

VE Day and the Covid-19 outbreak: Two historical moments that have shaped the world



The 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (VE Day) was marked on 8 May against the backdrop of the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. [Effie G. H. Pedaliu](#) writes that much like the end of the Second World War, Covid-19 will constitute a landmark moment, with future historians likely to draw a line between life before and life after the pandemic.

The difference between the commemorations for Victory in Europe Day in 1995 and 2020 could not be starker. The commemorative events in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of VE Day were a glorious affair. The Cold War had ended, 9/11 had not happened, Princess Diana was alive, the weather in London was warmer than the Mediterranean, Dame Vera Lynn sang 'White Cliffs of Dover' outside Buckingham Palace, nearly 15,000 veterans paraded, the Queen Mother wiped away a tear, a Spitfire, a Hurricane and a Lancaster thundered over the Palace, 'Woolton pie' was eaten in street parties, John Major's government was split by Europe, but the issue had not, as yet, divided the British people, bonfires were lit across the breadth and length of the country and the most fabulous firework display took place in Hyde Park.

Over that long weekend, probably the biggest three-day party the UK has seen, flag-waving crowds huddled together rejoicing in a spirit of national pride and reconciliation – not jingoism. It will not be easily forgotten or outshone for all those who experienced it. The festivities in London were accompanied by equally magnificent events in Paris where 55 heads of state, including the German Chancellor, came together to mark not only the defeat of Nazi Germany but also reconciliation among former enemies. The commemorations of that year culminated in the magnificent firework display on the Thames in August marking VJ Day and the end of the war.

In 2020, VE Day commemorations took place at home in lockdown, and all public events were cancelled. Optimism and joy had been replaced with uncertainty, social distancing and fear. Never before, since VE Day in 1945, has Dame Vera Lynn's rendition of 'We'll meet again' resonated so much with so many while the country and the World are caught in an existential struggle against a virus. Covid-19 is preying on life and livelihood, imposing severe restrictions to social interaction.

VE Day on 8 May 1945 was a public holiday in Britain celebrating the end of almost six years of war during which the Nazi war machine and its Axis allies had subdued and occupied most of continental Europe. Britain was able to avoid subjugation to continue fighting alone, at least for a year, and then with the help of its allies, to emerge victorious, undefeated, with its institutions intact and its diplomatic prestige enhanced.

A day earlier, on 7 May 1945, in Reims, the first Instrument of Surrender of Nazi Germany was signed. The surrender ceremony was repeated in Berlin on 8 May for procedural reasons and to ensure that the war ended at the same time on both European fronts. The end of WWII in Europe was joyously celebrated on the Continent. In the US, President Harry Truman said on hearing the news of the unconditional surrender of Germany 'This is a solemn but glorious hour', but 'we are only half-through'.

The war with Japan was still raging. The British Prime Minister Winston Churchill echoed this by remarking, 'We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, but let us not forget for a moment the toils and efforts that lie ahead'. It was a bittersweet moment of celebration and thanksgiving to the war dead. It was a moment of hope, fear, and uncertainty. The war had left huge economic dislocation and Europe was in rubble. Privation and suffering would not end instantaneously but all would join Churchill to cheer: 'Long live the cause of freedom!'

Historical moments

The current crisis is very different to a World War. Its destruction does not manifest itself in visible ruin but is counted in absence and death. However, this year, with the UN proclaiming the current pandemic the 'worst global crisis since WWII', VE Day comes as a reminder of what occurs when threats are underestimated and how tortuous the path to victory can be.

In his 'wilderness years' Churchill warned against appeasement and the dangers of the revisionist designs of Hitler and his Axis allies. He was not heeded. The viral outbreak was not an unforeseen threat, either. Through the millennia nothing has killed humans more efficiently than infectious disease. Since 9/11 and the outbreak of SARS, the WHO has warned humanity could be exposed to a deadly respiratory epidemic. In 2017, experts recommended urgent investment in health security because a global pandemic was a matter of 'when' and not 'if'.

Intelligence reports in 2018 and 2019 cautioned that a 'pandemic could cost the equivalent of 4.8 per cent of global GDP... and cause more than 100 million deaths'. In September 2019, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (a joint World Bank and WHO initiative) concluded that preparations to deal with a global pandemic were 'woefully inadequate'. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, public spending on strengthening national health and social care systems was not seen as a priority. Fears over pandemics were set aside.



