

The history of Britain's Second World War might be thought to have these themes:

- 'Their Finest Hour': Britain's victory?
- 'The greatest Englishman': Churchill's war
- 'The End of Glory' and 'The Audit of War': the price of victory
- 'The People's War' and the New Jerusalem: the impact of war on British politics and society

This is another area where you need to be strongly aware of the historiography, and of the way in which the war became something like the foundation myth of modern Britain, and the ways in which the war was itself mythologised after. What does this mean? Try reading this [blog article \*The British Myths of War\*](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/the-british-myths-of-war/): <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/the-british-myths-of-war/>

So, here are some of those myths:

- In 1940, after the miracle of Dunkirk, Little Britain stood alone against the might of Nazi Germany
- The nation united behind Churchill, and his words, in their darkest hour: 'I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, and tears'; 'we shall fight them on the beaches'
- The Battle of Britain saved the nation from Nazi invasion: the actions of 'the few' amounted to 'their finest hour'
- The people withstood the Blitz and united on the Home Front: it was 'the people's war'
- The turning point came in the North Africa, at El-Alamein, in 1942: 'before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.'
- In 1942, the Beveridge Report held out the promise of a 'new Jerusalem'.
- D-day began the liberation of Europe
- The Second World War was fought to end Nazi tyranny and to against the evils of Nazism; it was the 'good war'

#### **HOW CLOSE DID BRITAIN COME TO DEFEAT, AND WHAT WAS BRITAIN'S ROLE IN THE ALLIED VICTORY?**

[Use \*Flagship\*, pp191-98](#)

Firstly, understand the broad strategic outline of the war. Using [p 194](#), create a living graph of the war

All great wars see the combatants' objectives change as the war's nature changes. This was very much true for Britain in the Second World War:

- Why did Britain go to war in 1939? Why did it continue to fight after Poland's defeat?
- Why did Britain carry on fighting in 1940?
- The entry of the USA transformed Britain's position: how? How did it change Britain's war aims?
- How did Britain's war aims change in 1943?
- Was there a moral dimension to the war in Europe? If so, when from?

Make sure you know about:

- The Phoney War (the Bore War)
- The Norwegian campaign

- The Norway debate
- The Fall of France & Dunkirk
- The Battle of Britain
- The Blitz
- Lend-lease ('The arsenal of democracy')
- Operation Barbarossa
- The Einsatzgruppen Order & Operation Reinhardt
- The Atlantic Charter
- Pearl Harbor (& the German declaration of war on the USA)
- The Fall of Singapore & the creation of the South-East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere
- The Battle of Midway (& island-hopping)
- The Wannsee Conference & the Final Solution
- Stalingrad
- El-Alamein (& victory in North Africa)
- The Allied Bombing campaign: Hamburg, Dresden
- Kursk & the German retreat
- The invasion of Sicily and Italy (the end of Mussolini)
- D-day & the liberation of France
- V1s (Doodlebugs) & V2s
- The Soviet occupation of eastern and central Europe
- The allied conquest of Germany & VE day
- Hiroshima and Nagasaki (VJ Day)

Also make sure you know about the meetings of the Big Three (pp 199-203)

How close did Britain come to losing the war? If so, when? What was Britain's role in the Allied victory? How far did Britain's decision to fight on in 1940 determine the shape of post-war Europe?

### **THEIR FINEST HOUR? WHY DID BRITAIN SURVIVE IN 1940-41?**

Use Flagship, pp 226-27; 230-33

Know what these were:

- The Polish Guarantee and the German invasion of Poland in 1939
- The Phoney War (aka the Bore War)
- The Norway Debate
- The Fall of France and Dunkirk
- Dad's Army, little Britain and the threat of invasion
- The Battle of Britain
- The Blitz
- The People's War

Make sure you understand what we might call the conventional story, or the myth. Then be aware of how historians have questioned some elements. Why did Britain survive?

Then think of why Britain's survival mattered in the bigger picture. How important was it to the defeat of Nazi Germany? Or, to the subsequent freedom from communism of Western Europe? Then, how important was the decision to fight on made in May 1940?

## THE GREATEST ENGLISHMAN? HOW FAR DOES WINSTON CHURCHILL DESERVE HIS REPUTATION?

A popular parlour game, or poll, is the idea of the greatest: the greatest prime minister, the greatest Briton. Churchill usually wins both. It was Churchill's words that held nation together ('we shall fight them on the beaches'), Churchill's leadership that saved the day in 1940 and then won the war. One reason that view is so common was Churchill himself, as he admitted in his oft-reconfigured quip: 'history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it myself'. Churchill, who won a Nobel Prize for literature, primarily for his history of the war come memoir, wrote a kind of authorised version of the war.

Do some of the reading on Churchill and his reputation, and historians' reconsideration of Churchill. For all that, though, it is worth considering the words of Clement Attlee on his old wartime colleagues' death:

None of us can ever forget how, through those long years, he now and again spoke exactly the phrase that crystallised the feelings of the nation... we have lost the greatest Englishman of our time – I think the greatest citizen of the world of our time.

