

Home front during World War II



U.S. Government Publicity photo of American machine tool worker in Texas.

The [home front](#) is the name given to the activities of the civilians during a state of [total war](#). Life on the home front during [World War II](#) was a significant part of the war effort for all participants, and had major impact on the outcome of the war.

Overview

The major powers devoted 50–60% of their total GDP to war production at the peak in 1943. The Allies produced about three times as much in munitions as the Axis powers.

Munitions Production in World War II (Expenditures in billions of dollars, US 1944 munitions prices)

Country/Alliance	Year						
	1935-9 ave	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	Total 1939–44
U.S.A.	0.3	1.5	4.5	20.0	38.0	42.0	106.3
Britain	0.5	3.5	6.5	9.0	11.0	11.0	41.5
U.S.S.R	1.6	5.0	8.5	11.5	14.0	16.0	56.6
Allies Total	2.4	10.0	20.0	41.5	64.5	70.5	204.4
Germany	2.4	6.0	6.0	8.5	13.5	17.0	53.4
Japan	0.4	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.5	6.0	16.9

Axis Total	2.8	7.0	8.0	11.5	18.0	23.0	70.3
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Source: Goldsmith data in Harrison (1988) p. 172

Real Value Consumer Spending								
Country	Year							
	1937	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Japan	100	107	109	111	108	99	93	78
Germany	100	108	117	108	105	95	94	85
USA	100	96	103	108	116	115	118	122

Source: Jerome B Cohen, *Japan's Economy in War and Reconstruction* (1949) p 354

Allies

Poland

Jews in Warsaw Ghetto: 1943

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, conquering it in six weeks, as the Soviets invaded the eastern areas. During the German occupation there were two distinct uprisings in Warsaw, one in 1943, the other in 1944. The first took place in an entity, less than two square miles in area, which the Germans carved out of the city and called "Ghetto Warschau." Into the thus created Ghetto, around which they built high walls, the Germans crowded 550,000 Polish Jews, many from the Polish provinces. At first, people were able to go in and out of the Ghetto, but soon the Ghetto's border became an "iron curtain." Unless on official business, Jews could not leave it, and non-Jews, including Germans, could not enter. Entry points were guarded by German soldiers. Because of extreme conditions and hunger, mortality in the Ghetto was high. Additionally, in 1942 the Germans moved 400,000 to Treblinka where they were gassed on arrival. When, on April 19, 1943, the Ghetto Uprising commenced, the population of the Ghetto had dwindled to 60,000 individuals. In the following three weeks virtually all died as the Germans fought to put down the uprising and systematically destroyed the buildings in the Ghetto. ^[1]

Warsaw Uprising of 1944

The uprising by Polish Catholics began on August 1, 1944 when the Polish underground, the "Home Army," aware that the Soviet Army had reached the eastern bank of the Vistula, sought to liberate Warsaw much as the French resistance had liberated Paris a few weeks earlier. Stalin had his own group of Communist leaders for the new Poland and did not want the Home Army or its Catholic leaders (based in London) to control Warsaw. So he halted the Soviet offensive and gave the Germans free reign to suppress it. During the ensuing 63 days, 250,000 Poles; the Home Army surrendered to the Germans. After the Germans forced all the surviving population to leave the city, Hitler ordered that any buildings left standing be dynamited and 98% of buildings in Warsaw were destroyed.^[2]

Britain

See [Timeline of the United Kingdom home front during World War II](#).

[Britain's](#) total mobilization during this period proved to be successful in toppling the [Axis Powers](#), but carried a steep cost postwar. Public opinion strongly supported the war, and the level of sacrifice was high. The war was a "people's war" that enlarged democratic aspirations and produced promises of a postwar welfare state.

