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COVID-19, MYTH, MEMORY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Christopher Smith

INTRODUCTION

The novel SARS-CoV-2 virus, which emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, swept across the world in 2020. As of March 2022, the virus, and resulting disease, COVID-19, has killed approximately six million people.¹ In Britain, the disease struck particularly hard, deaths per million of the population numbering 2,578 at the time of writing. A figure comparable to, or higher than, many other economically developed European countries.² This tally came in spite of a highly successful vaccine roll-out programme, which has significantly reduced mortality and transmission in the UK. As was reported at the time, for much of the pandemic, Britain under-performed compared to similarly developed nations.³

The response of the British Conservative government to the pandemic was to implement highly stringent, invasive measures to diminish transmission, relieve pressure on healthcare infrastructure, and ultimately reduce mortality. These measures included the imposition of highly restrictive ‘lockdowns’ – rules, underpinned by legislation, restricting both movement and economic activity. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, outlined these extraordinary new rules in a letter sent to each household in the United Kingdom,

we are giving one simple instruction – you **must** stay at home.

You should not meet friends or relatives who do not live in your home. You may only leave your home for very limited purposes, such as buying food and medicine, exercising once a day and seeking medical attention. You can travel to and from work but should work from home if you can.

When you do have to leave your home, you should ensure, wherever possible, that you are two metres apart from anyone outside of your household.

¹ H. Wang, et al. (2022), ‘Estimating excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of COVID-19-related mortality, 2020–21’. *Lancet*, vol. 399, no. 10334, pp. 1513-1536.

² France stands at 2,245; Italy at 2,736; Spain at 2,247; and Germany at 1,633. Worldometer, 2022, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> [accessed: 13 May 2022].

³ Alexander Smith, ‘Britain's Covid daily death toll is one of the worst in the world. What went wrong?’, *NBC News*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/britain-s-covid-daily-death-toll-one-worst-world-what-n1255261> [accessed: 24 May 2021].

These rules must be observed. So, if people break the rules, the police will issue fines and disperse gatherings.⁴

This has been widely viewed as the most extraordinary and invasive set of limitation on basic freedoms of British citizens since the Second World War. *The Sunday Times* described this momentous decision in terms which directly referenced that conflict: 'Boris Johnson had ordered an expansion of the state not seen since the Second World War to save the National Health Service, an institution formed in the cauldron of that conflict.'⁵ The article was accompanied with an illustration by Russel Herneman, Julian Osbaldstone and Tony Bell.⁶ It depicted a couple sneaking to the pub stating, 'a swift half won't hurt', but with Boris Johnson sternly looking down on them, hands on his hips, in disapproval. The caption of the illustration reads, 'Careless Walk Costs Lives'. The cartoon was a direct homage to the Second World War's 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' posters, by the *Punch* cartoonist and later editor, (Cyril) Kenneth Bird who went by the penname Fougasse.⁷

The *Sunday Times* was hardly alone in framing its reporting of the COVID-19 crisis around the memory of the Second World War. Politicians, including the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, were also keen to draw such comparisons. This chapter outlines some of the efforts by the British government and the print media to link the COVID-19 crisis to the British cultural memory of the war and how myths regarding that conflict were used as framing devices to explain or justify government policy.⁸ In doing so, it demonstrates the perceived significance and legacies of the conflict in twenty-first century Britain and how the myths of the war continue to shape government and media rhetoric. But how effective have these efforts been? How readily has the British public accepted and drawn upon the comparisons made between the COVID-19 crisis and the Second World War? This chapter draws upon the #RecordCovid19 project to test the reception of this messaging. It demonstrates that, at least in the case of the respondents to #RecordCovid19 project, the Second World War has surprisingly little resonance. The project overwhelmingly received responses from young women. As

⁴ Boris Johnson, Prime Minister letter to nation on coronavirus, 28 March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pm-letter-to-nation-on-coronavirus> [accessed: 24 May 2021].

⁵ Tim Shipman, Caroline Wheeler, 'Ten days that shook Britain - and changed the nation for ever; The inside story of how Boris Johnson changed his priorities: save lives first, and then salvage the economy', *The Sunday Times*, 22 March 2020, p. 6.

