

## 5.6 The home front

The Second World War did not just involve soldiers, sailors and airmen. The armed forces may have been the ones who went off to fight the enemy on foreign soil, but the people left at home had their part to play too, and were greatly affected by the conflict. So what impact did the war have on people back in Britain?

## Mission Objectives

- Recall key terms and concepts such as rationing, Home Guard and total war.
- Identify ways in which the Second World War affected ordinary citizens.

In late 1940 German bombers began to bomb Britain's major cities. This was known as the 'Blitz'. Swansea, Cardiff, Bristol, Southampton, Plymouth, Birmingham, Coventry, Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester, Sunderland, Aberdeen, Sheffield and many other cities were targeted. London suffered the heaviest bombing – for one 11-week period, London was bombed every night except one! By the end of May 1941, over 30,000 civilians had been killed in the raids and 87,000 were seriously injured. In London alone, over a million homes were destroyed or damaged.

In May 1940, the government urged all men aged between 17 and 65 who weren't in the army to join what became known as the 'Home Guard'. These men worked part-time in their local area to prepare it for attack. Many of the men in the Home Guard were not permitted to join the regular army because their jobs were necessary to the war effort – farm workers, teachers and railway workers, for example. Others were too old to join up or had health problems. They weren't paid and to begin with they didn't have any weapons... so some made their own!

When the war began, everyone expected to be bombed from the air – so civilians prepared for it. Millions of people built their own bomb shelters in their back gardens.

The Germans tried to cut off supplies of food and other goods by sinking the ships that brought the supplies to Britain. So, in 1940, the government introduced rationing. This meant that every person was entitled to a fixed weekly amount of fuel, clothing and certain types of food. The government also encouraged people to grow their own food in their back gardens or allotments. The slogan for the campaign was 'Dig for Victory'.

## Fact

Members of the Home Guard were meant to be male – but women served in some units as cooks, messengers and telephone operators.

Air Raid Precaution (ARP) wardens had the job of patrolling the streets at night to make sure that no light was visible. They also helped out if there was an air raid, directing people to shelters, giving first aid and assisting the emergency services. There were 1.4 million ARP wardens, many of them part-time volunteers who also had full-time jobs during the day.

People put up thick blackout curtains to prevent any glimmer of light from escaping. 'Blackouts' made it more difficult for enemy bombers to locate their targets. Street lights were switched off or dimmed too, and cars were fitted with masked headlights. Windows were taped to stop glass from shattering everywhere if a bomb exploded nearby.

The government had the power to move people to any job it felt necessary to help win the war. Millions of women worked in weapons factories, on farms, and in military bases. Single women were forced to work but married women weren't. However, many decided to work anyway, as well as looking after their families.

When war broke out, the government evacuated schoolchildren (and their teachers), pregnant women, blind and disabled people, and women with children under five. They were moved from the large industrial towns and cities to safer countryside areas.

The government issued millions of gas masks to civilians as a precaution against gas bombs.

## Depth Study

1914–1918

## Earlier on...

In 1915, a Women's Land Army was created so women (known as Land Girls) could work in farming, replacing men called up to fight. In 1939, the organisation was revived under the same name and by 1944 it had over 80,000 members.

## Fact

When a country uses all its resources to try to win, and the war involves all its people in some way, the conflict is often called a 'total war'. The term became well known in connection with the Second World War because it was used by leading Nazi Joseph Goebbels in a 1943 speech in Berlin.

## Change

- 1 Explain two ways in which the home front in Britain in the First World War (see pages 50–51) and the home front in Britain in the Second World War were similar.
- 2 Explain two ways in which the home front in Britain in the First World War (see pages 50–51) and the home front in Britain in the Second World War were different.

## Over to You

- 1 In your own words, define 'total war'.
- 2 Prepare a short talk, or design a poster, aimed at primary school students. It should explain what life was like in Britain during the Second World War. Include details about:
  - the Blitz
  - air raid precautions
  - evacuation
  - changing roles of women
  - the Home Guard
  - rationing
  - the Dig for Victory campaign.
- 3 List the three biggest changes to civilian life during the war.