Munitions

In mid-1940 the R.A.F. was called on to fight the [Battle of Britain](#) but it had suffered serious losses. It lost 458 aircraft—more than current production—in France and was hard pressed. In order to speed output the government decided to concentrate on only five models in order to optimize output. They were Wellingtons, Whitley Vs, Blenheims, Hurricanes and Spitfires. They received extraordinary priority. Covering the supply of materials and equipment and even made it possible to divert from other types the necessary parts, equipments, materials and manufacturing resources. Labour was moved from other aircraft work to factories engaged on the specified types. Cost was not an object. The delivery of new fighters rose from 256 in April to 467 in September—more than enough to cover the losses—and Fighter Command emerged triumphantly from the Battle of Britain in October with more aircraft than it had possessed at the beginning.^[3]

Women

Most women who volunteered before the war went into civil defense or the [Women's Land Army](#). The main civil defence services were Air Raid Precautions (ARP), the fire service and Women's Voluntary Services (WVS). Initially, the women mainly carried out clerical work, but their roles expanded to meet demand, and female pump crews became commonplace. Women joined branches of the forces, which were revived in 1938-39: the Army's [Auxiliary Territorial Service](#), the [Women's Royal Naval Service](#) (Wrens), and the [Women's Auxiliary Air Force](#) (WaaFs).

Conscription for all women was introduced in 1941 for women of 21 in that year. They had to join the armed forces or the land army or be assigned other war work.^[4]

The WVS was the largest single women's organisation at this time. It was formed to support civil defence and to provide services not provided locally by other organizations, and had over one million members. "Typical WVS contributions included organising evacuations, shelters, clothing exchanges and mobile canteens"^[5]. The Women's Land Army/Scottish Land Army was reformed in 1938 so that women could be trained in agricultural work, leaving male workers free to go to war. Most WLA

members were young women from the towns and cities. Annice Gibbs, who worked for the WLA Timber Corps, remembers an encounter with Italian prisoners of war (POWs). "After our training, we soon got used to heavy work, such as lifting pit-props and cutting them into various lengths for the coal mines" ^[5]. There were no mechanical devices used then and every pit-prop was cut by hand. "...the Italian POWs worked to measure the trees. They were very well looked after and we were amazed to see them erecting field ovens. They cooked bacon and cabbage for their lunch and brewed delicious hot coffee ... and we sat under a tree eating beetroot sandwiches ... We were fortunate - they gave us some of their coffee and food" ^[5].

With the onset of war, everything changed. If fathers joined the armed forces, or were sent away to do vital civilian work, mothers often ran the home alone - and had to get used to going out to work, as well. Young single women, often away from home for the first time, might be billeted miles from their families.

Flexible working hours, nurseries and other arrangements soon became commonplace to accommodate the needs of working women with children. Before long, women made up one third of the total workforce in the metal and chemical industries, as well as in ship-building and vehicle manufacture.

They worked on the railways, canals and on buses. Women built Waterloo Bridge in London. Nellie Brook left the munitions factory where she worked due to poor health, and was assigned to aircraft manufacture. "I was told my services were needed at A V Roe at Yeardon, where they made Lancaster bombers. That was like something out of science fiction. To get there, we were taken out into the country. When you arrived you would never have thought there was a factory there, it was so well camouflaged; great big grass hillocks and once you went inside it was amazing. No windows, all these hundreds of people of both sexes all working away like ants. All doing different jobs that finished up producing one of Britain's finest planes" ^[6].

Rationing

Food, clothing, petrol, leather and other such items were [rationed](#). Access to luxuries was severely restricted, though there was also a significant [black market](#). Families also grew [victory gardens](#), and small home vegetable gardens, to supply themselves with food. Many things were conserved to turn into weapons later, such as fat for [nitroglycerin](#) production.

Evacuation

From very early in the war it was thought that the major cities of Britain, especially [London](#), would come under air attack, which did happen. Some children were sent to Canada. Millions of children and some mothers were evacuated from London and other major cities when the war began, but they often filtered back. When the bombing began in September 1940 they evacuated again. The discovery of the poor health and hygiene of evacuees was a shock to Britons, and helped prepare the way for the Beveridge Plan. ^[7] Children were only evacuated if their parents agreed but in some cases they didn't have a choice. The children were only allowed to take a few things with them including a gas mask, books, money, clothes, ration book and some small toys.

