

This month in history: VE Day, 80 years on

To mark 80 years of VE Day, Peter Doyle, Emeritus Professor at London South Bank University, describes the final days of World War 2 and Victory in Europe.

The final days of World War 2

For Winston Churchill at least, victory was never in doubt. In the tumultuous days of May and June 1945, his speeches stirred the British public into an overwhelming belief in the fortitude of the nation. In those dark days, inspired by the Prime Minister, there was almost relief, an expectation that come what may Britain as 'a fortress island' would stand against Hitler, backed by the Commonwealth and supported by the free forces of the occupied nations.

Despite Dunkirk, the achievements of the then multi-national Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain cemented the view that Britain, its Commonwealth and its Allies would prevail. In 1941, with the addition of Stalin's Soviet Union and Roosevelt's United States to the fray, doubts that the Allies would emerge victorious quickly faded.

When victory came it was expected; but not without setbacks. The Allied invasion in June 1944 raised hopes that once again, the war would be over by Christmas. Nevertheless, winter saw a counter offensive by Hitler in the Ardennes, and the battles through to Berlin were hard fought. When victory against Nazi Germany finally came, on 8 May 1945, it was not without the knowledge that defeating Japan would take more months, and that there would be many more losses yet.

But on 30 April 1945, with Soviet troops battling for the German capital, Hitler committed suicide and defeat stared the Nazi regime squarely in the face. At Lüneberg Heath, on 4 May, German forces surrendered to Montgomery's 21st Army Group, and on the evening of 7 May 1945, in Rheims, the act of unconditional surrender was accepted by Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower. This was timed to come into effect the following day – on what would forever more be known as Victory in Europe, or VE Day.



Victory in Europe

Anticipation for this momentous occasion had been building since early May. The British people knew that victory would soon be announced; newspapers were full of plans for two days of national holiday. On 7 May, the BBC interrupted its programmes and newspapers reported the news the world had waited for. The *Western Morning News* reported 'crowds gathered in the streets, the flags of the Free Nations were unfurled, there was singing and dancing', before the final announcement was made.

This news brought with it the confirmation that two public holidays were to be granted. And at three o'clock in the afternoon of 8 May, Churchill made his broadcast to the nation:

'Today, perhaps, we shall think mostly of ourselves. Tomorrow we shall pay a particular tribute to our Russian comrades, whose prowess in the field has been one of the grand contributions to the general victory. The German war is, therefore, at an end.'

VE Day 1945

With the short time available to prepare them, celebrations were impromptu and spontaneous but were held the length and breadth of the country. In many cases they had started early, as soon as notification was given of the national holiday. Street parties were organised, food somehow found, decorations fashioned from whatever was available – red, white and blue bunting could be purchased without the need for ration coupons.

Wishaw, on the outskirts of Glasgow, recorded the magic of the occasion in its local newspaper: 'The whole of Main Street was a blaze of colour. Flags of every nation, steamers and bunting were used with great decorative effect and won the admiration of the crowds who paraded the streets till late hour. The cinemas made good show with neon lights, clusters of lamps, flags and busts of the Big Three.'

In London, one million people took to the streets, and impromptu celebrations broke out everywhere. People danced in the fountains of Trafalgar Square and crowded pubs and bars – licencing hours were increased to meet demand. Outside Buckingham Palace, demands were made of the King and Queen, who appeared on the balcony eight times to great cheers. Their daughters, meanwhile, mingled with the crowds.

'Britain can take it'

The war in the west was over; the Nazi regime toppled, the occupied nations freed, the 'crusade against tyranny' completed. For the British, five long years of war – and all the privations that went with them – were almost complete. Among the many slogans produced by that war, 'Britain can take it' was coined, symbolic of a defiance that quickly became shorthand for British pluck and determination in adversity.

In times such as now it is common to remember and reference the dark days (with varying degrees of success and validity) when Hitler's regime tried unsuccessfully to crush the spirit of a people. In today's environment, there are other challenges. But that spirit endures, and with it, the remembrance of one of the most pivotal events in history. It is right that we reflect upon it on the 80th anniversary of VE Day.

About the author

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