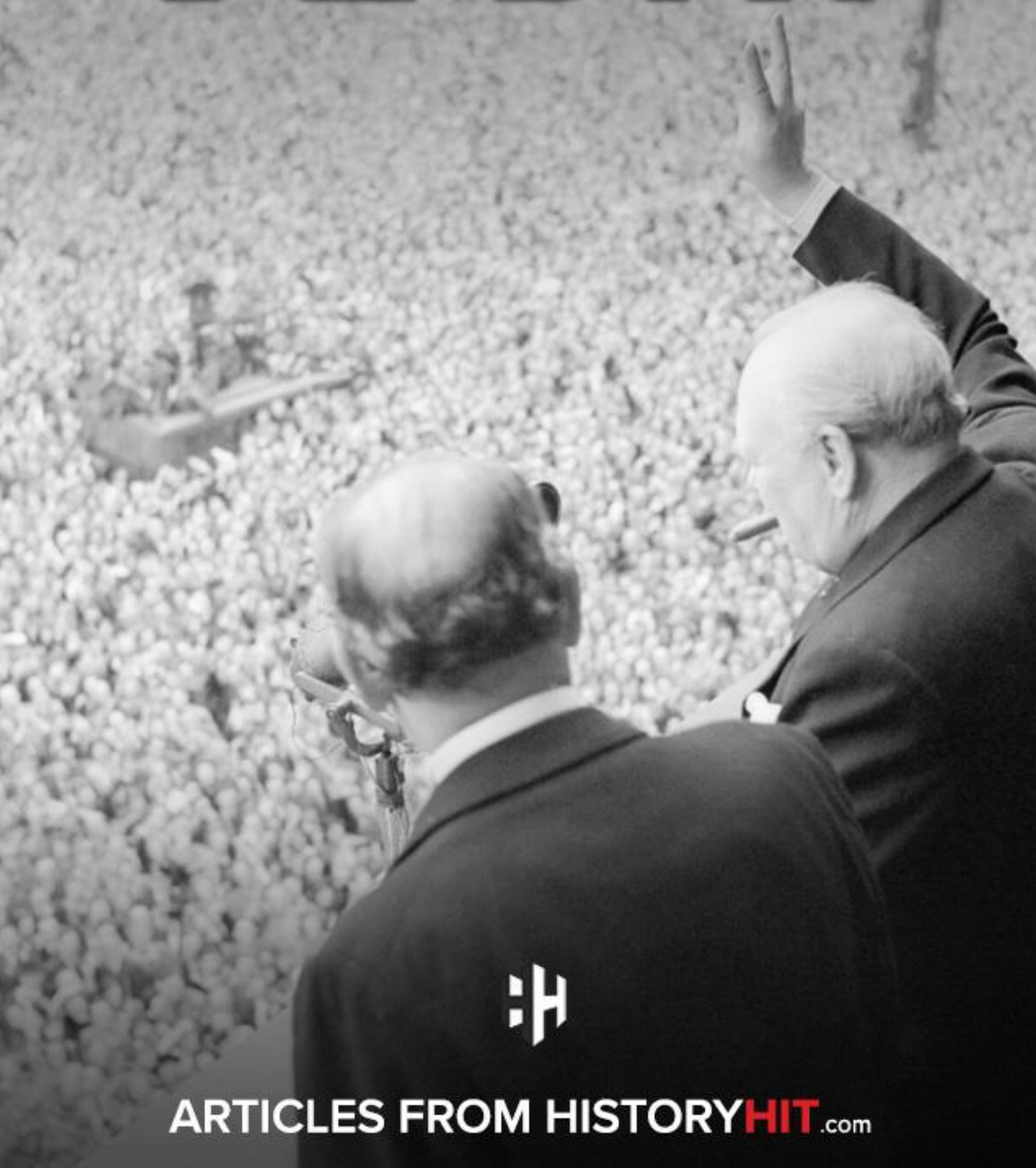


VE DAY



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3pm. 8 May 1945. Prime Minister Winston Churchill officially announced to the British people the long-awaited news: the German High Command, representing the remnants of Hitler's Third Reich – meant to last 1,000 years – had surrendered unconditionally. The Second World War in Europe was at an end.

