

# Knowledge Organiser: Depression, war and recovery 1930-1951 (Unit 1)

## Key Question 6: How difficult were conditions in Britain in 1945?

### Timeline of events

- 8 May 1945: VE Day - End of Second World War
- 18 June 1945: Demobilisation plan put in place
- 26 July 1945: General Election - Labour won a landslide victory

### Important concept

Although Britain had won the war, it found itself in a difficult situation, economically and socially. The war had been costly, not just financially, but also in human deaths and injuries. A new government was needed to rebuild the country in times of peace, and work and housing were needed for those now leaving the war industries and armed services.

### Key words

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| <b>Demobilisation</b> | Bringing the armed forces back from areas of conflict and reintroducing them to civilian life.           |
| <b>Manifesto</b>      | A public declaration of policy and aims that a political party will follow if victorious in an election. |

### War damage

- Many towns and cities in Britain had been bombed during the war. Some like Swansea and Coventry were almost completely destroyed.
- Thousands of shops and factories had been destroyed.
- 20% of schools and houses were destroyed or in need of repair.
- The new Labour government began to house people in army camps and in prefab housing temporarily.

### The economic position of Britain in 1945

- Britain was nearly bankrupt at the end of the war. The National Debt had risen from £760 million to £3500 million. Britain had spent close to £7 billion on the war effort, and had been forced to sell off much of its gold reserves. It had to depend on American loans in order to survive and recover. Income tax was raised by 50% to help the Government pay for the reconstruction.
- Shortages of food and raw materials continued. One hundred and seventy seven merchant ships and two-thirds of the Navy had been sunk, so food supplies were still a problem. Rationing remained in place for another 10 years.
- One in three houses had been destroyed by bombing whilst factories and shops had also been destroyed in large numbers.
- Britain suffered 264,433 military and 60,595 civilian deaths during the war. Many others were physically and mentally scarred by the war and unable to resume normal life.
- This period saw the end of the British Empire.
- However, there was some optimism as virtually every adult was employed and there was a sense of change - as shown in the Labour election victory.
- Optimism was felt in Wales too. Many evacuees, Bevin Boys, allied troops, and women in the land armies had experienced life in Wales for the first time during the war. There was a recognition that Wales had a distinct identity from the rest of Britain.

### Demobilisation

- In 1945, the British armed forces consisted of approximately five million men and women.
- A demobilisation plan had been put in place by Ernest Bevin in September 1944, and was put into action on 18 June 1945. 4.3 million men and women were released over the next 18 months.
- Military personnel were released in order, based on the length of their service and age. Soldiers from key roles, with vital skills which would be of benefit to the UK, were released ahead of their turn.
- Military servicemen and women encountered a variety of problems on their return to civilian life. Food was still rationed and numerous homes and places of work had been destroyed. Many people faced problems finding work or settling back into normal family life. The post-war divorce rate was high with over 60,000 applications processed in 1947.

### The reasons for Labour's victory in the 1945 General Election

- An election was called for 5 July 1945. Voting closed on 19 July to allow enough time for soldiers stationed abroad to vote. The two leading parties were Clement Attlee's Labour Party and Winston Churchill's Conservative Party.
- The election result was a surprise to many. Winston Churchill was a successful wartime leader and a hero. However, Labour secured a landslide victory and Clement Attlee became Prime Minister.
- While Winston Churchill was popular, the Conservative Party was not. The British public associated it with the days of the Great Depression, mass unemployment and appeasement. The Party had focused on Churchill's popularity as a war leader, but people were ready for a new start.
- There was a confidence that Labour would bring about great political and economic change. By promising to adopt the Beveridge Report they were able to win over voters. Labour promised jobs, fair wages, houses, free education and free health care. The promises of a welfare state, based on the Beveridge Report, and nationalisation of the Bank of England, coal, power, transport and iron and steel industries attracted voters to Labour.