⁶ Russel Herneman, Julian Osbaldstone and Tony Bell, 'Careless Walk Costs Lives', 22 March 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-ten-days-that-shook-britain-and-changed-the-nation-for-ever-spz6sc9vb> [accessed: 24 May 2021].

⁷ Howard Coster (2004), 'Bird, (Cyril) Kenneth [Fougasse] (1887–1965)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1002870> [accessed 24 May 2021].

⁸ For over-views of Britain, myth and the war, see: Angus Calder (1991), *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Cape); Malcolm Smith (2000), *Britain and 1940: history, myth and popular memory* (London: Routledge); Mark Connelly (2004), *We can take it: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow: Pearson);

such, it is possible that the relevance of the Second World War in British cultural memory is fading among this demographic.

BRITAIN, MYTH AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

That the national discourse surrounding COVID-19 crisis, which has led to the infection of over 22 million British citizens and resulted in the premature deaths of at least 176,708 people in the United Kingdom alone,⁹ has been framed around the Second World War is not surprising. As Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson have noted

Few historical events have resonated as fully in modern British culture as the Second World War. Despite it receding further into the distant past with that generation's passing, it continues to have a lingering and very vivid presence in British popular culture so that even those born in its aftermath have particular 'memories' of it.¹⁰

These myths and memories have, in recent decades, become a core subject of interest to historians of Britain's wartime experience.¹¹ Various different myths of the conflict abound. Key to this chapter and the COVID-19 crisis are three key myths: the 'People's War'; Churchill as the 'man of destiny'; and the creation of a 'New Jerusalem'.

In this context, a myth is not necessarily an event, or series of events, which did not happen. Instead, myth should be understood, in Roland Barthes analysis, as a purified picture of the past, which airbrushes out unfortunate or uncomfortable complexity from the desired narrative and gives historical actions 'the simplicity of their essences'.¹² To provide an example, in post-war France myths of 'resistance' emerged regarding the Vichy regime of 1940 to 1944: these minimised the collaboration, hardships and brutalities of the Vichy regime; promoted sites and groups associated

⁹ Worldometer, 2021, 'United Kingdom Coronavirus Cases' <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/uk/> [accessed: 13 May 2022].

¹⁰ Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (2014), 'Introduction: "Keep calm and carry on": The cultural memory of the Second World War in Britain', in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 2.

¹¹ Penny Summerfield (1997), *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Sonya O. Rose (2003), *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Noakes and Pattinson (eds.) (2014), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*.

¹² Roland Barthes (1957), *Myth Today*, in Roland Barthes (ed), *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 169-170.

with the French resistance; and associated the French nation with resistance.¹³ Rather than engage with bitter and divisive analysis of those years, blighted by collaboration and atrocity, resistancialism offered a heroic interpretation of them in which Nazism was imposed on France and the French resisted. One of the central myths of the Second World War to emerge in Britain, was that the British were fighting a 'People's War'. That is, the existential threat posed by Nazi Germany, particularly in 1940, led the British public to come together in a spirit of unprecedented unity. Everyone did their bit be it on the front lines or on the Home front, they did so with the quintessentially British 'stiff upper lip', and in doing so the rifts of class and gender closed. Yet, this narrative obscures the extent of those changes and glosses over extent to which those fractures continued to persist.¹⁴ Such myths were imposed from both "above", via government messaging and the media, and from "below" by the people themselves whose morale to which the government was in thrall. The state could only prosecute the war with the participation and acceptance of the people. As Angus Calder put it in 1969, were the people 'depressed by their conviction that victory would be the prelude to a new slump? Then plans must be made to ensure that life really would be better after the war'.¹⁵

Through created in the furnace of wartime, during the post-war period these myths of the Second World War have remained; always important and always present. This does not mean that they necessarily have remained static. For example, the People's War, originally a radical view of Britain's wartime experience, was somewhat diminished and changed in the Thatcherite 1980s. The idea of the united mass of Britons, in collective solidarity facing down existential thread of the Axis powers, was displaced and subordinated to a narrative of key heroes, Sir Winston Churchill above all elevated to the 'man of destiny'. This view of the war was better suited the individualistic ideology of the government of the day and the decision by Margaret Thatcher to once again take Britain to war, following the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands.¹⁶ Mark Connelly describes this process as the placing of an increased 'emphasis on the image of Churchill and a desire to set the people free from interventionalist controls.'¹⁷

Tied to the People's War myth, its natural conclusion in some ways, was the myth of the New Jerusalem. In the midst of the death, destruction and hardship, which had been visited on soldiers

¹³ Henry Rousso (1987) *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 10.

