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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Making a Usable Past? Time, Memory and Britain's Second World War

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Abstract

This article considers the emerging memory of the Second World War in 1945 Britain and asks whether this can help us to understand its popularity and power during the 'Brexit' debates of the 2010s. It examines the ways in which people writing for the British Social Survey organisation Mass Observation in 1945 negotiated the ends of the Second World War. Focusing on three key moments as the war came to its conclusion – the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in April, the end of the European war in May and Allied victory over Japan in August – the article considers the ways in which these writers attempted to draw on their recent pasts to negotiate a complex and uncertain present, and to imagine a post-war future. The article argues that while the cultural memory of the Second World War may be ubiquitous in early twenty-first century Britain, a study of its emergence and utility in 1945 reminds us that its power to help people imagine a future is contingent on contemporary circumstances.

Keywords: Mass Observation; Second World War; Brexit; cultural memory; time

Anyone arriving in Britain in the mid-2010s could well be forgiven for thinking that they had travelled through time as well as space. The Second World War, which had ended seven decades earlier, was everywhere. Drivers on the M40 motorway, perhaps heading to the Cotswolds for the long Bank Holiday weekend in May 2016, might have been alarmed to see billboards urging them to 'Halt ze German advance. Vote leave'.[1] The same month Boris Johnson told the *Sunday Telegraph* that the European Union (EU) was fundamentally a continuation of the Nazi attempt to dominate Europe, explaining that 'Napoleon, Hitler. Various people have tried this out and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods.'[2] Both of these references to

[1] *Independent*, 29 May 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/antieu-billboards-reading-halt-ze-german-advance-placed-on-m40-a7055186.html (accessed 7 Jul. 2026); Andrew Marshall, Twitter, 29 May 2016 (Tweet no longer available).

[2] Boris Johnson, *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 May 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/ (accessed 7 Jul. 2026).

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the Second World War were part of a wider public debate on whether or not Britain should remain within the European Union. The following month Britain voted by a small majority – 51.9 per cent against 48.1 per cent – to leave the EU in an advisory referendum.[3]

References to the Second World War were visible throughout the painful negotiations between Britain and the EU that dragged on over almost four years.[4] Those who advocated for a so-called 'hard Brexit', which would see Britain cut all trading and citizenship ties with the EU, were the most vocal in their mobilisation of a celebratory cultural memory of the war which emphasised both Britain being at its best 'alone', and its ability to defeat any imagined attempts by Germany to dominate Europe. Broadly, the argument went that Britain was at its best when it was out of step with the rest of the continent; it was only when Britain was alone that it could find its true self and rediscover an age of both global power and national unity. This narrative ignored the inconvenient fact that Britain had gone to war at the head of the world's largest empire, drawing on the military and labour power and resources of this empire and the volunteers who had travelled to Britain from occupied Europe, and working and fighting in concert with international allies the United States and the Soviet Union. In a trope that was to be repeated again and again, an equivalence was drawn between the aims of those who fought the Second World War, and the hardline Brexit supporters who portrayed themselves as the true inheritors and imitators of Winston Churchill. Nigel Farage encouraged all young people to see Christopher Nolan's 2017 film *Dunkirk* and ex-Conservative minister Anne Widdecombe, by then a Brexit Party MEP, drew a moral equivalence between the suffering of civilians during the Second World War and the potential hardships of her preferred 'no deal' Brexit', claiming that these were '[a]s nothing compared to the sacrifice we asked a previous generation to make in order to ensure Britain's freedom … my Granny was bombed out in Plymouth … people lost fathers and sons and brothers because they wanted freedom.'[5]

The Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage travelled from town to town on his campaign bus, the theme music from the 1963 American war film *The Great Escape*, a fictionalised account of a mass escape from a German prison camp in 1944, announcing his arrival. Brexit Secretary David Davis reassured voters that 'if we can get through World War Two we can get through this', while most infamously the Leave. EU publicity campaign, led by Farage and his financial backer Aaron Banks, was forced to apologise after sharing an image of the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel with her arm raised in an apparent Nazi salute, accompanied by the words 'We didn't win two world wars to be

[3]While this article refers throughout to Britain, it acknowledges that there were important distinctions and divisions between the constituent elements of the United Kingdom in the 2016 Referendum. In total, 72.2 per cent of the electorate voted. While England (53.4 per cent) and Wales (52.5 per cent) both voted to leave, Scotland (62 per cent) and Northern Ireland (55.8 per cent) voted to remain. In England, which has the largest electorate, areas of Lincolnshire, Essex and Norfolk had the highest proportions of Leave voters. Younger voters were more likely to vote Remain than older voters. BBC, *EU Referendum in Maps and Charts*, 8 Jun. 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028 (accessed 7 Jul. 2026).

[4]Britain eventually left the EU on 31 January 2020. For a historically informed analysis of the campaign and its outcome, see Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson and Jake Watts, 'Brexit and the Everyday Politics of Emotion: Methodological Lessons from History', *Political Studies*, 68 (2020), 837–56.

[5]Nigel Farage Twitter, 25 Jul. 2017, https://x.com/Nigel_Farage/status/889971797386514434?lang=en&mx=2; *Inews*, 9 May 2019 (accessed 20 Jun. 2024).

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pushed around by another Kraut.'[6] While this final example was widely criticised, other references to the Second World War played more successfully on the idea that this was Britain's 'finest hour' – an all too brief moment imagined as when, Mark Connelly has argued, the nation 'found itself', achieving a sense of national 'greatness' to which it has ever since been trying to return.[7] The promise of a retreat to the past as a means of imagining the future evidently had a potent emotional and nostalgic appeal in the campaign to leave, and how to leave, the EU.

The visibility of the Second World War in early twenty-first century Britain can be seen as one element of a wider wave of nostalgic reimagining, seen also in the popularity of cultural texts such as the television series *Foyle's War, Downton Abbey* and *The Crown*, suggesting that 'when the future (or even the present) is uncertain and unclear it can be very comforting to escape into a sense of constructed familiarity'.[8] Both during the war years and since a mythology of the British at war has acted as a powerful and attractive means of asserting a sense of national identity. As Matthew Grant has noted, 'in the three decades after 1945 the cultural memory of the Second World War underpinned British politics and society'.[9] Indeed, its presence has marked the 'long post-war' and after, surviving such temporal breaks as the end of the Cold War and the 'War on Terror', providing Britain with a consolatory and nostalgic sense of continuity in a rapidly changing present.[10] 'The war', as it is still commonly referred to in British culture, has therefore persisted long beyond its immediate temporal boundaries. From the multiple and popular war films of the 1950s to Queen Elizabeth II's invocation of Dame Vera Lynn in her assertion that 'we will meet again' during the first Covid-19 'lockdown' in the spring of 2020, the Second World War has endured both in the public world of cultural texts and political discourse, and in the more private world of family stories, memoir and the material artefacts of war that are passed down through the generations.[11] Few historical events have resonated and been returned to as profoundly and as frequently in British culture as the Second World War.

