
BETWEEN THE WARS

Donald Trump's return to the White House has reshaped the Ukraine conflict, showing how quickly international relations can change. Previously, American support had looked certain; now, under Trump, it has been erratic. President Zelensky captured his perception of Europe's piecemeal approach when speaking at Davos in 2026: 'We should not accept that Europe is just a salad of small and middle powers, seasoned with enemies of Europe.'

You realise just how quickly alliances and agreements can form and dissolve when you consider that Vladimir Putin attended the G8 meetings a little over a decade ago. More recently, Germany approved the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, aiming to double the flow of gas from Russia ...

But even though this conflict is happening today, I doubt many people remember the events that led to Russia's invasion. Who remembers the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, when Ukraine surrendered its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the US and the UK? What was the 2004 Orange Revolution all about? When and why did Russia annex Crimea – and would the US or UK have done the same in the same circumstances?

We have very short memories about the details of complex events. The media's narrative quickly stripped out the complexity and coalesced around the story that Putin is the bad guy, Ukraine is the victim and NATO members, especially the US, should provide unlimited weapons but remain 'hands-off'. Just think how we must have simplified and distorted the history of what happened between the world wars, then.

It has been 80 years since WW2 ended. My generation, let alone Gen-Z, only know about its awfulness by watching movies and playing computer games. My parents were children during WW1; relatives died in the war. Most of the politicians fought in the war. The conflict's horrible economic and human results were still visible; the national consciousness was still raw from the horrors.

Tim Bouverie's book *Appeasing Hitler* details the horrific loss of life, which explains the desire to maintain the peace and the loathing of military combat:

“ The desire to avoid a second world war was perhaps the most understandable and universal wish in history. More than 16.5 million people died during the First World War. The British lost 723,000; the French 1.7 million; the Russians 1.8 million; the British Empire 230,000; the Germans over 2 million. Twenty thousand British soldiers died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Among the survivors there was scarcely a soul that was not affected.

It's hard for us to understand the effect of this awful loss of human life on the national psyche. Siegfried Sassoon's words help capture the dreadfulness of the conflict. This poem, published in the last year of the war, is particularly poignant:

*Lines of grey, muttering faces, marked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!*

The joy of the moment when peace was declared soon vanished as the social and economic consequences became apparent.

Before the outbreak of WWI, the UK's national debt stood at 29% of GDP, with government spending and revenue in balance. By the end, the debt had skyrocketed to 143% of GDP. The country was spending much more than it raised through taxation – equivalent to 24% of GDP – and tried to bridge the gap by raising taxes and borrowing heavily, primarily from the US.

Victory was achieved, but it carried a devastating financial burden that determined the politics and economics of the following decades. The same can be said about Germany – probably more so.

My dad was 11 and still in school when WWI ended on Monday, 11 November 1918, and my mum was six years old.

Soon after, at 14 years and one month old, my dad left school with a letter from his teacher describing him as trustworthy and a talented draughtsman. The only thing I remember him mentioning from those days was that he'd won a prize for the quality of his painting – a fretwork set*. The incongruity of his talent for painting being rewarded with carpentry tools always amused him. What impressed me most, though, was that he was good at football and had a trial with the West Ham team. Maybe this last point got embellished over the years.

* A fretwork set is a collection of tools used for creating detailed ornamental designs in wood. It includes a fretsaw and various blades, drills and clamps.

As for his memories of that first war, I recall his tales of witnessing German Zeppelin raids over London. My dad's father was 41 when the war began, which meant he was too old to volunteer. When conscription came, he was within the eligible age range for only a brief period and was probably exempt because of his work (in the food industry) and the size of his family (five children). As a child, I heard many tales from my grandad, but none about the war.

Despite the sparsity of personal memories, then, this essay covers a significant period in my parents' lives, marked by major life events such as leaving school, entering the workforce, marrying and having a child. When writing it, I wanted to understand what life was like for them during this period, ending with the signing of the Munich Agreement at the end of September 1938. They went from being children growing up in the painful aftermath of the war to adults living through the political and economic turbulence that led to WW2.

There is nothing I can add to the many excellent histories that have been written about this subject. What I can do is view the timeline of events through my parents' eyes.

I am starting this essay in a place I knew almost nothing about and a subject I am sure was of zero concern to the average Brit at the time – post-WWI Germany. Britain at least had the prize of being the winner to comfort it during the economic turmoil that followed.

How on earth did Germany go from being an economic and social wreck to a mighty military machine in the space of two decades? What would my parents have known (or cared) about this transformation?

GERMANY POST-WWI

In 1914 the German Empire, like Britain, was an advanced and confident society – but with a very different form of government. Britain was ruled by its parliamentary democracy, whereas in Germany the Kaiser held supreme executive authority, with the powers to appoint and dismiss the Chancellor and top officials, command the armed forces, direct foreign policy and preside over the government and military, all largely independent of parliamentary control.

Before WWI, the average German worker earned slightly less than his British counterpart yet enjoyed steadier employment and better social protection. The country's health and pension schemes gave millions a degree of security that was unknown in most of Europe.

Berlin and Munich were modern cities with electric trams, clean water and efficient public services. Overcrowding remained a problem, but sanitation and infrastructure were ahead of much of industrial Britain.

Germany led the world in education and science. Schooling was compulsory and children remained in full-time education until the age of 14, unlike in Britain, where the official leaving age was 12 (although in London and other urban areas it was 14, as in the case of my dad). Technical colleges and universities produced skilled engineers and chemists whose discoveries powered both its prosperity and its military strength. Science, industry and the state were intertwined, creating a society that believed in discipline, order and progress through knowledge.

This description is something of a generalisation, of course, but it does capture the essential contrast between the two countries. The British were generally wealthier and enjoyed

greater personal freedom, though they lived with less organisation and little protection against illness or unemployment. Germans, by contrast, lived under a more authoritarian yet efficient, confident and technologically advanced regime. Their expectations of continual progress and rising prosperity were abruptly destroyed in 1918. Understanding the depth of that loss is crucial to appreciating the bitterness, instability and determination that shaped Germany's path to the next war.

The Double Blow: Defeat and Versailles

Germany's collapse in 1918 was not only a military defeat but also a moral and psychological one. The loss of trust in its institutions and feelings of betrayal that followed were every bit as damaging as the material destruction of war. In June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed, imposing punitive terms that exacerbated the sense of humiliation. Germany's post-war crisis was therefore the product of two intertwined wounds: the trauma of defeat and the punishment that followed.

The Treaty of Versailles demanded that Germany cede territory to France and Poland, stranding millions of ethnic Germans in the victor countries. The demilitarisation of the Rhineland placed Allied troops on German soil, a daily reminder of subjugation.

Germany's army, once the symbol of national unity, was slashed to 100,000 men without tanks and aircraft. The navy surrendered its fleet; conscription was abolished. France wanted the most draconian of these conditions; the US was less demanding, and Britain somewhere in the middle.

