



Your Country Needs You

The British Effort During the Wars and the COVID-19 Pandemic



Soumit Dasgupta MBBS MS FRCS FRCP

Consultant Neurologist, Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Liverpool, UK

Visiting Professor, University of Sienna, Italy

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Introduction

We as a nation are going through unprecedented times with the Covid 19 global pandemic. In the UK, we are yet to reach a peak and it appears that the current situation will continue for months to come. Tough decisions are being made, sacrifices are in place and the greatest hindrance to social interaction is in force considering that man at the end of the day thrives in social interaction.

Emmanuelle Macron has recently said, "Nous sommes en guerre" ("we are at war") regarding the situation in his country. Matt Hancock, our own health minister has alluded the current epidemic sweeping across the country to the hardships faced by the British public during the 2 great wars in the 20th century. Can the situation existing during the British war efforts of



1914-1918 and 1939-1945 be compared to the existing situation during the Covid 19 pandemic? This article tries to find an answer to this question and examines the similarities and the dissimilarities of this nation reacting in every possible way imaginable to the different situations.

The collective national effort

Both the wars and the current epidemic have generated what can be called a collective national effort. Mobilisation in military terms implies that the armed forces are stood on high alert and ordered to engage the enemy. However, there is a bigger part to mobilisation during wars that include the civilian war effort. This is when the whole nation engaged in the war comes together to stand as one in the crises. The British during the wars, inspired by charismatic leaderships in home soil understood that the whole nation will have to participate in the war effort to help the soldiers fighting in the front, help the economy in whatever capacity that an individual citizen can help with and overall maintain morals in very difficult times.

The Covid 19 effort has generated a similar feeling of collective national effort. The fundamental difference with the effort during the wars is that the wars were mostly fought outside of the country's borders. With the exception of the Blitz in 1940 and sporadic V1 bomb and V2 missile attack towards the end of the war, this country was largely unscathed from the devastation in Europe, the actual theatre of war. Yet the civilian population rose as one. Covid 19 effort is more complex as this effort is directed to combat an enemy in home soil and consequently demands more engagement and commitment than what the British citizens had to put up with during the wars.

Another important difference is the issue of social engagement. The home front war effort encouraged more interaction with each other to promote a sense of camaraderie and uplift civilian morale. The current viral epidemic encourages just the opposite. Man detaching itself from its neighbour, in the complex evolution of social fabric is almost incompatible with life. And that is what we will have to adhere to. Social distancing and social isolation can be detrimental to man's wellbeing especially among the socially vulnerable and it only remains to be seen as to how long this continues. Man is resilient enough to manage short temporary periods of isolation but who knows what will happen to this rather delicate and sensitive but essential attribute if it continues in the longer term.

The third important difference is the mind-set of the people in the country during the wars and in the present situation. The public during the wars knew that they had been putting up to fight a highly visible enemy who were the aggressors flouting human rights. This enemy can attack home any time if they are not defeated and try to establish a new world order of domination. The public during the present times know that they are fighting an invisible enemy who is attacking every second and leaving behind devastation in human lives in its wake but the current world order will not change. Infrastructures unlike in the aftermath of the wars will be preserved, human rights will be preserved and the country will be unscathed from physical damage. The citizens would mourn the death of their soldiers outside the country during the wars and would live themselves but they will mourn the death of their own neighbours in the current crisis and there is no assurance that they will not lose their own lives. This mind set is much more morally challenging and depressing than the mind set during the wars.



Since the past two generations had not seen the war, it would be impossible for us to appreciate what it was really like in those times. My personal opinion is that whilst rationing, air raid shelters and the fear of being injured or maimed were severe, they brought man closer to each other individually. The present situation is not letting that happen at an individual level. There was a predicted inevitability during the wars – either you win or you lose; however, in the current situation, there is supreme uncertainty and nothing is inevitable. Uncertainty in any form is far more challenging to face than a decisive future.

The economy

During the wars and the present crisis, the effect on the economy of the country is significant. In the former, private sector employment decreased to be redeployed to the war effort and a significant proportion of a healthy work force was injured or killed. The majority of the economy was diverted towards the war effort that led to a boom in manufacturing arms, ammunitions and sundries for the war with a significant drop in unemployment especially when conscription to the war effort started after the Blitz. Agricultural production increased by at least 35% and the nation was well fed by the introduction of rationing. In addition to this, much of the food grain to feed soldiers was supplied by the colonies especially India. In 1941, the GDP was more than 20% of what it was in 1938. Britain acquired a large reserve in foreign exchange due to the generous loans by both USA and Canada. Industrial infrastructure was reasonably well preserved and escaped physical devastation as the war was not fought on British soil. Since this country depended on imports to keep her factories running, this did suffer a blow in the initial period due to sinking of convoys by German U boats in the Atlantic, however, this was effectively countered by the Royal and the US Navy. So overall, Britain as a nation was financially secure and sufficient from the economic point of view. As a result, after the war, the recovery was quick.

The contrast with the current situation is stark. Here, private sector work is taking a nose dive with preservation of the work force. The economy is so hard hit with lock down and social isolation, that there is a serious chance of recession once the crisis is over. Jobs are being lost, businesses are packing up and the hospitality and the travel industry are fighting hard to survive. Some manufacturing is continuing and diverted to the collective effort to make ventilators for the health effort but overall since manufacturing needs people in a closed space to implement, it is bleeding every day. To top it all off, unlike in the war effort, there is no foreign aid coming as the countries that helped us so generously during the wars are themselves affected and there are no colonies any more. Imports are continuing but with the days passing by, a complete shut down of international borders is also predicted. The future is rather uncertain as to what the long term effects will be like on the economy of the world, let alone this country. This is unprecedented and far more serious than during the war.