Indeed, the multiple and repeated references to the Second World War seen during the Brexit debates of the 2010s can be viewed through the prism of temporality. Historians and others have explored the ways in which time is experienced, and highlighted the different ways of imagining, framing and navigating time. Time,

[6] *Guardian*, 4 Feb. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/04/do-mention-the-war-the-politicians-comparing-brexit-to-wwii (accessed 7 Jul. 2026) *Independent*, 9 Oct. 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/leave-eu-merkel-tweet-brexit-world-war-germany-kraut-arron-banks-a9148356.html (accessed 7 Jul. 2026); Leave.eu, 8 Oct. 2019, Twitter. This tweet is no longer available as it was withdrawn after one day by Leave.eu following complaints.

[7] Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004).

[8] Stuart Cartland, 'Cultural Nationalism: Brexit and the Rise of Nostalgia Identity', *Culture Matters,* 11 Jul. 2018, cited in Jon Stratton, 'The Language of Leaving. Brexit, the Second World War and Cultural Trauma', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23 (2019), 225–51, at 229.

[9] Matthew Grant, 'The Trial of Neville Heath, the Popular Press and the Construction of the Memory of the Second World War in Britain, 1945–1946', *English Historical Review*, 133 (2018), 1155–77, at 1155.

[10] Steven Morwood, 'Divided Europe: The Long Postwar, 1945–89', in *Themes in Modern European History*, ed. Rosemary Wakeman (2003), 11–50.

[11] 'Coronavirus: Queen Tells UK "We Will Succeed in Fight"', BBC News, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52176222 (accessed 7 Jul. 2026).

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understood as a fixed quantity, and carefully measured through clocks and calendars, is also imagined and subjective, experienced as slowing down or speeding up at times of crisis or pleasure, and intimately linked to and shaped by the cultural, the emotional and the social. While historians often divide the past into neat periods – ancient; medieval; early modern; modern; the long nineteenth century; the short twentieth; wartime; interwar; post-war – an interest in time itself as a subject of historical study is also evident. Recent works have, for example, challenged the belief that the early modern period was largely experienced as rich in time while modernity is shaped by speed and a related shortage of time.[12] Matthew S. Champion has argued persuasively that time is central to human histories, that it cannot be 'considered an object separate from human configurations, perceptions and measurements', while the linguist Michael Fortescue has demonstrated that different cultures and societies have different words for, and profoundly different conceptions of, time.[13] In the Brexit debates highlighted here, we can see a collapsing of time, with the decades between 1945 and the early twenty-first century overshadowed by the political and emotional resonance of the Second World War. To apply Paul Gilroy's Freudian analysis of British memory cultures, the Second World War acted to 'screen' the more difficult pasts that followed it, allowing those who believed that leaving the European Union would allow Britain to 'return' to its position as a powerful and independent nation to constantly reinvoke a particular memory of the Second World War.[14]

This article likewise looks back to the Second World War to better understand a contested present. However, in contrast to those who look to the war years as a means of navigating the contemporary and imagining the future, the article focuses on the way that the war was being remembered as it ended. It explores this through an examination of the ways in which people writing for the social survey organisation Mass Observation were looking back to their immediate past to plot a course through a turbulent present.

Focusing on this period of uncertainty and transition, the article asks whether the people of 1945 Britain were – like those of the 2010s – drawing on their experiences and memories of the Second World War to imagine the future. If so, did these memories help them to construct a 'usable past' that then aided them in the navigation of a rapidly changing present and uncertain future? And finally, can a study of the ways the war was being remembered at its close tell us anything about its ubiquity and appeal today? Unlike most Brexit campaigners in the 2010s, the Second World War was an immediate lived reality for these Mass Observation (MO) writers, but one that was nonetheless already being revised and reshaped as experience became memory. While much research on the cultural memory of the Second World War in Britain analyses its representation in cultural texts, this article focuses on the memories articulated by individuals writing for MO as the war came to a close.

[12]Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentman and Richard Wilk (eds.), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture* (Oxford, 2009).

[13]Matthew S. Champion, 'The History of Temporalities: An Introduction', *Past and Present*, 243 (2019), 247–54, at 247; Michael Fortescue, *Space, Time, World* (Amsterdam, 2024).

[14]Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York, 2004).

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These volunteer writers were part of an eclectic and ambitious project that sought to map the relationship between national and international events and 'the world of everyday life'.[15] Founded in 1937, by 1945 Mass Observation's panel of writers were well used to reflecting on their hopes and fears, being expected to act 'as meteorological stations from whose reports a weather-map of popular feeling can be compiled'.[16] Throughout the war years they had been asked to keep regular diaries and to reply to the regular and often lengthy questionnaires, known as Directives, that asked them to both describe their own experiences and feelings and to record those of the people around them.

MO often asked its panel of volunteer writers to work with time, to think as much about the future as the present. By 1945 Mass Observers were practised in imagining the future as regular wartime directives had asked them to do just that. A Directive from November 1941, shortly before the United States entered the war, asked them to consider 'what would happen if we lost the war?', and from December 1939 onwards they were asked to record their feelings about the coming year. January 1942 saw them asked for their 'post-war hopes and expectations', a question repeated four more times that year, six times in 1943, five times in 1944 and once in May 1945. While MO's interest in these questions was no doubt shaped by wider wartime debates on reconstruction, the phrasing of the questions, with their emphasis on feeling, imagination and time, invited respondents to reflect on their own lives and to write, often at length, about both the ways in which war was shaping these lives and their personal hopes for the future. As the war came to its ends in the spring and summer of 1945 Mass Observers were well-versed in blending the public and the private in their answers, and on drawing on their experiences of wartime to imagine a post-war future. This skill helped them to navigate the complex and often confusing ends of the war.

This article draws on this rich body of material to consider how the organisation's volunteer writers negotiated this period of hope and fear, of opportunity and uncertainty, and of optimism and pessimism, and asks how they drew on their experiences and memories of wartime to help them do so. Focusing on three key moments in 1945: the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April, the end of the European war in May and victory over Japan in August, it considers how Mass Observers were beginning to remember the war in ways that helped them to imagine the future. In this, they share much in common with the Brexit supporters of the 2010s and many who remembered and reimagined the war in the years between. To place the Mass Observers of 1945 in this longer historical context the article next outlines the changing memory of the Second World War in Britain since it came to an end.

Remembering Second World War Britain

The use of a particular memory of the Second World War to frame the Brexit debates was nothing new. Mark Connelly has argued that 'since 1945 nearly every international crisis involving Britain has been compared to or seen through the lens of the Second World War'.[17] The Suez crisis of 1956 saw appeasement drawn upon in support

[15]Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (2002), 102.
[16]Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Mass Observation* (1937).
[17]Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2014), 268.