¹⁴ Penny Summerfield (1988), 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', in Arthur Marwick (ed.), *Total War and Social Change* (London: Palgrave), pp. 95-118.

¹⁵ Angus Calder (1996), *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico)

¹⁶ Steven Fielding, Bill Schwartz and Richard Toye (2020), *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 57.

¹⁷ Connelly (2004), *We can take It*, p.11.

and civilians alike, a new Britain would be required after the war concluded. This would be a physical rebuilding of the nation, sweeping away destroyed, damaged or decrepit infrastructure and housing, replacing it with a modern, planned physical environment.¹⁸ This was part of a wider, prevailing view that, hitherto, society had failed millions of its citizens, who had been left to the ravages of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.¹⁹ After the British people had sacrificed so much to ensure victory, a consensus among the people and politicians emerged that it was incumbent on the post-war government to build a just, bountiful future. This would be the welfare state. As Lord Addison, the Leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, put it in 1944, 'We are not looking for (if I may so express it) a mushroom New Jerusalem, but we are looking for a determined and disinterested endeavour to apply the lessons of our great experiences, so that life and opportunity in our homeland shall be more worthy of the people who inhabit it.'²⁰ Arthur Marwick described such sentiment as the psychological impact of war, 'that such appalling slaughter must be for something'.²¹ Tied to this idea is that the war produced a period of 'consensus' politics, which was in the view of Paul Addison saw all three major parties go 'to the polls in 1945 committed to principles of social and economic reconstruction' and this consensus was 'positive and purposeful'.²² This general consensus broadly would hold firm until the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Yet, the British public and its politicians were, in fact, far from united in a desire to build and maintain this New Jerusalem and historians have long debated the extent to which there was a consensus.²³ As Ben Pimlott argues, 'Like most historical theories, the consensus thesis is as much about the present as the past. The assumption of harmony in the past is a way of underlining the gulf that is believed to exist in the present.'²⁴

In 2020, when Britain was once again facing a threat and impositions like no other, the press and politicians immediately turned to these myths of Second World War to describe this new crisis in easily understood, familiar terms. How then have these myths shaped the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 crisis and to what effect?

¹⁸ John Stevenson (1988), 'The New Jerusalem', in Lesley M. Smith (ed.), *The Making of Britain: Echoes of Greatness* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd.) pp. 53-70.

¹⁹ William H. B. Beveridge (1942), *Social insurance and allied services: Report by Sir William Beveridge* (London: HMSO), p. 170.

²⁰ *Hansard*, Lords Debate, vol. 130, cols. 776-777, 15 February 1944.

²¹ Arthur Marwick (1988), 'Introduction', in Arthur Marwick (ed.), *Total War and Social Change* (London: Palgrave), p. xvi.

²² Paul Addison (1975), *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Quartet, 1977), p. 14.

²³ For a brief summary of the consensus debate, see: Brian Harrison (1999), 'The Rise, fall and Rise of Political Consensus in Britain since 1940', *History* vol. 84, no. 274, pp. 302-308

²⁴ Ben Pimlott (1988), 'The Myth of Consensus', in Lesley M. Smith (ed.), *The Making of Britain: Echoes of Greatness* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd.) p. 135.

COVID-19, THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND BRITISH POLITICAL CULTURE

As noted above, the *Sunday Times*, in reporting on the imposition of lockdown measures in March 2020 drew heavily upon the Second World War to illustrate its point.

