

On the 40th anniversary of VE Day, we ask a wide range of people the question: 'what do you think was the significance of the defeat of fascism in May 1945?'

VE DAY:

What does it mean to YOU?

DAVID BLUNKETT (*Leader, Sheffield City Council*)

The 40th anniversary is a moment to reflect on just how near we have been, and how near we could be, to the calamity of a social and political order which would transform our world into a society based on the use of force, the denigration of humanity, and the abuse of power as tools for ordering our lives.

To remind ourselves is to avoid the likelihood of the past being reflected in the future.



TAMARA DEUTSCHER (*historian and writer*)

In May 1945 the embattled peoples of the continent emerged from the frightful nightmare of total war. There was a sense of relief - of elation.

The nightmare was over but the dawning day brought new anxieties and fears. Europe was in ruins; the political landscape was changed beyond all recognition. The uneasy truce between capitalism and communism, which had prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s had held because of Russian weakness and American isolationism. Both these restraints now belonged to the past.

The doctrine of 'socialism in one country' had lost its credibility. The USSR and the USA were now in the heart of Europe. The extreme polarisation of power in the world, divided into spheres of influence, had created a precarious balance between the two systems, a balance threatened by friction on the borderlines. The sudden expansion of American influence and the spectacular increase in the weight of the Soviet system linked with the revolution in atomic weaponry presented all of us with acute dangers. People wondered whether the world had not become too small to contain the antagonists.

Moreover, while the logic of the wartime struggle against fascism in alliance with the Soviet Union had led the Western powers towards a more progressive type of democracy, hostility and obsessive fear of communism now led them inevitably to seek friends among the most retrograde and reactionary regimes.

Fascism may have been defeated but its spirit was still too close for comfort.

AJP TAYLOR (*historian and broadcaster*)

The significance of the defeat of fascism in May 1945 is very simple. It is that capitalism and democracy are more efficient and more powerful political systems than fascism which has shown itself over the world as totally incompetent and destructive. Fascism is another name for political systems run by lunatics. A characteristic feature of fascism is a form of fancy dress. No-one who has seen Mussolini in action can doubt that he had not the slightest idea of what he was doing and concealed his follies by his Black Shirt.

Hitler was even worse. The Nuremberg demonstrations were far removed from any sane form of political action. Their object was to carry the audience off into uncontrolled hysteria. The only reason why fascism succeeded for a few years was because normal people



could not take fascism seriously and decided that it was less trouble for the fascists to rave away than to get rid of them.

When the ordinary people took action against the fascist lunatics they made an end of them in no time. The so-called Second World War was composed of a series of lesser wars most of which ended in no time at all. For instance, the Russians having been taken by surprise, could not begin their offensive until after the victory of Stalingrad in early 1943. Yet they won the entire war and conquered Berlin in little more than two years.

The British and Americans started their invasion of German-controlled Europe in June 1944. They reached the unconditional surrender of Germany in May 1945. The significance of the defeat of fascism is that it was all a bundle of nonsense and that it was dealt with when the democratic countries pulled themselves together. But it was not surprising that normal people took some time to grasp that fascism was certifiable.

PHIL PIRATIN (*Communist MP 1945-50*)

The defeat of Nazi Germany was the result of the combining of the forces, notably, of Great Britain, the USSR and the USA to destroy the fascist regime. The key factor was the combination of the anti-fascist forces.

The fascist menace could have been halted without resort to war had there been the will on the part of Britain and France to recognise Nazi Germany as their enemy, and taken a positive stand, together with

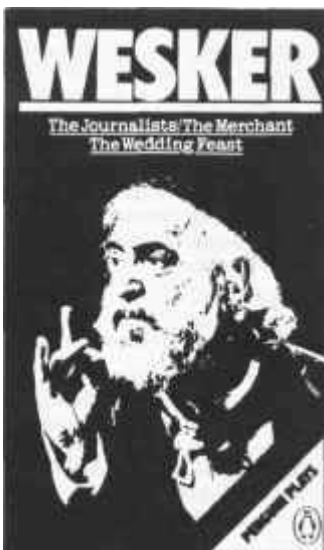


the USSR against the Hitler regime from its inception.

There were forces in Britain and France, however, so violently hostile to the USSR that they were prepared to betray their own national interests in the hope that their encouragement of the Hitler regime would result in the Nazi aggressive and expansionist policy being directed against the USSR. Such forces clung to these hopes even after the fall of Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland and France to the onslaught of the German armies.

