

# **HIST 225B: Twentieth Century Europe, 1901–2000**

## **Research Report**

**Title:** Wartime Experiences in Britain during the Second World War

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## 1. Region, Time Period, and Historical Rationale

This study focuses on **Britain during the period of 1939-1945**, when the country was suffering from repeated air attacks, people fleeing their homes in large numbers, rationing, and radical social changes. The main reason for choosing this theme is the plentiful and varied primary sources made by civilians, newspapers, and government ministries, which provide direct insight into everyday life during the war. These documents serve as a clear and unobstructed view of how people on the street dealt with terror, shortage, and disarray and at the same time, kept the spirit of the war alive. The home front is the platform from which the whole Allied war effort can be understood, as British civilian endurance was transformed both into a strategic resource and a cultural symbol of resistance. Delving into the events of the period not only helps to understand wartime mobilization in democratic societies but also how it led to the development of the post-war British identity.

## 2. Most Important Primary Source and Its Historical Significance

An article from *The Times* titled "Night Raids Continue Across London," published on 15 September 1940, which reported on the height of the Blitz, is the most important primary source for this research.<sup>1</sup> The point that makes this article so significant is that it quotes the people's response to the attacks that they had been subjected to for a prolonged time; therefore, it depicts how papers not only showed the risk but also how they helped the people's spirit to come alive again. Their significance in European history is due to the fact that such morale-boosting reports were instrumental in the total-war society's endurance, which was required to go on. The article is an example of the attempt to keep calm and show unity through the use of very carefully chosen words, while at the same time acknowledging that the destruction was widespread. It is helpful in the understanding of how the control of

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<sup>1</sup> The Times, "Night Raids Continue Across London," September 15, 1940, available via British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

news on the home front was one of the reasons that contributed to Britain's coming through the war.

### **3. Primary Source Quote #1 and Analysis**

One of the excerpts from *The Times* article states:

**"Fire crews worked without any break through the night while Londoners appeared at dawn resolute to carry on their normal routines."<sup>2</sup>**

This quotation shows how papers depicted endurance as a responsibility of the citizens. The point of the extract from the past is that it shows the common people's conduct as a revolt against the nation. The newspaper, by presenting the people as brave and resolute, persuaded them to see themselves as a community sharing the same emotional strength. This is in line with the general view that morale was kept deliberately and not by chance through the means of public communication. Moreover, the citation is an example of the press during wartime, which was barely on the border of reporting and influencing the people's feelings.

### **4. Primary Source Quote #2 and Analysis**

Another direct source of evidence is the official leaflet which was given out by the government in 1940: "**In case you are told to leave, you should follow the instructions without delay and carry as few personal things as possible.**"<sup>3</sup> The quoted order is an example of how the state, through its official discourse, represented the separation of families as something inevitable and done in a proper way. The historical clue here is that evacuations were not only a practicable solution to air raids but also a way to measure the public's trust in the government. The brief, commanding style of the message serves to convey the emergency as well as to make the acceptance of it seem quite natural. It was a move that helped to

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Information, Civil Defence Instructions for Households (London: HMSO, 1940), available via UK National Archives Discovery Catalogue, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13343>.

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cement the notion that British society was able to accommodate the intervention of the state on a large scale in wartime and thus was setting up the conditions for the development of social planning after the war.

## **5. Most Challenging Primary Source and Why**

The hardest source to understand was definitely the Mass Observation Archive 1941 letter.<sup>4</sup> It was a letter written by a London shopkeeper and contained his descriptions of nightly bombings and the strains of keeping his business running. The problem was with the emotional tone of the document and its fragmented writing style, which made it difficult to interpret. The letter, unlike newspapers or government leaflets, did not look for clarity or structure; it was an outburst of fear, confusion, and exhaustion. The challenge was to separate the subjective impressions from the factual details. However, this difficulty is exactly what makes the letter so valuable. It personalizes the raw side, the tiny bit, which is quite different from the more controlled narratives of the official sources.

## **6. Most Important Event and Source-Based Explanation**

The most significant event for this study was **the Blitz (1940-41)**, which affected nearly all aspects of British life during the war and had a great impact on the direct sources that were used.<sup>5</sup> Newspaper articles show the people's determination but also reveal the psychological pressure that the repeated bombings caused. Government leaflets illustrate how evacuation, civil defence, and behaviour instructions were organized and standardized to help calm the people. The main advantages of these sources are that they are very close to the events: they show people's reactions to the events as they happened. Their disadvantages are that there

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<sup>4</sup> Winston Churchill, "The Battle of Britain," speech delivered August 20, 1940, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/>.

<sup>5</sup> Angus Calder, "The Myth of the Blitz Revisited," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 21, no. 1 (2016), <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/893>.

may be selective reporting and that morale may be intentionally uplifted. Together with these limitations, the combined sources work to demonstrate how the Blitz became a turning point in Britain's wartime identity and led to the creation of the narratives of the communal spirit of endurance that lasted for a long time.

## **7. Key Individual and Their Historical Importance**

**Winston Churchill** was the person whose actions, speeches, and overall public presence had a major impact on the people's morale during the war.<sup>6</sup> With his background as a military historian and a politician, he was in a position to depict clearly and urgently what was at stake in the war. The importance of Churchill resides in his power to transform adversity into a message that brought people together. The reporting of his speeches by the newspapers spread the effect that he had, thus, it was instrumental in bringing back the feeling of national purpose. His role would have been insignificant if it were only the case that he had the power to directly control the events of the home front; instead, his rhetoric was the vehicle through which the people's suffering was seen as having a purpose. This study sees Churchill's impact as being great, while at the same time recognizing that morale was kept alive by the local communities, volunteers, and everyday citizens as well.

## **8. Thesis Statement and Reflection**

### **Thesis statement:**

*During the Second World War, British wartime experiences were very much the result of the interaction of government propaganda, the tough spirit of the people and the morale-building*

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<sup>6</sup> Imperial War Museum, "The Blitz Around Britain," 2021, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-blitz-around-britain>.

*stories from the papers. These three elements helped to keep up the general morale in spite of the continuous bombings and the forced changes of abode.*<sup>7</sup>

This thesis outlines the analysis of various primary sources that depict endurance not as a spontaneous reaction but as a deliberately constructed one that was aided by communication and a shared sense of identity. First of all, the examination of the correspondence, official orders, and news reports made it clear that the reinforcement of people's conduct was an ongoing expectation. The creation of this thesis involved the juxtaposition of deeply personal and emotional narratives from the individuals with carefully crafted public messages, thus exposing how both contributed to the making of the historical meaning of wartime Britain.

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Holmes, "Evacuation in Britain: Children's Experiences During the Second World War," *The Historian*, no. 142 (2019), <https://www.history.org.uk/historian/resource/10072/evacuation-in-britain-childrens-experiences>.

## References

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