INTRODUCTION

In 'A Personal Reflection on the Two World Wars' John Bourne neatly captures the public's view of Britain's contrasting roles in the two conflicts.

> The First World War was not really about anything, or not about anything important; the Second World War was about national survival at home and the defeat of a vile tyranny abroad. The First World War was hopelessly mismanaged by incompetent generals . . . compared with the Second World War generals who understood technology and fought wars of manoeuver that avoided heavy casualties.[1]

Furthermore, he writes, 'the outcome of the First World War was futile . . . making another war inevitable; the outcome of the Second World War, sanctified by the discovery of the Nazi death camps, was not only a military but also a moral triumph'.[2]

As regards the experience of combat, the First World War, invariably associated in popular mythology with the horror of the trenches, is imagined as an unending hell on earth whereas the later conflict, being more mobile and with far fewer British casualties, is thought to have been easier, or at least more tolerable.

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[1] Peter Liddle, John Bourne and Ian Whitehead (eds.), *The Great War, 1914–1945*, Vol. I (Harper Collins, 2000). See especially John Bourne, 'A Personal Reflection on the Two World Wars', p. 17.
[2] Ibid.

It is not the objective of this study to reverse the myth of First World War very bad – Second World War very good, but rather to argue that both of these stereotypes are flawed and, in particular, that Britain's role in both wars has been distorted in hindsight.

In the last thirty years or so a great deal of scholarly work has been published on virtually every aspect of the First World War, including controversial topics such as casualties, battle conditions, generalship (and Haig's role in particular), strategy, tactical and technological innovations and the notion of a 'learning curve'. Most, though not all of this work, has tended to place Britain's role in a more positive light. But, at the very least, recent scholarship, based on archival research and a more objective approach, has moved the debate forward from the emotional and polemical approach typified by phrases such as 'butchers and bunglers' and 'lions led by donkeys'.

Unfortunately this innovative and revisionist work has, on the whole, not filtered through to the non-specialist general public. Many school children are introduced to the First World War through a select number of war poets who, whatever their merits, do not provide a sound historical basis. The media – especially television, fiction and the theatre – incline towards a negative or farcical interpretation with entertainments such as *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and *Blackadder* still exerting a powerful influence. The Somme campaign, especially its disastrous first day, and the Third Ypres offensive – now invariably referred to as 'Passchendaele' – are given undue emphasis as representative of the whole war on the Western Front. This outmoded approach is badly in need of revision, particularly its depiction as a disastrous and futile conflict in contrast to the 'good war' of 1939–1945.

The First World War had already acquired a negative image in the 1930s, due mainly to the unprecedented scale of British losses and disappointment with the outcome both at home and in international relations. Whether the publication of a few 'disenchanted' writers truly represented national reactions to the war may be doubted but they have since, especially from the 1960s, been widely viewed as the true interpreters of the conflict and key contributors to a powerful myth. In reality, as common sense suggests and recent publications confirm, 'middlebrow' literature with a mainly positive, patriotic and reassuring message was much more widely read. Disenchantment with the First World War certainly did not prevent the nation from responding readily,

albeit in a grim and stoical spirit, to the renewed challenge from Germany in the late 1930s.

Britain's achievement in helping to defeat Nazi Germany was certainly important and worthy of celebration, but it was magnified in hindsight by the full, horrific revelations of the enemy's barbarism after the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps at the very end of the war, and by the massive documentary and visual evidence provided at the Nuremberg Trials. Numerous considerations contributed to British euphoria and exaggeration of Britain's role in relation to allies in the decades after 1945, but two influences receive special attention in this study: namely the spate of extremely popular British war films produced between the end of the war and the early 1960s; and Churchill's remarkably successful promotion of his own colossal status as war leader in his massive history *The Second World War*.

The sharp contrast in the popular view of Britain's role in the two world wars is now determined largely by comparative casualty statistics. Britain and the Dominions suffered approximately one million military deaths in the First World War as against only about one-third of that number in the Second. But the essential fact that cannot be over-stressed is that Britain fought the whole of the first great industrial war of mass armies on the principal front against the outstanding military power of the day. By contrast, in what seemed a disaster at the time but on a longer view may be deemed a blessing in disguise, British forces were expelled from Western Europe in June 1940 and did not return until precisely four years later. The numerous campaigns waged in this long interval, notably in North Africa, Burma and Italy, were far from irrelevant to Britain, but they were peripheral and on a very small scale compared to the titanic struggle on the Eastern Front where the bulk of the German forces were eventually driven back and annihilated. This seems almost too obvious to mention now but it took decades to be recognised in Anglo-American historiography.

