

# Society during World War Two | A1 Sample Answer

## The home front in Britain and in Germany

Even when land battles are being fought on the soils of foreign countries, war takes its toll on the civilian population of countries at war. The societies in countries involved with World War Two were greatly affected by the war be it due to the threat of invasion, lack of supplies, or even civilian casualties. However, society also played a huge role in keeping countries stable and it was important to keep the morale of the citizens high. Society in Britain and in Germany differed in many ways and, in some cases, may even have shaped the outcome of the war.

From the very beginning, life in Britain was dominated by the war. Every single aspect of society was shown to be helping the 'war effort', be it production in factories, rationing, women in the workforce or the establishment of the Home Guard. The government knew that while protecting people's lives was important, protecting their morale was especially so. They needed to keep civilians on guard against allowing the slightest advantage to the Germans. Leaflets encouraging positive action and caution were distributed, warning the people of what information to keep quiet about. All forms of media such as newspapers, radio and cinema were embellished with the slogan 'we can do it!'. All of this was aimed to encourage people to be vigilant and positive when contributing to the war effort. Britain was in a state of Total War which meant a war that involved the citizens on the Home Front as well as those on the frontline. During the Blitz, civilian targets were attacked just as much as the military.

The Home Guard was set up to halt any potential enemy landing. Originally it had been called the Local Defence Volunteer Force and was later nicknamed Dad's Army. Their main objective was to stop Operation Sealion which was the codename given to Hitler's plan to invade Britain. Their other tasks included checking identity papers, keeping order, drills, beach defences, night patrols, and switching road signs to confuse the enemy. The Civil Defence manned air raid shelters, air raid warning sirens, organised blackouts and evacuations, and distributed gas masks. 50,000 more people joined the fire brigade also. Without these measures, the death toll of the Blitz would have most certainly been considerably higher.

The Battle of Britain began in July 1940 with aerial attacks on Britain's airfields. Some success was achieved but the Luftwaffe was no match for RAF Spitfire and Hurricane planes. Hitler was impatient to invade Russia at this point and was determined to speed up the collapse of the United Kingdom. He

suspended the attacks on RAF bases and resorted to bombing British cities such as London and Coventry. He did this in the hopes of demoralising the population. Overall, around 22,000 people died during the Blitz which was most of the death toll for Britain during the war. Cities like London and Birmingham were the most affected. Cotter V1 and V2 rockets killed some people too however many deaths were simple accidents during blackouts. Many children were evacuated from the cities to the countryside where they lived with foster families until the Blitz was over. However Hitler's attempt at dashing the morale of the British people was a resounding failure. If anything it had the opposite effect. During the Blitz, the British bulldog spirit increased tenfold and the population became even more determined to win.

Women also played a significant role in the war on the Home Front. A large number were employed in factories. Up to 40% of all factory workers were women. Women became a vital source of labour with 7 million women in full time employment during the war. In the agricultural sector, civil services and medical services, women were a necessity. They helped produce planes, weapons and uniforms for the War Effort. In December 1941, conscription was introduced for single women aged 20-30 years old. By mid-1943, 80% of married women and 90% of single women were involved in the War Effort in some shape or form. There were many women in the WRENS, army, fire brigade and police force.

Being an island, Britain received much of its food supply from overseas and Hitler had hoped to exploit this fact by cutting off this supply. Rationing began in Britain in January 1940. British people made enormous sacrifices under this. Tea, milk, eggs, butter, sugar and all meat was rationed especially and each adult had a ration book detailing how much they were allowed. Gardens and parks were converted into allotments to make sure all the land was utilised to make food. The diet consisted mostly of turnips, cabbages, and potatoes. Powdered milk and eggs, and substitute coffee became the norm. The black market flourished and sold luxury goods such as fuel, cigarettes, meat and sweets.

The home front in Germany however was vastly different to this in many ways. For one, they were completely unprepared for the war, especially for one that dragged out as long as World War Two. They tried to control society to help the Reich but, due to the slack morale of many citizens, they had to go about enforcing this in a domineering, threatening manner. Media was censored strictly as were newsreels and even the letters soldiers sent home. Defeatist attitudes were banned and voicing it could lead to arrest. Criticism of Hitler or the dictatorship was dealt with in a brutally violent fashion. The Gestapo arrested thousands of 'enemies to the regime' and concentration camps such as Dachau, Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz were full of prisoners. Goebbels, chief of propaganda in Germany, knew the morale was failing

after 1942 and he played on German fear of Russian revenge. Many Germans had unswerving faith in Hitler and anyone who didn't was terrorised into submission anyway.

The workforce consisted of men only, be they German or forced slave labourers from occupied eastern countries. Unlike Britain, women were not involved nor were they encouraged to be. Hitler's brand of fascism promoted a belief that women belonged at home, raising children and definitely not helping the War Effort. However he was forced to redact this later on when Germany started to struggle during the war but it wasn't until 1942 that Total War was declared in Germany and women were allowed to help. By 1944, 50% of women were involved which was still much lower than in Britain. However there were 7.5 million forced labourers and 2 million prisoners of war working in factories, mines and farms for the Germans which added considerably to their War Effort.

Anti-Semitism continued throughout the war. Jews were persecuted, arrested, had their wealth confiscated, were deported to the east, used as slave labourers, sent to ghettos and concentration camps, and eventually were subjected to the Final Solution. There had been 500,000 Jews in Germany alone but this treatment of these 'enemies of the regime' was shown by propaganda to be necessary and justified. Very few people resisted the dictatorship in the beginning but, after 1942, there was some passive resistance. The 'White Rose' spread leaflets condemning Hitler and encouraging people to take a stand. These participants were arrested and executed later for treason. Due to the aforementioned control of society, criticising the regime could be fatal. By 1945, there were half a million Germans in concentration camps. There was some resistance from the Army high command. Von Stauffenberg attempted to assassinate Hitler in Operation Valkyrie but failed.

Civilian deaths in Germany were high. From 1942 on, German cities suffered heavy bombing from the allied forces. Cities such as Hamburg had 40,000 people killed in one raid. Berlin was destroyed and the beautiful city of Dresden was 90% ruined. Allied bombing claimed the lives of 600,000 civilians. Rationing was also far worse in Germany. They had 25% less food than usual compared to Britain's 12% less. This coupled with the destruction of their homes served to utterly wreck German morale.

Society in Germany and Britain was impacted by the war and society impacted the outcome of the war itself. The population of both countries had to contribute to the War Effort and their morale and dedication or lack thereof to the cause is arguably what shaped the war in the end.