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of British action against Nasser, who was himself compared to Hitler.[18] In 1975 the evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Donald Coggan, responded to that decade's economic crisis in a 'Call to the Nation' campaign which argued that the unity and shared sacrifice of the Second World War offered a model for collective self-sufficiency in the face of high inflation and unemployment.[19] The Falklands conflict of 1982, the Gulf crisis of 1990–1 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 likewise saw politicians and press remind the British public that the country had a proud history of defending democracy, while General Galtieri of Argentina and Saddam Hussein of Iraq were both compared to Hitler.[20] Latterly, outside national crises, football has stepped in to fill the gap. The 1990 World Cup saw England face, and be defeated on penalties by, Germany in the semi-finals. The press drew heavily on Second World War parallels, the *Sun* printing a photograph of the England player Gary Lineker's father on his market stall with a sign reading 'No Germans, Italians or Argies'.[21] When England and Germany met again in the semi-finals of the 1996 European Championship (resulting in another defeat for England on penalties) the *Daily Mirror* reworked Neville Chamberlain's speech declaring war in September 1939:

> Last night the *Daily Mirror*'s ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared to withdraw their football team from Wembley, a state of soccer war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently we are at soccer war with Germany.[22]

Few historical events have resonated as fully and widely in British culture as the Second World War.

However, no matter how permanent and 'natural' it may seem, the cultural memory of Britain's Second World War is neither. Rather it exists in a constant dialogue with contemporary forces. For example, the popular war films of the 1950s reimagined the war as one largely fought by men of the upper and middle classes. The working class, civilians and women who had been so visible in films such as *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *In Which We Serve* (1942), produced *during* the war, were largely banished to the margins. This reflected a period of conservative retrenchment when the radical impulses of wartime were moderated by thirteen years of Conservative governments and the electorate finally enjoyed the fruits of reconstruction, even as British power diminished on the international stage.[23] The memory of the war became a comforting reminder of British unity, and power. The appeal of this narrative cannot be overstated. When in 1961, as part of the longer *Beyond the Fringe* sketch 'The Aftermyth of War', Alan Bennett

[18]See for examples reader's letters to *Lancashire Evening Post,* 13 Nov. 1956, 8; *Wiltshire Times*, 16 Nov. 1956, 8; 'Essential facts of Suez Problem', *Somerset Guardian*, 23 Nov. 1956, 12.

[19]'How Best can Britain Be Saved?', *Daily Mail*, 16 Oct. 1975, 6.

[20]Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939–1991* (1997; rev. edn, 2023).

[21]Cited in Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, 290.

[22]*Daily Mirror*, 24 Jun. 1996, 1.

[23]For historically situated studies of the post-war films see Geoff Eley, 'Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory and World War Two', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 818–38; Penny Summerfield, 'Film and the Popular Memory of the Second World War in Britain', in *Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain*, ed. Susan R. Grayzel and Philippa Levine (Basingstoke, 2009), 157–75.

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delivered a gently comic monologue as a Battle of Britain pilot, imitating the walk and vocal delivery of the actor Kenneth More in the 1951 film *Reach for the Sky* (in which More had played RAF Group Captain Douglas Bader) audience members in Brighton booed and jeered, some walking out of the theatre, perhaps illustrating the truth of one reviewer's prediction that the sketch would make 'sentimentalists of the hand on shoulder "dear old fellow" school wince'.[24] More successful comedies about the war years, such as *Whisky Galore* (1949) and the hugely popular television series *Dad's Army* (BBC, 1968–77) were created by those who had experienced the conflict, demonstrating a generational divide that allowed war veterans a freedom to make gentle comedy out of the mythology of war that was not available to Bennett and the younger generation he represented. A popular and powerful nostalgia for the war years was visible less than two decades after the conflict had ended.

When Margaret Thatcher invoked Winston Churchill as 'a man who raised the name of Britain to supreme heights in the history of the free world' in her first conference speech as party leader in 1975, there was no such attempt at undercutting the mythology of unity, defiance and victory that had emerged during the war.[25] During her premiership (1979–90) a memory of the Second World War which foregrounded a Churchillian pugnaciousness and positioned Britain as a nation with a tradition of defending the rights of small nations to independence was invoked repeatedly, leading the socialist historian E. P. Thompson to mourn the absence of what he remembered as an 'anti-fascist and consciously anti-imperial army' in popular discourse and to claim with some exaggeration that 'one is not permitted to speak of one's wartime reminiscences today'.[26] By the mid-1980s the television satire *Spitting Image* regularly portrayed Thatcher as Churchill, dressed in a pinstripe suit and smoking a cigar.[27] Anniversaries of key wartime dates, particularly D-Day and VE Day, became part of the national calendar from the 1980s onwards, emphasising national pride in Britain's 'finest hour' and national unity through acts of collective commemoration and celebration.[28] Even the nuclear apocalypse could be reimagined and made knowable through the framework of air raids and civil defence during the Second World War.[29] Given this long history, it came as no surprise to historians of the experience and memory of the war when it took a prominent role in the formulation of Britishness being articulated by many of those campaigning to leave the European Union in 2016.[30]

[24]'140 Lines of Show News', *Evening News*, 13 May 1961, 4; 'Yes, there is a Doctor in the House', *Daily Herald*, 8 May 1961, 3; 'Student's Revue a Banquet of Fun', *Sussex Express and County Herald*, 8 May 1961, 8.

[25]Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, Blackpool, 10 Oct. 1975. Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102777 (accessed 7 Jul. 2026).

[26]Noakes, *War and the British*; E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (1980), 130.

[27]Yves Golder, 'Margaret Thatcher in *Spitting Image*', *Revue française de civilisation britannique/French Journal of British Studies*, 34 (2019), 1–13, at 7.

[28]See Janet Watson, 'Total War and Total Anniversary: The Material Culture of Second World War Commemoration in Britain' in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War,* ed. Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (2014), 234–55.

[29]Matthew Grant, 'Images of Survival, Stories of Destruction: Nuclear War on British Screens from 1945 until the Early 1960s', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10 (2013), 7–26.

[30]See Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson and Jake Watts, *The Politics of Feeling in Brexit Britain* (Manchester, 2024).

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Indeed, the cultural memory of the Second World War in Britain has been the subject of historical and cultural research from the 1980s onwards, when the groundbreaking collection *National Fictions* argued that the form of national identity becoming dominant under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government drew heavily on a memory of the war years as Britain's last moment of 'greatness', Britain's 'finest hour'. In their opening essay Graham Dawson and Bob West observed that this was only possible because of the 'powerful and continuing resonance of the war in English/British culture', noting its popularity across multiple cultural fields, including museums and heritage sites alongside books, magazines and comics, film and television.[31] Most studies of the formation and evolution of this powerful cultural memory have focused either on the creation of foundational myths during the war or on their cultural reimagining from the 1950s onwards.[32] This article instead attends to the interregnum: the months between wartime and the post-war world as the war came to its multiple and complex ends in 1945.