The last time the British state began a multiple service attack on a lurking enemy - D-Day in 1944 - it became known as The Longest Day. On Thursday one cabinet minister reflected: 'It feels like the longest week. It felt like Brexit was going to change the country but it is the coronavirus that will do that now.'²⁵

Importantly here, the *Sunday Times*, were clearly taking the cue from the unnamed cabinet minister alluding to D-Day, in describing the imposition of lockdown as the 'longest week'. The *Sunday Times* were hardly the first or last to present the crisis as akin to a war – a comparison which has elicited much criticism from historians.²⁶ Indeed, the Prime Minister himself had, in the days prior, announced that 'we must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy' and defeat the coronavirus 'enemy'. By extension, if he was now at the head of a "wartime government" then he was a "wartime Prime Minister".²⁷ Notably, Johnson was far from unique in this strategy. Across the Atlantic Ocean, President Donald Trump similarly attempted to position himself as a 'wartime president'.²⁸

On the one hand, clearly Johnson, who had previously written a biography of Churchill²⁹ (a thinly veiled literary audition for his political hero's former job in No. 10 Downing Street), had positioned

²⁵ Shipman, Wheeler, 'Ten days that shook Britain', *Sunday Times*, 22 March 2020, p. 6.

²⁶ Arne Kislenko (2020), 'Comparing COVID-19 to past world war efforts is premature — and presumptuous', *The Conversation*, 12 July, <https://theconversation.com/comparing-covid-19-to-past-world-war-efforts-is-premature-and-presumptuous-140701> [accessed: 24 May 2021]; Henry Irving, *et al.* (2020), 'The real lessons of the Blitz for Covid-19', *History & Policy*, 3 April, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-real-lessons-of-the-blitz-for-covid-19> [accessed: 24 May 2021]; Martin Gorsky (2020), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 9 April, <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/expert-opinion/covid-19-crisis-world-war-two-not-really> [Accessed: 24 May 2021]; Richard Overy (2020), 'Why the cruel myth of the "Blitz spirit" is no model for how to fight coronavirus', *Guardian*, 19 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/19/myth-blitz-spirit-model-coronavirus> [accessed: 21 May 2021].

²⁷ Boris Johnson (2020), 'Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 17 March 2020', *Speech*, 17 March, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-17-march-2020> (accessed: 24 May 2021).

²⁸ Caitlin Oprysko (2020), 'Trump labels himself "a wartime president" combating coronavirus', *Politico*, 18 March, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/18/trump-administration-self-swab-coronavirus-tests-135590> (accessed: 24 May 2021).

²⁹ Boris Johnson (2014), *The Churchill factor: How One Man Made History* (London: Hodder & Stroughton).

himself as the new 'man of destiny' for the COVID crisis. In this characterisation, elements of the largely right-wing British print media were keen to assist. When Johnson was himself struck down with COVID-19, the columnist Allison Pearson took to the pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, to claim that Johnson was elevated to a 'rambunctious hero', brutally victimised by a virus laying 'siege to the country, suspending the life and liberty that no one values more than he does'. Indeed, Johnson had come, in Pearson's view, to embody the nation and its struggle against the virus itself. She concluded, 'His health is our health; if he can defeat coronavirus, then so can we. During this crucial chapter in our history, we need the narrator of our national story as never before.'³⁰

Yet, given the scale of the problem, which required posed massive logistical problems in terms of the provision of healthcare and rolling out a functional test and trace system, as well as cooperation from the public as a whole to engage with lockdown, the 'war' against COVID-19 was also to be a 'People's War'. This was a point not lost on Johnson. On 23 March 2020 he addressed the nation stating that 'in this fight we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted. Each and every one of us is now obliged to join together.'³¹ Though clearly keen to present himself as a Churchillian figure, the 'man of destiny' for the times, it was also important to position the response of his government as leading a united Britain. Similarly, a wartime government eventually required a 'post-war' vision, which directly alluded to and incorporated the left-wing mythologies of Britain's Second World War. To this end, in a speech given in October 2020, pitching his tent firmly in the Labour Party's historical territory, he proclaimed that: 'In the depths of the second world war, in 1942 when just about everything had gone wrong, the government sketched out a vision of the post war new Jerusalem that they wanted to build. And that is what we are doing now – in the teeth of this pandemic.'³²

This 'People's War' view of the COVID-19 crisis, was also one plainly shared by the press and other elements of Britain's political ecosystem. The *Financial Times*, for instance, quoted the Secretary of State for Health, Matt Hancock, who was even more explicit in invoking the People's War than his Prime Minister: "Our generation has never been tested like this. Our grandparents were, during the second world war, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night,

³⁰ Allison Pearson, (2020) 'Only now do we realise how valuable Boris is to us all', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 April, p. 20.

