

Living with War

1 WARRIORS

The experience of war was extraordinarily diverse. The Eastern Front, where 90 per cent of all Germans killed in combat met their fate, overwhelmingly dominated the struggle against Hitler. Between 1941 and 1944, British and American sailors and airmen fought at sea and in the sky, but relatively small numbers of Western Allied ground troops engaged the Axis in North Africa, Italy, Asia and the Pacific. Much larger Anglo-American forces spent those years training and exercising: when 1st Norfolks went into action at Kohima in June 1944, for instance, it was the battalion's first battle since leaving France through Dunkirk in May 1940. Many other British and American units experienced equally protracted delays before joining the fray. The conflict was a pervasive circumstance for the peoples of Britain and its white dominions, and to a lesser extent the United States, but it imposed serious peril and hardship on only a relatively small minority of men 'at the sharp end' of ground combat. At sea, fatalities in most naval battles were counted in hundreds. In the sky, aircrew suffered high proportionate losses, but these were dwarfed by those of the eastern land campaign.

The Soviet Union suffered 65 per cent of all Allied military deaths, China 23 per cent, Yugoslavia 3 per cent, the USA and Britain 2 per cent each, France and Poland 1 per cent each. About 8 per cent of all Germans died, compared with 2 per cent of Chinese, 3.44 per cent of Dutch people, 6.67 per cent of Yugoslavs, 4 per cent of Greeks, 1.35 per cent of French, 3.78 per cent of Japanese, 0.94 per cent of British and 0.32 per cent of Americans. Within the armed forces, 30.9 per cent of Germans conscripted into the Wehrmacht died, 17.35 per cent of the Luftwaffe (including paratroopers and ground personnel), 34.9 per cent of the Waffen SS. Some 24.2 per cent of Japanese soldiers were killed, and 19.7 per cent of naval

personnel. Japanese formations committed against the Americans and British in 1944–45 lost far more heavily – the overall statistics are distorted by the fact that throughout the war a million of Hirohito's soldiers remained in China, where they suffered relatively modest losses. One Russian soldier in four died, against one in twenty British Commonwealth combatants and one in thirty-four American servicemen. Some 3.66 per cent of US Marines died, compared with 2.5 per cent of the US Army and 1.5 per cent of the US Navy.

A modest number of those fighting contrived to enjoy the war, usually when their own side was winning – Germans and Japanese in the early years, Americans and British thereafter. Young people who relished adventure found this readily available. Lt. Robert Hichens of the Royal Navy wrote in July 1940: 'I suppose our position is about as dangerous as is possible in view of the threatened invasion, but I couldn't help being full of joy ... Being on the bridge of one of HM ships, being talked to by the captain as an equal, and knowing that she was to be in my sole care for the next few hours. Who would not rather die like that than live as so many poor people have to, in crowded cities at some sweating indoor job?' Hichens was killed in 1942, but he was a happy warrior.

Special forces – the 'private armies' regarded with mixed feelings by more conventional warriors – attracted bold spirits careless about risking their lives in piratical enterprises by land and sea. Between 1940 and 1944, partly because Churchill's soldiers were unable to confront the Wehrmacht in Europe, British raiding units conducted many small operations of a kind the US chiefs of staff mistrusted, though American Airborne and Rangers later played conspicuous roles in the north-west Europe campaign. The prime minister promoted raids on German outposts to show aggression, test tactics and equipment, and sustain a façade of momentum in the British war effort. Probably the most useful of these took place on the night of 27 February 1942, when a small contingent of the newly formed Parachute Regiment assaulted a German radar station on a cliff-top at Bruneval, near Le Havre on the French coast.

The objective was reconnoitred by local French Resistance workers before 120 paratroopers led by Major John Frost dropped into thick snow, secured the position against slight resistance from the surprised Luftwaffe radar crew, and held it while an RAF technician, Flight-Sergeant Charles Cox, coolly dismantled key components of its Würzburg scanner. The force then fought its way down to the beach for evacuation by landing craft, having lost only two men killed and six taken prisoner. The captured

technology proved invaluable to British scientific intelligence. Churchill and the chiefs of staff were impressed by this first test of their paratroops, and endorsed a big expansion of such units. The Bruneval raid, trumpeted by Allied propaganda, was indeed a fine example of daring and initiative, aided by luck and an unusually feeble German response.

Such operations worked best when carried out by small forces pursuing limited objectives; more ambitious raids achieved more equivocal outcomes. A month after Bruneval, 268 commandos landed at Saint-Nazaire, while an old destroyer rammed the gate of the port's big floating dock. Next day, five tons of explosive detonated as planned aboard the destroyer, demolishing the lock gates and killing many German sightseers as well as two captured commando officers who had concealed their knowledge of the impending explosion. But 144 of the attackers were killed and more than two hundred army and naval personnel were taken prisoner. During the big assault on Dieppe in August 1942, the Germans suffered 591 ground casualties, but two-thirds of the 6,000 raiders, mostly Canadian, were killed, wounded or captured. By 1944, when Allied armies were deployed in major campaigns, British commando and airborne forces had been allowed to outgrow their usefulness, absorbing a larger share of elite personnel than their battlefield achievements justified. In the earlier war years, however, they made a useful moral contribution and delighted their participants.

Many professional soldiers welcomed the career opportunities Hitler provided. Those who survived and displayed competence gained promotions in months that in peacetime would have taken years; commanders unknown outside their regiments one summer could achieve fame and fortune by the next. In five years Dwight Eisenhower – admittedly an exceptional example – rose from colonel to full general. 'One of the fascinations of [the] war,' in the words of British Lt. Gen. Sir Frederick Morgan, 'was to see how Americans developed their great men so quickly ... Ike grew almost as one watched him.'

Britain's Sir Bernard Montgomery advanced from being a lieutenant-general in August 1942, unknown outside his service, to become an army group commander and national hero just two years later. At lower levels, many regular officers who entered the war as lieutenants became colonels or brigadiers by their mid-twenties. Horatius Murray, for instance, in 1939 after sixteen years' service had only attained the rank of major, but finished the war as a lieutenant-general. On the other side, the Wehrmacht's Captain Rolf-Helmut Schröder remembered his campaign experience

‘with gratitude’, despite being wounded three times. Likewise Major Karl-Günther von Haase, who survived captivity in Russian hands: ‘In the early war years we were proud to belong to the German army. I look back on my military career not without satisfaction.’

Some people found that bearing their share of their nation’s struggle for conquest or freedom rendered sorrows tolerable, ennobled loneliness and danger. But the humbler their personal circumstances, the slighter seemed the compensations for sacrifice. William Crawford, a seventeen-year-old Boy Second Class serving aboard the battlecruiser *Hood*, wrote home miserably: ‘Dearest Mum ... I know it’s wrong to say but I sure am fed up. I feel kind of sick, I can’nae eat and my heart’s in my mouth. We struck bad weather today. Talk about waves as big as houses, they’re crashing over our bows ... I wonder if it would do any good Mum if you wrote to the Admiralty and asked them if there was no chance of me getting a shore job at Rosyth. You know, tell them you have got two sons away and that. Be sure to tell them my age. If only I could get off this ship it would not be so bad.’ Crawford, however, was still aboard *Hood* when she was sunk with almost all hands in May 1941.

As his letter illustrates, stoicism was no more universal among sailors at sea than soldiers on the battlefield. ‘I am absolutely fed up with everything,’ a naval paymaster-commander named Jackie Jackson wrote to his wife from the Mediterranean in May 1941. ‘The dirt and filth, the flies and heat and more than anything the fact that I am not hearing from you.’ He complained that he had received only one letter in six weeks, ‘the most depressing I have ever received in my life. Add to that a cable which more or less implied that the house has been wrecked and you can get a fair idea of how much I want to hear from you occasionally, and at the same time how I dread it, as I am probably going to have even worse news and more complaints ... I’ve had a hideous time and I wonder why I’m alive.’ It is easy to see why such people as Winston Churchill, George Patton or pilots flying Mustangs or Spitfires – a small and privileged minority – enjoyed the war. It is equally apparent why many others – especially a Russian infantryman or Chinese peasant, a Polish Jew or Greek farmer – could not.

Most of those who fought clung stubbornly to their own amateur status, performing a wholly unwelcome duty before returning to their ‘real’ lives. As a twenty-four-year-old lieutenant in action against the Germans with the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, Peter White, reflected: ‘It must take about seven years ... to make a being feel really like a soldier

and not just a civilian dressed up. The situation seemed so ludicrously unreal and yet grimly real at the same time. We could at least comfort ourselves with the knowledge that the poor blighters opposite us were in the same boat even though it was a boat of their seeking.' John Hersey wrote of the Marines on Guadalcanal: 'The uniforms, the bravado ... were just camouflage. They were just American boys. They did not want that valley or any part of its jungle. They were ex-grocery boys, ex-highway laborers, ex-bank clerks, ex-schoolboys, boys with a clean record ... not killers.'