War and post-war

> I went over to the warden's post last night half expecting to be told that it would be the last time we should meet there, but although there was the biggest gathering of wardens for weeks, nobody had any solid news about our dissolution. We arranged however to have a farewell drinking party at the local next Monday ('unless of course it is VE Day'). The talk turned to the San Francisco Conference and I was rather depressed to find a pretty general mood among the men wardens of genial cynicism, a harping on the divisions and difficulties and indeed almost an acceptance of the idea that it would all fail – 'League of Nations over again' – that line of talk. I raised my voice in protest against the defeatism, but as I was the only woman taking part in the discussion all I got was a sort of indulgent-Uncle smile at my innocent optimism ... I still am cautious about the Dictatorship of the Bureaucracy. But actually Belsen and Buchenwald have done something to me – have completed, I could almost say, my journey from the middle to the left.[33]

[31]Graham Dawson and Bob West, 'Our Finest Hour? The Popular Memory of World War II and the Struggle Over National Identity', *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television*, ed. Geoff Hurd (1984), 10.

[32]See for example, Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (1992); Connelly, *We Can Take It!*; Noakes and Pattinson, *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*; Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship 1939–45* (Oxford, 2006). Important exceptions here include Grant, 'The Trial of Neville Heath'; Claire Langhamer, 'Astray in a Dark Forest? The Emotional Politics of Reconstruction Britain', in *Total War: An Emotional History*, ed. Lucy Noakes, Claire Langhamer and Claudia Siebrecht (Oxford, 2020), 137–56; Penny Summerfield *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998).

[33]Mass Observation Archive (MOA) Diarist no. 5307, 2 May 1945. She was writing the day after news of Hitler's death had been announced. The San Francisco Conference, formally known as the United Nations Conference on International Organisation, was a meeting of fifty Allied nations in San Francisco between April and June 1945. The United Nations Charter was signed by all nations present on 25 June 1945.

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So wrote a 37-year-old woman from Birmingham as the war in Europe moved towards its end. In her concern with the geopolitics of the future, seen here through a discussion of the San Francisco Conference which was continuing its negotiations that month, and her sense of her immediate wartime past, her diaries for 1945, which end in May, provide us with a snapshot of the ways in which one woman navigated the transition from war to peace. They show us how while she and her comrades at her Air Raid Warden's post, an organisation that Jessica Hammett has argued sits at the heart of the 'people's war', were preoccupied with what was to come, the experience of wartime was crystallising in her mind, providing memories which helped her shape and articulate her thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the future.[34]

The legal scholar Mary L. Dudziak has explored the ways in which wartime acts as a shorthand, both for different periods of the twentieth century, and for a particular bounded experience.[35] Dudziak argues that war is experienced and understood as a distinct form of time, one that enables greater legal powers for the state and which fundamentally informs 'the relationship between citizen and state, the scope of rights, the extent of government power'.[36] Warfare, she argues, shapes time in two distinct but interwoven ways:

> Once war has begun, time is thought to proceed on a different plane. There are two important consequences of this shift: first, we have entered a time that calls for extraordinary action, and second, we share a belief that this time will end decisively, so that this shift is temporary. Because of this, built into wartime is a conception of the future. To imagine the future requires an understanding of the past.[37]

While Dudziak's focus is on the ways in which states might make use of the concept of wartime as extraordinary and thus utilise it as an opportunity to extend their powers, this distinction between wartime and peacetime, and the belief that wartime is both temporary and that it will shape the future, is also experienced by individuals. Mass Observers like the air raid warden from Birmingham were beginning to draw upon and shape their memories of wartime in ways that helped them to imagine the future in a fast-changing world.

Mass Observation attempted to summarise the mood of the nation in the weeks before VE Day was finally announced: 'Every anti-climax added a little to people's slowly increasing apathy and confusion. Their hopes were raised and dashed so often, disappointments were so frequent, that it became safer to feel nothing at all.'[38]

Compared with the confusing and frustrating present, when the long-anticipated peace in Europe seemed to slip further away with every news cycle, and with the uncertain future, the past years of war were beginning to appear knowable and even comforting. As people moved slowly from wartime to post-war, many of them looked

[34]Jessica Hammett, *Creating the People's War: Civil Defence Communities in Second World War Britain* (Manchester, 2022).

[35]Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York, 2012).

[36]*Ibid.*, 15.

[37]*Ibid.*, 22.

[38]MOA, FR2263, Jun. 1945.

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back to the war years to provide a road map for the present that could help them to imagine the future.

For those experiencing the end of the Second World War in 1945, the war was already shaping their futures in multiple and sometimes unwelcome ways. Over 60,000 civilians and 270,000 combatants had been killed from Britain alone, while bombing was estimated to have destroyed around 50,000 homes.[39] Families had been separated through conscription and evacuation, and many were awaiting the fate of those recorded as 'missing' by armed services casualty departments. The welfare state, outlined in the popular *Social Insurance and Allied Services Report* of 1942, more commonly known as the Beveridge Report, promised a potential future in which the sacrifices of wartime would be rewarded by a social policy that supported citizens 'from cradle to grave' and imagined families with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker.[40] From the early days of the war people were told that they were fighting not only for the direct war aims of defeating Nazi Germany and (later) imperial Japan, defending the rights of small nations, and British status, in Europe and defending the British Empire in Asia, but also for changes within Britain and the creation of a post-war society that would reward people for their sacrifice by the creation of a more egalitarian and prosperous society.

The idea that the war would lead to a new kind of future was present throughout the war years as well as in the transition from war to post-war. The popular magazine *Picture Post* published a special issue titled *A Plan for Britain* in January 1941, calling for reform of areas including industry, housing, the health service and family benefits.[41] On the wireless J. B. Priestley was using his Sunday evening *Postscripts* broadcasts to call for reforms to property ownership, arguing that 'we must stop thinking in terms of property and power and begin thinking in terms of community and creation' while in his 1941 essay *The Lion and the Unicorn* George Orwell famously claimed that England was 'a family with the wrong members in control'.[42] Social change and economic reform were in the air from the earliest days of the war, noted by a Mass Observation diarist who described herself as a member of the 'landed gentry' and who, as she received evacuees and packed away 'a fine and favourite candelabra' on the outbreak of war, wondered 'when, if ever, it would come out again, for I feel this is the end of my class and way of life'.[43] By the war's end, many other Mass Observers were reflecting on the changes that were on the horizon, and the experience and meaning of war.

As much as 1945 was a time of relief and sometimes celebration in Britain as the long years of war came to a victorious end, it was also a time of instability and anxiety on both personal and political fronts. Military conscripts began to return to civilian life and to sometimes difficult family reunions, and the newspapers regularly published stories of both broken marriages and domestic violence.[44] Replying to a Mass

[39]Central Statistical Office, *Fighting with Figures: A Statistical Digest of the Second World War* (1995), vi.

[40]William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services Report*, Cmd 6402 (HMSO: 1942); 'Beveridge Tells How to Banish Want', *Daily Mirror*, 2 Dec. 1942, 1.

[41]'A Plan for Britain', *Picture Post*, 4 Jan. 1941.

[42]J. B. Priestley, *Postscripts* (1940), 36–7 [21 Jul. 1940]; George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn. Socialism and the English Genius* (1941). Accessed here via the Orwell Foundation, https://www.orwellfoundation.com/ (link to text now broken).

[43]MOA, Diarist no. 5340, 4 Sept. 1939.

[44]Alan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (New Haven, 2009).

