

# Chapter 10: Society During World War II

## Introduction

World War II had a profound impact on **daily life, economies, and social structures** across Europe and beyond. Britain experienced **rationing, evacuation, and heavy bombing**, while Nazi-occupied Europe endured **brutal repression, forced labour, and genocide**. Women played a **critical role** in the war effort, and resistance movements emerged in occupied countries. The Holocaust led to the **murder of six million Jews**, while collaboration with the Nazis also played a role in shaping wartime society.

## 1. Life in Britain During WWII

### Conscription and the War Economy

- **National Service Act (April 1939):**
  - All men aged **20-22** conscripted; later extended to **18-41**.
  - Those in **key industries (coal mining, armaments)** were exempt.
  - **By 1940, 2 million men** had joined the armed forces.
- **The Home Guard ('Dad's Army'):**
  - Formed in **May 1940** to defend Britain from invasion.
  - Comprised **older men and those ineligible for frontline service**.
  - Poorly equipped but provided morale-boosting reassurance.

### The Blitz and Civilian Impact

- **September 1940 - May 1941:** German Luftwaffe bombed British cities.
- **43,000 civilians killed, 250,000 homes destroyed.**
- **Coventry bombing (November 1940):** 500 bombers dropped **5,000 tonnes of explosives**.
- **From 1944, Britain faced V1 flying bombs and V2 rockets.**
- **Shelters:**
  - **Anderson shelters** (backyards) and **underground stations** (e.g. Bethnal Green Tube station).
  - **Blackouts** enforced by **Air Raid Precautions (ARP)** wardens.

### Evacuation – Operation Pied Piper

- **3.5 million people** evacuated from urban areas.
- **First wave (September 1939):** 800,000 children sent to rural areas.
- **Evacuations to Canada and Australia stopped (1940)** after the City of Benares sinking (77 children killed).

## *Women in the Workforce*

- **1941:** Women aged 18-60 conscripted into essential work.
- **Women's Land Army** (80,000 members by 1944) kept agriculture running.
- Women joined the **Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)** and **Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF)**.
- **7 million British women entered the workforce**, keeping Britain's arms production high.

## *Rationing and Food Shortages*

- **January 1940:** Sugar, butter, bacon rationed; later expanded to tea, milk, eggs, and cheese.
- **Ration books issued to all citizens;** pregnant women and children received extra rations.
- **Backyard farming encouraged** (Victory Gardens).
- **Black market emerged** - severe penalties for illegal trading.

## *Propaganda and Censorship*

- **Ministry of Information controlled news and messaging.**
- **Dunkirk portrayed as a heroic evacuation rather than a retreat.**
- **King George VI and Queen Elizabeth remained in London,** boosting morale.
- **Winston Churchill's speeches inspired national unity.**

## *2. Life in Nazi-Occupied Europe*

### *Repression and Forced Labour*

- **By 1944, 8 million foreign workers forced into German industry.**
- **Polish, Russian, and Jewish prisoners worked in slave-like conditions.**
- **Resources from occupied countries fed the German war effort.**
- **Harsh reprisals for resistance activities.**

### *Collaboration with Nazi Rule*

- **Vichy France (under Marshal Pétain) cooperated with Germany.**
- **Vidkun Quisling in Norway led a pro-Nazi puppet government.**
- **Militia groups like the Milice française helped round up Jews and resistance members.**

### *Resistance Movements*

- **French Resistance:** Conducted sabotage and intelligence gathering.
- **Yugoslav Partisans (Tito's forces):** 250,000 fighters delayed German invasion of the USSR.
- **Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April-May 1943):** Jewish resistance against Nazi deportations.
- **Warsaw Uprising (1944):** Polish Home Army fought Germans for 63 days before being crushed.

### 3. The Holocaust (1941-1945)

#### *Persecution of Jews and Minorities*

- By 1941, 8 million Jews lived in Nazi-occupied Europe.
- Yellow Star of David introduced for Jewish identification.
- Ghettos (e.g. Warsaw, 400,000 Jews confined) led to mass starvation and disease.
- Einsatzgruppen (SS death squads) executed 1.5 million Jews in Eastern Europe.

#### *The Final Solution and Death Camps*

- Wannsee Conference (January 1942): Nazi officials formalised the extermination policy.
- Operation Reinhard: Death camps at Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor.
- Auschwitz-Birkenau: Largest extermination centre; 1.4 million people murdered.
- Zyklon B gas used in mass executions.
- Medical experiments on prisoners, including by Josef Mengele.

#### *Impact of the Holocaust*

- 6 million Jews murdered; 5 million non-Jewish victims (Roma, Slavs, LGBTQ+ people, disabled individuals).
- Post-war Jewish migration to Palestine; foundation of Israel (1948).

### 4. The Impact of Allied Bombing on Germany

- From 1942, British and US bombers targeted German cities.
- Dresden bombing (February 1945): 25,000 civilians killed in firestorm.
- 350,000 German civilians died due to Allied bombing.
- German industry severely disrupted by attacks.

### 5. Women and Society in Nazi Germany

- Women discouraged from working pre-war; focus on Kinder, Küche, Kirche (Children, Kitchen, Church).
- 1943: Female conscription introduced due to labour shortages.
- 500,000 women served as auxiliaries in the German Army.
- Women in the SS worked as guards in concentration camps.

#### *Conclusion*

- WWII had a devastating impact on civilians, with bombing, rationing, and forced labour.
- Women played a crucial role in industry and the war effort.
- Resistance movements challenged Nazi rule, but collaboration also occurred.
- The Holocaust remains one of history's darkest events, reshaping post-war Europe.

## Key Terms

- **National Service:** British conscription system.
- **Operation Pied Piper:** British evacuation plan.
- **The Blitz:** German bombing of Britain.
- **Home Guard ('Dad's Army'):** British local defence force.
- **Einsatzgruppen:** Nazi mobile killing squads.
- **Wannsee Conference:** Planned the Holocaust's 'Final Solution'.
- **Treblinka/Auschwitz:** Major Nazi death camps.
- **Vichy France:** Nazi-aligned French government.
- **Warsaw Ghetto Uprising:** Jewish resistance in Poland (1943).
- **Dresden Bombing:** Firestorm attack killing 25,000 civilians.