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Children in Great Britain in the Second World War

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Key question : How did children live the Second World War ?

Introduction :

The Second World war, which broke out in 1939, affected many parts of the population : poors, riches, all the professions and all the fields, the adults, and the children etc. We can think that only the continent was touched by the consequences of the war, but in fact, Great Britain was greatly affected by the conflict.

First we will see the daily life of children, after what was the leisure of children and finally the after war consequences on children.

We may wonder how did children live the Second World War ?

I a) Daily life of children : Education :

The war disrupted the education of many children. The mass evacuation of 1939 upset the school system for months and over 2,000 school buildings were requisitioned for war use. One in five schools was damaged by bombing, and air raids frequently stopped lessons for hours, leading to a decline in attendance. Although many schools were evacuated during the war, others chose to stay open and 'make the best of it', converting cellars and basements,

as shown in this photograph, into makeshift classrooms. Children were crammed into large classes and stationery and teachers, books, paper and equipment were all in short supply.

Young male teachers were called up to the forces and older teachers brought out of retirement to replace them. After the war a significant number of children failed to reach the required levels of literacy and numeracy.

When the war began in 1939, most children left school at 14. The 1944 Education Act changed this, introducing free secondary education for all children and a leaving age of 15, but it didn't take effect until after the war.

However, some children were still going to class. But these children were rare. In class, the conditions were very particular. Indeed, the school could be evacuated at any time, and sometimes, the teacher and the students have to put on gas masks. The children were trained to wear a gas mask.

I b) The daily life of children outside school

During the war, over 200,000 houses were totally destroyed by enemy bombing. Many children had to re-locate several times, often into prefabricated, emergency homes. In all, Thirty million changes of address took place during the war. But some people didn't have access to a roof because their house was destroyed and their financial situation didn't allow them to have new ones. So, a few families lived in makeshift shelters. But in the prefabricated houses, the children of the same family often slept in the same beds. About the food, the Minister of Food instituted a rationing system the 8th January 1940. To buy most of the rationed products, people had to register at the shops of their choice, where they received a ration book containing tickets. So, the consumption of meat, fat and sugar was very limited, while the consumption of legumes, mainly potatoes, was favoured. However, the government took the initiative to distribute free milk for children.

Alongside, the children had to have a gas mask when they were going out, in case there were bombardments, fires or simply gas. As said earlier, the children who were not evacuated went to school.

I c) Role of children

Children of all ages could get involved in the war effort. Older boys and girls joined the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. They supported Air Raid Precautions by acting as messengers or fire-watchers. Younger children helped salvage war materials, raised money for munitions or knitted comforts for troops.

II a) Children's plays and toys

While commercial toys were scarce during WWII, materials were readily available. But children had a lot of imagination. Indeed, all debris they could find in explosion sites, in the forest, on the ground... could become a toy, as little weapons if they wanted to play to the soldier for example or pirates..., or made their own teddy bears, peg dolls made from scraps materials, bones, wood, clay and old fabric.

Tire race was a common game among children, especially with boys. Girls played mostly games, such as jump rope, the teachers and others...

II b) Explosion sites : a playground for children

Many of the buildings destroyed by bombing were left derelict for years and became mini nature reserves. Plants grew wild there and enabled beautiful butterflies to thrive even in an urban area such as Portsmouth. These places just became a little paradise, as a new little ecosystem, for all children as for small boys, who were avid hunting insects, especially the prized Red Admirals. Capturing and killing these poor harmless insects seemed the natural thing to do - now much regretted. Beyond that, here you could find a lot of debris from shells, building foundations, electrical wires and much more.

A new activity emerged following the bombardement, the shrapnel and shell collection. All small boys collectionned that debris, usually in a brown paper bag. The high temperatures experienced during the explosions sometimes produced beautiful rainbow colours on the metal, contrasting with the horrible twisted shapes and the evil intent of the munitions. Swapping and trading with other small collectors was a lively business.

III - The war consequences on children

Throughout the war, children suffered from starvation, evacuation, loss of family members, and disruption of education. It's very difficult to know what the children felt during WW2. WW2 was very hard for people and especially for children who were some of the main victims of wartime Britain but they were strong and solid against adversity.

III a) Physical and psychological effects

Physical:

They didn't have enough to eat, so they were very slim and weak. They had vitamin deficiency.

Some of them lost their legs, some others have had accidents and were disfigured.

Psychological:

They heard bombs all day, they were always fearful and stressed. It was very bad conditions for children to grow normally. As we see they had training to put on a gas mask, and air raid drill on a common day, so we can imagine it was really traumatic. All of these traumas lead to depressions and clinical anxiety, with high levels of self-criticism.

III b) Social impact

It was very difficult to have a normal daily life. They lost members of their family died in the war. A few were evacuated to new families, so separated from their brothers and sisters. Children didn't have the love they need and are usually given by the parents.

United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) is a social action created by the USA to help the war. They employed lots of people as nurses, and other jobs to help everyone and especially children. For example, making artificial limbs. The UNRRA brings food for people who need too.

c) Long-term effects

Physical

War caused lots of damage on children who became unable to work in a normal way and who were disfigured for the rest of their life. The war engendered a lot of health problems.

Psychological

A study on 870 people aged from 62 to 72, who were very young during the war, shows that the after-effects have a link with how children have lived the Second World War.

The study shows that the youngest evacuated child had more psychological effects than the oldest.

General nervousness, trembling, crying, and aggressive behaviors were the main psychological symptoms. And psychosomatic symptoms were headaches, anorexia, indigestion, enuresis and soiling.

Conclusion :

To conclude, children are like the forgotten victims of that war, but it's those who have suffered the most. Literally living hell, children between the bombing, the difficulties to find enough food, the loss of a family member, the

difficulties to have an access to a correct education, were still able to have fun, being content with modest toys and games.

But obviously, the war wasn't without any consequences on them, injuries and mental illnesses touched a lot of them.

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children's play

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