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Observation question on adultery in 1949, one in four married men and one in five women who responded admitted to extra-marital sexual relations.[45] Although Labour convincingly won the 1945 election, its policies both disappointed those to its left who hoped for revolution rather than reform and infuriated those to its right. The peace itself seemed fragile, as the brittle alliance between the 'big three' of the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain broke down, as did Britain's finances. A lack of shipping and infrastructure led to continued food shortages and rationing of both food and fuel. Although both Britain and France maintained the appearance of being world powers through their permanent seats on the Security Council of the newly established United Nations, it was increasingly clear to many that the war had profoundly changed the world order. How then, were people managing this time of rapid change and instability, of both hope and fear, and did they draw on memories of the war to do so?

Navigating the war's end, I: the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

The end of the European war was much anticipated ahead of its arrival. News of Hitler's death had broken on 1 May, after it was broadcast on German radio. The death of the German Third Reich had been announced a week earlier, when Soviet and United States troops met on the banks of the River Elbe in Saxony, the *Daily Express* proclaiming that: 'The Third Reich of Adolf Hitler is dead. It died in its 13th year at four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, when General Courtney Hodge's U.S. Army linked up with Marshal Koniev's first Ukrainian Army and cut Germany into two parts.'[46] German troops in Italy surrendered on 2 May, followed by the surrender of German forces in north-west Europe on 5 May and in southern Germany on 6 May. News of the concentration camps had broken as they were liberated, with British newspapers focused on the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in north-west Germany by British troops.[47] Nonetheless, final conclusive news of a German surrender proved elusive.

It was the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (swiftly shortened to Belsen in the press) in Lower Saxony by British forces in April 1945, not the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet soldiers four months earlier in January, that captured the British imagination and, for a long time, represented the horrors of the Holocaust in Britain. The news beginning to emerge from the concentration camps as they were liberated was a cause of both shock and uncertainty, while at the same time providing a measure of reassurance that the demands and sacrifices of war had been worthwhile. Coverage of Belsen in the press, and the White Paper of April 1945, written and disseminated rapidly following the visit to Buchenwald concentration camp by a delegation of British politicians, emphasised what Britain and its allies had been fighting

[45]Claire Langhamer, 'Adultery in Postwar England', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), 86–115, at 86.

[46]*Daily Express*, 28 Apr. 1945, 1.

[47]Bergen-Belsen was liberated by British forces on 15 April 1945. Majdanek in eastern Poland was the first camp to be liberated by Soviet forces in July 1944, with Auschwitz-Birkenau liberated in January 1945. The only hint of what was found there in *The Times* was its description of 'the capture of Oswiecim, the scene of many German massacres' ('Advance Down Oder', *The Times*, 29 Jan. 1945, 4). On 8 May 1945 the paper reported the Soviet inquiry into what they found there with the headline, '4,000,000 Deaths at Oswiecim Camp', *The Times*, 8 May 1945, 5.

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against.[48] The evidence gathered in the Report, together with widespread coverage of the conditions uncovered when British forces liberated Belsen on 15 April 1945, served as a reminder that the European war was indeed Britain's 'finest hour', which had pitted the 'whole civilised world' against a regime that had created 'the lowest point of degradation to which humanity has yet descended'.[49] The liberation of Belsen was made known to the British people largely through Richard Dimbleby's famous radio report for the BBC, and through the images captured by the British Army Film and Photographic Unit which accompanied his report in cinemas throughout the country and illustrated press coverage and exhibitions. Dimbleby's report of the liberation of Belsen was broadcast on the BBC on 19 April 1945, six days after British forces entered the camp to find some 60,000 starving and mortally ill people, and thousands of corpses of those who had already perished. The BBC initially refused to broadcast the report, worried that the scenes Dimbleby described were too far-fetched, and that the vivid picture of a 'world of nightmare' that he conjured would simply not be believed by listeners. However, the corporation underestimated its listeners' capacity to believe the apparently unbelievable – evidence of mass atrocities at the heart of modern Europe – and their capacity to believe that such brutality had been enacted by a nation-state they had long been accustomed to understanding in terms that saw it in opposition to imagined British beliefs and values.[50]

William Frye, an Associated Press correspondent following the war's progress in Germany, described burials at Belsen where 'There were no flowers, no tears, no music. The litany for the dead was the hoarse shouts of British soldiers, sick with disgust and fury, ordering the infamous brutes of Hitler's chosen legions about their horrible task of burying their victims.'[51] This contrast between the brutality enacted in the camps, and the repulsion and anger of the soldiers who liberated them, was a common theme in the press. Richard Dimbleby told his audience that 'I have never seen British soldiers so moved to cold fury as the men who opened the Belsen camp this week', while in the *News Chronicle* Colin Wills described the SS women of the camp for his readers, rendering their cruelty in his portrayal of their physical appearance: 'The pasty-faced girl, a great flopping fat middle-aged woman, women whose faces showed marks of cruelty, others showing merely the callousness of animal stupidity, and half a dozen

[48]Tony Kushner, 'The Holocaust in the British Imagination: The Official Mind and Beyond, 1945 to the Present', *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 23 (2017), 364–84; Caroline Sharples, 'Where, Exactly, is Auschwitz? British Confrontation with the Holocaust Through the Medium of the 1945 "Belsen" Trial', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, ed. Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce (2020), 181–200.

[49]'This was their finest hour' was famously, the final line of Churchill's first speech to the House of Commons as Prime Minister: Hansard, series 5, House of Commons, 18 Jun. 1940, vol. 362, Winston Churchill, col. 61; Hansard, series 5, House of Lords, 1 May 1945, vol. 136, debate on Buchenwald camp, Lord Denham, col. 65, and Viscount Simon col. 89. Simon was quoting from *Buchenwald: The Report of a Parliamentary Delegation* (HMSO: CMd 6626, 1945). The liberation of the Buchenwald Camp just five days earlier on 11 April 1945 was also widely covered in the British press, but it was Belsen, liberated by British troops, that received the most coverage in Britain and the widest commentary.

[50]Sonya O. Rose discussed the complex creation of a unified national identity in wartime, and the many contradictions and complexities within this, highlighting the multiple ways in which Nazi Germany was represented as 'other' to a Britain seen as individualistic yet organically unified. See Rose, *Which People's War?*

[51]'SS women Whooped at Belsen Tortures', *Evening Dispatch*, 21 Apr. 1945, 1.