RAF Corporal Peter Baxter lamented: 'My whole generation ... are wasting some of the finest years of their lives in the dreary business of war. Our manhood has come to full fruition, but it is stifling and decaying in these wasted years ... The deadening, paralysing influence of service life has blighted my middle twenties.' Many young men had never before lived away from home, and hated the indignities and discomforts of barracks existence. Frank Novy, a twenty-one-year-old, spent his first night in the army at a depot in Leeds. 'After a few minutes on the palliasse I heard complaints from all sides. My own was terribly hard, and I had no pillow, my teeth were aching and soon I had a headache. I felt depressed and tired out. I tried to sleep, but I kept thinking of home, and all I had left went round and round in my head, ceaselessly, persistently ... At times I felt so depressed that I wanted to cry, but couldn't.'

Recruits found themselves growing new skins. Len England described how a fellow soldier delivered a stream of wisecracks to a girl behind the counter in the YMCA, then turned to England and said in surprise, 'I've never flirted before in my life. I've only been in the army five days, and now look at what I'm doing.' England observed that he and his new comrades felt different people, 'more authoritative and self-assertive in uniform'. Educated men recoiled from the crude banality of barracks vocabulary: among Americans, everything seemed to be 'tough shit'; an alleged coward 'was shaking like a pup shitting carpet tacks'; civilians who escaped military service were '4-F bastards'.

No sentence was complete without its obscene expletives: the fucking officers made them dig fucking foxholes before they received fucking rations or stood fucking guard. Even the most delicately reared recruits acquired this universal military habit of speech, though officers' messes aspired to more gentility. Cultured men were pained by translation into a world in which art, music, literature had no place. Captain Pavel Kovalenko of the Red Army wrote one night in the line: 'After dinner I sat down to

read Nekrasov. My God, when will I be able to spend as much time as I want enjoying Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov. I saw a photograph of Tolstoy as a young man in officer's uniform ... Tears choked in my throat, almost overwhelming me.'

Captain David Elliott of the Welsh Guards found himself 'terribly depressed' on returning to his barracks in Britain after a weekend leave: 'There is nothing so utterly boring, so utterly narrow and so utterly petty as regimental soldiering which lacks the accompaniment of a state of battle ... Certainly in this battalion there is no charity, no loving kindness, no loyalty ... Among the officers, if not among the men, there are many problem children.' While embryo airmen revelled in the thrills of flight training, few recruits found comparable compensations in discovering how to become infantrymen. Pfc 'Red' Thompson from Staten Island, New York, felt that he acquired limited skills: 'I learned to take care of myself; to be wary, to look and listen; and to dig holes.' Every soldier became reflexively familiar with the order 'Get your gear on and stand by to move out,' usually with scant notion of where he was going. Ignorance of anything beyond a man's field of vision was the norm. As a 1942 recruit training in North Carolina, nineteen-year-old Missourian Tony Moody decided that he and his comrades cherished no lust for glory: 'We somehow hoped we wouldn't be in harm's way.'

Pressures on manpower caused the conscription of more than a few recruits who should never have been obliged to serve. 'My comrades were mostly from Yorkshire and Lancashire,' wrote the eighteen-year-old Pte. Ron Davidson.

The 1930s had been a bad time for many and physically some found things very difficult and others were barely literate. I remember one who did not make the grade, aneuretic and also sub-normal – needless to say he had been passed A1 by the army doctors! He could just about dress himself, but the intricacies of army gear were beyond him and we used to get him into it. We used to lay out his kit in the prescribed manner, but this was done at night so [he] slept on the wooden floor which he regularly wet. The army in its wisdom decided [he] was 'idle' and a malingerer and set about 'waking him up a bit'. This took the form of huge P[hysical] T[raining] I[nstructor]s chasing him all over the barrack square, yelling in his ear the most frightful obscenities.

This misfit was eventually discharged, but most rifle platoons included one or two subnormal men, whose conduct in battle was unsurprisingly erratic. British soldier William Chappell avowed his own submission to military service, but never ceased to ache for the civilian world from which he had been torn: 'I accept this life. I accept the loss of my home, the collapse of my career, the bomb that injured my mother, the wide scattering and disintegration of the web of friendship I had woven so painstakingly for myself ... I still want the same things. More chocolate; longer hours in bed; easily acquired hot baths, delicious, varied and delicate food; all my own possessions around me ... I am bothered by my feet, sick of khaki, bored and annoyed by my companions, all the monotonous, slow, fiddle-de-dee of army life. I long for it all to be finished with, and sometimes vaguely envy those who have gone.'

An American officer wrote from the Pacific: 'When the tents are down, I think every man feels a loneliness because he sees that this wasn't home after all. As long as there were four canvas walls about him, he could kid himself a little ... Standing on barren ground surrounded by scrap lumber piles and barracks bags with nothing familiar on his horizon he feels uprooted and insecure, a wanderer on the face of the earth. That which is always in the back of his mind now stands starkly in the front: "Will it ever end, and will I be here to see it?"' S/Sgt. Harold Fennema wrote to his wife Jeannette in Wisconsin: 'So much of this war and army life amounts to the insignificant job of passing time, and that really is a pity. Life is so short and time so precious to those who live and love life that I can hardly believe myself, seeking entertainment to pass time away ... I wonder sometimes where this is going to lead.' Yet if camp life was monotonous, at least it was closer to home than the theatres of war. Pfc Eugene Gagliardi, a nineteen-year-old newspaper pressman from Brooklyn, regarded his entire later experience of service in Europe as 'a nightmare. All my good memories of the army were before we went to France.'

Active service, when it came, changed everything. American correspondent E.J. Kahn wrote from New Guinea: 'As an urban selectee's military career progresses, he changes gradually from a preponderantly indoor being into a wholly outdoor one.' Marine Eugene Sledge recoiled from the brutish state to which the battlefield reduced him: 'The personal bodily filth imposed upon the combat infantryman by living conditions on the battlefield was difficult for me to tolerate. It bothered almost everyone I knew ... I stunk! My mouth felt ... like I had gremlins walking around in it with muddy boots on ... Short as it was, my hair was matted with dust

and rifle oil. My scalp itched, and my stubble beard was becoming an increasing source of irritation in the heat. Drinking water was far too precious ... to use in brushing one's teeth or in shaving, even if the opportunity had arisen.'

Combat opened a chasm between those who experienced its horrors, and those at home who did not. In December 1943, Canadian Farley Mowat wrote to his family from the Sangro front in Italy: 'The damnable truth is we are in really different worlds, on totally different planes, and I don't really know you any more, I only know the you that was. I wish I could explain the desperate sense of isolation, of not belonging to my own past, of being adrift in some kind of alien space. It is one of the toughest things we have to bear – that and the primal, gut-rotting worm of fear.'

The great Duke of Wellington justly remarked, 'Believe me, not every man who wears a military uniform is a hero.' In all armies, soldiers serving with forward combat units shared a contempt for the much larger number of men in the rear areas who fulfilled roles in which they faced negligible risk: infantry bore 90 per cent of global army casualties. An American or British rifleman who entered France in June 1944 faced a 60 per cent prospect of being killed or wounded before the end of the campaign, rising to 70 per cent for officers. Armoured and artillery units suffered much smaller proportionate losses, and those in the huge logistics 'tail' were exposed to no greater statistical risk of death or mishap than industrial workers at home.

Bombardment imposed an intense trauma. 'There was nothing subtle or intimate about the approach and explosion of an artillery shell,' wrote Eugene Sledge, remembering Peleliu:

When I heard the whistle of an approaching one in the distance, every muscle in my body contracted. I braced myself in a puny effort to keep from being swept away. I felt utterly helpless. As the fiendish whistle grew louder, my teeth ground against each other, my heart pounded, my mouth dried, my eyes narrowed, sweat poured over me, my breath came in short irregular gasps, and I was afraid to swallow lest I choke. I always prayed, sometimes out loud. I felt utterly helpless ... To me, artillery was an invention of hell. The onrushing whistle and scream of the big steel package of destruction was the pinnacle of violent fury and the embodiment of pent-up evil. It was the essence of violence and of man's inhumanity to man. I developed a passionate hatred for shells. To be killed by a bullet

seemed so clean and surgical. But shells would not only tear and rip the body, they tortured one's mind almost beyond the brink of sanity. After each shell I was wrung out, limp and exhausted.