Across Western Europe and beyond celebrations erupted. France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway and Denmark all gave thanks to their liberation from years of Nazi tyranny.

In Britain the mood was similarly jubilant. Six years of sacrifice was at an end. Relief and pride swept across the country. Relief that the War was over, pride that Britain had stood as a moral beacon of hope for the cause of freedom, refusing to give in during its darkest hour and inspiring the greatest fightback.

The war against Japan still raged in the East. British and Commonwealth forces were fighting a tough campaign through Burma. US-led units were engaged in a bloody battle for control over the island of Okinawa. For Britain, America and other Allied nations the fighting was far from over, but for those in Europe the fall of Hitler's Third Reich was cause for much-needed revelling.

From Alfred Jodl signing the first instrument of German surrender to the extraordinary UK election result in July 1945 this eBook tells the tale of VE Day and its aftermath.

Detailed articles explain key topics, edited from various History Hit resources.

Included in this eBook are articles written for History Hit by historians specialising in various aspects of the Second World War, as well as features written by History Hit staff past and present.

You can access all these articles on historyhit.com. *VE Day* was compiled by Tristan Hughes.

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VE Day celebrations in London: 8 May 1945.

8 May 1945: Victory in Europe Day and the Defeat of the Axis

By Graham Land

On 7 May 1945 a German High Command delegation, fronted by General Alfred Jodl, met with senior Allied officers, from Britain, America, France and Russia, in Rheims, France and offered a full surrender, officially bringing an end to the conflict in Europe.

Not just an end to fighting

Victory in Europe Day, or VE day as it is more commonly known, was celebrated by the whole of Britain, and the 8 May was declared a public holiday. But as word spread of the events in Rheims people took to the streets in their thousands to rejoice at the ending of one of the hardest periods of their country's history.

The end of the war meant an end to the rationing of food, bath water and clothing; an end to the drone of German bombers and the destruction their payloads caused. It also meant thousands of children, evacuees sent away from their homes for safety, could return home.

Soldiers who had been away for years would also be returning to their families, but many more would not.

As word began to spread the population waited anxiously by the wireless to see if the news was true. As soon as confirmation came through, in the form of a broadcast from Germany, pent up tension was released in a wave of joyous celebration.

Bunting was hung up on every major street in the land and people danced and sang, welcoming the end of the war and the chance to re-build their lives.

Royal revellers

The following day the official celebrations began and London in particular was full of revellers excited to hear from their leaders and to celebrate the rebuilding of Britain.

King George VI and the Queen greeted the gathered crowds eight times from the balcony of Buckingham Palace to great cheers.

Mingling with the crowds two more royals were enjoying themselves on this important occasion: the princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret. They had been permitted, on this singular occasion, to join the party on the streets; they mingled with the crowds and shared in the joy of their people.

Amongst the crowds celebrating in London on the evening of 8 May 1945 was Hollywood actor David Niven. One sharp-eyed cameraman spotted him dancing in the West End

A country's pride personified

At 15.00 on 8 May Winston Churchill addressed the people that congregated in Trafalgar square. An excerpt of his speech shows the pride and triumphant feelings that filled the hearts of the British people that day:

"We were the first, in this ancient island, to draw the sword against tyranny. After a while we were left all alone against the most tremendous military power that has been seen. We were all alone for a whole year. There we stood, alone. Did anyone want to give in? [Crowd shouts "No."] Were we down-hearted? ["No!"] The lights went out and the bombs came down. But every man, woman and child in the country had no thought of quitting the struggle. London can take it. So we came back after long months from the jaws of death, out of the mouth of hell, while all the world wondered. When shall the reputation and faith of this generation of English men and women fail? I say that in the long years to come not only will the people of this island but of the world, wherever the bird of freedom chirps in human hearts, look back to what we've done and they will say "do not despair, do not yield to violence and tyranny, march straightforward and die if need be-unconquered."