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trim, alert young women, handsome in the way some Nazi young men are handsome, with hysterical magnetised vitality.'[52] *The Daily Dispatch* told its readers that the battle-hardened men 'who have seen war at its ugliest ... have never before seen anything like Belsen, and a wave of hatred and horror has spread through their ranks'. The inmates had 'found that after months of bestiality there is friendliness and goodwill among men'.[53] A young woman from Stanmore in Middlesex, who wrote in her Mass Observation diary that 'it seems incredible, but it could have happened here' was in the minority.[54] Coming at the end of almost six years of war it was easy to believe in a uniquely inhuman enemy that deserved to be punished, and equally to believe, as one interviewee explained, that 'no English person can imagine human beings would resort to such acts of barbarity'.[55]

The *Daily Express* held an exhibition of photographs from what it termed 'The Horror Camps' at its reading room in central London, a smaller selection at a temporary exhibition in Trafalgar Square, while another exhibition toured reading rooms around the country. In an accompanying press release, published in the paper on 21 April 1945, it argued that 'a duty is imposed on citizens everywhere to investigate and see for themselves the overwhelming mass of evidence that has been accumulated with the advance of the Allied armies'.[56] Few people expressed any desire to see the images coming from camps such as Belsen and Buchenwald, but nonetheless many agreed that to do so, to bear witness, was a necessity. As a young man from Newport in Wales explained: 'I think I know by this time something about the corruption of which the heart of man is capable. It is only by keeping this in mind, neither refusing to admit it nor ignoring it, that we can do something about it.'[57]

Images from the concentration camps acted both as a reassurance that the war had been worthwhile and as a warning against such atrocities in the future. They also formed a kind of temporal break, with some Mass Observation respondents describing a sense of before and after they had knowledge of the camps. A young man from Middlesex explained that since he saw images from Belsen and Buchenwald 'I don't really think it matters what we do to them (Germans)', while a shop assistant from Essex recorded a letter from his sister stating 'I just can't forget it. It doesn't seem possible that such things could happen in a civilised world.'[58] Following a report on VE Day in May which had described looking forward to the future, a diarist from Sheffield remarked that 'Burning Belsen is the only thing to do' and a diarist in London struggled to make sense of the camp, explaining that 'the stories of suffering and cruelty in this camp are indescribable'.[59] Like many who have attempted to represent the Holocaust

[52]Richard Dimbleby, BBC broadcast, 19 Apr. 1945; Colin Wills, 'The Kind of Women Who Staffed Concentration Camps', *News Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 1945, 1.

[53]'SS Women Bury Belsen Dead', *The Daily Dispatch*, 21 Apr. 1945, 1.

[54]MOA, Diarist no. 5303, 19 Apr. 1945.

[55]MOA, File Report (FR) 2248, 'German Atrocities', 5 May 1945.

[56]Durham County Record Office, D/DLI7/404/27, 'Transcript of the *Daily Express* Newspaper, 21 Apr. 1945'.

[57]MOA, Diarist no. 5233, Mar., Apr., May 1945.

[58]MOA, Diarists no. 5205 and no. 5303, both Apr. 1945.

[59]MOA, Diarist no. 5447, May 1945; MO Diarist no. 5443, Apr. 1945.

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since 1945, these Mass Observation diarists strained to comprehend and communicate both the horrors being reported and their own responses to them.[60]

Mass Observation sent volunteer interviewers to ask both visitors to the London exhibition and cinemagoers who had just seen the newsreel footage for their immediate responses. One woman overheard talking to a friend outside a cinema in Kilburn, North London, told her that she should see the film as 'It'll do you good. It'll make you think.'[61] A man interviewed leaving the photographic exhibition explained that: 'Although I hated seeing it, at the same time I'm glad that I did. I only hope that the exhibition is shown in every town and village. It's being shown at the right time too.'[62] The shop assistant from Essex who had described his sister's letter for Mass Observation agreed. While he had been shocked by what he saw, finding the footage 'horribly gruesome', he felt that 'everybody should see it, fully to appreciate the sickening horror of the Nazi regime'.[63] This sense that people had a *duty* to view the footage, however upsetting, was widespread, and underpinned both by the hope that knowledge would avert such horrors happening again, but also that it helped to justify the losses and hardships of the war, proof that, as another Mass Observation writer explained, 'I felt that I had been fighting for something worthwhile.'[64] Evidence emerging from the camps served both as a temporal rupture, a catastrophe after which nothing could ever really be the same, and a reassurance that the demands of war had, after all, been worthwhile.

Navigating the war's end, II: the surrender of Germany

If the atrocities that were widely known after the liberation of the concentration camps assured many that the war had been worth fighting, the surrender of the German government the following month provided an opportunity for both celebration and wider reflection. While many greeted news of the final surrender of Germany by joining parties, both impromptu and organised, many also took time to reflect on the end of the European war, and what this meant for the future, both individually and collectively. For some the war that was coming to an end was already being recalled in terms that we might associate with the nostalgia of more recent times. In Coventry a middle-aged woman described how the drawn-out and long-expected nature of the end of the European war contrasted poorly with the excitement and heroism of the war years, particularly the dramatic events of 1940:

> Victory has been so certain for so long that it is getting familiar. Life goes on as usual and we actually forget to turn on the news ... The one thing that still thrills me speechless is June 1940, little boats of Dunkirk, and August 15, September 15, 1940, Battle of Britain.[65]

[60]See, for example, Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, 2000).

[61]MOA, FR2248, German Atrocities', 1945.1.

[62]MOA, FR2248, 'German Atrocities', 1945.5.

[63]MOA, Diarist no. 5205, 3 May 1945.

[64]MOA, Respondent no. 1630, May 1945.

[65]MOA, Diarist no. 5318, 4 May 1945.

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The 'signal events' of 1940 – the retreat from Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz – identified by Sonya O. Rose – were already shaping memories of the war years as they ended, providing a contrast for this diarist between the excitement and importance of the war years, and a more monotonous present. A similar nostalgia for the experiences of war was accompanied by concerns about the future for a young soldier writing from South London who explained that:

> I felt scared of the peace. I had enjoyed the war because I felt that I was fighting for something worthwhile – or rather against something. I had felt important up to now ... I was afraid that I should wake up in the morning and find myself back in 1939, with all the pleasure of my wartime experiences and the friends that I had gained proving to be nothing but a long dream.

He found the transition from war to peace difficult to grasp, commenting that 'I found myself thinking that all this celebration's out of place in wartime ... I had geared my outlook to war for so long that I found it impossible to switch off at short notice.'[66] Despite spending the night of VE Day celebrating in central London the war continued to shape his conceptions of time, with the post-war appearing unknowable, disorienting, even frightening.

A similar sense of temporal dislocation was expressed by a young mother in Brockley, south London. Like the soldier she felt that 'it was all an illusion maybe, as that the years of war had been something that I had dreamed', while in Berkshire a chicken farmer was feeling nostalgic for the heightened emotions and sense of unity and purpose that she associated with the war:

> For some reason that I find hard to analyse, I felt a profound depression. Was glad, naturally, that the guns had ceased, that no more lives in Europe at any rate were being lost but could not get up any sense of rejoicing ... As for 1940, those were exhilarating days, I was carried on a wave of exultation. Why then, on the eve of V Day, could I feel nothing but a dull depression?[67]

While she was happy that the fighting was over she, like many others, found it difficult to anticipate the future with confidence or excitement. In contrast to the war years, understood by many Mass Observers in 1945 as a time of excitement and purpose, the future appeared uncertain and unknowable, the tensions that were to shape the Cold War seen in 'the farce of San Francisco where one of the Big Three so cynically makes a mockery of her agreement at Yalta in regard to Poland' combining with 'the memory of those frightful camps at Belsen, Buchenwald etc' to create a nascent nostalgia for the certainties of wartime.[68]

For a housewife in Kent the contrast between wartime and peacetime was felt in unwelcome, highly personal, terms. After news of Germany's surrender had been announced on the evening of 7 May she felt 'deeply depressed ... as if I were floating in nothingness'. Unlike the diarists quoted above, she described her war years as

[66]MOA, Respondent no. 1680, May 1945.
[67]MOA, Respondent nos. 2465 and no. 3388, May 1945.
[68]MOA, Respondent no. 3388, May 1945.