The lock down and the common man

“Bombs, blackouts, air-raid shelters, sirens and rationing were real impositions, compared with the inconvenience of washing your hands”, said a war veteran. There were curfews in force and movement was restricted. However, the population was not asked to keep a distance.



Compare this to the current situation. Let's talk about a 30 year old man in March 2020 who in 2070 will reminisce thus: " Staying at home, unable to visit my elderly parents, possibility of losing my job, superstores empty of provisions, children can't go to school and the uncertainty of whether I will be struck down by the bug and die were the realities on the ground compared to bombs and blackouts that brought you closer".

It must be borne in mind that a society consumes only if it produces. During the war effort, people put in on an average 60 hours per week of work to sustain production leading to consumption. This is impossible in the current climate when in spite of the digital revolution and the luxury of working from home simply cannot replace hard and physical hands-on activities. That is why there is a serious risk of the fabric of economy crumbling down. The government is doing its best to help by sanctioning billions of pounds to support citizens who cannot work due to the social isolation but obviously sustainability is an issue. Karl Marx in 1868 said : 'Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.'

Civilian casualties during the wars were circa 85,000 and unless contained, civilian casualties predicted during the Covid crisis are circa 500,000, and with government measures circa 25,000. So as a killer, the virus is more deadly than the wars. Moreover, the people killed during the war were the young healthy population whereas the population losing their lives are the elderly and vulnerable population in the majority in the present crisis.

A lesson learnt from wars was that over a period of time, government imposed measures did not sustain and people will go about on their jobs at the risk of being punished. Conscription and evacuation were prime examples. That is why the current government understandably is doing this gradually and already there has been defiance against social isolation in the parks and the beaches.

Politics and leadership

It needs to be remembered that a war is fought for political reasons. When more and more countries become involved it achieves a 'world' or global proportions but even then at least from the geopolitical point of view, much of the world is spared. The current pandemic is global and has spread to every corner of the world. This is a fundamental difference with serious implications.

Management of trans-country borders during the war within one side (let's say the Allies or the Axis) allowed free movement of people. There was no closure and indeed a significant proportion of émigré or temporary governments from Europe were set up in the UK during the Second World War because there was unrestricted entry. This meant that people did have a choice of moving from one unsafe place to a safe one. This is next to impossible in the present viral pandemic. Borders are shut and people have to stay put where they are. Evacuation is not an option.

Cross country financial and material aid during the wars was implemented with great success and kept many countries functioning. This situation is not possible in the current climate as all countries are geared to combat their own epidemics.

Leadership needs to be decisive. David Lloyd George provided this during the First World War and Winston Churchill during the second. These leaders were ahead of their times. Lloyd George appointed world experts in economy and finance to run the economy and mobilised a



huge volunteer force. Churchill motivated the public with his stirring speeches at a time when Britain was alone and the rest of Europe reeling under the Nazi juggernaut. Morals were kept high.

The UK government although slow to react to the corona pandemic has now taken some decisive steps and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a very sympathetic and considerate package for the citizens at a risk of financial hardships. However, in the wake of the December elections, and with the fallout of Brexit still in the political discourse, the country is as divided as ever. It will be interesting to see if this pandemic will bring the country closer together, or exacerbate this divide. It is important to note, however, the real sense of community spirit and care has blossomed from this crisis.

The aftermath of the wars led to profound global political changes as well. A new world order was established, political boundaries were redrawn, countries became free from the colonial yoke and the geopolitical scenario changed completely. Human fundamental rights and freedom were re-evaluated and the guilty punished – the whole concept of war crime arraignment was something new and exceptional. After the dust settles with the current pandemic, the world will remain what it was from the geopolitical point of view.

Health

It goes without saying that when a nation is threatened with crises like wars or an epidemic, civilian and public health suffers. There was no national health service during the wars and the patient profile was dominated by war casualties from trauma or otherwise. The general population could have suffered mental health problems but their physical health profiles did not differ much from peacetime ones. Nevertheless health services were stretched even with the establishment of several dedicated military hospitals. It was clearly identified that the current provisions were simply not enough to face another similar situation and thus the NHS was born.

We are facing a different situation now. We have the NHS, which is one of the best health services in the world but we are at serious risk of getting swamped by the epidemic. Covid morbidity is rising exponentially and there are not enough provisions to care for the very ill. We are seeing a similar situation in Europe and it only reinforces the idea that a natural disaster can be far more intense than a man made one.

Conclusions

Both the wars and the Covid epidemic have generated a collective effort to combat against these and stand together. That is the only similarity. The war effort is significantly different from the present effort as this article has shown, in terms of the mind-set, the social distancing, the effects of a lock down, the main differences in people's lives, the economy and the predictability for a normal future. There is one positive aspect of these calamities and that is the blossoming of humanity. Man stands shoulder to shoulder with one another like never before, lending a helping hand regardless of inequalities, classes, genders, race or creed. Man is tempered by millennia of survival and civilisation and is resilient enough to withstand any adversity. And I am sure that phoenix will rise from the ashes.



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