

Victory in Europe Day



VE DAY SHOULD BE REMEMBERED. The victory of America, of the Red Army's rank and file, of Britain and her allies, is worth celebrating. We do, of course, have to suffer the Vera Lynn schmaltz, and take comfort once again from the great sound of Glenn Miller, and the irrepressible optimism of Americans during the 1940s. It is also worth treasuring the memory of that old bastard, Winston Churchill, who ignored the Tory leadership and Britain's landed oligarchy by refusing to contemplate surrender to the fascists. Churchill, with the pugnaciousness of the drunk that he undoubtedly was, threw his lot in with tens of millions of workers, and a lower middle class that had largely rejected the British Union of Fascists leader, Oswald Mosley, in a fight to the finish with Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.

For those of us born in the last months of the war, who grew up playing in bomb sites, in a world sorely in

need of repair, and rather more than a lick of paint, the war continued to dominate. The war and its aftermath configured everything while I was growing up, and didn't really start to ebb away until the mid-sixties. We were saturated with hatred of the 'Jerrys', ridicule of the surrender-prone 'Ities', and of the Asiatic cruelties of the 'Japs'. The adults that raised us were fraught; disfigured by the war every-which-way, exhausted by austerity, overcrowding, and wretched housing.

The fifties were a welcome relief from the colourless 'common sharing' imposed by rationing and the war. It was a relief to escape from communal effort and look forward to a world where oranges could be enjoyed the-year-round, and new suits, starched petticoats, and rock 'n roll brightened things up. The left, of course, continues to be gripped by the marvel of universal health insurance, which arrived in 1948, while forgetting the full employment, seaside holidays, and the deluge of council houses, televisions, transistor radios, hygienic kitchen cabinets, and refrigerators, delivered during the "thirteen wasted years of Tory rule" from 1951 to 1964.

Of course, the necessity of the war, was not challenged by anybody apart from a truly tiny number of pacifists. It was a *good* war and everybody remembered doing their bit, fighting at the front, retreating in chaos and confusion, 'keeping their sunny side up', twelve-hour shifts, one-day off a month, coping with air raids, doodlebugs, and feeding the crowds in 'British Restaurants'. So, us kids, growing-up into teenagers were trapped between respect and ridicule – we knew that our elders were tough, brave, and had not shrunk from doing the impossible, but they were also appalling – damaged, ludicrous, and bloody annoying. I suspect that most youngsters think something similar about their parents' generation, but the loss, envy, and indignation, of those who'd sacrificed their youth to the war was particularly difficult for their kids to bear.

Seventy-five years after VE Day this is actually how we need to remember the war and its blood-soaked

contradictions. The descent into barbarism is well known. This involved not simply the manifest crimes of the Nazis and Japan's imperial army, or those of the Red Army careering across East Prussia, Poland, and Germany. The mass aerial bombardment of civilians in Japan and Germany, by enormous fleets of American and British war planes, must also be counted amongst the worst crimes in history, even before the use of atomic weapons to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

When remembering the war, we cannot forget the alliance between the Nazis and the Soviet state which lasted for the opening 22 months of the conflict – from September 1939 to June 1941 – in which the Soviet Union worked together with the Third Reich in the invasion and partition of Poland. Not satisfied with supplying the fascists with petroleum and other war materials, the Soviets deported tens of thousands of Polish civilians to camps and prisons. Stalin's political police, the NKVD, compounded this crime by murdering 22,000 Polish soldiers, priests, politicians, administrators, writers, and other intellectuals, in a massacre named after the Katyn Forest where a large number of the bodies were dumped in huge pits.

Neither can we forget that in February 1942 Britain's colonial policy was in complete disarray. Singapore had fallen to the Japanese, and the defeat of American and Dutch forces in the Philippines and Indonesia signalled the end of European colonialism in Asia. This resulted, in short order, in the Bengal Famine of 1943. Some three million people are thought to have died in the famine caused by the economic and trade policies pursued by the rulers of the Raj, panicking in London in the face of defeat at the hands of 'inferior Orientals'. Desperation in Whitehall and Delhi was compounded by Tokyo's alliance with the Indian National Army, founded a year earlier, to drive the British out of the sub-continent.

The 'good' war clearly involved a mass of confusing and contradictory elements in which the record of the British, the Americans, and the Soviet Union, does not emerge unscathed or untarnished by the mayhem. All

were involved in the deliberate killings of unarmed civilians upon an industrial scale. All were involved in the wholesale suppression of democracy and civil rights. None were innocent.

So, there are very good reasons for celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of VE Day on May 8th and VJ Day on August 15th. These days mark the end of the merciless killings, the end of Soviet tanks riding roughshod over columns of fleeing German men, women and children, the end of the Red Navy deliberately drowning German civilians by the thousand in the Baltic, the end of burning entire Japanese cities to the ground, the end of the systematic murder of Jews, Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the starving to death of POWs in camps, from the Western zones of Germany to South East Asia and Japan. To be sure the mass enslavement and killings went on unabated in territories controlled by the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of China, but for the rest of the world, the war was over.

The crimes involved in the destruction of Hamburg, Tokyo, and Dresden, the 'ethnic cleansing' of millions in Eastern Europe, of British policy in India, of our surrender of Poland to Stalin's tender mercies, none of these crimes must be allowed to blunt the stalwart determination of American soldiers, airmen, sailors, and munitions workers, who with the rank and file of the Red Army, eventually came to our aid, and made victory in the war against fascism possible.

In some quarters it is common to attribute the defeat of the fascists to the heroic defence of Stalingrad and the tank battles at Kursk. But this account only works if one forgets that the Japanese were prevented from invading the Soviet Far East, after 1941 because the Americans kept the 'Nips' rather busy by fighting their way across the Pacific. It also involves ludicrous attempts to minimise the critical importance of the landings of American and British troops, together with their allies, in Sicily, the invasion and fighting in Italy, and the battles for Normandy and the Ardennes. Many

of those who remain entranced by the wonders of Stalinism also like to ignore the extent to which the Red Army marched in American boots, and ate American rations, that arrived on the Eastern front in American trucks and jeeps, courtesy of the heroic seafarers of the Artic Convoys.

I have no doubt that many on the left will wince at the celebrations and the bunting (although unavoidably muted by the pandemic). They will hate the Queen's speech, the veneration of Winston Churchill, the airing of his oratory all over again, and the screening of hagiographies on telly.

But the truth is, that until the left in Britain learns to celebrate the astonishing courage of our people from across the world, and their grim determination in 1940, and in the following four years – years, let us not forget, of grinding misery and defeat – the left will always be irrelevant.