³¹ Boris Johnson, 'Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 March 2020', Prime Minister's Office, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020> [accessed: 13 May 2022].

³² Boris Johnson, 'The Prime Minister's full text. He says that, like Churchill's wartime government, he is sketching out a vision of a new Jerusalem', *Conservative Home*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2020/10/the-prime-ministers-full-text-he-says-that-like-churchills-wartime-government-his-is-sketching-out-a-vision-of-a-new-jerusalem.html> (accessed: 23 February 2021).

the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort.”³³ This, Jonathan Ford, also of the *Financial Times*, plainly agreed, writing that Britain, ‘With its memories of communal sacrifice leading to ultimate triumph, the second world war looms large in Britain’s national consciousness.’ But with the caveat that ‘the “mobilisation” required to beat coronavirus may have a different shape and rhythm from those distant events.’³⁴

Clearly then, at least three key myths of the Second World War were key to both explaining and making palatable the COVID-19 crisis and its’ incumbent restrictions to the British public. As a touchpoint, the war provided an important reference point indicating the scale or the problem, the type of invasive response which the government would employ, and as a source of favourable, populist political rhetoric with which to couch that response. These myths were the ‘man of destiny’, as embodied first by Churchill and then 80 years later, by Boris Johnson. Second, the ‘People’s War’, the myth that the British people were unified by a single cause: the defeat of the Axis powers. In 2020, that enemy had been replaced by the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus. Third, the myth of a New Jerusalem, that the extraordinary and invasive economic measures of wartime led inexorably to a new Britain, where the newly empowered Labour government of 1945, having learned the lessons of the Second World War, went on to enact its radical, egalitarian vision of the post-war society. In 2020, the same arguments were instantly seized upon by Conservative Party Ministers to justify their own economic policies during COVID-19.

#RECORDCOVID19

Interestingly, though plainly hugely significant tools in framing the COVID-19 crisis, the #RecordCovid19 project shows surprisingly little evidence that these narratives and myths from the Second World War, applied to the pandemic, cut through to the public – or at least that small section of the public who submitted their experiences to the project.

The first observation to note is that of the 117 ‘diary’ entries submitted to the project, some 77 emerged from individuals who explicitly listed their location as being in the United Kingdom. Of those entries, only five directly discuss the war.³⁵ The diarist most concerned by the war, Diarist 17,

³³ Laura Hughes (2020), ‘UK to ask over-70s to self-isolate for up to four months’, *Financial Times*, 15 March, <https://www.ft.com/content/26cc9170-669f-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3> [accessed: 24 May 2021].

³⁴ Jonathan Ford (2020), ‘The new wartime economy in the era of coronavirus’, *Financial Times*, 25 March, <https://www.ft.com/content/5945c61a-6dc7-11ea-89df-41bea055720b> [24 May 2021].

³⁵ [#Record Covid19–3] Lincoln, Stage manager, Female, 29; [#Record Covid19–17] North West UK, Sales Rep, Female 57 yrs old; [#RecordCovid19-43, Student, Female, 20; [#RecordCovid19–51] Suffolk, England, Postgrad Student, Female, 22; [#Record Covid19-84] London, Office Worker, Female, 40 something.

is a sales representative, a grandmother from the Northwest of the United Kingdom, aged 57. In her entry, she compared the experience of lockdown and, more explicitly, demonstrated a stoicism regarding becoming acclimatised to fear and panic prompted by the situation.

I often wondered how folk coped when living through the war years, the prospect of being bombed etc.. I sort of get it now. Corona virus is a deadly threat -but it's impossible to keep at that high level of intense panic all the time. I find that when looking at the national figure of deaths.... I couldn't take it in. A couple of the earlier totals added to over 900 in a couple of days.³⁶

As Penny Summerfield has shown, in her study of women's wartime memories collected through oral history interviews, some women reflected on and presented their own experiences of war as an act of 'stoic coping', which were compared sometimes unfavourably to the heroism of those in active military service.³⁷