The 8 and 9 May were declared public holidays in Britain, but the celebrations were to continue for weeks, as sailors, soldiers and airmen returned to their families

The war continues in the East

As far as the British government and the armed forces were concerned there was still another war to fight in the Pacific. They had been supported by the Americans in their European struggle and now the British would aid them in turn against Japan.

Little did they know that this conflict would be brought to a swift and infamous end less than four months later.

What Was It Like for Someone Celebrating VE Day in Britain?

By Robin Cross

By the spring of 1945, the end of the war seemed to have been a very long time coming. With the announcement of Hitler's death in a news flash on the General Forces Programme on the evening of 1 May, Britons' long-deferred expectations of a victory celebration rose to fever pitch.

British troops hear news of victory

In Germany the reaction of British troops, many of whom had seen much hard fighting, was more laconic. Men of the 6th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, who were then outside Hamburg, heard the original German announcement of the Fuhrer's demise huddled around their command radio set in a captured farmhouse.

The next morning they left behind a memento of the occasion on a village monument which commemorated a visit by Hitler in 1935. One of the Fusiliers, a stonemason in civilian life, chipped out the end of the story, "KAPUT 1945."

In the background, as celebrations began in London and beyond, Operation Exodus was being carried out. It saw prisoners of war released from camps in Europe flown back to Britain. By the end of May 345,000 POWs had been repatriated by Allied aircraft

Agonising wait on the Home Front

In Britain there was an agonising hiatus while people were kept waiting. The reason was that there was an agreement between the Allies not to announce that peace had broken out until the Germans had signed instruments of surrender in Rheims, in France, and in Berlin.

Tight control was maintained over Allied war correspondents in Rheims, hungry for leaks, but this did not prevent an enterprising Associated Press man breaking the story.

News of the German surrender of their forces in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark, signed in Field Marshal Montgomery's tent on Luneburg Heath at 6.30pm on 4 May, reached New York on 7 May.

General Eisenhower, the Allied Supreme Commander, was furious, but the news was greeted with universal rejoicing in New York. That night it was announced on British radio, at 7.40pm, that 8 May would be Victory in Europe Day and a public holiday.

VE day in Britain

As midnight approached, a young London housewife went up to the roof above her flat in the Edgware Road

"... from which my husband and I have so often watched fires flaring up in a ring around London as far as we could see, and seen explosions, listened to bombs falling and planes and guns during the 'Little Blitz' of spring 1944; also watched the buzz bombs [V-1 missiles] with their flaring tails careering over the houses before the final 'bang' ...

As I looked, fireworks began to erupt around the horizon and the red glow of distant bonfires lit the sky – peaceful and joyous fires now, in place of the terrifying ones of the last years.”

As midnight struck, the big ships riding at anchor in ports from the Firth of Clyde to Southampton opened up their sirens in deep-throated booming V-signals. Smaller craft followed them with a cacophony of hoots and whistles and searchlights flashed out a V in Morse across the sky.

The noise could be heard for miles inland, and people living on the coast, thrilled by the din, defied the continuing black-out regulations, threw open their curtains and let their lights blaze out into the night.

In London on the night of 7 May, there was a violent thunderstorm and the morning of 8 May found many people in a subdued, reflective mood.

A London woman noted:

“May 8, Tuesday, a thunderstorm greeted VE-Day, but was over before I went to join the longest fish queue I can remember.”

The writer John Lehmann recalled:

“My chief recollection of VE-Day is of queuing for a bus to Paddington which never came, and finally having to walk across Hyde Park with a heavy suitcase, pouring with sweat.

The crowds were more dazed than excited ... good-tempered, a little bewildered and awkward about celebrating, like cripples taking their first steps after a miraculous healing ...”

Churchill makes his speech

In the afternoon the pace picked up. At 3pm came Winston Churchill’s speech from Downing Street relayed by speaker to the crowds in Parliament Square and beyond them across the nation.