It was the courage and sacrifice of the peoples of the USSR which stopped the fascist advance in Europe. It was their example in retreat and in advance which introduced a new factor into the war, and which determined its outcome.

The dominant role performed by the leaders of the USSR, USA and Britain in combining to achieve victory over the Nazi forces also then appeared as a hopeful omen for the future world peace and progress.



ARNOLD WESKER (playwright)

I'm not sure that 'the defeat of fascism' (Nazism) in May 1945 was any more than another landmark in

the ongoing history of belated human endeavour to keep down the ever-present needs of evil and madness which seem to surge through the flaws of mankind's crust. The problem is: we seem unable ever to identify the flaws in time, which is not a helpful observation for your 40th anniversary.

ANNE NIGHTINGALE

(broadcaster and disc jockey)

It was a time when I would have loved to be around and dancing in the street; I resent missing it, it must have been incredible... didn't they have lots of street parties? But then when I think about central America and South America I think, what a pity, after all that it didn't, in the end, prove to be the final overthrow of oppression.

RAYBUCKTON (General

Secretary, ASLEF)

My first real understanding of the viciousness of fascism was when I became friendly with a young German who had escaped from Dachau concentration camp. Although I could not understand the real meaning of war and why it was necessary to fight each other my friendship made me realise the necessity to obliterate the fascists although this meant innocent people suffering.

At the end of the war I breathed a sigh of relief that it was over (and that the senseless maiming and killing was at an end), that the fascists had been defeated, and that their leaders, who had escaped death, were put on trial. I believed we had witnessed the end of fascism.

I was so delighted to see socialism spreading to so many countries. Although not as real as I would have liked in this country, we did witness a great stride forward with the election of a Labour government under Clem Attlee. We saw a move towards a more caring society, towards public ownership of our basic industries. Alas, we did not go far enough and the capitalist system, realising the danger to themselves, again attacked the working class.

The resurgence of fascist and racist tendencies is presenting a serious threat to democracy, peace and freedom. Our dreams and aspirations at the end of the war are now in jeopardy. The people must realise this and fight back before it is too late because if we are again allowed to be dragged into another war, none of us will be alive to dream or have aspirations for socialism as I had at the end of the war.

PAUL OESTREICHER (Reverend

Canon, Member of the Church of England)

Italy, Germany and Japan, three forms of right wing dictatorship, were militarily defe-

ated 40 years ago. 'National Socialism' ie, extreme nationalism combined with messianic and often racist ideology, was not given a death blow. It still has its right and, more sadly, left wing proponents.

Fascism, in its popular left wing usage (ie, every kind of illiberal right wing political system) is, and remains, alive and well both in theory and practice in many parts of the world. To make things worse, many left wing abuses of power, again in theory and in praxis, contain substantial elements of the fascist mentality. The struggle for freedom from economic exploitation and state oppression, both essential to Marxist hope, remain as important in 1985 as they were in 1939. And it applies in equal measure to the first, second, and the third worlds.

LORD HAILSHAM (Lord High

Chancellor)

I remember VE Day very well, it was a moment of great rejoicing. It never occurred to me that people wouldn't go to war any more, I was just relieved that this war was over. . . we had won and the forces of evil had been beaten - for the time being.

MARY STOTT (journalist and

campaigner for women's rights)

At the end of the Second World War I had lived through, I was not thinking so much about the defeat of fascism as that now was the opportunity to live a normal family life. My husband, called into the navy in 1941, had been sent to the Mediterranean just a fortnight after our daughter was born. We did not see him again until the spring of 1945. And then suddenly we were free - free from the nightmare cloud of anxiety that had hung over us for so long, but free also in the political sense.



With the coming of war we had put into cold storage all our idealistic hopes about a better, fairer society. Now, especially after the notable

victory of Labour in the general election of 1945, we could take our hopes out again. Surely, we were on our way to a new social order: a free national health service; a free and truly democratic education system, from nursery to university; nationalisation of major industries and services like coal and the railways; slum clearance and the provision of houses to rent for all who needed them.

In 1945 we seemed to be on our way. It is bitter to think how many of our dreams did not come true.

TAM DALYELL (Labour MP)

Whereas I would like to think that I would have had the guts to be a conscientious objector in August 1914, and to have campaigned against the ludicrous way in which Europe slipped into the nightmare of the First World War, I would unquestionably have joined up on September 3, 1939.

Some wars - for example the Boer War and the Falklands - are fought basically because they partly make the nation feel good, and the fighting saves the political skins of important personages, sitting comfortably at home. As in Flanders in 1915-1918, there was a brave expedition, where individual personal achievement is not diminished by the vain and contemptible folly of those who sent them, the same persons who could have avoided bloodshed.