Economically, the enormity of the reparations compounded the sense of injustice. Germany was expected to pay 132 billion gold marks, equivalent to approximately \$33 billion. In today's dollars, that is \$600 billion – an enormous sum of money.

Even though this financial burden was repeatedly renegotiated and reduced, it still caused financial panic at the time – not surprisingly. The mark collapsed, savings vanished and unemployment soared. The middle class, once Germany's stabilising force, had its financial security destroyed by inflation as the government printed money, struggling to pay reparations and finance post-war recovery. Over the next few years, hyperinflation devastated the German economy.

Perhaps the most damaging part of the agreement was the 'war guilt clause', which declared Germany solely responsible for the conflict and liable for all its damage. This became a lasting sore that Hitler exploited to devastating effect.

Throughout the war, Germans had been told that victory was close. Censorship and propaganda kept the news of mounting defeats from public view, so when the country surrendered, it came as a traumatic shock to most people. Many civilians simply could not believe the war was lost. Out of this disbelief grew the poisonous myth that Germany had been betrayed by its politicians, the Jews and its socialists. Everybody wanted to deflect the blame for the defeat, especially the army's leadership.

Millions of demobilised soldiers returned to unemployment and civil disorder. The monarchy and officer corps that had anchored society were discredited. Germans felt adrift, resentful and suspicious of the emergent democracy. Despite its failure, nostalgia remained for the certainty and discipline of the old Empire.

To make matters worse (if that is possible), like the rest of Europe Germany suffered from

the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918–19, which killed somewhere between 20 and 50 times more people per capita than Covid.

In that first year after the armistice, Germany was therefore less a nation than a population in shock.

Together, defeat and the Versailles Treaty shattered Germany's self-belief. Before 1914, the nation had drawn its strength from a sense of order and moral purpose. After 1918 that certainty collapsed. The loss of empire and army left a vacuum that democracy struggled to fill.

In its place was Germany's new government, the Weimar Republic, the country's first constitutional and parliamentary democracy, which was soon blamed for the defeat and humiliation. From all parts of the political spectrum, it was despised for its apparent weakness and accused of betrayal. The institutions that were once the foundation of Germany's success – the Reichstag, the civil service and the police – lost all trust.

Germany may have been humiliated, however, but it was not destroyed. Its industrial base, though weakened, remained largely intact, and its scientists and engineers were still among the best in the world. What had been broken was confidence, faith in leadership and trust. The belief that Germany had been wronged became a unifying emotion that fuelled the political instability, economic despair and hunger for revenge that would dominate German life.

Stability at a terrible cost

By 1923 Germany had reached breaking point. The mark had collapsed, savings had plummeted in value and faith in government had vanished. Hyperinflation turned daily life into chaos: wages were paid twice a day and spent immediately before prices rose again. The social order of the old empire had disintegrated.

The crisis worsened in January 1923 when France and Belgium, determined to force reparation payments, occupied the Ruhr – Germany's industrial heartland. Unable to respond militarily, the German government called for 'passive resistance'; railways were halted, mines closed and production stopped. It was an act of national unity but an economic catastrophe. To pay striking workers, the government printed money – and inflation spiralled even further out of control.

By the autumn, Germany was paralysed.

Recovery began when the government ended the resistance and introduced a new currency, the Rentenmark, which was backed by mortgages on land and industry rather than gold. Confidence returned and in 1924 the Americans led an international group that provided loans and helped restructure the reparations. This, combined with the end of the occupation in 1925, restored something approaching normality. However, the trauma left a deep scar on the German psyche.

The following years seemed relatively prosperous, but this stability was fragile, relying on large amounts of debt that ended when the Wall Street crash occurred in 1929. Banks failed, and the troubles of 1923 returned. Unemployment soared from around 1.4 million in 1929 to over 6 million by 1933, roughly one-third of the German workforce.

The German middle class, having been ruined twice – first by hyperinflation and then by depression – longed for stability. Democracy had been tried and had failed to provide the

answer, leaving a vacuum for more radical politics to thrive. Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party promised to stop the chaos and restore order.

Hitler's message was simple: Germany's suffering was not accidental but the result of betrayal. There were multiple culprits: the Marxists, the Jews and the politicians who had signed the hated Versailles Treaty. Only a strong, disciplined nation, he claimed, could restore honour and prosperity, and the message was endlessly repeated by the party's propaganda machine.

In 1928, Hitler's party had won less than 3% of the vote; by 1932, it was the largest party in the Reichstag. His blend of nationalism, anti-communism and social reform targeted the fears of all classes. Industrialists wanted protection from the communists, workers longed for the end of unemployment and farmers craved a stable market for their goods. While the other political parties bickered, Hitler masterfully exploited the country's pain and resentment, providing a decisive figure who echoed people's fears and seemed to provide the answers.

Confidence turned to conquest

When Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, he acted fast. Parliament was sidelined, trade unions banned and the opposition crushed. Unemployment fell rapidly as the regime launched massive public works projects, including the construction of motorways and housing. Rearmament began, disguised as 'recovery projects'. By 1936, unemployment had fallen and order was returning, along with national pride.

For many Germans, life genuinely improved. Prices stabilised, wages rose and the humiliation of defeat faded. The new government encouraged national unity through parades, uniforms and rousing slogans, making obedience feel like patriotism. After 15 years of chaos, Hitler had given Germany what it most desired – stability and self-respect.

But that confidence had a dark foundation. The regime's recovery was built on militarisation. Factories manufacturing cars produced tanks; engineers designed aircraft and artillery under the cover of 'civil research'. By 1935, Hitler openly defied the Versailles Treaty; he restored conscription and began rebuilding the Luftwaffe. The weak response from the Western powers convinced him that they lacked resolve. The following year, German troops entered the Rhineland.



When writing this section, it was difficult not to see parallels with events unfolding in Europe today. Many of the conditions that contributed to Hitler's rise are, to some extent, present once again now. Trust in institutions is at an all-time low. Established political parties are widely held in contempt, and the notion that democracy has failed is increasingly prevalent, particularly among young people. Even more worrying is their growing acceptance that physical force is a legitimate way of achieving political ends.

Society is more polarised than ever. Although the current economic difficulties are nowhere near as severe as those of the 1930s, many people no longer believe that the existing economic system serves their interests. Most people's living standards have stagnated, a trend

exacerbated by the high prices of day-to-day essentials, particularly housing and energy. Rightly or wrongly, social media is blamed for amplifying the atmosphere of gloom.

We may not yet be in a situation where one nation is blamed for the troubles, although, ironically, Russia and the US are seen as the villains by many people. There are other scapegoats, real and imaginary: immigrants and the mega-rich. And one of the darkest horrors from that earlier period has returned: the persecution of Jews. The saying ‘history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes’ seems very apt in our current situation.

I must admit, researching this era has not made me more optimistic about our future.