10 Downing Street pictured on 8 May 2020, Credit: [Pippa Fowles / No 10 Downing Street \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

From the moment China let the world know that the deaths in Wuhan had been caused by a new coronavirus and the WHO began issuing stark warnings – right up to when the cluster in Lombardy was discovered on 21 February – there had been a chance for more effective strategies of containment to be adopted or, failing that, for western governments to prepare. The window of opportunity was squandered. Some governments even flirted with the idea of a period of inaction that would allow 'herd-immunity' to build in the population and limit the economic impact of the virus. This period could be considered as having a similar outcome to the policy of appeasement prior to WWII. It allowed a threat to intensify and spread.

VE Day came with a heavy price, millions of lives were lost, among them 6 million European Jews. Europe was reduced to ruin and soon it would become divided by the 'Iron Curtain'. It brought the realisation that overcoming such destruction, division, destitution and hatred necessitated reconciliation and cooperation. As Robert Schuman put it on 9 May 1950 when he announced his plan for the pooling of the war-making industries of France and Germany, 'World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it'.

Covid-19's appalling toll on life and livelihood, its disruption of normality, institutions and practices and its ability to cause mass uncertainty and mental anguish make it, like WWII, a major punctuation point in the history of humankind – life before and life after coronavirus, is how time will be interpreted in the years to come.

A divided world

VE Day symbolises that leadership and international collaboration can overcome overwhelming odds and challenges. The Grand Alliance (Britain, the US and the USSR), France and all those countries that on 1 January 1942 signed the 'Declaration by the United Nations' combined their strength to take on the might of the Axis. As Churchill put it on 8 May 1945, 'almost the whole world was combined against the evil-doers who are now prostrate before us. Gratitude to our splendid Allies goes forth from all our hearts'.

When SARS (2003), MERS (2012) and Ebola (2014) emerged, the international community worked together to contain the threats. At the dawn of 2020, though, when the threat from Covid-19 arose, the international community was more fragmented than at any time since 1945 because of a populist wave that has been nationalistic and distrustful of multilateralism. The western order in early 2020 is in disarray and unable to cooperate effectively to put a stop to the spread of the infection. Contagion in a globalised world, everyone now knows from bitter experience, cannot be stopped from becoming a pandemic without concerted international action and trust in governments and institutions.

Covid-19 has also exposed a lack of global leadership and international cooperation challenging the robustness of institutions and alliances such as the EU and NATO. Interactions among states are likely to be affected too and may give rise to different patterns of international relations. America is seemingly bent on an inward journey and wishes to keep the world out. It has abrogated its world leadership during this crisis and its prestige has been tarnished. Ceasing funding to the WHO in the middle of a pandemic is not just an act of international vandalism, it is an act of acute self-harm.

China's 'mask diplomacy' has exposed the country's limitations rather than its strengths. Its authoritarian structures have hindered the quality of information flow to its central government and what it shares with the world. China appears defensive, manipulative and even overbearing. During this crisis its hunger for publicity when offering aid and its desire that the WHO not highlight Taiwan's effective policies at suppressing the virus – which could have offered early lessons on good practice – have distorted the WHO's message on containing the virus. Perhaps, a more apt term is 'masked diplomacy' and it has to do more with China's domestic affairs than its foreign policy.

Russia does not seem to have had a good crisis either. The EU has fallen prey, once again, to its design faults and internal fault-lines. The European Commission, the lynchpin of the Union, is too beholden to the European Council. For as long as the interests of the nation state prevail over the common good of the Union and for as long as Germany acts as a prisoner of its past and fails to act as a leader, the Union will continue to be both 'unloved' and precarious.

Therefore, as on VE Day 1945, the world awaits leadership and, if anything, international relations are likely to become more complicated. Geopolitical pressures, as well as national and economic interdependence may be joined by a new factor, health security. The introduction of Covid-19 free corridors may change how states relate. Countries may decide to interact more closely with others that have developed comparable resilience and approaches to health security in order to protect themselves from cyclical epidemics, at least, until vaccines and treatments are found. This may lead to yet further fragmentation and the rise of new alliances when in reality without a huge collaborative effort, the pandemic will not be quelled and, in some corners of the world, may become entrenched and a recurrent threat to the rest.

VE Day 75 years ago epitomised the victory of democracy and peace over aggression, dictatorship and demagoguery. Shortly after, the European Convention on Human Rights was to become integral to the re-imagining and political reconstruction of post WWII Europe. This was a Western Europe that took seriously Sir David Maxwell Fyfe's [warning](#) that 'barbarism is not behind us but underneath us'.

Over the course of this pandemic, politicians have revised their rhetoric and have delegated a big part of their virus-related communications strategy to scientists and experts, stressing repeatedly that they follow scientific advice. The role of the expert and the scientist has been upgraded again. 'People ... have had enough of experts' does not ring true at this time, but that does not mean that demagogues have been checked, as some commentators have hastily suggested.

