

## UK DURING WW2

### 1/Britain, the pivotal country of European resistance

#### a) The Phoney war (September 39-May 40) and Dunkirk battle.

Chamberlain the Prime minister from 37 to 40 started on the wrong foot. There was a lack of preparation and a common desire to pretext the war was not happening. (« Munich spirit ). September 3rd 39, the declaration of war was a surprise. Fearing a German invasion; the British government printed a poster to reassure the population. One of them ("Keep Calm and carry on" was never displayed although 2.5 million were printed. It has been found in an attic in 2001 and has now become a trade-mark (in 2005).

Churchill became Prime Minister of a coalition government on May 10th, 1940 while at the same time France was invaded by Germany. See film Darkest hours, Joe Wright, 2017. Churchill's early days as Prime Minister

The Battle of Dunkirk was fought between the Allies and Nazi Germany, as part of the Battle of France on the Western Front. Memory: Not a debacle but a strategically withdrawal to keep fighting.

History: It was the defense and evacuation to Britain of British and other Allied forces from Dunkirk's shores (26 May to 4 June 1940). See film Dunkirk, Chris Nolan, 2017

#### b) Churchill: the great leader of a warring nation

When France surrendered in June 1940, Britain remained one of the only fighting nations lefts in Europe. Britain's fighting spirit attracted many governments in exile: The Polish, Belgian, Norwegian, Dutch, Greek, Yugoslav governments settled in London, as well as many individuals who were determined to go on fighting. At the end of June 1940, De Gaulle was acknowledged by Churchill as the "leader of the free French people" and he organized the French Resistance from London with British support.

#### c) In July 40 the German Air Force aimed to destroy the RAF and the British Aircraft industry to take control over the Channel and Southern England.

In a famous speech, Winston Churchill thanked the 2500 young British officer pilots flying Spitfires who won the fight. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few". The media then took expression, "the Few", to qualify the pilots.

Memory: The army and particularly the RAF pilots were seen as heroes. They witnessed also British stoicism, phlegm and professionalism.

History : many pilots were far from young. Many were not from the United Kingdom: the countries represented in Fighter Command in 1940 included Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Ireland, Jamaica, New Zealand, Poland, the Rhodesia, South Africa and the United States. (...) The Hurricane flew in much greater numbers in the Battle than the Spitfire and shot down far more enemy aircraft. And finally, the RFA pilots were not alone: the British historians Duncan Grinnell-Milne and Stephen Roskill have proved the maritime dimension was necessary to thwart the invasion. The involvement of the Royal Navy and the population is now better underlined.

### 2) The Blitz (September 40-June 41)

#### a) The Blitz definition:

German bombing campaign against Britain started with the bombing of London on September 40. It was a 76-night-raid. It then extended to other British cities. The Blitz

did not end until May 1941. By that time 1,400,000 people were made homeless in London alone. 43 000 civilians died and 70 000 were injured. Across the UK 43,000 people were killed. Lots of buildings were reduced to rubble.

During that tragic period, Churchill managed to arouse a strong patriotic feeling in the nation and to channel all energies towards a single aim: winning the victory. People went out about their daily life. Young children were given these red and blue gas masks. They were called "Mickey Mouse" masks

The Blackout imposed on all civilians in all cities was absolute: light (even the red glow of a cigarette) was banned.

Strict rationing was imposed even if cafes and restaurants continued to operate.

#### b) Evacuation:

It was about displacing 3, 7 million people to places safe from bombing. This was explained in popular newspaper such as the « daily express » and the « daily mirror ».

Memory: Children only were displaced: all left singing the popular tune « Wish me luck when you say goodbye ». All classes came together during evacuation.

History: 800 000 kids were displaced like explained by Ben Wicks in his book « No time to say goodbye » , 1988. Class antagonism rose: lots of kids were poor and uneducated.

#### c)The home front

For the British people, WWII was a total war. It demanded the mobilization of every resource, every citizen, every source of energy. Trenches were dug out and hundreds of miles of barbed wire were put up to prevent a possible landing. Every man aged 18 to 50 was mobilized and from spring 1941, every woman in Britain aged 18-60 had to be registered, and their family occupations were recorded. Each was interviewed and required to choose from a range of jobs. It was emphasized that women would not be required to bear arms.