UK: POST-WW1

In 1914, Britain appeared to be one of the most secure and prosperous nations on earth. Its empire covered a quarter of the globe, its Navy ruled the seas and London was the centre of international finance. The pound sterling was the world’s reserve currency.

Behind the splendour of empire and wealth lay deep and widening social divisions, however. In industrial towns, millions lived in overcrowded, unsanitary housing and relied on insecure work in coal, textiles and shipbuilding. The Labour movement was gaining strength, demanding better wages and representation, and Ireland stood on the brink of rebellion over Home Rule. Pressure was mounting for change to the hierarchical order that had defined Victorian society.

Economically, Britain’s pre-eminence was already being challenged by newer, more efficient rivals – above all Germany and the US. British industry relied on empire trade rather than modernisation. Yet for the middle classes, life in 1914 remained comfortable and predictable. Then came the war, which claimed nearly a million British lives and shattered the rules that held this faltering society together.

Victorious but drained

In 1918, Britain stood among the victors but felt little triumph. Almost every family had been touched by loss. Returning soldiers expected gratitude and opportunity, but found unemployment, housing shortages and rising prices. The Prime Minister of the coalition government (David Lloyd George) promised ‘a land fit for heroes’, yet the economic resources necessary to build that dream no longer existed.

The nation’s finances lay in ruins. The war had increased Britain’s national debt tenfold, leaving it owing vast sums to the US, roughly \$80 billion in today’s money. Inflation, which had been near zero before the war, soared to 22%, eroding living standards and sparking a wave of strikes across shipyards, mines and railways.

As in Germany, the turmoil was exacerbated by millions of servicemen re-entering civilian life faster than the economy could absorb them and a death toll from the Spanish flu pandemic measured in the hundreds of thousands.

Hierarchies that had existed before the war were questioned, with women taking on men’s work and being able to vote, once they were 30. The Labour Party emerged as a serious

political force, while the once-dominant Liberals split and faded. Irish rebellion continued, leading to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921.

For most Britons, then, the elation of winning the war was transitory. The early post-war years felt like exhaustion, not peace.

The 1920s: struggle for stability

During the 1920s, conditions for many people gradually worsened. The decade was dominated by efforts to restore financial balance. Governments sought stability through retrenchment by cutting expenditure, reducing debt and re-establishing pre-war standards of financial discipline. Public spending on housing and education was sharply reduced, and unemployment, which was already high after demobilisation, became chronic in the old industrial regions of the north, Scotland and south Wales.

Returning the pound to pre-war exchange rates was intended to signal renewed confidence but proved disastrous for exporters. British goods became too costly in world markets, leading to industrial contraction and an accompanying reduction in living standards.

Resentment grew across mining communities, ultimately erupting in the 1926 General Strike, when millions of workers walked out in solidarity. Many Londoners lacked sympathy for them, however, my dad included. It is one of the few things about this era I remember him talking about.

Though the strike ended without concessions, it exposed how divided the nation remained between labour and capital, north and south, prosperity and decline.

Yet despite economic strain, this decade also brought visible social progress. During the 1920s, roughly 600,000 council houses were built, though this was a small number compared with the 2 million private properties. For comparison purposes, roughly 2 million houses were built in the UK during the past ten years.

By the late 1920s, Britain appeared calm but fragile. The economy depended heavily on international trade and finance and when the Wall Street crash of 1929 struck, the consequences were immediate. Demand for British exports suddenly collapsed, investment dried up and unemployment levels rose sharply. The bad old days fast returned as factories closed, dole queues lengthened and confidence in traditional politics waned. The 'Great Depression' had begun.

From fatigue to resolve

By 1931, unemployment in Britain rose above 2.5 million, peaking at over 3 million the following year, with the highest rates in northern industrial regions. A severe run on the pound threatened the nation's financial stability.

In response, a National Government was formed – a coalition aiming to restore confidence and balance the budget – imposing deep cuts to public spending (including a 10% reduction in unemployment benefits). The government's decision to abandon the gold standard in September 1931 devalued sterling, making exports more competitive and helping economic recovery. This enabled interest rates to be reduced to historic lows, spurring a boom in housebuilding and boosting consumer spending, predominantly in the south and

southeast, where recovery began around 1933. Meanwhile, the north remained trapped in persistent economic depression*.

The reason for the economic turmoil resonates disturbingly with today's financial conditions. Stock markets are at record highs, with government indebtedness at levels only seen during wartime.

Throughout this period, the UK remained a parliamentary democracy while much of Europe turned to authoritarianism. The public's memory of the war kept most voters wary of ideological extremes. Not everything was bad about the 1930s. The welfare state took early shape through unemployment benefits and local housing schemes, and scientific advances promised to make lives better.

Foreign policy, however, was dominated by fear of another war. The trauma of WWI ran deep both with politicians and with the public. Successive governments believed peace could be maintained by negotiation and limited rearmament. The policy of appeasement with Germany had at its core the assumption that the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh, a view that was shared across the political spectrum. It was believed (or maybe hoped) that reasonable concessions would secure lasting peace. At this time, the Labour Party was led by George Lansbury (1932–35), who adopted a pacifist position of total disarmament. In 1933, he said: 'I would abolish the whole dreadful equipment of war and say to the world: "Do your worst!"' Thankfully, he never became Prime Minister.

When Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland in 1936, Britain protested but did not act. Many felt Germany was merely reclaiming sovereignty over its own soil. Chamberlain, who became Prime Minister in 1937, personified the cautious spirit of the age, determined to protect the UK's interests without repeating the slaughter of the previous generation.

The climax came in September 1938, when Hitler demanded the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. Determined to avoid war, Chamberlain flew to Germany and subsequently signed the Munich Agreement, granting Hitler the territory in exchange for his promise of peace.

As we all know, his claim about 'peace in our times' was not to be. In the essay 'War is declared' I tell the story of how the agreement unravelled, war was declared and my dad began his military 'career'.

The US was the clear winner

My parents seldom spoke about the United States yet, as a child, I was captivated by the country that would later play a significant role in my life and still does. Any account of the inter-war years must comment upon how it was affected.

Despite the hardship of the Great Depression, the US emerged from the period as the world's dominant economic power. By 1939 its industrial output was greater than that of Britain, France, Germany and Japan combined. American manufacturing accounted for around 30% of total world production, and its GDP per capita was roughly double that of the UK.

* Several things struck me when writing about this economic turmoil. The damage that was done to the industrial regions of the UK has never recovered. When today's politicians promise instant solutions to regional revival, they are claiming to be able to reverse damage that has accumulated over nearly a century.

The US held the world's largest gold reserves and remained a net creditor nation, while Britain struggled under war debts and Germany's economy was distorted by rearmament and state control.

Even after a decade of economic crisis, the sheer scale of American industry, natural resources and financial strength left it in a commanding position, making it, in economic terms, the clear winner of the inter-war years.

