is, as one can imagine, as difficult to pinpoint as are its beginnings. If the end of 1942 marks a turning point in the war and in people's minds, no one could predict when the victory, which the country's survival alone had now made certain, would come. The question of the war's duration does not seem to be raised in any of the popular sources. Was it tempting destiny to guess at the number of years? or too discouraging to count the months? The First World War which had prepared people for aerial bombings and introduced practices such as the use of underground stations as shelters, seems to have conditioned people into thinking in terms of a four year war at least. In 1914 a lightning war was expected, which in fact turned into four-year long trench warfare. In 1939, once the possibility of a lightning aerial war had passed and the immediate danger of invasion was over, the idea of a long war seems to have been accepted. The government had indeed made forecasts for a three-year war (Calder: 1992, 20; 69; 109; Harrisson, I). On Leap Day 1940 Mrs Milburn noted "A great deal can happen in four years. One dare not speculate — only, God be with us, for they may be very difficult."

Four years later, the end of the war could be foreseen. Mrs Milburn now remarked on the number of tanks and other vehicles parked on roadsides waiting for 'the invasion'. "Once when we talked of 'the invasion' it meant probable invasion of England by Germany. Now it is spoken of as a settled plan with the date fixed (but this is a secret of course) and everything arranged, but it is the invasion of the Continent this time." (27th January 1944) Her semantic acumen in noting the term's changing meaning should be underlined. The wait was long, almost as long as the wait for the assault after the declaration of war. For more than six months combatants and civilians worked in hope. In the meantime a new aerial attack, the second Blitz, followed by the V1s, once more united people in defying adversity. London at least was once more on the Front Line. "It's quite like old times again," remarked Churchill on a visit to ruins in Paddington in February. Even bereft of the adjective "good," his remark was found offensive. His machiavellian good spirits can be explained by the unifying virtue of these attacks, "all due to the fact that the flying bombs have again put us in the front line," noted Field Marshall Alan Brooke (Zeigler 269; 286). The chronological events of the war as experienced by the population render the union of civilians and armed forces primordial, with one and all involved, targets and victims. This is true not only for the elaboration of the myth (comforting as it was), but also for the real sense of unity that came out of the war at its high points. The front line closes in, people draw closer. It moves away and exhortations to effort intensify, a sign that people are less vigilant after the emergency has passed.

The Normandy landings mark the beginning of the end at long last. Once the danger of the V1s and V2s was over, and the advance of the allied armies in France and Italy was known, the nearness of the end could be guessed at. In September 1944, the fifth anniversary of the war's outbreak was marked by prophecies of the war's end within the month and rumours of the German capitulation (Brittain 364). Extra supplies granted for Christmas (sugar, margarine, sweets, tea and meat)[34] augured an improvement in individual daily living conditions. The unconditional support Churchill was given at the Labour Party

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[34] Mrs Milburn, 17 October 1944.

Conference on 11th December, "until victory over Europe is both overwhelming and complete," followed the next day by the Allied meeting at Yalta, sole "peace" conference held, hastened the arrival of the end of the war, in people's minds at least.

There is a chronological symmetry between the beginning and the end of the war in the succession of procrastinations leading to its close. The landings were only finally consolidated by the capture of Berlin, eleven months later. The capitulation of the German army in Italy and the taking of Rangoon, Burma on 2nd May 1945 preceded the final capitulation. The news came at last on 6th May 1945 (Sansom 200), but it was only officially announced at midnight on the 7th, after a long day's wait at fever pitch. "The war is over, that's obvious but when is Churchill going to say so?" puzzled a woman weaver that evening (Sheridan 230-31). The victory celebration with two days' holiday was criticised by those who remembered the soldiers and prisoners in Asia. "They ought never to have announced it until Japan was licked," was a remark heard in Leeds on the 9th (Sheridan 228). A new wait began for the families. Mrs Milburn's war diary ends on 9th May, the long awaited day her son, a prisoner in Germany since Dunkirk, arrived home, thus closing that family's war. The official thanksgiving ceremonies on the 14th closed the parentheses for others (Barnett 2).

Between Victory in Europe (VE) Day and Victory over Japan (VJ) Day a further four months went past, during which signs of a return to peace could be detected. The coalition government's resignation on May 25th ended the political hiatus created by the war, giving way to the normal workings of democracy. The general election was held on 5th July. The proclamation of the results three weeks later added a further delay, in order to include the votes of those mobilised overseas. An additional improvement in food supplies (Glasgow, 27th July 1945, Calder and Sheridan, 228) led to hopes of a rapid end to rationing. The hesitations of the end of the war in Asia are also well-documented. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August 1945 had shown the terrible efficiency of the atomic bomb and the inevitability of the fall of the Japanese Empire. On the 10th, the news of the Japanese capitulation circulated in London. Popular rejoicing began, with confetti

and frenzied crowds, albeit less numerous and rowdy than in May. But the official announcement following the signature of the treaties, accompanied by the granting of a day's holiday, only came on 14th August. The uncertainty of these days caused further worry to the families of soldiers and prisoners. "There was much cheering — then when the news seemed doubtful some tears from those who had men imprisoned in the Far East," recorded Beryl Johns (Sheridan 257). The day after, one country at least was sure that the war was over. On 15th August the United States abruptly ended the lease-lend it had granted Britain. Finally, it was another month before the Japanese troops in South East Asia surrendered on September 12th at Singapore, leading light of the waning British Empire.[35]

Was this the end? On 3rd September 1945, a Labour militant tried to draw conclusions after six years of war to the day. She lucidly foresees the future as a beginning not an end, a continuation rather than an abrupt stop or a return to the *ante quo*.