Diarist 17, continuing the allusion to the Second World War, compared frontline NHS workers to soldiers. The entry was submitted on 22 April 2020. By that stage of the pandemic at least 21,045 people in Britain had died,³⁸ contact tracing was in its infancy and subject to severe structural shortcomings,³⁹ and the NHS stockpiles of ventilators and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were running dangerously low.⁴⁰ These failures were keenly felt by Diarist 17 who wrote,

We have one of the worst death tolls in the world. Why? Questions need to be asked and answered and people held to account. We owe it to all the families that have lost loved ones and to the NHS and other staff, killed 'in the line of duty'. It has been described frequently as a war...and staff 'on the front line'. However, the soldiers in this war didn't know it was coming, are amongst the lowest paid and have gone into battle without proper protective equipment.

As Summerfield observed of one of her interviewees in the Second World War, the interviewee stoically survived the humdrum of wartime while her military serviceman father was a hero. In this instance, Diarist 17 presents herself as stoically surviving COVID-19, increasingly numbed to the scale

³⁶ [#Record Covid19-17] North West UK, Sales Rep, Female 57 yrs old.

³⁷ Penny Summerfield (2016), 'Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice', *Miranda*, 12. For a wider discussion see also: Summerfield (1997), *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*.

³⁸ Worldometer, 2021, 'United Kingdom Coronavirus Cases' <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/uk/> [accessed: 25 May 2021].

³⁹ Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnott (2021), *Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus* (London: Mudlark) pp. 98-100.

⁴⁰ *BBC News* (2020), 'Coronavirus: UK failed to stockpile crucial PPE', 28 April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-52440641> [accessed: 25 May 2021].

of death and restriction. The heroes, the health workers, were however being badly let down by an incompetent government.

Another respondent to reflect on the analogies of wartime is Diarist 43, a female, recent history student, aged 20. As a history student, Diarist 43 noted that ‘the reality at home is that all of us are healthy, positive and carrying on – something I reflect on as a little reminiscent of attitudes such as the blitz spirit (although of course, in a very different context).’⁴¹ Interestingly, Johnson and the government’s efforts to present themselves as wartime leaders, appeared to hit home.

This is another prospect I find interesting as a history student. I don’t think I ever understood the rather deep relationship between a Prime Minister and the state of public attitude during war, or times of great strain. I honestly never thought I’d be waiting each day to see a figure like Boris Johnson or Dominic Raab [Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs] speak at a podium, and yet here I am.

By contrast, Diarist 3, a female Stage Manager aged 29, compared Johnson unfavourably to Churchill. In particular, as a theatrical arts professional, she worried that the government’s financial support system for the self-employed would be insufficient and negatively impact her industry. As a result of this perceived failure she concluded, ‘I have often heard that during WW2 Winston Churchill was told to cut funding to the arts to fund the war effort, and his reply was “Then what are we fighting for?” The same still applies today.’⁴²

Diarist 51, a female postgraduate student aged 22, also noted the efforts in by the media and government to place the COVID-19 crisis within the context of British cultural memories of the Second World War. However, the wartime references did not have the desired effect. In fact, the reverse was the case, the Diarist viewing such patriotic displays as a distraction from the perceived incompetence of Johnson’s government.

I feel like I’m in the incinerator from Toy Story 3, trying desperately to run from a massive fiery hole, and someone’s at the controls, and everyone’s screaming for them to do something and they’re just singing Vera Bloody Lynn as though if we were all a little more gung-ho and Blitz Spirited about this then we’d all be muddling along nicely. I hate that our country is nearly the

⁴¹ [#Record Covid19-43] Student, Female, 20.

⁴² [#Record Covid19-3] Lincoln, Stage manager, Female, 29.

laughing stock of the world. I hate the idea that smug people are going to be blaming us for Boris Johnson.⁴³

Finally, Diarist 81, briefly alluded to the war and, interestingly to the memory of the war.⁴⁴ A female office worker in her 40s, wondered whether individuals would continue to discuss their own experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic after the event concludes. The argument being that while the Second World War looms large in popular culture, individual memories of trauma and loss from that period did not. 'Everyone mentioned "the war"', the diarist believes, 'but no one wanted to talk about their individual experiences of it – because everyone who had been through it felt the same.' As such, bitter and painful memories were not passed down to those who did not live through the war years. In the case of COVID-19, the view of the diarist is that 'Everyone just wants to put it in a box, draw a line under it. Because everyone has shared it there is no need to try and explain it, as with a unique and individual trauma.' The result being that, as with the Second World War, popular culture will remain, but individual experience of the trauma of the pandemic will fade.