The Hitler war was different. It was about Jews not being put in gas-ovens. It was about a Master Race mentality. Had Hitler won, civilisation would have been retarded.

In the aftermath of the Falklands, we rightly concern ourselves with the expenditure of public funds denied to a hundred peaceful uses in the preceding course of the Government's expenditure cuts, and the appallingly wounding financial cuts on civilised life for the less well-off since August 1982. No-one really complained about the costs of defeating Hitler. We knew it had to be.

GORDON McLENNAN (General

Secretary, Communist Party)

The defeat of fascism was a victory for democracy. The most barbaric and inhuman dictatorship the world has known was defeated by the endeavour, courage and sacrifice of tens of millions in the armed forces, in the war work and in the resistance movements, joined together in a great anti-fascist, peoples' war. It demonstrates that countries with different social systems could work together for a common cause.

Hitler, and the foulness that he represented, were beaten by the joint efforts of the socialist Soviet Union and Britain, the US and other capitalist countries. So it demons-

trated that peaceful co-existence is possible and that a third world war is not inevitable. It showed the great strength of the socialist system, which, despite the repressions and mistakes of the Stalin period, enabled the Soviet Union to bear the brunt of the struggle against Nazism and make the major contribution to its defeat.

The defeat of fascism in May 1945 created conditions for the success of the national liberation movements in the colonial countries, for the establishment of more socialist states, and for working class and democratic advance in many capitalist countries.

The Second World War established that the real enemies of the British people are those who back fascist and authoritarian regimes, propagate racism, preach anti-Sovietism and anti-communism, and prepare for nuclear war.

The central lesson of 1945 for 1985 is that these forces can be defeated by the building of the widest front of struggle against them.

PETER PRESTON (*Editor, Guardian*)

I think the story of Hitler's Germany was how a nation can have a collective nervous breakdown and become evil in a collective way. And looking back though there have been, and are, plenty of quasi-fascist states around the world, they are essentially sedentary ones, not seeking to export their fascism to other countries.



The defeat of Hitler was the defeat of fascism as a dynamic belief. That has to be one of the major events of modern history. I don't necessarily think 40 years is a particularly meaningful anniversary. It's because 1985 is one year after 1984 and the somewhat confected celebrations of D-Day.

But if people want to concentrate on the end of Hitler and on the end of the madness that gripped German society - and contemplate too the nature of modern German democracy - then that single day in 1945 is the pivot for a lot of lessons and for a lot of rejoicing.

CLAIRE RAYNER (*writer, broadcaster and agony aunt*)

I was 14 at the time and I was in a small country town; everyone was jumping up and down and getting so excited and I thought...*why?* I couldn't imagine that this one day would make anything better and all these grown-ups were behaving very oddly and getting drunk and I felt very disgusted that they were making such a fuss about something being over that they'd started in the first place.

In any case, I remembered how much they'd enjoyed the war, they'd been thrilled by it, had a marvellous time, the women going out with all those Americans in their glamorous uniforms. So yes, they'd started it and made life rotten for the rest of us. It was ghastly being a kid, being an evacuee. . . for all those years life had been absolute shit, being bombed out, being blitzed, my education had been wrecked and it was all so dreary.

And all this fuss about one day. But I do remember that it was sunny.

SPIKE MILLIGAN (*actor and writer*)

The significance of the defeat of fascism was that it terminated it. It terminated it as an organisation and dominating force in world affairs, though it still has residuals in various parts of the world, witness the National Front in England, or the neo fascist party in Italy. Deep down, anybody who is a racist still harbours the seeds of fascism within his personality, and therefore, you can see that whereas fascism as a centralised and powerful force has been dissipated, there might be anything up to ten million people in the



world today who if put into concert would reconstitute a fascist party, a fascist army and a fascist state. It is only their dispersal in small enclaves that prevents this. I still know 'jolly decent Englishmen' who still talk of people as niggers, wogs and wops, but then, of course, fascism was not entirely made up of racialism. It was the basic desire through the Nietzschean philosophy of the superman, who seemed to glow in the Nazi hierarchy which brought about a state of national fervour, that energy had to be canalised into national fervour which could only last a short while without an obvious attempt to explode into war, which it did.

When we talk of war that is not a speciality of the fascist state; war is part of human; make-up and can be as deeply implanted in Mrs Thatcher as it can be in Adolf Hitler. I would say that the only way to end wars is to have them. So there - any questions?

