

## Reflections on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

The government had intended that we should celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany on a special Bank Holiday Friday on May 8<sup>th</sup>. Such celebrations are now inappropriate and impossible in view of the Coronavirus pandemic. Yet, ironically, while denying us the opportunity to celebrate it, the pandemic seems also to have lent new relevance to the nation's war experience. Public figures keep telling us that we are engaged in a war in which each and every one of us must play our part. In the Second World War we were told that careless talk costs lives; now the refrain is that careless social contact can kill. In the War officials enforced the blackout; in the pandemic the police warn people off beaches and away from beauty spots. Addressing a nation suffering under lockdown, the Queen recalled her and her sister's wartime broadcast designed to ease the pain caused by wartime evacuation. Eighty years ago the pilots of the Battle of Britain were presented as heroes; in 2020 we clap on Thursdays in recognition of the selfless heroism of doctors and nurses. In her address, the Queen hoped that modern Britons would emulate in the present crisis the sense of solidarity and public spirit of our forebears. I am sure that she particularly had in mind the sense of common purpose which Britons exhibited during the Second World War. The huge response to the government's call for volunteers to assist the vulnerable in the community suggests that the Queen's hope will not be disappointed.

How will we react when the lockdown is finally eased? I suspect that there will be an overwhelming desire to hold parties and to enjoy the social interaction at present forbidden to us. Certainly, VE Day in 1945 was greeted by huge crowds in London and street parties throughout the country. People who remember that time tell me that pretty dresses were brought out of storage for girls to wear, in an effort to forget the drabness of life during the war. Party foods which had long disappeared from menus were brought out, fruit jellies, for instance. My informant told me, though, that boys in her street complained that the jellies were not sweet enough, doubtless because sugar was rationed. The privations of wartime could not at once be ended. Indeed, in some respects things got worse before they got better: in 1946 bread was rationed for the first time, followed by potatoes in 1947.

So if on VE Day people could not yet celebrate the end of austerity, what were they celebrating? Certainly, they were exulting in the victory of their side. The visceral hatred of the Germans evident in the First World War seems to have been less manifest in the Second War.

One Londoner recalled: *You used to hear, 'Bloody Jerry!' or 'Old Adolf's having another go at us', but it was half-jokingly said and felt.* On the other hand, unlike in the First War, there was almost total agreement that the war had to be fought and the government never faced the sort of serious unrest manifest in Red Clydeside or in South Wales in 1914-8. Victory can plausibly be presented in the way the Queen in her recent broadcast seemed to remember it, as a triumph of the British spirit. Before the War the government had feared that morale would disintegrate under the impact of bombing. Such fears were not groundless. After the bombing raids on the East End of London in September 1940, Mass Observation reported: *The whole story of last weekend has been one of unplanned hysteria... Of course, the press version of life going on normally in the East End on Monday is grotesque.* And yet the 'Blitz spirit' was not just an invention of the press. The *hysteria* recorded in September 1940 occurred partly because the experience of bombing was novel. People could and *did* get used to it and they then reacted to nights of terror and loss very differently by continuing their usual routines: for example, most men turned up for work after the terrible raid on Coventry in November 1940. Local authorities could and did prepare for the raids. The council in Hull rehoused tens of thousands within four days of a major attack, in contrast to the Liverpool authorities, who attracted *unprintably violent comments* from all sections of the community. Of course, human greed and selfishness did not disappear: there was a persistent problem of looting of war-damaged properties, while one result of rationing was a flourishing black market. Some were prompted to vent their frustrations on minority groups, such as Jews, Greeks and the Chinese. Even so, the Queen's memory of a nation united in a common purpose during the Second World War has real substance and it deserves celebration.

As the First World War receded into the past, people had come to question the gloriousness of victory and even the need to have fought. There has not been a similar change of sentiment concerning the Second World War. It continues to be regarded as a just war. Confronting the issue of whether going to war by Christian states is compatible with their Christianity, St Augustine had argued that war in self-defence was legitimate. Given Hitler's invasion plan, Operation Sealion, and the aerial attack of the Battle of Britain, designed to prepare the way for it, it seemed obvious to most people that the War was a defensive one. It is true that Hitler was prepared to offer Britain peace terms after the fall of France, and not everyone felt that Churchill was right to reject them out of hand. Yet Churchill saw that in a world dominated by the Third Reich Britain would be allowed to survive only as a 'slave state'.