A century after the outbreak of the First World War it is harder for critics of the ensuing conflict to grasp Britain's strategic interests in the security of the Low Countries and the Channel coast, which were widely held to justify her intervention in the war, albeit on the erroneous assumptions that it would be comparatively brief and require only a limited contribution. Later concentration on terrible conditions

and heavy losses lends weight to the argument that the war was too costly and not worth fighting, but this attitude was held by only a small minority at the time. Even influential 'anti-war' writers such as Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Richard Aldington hated the conflict as they experienced it but still believed that it had to be endured until victory was won.

Britain entered the Second World War for similar concepts of national and imperial strategic interests as had motivated her leaders in 1914. The threat posed by the Kaiser's Germany now seems, in distant hindsight, far less serious than that of Hitler, but arguably it was the other way round. Germany saw Britain and her empire as the vital obstacle to her global ambitions in the 1900s and had been planning for naval confrontation and invasion since the 1890s. By contrast Hitler had not been planning seriously for war against Britain until the late 1930s, and even hoped in 1939–1940 that she would accept German domination in Europe.

As regards battlefield conditions, the belief that the Western Front in 1914–1918 was uniquely horrific has taken such a deep hold on the public imagination that it seems almost irrational to query it. Yet those few historians who have carefully compared the two world wars (and other large-scale conflicts) concur that modern, industrialised war is always horrific for soldiers 'at the sharp end'. This study will attempt to demonstrate the dreadfulness of combat conditions prevailing in Italy and North-West Europe between 1943 and 1945 while excluding the even more hellish climatic and logistic experience of the campaign in Burma.

First, however, it is necessary to touch on some of the reasons why the Western Front in 1914–1918 acquired its reputation for unique awfulness. Romantic illusions and ignorance about the likely nature of a great European War before 1914, especially in Britain where recent experience was lacking, made the impact more shocking, witness the reaction of cinema audiences to the film of the battle of the Somme in 1916. The conflict was not 'over by Christmas' but developed into a protracted siege war in which front-line conditions were often appalling. The failure of either alliance to deliver a knockout blow or negotiate for a peace without victory made the conflict seem unending. For the Western Allies victory only began to seem possible in the summer of 1918, whereas in the later war Germany faced unavoidable defeat from early 1943.

Popular representations have given a distorted impression of the Western Front as resembling conditions on 1 July 1916 all the time. The common experience for most soldiers for much of the time was boredom and weariness, endless marching, drilling, fatigues and, above all perhaps, lack of sleep, with occasional episodes of fear and danger. A huge popular misconception is that the troops were herded into the trenches en masse and kept there for weeks without a break. The much more complex reality of front-line routines will be explained in detail.

An important and valid explanation of the First World War's negative image is that the civil population had little understanding of conditions at the front; hence the frustration and anger of many soldiers on leave, even to the extent of preferring to be back with their comrades. This justified rage at complacency and ignorance at home goes far to explain the bitterness of some of the veterans' memoirs and poetry, Siegfried Sassoon's satirical war-time verses being a good example.

The First World War left a powerful legacy that greatly influenced the British nation before and during the second conflict. Clearly, modern warfare was not romantic – if indeed it ever had been – and another struggle with Germany was likely to be a long attritional fight for survival in which every aspect of the nation's staying power would be tested to the limit, civilian morale not least important. Another war with Germany had been expected since the mid-1930s and its immediate horrors even exaggerated in the anticipation of all-out bombing of cities with the widespread use of gas. Consequently there was little euphoria or idealism evident in 1939, in contrast to the opening phase of the First World War.

Britain suffered a series of humiliating defeats between the spring of 1940 (Norway, followed by Dunkirk) and mid-1942 (Tobruk) but their impact at home was muffled by Churchill's rhetoric and, after a shaky start, skilful propaganda that even contrived to distil the 'Dunkirk spirit' from the Allied defeat and the Field Force's fortunate escape.

A vitally important contrast with the earlier conflict was that in the Second World War there was far less of a gap between home and military 'fronts'. A form of conscription was in place from the outset, civilians were heavily involved in war work and suffered from bombing, constant anxiety and fears of possible invasion, evacuation of children, homelessness, rationing and other privations. Indeed many servicemen had an easier war than their families at home. Propaganda effectively exploited these hardships by stressing that it was a 'people's

war', involving even the Royal Family, and that eventual victory would bring greater benefits than after 1918. Despite continuing shortages and austerity through the 1940s and early 1950s this promise was, on the whole, realised.