The Women's Land Army/Scottish Land Army was reformed in 1938 so that women could be trained in agricultural work, leaving male workers free to go to war. Many women, however, were eventually to work - and die - under fire. The ministry of the information sponsored a film celebrating women in factories « Millions like us ». Or some artists like the impressionist painter Dame Laura Knight.

However absenteeism in such groups was high since women were either mothers or housewives or both. There were lots of illegitimate births (linked with emancipation of women). The ministry of health even launched a series of posters warning against sexually transmitted diseases and advising sexual hygiene. A Monument to the Women of World War II on Whitehall in London was unveiled in 2005

The BBC was a crucial instrument of national information entertainment and unity. Ex: Radio program « The kitchen front » every weekday morning at 8.15 taught how to use rationed food best. From June 2003 to January 2006 a BBC project collected the memories of people who had lived and fought during World War Two on a website and was called: The heroes of the Homefront during the Blitz..

British memory has been shaped by a particular cultural-historical interpretation of the Second World War which gives prominence to the summer of 1940 as a transformative episode in British society. 1940 was the point whereby the nation, divided by the class conflict and political in-fighting of the depression years, overcame its internal fractures and, united in defiance of German hegemony on the continent and daily bombing raids by

the Luftwaffe, became “the people”. The battle of Britain is the symbol of British resistance, Britain fighting alone. By surviving the experience, Britain brought freedom to the world, but there are two versions: Left/labor: The Blitz represent the triumph of the people gather in the face of adversity. It allowed the birth of a Welfare state after the war. Right/ Conservative: The Blitz witnessed deep patriotism and Churchill’s efficient leadership.

History: Some, like Peter Stansky, in his book "The first days of the Blitz" question the heroism of the population, He also thinks that the Blitz heroic dimension was purposely created during the war, and maintained afterward with an inch of manipulation. See film *Their Finest*, Lone Scherfig, 2016.

Historians Angus Calder and Juliet Gardiner (*The Blitz. The British under attack*, 2010) explained that people exploited the crisis for their own gain, selling places in the tube (as a shelter) to sleep at night. Strikes increased because working class people suffered the most: they lived near their work place: factories, docks which were the first targets.

#### The use and abuse of Blitz’s myth.

This has allowed a narrow, nostalgic and politically malleable collective memory of 1940 which reinforces a certain form of British identity. Indeed, British politicians have frequently called upon the memory of wartime in use and abuse of the myth of the Blitz in time of crisis. For example, Thatcher during the Falklands war; Tony Blair after the bombing attacks of July 7th 2005 paid tribute to «the stoicism and resilience of the people of London”, Cameron in the economic crisis etc.

### **3/Britain, the symbol of resistance against Nazi Germany**

#### **a)Churchill was a prominent figure of the great Alliance**

Shortly after the German attack on Russia in June 1941, Churchill offered Britain’s support to Stalin.

He also reinforced British links with the US thanks to the Lend-Lease agreement and the Atlantic Charter (March and August 1941) which laid down the fundamental principles for world affairs after the war. The Charter stipulated freely chosen governments, free trade, freedom of the seas and it condemned territorial changes against the wishes of local populations. When the US eventually went to war in December 1941 the “special relationship” between the two countries grew even stronger.

See film *Churchill*, Jonathan Teplitzky, 2017

#### **b)Stalingrad, a turning point of WW2**

The Battle of Stalingrad was the largest and bloodiest confrontation of World War II, in which Nazi Germany and its allies fought the Soviet Union for control of southern Russia and its oil fields. From August 1942 through February 1943, more than two million troops fought in close quarters – and nearly two million people were killed or injured in the fighting, including tens of thousands of Russian civilians. The protracted fight was unprecedented in terms of duration and scale, and became a turning point for the war and a symbol of steadfastness and heroism of the Red Army, who, in the words of Churchill, "tore the guts out of the Nazi war machine." . The loss at Stalingrad was the first failure of the war to be publicly acknowledged by Hitler. It put Hitler and the Axis powers on the defensive, and boosted Russian confidence as it continued to do battle on the Eastern Front

in World War II. In the end, many historians believe the Battle at Stalingrad marked a major turning point in the conflict. It was the beginning of the march toward victory for the Allied forces of Russia, Britain, France and the United States.