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'very futile looking back; I have done nothing useful as far as I can see'. Often separated from her businessman husband she had lost her London flat to a bombing raid and had spent the war years moving between temporary accommodation in Somerset, Wales, Surrey and Kent. Her fears for the future combined the personal – telling her husband that 'I demand reasonable surroundings etc if I have to continue as domestic servant' – with the geopolitical: 'one expects the "guns of Moscow". Rather dreading "afterwards", generally and personally.'[69] Unable to find personal meaning in the war years, and anxious about declining relations with the Soviet Union, she was unable to look either backwards or forwards with enthusiasm, and was instead trapped in a state of depression and anxiety, resenting the 'uproar' in her village as night fell on VE Day. Her inability to find meaning in the recent past meant that she was equally unable to imagine a post-war future. Dudziak argues that 'to imagine the future requires an understanding of the past'.[70] In her diaries, this woman was unable to accomplish either.

Another diarist also struggled with some of the dominant meanings of wartime, but was able to mobilise her own understanding to make a forceful argument for a post-war future. A young woman living in the Wirral, close to badly bombed Liverpool and Birkenhead, she was in a similarly reflective mood on VE Day. Returning home after an evening of 'wine and song' with friends where talk turned to politics and the possibility of war with Russia, which the barman thought unlikely ('78% of the fighting men are communist. They'll make revolution before they'll turn and fight Russia'), she passed the site of a house that had been destroyed in a 1941 air raid. Neighbours had set a celebratory bonfire in its ruins, but she remembered the Shone family who had lived there, and especially Dorothy: 'a small, laughing young girl of 19, engaged to a soldier, great fun at a party or in a dance. People had stood away from the blazing ruins, helplessly, as she screamed in agony, trapped.' This memory prompted her to think of the future, and the war's legacies and meaning in the post-war world. If the bonfire marked the beginning of 'a lasting peace' then it, and the war whose end it marked, 'is good'. If, however, the world was moving towards yet another conflict 'then this country deserves all the desolation and damnation that will result from the short-sightedness and stupidity of its people'.[71] The recent past, the present and the future mingled in her writing, as she tried to find meaning from the years of war.

Navigating the war's end, III: the atomic age

Three months later the war in Asia and the Pacific came to its conclusion when the surrender of Japan was announced on 15 August.[72] The means by which it was finally ended – the use of atomic weapons by the United States – was understood by many Mass Observers to be a decisive break with the past, and the beginning of a new era

[69]MOA, Diarist no. 5372, May 1945.

[70]Dudziak, *War Time*, 22.

[71]MOA, Respondent no. 3642, May 1945. Dorothy Shone, together with her parents Dorothy and George, are listed on the Heswall War Memorial. Imperial War Museum, War Memorials Register, 'Heswall', https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/1271 (accessed 7 Jul. 2026).

[72]The formal Instrument of Surrender was signed on 2 Sept. 1945.

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in world affairs. At the same time, it was clearly a final act in the war. While the liberation of Belsen in April could be understood as a validation of the sacrifices and difficulties of war, a Mass Observation Report written shortly after the bombs were used summarised the general mood among both its writers and others observed in public as 'horror mixed with fear'. While the descriptions of Belsen circulating in the spring had provoked horror, they had also acted for some to justify the war effort. Reactions to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, were described as: 'Similar to that in 1940–1 – when news came in that the Germans had invaded another country – the mind seemed unable at first to grasp the situation and the emotions were given full scope.'[73] As Claire Langhamer has argued, the post-war period saw the emergence of a form of 'emotional citizenship', in which citizenship could be seen 'as a form of emotional practice'.[74] Responses to the use of atomic weapons amongst Mass Observers demonstrate not only the ways in which they used a language of feeling to express themselves and articulate their positionality, but also how they often drew on the experience of war to try to make sense of this new kind of weapon.

Dudziak has argued that the Cold War was a time of anxiety, shaped by the spread of nuclear weapons and the experience of the Second World War, creating the fear that 'once nuclear weapons were created, nuclear conflagration was inevitable'.[75] In his work on nuclear cultures in post-war Britain, Jonathan Hogg has shown how individual attitudes to and feelings about nuclear war were 'rooted firmly in context … circulated in and … shaped by national discourse'.[76] Any national discourse surrounding the new weaponry in the days after it was first used was marked by ambiguity: 'the bomb that has changed the world' was the headline in the *Daily Express* on 7 August, while two days later readers of the *Daily Mirror* learnt that 'practically all living things – human and animal – were literally seared to death by the tremendous heat and pressure'.[77] Parliament was not sitting but when it returned on 15 August to mark the Japanese surrender thankfulness was combined with an awareness of the power of the atom bomb. While Attlee's announcement recognised the many losses of the war its emphasis was on 'the final and complete victory of the allies' and the restoration of 'peace on earth'. Viscount Addison, giving the response of the House of Lords to the King's Speech, noted 'that this abrupt conclusion must have been due in, in great measure, to the application of a terrible new force'.[78] Writing a few days earlier George Bernard Shaw asserted that 'it is too deadly to be used as a weapon' even if 'it has had its momentary success by finishing the war with Japan', while the Archbishop of Canterbury claimed in the Lords that although 'half a million people in a moment were destroyed', by bringing about the end of the war it had 'saved more lives and suffering

[73]MOA, FR2272, 'A Report on Public Reactions to the Atom Bomb', Aug. 1945.

[74]Langhamer, 'Astray in a Dark Forest?', 140.

[75]Dudziak, *War Time*, 69.

[76]Jonathan Hogg, 'The Family that Feared Tomorrow: British Nuclear Culture and Individual Experience in the Late 1950s', *British Journal of the History of Science*, 45 (2012), 535–49, at 537.

[77]*Daily Express*, 7 Aug. 1945, 1; *Daily Mirror*, 9 Aug. 1945, 1.

[78]Hansard, series 5, vol. 413, House of Commons, 15 Aug. 1945, Prime Minister's Announcement, col. 49; Hansard, series 5, vol. 137, House of Lords, Viscount Addison, col. 13.

