**What was the most significant impact of World War Two on family lives in Britain?**

World War Two (1st September 1939- 2nd September 1945) was arguably the greatest and most destructive war in history. It transformed the social and economic landscape of Britain, and its impact was felt by the entire country for many decades. The war affected all citizens (albeit in different ways) regardless of age, gender or social status. In this essay I will discuss some of the main changes experienced during World War Two, and in particular, those which had the most significant impact on ordinary British lives, supported by direct video interviews with first- hand accounts relating to how the War changed lives.

One of the key effects of World War Two was conscription, and the changes it had on young mens’ lives. On 27th April 1939, Neville Chamberlain (then the Prime Minister) controversially announced the introduction of conscription, which made joining the army compulsory for young men who were fit to fight. By the summer of 1941 almost 2,500,000 men were in the British Army. By the end of the war, this had risen to 2,920,000. Sadly, the war resulted in approximately 300000 military deaths, but of the men who survived the trauma of war, many acquired mental and physical disabilities which impacted their lives heavily. The families of the soldiers were badly affected too, suffering distress and grief from the loss of loved ones. However, the conscription of men into the army did have some positive effects. Many men fit for war had to leave their jobs behind and this led to an unfilled demand for workers in factories as steel and coal production was vital for the war effort. Hence the unemployment rate decreased, and indeed many women found opportunities that had not previously existed. This can definitely be seen as one of the most significant impacts of World War Two both for the emotional impact, but also at a practical level for families.

Although the war was a horrendous time for many, it did promote the role of women. The war gave them the chance to become more independent and to finally gain financial independence, with jobs and opportunities previously dominated by men. An example of this was the National Service Act passed by Parliament in December 1941, due to labour shortages. This legislation called up women between the ages of twenty and thirty (although pregnant women and those with young children were exempted from work). Women went to work in munitions factories, tank and aircraft factories, civil defence, nursing, transport and many other jobs traditionally done by men. By 1943 around 90% of single women and 80% of married women were involved in (war) work. Although wages were meagre, it changed perceptions of a woman’s role as a home maker in the way World War I had not managed to do. The ladies we interviewed were both adamant that women made a significant, if largely unrecognised contribution to the war effort and many were unhappy after the war when they had to relinquish these challenging roles and return to being housewives. Finally they pointed out that the war helped bridge the gap between classes, as rich and poor were united by a single cause. Although we can say that conscription was one of the key effects of World War Two, the Role of Women could be seen as more significant due to its long-lasting effect, and the changes it brought to women’s lives since.

Most mothers and children recount the difficulties of rationing in World War Two. Rationing was a means of ensuring the fair distribution of food during the war. In January 1940, bacon, butter and sugar were rationed, and soon after this it was followed by meat, fish, jam, biscuits, cereals, cheese, eggs, and milk. Although rationing was a hardship of the war, a Gallup Poll showed over 60% were in favour of this system. Many women had to learn new ways to accommodate the rations and substitutes into the meals they made, and the diets and food of citizens changed significantly during the war, (although our interviewees were keen to point out they never went hungry). Rationing also included a coupon system which not only limited the amount of food a family could buy but also the amount of clothes. Rationing had a large effect on upper and middle class (house) wives in particular, who were not accustomed to having limits on their spending. For instance, during the war in May 1943, the annual clothing coupon allowance was cut from 48 to 36 and then to 20 per adult. When one considers a coat needs 18 coupons, this reduction caused serious problems for people. Rationing presented a huge challenge for ordinary people during the war as they had to adapt and make do with what they had in order for the country to be able to provide for the whole population during the war. I found our interviewees had the strongest memories of this (unsurprisingly as they were children) and both said their least favourite food substitute was dried, powdered egg, which made “ghastly omelettes”! However wide-spread this change was in Britain, I would not say it had the most significant impact of World War Two on ordinary life (especially compares with other effects such as conscription). Compared to what many people had to deal with, rations were only a minor difficulty and the introduction of the system was widely supported.

