Revision Guide

Unit 3b: War and the transformation of British society c.1931-51
Contextual knowledge

Topic 1: The impact of the Depression

- At the end of WWI the only financial help for the unemployed was national insurance benefit and only covered workers in a few industries. Workers and employers paid into an unemployment fund, however when work dried up the fund paid benefit for up to 15 weeks.

- The Depression made unemployment worse by 1930 it had risen to 2.4 million. This led to petitions and hunger marches organized by the NUWM to highlight the problem of unemployment.

- The coal, iron and steel industries were worst affected by unemployment, in the north and east of England and in Scotland and Wales, which relied on these industries for work.

- The south was not as badly affected and new industries grew such as the car industry.

- The labour government led by Ramsay Macdonald did not have enough money to cover the rising unemployment rate and Macdonald proposed benefit cuts and the setting up of a means test. Macdonald though did not have the support of his part and the government collapsed.

- Macdonald then set up a National government made up of moderate Labour, Liberal and Conservative MPs. The national government then introduced the following reforms.
  - Benefit rates cut by 10%
  - Introduction of a means test to see who was entitled to financial assistance, often very strictly enforced, 271,000 could no longer claim benefit.
  - Special Areas Act: £2 million aid for Scotland, Tyneside, Cumberland and Wales.

The Jarrow march

- Almost all workers worked at Palmers shipyard, when palmers closed unemployment in Jarrow reached 64% by 1935.
- Jarrow received hardly any support from the Special Areas act and by 1936 many were starving
- Members of Jarrow town council planned a march for jobs. They chose 200 of Jarrow’s fittest unemployed men to march and took with them a petition asking for the government to provide work.
- The marchers covered 291 miles in 22 stages holding public meetings along the way.
When they reached London the government refused to see the MP for Jarrow, Ellen Wilkinson or the petition.

Very few of the marchers were given work although an MP called Sir John Jarvis opened a steel works in Jarrow.

Although they did not achieve their aims the marchers inspired many and generated huge public support.

**Topic 2: Britain Alone**

- As soon as war broke out the British expeditionary force (BEF) were sent to France to defend the French-German border. But when the German attack came it surprised them by its speed and direction, through Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium.
- The BEF tried to counter attack but was forced to retreat.
- On 10th May 1940 when the invasion began Winston Churchill was made Prime Minister.

**Blitzkrieg**

- This was the German military tactic to invade Western Europe, known as ‘lightning war’.
- German planes bombed the area to be occupied, tanks then moved in and took over the area, followed by troops who moved in and occupied the area under artillery fire. This strategy would then repeat itself with planes and tanks moving on to the next target area.

**Dunkirk**

- Blitzkrieg proved to be a very effective tactic and forced the allied troops to retreat to the French port of Dunkirk, the only port not captured by the Germans.
- The plan to rescue as many troops as possible from Dunkirk was carried out by the British Navy and was called Operation Dynamo.
- The government asked owners of small ships to go to Dunkirk to ferry soldiers to the big ships. They had estimated 20,000 to 30,000 troops might be brought home. The final total was 338,000.
- Even though Dunkirk was a defeat as France would soon be occupied by Germany, many people saw the evacuation as a victory.
- Churchill promoted Dunkirk as an example of how the British people could work together to produce victory in the face of near certain defeat.
- ‘Dunkirk spirit’ became a phrase used for keeping going in the face of huge obstacles.
The Battle of Britain

- When France surrendered on 22nd June 1940, Hitler turned to Britain. His plan to invade was called Operation Sea lion, this firstly relied upon destroying the Royal Air Force (RAF).
- It was a battle between the RAF and Luftwaffe for control over the skies of Britain and it was fought over many months.
- There were four stages including Luftwaffe attacks on the British coast, especially radar stations, attacks on RAF airfields and London.
- On 15 September the Luftwaffe were defeated. This is now Battle of Britain day because the Luftwaffe that the RAF was still a fighting force and Hitler called off operation Sea lion.
- The British victory was aided by their use of radar, superior fighters such as the Spitfire and British factories working around the clock to replace lost aircraft.