Enforced passivity in the face of bombardment was among the most dismal predicaments of every soldier. 'Give a Jock a rifle or a Bren gun and allow him to use it, and however frightened he may be he will face up to most things,' wrote Captain Alastair Borthwick of the 5th Seaforth Highlanders. 'Put him, inactive, in a trench and danger becomes progressively more difficult to bear. Fear is insidious, and it grows in inactivity.' Most soldiers discovered a special horror in enduring a mortar barrage – one fancifully likened the sudden, repetitive dull crumps to the sound of a woman beating a carpet. Bombs which detonated in overhead trees broadcast deadly wood splinters and steel shards across the area below. Peter White was overcome by pity for one of his soldiers amid such an assault:

Young Cutter, who was really quite unsuitable for such a pastime, gave way completely each time we listened with fascination to the plopping of the bombs' ascent from the enemy hill and lay quivering during the tantalisingly long wait for the whisper of their descent which sounded for a moment before our surroundings erupted to shattering crashes painful to the ear. As each climax came, the whimpering misery of Pte. Cutter broke out in an uncontrollable stream of verbal pleading. He recovered enough in between to murmur 'I'm sorry, Sir' ... I felt a wealth of sympathy for Cutter, but dared not show it for I felt he would just collapse the more. He had so lost control of himself by the time a pause arrived long enough for us to scamper out and continue digging that I told him to stop where he was until he had collected his wits. He was in such a state his condition might have put ideas into the heads of others. He grovelled in the sand moaning 'Oh God! Oh God, when will it stop ... Sir ... I, sorry. God! Oh stop it.' No one mocked him or made fun. We had all tasted too vividly of the ordeal ourselves to feel anything but great compassion.

With experience, men overcame their initial delusion that all those who found themselves beneath a storm of high-explosive must be doomed to die: they discovered that most soldiers survive most battles. Thereafter, it became a matter of personal taste whether an individual decided that he himself was bound to be among the fortunate, or condemned to join the

dead. 'We had learned our first lesson, that fate, not the Germans or Italians, was our indiscriminating enemy,' wrote a Royal Engineer corporal in Sicily. 'With the same callousness as Army orders; without fairness or judgement. "You and you dead, the rest of you, on the truck."' Farley Mowat wrote in August 1943 with the gaucherie of his twenty-two years: 'It's hard for guys my age to grasp that nobody lives forever. Dying is just a word until you find out differently. That's trite but horribly true. The first few times you almost get nicked you take it for granted you are almost immortal. The next few times you begin to wonder. After that you start looking over your shoulder to make sure old Lady Luck is still around.'

Many men fantasised about earning the privilege of a light wound, what the British called 'a Blighty one', which would enable them honourably to escape the battlefield. Chance, however, was often ungenerous: a young officer of the Burma Rifles was flown fresh from India to join an embattled Chindit column in 1944. On the very night of his arrival, he had been in action for less than two hours when a bullet lodged in his right thigh, severing his penis and right testicle. Corporal James Jones wrote of Guadalcanal: 'It's funny, the things that get to you. One day a man near me was hit in the throat, as he stood up, by a bullet from a burst of MG fire. He cried out, "Oh My God!" in an awful, grimly comic, burbling kind of voice that made me think of the signature of the old Shep Fields' Rippling Rhythm band. There was awareness in it, and a tone of having expected it, then he fell down, to all intents and purposes dead. I say "to all intents and purposes" because his vital functions may have continued for a while.'

Jones suggested that some men found consolation in resigning themselves to the apparent inevitability of their own deaths: 'Strangely, for everyone, the acceptance and the giving-up of hope create and reinstall hope in a kind of reverse-process mental photonegative function. Little things become significant. The next meal, the next bottle of booze, the next kiss, the next sunrise, the next full moon. The next bath. Or as the Bible might have said, but didn't quite, Sufficient unto the day is the existence thereof.'

The grotesque became normal. 'One learned to accept things one would not have thought possible,' said Dr Karl-Ludwig Mahlo, a German army medical officer. Hans Moser, sixteen-year-old gunlayer with an 88mm flak battery in Silesia, was surprised to find himself unmoved when an explosion killed the neighbouring crew, leaving their gunpit strewn with body parts: 'I was so young I didn't think a lot about anything.' US infantryman Roscoe Blunt watched the impact of a shell on a fellow soldier: 'The man

disintegrated, leaving only patches and puddles of flesh and bone spattered in the mud. Graves registration would never find this one, not even his dog tags. Another unknown soldier. I sat and ate my food. I had not known him.'

Most men under fire focused upon immediacies and loyalties towards each other. Their hopes and fears became elemental, as described by British lieutenant Norman Craig in the desert: 'Life was so free of all its complexities. What a clarity and a simplicity it really had! To stay alive, to lead once more a normal existence, to know again warmth, comfort and safety – what else could one conceivably demand? I would never chide circumstance again, never question fate, never feel bored, unhappy or dissatisfied. To be allowed to continue to live – nothing else mattered.' Comradeship was fundamental: 'Nobody has the courage to act in accordance with his natural cowardice with the whole company looking on,' said a Luftwaffe NCO named Walter Schneider, pleased with his own paradox.

The intimacy forged by even a few weeks of shared battle experience caused some units to behave with cynical ruthlessness towards newcomers – outsiders. A veteran American staff sergeant said about Anzio, where his unit had eight replacements killed within twenty-four hours of their arrival: 'We weren't going to send our own guys out on point in a damn-fool situation like that. We had been together since Africa, and Sicily, and Salerno. We sent the replacements out ahead.' It was the same in every army: 'The company was the *Heimat*,' said SS Unterscharführer Helmut Gunther, 'the people you wanted to be with. What mattered about being wounded was separation from your unit. You had a completely different feeling towards those who had been with you a long time as distinct from those who hadn't. A few months are an eternity for a soldier in war.' Some Scottish soldiers of 51st Highland Division mutinied at Salerno in September 1943, rather than accept posting to another formation.

Only a small number of warriors articulated hopes more ambitious than those for personal survival. One of these was a British officer who wrote to his parents before being killed in his first North African battle: 'I should like you to know what it is I died for ... There is, I feel, both in England and America a tremendous surge of feeling, a feeling which, for want of a better word, I shall call "goodness". It is not expressed by the politicians or the newspapers, for it is far too deep for them. It is the heart-felt longing of all the "middling folk" for something better – a world more worthy of their children, a world more simple in its beliefs, nearer to earth

and to God. I have heard it so often among soldiers in England and America, in trains, in factories in Chicago and in clubs in London, sometimes so poorly expressed that one can hardly recognize it, but underlying it all there is that craving for a new life.'

All this was true. While Winston Churchill saw himself conducting a struggle to preserve the greatness of the British Empire, most of his fellow countrymen yearned instead for domestic change, most vividly anticipated in the Beveridge Report, published in November 1942, which laid the foundations of Britain's post-war Welfare State. The *Spectator* editorialised: 'The report has almost eclipsed the war itself as a subject of discussion in the country; it has been keenly debated by British troops overseas.' Captain David Elliott wrote to his sister, after hearing a discussion among his Guardsmen about Beveridge: 'If it is not accepted *in toto* I feel there will be a revolution.' Independent Labour MP Aneurin Bevan told the House of Commons with unwonted accuracy: 'The British Army is not fighting for the old world. If hon Members opposite think we are going through this in order to keep their Malayan swamps, they are making a mistake.'

There was a striking contrast between the attitudes of European and Asian peoples, who sought social and constitutional change as a reward for victory, and that of Franklin Roosevelt's fellow countrymen, who were largely content with the society they had got. A *New York Times* writer observed sardonically about the American overseas: 'Tea from the British and *vin rouge* from the French have only confirmed his original convictions: that America is home, that home is better than Europe.' Ernie Pyle recorded the aspirations of soldiers whom he met before the invasion of Sicily, overwhelmingly dominated by the hunger to go home: 'These gravely yearned-for futures of men going into battle include so many things – things such as seeing the "old lady" again, of going to college, of holding on your knee just once your own kid, of again becoming champion salesman of your territory, of driving a coal truck around the streets of Kansas City once more and yes, of just sitting in the sun once more on the south side of a house in New Mexico ... It was these little hopes that made up the sum total of our worry rather than any visualization of physical agony to come.'

Men's obsessive ambition to return to where they belonged became more emphatic when such 'physical agony' came. US Army nurse Dorothy Beavers wrote a letter for 'a beautiful young man, a captain, who had lost both arms and legs. Yet he still seemed thrilled that he could say: "I'm

going home.” When American machine-gunner Donald Schoo’s driver had a hand blown off, the man ran in circles yelling hysterically, ‘I’m going home! Thank you, God! I’m going home!’ A soldier who received a ‘Dear John’ letter from his spouse told a reporter: ‘Any guy overseas who says he’s in love with his wife tells a damn lie ... He’s in love with a memory – the memory of a moonlit night, a lovely gown, the scent of a perfume or the lilt of a song.’

