

Topic Guide

Britain during the Second World War

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This series, rather than giving the contents found in textbooks, focuses on ways in which topics may be studied to best advantage. Dr Robert Pearce provides advice which can be used as a revision aid or when beginning study.

The nature of the topic

If a topic is worth studying it is worth studying well, and that means that your approach must have sufficient range as well as depth. The former is especially important, so be sure to study Britain in 1939-45 from several perspectives and to put the period into context by acquiring a working knowledge of the late-1930s and, even more important, the general election of 1945.

The vital first steps

First, you need to acquire a sound overall knowledge of the topic - of the failure of appeasement under Chamberlain, of Churchill's accession to the premiership and the functioning of the wartime coalition, the changes in the economy and society that followed, Britain's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany, plans for post-war reconstruction, and the reasons for Labour's victory in 1945. Only if you study the full range of issues will you be able to focus on any particular one singled out in an exam - and see it in perspective. If there is a central theme to grasp, it must be political change. After all, politicians acquired greater (almost dictatorial) powers in Britain at this time.

Books and articles will provide most of the information you need. But do not neglect film, video and audio sources. They can give a real insight into personalities and events.

Fundamental issues

- Why did Churchill come to power in May 1940? This question breaks down into two: why did Chamberlain resign and why was it Churchill, rather than someone else, who succeeded him? Beware of the popular myth that somehow 'the people' called for Winston to be premier. You need to explain why Halifax turned the job down.
- How successful was Churchill as Prime Minister? What were his strengths and weaknesses - and how did these vary over time? What were his major achievements?
- Which other politicians made a major impact? Were Labour ministers - like Bevin, Attlee and Morrison - particularly successful?
- Was it a 'People's War', symbolised by 'fair shares for all', a new spirit of equality and the Beveridge Report, with its plans to eliminate poverty? What about spivs, the black market and the privileges of the rich?
- How did Britain organise economically for the war?

How efficient was British industry? What role did women workers play? How important was American aid?

- How important was Britain's role in winning the war? You need to be aware of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, El Alamein and the allied bombing of German cities at the end of the war. How important were these compared with the Eastern Front and the efforts of the Americans?

High-grade issues

Once you've grasped the basic issues, you can ask the sort of awkward questions which test out, and add to, historical knowledge. These include the following:

- How important was Churchill's oratory? Did he really 'mobilise the English language and send it into battle'? What promises he did make the British people and were they fulfilled?
- How able was Churchill's international diplomacy during the war? Was he adept in his handling of the Americans and the Soviets? Did he make strategic blunders?
- To what extent was there a leftward swing in public opinion during the war? What was the ethos of J.B. Priestley's radio broadcasts in 1940? Why did by-elections go against the government, despite the electoral truce?
- Why did so many strikes occur in British industry during the war? In particular, why were there so many problems with the coal-mines? Were industrial relations better in 1939-45 than in 1914-18?
- Was the Beveridge Report a 'blueprint' for the welfare state? Was it really a revolutionary document? Why was another Liberal, Maynard Keynes, also an important figure during the war?
- How far did Labour's victory in the 1945 election reflect wartime changes, in ideology and in politics? How far was it a protest against the conditions of the 1930s? (Were the 1930s reinterpreted in the light of the rising expectations of the war years?)

Reading suggestions

Paul Adelman, *Britain: Domestic Politics 1939-64*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1994, provides a concise introduction, as does Robert Pearce in five chapters of his *Contemporary Britain 1914-79*, Longman, 1996. There is much more depth in Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, Routledge, 1999. Angus Calder, *The People's War*, Cape, 1969, is a classic. Robert Mackay, *The Test of War: Inside Britain 1939-45*, UCL Press, 1991, is a good account of economic issues. Biographies of Churchill are legion, and keen students should seek out the one best suited to them.