The comparatively light scale of battle casualties compared with the First World War ensured that there was much less of a backlash against the generals and political leaders. Army commanders were acutely conscious of the need to minimise losses, on practical grounds of limited available manpower as well as due to greater sensitivity about morale, but they were considerably helped by the comparatively small scale of British battles. Greatly improved medical supplies, treatment of casualties in the battle zone and evacuation transport – especially by airlift – also saved thousands of wounded soldiers who would have died in the earlier war.

Even so the remarkable fact has to be confronted that casualties 'at the sharp end' were as heavy, or indeed heavier, than in the worst phases of the First World War, in proportion to the numbers engaged in the front line. Brutal, relentless attrition was the prevailing feature of the Second World War as all accounts of fighting in Italy and North-West Europe between 1943 and 1945 make abundantly clear.

In terms of national effort, military achievement and realisation of war aims, Britain was more successful in the First World War than the Second. From a very modest military base in 1914 Britain (and the Empire) created a truly remarkable nation in arms. After an undistinguished start in unexpected conditions the Army's leaders gradually learnt lessons in command and control and developed impressive tactical, technical and training innovations. By 1918 a truly modern military machine, with excellent inter-arm and inter-service co-operation, was in being. Although the French Army's role was still significant and the American forces were just beginning to make an impact, it was the British (and Dominions') land and air forces that played the major role in the culminating advance to victory in the autumn of 1918. This astonishing achievement was generally understood and appreciated at the time, giving Britain a strong diplomatic position in the post-war settlements.

After victory over Germany in 1918 Britain secured virtually all her war aims. France and Belgium were liberated and the former recovered Alsace-Lorraine. German naval and air power was destroyed and her Army limited to 100,000 regular soldiers; France's security was

safeguarded by a demilitarised buffer zone in the Rhineland; and the new Western frontiers were guaranteed by the Locarno Treaty in 1925. With the award of mandates in the Middle East the British Empire was enlarged to its greatest extent. These settlements reflected Britain's military might: powerful only at sea in 1914 but with vastly expanded land and air forces also in being at the end of the war.

In sharp contrast, Britain enjoyed her 'finest hours' early in the Second World War but thereafter her relative power vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union declined steadily. Consequently Britain ended on the winning side in 1945 but with her industrial and financial bases severely weakened and her hold on the Empire fatally undermined. Churchill strove valiantly but in vain to counter this comparative loss of power by the exercise of personal leadership, and by appealing for continuing co-operation on the part of his war-time allies. In the event Britain did not even achieve her initial reason for going to war: the restoration of a free, independent Poland. Even worse, it soon became clear that Britain and the United States had defeated one terrible tyranny only to see it replaced by another, with much greater staying power, in Central and Eastern Europe.

The argument in the following chapters is that the stark contrasts between the character and historical legacy of Britain's two world wars against Germany have been exaggerated and clouded by hindsight. Recent research and publications have tended to put Britain's performance and achievement in the First World War in a more positive light; but a more thorough and objective reappraisal of the nation's contribution to the defeat of Germany in the later war has scarcely begun.

So deeply rooted are the beliefs about these contrasting 'bad' and 'good' wars, particularly negative interpretations of the First World War, that they will be difficult to alter in any radical way. But the passage of time provides ground for hope, and exactly one hundred years after the outbreak of war in 1914 this exploratory study should at least stimulate debate.

1 THE CREATION OF MYTHS AFTER 1945

In Britain in 1945 victory was greeted with relief rather than euphoria. Living conditions remained harsh and an 'Age of Austerity' was dawning. It would soon become clear that although Britain had emerged on the winning side she was markedly in decline as a world power and her Empire was breaking up. Nevertheless Britain's role in the Second World War continued to be viewed in a very patriotic light in sharp contrast to the First World War, whose negative attributes were ever more grimly emphasised.