Isolation was a towering sensation, even for men serving amid legions of their compatriots. ‘I see all these thousands of lonely soldiers here,’ John Steinbeck wrote from the British capital in 1943 about the GIs on its streets. ‘There’s a kind of walk they have in London, an apathetic shuffle. They’re looking for something. They’ll say it’s a girl – any girl, but it isn’t that at all.’ Although soldiers often talk about women, under the stress and unyielding discomfort of a battlefield most crave simple pleasures, among which sex scarcely features. A US Marine Corps lieutenant colonel in the South Pacific fantasised about his ambitions on returning home: ‘I’m going to start wearing pyjamas again ... I’m going to polish off a few eggs and several quarts of milk ... A few hot baths are also in order ... But I’m saving the best for last – I’m going to spend a whole day flushing a toilet, just to hear the water run.’

It is striking to contrast such modest ambitions, common to most soldiers of the democracies, with the martial enthusiasm of some of Hitler’s men, especially those of the *Waffen SS*, which persisted in surprising degree until the last months of the war. An American-born Italian woman wrote with mingled bewilderment, repugnance and fascination about two German officers she met in 1943: ‘They are the most highly specialized human beings that I have ever encountered: the “fighting man”. Both of them are under twenty-five; both have taken part in the campaigns of Poland, France, Russia – and now Italy. One of them, risen from ranks, commanded for six months a company of Russian deserters ... It is impossible to convey the depth of conviction in his voice, while he expounded to us the familiar doctrines which had been taught him: the needs of *Gross Deutschland*, Nordic racial superiority, the inevitability of Germany’s entry into the war (in spite of all Hitler’s efforts to make peace with England), his pride in his country and his men, and above all his unshakable certainty, even now, of victory.’

It is an enduring enigma, how a German army overwhelmingly composed of conscripts, as much citizen soldiers as were their Allied counterparts, should have shown itself consistently their superior. Part of

the answer must lie in the supreme professionalism of the officer corps and its combat doctrine; through the ages Germany had produced formidable soldiers, and under Hitler their performance attained its zenith, albeit in an unspeakable cause. Beyond this, the role of compulsion became almost as important as it was in Stalin's armies. German soldiers who fled a battlefield or deserted knew they were liable to execution, a sanction imposed with increasing frequency as the Nazi empire crumbled. The Wehrmacht shot nothing like as many of its own men as did the Russians, but by 1945 penal executions ran into tens of thousands. Allied commanders, desperate to persuade their own men to try harder, often lamented their inability to impose deterrent capital sentences on deserters.

But more important to residual German resistance was the contribution of a core of fanatics, notably Waffen SS formations. A decade of Nazi indoctrination moulded excellent junior leaders. Even when it was plain that the tide of war had turned irreversibly against Hitler, many Germans made extraordinary sacrifices to preserve their homeland from Russian retribution. Not every member of the Wehrmacht was a hero: in 1944–45, a growing number showed themselves willing and even eager to surrender. But the ethos of Hitler's army – like those of Russia and Japan – differed importantly from that of the British and American forces. The price of allowing men to retain some civil liberties and freedom of choice, and of forgoing brutal sanctions upon the weak, was that the Western armies were obliged to compensate by firepower and patience for their soldiers' lesser willingness to accept sacrifice.

2 HOME FRONTS

Nikolai Belov of the Red Army wrote in his diary at the end of 1942: 'Yesterday I received a whole bunch of letters from Lidochka. I sense that she isn't having an easy time back there with the little ones.' Captain Belov understated his wife's predicament. In many societies, civilians suffered more than soldiers. Romanian Mihail Sebastian never saw a battlefield, but wrote in December 1943: 'Any personal balance sheet gets lost in the shadow of war. Its terrible presence is the first reality. Then somewhere, far away, forgotten by us, are we ourselves, with our faded, diminished, lethargic life, as we wait to emerge from sleep and start living again.' Although statistics are drastically distorted by the mortality in Russia and China, it is notable that globally more non-combatants perished between 1939 and

1945 than uniformed participants. It is hard to use the phrase 'home front' without irony in the context of Russia's war, in which tens of millions found themselves in the condition described by Ukraine partisan Commissar Pavel Kalitov in September 1942, at the hamlet of Klimovo: 'A pale, thin woman sits on a bench with a baby in her arms and a girl of about seven. She is weeping, poor wretch. What are her tears about? I would do anything to be able to help these miserable human beings, to ease their pain.'

Three weeks later, he described a similar scene in Budnitsa: 'What is left of it? Heaps of ruins, chimneys sticking out, scorched chairs. Where there were roads and paths, there are thorns and weeds. No sign of life. The village is under constant artillery fire.' Shortly afterwards, Kalitov's unit received an army order to clear all civilians from a fifteen-mile zone behind the front; they were to be permitted to take their belongings, but no forage or potatoes. Kalitov wrote unhappily: 'We've got to work with the civilians, to prepare them so that they do this without resisting. It's a tough business: many people are living almost entirely off potatoes. To demand that they leave these for the troops means sentencing them to terrible hardships, even death. A family of refugees stands in front of me now. They are so thin and gaunt, one can see through them. It is especially hard to look at the little ones – three of them, one a baby, the others a little older. There is no milk. These people have suffered as much as us, the soldiers, or even more. Bombs, shells and mines no longer scare them.' He marvelled at what human beings showed themselves able to endure.

Even those Russians who did not suffer siege or bombardment spent the war labouring in conditions of extreme privation: they received five hundred calories a day less nourishment than their British or German counterparts, a thousand fewer than Americans. Some two million perished of hunger in territories under Soviet control, while a further thirteen million died under bombardment or in German-occupied regions; prisoners in the gulag's labour camps occupied the lowest place in the hierarchy of priority for rations, and one in four of them died in each of the war years. Russians suffered widespread scurvy as a consequence of vitamin deficiency, together with many other conditions associated with hunger and overwork. 'We had no life of our own outside the factory,' said Moscow woman Klavdiya Leonova, who worked in a textile plant making army tunics and camouflage netting.

Throughout the war, her production line operated around the clock, its workers organised in two twelve-hour shifts. They were fed badly baked

bread and *kasha* – a porridge made with burned wheat – distributed at the work benches. ‘We did not starve, but we were always very hungry and often ate potato peelings ... Sunday was in theory a day off, but the factory Party Committee often called on us for outside work, such as digging trenches or bringing in timber from the forests around Moscow. We had to load lorries with pitprops which were so heavy they would have been a burden even for a professional weightlifter ... We lived with the peasants ... the women regularly abused the regime. They abused us too, because we collected berries and mushrooms in the woods which they had hoped to sell to us.’

In the unoccupied Western nations, some people prospered: criminals exploited demand for prostitution, black-market goods, stolen military fuel and supplies; industrialists made enormous profits, many of which somehow evaded windfall taxes; farmers, especially in the United States, where incomes rose by 156 per cent, experienced greater prosperity than they had ever known. ‘Farm times became good times,’ said Laura Briggs, daughter of an Idaho smallholder. ‘Dad started having his land improved ... We and most other farmers went from a tarpaper shack to a new frame house with indoor plumbing. Now we had an electric stove instead of a woodburning one, and running water at the sink where we could do the dishes; and a hot water heater; and nice linoleum.’

But far more people hated it all. Lt. David Fraser, a Grenadier Guardsman, identified an important truth about the circumstances of millions, soldiers and civilians alike: ‘People were not where they belonged, so that the effect was of a dream from which one hoped one day to awake.’ In April 1941, Edward McCormick wrote to his son David, who had enlisted with his brother Anthony, and now embarked with an artillery regiment for the Middle East. ‘To Mummy, in particular,’ their father said,

the whole war centres round you and Anthony. The chief motivating force in her life, ever since you were born, has been your health, happiness and safety. These are still her instinctive thoughts, and you don’t need me to tell you therefore how devastating this parting with you both has been to her. I feel it too, and it appalls me to think of the hardship, danger and filth which will probably be your experience. There is no doubt whatever, in my mind, that this war had to come. A Nazi victory can only mean the enjoyment of life by a very small number of chosen Germans, and the souls of all people under them will be engulfed. You and Anthony are helping to rid the world of this plague and, while personal feelings make

me wish you were far away from it all, I am filled with pride ... at what I know you will achieve. Mum and I send you our fondest love and blessings and pray for your well-being and safe return to us. DAD

It would be more than four years before the McCormick family was reunited, a separation common to scores of millions. And although enlistment in uniform was the commonest cause of displacement and the sundering of families, these things also took many other forms. Half the population of Britain moved home in the course of the war, some because they were evicted to make way for servicemen, some because their houses were destroyed, most because wartime duties demanded it. A significant part of the Belgian fishing fleet adopted a new life at the port of Brixham in Devon, while some Danish fishermen worked from Grimsby in Lincolnshire. Elsewhere in Europe, more brutal imperatives intervened. In January 1943, for instance, a British nurse named Gladys Skillett found herself giving birth to a child not in the British Channel Islands that were her rightful home, but in the maternity ward of a small German hospital at Biberach. She was one of 834 civilians on occupied Guernsey deported to the Reich in September 1943 to spend the rest of the war in an internment camp, as hostages; there should have been 836 of them, but an elderly major and his wife from Sark slashed their wrists before embarkation. Mrs Skillett forged a lifelong friendship with the wife of a Wehrmacht soldier who shared her hospital room in Biberach, and who gave birth to a healthy son on the same day as her own arrived.