Germany never repaid its huge reparations bill – but neither did the UK and France repay their debts to the US. The British government justified its default by citing the economic challenges of the Great Depression and the interconnected nature of war debts and reparations. Other nations owed the UK more than it owed to the US, which complicated repayment efforts. However, no agreement was reached to formally cancel or restructure the debt.

This default had long-term consequences, including tensions in Anglo-American relations and limitations, lasting decades, on Britain's ability to borrow in US financial markets. Britain's debt default created obstacles to conventional borrowing in the US during WW2 that were overcome, but at a significant cost.

Winston Churchill was the Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1924 to 1929, and played a central role in trying to persuade the US to cancel the war debts. This makes it more impressive that he was able to play such a pivotal role in persuading the US to support the UK during WW2. When I asked Tim Bouverie, the author of *Allies at War*, about this, he said the Americans had reservations about Churchill, related not to the war debt, but rather to his excessive drinking.

HOW THESE EVENTS WERE REPORTED

The previous two sections summarise the inter-war years from the German and British perspectives. To conclude this essay, I look at the era's defining events through my dad's eyes using the reporting of the *Daily Express*, the newspaper he and his family read the most.

Back in those days, the newspaper was a far more serious and substantial publication than it is today. It was a broadsheet filled with densely written reports, political analysis, war coverage and in-depth commentary, reflecting an audience that expected newspapers to inform rather than entertain. Its pages were dominated by text, with few photographs and little emphasis on design or sensationalism. By contrast, the modern *Daily Express* is designed for quick, easy reading.

WWI ends as the Spanish flu peaks

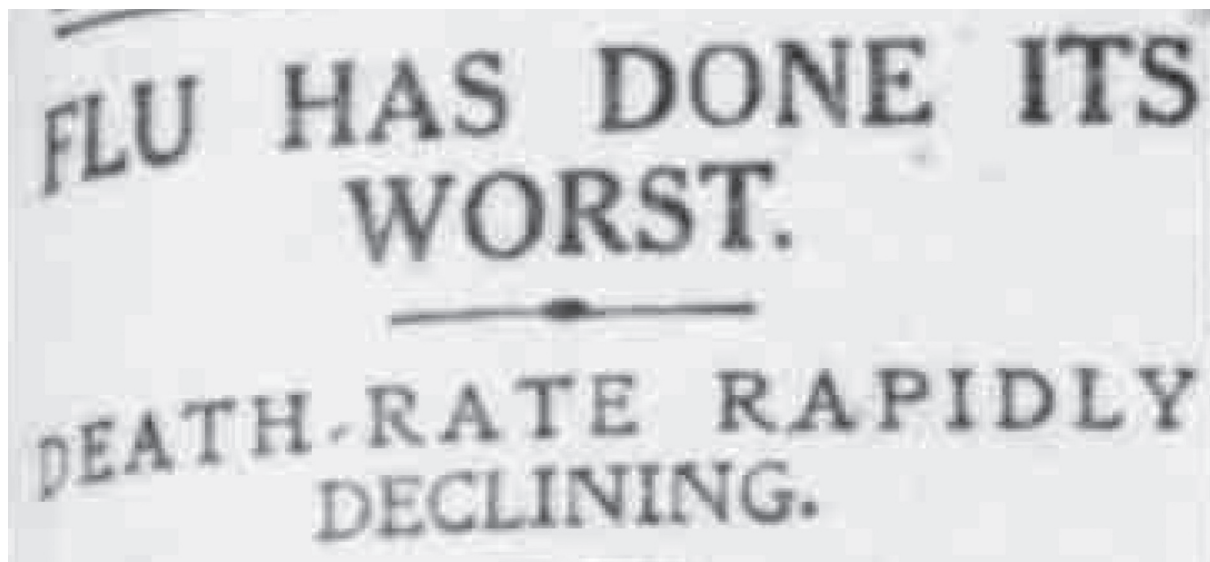
The Spanish flu reached its height in the UK during the autumn of 1918, with the deadliest wave occurring in November and December, the same time as the Allies and Germany ended the fighting on the Western Front.

For some, this was a time of tragedy as influenza swept across Europe, bringing the deadliest outbreak since the Black Death. For most, however, it was a time of relief and celebration, as the long nightmare of WWI finally came to an end.

My dad was 11 at the time, so I doubt he paid much attention to the newspapers. Knowing my grandfather and his keen interest in current events, however, I'm certain he would have read the same papers I've examined.

During November, there were mentions of influenza on most days, but they were tucked away in the middle pages. Many were short articles about what to do when infected, like consuming lots of Bovril and Oxo.

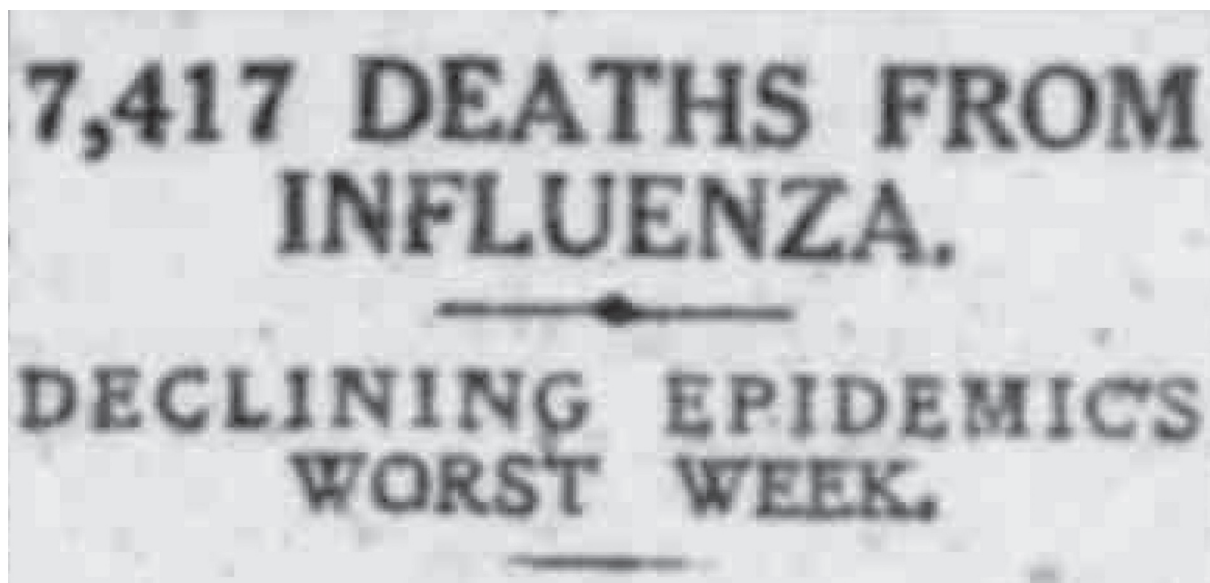
Those commenting on the severity of the infections were brief and far from the headlines. These two are typical of how the pandemic was reported:



“ So far as I can judge, the influenza epidemic is abating. The number of cases has decreased,’ said the medical officer for the City of London in an interview yesterday.