As the editors of a two-volume study entitled *The Great War, 1914–1945* remarked, 'The First World War has more often than not been regarded as a "bad" war resulting from failures in diplomacy, and a war characterised by the "futile" sacrifices of trench warfare on the Western Front; standing in stark contrast to the justifiable and necessary struggle, between 1939 and 1945, against Nazi tyranny and Japanese militarism'.[1] One of the contributors neatly summarised the contrasting myths of the two world wars: 'The First World War was not really about anything, or not about anything important; the Second World War was about national survival at home and defeat of a vile tyranny abroad'.[2] Moreover, whereas the earlier war had been hopelessly mismanaged by incompetent generals, their successors had been technically proficient and had avoided heavy casualties by conducting mobile wars of manoeuvre.[3]

[1] Liddle, Bourne and Whitehead (eds.), *The Great War, 1914–1945*, Vol. I.
[2] Bourne, 'A Personal Reflection on the Two World Wars', p. 17.   [3] Ibid.

Why, despite years of hardship and suffering and a series of military disasters between 1940 and 1942, cumulatively worse than any single defeat in the First World War, did positive attitudes, bordering on triumphalism, persist after 1945?

During the conflict Winston Churchill had established a colossal personal reputation as the supreme leader, who by his courage and fortitude, had pulled the nation through its greatest crises. His status might have suffered a steady decline after his, and his party's overwhelming defeat in the 1945 general election but, as after the First World War, Churchill the historian and publicist came to the rescue of Churchill the statesman.

As David Reynolds notes in his brilliant, and aptly titled analysis, *In Command Of History*, Churchill was remarkably 'quick off the mark, wrote on an epic scale and reached a global audience'. The six weighty volumes of *The Second World War*, which appeared between 1948 and 1954, were published in fifteen countries, while extracts appeared in some fifty newspapers and magazines in forty countries. Reynolds adds that numerous people who never opened the books would have become familiar with Churchill's themes and viewpoints from these serialised versions and also from reviews. The Churchill legend also received a tremendous boost by the TV serialisation of his war memoirs in *The Valiant Years* (1960–1963) with Richard Burton reading Churchill's words.[4]

In addition to the unique position he had enjoyed as a war leader who really did try to dominate events as a grand strategist and even as a battlefield tactician, Churchill possessed at least two great advantages. Although a great deal of his text was originally drafted by a team of researchers and advisers, it was Churchill's gift for purple prose and memorable phrases that stamped his authority on the history, not least in the volume titles (beginning with *The Gathering Storm* and *Their Finest Hour*), and provided a structure of chronology and themes for later historians. Secondly, thanks to a remarkable arrangement with the Cabinet Office, Churchill was able to quote from and publish a mass of war-time documents that would remain closed to other historians for several decades, thereby giving his account an unrivalled authority. Of course, Churchill's version of events did not command universal

[4] David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (Penguin Books, 2005), pp. xxi–xxvi.

accord, particularly in the United States, whose war effort had been, to say the least, understated; in Britain it is hardly an exaggeration to say that this epic history consolidated Churchill's reputation as the supreme leader who had won the war.

For millions of British citizens, whether or not they were much influenced by Churchill's history, cinema in the 1940s and 1950s (as indeed during the war years), exerted an overwhelming attraction that it is difficult for later generations to grasp. It is important to stress that in the later 1940s and 1950s cinema was still a key mass medium and it was precisely then that the British war-film output reached its peak. After 1945 war films could celebrate victory and Britain's role in winning it. The conflict was generally depicted as a good war in which Britain's national solidarity and heroic deeds were emphasised. Most war films were up-beat and exciting, some even depicting the struggle as a 'great game' – an approach also evident in popular comics like *The Eagle*. British war films, and their leading actors, remained popular throughout the 1950s. For example they constituted eight of the top sellers in 1958.[5]

On a personal level John Bourne (born in 1949 and later to become a distinguished historian at Birmingham University) grew up a keen student of the Second World War, finding it first and foremost 'glorious'. On television he watched war-time newsreels in the series *All Our Yesterdays*, and repeats of earlier war films. The cinema supplied what he could not view on television with the result that by the age of ten he could recite the litany of landmark events from the *Graf Spee*, Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain to D-Day, Arnhem, the V2s and Belsen. Thus he grew up believing that 'we' had won the war. Britain always seemed to play the key role, with foreigners having only walk-on parts in the drama. Allied efforts, except for those of the gallant Poles, were not really recognised. The Eastern Front was seen to have been bloody and important, but the Soviet Union was now the mortal enemy. Whereas the earlier war seemed to be one of mass victims, the Second World War, especially in British films, was characterised by the heroic deeds of individuals and small groups.[6]

[5] John Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War": British War Films of the 1950s', in *Journal of Contemporary History* 33(1), (January, 1998), pp. 35–63.
[6] Bourne, 'A Personal Reflection', pp. 14–19.