Soviet Union

[Image:Boy in factory.jpg](#)

Boy making ammunition

After rapid German advances in the early months of the war reaching the city of Moscow, the bulk of [Soviet](#) industry and agriculture was either destroyed or in German hands. But in one of the greatest logistics feats of the war, thousands of factories were moved beyond the [Ural Mountains](#) along with well over a million workers. In general the tools, dies and machines were moved, along with the blueprints and skilled engineers.

The whole of the Soviet Union became dedicated to the war effort. Conditions were severe. In Leningrad, under German siege, over a million died of starvation and disease. Many factory workers were teenagers, women and old people. Despite harsh conditions, the war led to a spike in Soviet [nationalism](#) and unity. Soviet [propaganda](#) toned down [socialist rhetoric](#) of the past as the people now rallied by a belief of protecting their motherland against "evil" [German invaders](#). Ethnic minorities thought to be collaborators were moved into exile.

Religion, which was previously shunned, became an acceptable part of society. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}

[\[edit\]](#) United States

See [United States home front during World War II](#).

[\[edit\]](#) China

[China](#) suffered the second highest amount of casualties of the entire war. Civilians in the occupied territories had to endure many large-scale slaughters. In a few areas Japanese forces also unleashed newly developed biological weapons on Chinese civilians leading to an estimated 200,000 dead ^{[[8\]](#)}. Tens of thousands are thought to have died when Nationalist troops broke the levees of the [Yangtze](#) to stop the Japanese advance after the loss of the capital, [Nanking](#). Millions more Chinese died because of famine during the war.

Millions of Chinese moved to the Western regions of China to avoid Japanese invasion. Cities like [Kunming](#) ballooned with new arrivals. Entire factories and universities were often taken along for the journey. Japan captured major coastal cities like [Shanghai](#) early in the war; cutting the rest of China off from its chief source of finance and industry.

The city of [Chongqing](#) became the most frequently bombed city in history. ^{[[9\]](#)}

Though China received aid from the United States, China did not have sufficient infrastructure to properly arm or even feed its military forces. Much of the aid was also funneled away through corruption.

Communist forces led by [Mao](#) were generally more successful at getting support than Nationalists. Based mainly in Northern China, they worked with local villages to counter the over stretched [Imperial Army](#) with [guerrilla](#) tactics.

In occupied territories under Japanese control, civilians were treated harshly.

India

With the massive demands of manpower for the [British Indian Army](#) fighting in European, African and [Burmese](#) theaters of war there was a shortage of able bodied men for [agriculture](#). Further military restrictions (The British were afraid [Bengali plains](#) might fall into Japanese hands and prevented cultivation of border areas and also moved all [rice](#) stocks back towards [Calcutta](#)) as well as forced procurement of rice for the war effort in Europe led to severe food shortages culminating in the Bengal famine in 1942 in which an estimated 3 million to 7 million Indians are said to have perished. At the time this famine was considered as bad an atrocity as the Germans starvation of the [Polish Jews](#) and was in purely numerical terms a much larger catastrophe. It has been found that a number of images found in [holocaust](#) museums around the world as pictures of people starved to the bone are actually mislabeled photographs of Bengali civilians under British rule. In recent years the famine has been explained as a combination of a natural drought as well as the military restrictions but reliable records of whether there was any natural element to the famine are not be found.

With the British recruiting Indian soldiers in large numbers as well as the Japanese recruiting Indian expatriates into the [Indian National Army](#) (INA) a state of civil war existed on the east Indian border with Indians killing Indians. This in turn led to civilians who supported either the British or the INA rioting against each other.

Axis

Germany

Germany had not fully mobilized in 1939, nor even in 1941. Not until 1943 under [Albert Speer](#) did Germany finally redirect its entire economy and manpower to war production.