This view is confirmed by Dr Lawrence, the medical officer of health for Edmonton. He says ‘There is every sign that the worst is over.’

Daily Express, 5 November 1918, page 3



“

The Registrar-General's weekly return issued last night, which covers the period when the epidemic was at its height, shows that in the ninety-six great towns in England and Wales, including the county of London, there were 7,147 deaths last week from influenza, as compared with 4,462 in the previous week.

The deaths in London numbered 2,688, as compared with 1,586, 351, and 80 in the preceding three weeks. In Greater London a further 1,719 deaths were recorded, as compared with 829 in the preceding week.

The Schools Medical Officer of the London County Council yesterday morning confirmed the reports of a steady abatement of the influenza epidemic. 'There has been an all-round improvement in the health of both teachers and scholars,' he said. 'The number of fresh cases is fewer.'

An encouraging report was made also by the operating manager of the London General Omnibus Company and the Underground Railways. 'Our sick list,' he said, 'has been steadily declining each day.'

Daily Express, 5 November 1918, page 3

The contrast between the reporting of this illness and that of the Covid pandemic is astonishing, especially when the Spanish flu claimed so many more lives per thousand people.

Understandably, news about the end of the war dominated the press – stories that were happy and optimistic rather than accounts of illness and death due to the flu. It's likely that the wartime censorship, under the Defence of the Realm Act, was still restricting accounts of anything that might damage morale, too. Whatever the reasons, editors seemed reluctant to highlight the scale of flu casualties.

This influenza outbreak – that's what it was called, not a pandemic, other than in medical journals – was reported as a series of disconnected local tragedies rather than a single, world-shaping event. Unlike Covid, there were no daily bulletins with statistics and government press conferences.

Perhaps the subdued reporting was because death was much closer to people in those days. Male life expectancy in 1913 was just 53 years and infant mortality (deaths under the age of one per 1,000 live births) was over 100 in many parts of the UK. Today, the rate is 25 times lower.

I doubt my dad's family ever realised they were living through the worst pandemic of the past 500 years, which probably explains why neither he nor my grandfather ever spoke about it.

As you would expect, the German surrender and its implications dominated the news. This was the headline of the *Daily Express* on Tuesday, 12 November 1918, followed by the other stories about the victory:

THE TERMS OF THE ARMISTICE.						
Cologne, Coblenz, and Mainz to be occupied, with all Germany west of the Rhine.	2,500 Heavy Guns, 2,500 Field Guns, 30,000 Machine Guns & 2,000 Aeroplanes to be surrendered.	5,000 Locomotives, 150,000 Wagons and 5,000 Motor-Lorries to be delivered.	Evacuation of Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, and Luxemburg.	France, and	6 Battle-Cruisers, 10 Battleships, 8 Light Cruisers and 50 Destroyers to be interned.	All Submarines to be handed over. Allied right to occupy Heligoland reserved.

GERMANY SURRENDERS BY
LAND, SEA, AND AIR.
SEQUEL TO DEFEAT IN THE FIELD.
ALLIED ARMIES TO OCCUPY
THE RHINE TOWNS AND
PROVINCES.
FREEDOM FOR OUR PRISONERS.

THE FALLEN KAISER
EXILE.
A HIDDEN GUEST.

The *Daily Express's* reporting of the end of the war mirrored other newspapers', a visual display of victory by quoting lots of facts and numbers. News information remained rigidly controlled by government and so the reporting echoed the official bulletins from the Admiralty and War Office.

When the Armistice was signed, the first authorised information came via government telegraphs: a factual list of the surrender conditions issued by the Allied Supreme Command. Editors printed this text verbatim because it was official, reliable and could be published without fear of breaching censorship rules.

After four years of abstract despatches about 'advances' and 'enemy retreats', the public must have longed for evidence that Germany had truly been defeated, which the lists of seized war material provided. I imagine that today the victory would be reported with an emphasis on the coming peace rather than the scale of the material gains.

Eight years passed before the next major event and as an 18-year-old my dad was reading the newspapers by this time. It's an event that he talked about and one I suspect conditioned his political outlook.

The 1926 General Strike

After WWI the government returned the mines to private ownership. Falling coal prices in the early 1920s led mine owners to demand wage cuts and longer hours. The industry's profitability declined further, as did miners' working conditions, with the availability of European coal and the strengthening of the pound, which was restored to the gold standard.

To postpone the threatened industrial action, the government granted a subsidy to maintain miners' wages for nine months and, as is the way of governments throughout the ages, established a Royal Commission to review the industry.

When the subsidy expired in April 1926, negotiations collapsed. The Royal Commission recommended reorganising the industry and implied that wage reductions were inevitable.



I vividly recall the miners' strike of 1972, which is still reported today, although differently from how I remember it, but that's another story. What I hadn't realised was that miners' wage levels, relative to other industrial workers, were similar to those in 1926.

By the mid-1920s, coal miners were among the worst-paid major industrial workers in Britain. In 1925, before the government subsidy, the average weekly wage of a coal miner was about £2.25. Skilled engineering and shipyard workers earned £3.50 to £4, while railwaymen averaged around £3.

Immediately before the 1972 strike, miners were ranked 18th out of 20 major industrial groups in average pay.

The big difference between the two disputes lay in direction rather than cause: in 1926 the strike aimed to prevent further wage cuts, whereas in 1972 it sought a 47% pay rise to restore the miners' position relative to other industrial workers to where it had stood in the early 1960s. Despite having different objectives both miners' strikes ended with similar conclusions.



In support of the miners, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) called out nearly 1.7 million workers in transport, printing and heavy industry, on the evening of 3 May 1926. Thus started the first (and only) General Strike in British history.

The strike paralysed much of the country: trains stopped, buses were idle and many newspapers ceased publication. The government was prepared after months of contingency planning and used volunteers, troops and road transport to maintain essential services.

Despite widespread disruption, the strike remained largely peaceful yet, as the days passed, the government's organisation and the TUC's lack of clear strategy took their toll.

After nine days, on 12 May 1926, the TUC ended the strike without winning any concessions for the miners. Union funds were running out, public support was wavering and the government refused to negotiate while the strike continued. The TUC feared that prolonging the action might provoke a national breakdown or even violence.

The miners, left to fight alone, remained on strike until November but were eventually forced to accept wage cuts and longer hours. Nothing tangible was achieved, and the defeat ushered in years of tighter control over industrial action and declining confidence in the trade union movement.

In London, support for the General Strike was mixed, with manual and transport workers, especially in the docks, railways and tram services, being the most in favour. However, the capital was less militant than the northern coalfields or industrial Midlands. Trade union membership was more fragmented, and many London workers, particularly clerical and service employees, feared losing their jobs if the strike dragged on.