In Great Britain, this battle became an important factor of social and political life. The UK is the only country in the world, which organized a massive popular movement to collect donations for the destroyed Stalingrad. Clementine Churchill, the Prime Minister's wife, was a distinguished Russian nurse. The title, together with an Order of the Red Banner was bestowed on her by the Soviet government for services in helping Russians survive the hardship and devastation of the Nazi invasion. She was at the helm of the "Aid to Russia Fund", collecting donations from British people to the needs of the wounded and the sick. There was a real danger of epidemic due to a lack of hospitals and equipment. Researchers of the "Battle of Stalingrad Foundation" traced 307 towns and villages across Great Britain that donated money for the new hospital in Stalingrad. The Queen Mother was awarded the title of Honorary Citizen of Volgograd with the wording "for special merits in organizing assistance to Stalingrad by the inhabitants of Great Britain during World War II and the development of friendly relations with Russia". Source : stalingrad-uk.com

The scale of the devastation was witnessed by Clementine Churchill when she visited Stalingrad in April 1945.

"What an appalling scene of destruction met our eyes. My first thought was, how like the center of Coventry or the devastation around St Paul's, except that here the havoc and obliteration seems to spread out endlessly." "When one is in a city like Stalingrad the staggering loss of life and suffering produced by Nazi aggression almost overwhelms one. The imagination is baffled by the attempts to encompass calamity on so vast a scale."

As a result of their devastating war experience, Coventry and Stalingrad started the twinned, or sister, cities movement around the world.

In his memories, Churchill reported a conversation he had with Stalin in November 1943 at the very beginning of the Tehran conference (November 28th- December 1st, 1943, the first inter Allied conference where the three met (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin).

### c) D Day

On June 6, 1944 the Allied Forces of Britain, America, Canada, and France attacked German forces on the coast of Normandy, France. With a huge force of over 150,000 soldiers, the Allies gained a victory that became the turning point for World War II in Europe. This famous battle is sometimes called D-Day. To prepare for the invasion, the Allies amassed troops and equipment in Britain. They also increased the number of air strikes and bombings in German territory. Right before the invasion, over 1000 bombers a day were hitting German targets. They bombed railroads, bridges, airfields, and other strategic places in order to slow down and hinder the German army.

The Germans knew that an invasion was coming. They could tell by all the forces that were gathering in Britain as well as by the additional air strikes. What they didn't know was where the Allies would strike. In order to confuse the Germans, the Allies tried to make it look like they were going to attack north of Normandy at Pas de Calais.

Although the D-Day invasion had been planned for months, it was almost cancelled due to bad weather. General Eisenhower finally agreed to attack despite the overcast skies. Although the weather did have some affect and on the Allies ability to attack, it also caused the Germans to think that no attack was coming. They were less prepared as a result. The first wave of the attack began with the paratroopers. These were men who jumped out of planes using parachutes. They jumped at night in the pitch dark and landed behind enemy lines. Their job was to destroy key targets and capture bridges in order for the main invasion force to land on the beach. Thousands of dummies were also dropped in order to draw fire and confuse the enemy. In the next stage of the battle thousands of planes dropped bombs on German defenses. Soon after, warships began to bomb the beaches from the water. While the bombing was going on, underground members of the French Resistance sabotaged the Germans by cutting telephone lines and destroying railroads. Soon the main invasion force of over 6,000 ships carrying troops, weapons, tanks, and equipment approached the beaches of Normandy.