There was a huge cheer when the Prime Minister announced the liberation of the Channel Islands, occupied since 1940, and a flurry of flag-waving when he announced that “the German war is therefore at an end”.

As he finished, the buglers of the Royal Horse Guards sounded the Cease Fire, and as the notes faded away in the warm summer air, soldiers and civilians in the crowd stood to attention to sing the National Anthem.

Churchill was the man of the moment, addressing the House of Commons, attending a thanksgiving service in Saint Margaret’s Church, in Westminster, and speaking to a huge crowd from the Ministry of Health building in Whitehall, telling them,

“This is your victory. It is the victory of the cause of freedom in every land.”

Dance halls in London stayed open until midnight on 8 May 1945. We may consider this an early closing time today, but back then this was extraordinary

Mastering his painful stammer, King George VI spoke to the nation in his longest broadcast speech – all of 13 minutes – and with Queen Elizabeth and the two princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret, and the Prime Minister made numerous appearance on the balcony at Buckingham Palace.

The king wore his naval uniform and Princess Elizabeth that of a subaltern in the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

Shadows of war

As darkness fell in London and across the nation the night sky was lit by thousands of bonfires, long in preparation, at the top which were perched effigies of Hitler and his henchmen.

At 11pm in the village of Stoke Lacy, a reporter on the Hereford Times, witnessed the immolation of the late Fuhrer:

“At that hour the excitement was intense when Mr W.R. Symonds called upon Mr S.J. Parker, of the local Home Guard, to set the effigy alight. In a few minutes the body of Hitler disintegrated as his 1,000-year empire had done.

First his arm, posed in the Hitler salute, dropped as smartly as it ever was raised in life ... Then a leg fell off and the flames burnt fiercely to the strains of ‘Rule Britannia’, ‘There’ll Always be an England and ‘Roll out the Barrel’”.

The crackling fires spoke of victory and the release from fear but they could not banish the shadows of the recent past.

The novelist William Sansom, who had served in the Auxiliary Fire Service during the Blitz, found himself recalling those days:

“ Pinpointed across the city [of Westminster] appeared the first urgent firebursts, ever growing, as though they were in fact spreading, as each bonfire reddened and cast its coppery glow on the house rows, on glassy windows and the black blind spaces where windows had once been.

Alleys lit up, streets took on the fireset glare – it seemed that in each dark declivity of houses there lurked the old fire. The ghosts of [fire] wardens and fireguards and firemen were felt scurrying again down in the redness.

Fireworks peppered the air with a parody of gunfire. The smell of burning wood charred the nostrils. And, gruesomely correct, some of the new street lights and fluorescent window lights ... glowed fiercely blueish-white, bringing again the shrill memory of the old white thermite glare of the bursting incendiary”.

Those with less painful memories were happy to sing along with a song of 1943 which had anticipated the end of the war:

*“I’m going to get lit up when the lights go up in London,
I’m going to get lit up as I’ve never been before;
You will find me on the tiles, you will find me wreathed in smiles;
I’m going to get lit up, so I’ll be visible for miles.”*

The Unique Wartime Experience of the Channel Islands During World War Two

By Laura McMillen

The Channel Islands were the only part of the British Isles to fall under Nazi Occupation during World War Two.

After the German offensive raced through France, the British government concluded in June 1940 that the islands were indefensible; island officials were ordered to demilitarise and some citizens were evacuated to mainland Britain.

Profoundly impacted by almost 5 years of German Occupation, the islanders were liberated following the German surrender in May 1945. How did this liberation unfold and what did it mean for those who lived through it?

German occupation

German troops landed in Guernsey on 30 June 1940. Deemed of little strategic importance by the British, the islands were not to be defended and in the preceding 10 days some 17,000 civilians had been evacuated, mostly to England.

For the remaining islanders – 41,101 in Jersey, 24,429 in Guernsey, 470 in Sark and just 18 in Alderney – the humiliations and deprivations of military occupation would characterise their wartime experience.