Bianca Zagari was a mother of two in a prosperous Italian family, who fled from their home city of Naples in December 1942, when American bombing began. A party of fourteen including in-laws, nephews and nieces, maid and governess, they settled in the remote and impoverished Abruzzo region, renting two houses in a village in the Sangro valley, accessible only on foot. There, they eked out an uncomfortable existence until, to their horror, in October 1943 once again bombs began to fall around them; they were only eighteen miles from Monte Cassino, in an area bitterly contested between the German and Allied armies. Zagari and her children fled with the villagers; as they clambered into the hills, a peasant told her, in local dialect she could barely comprehend, that the bombing had claimed most of her relations: 'Signora, the ten dead are yours.' She wrote: 'Now it is dawn and others are climbing up from Scontrone, terrified. Each one gives me a horrific detail: a hand, a little foot, two plaits with red bows, a body without a head.'

Her husband Raffaele survived, but most of his family perished. The survivors existed for weeks in caves in the mountains, learning skills such as Zagari had never known – lighting fires and building rough shelters with scant help from the unsympathetic local people, who cared only for their own. ‘I have to ask for everything from everyone – it is like begging for alms.’ When the Germans found them, all the men were conscripted for forced labour: ‘They took one while he was digging under ruins for his mother.’ After months of misery, one day she fled across the mountains with her two children and her jewel case. Eventually a pitying German lorry-driver gave them a lift to Rome. ‘We arrive via the Porta San Giovanni. I feel I am dreaming – I see nannies with children playing calmly. The war seems a distant rumour. Everyone asks where we have come from. No one understands the answer that we have come from Scontrone where nine members of the family have been killed. At the Corso hotel, where the concierge knows us and tries to help, we hear another guest threatening that he will refuse to patronise the establishment again if it admits such vagabonds as ourselves.’

The Zagaris were able to exploit their wealth to deliver them from the worst privations, as most Italians could not. When the icy winter of 1944 came, disease, lack of fuel and food imposed a bitter toll on civilians, especially children. One mother said: ‘Suddenly my little girl became unwell. The doctor said it was colitis – a death which took five hours, an indescribable agony. The house was freezing and Gigeto [her husband] ran to buy lots of bottles to fill with hot water. I put her in our bed and held her close with the bottles around her. “Gigeto,” I screamed, “Santina must not die.” But she did.’ Many people who had lost their homes by bombardment or expulsion were reduced to a primitive mountain existence, as a young girl described: ‘The cold and damp of the caves got into our bones. My mother crouched in a corner clutching my three-month-old brother in her arms. She told me to go into the town and find a doctor. I ran like a hare, but found that he was away from home – at the house of the Podestàs whose son had a high temperature like my brother. Eventually he gave me a prescription – but he wouldn’t give me any of the drugs that were on his table. He said he would come and visit, but when he arrived my little brother was already dead.’ Their distraught mother said, ‘My baby boy died because my milk was bad because I didn’t eat enough.’ She was one among millions.

People displaced from their homes and countries spent much of the war waiting: for orders or visas; an opportunity to flee from looming peril;

permission to travel. Twenty-one-year-old English girl Rosemary Say, having escaped from German internment into the Vichy zone of France, kicked her heels for weeks in Marseilles among an unhappy community of fellow fugitives: 'It was sad to see the waste of intellect and ability as the delays lengthened and the future for many continued to look bleak. Had he got his visa at last, had he been arrested or just scarpered into the countryside to try his luck? We waited and wondered. But if the person didn't come back he was soon forgotten. We were only really held together by a common wish to be off and away and to begin our lives again ... There was a lot of suspicion and hopelessness ... Feelings ran high and quarrels were loud and violent. We all shared the worry of our uncertainty.'

Ukrainian teenager Stefan Kurylak was shipped westwards by the German occupiers to labour for an Austrian Alpine farming family, devout Catholics named Klaunzer. On first sighting the boy, Frau Klaunzer burst into tears; without knowing why, the young Ukrainian followed suit. It was explained to him that the Klaunzers' son had been killed on the Eastern Front a few weeks before. Frau Klaunzer kept mouthing one of the few German phrases Stefan could understand: 'Hitler no good! Hitler no good!' Stefan was thereafter treated with kindness and humanity: he worked on the family land, not unhappily, until the end of the war, when his hosts begged him in vain to stay on as one of themselves.

Few such experiences were so benign. Fourteen-year-old Pole Arthur Poznański returned to the Piotrków ghetto one day in October 1942 from the Hortensja glassworks where he and his younger brother Jerzyk worked. He was handed a crumpled note by a member of the ghetto's Jewish militia. It was from his mother. There had been a deportation: 'We are being taken. May God help you, Arthur. We cannot do anything more for you, and whatever may happen, look after Jerzyk. He is but a child and has got no one else, so be his brother and parent. Goodbye ...' Arthur, passionately moved, kept repeating to himself, 'I'll try! Yes, I'll try!' But he thought, 'How? I felt so lonely and helpless.' The boys spent the rest of the war in concentration camps, separated by hundreds of miles, but both miraculously survived; the rest of their family perished.

The British endured six years of austerity and spasmodic bombardment. The night blackout promoted moral as well as physical gloom. Yet the circumstances of Churchill's islands were much preferable to those of Continental societies, where hunger and violence were endemic. Like North America, Britain was shielded by expanses of sea, relative personal freedom and wealth. Privileged Britons remained privileged indeed: 'The

extraordinary thing about the war was that people who really didn't want to be involved in it were not,' the novelist Anthony Powell wrote afterwards.

This was true, within a limited social milieu. The week before D-Day, as 250,000 young American and British soldiers made final preparations for hurling themselves at Hitler's Atlantic Wall, in London Evelyn Waugh wrote in his diary: 'Woke half drunk and had a long, busy morning – getting my hair cut, trying to verify quotations in the London Library, which is still in disorder from its bomb, visiting Nancy [Mitford, at her bookshop]. At luncheon I again got drunk. Went to the Beefsteak [Club], which I have just joined ... Back to White's [Club] – more port. Went to Waterloo in an alcoholic stupor, got the train to Exeter and slept most of the way.'

Waugh was untypical; many of the friends with whom he caroused were on leave from active service, and several were dead a year later. The German V-weapon assault was about to commence, inflicting fresh death and destruction on war-weary Britons. But, just as life in New York or Chicago was much more comfortable than life in London or Liverpool, so Londoners were vastly better off than the inhabitants of Paris, Naples, Athens, any city in the Soviet Union or China. Lancashire housewife Nella Last reflected in October 1942 that her war had thus far inflicted little hardship or suffering, 'in comparison to three-quarters of Stalingrad being demolished during the first bombardment. We have had food, shelter and warmth when millions have had none – what will be the price we will have to pay? – we cannot expect to go on "escaping", there is no escape for any of us. I saw a neighbour's baby today and I felt a sudden understanding for those who "refuse to bring babies into the world now". All this talk of "new worlds" and "after the war", no talk of the suffering, the anguish, before all this is over.'

Mrs Last was unusually sensitive; most of her compatriots were too preoccupied by their own present troubles to concern themselves with the larger but remote miseries of others. On 22 November 1942, housewife Phyllis Crook wrote to her thirty-two-year-old husband serving in North Africa: 'Christmas is going to be a beastly time and I'm hating the thought of it. However it's got to be got on with "as usual" and I have been busy trying hard to get things for all the kids of our acquaintance. It would be so easy to say "I can't get anything" and leave it at that. It is so cold ... How I wish I could retire for the winter instead of constantly shivering. Chris [their small son] asked God to make you a good boy tonight! Well my love

news seems very scarce and I must say goodnight. Life seems too mouldy for words. I wonder when we shall see you again. It all seems horribly far away and doesn't bear too much thinking about. Look after yourself, my dear and don't go going into any danger, as Daddy would say! All my love always, dearest Phil. PS Joyce is now working in a factory 11 hours a day. John Young has had malaria.'