Rather, in some countries, they have taken advantage of the emergency to scrap human rights and civil liberties. Hungary has become the EU's first dictatorship and even more extraordinarily, the EU has not yet suspended its membership. Elsewhere, demagoguery has been more circumspect awaiting the end of the crisis, ready to claim credit for success and off-load any failures to the experts. Demagogues are too narcissistic to mark any victory with Eisenhower's touching words on 8 May 1945: 'Humility must be the measure of a man whose success was bought with the blood of his subordinates, and paid for with the lives of his friends'.

The future

A pandemic, like war, initiates change, and occasionally, transformation. Both shake the foundations of the existing world order which, in any case, is rarely stable. Both highlight weaknesses and are reminders of why multilateral institutions have been established. Both evaluate their currency and worth. Covid-19 could act both as an accelerator as well as an inhibitor of major geopolitical re-adjustments and shifts.

Immediately after VE Day in 1945, the economic dislocation brought on by years of war made the resumption of peacetime economic activity problematic. America feared a recession and the Europeans could not see how they could rebuild their countries and feed their people. Total war had destroyed the old order. Wartime gave politicians, academics, businessmen and officials the opportunity to dream of a new world with new institutions such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF. They shed antagonistic trading blocs and built a new multilateral world order. This came in handy as a new enemy appeared on the horizon, Soviet Communism. The US decided too that it was in its interests to usher in *Pax Americana* through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NATO. European economic and political reconstruction was deemed the only way to leave behind the Great Depression for good and to defeat communism.

It was under the hold of the Black Death that embryonic developments surged to sweep away medieval institutions. This pandemic is predicted to bring an economic downturn that the world has not seen for three centuries and unemployment levels higher than those of the Great Depression. People wish to go back to the pre-Covid-19 era but continuity has fractured. A new normal needs to emerge. Hopefully, it will be quick and Gramsci's observation that 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born, this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' will be irrelevant this time.

Plagues, like wars, are game changers and necessitate bold thinking. The pandemic has already led politicians, even those who are neo-liberals, to redesign welfare provision overnight and resort to giddy levels of borrowing. It has made avowed libertarians look beseechingly to a Hobbesian state for protection. Suddenly, 'society' seems to have been re-discovered. The key question for national governments now is likely to be how social harmony and future prosperity can be secured in the post-Covid-19 era.

Will states opt for orthodoxy, economic nationalism and austerity once again? Can they do so when the current situation is precipitated, to a degree, by political failings and by state-imposed lockdowns? Can they opt to rethink economic policy in new imaginative ways? Once the virus has been defeated is the only way out to slash private debt and allocate a time limited taxable basic income to all to kick-start the economy? Something akin to the bail out of the banks in 2008 may be necessary now that big government and more national debt are inescapable. The fragile resilience of long supply lines makes desirable already mooted moves to more self-sufficiency and may accelerate some de-globalisation.

Covid-19 has profoundly jugged the West as both Europe and the US, for the time being, bear the brunt of the infection. When the pandemic is over, and as attempts to restore normalcy begin, historical thinking will be needed to comprehend the forces that led to the rise and mismanagement of a pandemic threatening to destroy our way of life for which so much was sacrificed during WWII. As David Armitage [points out](#), 'only by delving deep into the past can we hope to project ourselves imaginatively any meaningful distance into the future'. The lens of international history offers a useful analytical tool to amplify comprehension of the forces and the inputs from different actors that contributed to this international disaster *par excellence*. After all, as Donald Cameron Watt, Stevenson Professor in International History (1981-92) observed in his Inaugural Lecture at LSE in 1983, the discipline has its roots in 'disaster studies'.

As VE Day demonstrates, periods of intense sacrifice may not be in vain, but they cannot protect us from future threats and this is why Churchill concluded that 'there is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them'. Britain won WWII and was able to celebrate VE Day undefeated partly because Churchill, haunted by Gallipoli, took care not to squander the country's resources and picked winnable battles.

He stubbornly refused to open the second front in 1943 when Roosevelt and Stalin were pressurising him, delaying until D-Day in June 1944 when he was sure that the risks to the British Isles and people had decreased. Britain ought to devote all its resources to fighting Covid-19 and its unimaginable human, social and economic costs. Rocking the foundations of a country's economic system twice in quick succession however, in the first instance by an act of God and then, wilfully, because of impatience to end the Brexit transition, can bring about long term damage.

VE Day is about commemoration, thanksgiving and reflection. All these can be fulfilled in the solitude of one's own home. This year's VE Day was different, but at the same time, it was an exceptional anniversary with a clear message for all. Darkness is not endless and light will, in time, always shine through.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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