Clearly, then, the #RecordCovid19 project suggests that some of the wartime messaging did have an impact on a small number of the diarists, but that this was as likely to produce a negative reaction (at least among this self-selecting sample) as a positive one. In general, however, diarists overwhelmingly did not comment on the Second World War at all. In fact, just 5% of diarists made any reference to the conflict. Instead, diarists were far more concerned with narrating the impact of the extraordinary measures imposed by the government on their own lives and those of their families and friends. In addition, a theme running throughout the entries was the perceived risk of death or illness, again reflecting the risks to themselves and loved ones.

Of course, #RecordCovid19 is a self-selecting qualitative collection of diaries. As noted, 76 of the diarists reported that they are from the United Kingdom, yet clearly fifteen of the entries were produced by individuals who had already contributed to the project. As such there are 61 entries by unique individuals. 34 (56%) of 61 of the diarists reported that they are female, 17 (28%) that they were male, three (5%) that they are non-binary and seven (11%) gave no response. 48 (79%) of the respondents that they are under the age of 35, 7 (11%) that they were over the age of 35, and six (10%) either did not give an age or placed themselves within a wide range. Further there were 23 students (38%), six teachers or trainee teachers (10%). The rest are spread over a range of largely

⁴³ [#Record Covid19-51] Suffolk, England, Postgrad Student, Female, 22.

⁴⁴ [#Record Covid19-84] London, Office Worker, Female, 40 something.

professional or service industry occupations such as the civil service, administration, sales or unemployed. Clearly then, the diaries are largely submitted by younger people and predominantly women, thus are not reflective of wider British society. The sample provided also is clearly slanted towards the educated, many of the contributors being students or in professional occupations. Indeed, 15 of the diarists, some 25% of the sample, are female students in their late teens or early 20s. If the sample is not representative of the wider British public, it might however be representative of a largely educated, younger and predominantly female demographic.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the myths, memories and cultural legacies of the Second World War have played a profound role in reactions to the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 and 2021. Like the Second World War, the pandemic has required massive effort by the state and public alike to overcome the extraordinary challenges posed by the crisis. During the Second World War, state intervention led to conscription, the direction of labour and industry, the evacuation of the cities of children and pregnant women, and massive economic controls among many other interventions by the government. During the COVID-19 crisis, the government has again been required to step in, restrict the movement of citizens, require the donning of face masks in public spaces and the effective suspension of vast swathes of the economy. This has been combined with a massive effort to procure PPE, vaccines and other health related products. In order to explain and encourage the public to engage with restrictions, unsurprisingly the government turned to the ingrained memory of the Second World War. The press and other media outlets dutifully followed suit and the key myths of the war have loomed large in discourse regarding the COVID-19 crisis.

Cultural historians of Britain's Second World War have been convinced that the role and place of the conflict in British cultural memory has little sign of diminishing. Geoff Eley went as far as to suggest that a person need not have lived through the second world war to have an ingrained memory of it, so ubiquitous is it in cultural memory.⁴⁵ Surprisingly, given the status of the war in British culture and the efforts by the state and Britain's media organs to link the crisis to that past, very few diarists – primarily younger people under the age of 35 and women – in the #RecordCovid19 Project reflected on the war at all. Only five individuals commented in their diaries on the Second World War, despite the emphasis upon comparing the COVID-19 crisis to the war by both politicians, the print media and other commentators. Indeed, one of the five diarists who did draw the comparison was aged 57 and

⁴⁵ Geoff Eley (2014), 'Foreword', in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury), pp.xi-xxi.

another a history student at university – individuals perhaps more likely to be attuned, based on age and education, to such historical comparison. This may suggest that evoking an increasingly distant war, not of their parents or even grandparents' generation, has saw only limited return with the generation largely sampled. This might reflect a rejection of the comparison, alternatively it may suggest that the war is increasingly less relevant among the current generation of young, educated adults.