To most people today, the Blitz is synonymous with World War Two. It caused massive damage to property, destroying many historic buildings, and cost many lives. On September 7th 1940, Germany began its bombing “blitzkrieg” (lightening war) on Britain. These night-time bombing raids on London (which was bombed for 57 consecutive nights from September 7th) and other areas in Britain (such as Liverpool, Glasgow, and Coventry) by Nazi German aircraft, lasted till May 1941. There were over 45000 civilian deaths in Britain, 7736 of them children, and many more seriously injured. In addition, the Blitz destroyed at least 220,000 British dwellings and at least 3.5 million suffered from some form of damage. To protect themselves from the Blitz the government ordered “blackouts”. A blackout was the practice of collectively minimising light in order to lower the risk of bombs falling in particular areas. The Blitz had a devastating effect on the country, and Patricia recalled seeing the orange blaze above London from her home in Harrow on the Hill. Hillary gave us some gruesome details on the very real impact of the bombing, as the force of an explosion blew a young friend of hers out of her house and into the gutter in the street. Many of them were left physically and mentally harmed by the events of the Blitz, and many with their homes, possessions and livelihoods destroyed. As Winston Churchill famously said of the Allied fighter pilots during the Blitz, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”.

Partly as protection from the relentless bombing during the Blitz, and the continual threat of invasion, evacuation was widespread. Nearly around 3,750,000 children were evacuated between June and August 1939. In July 1939, the government published a leaflet called ‘Evacuation: Why and How?, and stated “crippling dislocation of our civil life… to prevent this is the removal of the children from the most dangerous areas”. This had impacted children lives significantly as many children were moved away from their family and homes for years on end. Although, some did enjoy their time and were kept safe and well, there are many stories of children who were treated horribly and abused during their evacuation (including Hilary’s husband), which would affect them for the rest of their lives. The war also disrupted children’s education. Many schools were bombed out, and whole schools evacuated making education a difficult endeavour. Furthermore, as the war progressed many young male teachers were conscripted into the armed forces, leading to a shortage in teachers and an increase in class sizes. The Blitz definitely had one of the most significant impacts on ordinary lives in the UK. Not only did it kill many innocent civilians, but it terrorised the entire population, and many homes and lives were crippled by its effect. In addition, unlike conscription or the Role of Women, the Blitz targeted all- women, children, elderly and its effects wide spread throughout Britain.

Lastly, another key aspect of a World War Two was Propaganda, which had a considerable effect on the British public. Many government figures were tasked with maintaining morale during the harsh times of World War Two, and influencing the opinion of others. In the 1940s, televisions were not widespread and the population relied on newspapers (Patricia found out her brother was missing in action after finding his name on a list in the Evening Standard) and the radio. Their primary news source was the BBC, who recruited many famous authors such as George Orwell and T.S. Elliot for internal and external propaganda. Before conducting our interview, I perceived this as a negative. However, both our interviewees felt it was so important, as it often kept the public hopeful. Hilary felt that Winston Churchill played a key role in rallying the spirits of the nation and ordinary people truly believed that he had the power to win the war for them, and shows us how propaganda had such a significant impact on the ordinary population.

Overall, having considered all the factors that impacted lives of people in Britain and speaking to our interviewees, I believe the Blitz had the most significant impact on lives. I heard first hand how it shattered lives and destroyed so much of our historic city and also our local neighbourhood. However, I acknowledge this is partly coloured by the age of our interviewees as they were children and their perception of events were different. As Patricia said, “her parents experiences were more painful”, and from their views we may have suggested conscription as the largest impact, having lost two sons aged 18, and 19 to the war. What struck me though, while I initially expected them to talk about crippling fear and devastation they both assert they were “not scared”, and even that it was exciting. I was amazed at the resilience of the people at the time and now understand why neither lady has been too scared of the coronavirus and our current lockdown.