> Just as the aeroplanes of the last war became the big bomber . . . of this war, so the atomic bomb which finishes this war will add new frightfulness and unseen dangers for any future war. . . . As to Peace — it is good that the fighting is stopped, but it looks as though economic warfare is to continue . . . our government going cap in hand to America . . . if the socialist government can deliver the goods — that is, if it can give the people food, work and houses; . . . then socialism and democracy will go ahead (Sheridan 257-58).

"Food, homes and work for all," had announced Lord Woolton in 1940 (Jenkins 41), a social programme comprising not only the inauguration of the Welfare State but also the end of war conditions. 'A country fit for heroes' Lloyd George had promised in vain for the years after 1914-1918. If the Labour government had benefited from aspirations for a better world and was straining to achieve it, for the moment the world resembled that of the war.

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[35] For some Japanese soldiers, hidden for decades in the jungle or on Pacific islands, the war never ended.

In order to limit the consumption of imported goods and redress the balance of payments, rationing continued for certain goods for some five years. Sweets were taken off in April 1949 and petrol one year later in May 1950. Luxury items and cloth came off even later (Jenkins 136; Alan Sked and Chris Cook, *Postwar Britain,* 1993). Demobilisation, begun on 18th June 1945 according to age and years of service, lasted two whole years. Mutinies broke out in India and South East Asia in 1946 due to the slowness of the process and the troops' living conditions in the meantime (*The Observer*, 4 August 1996; Calder and Sheridan, 148-50). When soldiers arrived home, they were to discover a country worn-out by the war, which did not recognise their right to a hero's welcome. "Ruin, rubble and rudeness" awaited them (Kee). The housing crisis took years to reabsorb. Many slums had been destroyed or damaged —four out of ten million homes in all (Harrisson 312) — and their replacement had been decided in 1944. It took three years of tergiversation (Mrs Milburn ridiculed the indecision on 23 February 1945) to supply three thousand "prefabs" which were supposed to last ten years. Some were still inhabited in the 1970s. The housing crisis, exacerbated by the cold winter of February 1947, led to a demonstration in September, the "Great Sunday Squat," to draw attention to the homeless (Kee). British society continued to pay the price of war until the end of the decade and after.

Post-war austerity only partly explains the nostalgia for the war period. In 1947 Sansom, himself an ex-volunteer from London saw men still wearing their blue cap and coat of the ARP, not through need but out of nostalgia for "times that were not wholly bad" (Kee 201). The real and unromanticised memory of camaraderie, generosity and mutual tolerance remained. Some people had reached the zenith of their lives in action during the war. "Heroes become bores," predicted Osbert Sitwell in November 1918 in his poem "The Next War." Others missed the activity war had procured. "Women like myself who have been busy and useful, feeling they were 'helping' cannot find a way to help the 'peace' as we did in wartime," commented Mrs Last, on the last day of the last year of the war (31 December 1945, Sheridan 264).

The chronology of the front line superimposes that of the war's major domestic events for British society. The opening and closing periods of the war provide a curiously neat framing. The months from Munich to the invasion of Poland parallel those from Yalta to the fall of Berlin. The weekend-long wait for the declaration of war has its counterpart in the three days preceding the official declaration of both the German capitulation in May and Japanese in August. The Blitz of Autumn 1940 is echoed by the mini-Blitz of Spring 1944 and the Flying Bombs of that summer and autumn, the one preceded by the *Sitzkrieg*, the other by long preparations for the Normandy landings. The mass combat of the latter amplifies the élite combat of the Battle of Britain while the massive departure of Allied troops in June 1944, so rapid that it forestalled leave-taking (Reynolds 236 *et passim*), put an end to the pacific occupation that had brightened up "the long haul" (Zeigler). The matching beginning and end appear to round off the period in formal fashion, perhaps helping people to bury the past six years and set their minds to the future. A golden age, the end of an époque, the dawn of a new society, a social melting pot, the war period was all that at the same time. It was an intense period during which society, faced with external threats, drew together and remodelled itself. "The truth lies in the memory of stripped vanities, of belief in the common purpose, in a shifting of ambition from his self to other people and to all people," concluded Sansom (Reynolds 201). The shifting and barely distinguishable people's chronology of the war brings out the way in which the myths of the war were fashioned and reinforced.

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