Island leaders and civil servants were asked to stay in their posts and a Controlling Committee chaired by Ambrose Sherwill oversaw the day to day running of the islands.

Castle Cornet in St Peter Port, Guernsey, is the only place in the British Isles where you can see the defences of Henry VIII enhanced by Hitler.

Civilian life under Nazi rule

Occupying forces imposed restrictions, including a nightly curfew and censorship of the press. European time and occupation currency were introduced.

On the orders of Adolf Hitler, the islands became an “impregnable fortress”. German Forces, Organisation Todt – the German civil military engineering group – and imported foreign workers built newly reinforced bunkers and adapted existing defences.

The Channel Islands contained a fifth of the ‘Atlantic Wall’ – a defensive line built from the Baltic to the Spanish Frontier.

Although islanders grew and produced what they could, including tobacco, salt and bramble and nettle tea, food shortages were severe. After an appeal in late 1944, a Red Cross ship named SS Vega made 5 trips to bring islanders desperately needed food supplies.

While there was no organised resistance, some brave citizens took part in individual acts of resistance, including hiding Jews and helping foreign forced and slave labourers of the Organisation Todt (OT), who had been imported by Germans for building projects.

Some citizens painted ‘V’ for Victory in public spaces, but Nazi reprisals were harsh. The highest profile resistance fighter caught by the Nazis was Ambrose Sherwill, President of the Controlling Committee in Guernsey. He was sent to Cherche-Midi prison in Paris for helping two British soldiers in the unsuccessful Operation Ambassador (July 1940).

In purported retaliation for the internment of German citizens in Persia by the British Government, Nazi forces deported and interned some 2,300 innocent civilians.

The fear and social disruption of occupation affected almost every area of civilian life.

There were six commando raids on Guernsey and Sark during World War Two. Their main objectives were to find out what was happening on the only part of the British Isles to fall to Nazi Germany.

Nazi surrender and the anticipation of liberation

Hitler's suicide 30 April 1945 marked the final phase of Nazi Germany's surrender. Liberation, expected for several weeks, was anxiously anticipated.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced Victory in Europe on 8 May 1945, the Channel Islands were to be freed the following day:

"Hostilities will end officially at one minute after midnight tonight. And our dear Channel Islands are also to be freed today."

Barbara Journeaux, a young resident of Guernsey at the time of Liberation, recalls a swell of patriotic fervour as her father listened to Churchill's speech. He took the piano from the infant's classroom of the local school outside so that all the children could sing 'God Save the King' and 'There will Always be an England' as a flag was raised.

German commander, Admiral Hoffmeier, refused to surrender the Channel Islands until the early hours 9 May 1945. The surrender was completed by Major General Hiner and Captain Lieutenant Zimmerman aboard HMS Bulldog.

Jubilant scenes at St Peter Port seafront and harbour greeted the British Troops of the Special Task Force 135 on the morning of 9 May 1945.

One contemporary account remembers oranges, stockings and sweets being thrown from the balcony of the Pomme d'Or Hotel as the islanders celebrated the arrival of the 'Tommyes' and their supplies from mainland Britain.

While Guernsey and Jersey were freed on 9 May, Sark was not liberated until the following day and the German troops in Alderney did not surrender until 16 May 1945.

The population of Alderney were not allowed to return until December that year, when the island had been cleaned up.

Although preparations had been made from early 1944 for Brigadier Alfred Ernest Snow's Task Force 135 of 6,000 military and naval forces to liberate the Islands, there had been no rush to enact 'Operation Nest Egg'. Germans in the islands were so cut-off they were effectively prisoners of war.

Ultimately, the liberation in May 1945 went ahead peacefully. There were no casualties during liberation, but a small number of British and German troops would lose their lives clearing mines in the subsequent clean up operation.

Complex legacy of wartime occupation

After initial celebration, practical aspects of liberating the islands began in earnest. Food supplies were brought to the Islands and the landing craft used to deliver large amounts of supplies were then used to transport German POWs to UK.