Economy

Although Germany had about twice the population of Britain (80 million versus 40 million), it had to use far more labour to provide food and energy. Britain imported food and employed only a million people (5% of labour force) on farms, while Germany used 11 million (27%). For Germany to build its twelve synthetic oil plants with a capacity of 3.3 million tons a year required 2.4 million tons of structural steel and 7.5 million man-days of labour; Britain brought in all its oil from Iraq, Persia and North America. To overcome this problem Germany employed millions of forced laborers and POWs; by 1944 they had brought in more than five million civilian workers and nearly two million prisoners of war—a total of 7.13 million foreign workers.

Rationing

For the first part of the war, there were surprisingly few restrictions on civilian activities. Most goods were freely available in the early years of the war. Rationing in Germany was introduced in 1939, slightly later than it was in Britain, because [Hitler](#) was at first convinced that it would affect public support of the war if a strict rationing program was introduced. The [Nazi](#) popularity was in fact partially due to the fact that Germany under the Nazis was relatively prosperous, and Hitler did not want to lose popularity or faith. Hitler felt that food and other shortages had been a major factor in destroying civilian morale during [World War I](#) which led to the overthrow of the [Kaiser](#) and other [German monarchies](#) at the end of the war. However, when the war began to go against the Germans in Russia and the Allied bombing effort began to affect domestic production, this changed and a very severe rationing program had to be introduced. The system gave extra rations for men involved in

heavy industry, and lower rations for [Jews](#) and [Poles](#) in the areas occupied by Germany, but not to the [Rhineland](#) Poles.

The points system

According to a 1997 post by Walter Felscher to the Memories of the 1940's [sic] [electronic mailing list](#):

For every person, there were rationing cards for general foodstuffs, meats, fats (such as butter, margarine and oil) and tobacco products distributed every other month. The cards were printed on strong paper, containing numerous small "Marken" subdivisions printed with their value – for example, from "5 g Butter" to "100 g Butter". Every acquisition of rationed goods required an appropriate "Marken", and if a person wished to eat a certain soup at a restaurant, the waiter would take out a pair of scissors and cut off the required items to make the soup and amounts listed on the menu. In the evenings, shop-owners would spend an hour at least gluing the collected "Marken" onto large sheets of paper which they then had to hand in to the appropriate authorities. ^[10]

Rare foods

The amounts attributed under rationing were sufficient to live from, but clearly did not permit luxuries. Whipped cream became unknown from 1939 until 1948, as well as chocolates, cakes with rich crèmes etc., and meat, of course, could not be eaten every day. Other items were not rationed, but simply became unavailable as they had to be imported from overseas: coffee in particular which throughout was replaced by substitutes made from roasted grains. Vegetables and local fruit were not rationed; imported citrus fruits and bananas were unavailable. In more rural areas, farmers continued to bring their products to the markets, as large cities depended on long distance delivery. Because coffee was scarce, people created a substitute for it made from roasted ground down barley seeds and acorns. Many people kept rabbits for their meat when meat became scarce in shops, and it was often a child's job to care for them each day.

Labor

Women were idealized by Nazi ideology and work was not felt to be appropriate for them. Children were expected to go to houses collecting materials for the production of war equipment. The German industry used [forced labour](#), called [Arbeitseinsatz](#) from the countries they occupied.

Japan

Japanese Rice Supply

Year	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Domestic production	9,928	9,862	10,324	9,107	8,245	9,999	9,422	8,784	6,445
Imports	2,173	2,546	1,634	1,860	2,517	2,581	1,183	874	268
All rice	12,101	12,408	11,958	10,967	10,762	12,580	10,605	9,658	6,713

Source: Cohen, *Japan's Economy in War and Reconstruction* (1949) p 368-9

See also

- [Timeline of the United Kingdom home front during World War II](#)
- [Rosie the Riveter](#)
- [Women's Land Army](#)
- [Female roles in the World Wars](#)
- [Utility furniture](#)
- [Lotta Svärd](#)

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