DAVID STEEL (*Leader of the Liberal Party*)

I believe that two revolutionary movements have made a major impression on 20th century Europe; Marxism and fascism. Both are widely used (and misused) in political invective, but fascism stands out in the near unanimity of condemnation it receives and the perception that it was defeated in 1945.

This defeat must not be seen simply as the overthrow of Hitler's and Mussolini's brands of totalitarianism. In geostrategic terms, the manner of their overthrow was as significant as their defeat: the strategic reality of postwar Europe meant that our continent had become clearly divided between the interests of East and West.

The defeat of fascism is clearly a

cause for celebration, but this celebration must be treated with caution as one must never assume that an ideology, no matter how loathesome, has been or can ever be completely defeated. This is clearly shown by recent rallies and electoral victories in France and Belgium.

The VE Day celebrations must not blind us to the need to be permanently on our guard to prevent fascism (in whatever guise) overthrowing democracy again.

JONATHAN MILLER (*doctor and writer*)

The defeat of fascism in 1945 brought to an end an unbelievably malignant phase in European politics. There is no easily identifiable descendant. People assume that fascism is a sort of universal, evil principal which takes different forms at different times. I tend to think that we saw, between the wars, something peculiar to its times. I become very impatient when people equate Mrs Thatcher and her government with fascism.

There are features of South Africa that are repressive, brutal and tyrannical, but we must not equate these with fascism. Different political structures operate at different political times. The elaborate ideology of German fascism is quite different to anything we see today. There are racist movements but we cannot delude ourselves that it's Nazism on the march again. Racism today is different. The Action Franchise, for example, was a much more nostalgic movement, looking back to the catholic world of the Ancien Regime, than the contemporary Right of France today. This is a new movement - undisguised, just as dangerous - but quite different. We have to explain what gives rise to these movements in the 1970s and 1980s.

JO RICHARDSON (*Labour MP and feminist*)

It barely impinged on me at the time, although I remember it well. Just a great relief that it was all over...the constraints of blackouts and the men being away and being killed and the general terror of war...and then the feeling that we should all get on with the next business.

I don't know that I translated it in directly political terms; I was working in a factory (in the office part of it). I'd been politically conscious until that point - but I hadn't joined a party. Right after VE Day I joined the Labour Party and haven't looked back since. I felt the new world was going to come upon us; I thought very much in terms of 'let's get up and get on with the next thing'; that was why I joined the party. I believed I was taking part in making a better world. I still do.

JEREMY SEABROOK (*journalist*)

The meaning of that defeat looks very different in 1985 from the way it appeared then. I can just remember the revulsion that so many people felt when the concentration camps were opened, and the way this contributed to the will for radical change. In large measure, the history of the last 40 years has been the history of the erasure of that memory and of that impulse. It is now clear that fascism - a recurring and protean phenomenon - was not defeated at all - merely one particularly virulent form of it; and in the contemporary world, many millions of human beings continue to be subordinated to one or another of its many metamorphoses. There is no ultimate victory over these insidious abstractions, as the voice of Albert Camus warned at the end of the war, when he compared the infection of Nazism to the spread of the plague. He wrote then 'The plague bacillus never dies completely; it can remain for years sleeping in furniture and linen, waiting patiently in rooms and cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers, and the day may come when, for the suffering and the instruction of humanity, the plague will rouse up its rats and send them to die in an innocent city.'

HARRY LANDIS (*actor and director*)

I had been at work well over a year. A factory in Shadwell, London. I wore a trilby to look like Cagney and smoked De Reske Minors to look like Bogey.

Suddenly it's peace and a whole new atmosphere. What wonders lie ahead of us? Would we see the socialism I had heard Phil Piratin talking about in the Mile End Baths?

Just before the war big boys of 12 and 13 went round grabbing us eight and nine year olds shouting, 'Red or Black'? If you dared say 'Red' you got thumped. With the defeat of fascism, that could never happen again.

It was impossible that we would ever hear again the gangs of youths shouting, 'The Yids, the Yids, we've got to get rid of the Yids'. This war had got rid of them forever.

It would certainly be the end of larking about with girls in the brick air-raid shelters in the streets. Pity to demolish them. They were so handy.

Soon be the General Election. People think Piratin might get in and represent the East End in parliament. A new world is opening up and I've found Unity Theatre.

ALISTAIR GRAHAM (*General Secretary, CPSA*)

As somebody who was born during the Second World War it would be

easy to catalogue the significance of the defeat of fascism as providing a world peace which I have been able to enjoy for 40 years.