## HOW FAR DID BRITAIN CONTRIBUTE TO THE ALLIED VICTORY IN 1945?

Is it fair to assert, after Orwell, that Britain's primary contribution to victory was as Airstrip One (ie, the jumping off point for the US)?

Use Flagship, pp 228-30

- How significant was the Battle of the Atlantic?
- What impact did Britain's bombing offensive on the outcome?
- How important was Britain to victory in Europe?

## HOW FAR DID THE WARCOST BRITAIN ITS GREAT POWER STATUS AND ITS EMPIRE?

In part, you will only be able to answer this question later (when we have looked at Britain's position in the post-war world). For now though, we need to ponder three things. The first is the impact of the fall of France, and Britain's parlous position in 1940, upon her prestige and geopolitical position. Then, the impact of the fall of Singapore, in particular. In those contexts, we should then examine Britain's relations with its empire and commonwealth (use Flagship, pp 205-8).

## THE HOME FRONT

Be familiar with the idea of total war.

Use Flagship, pp 230-37

- How was the home front run? What was the role of Ernest Bevin?
- In what ways did war affect people's everyday lives?
- What was the impact on the Labour force, and women?
- What was the impact of German bombing?
- The war greatly increased the role of the state
- The importance of the Beveridge Report, the white papers, the Family Allowance and the 1944 Education Act (the Butler Act)
- The economic impact of the war:
  - The cost, Lend-lease and war debt
  - Bretton Woods

The war and the shift left is covered fully in the section on Labour 1945-51

## FURTHER READING, LISTENING & VIEWING

Sixth form history needs you to do reading of your own. Already, this guide had given you references to the Flagship textbook, and some other resources. You need to take steps beyond that both online and, of course, by resorting to another revolutionary technology, the book. For modern British history, there is a dizzying array of printed and online resources, of startlingly variable quality. If you do find something not on here that's good, let the rest of us know through the Facebook page or email [s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk](mailto:s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk) and we'll add it.

For each topic or area, we have colour coded each book or article:

Blue is essential

Yellow means if you want to develop a deeper understanding you should read one or all of these

Green means this is a monograph, or a sophisticated or highly detailed account. Learn how to dip into real history books, a vital study skill; you might sometimes find full books actually become more engrossing

Pink is for choices that are more loosely related, and have grabbed someone's interest at some point. Try one or two, they might be fun

## A WORD ABOUT ONLINE RESOURCES

Three of the best resources are, of course, the History department's very own Blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

### *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*

Beyond that, for the British history course, get used to using one of the best resources available, and for free; the DNB. Any local library card will get you in: anyone can join the City Library via this link <https://eforms.newcastle.gov.uk/popup.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=JVpTDqdaf2o>. Once you have a library card number, got to <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> and fill in your number. You then have access to it all. They vary in quality from the good to absolutely excellent, and they are all written by leaders in the field. The best have a particularly good last section, dealing with how history has viewed these men and women, and their historiography. There are also the **Themes**.

### *History Today*

Beyond that, another invaluable resource is **History Today**. We have institutional access to the entire archive, here: <http://www.historytoday.com/user/login>

Username: Tilbrook

Password: historian

You can search at your leisure, and find all sorts. These guides will flag some up for you.

### *Philip Allan Resources*

Another good resources is Philip Allan Magazines Online, aimed very much at sixth-form students: here <http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Username: j.richardson@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Password: rgs1

The archive is then searchable

There is a range of series aimed at sixth form history students. None make for exciting reading, and they vary in quality, but you should always aim to read at least one. The politics of the coalition are pretty well covered in the following:

Michael Lynch, *Britain 1900-51 (Access to History)* (Lon 2008)

Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (Lon 1996)

TO Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History 1906-92* (4<sup>th</sup> ed, Oxford 1993)

Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1945* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2002)

Pugh is one of the best current writers on the history of Britain in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

AJP Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford 1965)

The episode of Andrew Marr's *The Making of Modern Britain* on the war is worth a watch

The DNB entries on Churchill, Attlee and Bevin are essential, but others are also worth a look

There is a blog article of the way we view the war, *The British Myths of War*;

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/the-british-myths-of-war/>

And here, on the Blitz:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/06/the-peoples-war-londons-heroes-my-family/>

There are blog articles on the wartime chancellors:

Sir John Simon <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/24/the-chancellors-11-sir-john-simon/>

Sir Kingsley Wood <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/04/the-chancellors-12-sir-kingsley-wood/>

Sir John Anderson <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/22/the-chancellors-13-sir-john-anderson/>

And foreign secretaries:

Lord Halifax <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/27/the-foreign-secretaries-11-lord-halifax/>

Anthony Eden <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/23/the-foreign-secretaries-10-sir-anthony-eden/>

And home secretaries:

Sir John Anderson <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/11/the-home-secretaries-14-sir-john-anderson/>

Herbert Morrison <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/14/the-home-secretaries-15-herbert-morrison/>

Sir Donald Somervell <https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/05/22/the-home-secretaries-16-sir-donald-somervell/>

Paul Addison, *Churchill: the Unexpected Hero* (Oxford 2005)

Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (Lon 2001)

Taylor Downing, *Churchill: Cometh the Finest Hour* (History Today, 2010), on how Churchill became prime minister:

<http://www.historytoday.com/taylor-downing/churchill-cometh-finest-hour>

David Day, *Churchill and his War Rivals* (History Today, 1991) argues that Churchill's position as PM was less secure than we suppose:

<http://www.historytoday.com/david-day/churchill-and-his-war-rivals>

There is a blog article on Churchill's speeches, and Richard Toye's book *The Roar of the Lion*:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/17/1945-and-all-that-churchill-those-speeches-the-war-and-the-people-and-professor-richard-toye/>

Richard Wilkinson, *Winston as Warlord: A Critical Appreciation* (History Today, 2011)

<http://www.historytoday.com/richard-wilkinson/winston-warlord-critical-appreciation>

Mihr Bose, *Churchill and the Reality of Politics in Wartime Britain* (History Today, 2015) challenges the view that Churchill won the war:

<http://www.historytoday.com/mihr-bose/churchill-and-reality-politics-wartime-britain>

Andrew Roberts, *Churchill and the Revisionists* (History Today, 1997) is a defence of the great man:

<http://www.historytoday.com/andrew-roberts/churchill-and-revisionists>

John Colville, *The Centenary of Churchill* (History Today, 1975). Memories of the great man, by one who knew him:

<http://www.historytoday.com/john-colville/centenary-churchill>

David Reynolds, *Churchill the Historian* (History Today, 2005)

<http://www.historytoday.com/david-reynolds/churchill-historian>

Phil Reed, *The Churchill Museum* (History Today) is an introduction to the museum based around the Cabinet War Rooms in Whitehall. If you get the chance, go:

<http://www.historytoday.com/phil-reed/churchill-museum>

John Bew, *Citizen Clem* (Lon 2016)

Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Lon 1995)

Robert Pearce, *Ernest Bevin* (History Today 2002)

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/ernest-bevin>

Tony Corfield, *Why Chamberlain Fell* (History Today, 1996), emphasises the role of Bevin in Chamberlain's fall:

<http://www.historytoday.com/tony-corfield/why-chamberlain-really-fell>

The Norway debate is covered in this blog article:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/tory-leaders-we-have-known-neville-chamberlain/>

Andrew Stewart, *The Battle for Britain* (History Today, 2015), looks at the role of empire troops in 1940:

<http://www.historytoday.com/andrew-stewart/battle-britain>

Patrick Wilson, *Dunkirk: Victory or Defeat?* (History Today, 2000)

<http://www.historytoday.com/patrick-wilson/dunkirk-victory-or-defeat>

Richard Overly, *The Battle of Britain: The Many and the Few* (History Today, 2010), the myths:

<http://www.historytoday.com/richard-overly/battle-britain-many-and-few>

Brian James, *Pie in the Sky?* (History Today, 2006). Was it the Royal Navy rather than the RAF that saved Britain in 1940?

<http://www.historytoday.com/brian-james/pie-sky>

DC Watt's review of David Reynolds' *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41* (History Today, 1981), gives a careful account the creation of the alliance that won the war in the west:

<http://www.historytoday.com/d-c-watt/creation-anglo-american-alliance-1937-1941>

James Barker, *Sowing the Wind: Bomber Harris and the Bombing Campaign* (History Today, 2005):

<http://www.historytoday.com/james-barker/sowing-wind-bomber-harris-and-bombing-campaign>

James Holland, *The Dambusters: Barnes Wallis and Bomber Command* (History Today, 2013):

<http://www.historytoday.com/james-holland/dambusters-barnes-wallis-and-bomber-command>

Taylor Downing, *The RAF: On Record, Off Target* (History Today, 2012)

<http://www.historytoday.com/taylor-downing/raf-record-target>

John Keegan, *Normandy and Aftermath* (History Today, 1984)

<http://www.historytoday.com/john-keegan/normandy-and-aftermath>

Stephen Cullen, *The Home Guard, 1940-44* (History Today, 2004). The Home Guard had an important impact upon Britain, and 1945.

Rowena Hammal, *'Never Surrender'? British Civilian Morale During the Second World War* (History Today, 2012):

<http://www.historytoday.com/rowena-hammal/never-surrender-british-civilian-morale-during-second-world-war>

Penny Summerfield's review of Virginia Nicholson's *Millions Like Us* (History Today, 2011), gives a good overview of many women's experience of war:

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/08/millions-us-women%E2%80%99s-lives-war-and-peace-1939-1949>

There is a [blog article on the Beveridge Report](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/1945-all-that-the-beveridge-report/>

Harriet Jones, *Beveridge's Trojan Horse* (History Today 1992)

<http://www.historytoday.com/harriet-jones/beveridges-trojan-horse>

Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (Lon 1975)

Kevin Jeffreys, *Winston Churchill and the Wartime Coalition* (History Today, 1998)

<http://www.historytoday.com/kevin-jefferys/winston-churchill-and-wartime-coalition-1940-45>

Benn Steil, *Keynes: The Dunkirk Diplomat* (History Today, 2013) offers a critique of Keynes at Bretton Woods:

<http://www.historytoday.com/benn-steil/keynes-dunkirk-diplomat>