Preparing for War

- Preparation for German bombing began from 1935 with local councils instructed to build air raid shelters. However from 1939 the Government gave out Anderson shelters for people to construct in their gardens.
- By 1939 there were 1.5 voluntary Air Raid Precaution (ARP) wardens, who organized the deployment of sandbags and barrage balloons. They were also responsible for ensuring the blackout was followed.
- In May 1940 volunteers were called for to create a Local Defence Force. In August the LDF was renamed the Home Guard and was one million strong. They were responsible for manning anti-aircraft guns, helping rescue workers after air raids and clearing up bomb damage. Most importantly they trained to fight a German invasion.

Evacuation

- Most evacuees were children although the government also evacuated pregnant women and blind people.
- This freed parents to work in volunteer groups such as the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS)
- People who could afford to do so made their own arrangements for evacuation with friends, family or even strangers in the countryside.
- Evacuation began in September 1939, in the first four days three million people were evacuated. By December there had been no bombing so many went back home for Christmas.
The Blitz

- Blitz is the term given to the bombing of British cities from 7 September to May 1941.
- London was bombed most often and heavily but there were raids on many other British cities including Coventry and Liverpool.
- The raids deliberately targeted civilians to destroy British morale so that the public no longer supported the war.
- Over 43,000 people were killed
- 2 million were made homeless
- People however did not turn against the war in large numbers.

The Blitz on Coventry

- The Luftwaffe bombed Coventry in retaliation to an RAF raid on Munich.
- The bombing was so fierce that it was visible from 150 miles away.
- Estimates of those killed were as high as 554 and there were thousands of injuries.
- Over 4000 homes were destroyed as well as the city’s cathedral.

New Dangers

- By January 1943 the Luftwaffe were losing a bomber and four trained crew for every five civilians killed, so the Germans looked for new ways to bomb Britain from a distance.
- German scientists developed a flying bomb known as the V1 which were driven by a motor that was supposed to cut out over the target.
- They were launched from the French coast from June 1944 and although many failed to reach their targets, they killed roughly 6,000 people.
- 1.5 million people left London.
- The V2 was then used, rocket powered only a 1000 reached Britain killing 2,700.

Topic 3: Britain at War

Government control

- During the war the government needed to keep much tighter control over the country than it had in peacetime.
- It needed much more central organisation to plan war production, rationing and evacuation. It also needed to warn people about the dangers of talking too freely about things like troop movements.
The Ministry of Information

- This ministry was responsible for censorship and propaganda. The aim of censorship was to stop information getting out that would encourage the enemy and demoralize the British people.
- Censors told newspapers what information they could (or could not) print.
- The Ministry of information also built up a large team of workers to produce posters and leaflets to persuade people to do (and not to do) certain things to help the war effort.

Rationing

- By January 1940, German submarines had sunk over 100 ships carrying food to Britain.
- What was on ration and the rationed amount changed during the war.
- The Ministry of food encouraged people to grow their own food and keep chickens and rabbits.
- Many people joined ‘pig clubs’: buying a pig, sharing its care then sharing the meat when it was killed.
- A ‘black market’ grew where you could buy rationed goods at high prices.

Working Women

- In July 139 the government reformed the Women’s land army as it knew they would need to clear and farm more land to produce the huge amounts of food the country would need when war began.
- By March 1940, over 30,000 men had left farming for the army and it became clear that women were needed for all types of war work.
- In December 1941, the government introduced conscription for all unmarried women aged 20-30.
- Women could choose to join the armed services, civil defence or industry.
- When the war ended many women had to give up their jobs for the returning men.

D-Day

- The British convinced US generals that an invasion of France had to be planned carefully as Germany had had years to plan defences along the French coast. The plan was called Operation Overlord.
- The allies needed landing craft to land as many troops as quickly as possible. They also needed to plan to send more troops and supplies quickly.
- They needed to divert as German troops as possible from Normandy, the planned landing site. So they carefully leaked information suggesting they were planning to invade a different part of the coast.
- The date chosen was dependent on the weather and changed several times.
- The invasion was finally set for the night of 6 June 1944.
Why did D-Day succeed?