The *Daily Express* published a one-page newsletter on 10 May, clearly stating its belief that the strike was unlawful and should end:

“ The Quandary of the Workers.

The workers of Great Britain are in a difficulty. On the one hand is their loyalty to their country and their families: on the other their loyalty to their Unions. LOYALTY TO AN ORGANISATION OUGHT NOT TO BE PUSHED TO THE EXTENT OF BREAKING THE LAW.

The Trade Union Leaders, WITHOUT CONSULTATION with the workers affected have called out the vital trades IN DEFIANCE OF THE LAW.

We are a law-respecting people. There is no breach of loyalty in refusing to break the law. Is there no want of loyalty to one's wife and children in exposing them to hardship in support of illegality?

WHOLE COMMUNITY.

EVERY WORKER OUGHT TO ASK HIMSELF IN THE DEEPEST SINCERITY WHETHER HE IS NOT FAILING IN HIS DUTY TO HIS FAMILY AND THE NATION OF WHICH WE ARE ALL PROUD BY HELPING TO PROLONG IT.

When the TUC surrendered and the strike ended on 13 May 1926, the *Daily Express* celebrated, as shown on its front page and in the accompanying article:

GENERAL STRIKE CALLED OFF

A Victory of Common Sense

Premier's Statement in
The Commons

MINERS STILL OUT

Delegates Conference in London
Tomorrow

SETTLEMENT PLAN

A GREAT DAY
FOR ENGLAND

* * *

The British people to-day are filled with pride and relief—pride in the magnificent restraint and courage that have been shown by the whole nation in its hour of trial, relief at the termination of a futile expedient in circumstances that rob it of all possibility of future menace.

* * *

“ The outstanding lesson of the last ten days is the calamitous failure of a general strike when it is aimed at a community so self-reliant, so resolute, and so good-tempered as the British.

In an age when many institutions have crumbled at the touch of new forces, the constitution of England emerges impregnable and even reinforced from the contest to which it was so hastily challenged. To the wonder of all the world, Great Britain has come through her most formidable civil crisis since the Great Rebellion, with undiminished energies and with enhanced prestige.

The Prime Minister's statement implies that the people have won a great victory.

For the moment, it is enough to be thankful for the return of common sense, and for the triumph of the individual citizen over the tyranny of the trade union machine.

I am sure the Stroud family agreed with these sentiments. Within three years, the hardship that the miners suffered spread to most other parts of the UK economy and the political establishment was engulfed in the financial upheavals that started in the US.

The Great Depression

When the strike collapsed, government subsidies ended and local wage agreements were replaced with a national one, resulting in average pay falling by around 10–25%, depending on the region. Unemployment among miners soared, and many pits closed entirely. Especially hard hit were pits in South Wales and Durham. Things got even worse as coal production across Europe recovered, often extracting coal more efficiently by using new mechanisation, further driving down prices and wages.

Then came the Wall Street crash of 1929, when the US stock market collapsed, triggering a global chain reaction resulting in a dramatic decline in world trade, falling demand for exports, and widespread financial instability. This awful cocktail of problems severely affected Britain as a major trading nation.

Events started to unfold on Thursday, 24 October 1929, with the sharp decline in the US stock markets. The decline continued with the famous crash of the following week, on 'Black Tuesday'. This is how the *Daily Express* reported the event the following day:



Daily Express, Wednesday, 30 October 1929

The omitted text below the photograph says: 'Mr. J. P. Morgan, head of the great American financial group. (Centre) Dealers were anxiously awaiting news outside the London Stock Exchange last night. (Right) Mr. Edward Henry Harriman Simmons, president of the New York Stock Exchange.'

Dad was 22 when this crash happened. Although the reporting was dramatic and this was a major event, it must have seemed very distant. What happened to the stock market in the US would have been of little concern to him since he didn't own any shares. What would have been more worrying was the talk about 'banks stemming panic tide'.

At first, then, the crisis seemed remote from Britain, yet the repercussions would soon be felt as American factories closed and imports dried up, and world trade contracted sharply. British exports of coal, steel, engineering goods and textiles fell by almost a third between 1929 and 1931. Unemployment, already high after a decade of post-war stagnation, surged from 1.2 million to more than 2 million within a year.

The strain spread to the financial system. British banks that had loaned to exporting industries and overseas borrowers were exposed to the defaulting of these borrowers. Smaller banks were the most at risk and major clearing banks grew defensive, restricting credit to businesses and households. What started as a problem on Wall Street soon affected Main Street.



Whenever I watch the film *Too Big to Fail*, which charts the subprime-induced market crash in 2008, I think about events in 1929 and worry about the current financial conditions.

The person playing Ben Bernanke, the Chairman of the Fed, says:

“ The depression may have started because of a stock-market crash, but what hit the general economy was a disruption of credit. Average citizens unable to borrow money, to do anything. To buy a home, start a business, stock their shelves. Credit has the ability to build a modern economy, but lack of credit has the ability to destroy it, swiftly and absolutely. If we do not act, boldly and immediately, we will replay the depression of the 1930s – only this time it will be far, far worse. We don’t do this now, we won’t have an economy on Monday.

Chilling words indeed.



The Bank of England, which was bound by the gold standard, was unable to expand credit or lower interest rates to stimulate recovery. Instead, it had to defend the fixed value of the pound, which made British exports still more expensive abroad.

By the summer of 1931, the situation had turned into a full-scale crisis. Foreign investors, alarmed by falling exports and growing budget deficits, began withdrawing funds from London. Gold reserves drained rapidly as confidence in sterling collapsed.

Attempting to restore stability, the Labour government imposed spending cuts and sought emergency loans from New York and Paris. The austerity measures, especially reductions in unemployment benefits, split the Labour Party. Amid political turmoil and mounting public unrest, the Prime Minister resigned and agreed to lead a National Government, formed in August 1931, to confront Britain’s gravest economic crisis in a generation.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT EXPECTED.
SEQUEL TO THE KING'S INTERVENTION.
GOVERNMENT INTENTION TO RESIGN.
DAY OF EXCITING EVENTS.

PREMIER AT THE PALACE AT 10.15 P.M.	CABINET SIT FOR NEARLY FOUR HOURS.	THREE-PARTY CONFERENCE AT MIDNIGHT.
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Daily Express, Monday, 24 August 1931

The caption to the photograph reads: ‘Downing Street thronged with people eager to see Ministers arriving for last night’s critical Cabinet meeting. Eventually, the crowd became so dense that the police were obliged to clear the street.’

What a day this must have been. The photograph is revealing, showing a vast crowd, literally outside No. 10 Downing Street and spilling onto Whitehall, something that we couldn’t conceive today, and not a placard in sight.

What did my dad make of this day’s newspaper? I suspect he had better things to do than worry about the state of the nation because on the previous Saturday (22 August) he had married my mum.