1,000 German troops remained behind to help with clear up operation, removing land mines and dismantling large guns, which were then dumped at sea. In the summer months, batches of evacuees and deportees returned.

The assimilation of those who had left back into island life was not without complications. Many evacuees had been young children when they had left 5 years previously, they struggled to remember their relatives and many could no longer speak the local Patois language.

Food shortages had emaciated some residents and German fortifications dotted the landscape. Rationing continued, as in mainland Britain, until 1955. Some relationships were strained by differing experiences of and attitudes to the morality of occupation.

Despite the complex legacy left by almost 5 years under Nazi occupation, Liberation Day continues to be celebrated annually in the Channel Islands to celebrate the triumph of their freedom.

How Did American Soldiers Fighting in Europe View VE Day?

By Frank Lavin

As we grapple with the plague of Coronavirus, can we draw any inspiration from what our country accomplished during World War Two?

On 8 May 1945, seventy-five years ago, a heroic national struggle came to an end when Nazi Germany surrendered to the United States and its allies.

Mixed emotions for GIs

The U. S. erupted in celebration, but for the GIs who had been fighting in Europe, the day was one of mixed emotions. In my dad's letters to his parents, the mood is ambivalent.

Carl Lavin served as a rifleman in the 84th Infantry Division, which entered combat after D-Day and had fought from the Belgian frontier through the Battle of the Bulge, across the Rhine and the Roer, and now found itself on the Elbe, linking up with Russian troops.

For these soldiers, there were three reasons why VE Day was subdued.

1. Anticlimactic victory

First, the victory was anticlimactic. All the GIs knew for several weeks that the war was over. The German attacks were less frequent and less professional.

The surrendering and captured Wehrmacht troops were not hardened soldiers, but simple villagers and kids. These kids were younger than the Americans – and the Americans themselves were just kids, Carl having graduated from high school in 1942.

So the final weeks were more a matter of cautious advance rather than combat. As April progressed, it was increasingly clear that Germany had lost the will to fight. With Hitler's April 30 suicide, it was just a matter of days.

2. Continued conflict in the Pacific

Second, there was still Japan. The GIs knew — *knew* — they would be shipped to Japan.

“This is a solemn but glorious hour,”

President Truman told the nation in his VE address,

“We must work to finish the war. Our victory is only half won. The West is free, but the East is still in bondage...”

There was almost a fatalism in Dad’s letter home. He wrote:

“Well I feel fairly certain that I’ll go back to the States, get a furlough, and go to the Pacific... Don’t expect quite as many letters from me as you’ve been getting.”

Maybe not much to celebrate.



A famous image from the island of Okinawa on 8 May 1945. A few yards behind the front lines, fighting men of the US Army’s 77th Infantry division listen to radio reports of Germany’s surrender. Their battle hardened faces indicate the impassiveness with which they received the news of the victory on a distant front.

3. Human cost of war

Third, they knew the price they paid. In over 150 days in combat, the 84th Division suffered over 9800 casualties, or 70% of the division.

You can savour the victory, but there is a bit of emptiness. War correspondent Ernie Pyle explained,

“You feel small in the presence of dead men and ashamed of being alive, and you don’t ask silly questions.”

So it was a subdued celebration. The men of the 84th understood there would eventually be an end to the fight, and they knew there would be other enemies. Most of all, they understood they had to mourn their dead, just as we must mourn our dead today.

Why Did Labour Defeat Winston Churchill’s Conservative Party in 1945?

By Graham Land

Wars often bring political change. But what made the events of July 1945 so remarkable was that the government toppled had led its country to victory and was headed by an immensely popular and seemingly untouchable leader.

When Winston Churchill’s Conservatives were defeated by a landslide, it ushered in a new era and a new Labour government. The latter would introduce the NHS and the welfare state, and drag Britain into a new post-imperial age.

The fact that three weeks passed between voting and declaration demonstrates the strange nature of the times. The war in the west was won, but the last shots of Nazi Germany had been fired only weeks ago and hundreds of thousands of British troops were still overseas.