- The Germans were confused about where troops would land by leaked messages suggesting the invasion would be near Calais.
- The Pluto fuel pipeline, the rapid ferrying of troops and supplies once the invasion began were all vital to the success of D-Day.
- Parachute troops captured inland areas on the first day. They helped the French resistance to blow up railway lines and bridges to disrupt German communications.

The defeat of Germany

- Following D-day Germany was under pressure from all sides as the Soviet Union attacked from the East.
- The Allies put further pressure on Germany by bombing industrial sites, military bases and cities in Germany.
- The Allies path to victory was not a smooth one. They suffered heavy losses at Arnhem in Holland.
- By April 1945, Soviet troops were closing in on Berlin. Hitler committed suicide and Germany surrendered.

Topic 4: Labour in power 1945-51

Labour comes to power

- Although the war with Japan was still going on in the Pacific, the end of the war in Europe seemed like the end of the whole war to many people.
- People wanted homes, jobs and a chance for a better life.
- Churchill wanted to keep the coalition government running until Japan had been defeated but the The Labour party and Liberals wanted an election and a fresh start for the country.
- Churchill and the conservatives thought they could rely upon the popularity of his wartime leadership and their campaign focused on Churchill, not the party. One slogan was, ‘Let Him finish the Job’
- The Conservatives promised new home and support for the poor and unemployed but many Conservative politicians had opposed such reforms in parliament. They misjudged the mood of the nation and were too confident in Churchill’s magic.
- Churchill also made the mistake of claiming that Labour’s socialist state would never work without a Gestapo to run it. He was comparing the Labour party to the Nazis despite the fact that the Labour leader, clement Atlee had been his deputy for most of the war. The campaign never really recovered and Labour won a landslide victory.
The Beveridge Report

- During the war Ernest Bevin, the minister of Labour (and a member of the Labour report) set up a committee to suggest how to improve life in Britain after the war.
- William Beveridge, who had experience studying social problems, was its chairman.
- The report was over 300 pages long. It had a huge amount of public support, selling over 70,000 copies in the first few days. Most Conservative MPs disagreed strongly with its recommendations.
- The report said that the state should support its citizens ‘from the cradle to the grave.’ It had to fight the ‘five giants’ of want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness.
- As the government took control of more aspects of life during the war, it changed people’s views on how government worked and what parts of life it was responsible for.

Fighting giants

- People in Britain approved of the Beveridge report and wanted the government to fight the five giants.
- In 1945 the Family allowances Act was passed which paid mothers 5 shillings a week for every child after the first one. Payments did not begin until 1946 so the Labour government got the credit.
- The Labour government brought in a range of measures to provide state support for everyone including
  - 1947 Education Act- Free education up to 15
  - 1946 National Health Service Act- Free medical and dental care for all.

The National Health service

- Before the war the health service was a muddle of free panels and private care while hospitals were run privately or by voluntary groups.
- A free national health service was suggested by Beveridge in his report but doctors were suspicious of state control of their profession.
- The British Medical Association (BMA) had a long history of disputes with the government and had fought previous attempts to extend free healthcare.
- The BMA sat on government committees during the war to try to agree on a new health service but reaching agreement was difficult. They disagreed with the government on the level of government control, over who should get free healthcare and how doctors should be paid.
- When the Labour government came to power in 1945, the new minister of health, Aneurin Bevan, consulted the BMA, but pushed the law through at the same time. Disputes with the BMA though meant that the National Health Service act did not come into force until July 1948.
- The NHS was very popular and the government underestimated how much it would cost. By 1949 the government was debating introducing charges.
The National Health Service Act of 1949 set a-shilling prescription charge (the old, poor or disabled did not have to pay) Bevan disagreed with this act and resigned because of it.