It was only when writing this section that I realised their marriage happened in the middle of a national crisis. Looking at their wedding photos and the faces of my aunts, uncles and grandparents, I wonder what was going through their minds? My dad was nearly 24 years old, my mum was 19, and here they were, embarking on a new life as a couple, when everybody must have wondered if their job and savings were safe. I think they had a brief honeymoon, but maybe they were back at work on that fateful Monday.

After the formation of the National Government, the financial turmoil continued until the coalition of Labour, Conservative and Liberal ministers promised to restore confidence by cutting spending and balancing the budget. Emergency measures reduced unemployment benefits, public sector pay and defence costs, but they failed to halt the crisis.

Investors kept withdrawing funds, draining the Bank of England’s gold reserves. Despite £80 million in credit from the US and France, the outflow continued, worsened by unrest in the Royal Navy over pay cuts, known as the Invergordon Mutiny. By mid-September, the reserves were nearly exhausted, and on 21 September 1931, Britain abandoned the gold standard, letting the pound float.

Sterling immediately fell by about 25%, but the panic subsided. Imports became dearer, but exports gained and interest rates could be lowered. What began as a humiliation soon became a turning point: the end of rigid deflationary policy and the first step toward recovery from the depression triggered by Wall Street’s crash two years earlier.

The *Daily Express* was intent on painting this event in the most positive terms:

BRITAIN OFF THE GOLD STANDARD.

LAST NIGHT'S DECISIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT



THE PRIME MINISTER running into 10, Downing-street on his return from Cheapside last night for consultations in connection with the crisis.

No More Gold To Be Sent Abroad.	Stock Exchange Closed To-day.	Bank Rate Up To Six Per Cent.
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BUSINESS AS USUAL.

"THE INTERNAL POSITION OF THE COUNTRY IS SOUND."

GOOD NEWS.

DISCUSSING... FOR BRITAIN.

Daily Express, Monday 21 September 1931

This is the text from the *Good News* section. It would be interesting to know who wrote this because it is 100% 'feel-good' reporting.

“ THIS MORNING'S pronouncement from Whitehall is good news. Nothing more heartening has happened in years. Never mind how it came about. Don't waste time in reviling the foreigner or in moaning about the humiliation of events. The fact remains that at last we are rid of the gold standard – rid of it for good and all.

To future historians it will seem incredible that we should ever have been chained to an arbitrary metal, and that our financial standing in the world should have been at the mercy of unscrupulous and panic-stricken foreign investors.

Now our export trade will have its chance to grow, because the £ will be at its correct level and not an artificially sustained one. It is true that for a time we shall have to purchase much of our foodstuffs from abroad; but there is such a surplus of food commodities in the world, and since we are the one great importing country we shall be in the position to protect ourselves against excessive prices.

While we are doing this we can stimulate our own agriculture to the greatest degree, and, by taking our eyes away from New York, from Berlin, from Paris, we can go ahead with plans for a self-sustaining Empire.

We repeat that whatever the difficulties and embarrassments of the moment, this morning's news is good. It is the end of the gold standard and the beginning of real recovery.

Twelve months after leaving the gold standard, the economy had begun to recover. Abandoning the fixed exchange rate stimulated domestic demand by allowing sterling to depreciate and boosting exports.

By late 1932, confidence in the financial system had returned and industries serving the

home market, especially construction and consumer goods, were expanding. Industrial output was up and unemployment, though it was still high at over two and a half million, had begun to fall. Britain's economy was stabilising and showing the first signs of sustained recovery.



There are clear parallels to the events of 1992, when under intense speculative pressure Britain was forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). In the hours before leaving the ERM, the government raised interest rates from 10% to a briefly announced 15% in a desperate attempt to defend sterling's value.

Despite these efforts, the pound fell sharply from around \$1.90 to near \$1.50 in the weeks that followed. Yet, as in 1931, abandoning the fixed exchange rate ultimately proved beneficial: the weaker currency boosted exports, inflation eased as domestic demand recovered and the freedom to set interest rates independently paved the way for renewed economic growth.

A more worrying parallel is between 1931 and today. It is not the exchange rate that is anchored to an external variable, but politicians' freedom to alter economic policy that is constrained by the Office of Budget Responsibility and how its reaction affects the bond market and the cost of UK borrowing.

There are two other similarities – first, the UK's ruling party is Labour, and is unpopular and ideologically divided. Second, today's global economic outlook is fragile because of the largest nation's high level of indebtedness.



The 1936 abdication crisis

In the final months of 1936, few Britons had any inkling that a constitutional crisis was brewing. King Edward VIII, who had succeeded his father in January, was popular, a bachelor King, a good communicator and he seemed to bridge class divides. Behind the scenes, however, his intention to marry the twice-divorced American Wallis Simpson alarmed both the government and the Church of England. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin warned that such a marriage was unacceptable for a sovereign who was also head of the Church.

Until early December, the press kept a strict silence, following government requests not to report the affair even as foreign newspapers openly discussed it. As late as the first days of December, most of the British public had no idea what was happening. With today's press and social media teeming with stories about the disgraced ex-prince Andrew, it's unthinkable to us now that a national government would have such control of the media.

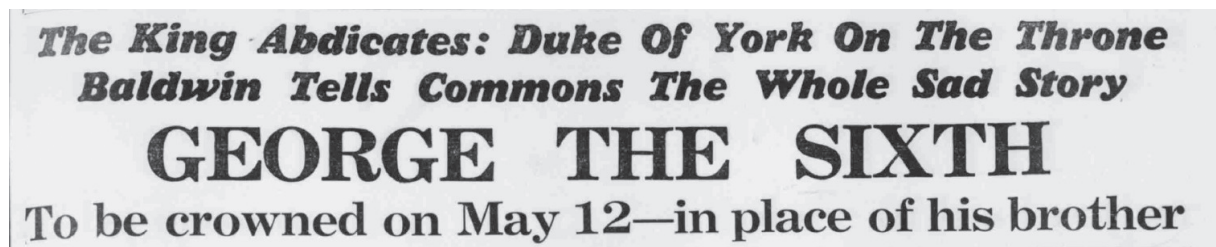
When the news broke on 5 December, events moved quickly, first through American and European papers and then in the British press. Baldwin informed Parliament that the King intended to marry Mrs Simpson. Within days, Edward accepted that his only constitutional

option was abdication. On 10 December, he signed the Instrument of Abdication and the following evening he addressed the nation in a radio broadcast.

I remember my parents speaking about this story with sympathy for both Edward and his brother, who later became King George VI.

We have some insight into how the country felt about the event because the newly formed British Institute of Public Opinion, the UK branch of the American Gallup organisation, conducted one of its earliest national surveys on the crisis. Published in early 1937, it found that a majority of respondents (around 56%) believed the King should have been allowed to remain on the throne and marry Wallis Simpson, while about 30% agreed with the government that he could not do so and still fulfil his constitutional role. The remaining 14% were undecided.

The *Daily Express* headline was very factual, including a transcript of the radio speech that explained the details of how the abdication worked. A recording of Edward's radio speech is available online.