It was their votes that would take weeks to filter through. It also meant that the coalition war government was exhausted – not least its prime minister, hero and figurehead, Winston Churchill.

Over 1,000,000 people packed the streets of London on 8 May 1945 to celebrate the end of the war in Europe. Relief that the conflict was finally over. Pride at the nation's moral leadership during Britain's darkest hour and the ensuing fightback

“Win the peace”

Churchill had wanted his alliance with the Labour Party to continue until Japan was defeated. But its leader, Clement Attlee, refused, arguing that the end of the war was nigh and that, after ten years without an election, it was time to test the public mood.

On 15 June, parliament was finally dissolved and electioneering began. The Labour Party, which had barely broken the Conservatives' domination since 1906, had sensed a desire to “win the peace”, amongst the electorate.

Despite Labour's important contribution to the war, the party had been considering its peacetime policies at least since the influential Beveridge report of 1942, which had proposed the creation of a welfare state.

After the report, polls had shown gradually increasing levels of support for Labour, particularly among the armed forces – which was a huge segment of the population by this stage of the war. They were cautious of the unemployment and misery that had followed demobilisation in 1918, and wanted new fresh ideas to avoid a repeat performance.

The hopeful messages that they yearned for formed the crux of Labour's campaign throughout June, as the party vowed to eradicate unemployment, implement the NHS and the welfare state and follow Keynesian economic policies in order to avoid a repeat of the post-World War One economic difficulties.

For a nation exhausted by six years of war, and disillusioned by decades of Conservative rule (which had included the inglorious appeasement years and the Great Depression) these new and revolutionary socialist ideas based on the utopian idea of a more caring society were very welcome.

The problem with Churchill

The Conservatives, meanwhile, did their best to throw away what was seen as an unassailable position. Their campaign was – understandably enough – based around the towering figure of Churchill, who was rightly seen as the saviour of not only Britain but the western world after his heroic lone stand in 1940.

There were numerous problems with this approach, however, not least that Churchill was ageing, ill and utterly spent after six years of effort that might have killed lesser men with their sheer strain.

Signs that he was nowhere near his best were rife during the election. Furthermore, even at the best of times, the attributes that made Churchill such a magnificently unifying wartime leader made him ill-suited to normal party campaigning. He had changed sides twice in his political career, and exasperated his Conservative fellows by focusing remarkably little on furthering the party.

The prime minister did not listen, however. After his clashes with Stalin and Roosevelt, he saw parliamentary politics in a different light to his fellows, particularly after years of working in an excellent wartime coalition.

As a result, the Conservative campaign was hopelessly muddled; their overwhelming focus on the leader left little room for promoting any actual forward-thinking policies that might win votes. The fact that one of their main ideas was granting India the same dominion status as Australia or Canada spoke volumes.

Churchill's performance didn't help, and one infamous moment in which he claimed in a public broadcast that the Labour Party would need to resort to a form of "Gestapo" to implement their policies came to symbolise how out of touch he and his party were.

The results

Despite all this, when the election results were finally announced on the 26 July few could have predicted the landslide that Labour would achieve. Labour won 393 seats to the Conservatives' 197, a stunning swing of 12 per cent from the last election that is still a record in British politics.

Churchill was gloomy and when his wife Clementine called the result a "blessing in disguise", he gruffly replied that it was "very effectively disguised". He did, however, disagree with the claim that his electorate had been ungrateful, answering that "they have had a very tough time". His 55-year career in politics was not over, and he would have one more spell as prime minister in 1951.

As for Labour, the party had a stable majority government under Attlee's capable leadership for the first time in its history. For Britain's lower classes and imperial subjects, this was an era-defining moment that promised a permanent change of the guard in British and world politics.

Clement Attlee's government also presided over the decolonisation of India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon and Jordan, and saw the creation of the state of Israel upon Britain's withdrawal from Palestine.