Like the nominally independent regime set up at Vichy in France, Britain would doubtless have been required to adopt Hitler's key policies, such as the creation of a Jew-free society. In view of what happened in occupied Europe, we have many reasons to be grateful that Britain remained independent. Occupation divided societies: some people actively collaborated, some resisted, most acquiesced in order to survive. Suspicions, betrayals and enmities lasting for decades after the War were the inevitable result in countries such as France and Norway. Women whose heads were shaven to mark them as 'Nazi whores' and their children were among the saddest victims of post-war revenge on collaborators. Alliance with Hitler's Germany also meant supplying conscripts for his armies on the Eastern Front and tens of thousands of workers for German industry.

VE Day, then, was a celebration of deliverance from a fate rightly regarded as worse than any earlier would-be invader had threatened England with. But not everyone has felt able to applaud Britain's war effort without reservations. In particular, the reliance on aerial bombing associated with 'Bomber' Harris has been much criticised. Bishop Bell of Chichester wrote in 1943: *To bomb cities as cities, deliberately to attack civilians...is a wrong deed, whether done by the Nazis or by ourselves.* The loss of lives in Hamburg on July 24<sup>th</sup> 1943 (45,000) and in Dresden on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1945 (35,000 at least) was out of all proportion to the damage to German morale supposedly inflicted. Moreover, fighting Hitler meant alliance with another dictator who had blood on his hands, namely Stalin. The moral compromises involved in this alliance became glaringly evident after the War. Stalin demanded that Soviet prisoners of war be repatriated from parts of Europe under Western control. British and American authorities felt obliged to assist, even after it became clear that Stalin, convinced that anyone taken prisoner must have wavered in his loyalty, intended to have many of them shot or sent to the Gulag. He and the puppet regimes he sponsored also insisted that Eastern Europe be cleared of Germans. At the Potsdam conference in 1945 Britain, the USA and the Soviet Union agreed on an 'orderly and humane' transfer of millions of Germans, whose ancestors had in most cases lived in the area for seven or more centuries. Such a relocation of millions had inevitably to be forcible and given the scale of the transfers and the chaotic condition of Eastern Europe at the time, it could not in practice be orderly or humane. The death toll of this ethnic cleansing certainly totalled hundreds of thousands.

And yet it seems impossible to regard the two sides in the Second World War as morally equivalent. When he attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, Hitler announced a war of extermination. Millions of Jews from all over Europe were

his primary targets, but tens of millions of Slavs were doomed as inferior specimens of humanity to survive at best as slaves of the Aryan master race, while the staggeringly high death rate among Soviet prisoners of war taken by the Germans reflected their abominable treatment of these *Untermenschen*. It cannot be said that Britain was fighting to end these horrors. At least until the liberation of the camp at Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, the general public knew little of them, while the government concentrated on military and diplomatic concerns. The knowledge of Nazi racial policies which we now have, however, gives us the best possible reason to celebrate the defeat and collapse of Hitler's odious regime.

As we look back 75 years, we celebrate the courage and self-sacrifice of those who fought for Britain, most famously 'the few', who won the Battle of Britain, and the armies which invaded Normandy in 1944. We celebrate too the 'Blitz spirit', which bound most Britons together and enabled them to withstand the ordeal of the bombing and later the terrifying V-weapons. Every victory in war, though, comes at terrible cost. I have referred in particular to the tens of thousands of victims of Allied air raids and to the millions of East European Germans forced in 1945 and afterwards out of their ancestral homes. There are good arguments here for pacifists who want to argue that war is always wrong. Yet the Second World War also makes me wonder whether such pacifism is perhaps too simple. It has been said that all that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. If ever a regime had to be stopped, that regime was surely Nazi Germany. Its final defeat 75 years ago seems worth celebrating. So how unfortunate it is that at present I can only urge you, in the words of the government of 1939 to a nation at war, to *Keep calm and carry on*.