Yet my reaction to the question posed is a strong antagonism to the terms of the postwar division of Europe and my personal difficulties in coping with trying to understand the nature of a society that tolerated a political regime which organised the systematic destruction of millions of Jews living in occupied Europe.

I was reminded of the nature of the post war division of Europe when I recently had the opportunity to visit both East and West Berlin where that hideous wall divides a city that wants to be united; where there is an underground traffic of people from East to West Berlin for money and where Honecker cannot arrange to visit Western Germany because of a tap on the shoulder from Moscow.

For me it is the great events of the uprising in Hungary in 1956 which has led to the most liberal regime in Eastern Europe; the Prague Spring of 1968 and the capacity of Solidarnosc to survive in Poland, despite all the difficulties of that sad country, which for me provide the pointers that the postwar divisions of Europe may not be inevitable.

MIKE HARDING (*entertainer*)

The fascism of the 30s was defeated in 1945 only to be replaced by a new form of fascism based on international capital and the new emperors - the multinationals.

Since 1945 the myth of peace has been a screen behind which the West, and America in particular, have sought to extend their spheres of influence in Africa, Central America and now, of course, outer space.

The new fascism is based on the subjection of peoples through fear. In the Third World fear of hunger, in the West fear of unemployment and, of course, the fear of 'Soviet



domination'. The new fascism is harder to detect but it's there all the same based on power groups and oligarchy and cadres of the elite drawn from, in Thatcher's England for example, the same half-dozen public schools and clubs.

We defeated Hitler and replaced him 40 years on with a regime very like the one he would have liked to have seen in a conquered Britain - anti-union, anti-socialist, anti-democratic and anti-poor.

DORA RUSSELL (*life-long campaigner and writer*)

The significance of the defeat of fascism in May 1945 is that the allied victory was due quite as much to the heroic sacrifices of the secret resistance as to the bravery of the armies. The resistance in Holland, Belgium, France, and even in Germany, was skilful and effective in their sabotage and watch on German plans and movements. A large number of the resistance personnel were of the Left or communist movements. In 1945 their contribution to the war effort was belittled, and all opportunities for their political co-operation were restricted, proscribed.



The Left, on the other hand, has continued to make two serious errors. It allowed nationalism to obscure the basic slogan 'workers of the world unite'. And it has persisted in splitting itself by dogmas and heresies, Marxism and Trotskyism. Militant reaction wins by its unity in acts of repression. I am antagonised by a journal named *Marxism Today* because for me Marxism is a description of the class structure of the British industrial revolution, carried into dogma and over-rated; and carried over into places and situations where it does not belong. There is only one enemy - capitalism - for self and profit. Its opponent is socialism, the mutual sharing of labour, the care of the planet and of the produce by which it sustains us. With unity on that basis we could win, and must continue the fight.



GEOFFREY GOODMAN (*Labour Editor, Daily Mirror*)

When I stood on an RAF airfield on the frontiers of Germany waiting for take-off alert and heard that the war in Europe was over, my first instinctive reaction was disbelief.

Could it really be true that the extraordinary grip of Nazi Germany over Europe had at last been broken?

Would those dreams of a new world really begin to take off - in the flowering of all those splendid ideas we had discussed endlessly during battle stations. Would any of that really be possible when we returned home?

Those were the thoughts I can still recall 40 years later. It did seem then, that there was the chance, a real opportunity, that the entirely new landscape of hope that stretched out before us might bear fruit.

Around us was death and destruction. We had lived with that landscape for a long time. Now it seemed to mark the past. The future could be something else, something really better.

Were we too young, too naive? Perhaps. Yet the defeat of fascism, for me, then spelled out a real message of hope.

We gathered around on that airstrip and agreed with all that, maybe we were too simplistic, still too immature, to realise that it was far easier to destroy a poisonous weed than to plant and nurture the healthy growth of new seeds.

GEORGE MELLY (*musician*)

I was in the navy, in a training camp, and all I can remember is getting very drunk. I wasn't on shore leave that night - we had alternate nights ashore - and a friend of mine stole some unconsecrated communion wine from the local chapel and we got drunk on that and I seem to recall dustbins being set on fire.

I suppose it would have been different in the middle of London, but outside an ex-Butlin's holiday camp in Wales there wasn't much more to it than that.

As to the meaning of it all... I was an anarchist at the time - still am - and I didn't believe that the eradication of one sort of fascism was enough to eradicate it from the universe.

There was, though, some relief: that it meant I wouldn't be sent on a Russian convoy. But the war in Japan was still on, and the possibility was still there that I could be sent to the Far East... though that never actually happened.

Compiled by Sally Townsend