Attlee quickly left Britain to meet Stalin and Roosevelt at Potsdam, where they decided the fate of the post-war world. Though his government was savaged at the time to the extent that it crumbled in 1951, in recent years many historians agree that it was one of the most successful domestically in recent times.

The NHS and welfare state remain strong to this day, as do reforms in housing, women's rights and nationalisation.

5 Facts About the British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War

By Jonathan Fennell

The British and Commonwealth Armies that fought the Second World War were made up of over 10 million soldiers from Britain, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the many other components of the British Empire.

These armies made numerous contributions to the peoples, institutions and states of the British Commonwealth: they played a key role in the military defeat of the Axis, albeit to different extents in different theatres at different times.

Their varying levels of performance at critical moments during the long global conflict were a factor in the declining extent and influence of the Empire; and they functioned as an instrument of social change in all the countries from which they were recruited.

Here are 5 interesting facts about the British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War:

1. Letters by those in the British and Commonwealth Armies were censored

This was done by the military establishment, who turned the letters into regular intelligence reports. 925 of these censorship summaries, based on 17 million letters sent between the battle and home fronts during the war, still survive today.

These remarkable sources cover the campaigns in the Middle East (most importantly in East and North Africa and Tunisia), in the Mediterranean (most importantly in Sicily and Italy), in North-West Europe (most importantly in Normandy, the Low Countries and Germany), and in the South-West Pacific (most importantly in New Guinea).

The censorship summaries allow the soldiers' story in the Second World War to be told on a level comparable with that of the great statesmen, such as Churchill, and military commanders, such as Montgomery and Slim.

Between January and August 1945 the multinational 5th Naval Fighter Wing on HMS Indomitable would be in the thick of the fighting in the Far East, as the BPF hit targets in the Sakishima Gunto Islands, on Formosa and, finally, Japan itself.

2. Soldiers voted in key elections during the conflict

The soldiers who fought to defend democracy were also periodically required to partake in it. Elections were held in Australia in 1940 and 1943, in South Africa and New Zealand in 1943 and in Canada and the United Kingdom in 1945. A referendum on state powers was held in Australia in 1944.

Remarkably, considering the challenges of holding elections during a world war, detailed statistics of the soldiers' vote survive for nearly all of these national polls, allowing historians to ascertain whether this body of electors influenced outcomes in some of the defining elections of the 20th century.

3. The victory campaigns of 1944/45 were built on a remarkable transformation in tactics

The British and Commonwealth Armies demonstrated a remarkable ability to reform and adapt in the extraordinarily challenging situation that unfolded after the catastrophic defeats in France, the Middle and Far East between 1940 and 1942. In the immediate aftermath of defeat, they developed a risk averse firepower heavy solution to tackling the Axis on the battlefield.

As the war wore on and the British and Commonwealth Armies became progressively better equipped, well led and prepared for combat, they developed a more mobile and aggressive solution to the combat problem.

The complete British and Commonwealth reconquest of Burma and subsequent recapture of Malaya from Japanese forces was only prevented by Japan's unconditional surrender on 2 September 1945.

4. There was a major change in the way the army was trained...

It soon became apparent to wartime leaders and military commanders that training lay at the heart of problems facing the British and Commonwealth Armies in the first half of the war. In Britain, Australia and India, vast training institutions were established where many thousands of soldiers could practice the art of fighting.

In time, training bred confidence and allowed citizen soldiers to match the performance of even the most professional of armies.

5. ...and in the way military morale was managed

The British and Commonwealth Armies came to understand that when the stress of combat pushed soldiers to, and beyond, their limits, they needed strong ideological motivations and an effective welfare management system as a bulwark to crisis. For these reasons, the armies of the British Empire developed comprehensive army education and welfare processes.

When the Army failed to deliver in these regards, a setback could turn into a rout and a rout could easily turn into a disaster. As the war progressed, formations in the field became increasingly effective at using censorship to gauge when and if units were experiencing morale problems, vital shortages in welfare amenities, or if they needed to be rotated and rested.

This reflective and remarkably sophisticated system of monitoring and managing the human factor in war was to make all the difference.