American troops landed at Omaha and Utah beaches. The Utah landing was successful, but the fighting at Omaha beach was fierce. Many US soldiers lost their lives at Omaha, but they were finally able to take the beach. By the end of D-Day over 150,000 troops had landed in Normandy. They pushed their way inland allowing more troops to land over the next several days. By June 17th over half a million Allied troops had arrived and they began to push the Germans out of France.

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces was Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States. Other Allied generals included Omar Bradley from the United States as well as Bernard Montgomery and Trafford Leigh-Mallory from Britain. The Germans were led by Erwin Rommel and Gerd von Rundstedt.

#### Interesting Facts about D-Day

The troops needed the light of a full moon to see to attack. For this reason, there were only a few days during a month when the Allies could attack. This led Eisenhower to go ahead with the invasion despite the bad weather.

The Allies wanted to attack during [high tide](#) as this helped the ships to avoid obstacles put in the water by the Germans.

Although June 6 is often called D-Day, D-Day is also a generic military term that stands for the day, D, of any major attack.

The overall military operation was called "Operation Overlord". The actual landings at Normandy were called "Operation Neptune".

#### **4)A forgotten history is being written**

##### **a) Jewish immigration in UK during WW2**

The Historical investigation of Jewish immigration began with the opening of archives in the 1970s.

The first book was Island Refuge, 1973 by Allan James Sherman. It concluded that Britain had been lenient (indulgent) in permitting entry to as many refugees as it did.

But a more recent book Whitehall and the Jews, 33/48, 2000, by Louise London emphasizes the government's reluctance to admit Jewish refugees.

However, some personal initiatives were led by people who criticized Churchill for this unfit policy of asylum such as [Eleanor Rathbone](#), who wanted to inform with severity the government of testimonies of an ongoing genocide. When Jan Karski reached England late

in 1942 bringing word of extermination camps in Poland and the early use of gas, Rathbone was among those he contacted. She founded a new organization, the National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror, to press the government to mount efforts to rescue those threatened with annihilation. Until 1944 at least its efforts met with very little response: officials adopted a dilatory, “wait and see” attitude and, to Rathbone's fury, tied the question up

An original initiative was the kinder transport. It was the organization of the transport of 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria to England through the Netherlands just before the war, in 1938. Moreover, they had to come alone and with money. They were hosted in families; most of them were Jewish English. See the outdoor bronze memorial sculpture by Frank Meisler, located in the forecourt of Liverpool Street station in London, unveiled in 2006.

### **b) The Channel Islands**

Hitler considered the Channel Islands: Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney etc. a valuable landing stage for the invasion of France. Churchill decided to leave them undefended: on July 1st 40 German troops arrived in Guernsey.

Four concentration camps were built on Alderney, the only one on British territory. The atrocities perpetrated on the inmates (Jews, Poles, Spaniards and Russians) have been known since 1997 but the chief of these camps: Max List has never stood trial.

See film *Another mother's son*, Christopher Menaul, 2017 and *The Guernsey literary and potato peel pie society*, Mike Newell, 2018

### **c) The refugees from the German Reich became victims in the UK.**

As they belong to enemy countries, they were seen as possible spies and called ‘Enemy Aliens’ in a context of collective fear of invasion. Hundreds of German’s families were sent by boat to the isolated Isle of Man (in the Irish Sea, between Britain and Northern Ireland). and put into concentration. These refugees felt unfairly punished they were separated - men to some camps and women and children to others and while they hoped to find asylum in the UK.

By the end of 1940, 14,000 ‘enemy aliens’ were interned on the Isle of Man.

CCL: A “less heroic side” has been discovered by Louise London while Angus Calder criticized the abuse of “the Myth of the Blitz” by the politicians to hide the disunion of the UK and to build a common myth, source of reunification.

Last but not least, some fascist ideas are still alive in the British Far Right. This extremist ideology reemerges through political parties such as the UKIP, especially in time of economic and social crisis, in a context of globalization which enlarges the gap between the rich and poor citizens. This can explain why the British Far Right is so anti-European: it is an ideal excuse to find a scapegoat to the current British problems and dream of an imperial past time which does no longer exist. The difficulty to face reality around a fair and efficient political project for all is the real challenge for the UK.