**The King Abdicates: Duke Of York On The Throne
Baldwin Tells Commons The Whole Sad Story
GEORGE THE SIXTH
To be crowned on May 12—in place of his brother**

Daily Express, front page, Friday, 11 December 1936

As shown in the extracts below from the paper's opinion pages, the editors were sympathetic to the King and the awful decision he had to make.

A GREAT LOVE STORY

that
will
be told
for ever



Daily Express, opinion page (12), Friday, 11 December 1936

“

THE King Goes.

In a tense, silent House of Commons the Speaker reads the statement of abdication. Then the Prime Minister tells the story of many long, anxious councils with the King when he sought to dissuade him from his project. He brings his hearers to that day at last when the King made his choice.

Mr. Baldwin's speech makes an immense impression on the House. And, indeed, it is an oratorical triumph.

The King Said

THE King comes out of Mr. Baldwin's speech with new credit. From that careful and factual account, it is plain that from first to last King Edward behaved with straightforwardness and courage. He told his Prime Minister frankly of his purpose and has held steadfastly to it.

The King declared that he would never countenance a party of 'King's friends,' and in his farewell message he asks that our sad divisions should cease.

What Did She Do?

As for the proposition that the King ought not to marry a woman who has divorced her husband, that, if you like, is untenable. Are you going to hold it against her that she made use of the law of the land? In what has she

done wrong? She has been the injured party. In the eyes of Justice, she bears no guilt.

It's hard for us to appreciate the enormity of the abdication, which was the first great 'media event' of modern Britain, with every paper carrying the story of the King's choice between duty and love. It dominated radio, cinema and newsreels, bridging class and politics. Since the war the news had been full of economic woe – only a month earlier the papers had been reporting details of the Jarrow March and the mass unemployment that existed in parts of the UK. This was such a different story, one that everybody could understand and identify with as well as having an opinion.

With the benefit of historical perspective, it was a visible clash between the old British value system of duty and hierarchy and a more emotional modern society.

Time has not been kind to Edward and Mrs Simpson. The TV series *The Crown* begins by portraying the event as an impossible love story, but in later episodes it is highly critical of the role they both played before and during the war. After meeting Andrew Lownie and hearing him speak about his book, *Traitor King: The Scandalous Exile of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor*, the tales of their closeness to Nazi Germany and sense of entitlement made it hard to feel sorry for them.

Both my mum and dad died before the unflattering stories of the couple became widespread. I find it amazing how these few days at the end of 1936 captured so much attention and still do.

The Munich surrender

The Munich Agreement, signed on 30 September 1938, marked a defining moment of the inter-war years. Adolf Hitler demanded the annexation of the Sudetenland, a border region of Czechoslovakia inhabited by a large ethnic German population. The crisis traced its origins back to the end of WWI when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and its former crown lands, Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia, were incorporated into the newly founded state of Czechoslovakia.

In response, Britain's Prime Minister, along with French and Italian leaders, met with Hitler in Munich and sanctioned his invasion in return for the promise of 'no further territorial demands'. Czechoslovakia was not invited to the negotiation and had to accept the imposed terms.

Today, the Munich Agreement has become shorthand for the perils of appeasement, the idea that yielding to an aggressor's demands only encourages further aggression. In 1938, haunted by memories of WWI, Britain chose compromise over confrontation, in the hope of preserving peace. Instead, this emboldened Hitler, leading within a year to the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of WW2.

On his return from Munich, Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, was greeted as a national hero. Gallup polling at the time reported that around 70–80% of respondents supported his policy, believing he had averted another catastrophic war.

At this time, my dad was 31 years old and a father with a one-year-old daughter. I have no idea whether he was cheering on the streets or in the minority who supported Winston

Churchill, who believed it was a humiliating surrender. Speaking in the House of Commons on 5 October 1938, Churchill declared:

“ We have sustained a total and unmitigated defeat, and France has suffered even more than we have. Do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning ... This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of the bitter cup which will be proffered to you unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour we arise again and stand for freedom as in the olden time.

Why on earth did I never talk to my parents about this time? I didn't, so what they believed will have to remain a mystery.

There is no doubt that the *Daily Express* positively reported the event:

**Multitude cheer the Premier home and hear him say:
“YOU MAY SLEEP QUIETLY—
IT IS PEACE FOR OUR TIME”**

Daily Express, front-page headline, 1 October 1938

This news article was on the front page and reported the chronology of the agreement and implied the sincerity of Hitler in an unquestioning way.

“ Hitler told the Premier: ‘Britain should be strong’
From SELKIRK PANTON

Hitler today realised the greatest dream of his life, which he put down in ‘Mein Kampf,’ the Nazi ‘bible’ which he wrote fourteen years ago – peace with the British Empire.

Today he and Mr. Chamberlain signed an agreement which means in effect that the great war will never be repeated between the two nations.

Hitler hinted to Mr. Chamberlain yesterday that non-aggression pact should be concluded. Last night he asked Mr. Chamberlain to remain a little longer in Munich. This morning he telephoned: ‘Could you see me at 11.30?’

Half an hour later they met, not in the magnificent Führerhaus, where yesterday’s Four-Power meeting took place, but in Hitler’s five-roomed flat in the Prinz Regentenstrasse.

News of the pact came late to Berlin. At first people could not believe it, but when the official announcement was made from Munich and a radio statement had removed all doubt, Britain and her Prime Minister were heiled from the Baltic to the Alps.

Nazi Germany, twelve hours after celebrating the cession of Sudeten-

land, forgot this victory entirely to hail the new agreement with Britain. It has removed the greatest fear of the people – war with the British Empire.

The agreement between the sixty-nine-year-old democrat and the fifty-year-old dictator is being claimed too as the greatest victory in Hitler's life. And it is, I learn, only the beginning of a general all-round settlement in Europe. Three questions will now be settled, Germans hope, in the general pacification. These are – colonies, the Polish Corridor, and Danzig.

Hitler told Mr Chamberlain at Godesberg, and repeated yesterday, 'Germany will never mobilise to obtain colonies.' He emphasised, however, that he has not given up his claim to colonies, but believes the question can best be settled by consultation.

Hitler made it clear to Mr Chamberlain that he is greatly interested in the future of the British Empire and believes that world peace depends on a strong Britain. He said, for instance, 'If disorder should occur in India and the Indians defeated Britain and seceded from the British Empire, it would be a terrible blow for me.'

His chief interest at the moment is for a 'symbolic' return of at least some portion of the former overseas territory to the Nazi Reich.

Gallup polls conducted after Hitler's occupation of Prague in March 1939 revealed that the surge of optimism following the Munich Agreement had vanished, with two-thirds of the public now believing that war was inevitable.

At this time, my mum and dad couldn't know how their lives were about to change. It didn't take long for them to find out, however, and that is covered in the next essay, 'War is declared – what next?'

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