Mrs Crook's woes would seem trivial, her self-pity contemptible, to many people of war-ravaged nations. Her own life and those of her children were unimpaired, and they were not even hungry. But separation from her husband, the necessity to occupy lodgings far from her east London home, the drab monotony of wartime existence seemed to her, like many others, sufficient causes for unhappiness. And ten days after writing that letter she became a widow, when her husband was killed in action.

News of the violent and premature deaths of distant loved ones was a pervasive feature of the wartime experience. Often, little was known of their fate, as J.R. Ackerley noted in a poem published in the *Spectator*:

We never knew what became of him, that was so curious;
He embarked, it was in December, and never returned;
No chance to say Good-bye, and Christmas confronting us;
A few letters arrived, long after, and came to an end.

The weeks dragged into months, and then it was December.
We troubled the officials, of course, and they cabled about;
They were patient but busy, importunities without number;
Some told us one thing, some another; they never found out.

There's a lot go like that, without explanation;
And death is death, after all; small comfort to know how and when;
But I keep thinking now that we've dropped the investigation;
It was more like the death of an insect than of a man.

Countless families struggled to come to terms with loss. British Army officer's wife Diana Hopkinson described a reunion with her husband on a station platform in Berkshire, after a long separation during which they received news that his brother had been killed in action. 'His strange uniform, his strangely thin face glimpsed in the dimmest light, gave me a feeling of artificiality. Even in our kisses there was something unreal. In

bed there was a terrible sadness to overcome – Pat’s death – before we could make love. When at last he turned towards me, we made love as if we were partners in a solemn rite, strange, speechless, but familiar.’

Sheffield housewife Edie Rutherford was just preparing tea when her young neighbour, the wife of an RAF pilot, knocked on the door. ‘Her face was wooden and she jerked out: “Mrs Rutherford, Henry is missing,” thrust the telegram into my hand. Of course I just opened my arms and took her in and let her have a good weep the while I cursed audibly this blasted war. “He isn’t dead. I’m sure he isn’t dead. He was home only last Wednesday. He’s alive somewhere and worrying because he knows I’ll get this telegram to upset me” ... It is difficult to know what to say to a wife in such trouble. I did my best, poor lass. Felt myself as if my inside had fallen out. I wish to goodness this war would end.’

Housewife Jean Wood recorded: ‘I had a very nice lady and her husband, neighbours. She was having her son on leave and she didn’t have any meat for him. But that particular day the butcher let me have some rabbit ... a taste treat. I didn’t want the rabbit, ’cause I’d rather give my small children an egg, if I could get eggs. So I took the rabbit round to her. She was so thrilled. On that particular day, her son was killed. We could have flung the rabbit anywhere, for all we cared. He was such a nice boy, a young officer, nineteen years old.’ They were all ‘nice boys’, to those obliged to mourn them.

Muriel Green, one of Britain’s 80,000 ‘land girls’ providing agricultural labour, burst into tears on the last night of a home leave in Norfolk in June 1942. ‘I cried because of the war. It has altered our life which can never be the same. To see the desolate emptiness of the seaside upsets me. When you are away and Mother writes to say the latest desecration, the latest boy missing, the latest family to sacrifice, it is just words. But in the home it is mortifying. Life will never be so sweet as before the war, and the last two summers and early ’39 were the most perfect years of my life when all seemed young and gay. I could have cried for hours had I not known it was upsetting Mother.’

American Dellie Hahne was one of many women who married the wrong man amid the stress and emotional extravagance of the time, and repented at leisure during the years that followed. ‘He was a soldier. He could not be anything but a marvelous, magnificent human being,’ she said, with the ruefulness of one who learned better. She came to pity others who experienced domestic miseries: ‘Pregnant women who could barely balance in a rocking train, going to see their husbands for the last time

before the guys were sent overseas. Women coming back from seeing their husbands, traveling with small children. Trying to feed their kids, diaper their kids. I felt sorriest for them. It suddenly occurred to me that this wasn't half as much fun as I'd been told it was going to be. I just thanked God I had no kids.'

Many children clung to parting memories of fathers from whom they became separated for years – in some cases forever. Little Californian Bernice Schmidt was nine when her parents got divorced. As a newly single man, her thirty-two-year-old father Arthur thus became eligible to be drafted. He was given leave from training camp before embarkation, and took his three children to a Los Angeles amusement park. He told them how homesick he was, and gave each a little parting present: Bernice's was a pin in the shape of two hearts held together with an arrow, inscribed 'Bernice, love daddy'. Pfc Schmidt was killed in action with the 317th Infantry on 15 November 1944. His daughter never forgot the day that news came, because it was her twelfth birthday. One day in October 1942, Nella Last was gazing at a neighbour's children. Their mother touched her arm and asked, 'What are you thinking about?' Mrs Last said, 'Oh, I don't know. Always be glad that your Ian is only seven.' The woman said simply, 'I *am*.'

Until 1943, when Stalingrad and bombing began to change everything, most German civilians save those who lost loved ones found the conflict a numbing presence rather than a trauma. 'Is it possible that one can get used to war?' mused Mathilde Wolff-Monckeburg, the elderly wife of an academic living in Hamburg, in 1941. 'This question tantalises me and I am afraid of a positive reply. All that was unbearable at first, all that was impossible to fathom, has by now become somehow "settled", and one lives from day to day in frightening apathy ... We still have our comforts and warmth, we have enough to eat, we occasionally have hot water, we do not exert ourselves apart from daily shopping expeditions and small household duties.' Like all Germans except National Socialist functionaries, who enjoyed privileges in food as everything else, she complained chiefly about the dreariness of rations: 'One grows ever more sensitive to the emptiness inside and greed for the unobtainable becomes ever more intense,' Wolff-Monckeburg wrote in June 1942. 'Glowing fantasies multiply in tantalising colours when one thinks of large juicy beefsteaks, new potatoes and long asparagus with lumps of golden butter. It is all so degrading and miserable – and there are people who call this a "heroic" period.' But if Germans complained of privation,

this was slight by global standards: whereas British output of consumer goods fell by 45 per cent between 1939 and 1944, Germany's declined only by 15 per cent. If its people disliked what they were obliged to eat – their annual consumption of potatoes rose from twelve to thirty-two million tons – they experienced severe hunger only when the war ended in May 1945; the Nazis starved the conquered nations to keep their own citizens fed.

More than any other aspect of the war, food or lack of it emphasised the relativity of suffering. Globally, far more people suffered serious hunger, or indeed died of starvation, than in any previous conflict, including World War I, because an unprecedented range of countries became battlefields, with consequent loss of agricultural production. Even the citizens of those countries which escaped famine found their diets severely restricted. Britain's rationing system ensured that no one starved and the poor were better nourished than in peacetime, but few found anything to enjoy about their fare. A land girl, Joan Ibbertson, wrote: 'Food was our obsession ... In my first digs the landlady never cooked a second vegetable, except on a Sunday; we had cold meat on Monday, and sausage for the rest of the week. Sometimes she cooked potatoes with the sausage, but often she left us a slice of bread each. The two sausages on a large, cold, green glass plate greeted us on our return from a day on leeks or sprouts, and a three-mile cycle ride each way ... A neighbour once brought round a sack of carrots, which he said were for the rabbits, but we benefited from this act of kindness ... We had dried eggs once a week for breakfast, but the good lady in charge liked to cook it overnight, so it resembled, and tasted like, sawdust on toast. We had fishpaste on toast, too, some mornings ... One Christmas we were allowed to buy a chicken. My bird was so old and tough that we could hardly chew through it.'

Each week a British adult was entitled to four ounces of lard or butter, twelve ounces of sugar, four ounces of bacon, two eggs, six ounces of meat, two ounces of tea and unlimited vegetables or home-grown fruit 'off-ration', if available. Most households resorted to improvisation to supplement authorised issues. Derek Lambert, then a small boy, recorded a scene at his family's table: 'One morning a jar was put on the breakfast table with supreme nonchalance ... My father, an undemonstrative man, spread the nectar on his bread and bit into it. He frowned and said: "What was that?" "Carrot marmalade," said my mother. With unusual deliberation, he picked up the jar, took it into the garden and poured it onto the compost heap.'

Yet any Russian or Asian peasant, or Axis captive, would have deemed carrot marmalade a luxury. Kenneth Stevens was a prisoner in Singapore's Changi jail. He wrote: 'In this place one's mind returns continually and dwells longingly on Food ... I think of Duck and Cherry Casserole, Scrambled Eggs, Fish Scallops, Chicken Stanley, Kedgeree, Trifle, Summer Pudding, Fruit Fool, Bread & Butter Pudding – all those lovely things were made just perfectly "right" in my own home.' Stevens died in August 1943 without ever again tasting such delicacies. Only in 1945 did his wife receive his diary from the hands of a fellow prisoner, and share his anguished fantasising from the brink of the grave. Meanwhile, the average height of French girl children shrank by eleven centimetres and of boys by seven centimetres between 1935 and 1944. Tuberculosis stimulated by malnutrition increased dramatically in occupied Europe, and by 1943 four-fifths of Belgian children were displaying symptoms of rickets. In most countries city-dwellers suffered more from hunger than country people, because they had fewer opportunities for supplementing their diet by growing their own produce. The poor lacked cash to use the black market which, in all countries, continued to feed those with means to pay.