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... than that which was so desperately inflicted on the Japanese'.[79] Amidst such uncertainty and ambiguity many turned to their memories of war to try to make sense of the 'most fearfully destructive weapon mankind has ever known'.[80]

Some Mass Observers, and many of those whose conversations they overheard and reported, saw the use of the bomb as worthwhile if it ended the war swiftly. While memories of the war did not provide them with any comfort in their understanding of the new weaponry and its impact, it did give them a sense of justification for its use. An Eton schoolmaster was keen to explain that: 'Total war has shown us that civilians are as much military targets as front line soldiers, and since the Japanese at home are compelled to make munitions etc, they are not to be exempted from our attacks.'[81] A soldier from Birmingham had been so hardened by war that he struggled to feel very much at all, writing that 'I hardly feel the Japs are human', while another man from the West Midlands simply thought 'as for Japan, they deserve wiping out'.[82] Similarly to those in London whom Mass Observation reported as drawing on their own experiences of bombing to explain their support for the use of the weapons against Japanese cities, these respondents saw the new weapons in the context of an ongoing war, rather than as harbingers of a new and uncertain future.[83]

The anxiety with which many had been imagining the future in May was often intensified by this new weaponry. The memories of the war that had offered some consolation or sense of stability for many of Mass Observation's panel of writers in the spring were less able to do so in the face of the atomic bomb. Even more than the horrors of Belsen, reports of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were experienced as a temporal rupture which destabilised the ability of many to imagine a future. Some however were able to draw on their experiences and understandings of wartime to explain the use of atomic weapons. A teacher in her forties explained that while she felt 'disgust that such a thing had to be, even to finish the war quickly', she also

> agreed with a remark in the *Manchester Guardian*, that one could not condemn the use of the atomic bomb after having condoned the use of ordinary bombs ... and I felt glad that the Allies had used the bomb first for our enemies would have had no compunction in doing so.[84]

A retired schoolmistress agreed, writing that while she 'felt pity for the human race' that employed its intellect to destroy, she also looked backwards to provide a context for the bombs' use, arguing that 'given the context of total war I do not think it is reasonable to object to the use of the atomic bomb'.[85] For these respondents, their

[79]George Bernard Shaw, 'The Atom Bomb', *Sunday Express,* 12 Aug. 1945, 4; Hansard, series 5, vol. 137, House of Lords, 16 Aug. 1945, 'Address in Reply to His Majesty's Most Gracious Speech', Archbishop of Canterbury, col. 61. The church was not united in its response to the bombing of Japan. The Dean of St Albans refused to allow victory peals to be run from St Albans Abbey on VJ Day.

[80]'The Atomic Bomb', *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 11 Aug. 1945, 4.

[81]MOA, Respondent no. 3683, Aug. 1945.

[82]MOA, Respondents no. 2635 and no. 1094.

[83]MOA, FR2272, 'A Report', Aug. 1945, 4.

[84]MOA, Respondent no. 1048, Aug. 1945.

[85]MOA, Respondent no. 1056, Aug. 1945.

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understanding that war conditions justified use of the new weapons pulled against their fears for what this might mean for the future.

Others were less able to draw on memories of the war years to support their feelings about atomic weapons. For them, Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked a break with the past as they understood it. For Nella Last, probably Mass Observation's best-known diarist, the bomb made 'the end of the world a terrifying possibility' while a 38-year-old draughtsman thought that 'life on this planet cannot be quite the same as it was'.[86] Some were even more pessimistic, drawing on science fiction, rather than the experience or memory of war, to try to understand the new weapons. The young woman from the Wirral, who on VE Day had remembered those killed in a bombing raid, described how in 1940 she had read a book by H. G. Wells 'in which he described an atom bomb used against Paris'. Despite its vivid description of a city destroyed she felt 'comforted, thinking to myself that such bombs would never be invented in my lifetime'. When she heard of the bombing of Hiroshima, she had been 'shaken with horror! Such weapons had been invented in my lifetime!'[87] Still others found news of the new weapons almost incomprehensible, and were unable to find any means, neither from their own experience of the war years nor from the national discourse about the bomb, to make sense of it. For them, the end of the war literally risked ending the future altogether. A young mother described how she felt 'my children cannot escape annihilation ... I am afraid. I AM AFRAID' while a middle-aged woman struggled even to describe her state of mind, writing: 'My poor brain is cluttered with all sorts of stuff. It's like my string bag which my untidy family has so muddled and mixed up that I cannot get it sorted out .... Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof ... My mind refuses.'[88] For both of these respondents the future had become literally unimaginable.

Conclusion

Mass Observers writing in the spring and summer of 1945, as wartime turned into postwar, were engaged in the process of making a 'usable past' from their experiences, a term more often used to analyse memory-making at the national level than the personal, and which has become particularly associated with analyses of how Germany remembered, or forgot, its Second World War.[89] The creation of such memories is both a dynamic process, emphasising what is useful at the time of remembering, and a partial one – elements of the past that are less valuable at any given time being marginalised or even silenced. In 1945 as more recently, the memories of the Second World War that were most often articulated by those living through the war's end were those which helped them to make sense of past, present and future.

This article has focused on three 'snapshot moments' in 1945: the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in April, VE Day in May and the use of atomic weapons against Japan in August. Memories of the war were drawn upon to try to understand all three and to imagine what they might mean for the future. As news of Belsen and other camps

[86]MOA, Respondents no. 1061 and no. 1108, Aug. 1945.

[87]MOA, Respondent no. 3642, Aug. 1945.

[88]MOA, Respondents no. 1022 and no. 1016, Aug. 1945.

[89]See, for example, Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 2001).

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liberated by the Western allies broke, the sacrifices of the war appeared to many to be worthwhile, and the sense that the war had been necessary and justified was widespread. For others the horror of the concentration camps caused a kind of temporal rupture, meaning that it was difficult to make sense of either past or future. At the end of the European war in May feelings, and thus the ability to draw on memories for reassurance, were largely more straightforward, and the memory of the war that was ending in Europe was drawn on again and again as a tool with which to plot a route through the rapidly changing present and make sense of an uncertain future. As the Asian and Pacific War came to its dramatic end such memories were less usable; for many the use of atomic weapons fractured time, marking a complete break with the past and throwing into confusion and uncertainty any imagined future.

The cultural memory of the Second World War, explored and analysed by historians as it circulated from the 1950s onwards, was already serving as a resource for Mass Observers navigating the profound social, economic and political changes and ruptures of 1945. It served this purpose more successfully in April and May of that year than it did for those articulating overwhelming shock and fear in the aftermath of the new atomic weapons. Where the memory of the war was helpful or comforting, we can see understandings of the war years – as Britain's 'finest hour', as a time of unity, and as a period that saw a shared sense of nationhood coalesce around shared values – that we might be familiar with today. Looking back to the war as it came to its end gave the Mass Observers of 1945 the tools to plot a course through the upheaval that the war's end entailed, but this had its limits: the shock of atomic weapons and the fear that there may no longer be a future to imagine constrained people's ability to draw comfort from the immediate past. In 1945, as in the 2010s, the memory of the Second World War could act as a road map through a period of profound social, political and economic change. From the 1950s onwards, the war years appear to have a particular appeal at times when it is feared the country's best years are behind it. But as a detailed examination of its shape and utility in the transition from war to post-war shows, the cultural memory of the Second World War may be ubiquitous in contemporary Britain, but its power to console and to shape imaginings of the future is limited by the circumstances of the present.

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