

The Home Front

1 | Wartime life

On 10 May 1940, Winston Churchill was asked by King George VI to form a **Coalition Government** for the purpose of national defence. In May 1940, the government introduced the **Emergency Powers Act**, mobilising the economy and population to an unprecedented level. **Rationing of food** distribution and consumption was imposed, to ensure fair shares for all. The allowance was of 3,000 calories per day, so that everyone might be healthy and well fed. The **Home Guard** was created in order to resist the looming invasion of Britain. Air Raid Protection Wardens (ARP) patrolled the streets to enforce the **blackout**, thus preventing German bombers from locating their targets. **Maintenance of civilian morale** was considered essential and the government distributed **war propaganda** posters to encourage people. The BBC and cinema were of great help. **Women** were needed to replace men on active service. In December 1941, unmarried women were conscripted in auxiliary services. So, the war increased economic and social **emancipation of women**. Nevertheless, the number of women who remained at home exceeded those who were employed.

2 | Social improvements

In 1940, there was a shortage of skilled labour because war service depleted the work force. In the following years, this was overcome through training programmes and **near full employment** was achieved. Average wages rose but, despite maintenance of morale, several outbreaks of **industrial unrest** occurred. **Evacuation of children** brought home to the public the scale of child deprivation and poverty, thus reinforcing determination to accept a **welfare state**. On 1 December 1942, the Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, written by **Sir William Beveridge**, proposed the elimination of what Beveridge called the five giants: 'want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness'. Those proposals were seen as a 'Blueprint' for a welfare state. Although the Conservatives were reluctant, they could not reject the whole idea. Public support to the welfare state ensured the **victory of the Labour Party in 1945**, because, while Churchill was an outstanding wartime leader, the Labour was more involved in domestic issues. The **Education Act of 1944** brought in a system of secondary education for everyone based on aptitude, and consisting in grammar schools, technical schools and secondary modern schools. The school leaving age was raised to 15.

3 | The economy

Britain was nearly bankrupt. Shipping losses, resulting from German U-Boats attacking Atlantic convoys bringing food and military supplies from the USA, seriously impaired Britain's earnings. The Aid to Democracies Bill was passed by Congress on 11 March 1941. The **Lend-Lease Act** permitted Britain and the other Allies to order all they needed immediately. The US became '**the arsenal of democracy**'. Lend-Lease was swiftly terminated on 17 August 1945, once Japan had surrendered.

Conclusion

The British people fought during more than five years to defend freedom and democracy. During one year, between 17 June 1940 and 22 June 1941, England was alone to face the onslaught of Nazi power. It was in London that Freedom fighters from all the continent, among them De Gaulle, could seek shelter. Britain was then **a beacon of freedom**.