In the matter of diet Canada, Australia and New Zealand escaped lightly, and Americans scarcely suffered at all. Rationing was introduced to Roosevelt's people only in 1943, and then on a generous scale. *Gourmet* magazine gushed tastelessly: 'Imports of European delicacies may dwindle, but America has battalions of good food to rush to appetite's defence.' Meat was almost the only commodity in short supply, though Americans complained bitterly about that. A housewife named Catherine Renee Young wrote to her husband in May 1943: 'I'm sick of the same thing ... We hardly ever see good steak any more. And steak is the main meat that gives us strength. My Dad just came back from the store and all he could get was blood pudding and how I hate that.' But whatever the shortcomings of wartime quality, in quantity American domestic meat consumption fell very little, even when huge shipments were exported to Britain and Russia.

Every nation with power to do so put its own people first, heedless of the consequences for others at their mercy. The Axis behaved most brutally, and with the direst consequences: Nazi policy in the east was explicitly directed towards starving subject races in order to feed Germans. Such was the regime's administrative incompetence that food imports to the Reich, and consequent Soviet deaths, fell far short of the hopes of agriculture minister Herbert Backe and his 'Hunger Plan'. People in occupied regions

displayed extraordinary ingenuity in hiding crops from the occupiers, and clung tenaciously to life in defiance of the predictions of Nazi nutritionists, who anticipated thirty to forty million fatalities. But many people indeed perished. Pre-war Soviet agriculture was grossly inefficient, and much farmland had been overrun by the Wehrmacht. Even when it was reclaimed, machinery had been seized or destroyed, the countryside laid waste. In pursuit of the Wehrmacht's policy of seeking to live off the land, German soldiers in the east consumed an estimated seven million tons of Russian grain, seventeen million cattle, twenty million pigs, twenty-seven million sheep and goats and over 100 million domestic fowls.

The Japanese throughout their empire adopted draconian policies to provide food for their own people, which caused millions to starve in South-East Asia. China also suffered appallingly, its peasants despoiled by both the Japanese and Nationalist armies. In Henan province in 1942, when unseasonable frost and hail were followed by a plague of locusts, millions left their land and many perished, to the horror of Western eyewitnesses: 'As they died the government continued to wring from them the last possible ounce of tax ... Peasants who were eating elm bark and dried leaves had to haul their last sack of grain to the tax collector's office.'

Though the Allies were not responsible for anything like the human toll exacted by the Axis, their policies displayed a harsh nationalistic selfishness. The United States insisted that both its people at home and its armed forces abroad should receive fantastically generous allocations of food, even when shipping space was at a premium. For every pound of supplies the Japanese transported to their island garrisons, many of whom – at Rabaul, for instance – spent the second half of the war engaged in subsistence vegetable gardening rather than combat operations, the US shipped two tons to its own forces. American reluctance to feed their men on local supplies was increased by the shortcomings of some nations' canning processes: eight US airmen died in an outbreak of botulism after eating Australian tinned beetroot. American specialists were thereupon dispatched to raise local standards. Major Belford Seabrook, of the famous New Jersey agribusiness, introduced its principles to Australia. Coca-Cola established forty-four bottling plants in theatres of war, which produced 95 per cent of all soft drinks sold in camp PXs. The United States reduced agreed allocations of meat to Britain to maintain supplies to its own civilians and soldiers; Gen. Brehon Somervell, a notorious anglophobe, supported his transportation chief's 1943 assertion that the British people 'were still living "soft" and could easily stand further reductions'.

For Italians, hunger was a persistent reality from the moment the country became a battlefield in 1943. 'My father had no steady income,' recalled the daughter of a once-rich Rome publisher. 'Our savings were spent, we were many in the house, including two brothers in hiding. I went with my father to the [public] soup kitchen because my mother was ashamed to do so. We made our own soup from broad-bean skins. We had no olive oil ... A flask of oil cost 2,000 lire when our entire house had cost only 70,000. We bought whatever was available on the black market, bartering with silver, sheets, embroidered linen. Silver was worth less than flour; even our daughters' dowries were exchanged for meat or eggs. Then in November with the cold weather we had to exchange goods for coal: the longest queues formed at the coal merchants. We carried the sacks back on our own, because it was better that no man showed his face [lest he should be conscripted for forced labour].'

'Hunger governed all,' Australian correspondent Alan Moorehead wrote from Italy. 'We were witnessing the moral collapse of a people. They had no pride any more, or dignity. The animal struggle for existence governed everything. Food. That was the only thing that mattered. Food for the children. Food for yourself. Food at the cost of any debasement or depravity.' Prostitution alone enabled some mothers to feed their families, as British Sergeant Norman Lewis witnessed in 1944. At a municipal building in the outskirts of Naples, he encountered a crowd of soldiers surrounding a group of women who were dressed in their street clothes,

and had the ordinary well-washed, respectable shopping and gossiping faces of working-class housewives. By the side of each woman stood a small pile of tins, and it soon became clear that it was possible to make love to any one of them in this very public place by adding another tin to the pile. The women kept absolutely still, they said nothing and their faces were as empty of expression as graven images. They might have been selling fish, except that this place lacked the excitement of a fish market. There was no solicitation, no suggestion, no enticement, not even the discreetest and most accidental display of flesh ... One soldier, a little tipsy, and egged on constantly by his friends, finally put down his tin of rations at a woman's side, unbuttoned and lowered himself onto her. A perfunctory jogging of the haunches began and came quickly to an end. A moment later he was on his feet and buttoning up again. It had been something to get over as soon as possible. He might have been submitting to field punishment rather than the act of love.

In December 1944, when there was hunger verging upon starvation in Italy and indeed all Europe, a British Embassy official in Washington visited assistant secretary of war John J. McCloy to protest against the policy of shipping extravagant quantities of supplies to US forces overseas, while liberated civilians were in desperate straits: “In order to win the war,” he demanded of McCloy, “were we not imperilling the political and social fabric of European civilization on which the future peace of the world depended?” This drew from Mr McCloy the immediate rejoinder ‘that it was a British interest to remember that, as a result of the complete change in the economic and financial position of the British Commonwealth which the war had brought about, we, in the U.K., depended at least as much upon the U.S. as we did upon Europe. Was it wise to risk losing the support of the U.S. in seeking the support of Western Europe? This was what was involved.’ The shocked British official persisted in pressing the case for feeding Europe’s civilians. McCloy stuck to his guns, asserting that it would be fatal for Britain ‘to argue that the war in the Pacific should be retarded in order that the civilian population of Europe should be fed’.

The Foreign Office in London professed acute dismay on receiving the minute of this meeting, but British impotence in the face of US dominance remained a towering reality. That only a relatively small number of Italians died of starvation between 1943 and 1945 was due first to the illicit diversion of vast quantities of American rations to the black market, and thereafter to the people – much to the private enrichment of some US service personnel; and second to the political influence of Italian-Americans, which belatedly persuaded Washington of the case for averting mass starvation.

The British government, in its turn, imposed extreme privation on some of the peoples of its empire, to maintain the much higher standard of nourishment it deemed appropriate at home. In 1943, allocations of shipping to Indian Ocean destinations were slashed, for good strategic reasons but at deplorable humanitarian cost. Mauritius suffered shocking hardships, as did some East African countries where white settlers made fortunes from wartime agricultural production, exploiting conscripted native labour paid derisory wages.

The 1943–44 Bengal famine, of which more will be said below, prompted a brutally callous response from Britain’s prime minister. When Wavell, then Viceroy, heard of the massive British 1945 airlift to Holland, where people had been reduced to eating tulip bulbs, he noted bitterly: ‘A

very different attitude [exists] towards feeding a starving population when the starvation is in Europe.' Greeks also suffered from the British blockade of Hitler's empire – at least half a million died of hunger. Churchill was assuredly right, that concessions to allow food imports into Greece and other occupied nations would have served the Wehrmacht. But a fundamental reality persists: the Allied powers provided for their own peoples levels of nourishment which they denied to others, including societies notionally under their protection.

3 A WOMAN'S PLACE

The mobilisation of women was a critical social phenomenon of the war, most comprehensive in the Soviet Union and Britain, though Adam Tooze has shown that Germany also used female workers more widely than formerly supposed. The Japanese social ethos precluded the elevation of women to positions of responsibility, but they played a critical role in factories, and by 1944 provided half of Japan's agricultural labour force. Pre-war Britain used women workers much less than the Soviet Union, but quickly conscripted them under the pressures of siege. Some thus found a fulfilment they had not known in peacetime: Peter Baxter's fifty-five-year-old mother worked as a clerk in the British Ministry of Supply, 'and is, I suspect, enjoying herself more than she has done for years', her son wrote. 'She has a quick brain, and it is stimulating for her to be using her wits instead of toiling through a load of housework ... I can't help thinking that, much as my mother has loved her children, she might perhaps have been happier all these years if she could have kept on with a business career as women do in Russia.'

Many girls suffered, however, when thrust into a male-dominated, shamelessly chauvinistic factory world, as was Rosemary Moonen: 'My initiation into factory life was shattering. Being a hairdresser in a high-class salon situated in a select area of the town, I was a somewhat genteel, reserved type of girl. To be plunged abruptly into a world of coarse, ill-bred men and women, where language was foul and bluer than the bluest sky, was an experience ... harsh and unreal.' The foreman to whom Moonen was first introduced tossed her a broom contemptuously, saying: 'Here! Take this! And sod around!'

I was stung to humiliation before the rest of the girls ... He returned thirty minutes later to find me sitting on a box doing nothing. Furiously

he demanded ‘What the blankety blank I thought I was doing?’ Summoning all my courage I retorted that until he had the decency to show me the job I had to do, presuming it was to help the war effort, I intended staying where I was. Somewhat taken aback he treated me to a stream of foul language, calling me some of the filthiest names imaginable. I was so angry and disgusted by this time, that I brought up my hand and slapped him hard across the cheek ... He apologised grudgingly, and took me to a machine, and demonstrated the pedals, handbrakes and rollers for me to operate ... At the end of that shift I went home and wept bitterly. How was I ever going to stand the atmosphere?

Sarah Baring was a peer’s daughter whose sole pre-war occupation had been that of a dancing debutante. Now she found herself drilling alloy sheets in an aircraft parts factory, which she hated: ‘The airless workplace, the indescribable food, the damp floors which even soaked through the wooden clogs we wore on our feet, the twit of a shop steward who hadn’t the courage of a flea ... the bullying and oppressive attitude of the manager ... I had to take the odd day off and lie in bed fighting constant fatigue.’ Baring was fortunate enough to be able to exploit her fluency in German eventually to gain a transfer to Bletchley Park.

Every nation sought to elevate and glamorise the role of women war workers, as a stimulus to recruitment. In America in 1942, Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb composed a popular ditty:

All the day long,
Whether rain or shine
She’s a part of the assembly line.
She’s making history,
Working for victory,
Rosie the Riveter.

The original of Rosie the Riveter, who became an American feminist icon, was twenty-two-year-old Rose Will Monroe from Pulaski County, Kentucky. Like millions of Americans, she relocated to war work – in her case on the Willow Run B-24 and B-29 assembly lines at Ypsilanti, Michigan. She was made the star of a propaganda movie, and in May 1943 Norman Rockwell produced a famous painting of Rosie the Riveter, published as a *Saturday Evening Post* cover, though his physical model was an Arlington, Virginia, telephonist. By 1944, twenty million American

women were working, a 57 per cent increase on the 1940 figure. The progress of black civil rights in the US, though extremely sluggish, was importantly enhanced by the recruitment into factories of African-American women, often working alongside whites. All female workers, however, remained severely disadvantaged by lower pay, earning an average \$31.50 a week against the male average of \$54.65. Many were employed in shipyards, which briefly spawned a 'Wendy the Welder' propaganda character, based on Janet Doyle of the Kaiser Richmond Liberty yard in California. Another much-publicised 'Rosie' was Shirley Karp Dick, who was paid \$6 to model for photos, of which the most famous showed her treading on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Canada followed suit by promoting 'Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl'.

It would be mistaken to romanticise the role of Rosie: the US industrial workforce remained overwhelmingly male-dominated, and the lifestyle of that early generation of working women was often wretched. A vast, squalid trailer park grew up beside Ford's Willow Run plant. Some workers commuted as much as sixty miles daily rather than endure life there. Wages were high, but there was social concern about 'eight-hour orphans' – the children of working wives simply abandoned at home through the day. A few such hapless offspring, it was discovered, were left in cars at factory parking lots. Moreover, many of the new workers took time to acquire appropriate skills. Some 'Rosies', like their male counterparts, were less than competent, a reality reflected in the structural limitations of some of the ships they built. Likewise, the intense agricultural effort on both sides of the Atlantic was sometimes blighted by ill-judged production decisions and inadequate skills. In April 1942 Muriel Green, working in a market garden in southern England, reflected glumly on the waste of much of her effort growing vegetables: 'I suppose in everything there is waste: that is what is the matter with this country. There seems so little full effort and so little result – so far.'

In Russia, the plight of both women military conscripts and civilians was vastly worse. *Pravda* correspondent Lazar Brontman recorded in his diary the desperate efforts of Moscow housewives to escape factory service. Those with children under eight were exempted until the summer of 1942, but thereafter this age limit was lowered to four. Women begged office jobs of any kind, to avoid labour in the ZIS vehicle works. Brontman recorded the droll assignment of some privileged women who became 'hooves' – avoiding more demanding duties by working in a Moscow theatre imitating the sound of galloping horses during a play about Soviet cavalry. More

than 800,000 Russian women served with Stalin's armies. For some, including ninety-two who became Heroes of the Soviet Union, the experience may have been uplifting. The female 'rabbit units' of the Red Air Force, named in self-mockery for an incident early in the war when desperately hungry girl flight trainees ate 'like rabbits' raw cabbages which they found on a station, became famous. A handful of women served as snipers at Sevastopol and Leningrad, and in 1943 large numbers of female graduates began to emerge from sniping schools. Their superior breathing control was found to promote marksmanship, and they played a useful role in the latter war years – though not, contrary to myth, at Stalingrad.

Some women, however, recoiled from the experience of battle. Nikolai Nikulin witnessed an incident on the Leningrad front, during shelling which left a sentry writhing in agony on the ground. A girl nurse sat sobbing beside him, 'tears running down her filthy face that has not seen water for many days, her hands shaking in panic'. The wounded man himself eventually pulled down his trousers and bandaged a shocking thigh wound, while seeking to calm the girl. 'Daughter, please don't be scared! Don't cry.' Nikulin observed dryly, 'War is not a place for girls.'

Many women in uniform were ruthlessly sexually exploited. Captain Pavel Kovalenko wrote one day: 'I went to visit the tank regiment. The unit commander had got drunk celebrating his new rank of lieutenant-colonel and was snoring away. I was struck by the spectacle of the prostrate figure curled up beside him – his "campaign wife", as it turned out.' 'Campaign wives' became a phenomenon of Russia's war, and only a fortunate minority gained wedding rings from the experience. 'The PPZh is our great sin,' sighed Vasily Grossman, using the Red Army's slang phrase for commanders' sexual abuse of its women. Thousands were evacuated when they became pregnant, deliberately or otherwise. Almost the only concession to their sex was that they were eventually granted a tiny extra ration of soap.

Meanwhile, women labouring in fields and factories in the absence of their menfolk suffered chronic hunger, and were often required to perform tasks beyond their physical strength. Hernias became commonplace among those who struggled daily with heavy loads, or were harnessed to the plough in lieu of dead oxen. Grossman reflected in the dark days of August 1942: 'Villages have become the kingdoms of women. They drive tractors, guard warehouses, queue for vodka. Topsy girls are out singing – they are seeing a girlfriend off to the army. Women are carrying on their shoulders the great burden of work. Women dominate. They feed and arm us now. We do the fighting. And we don't fight well. Women look and say

nothing. There's no reproach [in their eyes], not a bitter word. Are they nursing a grievance? Or do they understand what a terrible burden a war is, even an unsuccessful one?

Housewife Valentina Bekbulatov wrote to her son at the front, describing the family's desperate circumstances: 'Dear Vova! I received the money that you sent, but you didn't need to bother, it's not enough anyway to help us in our poverty, and you deprive yourself even of this meagre support. I earned only twenty-six roubles this month, so you can imagine what our situation is like – there is no chance to buy anything at the market. We are waiting for milk. Uncle Pazyuk came over recently, he brought some household stuff to exchange for flour. Aunt saw her three sons off to the army – Aleksei, Egor and Aleksandr. Aleksei has already been in a battle, Egor is in the Far East, and from Aleksandr there aren't any letters ...'

Evdokiya Kalinichenko was wounded in the leg as an army nurse, discharged and sent back to the university she had previously attended, which was evacuated to Kazakhstan. From there, she wrote to her family, painting a picture which captures a fragment of the vast collective tragedy of her people:

It sometimes seems to me that our university is a refuge for all the miserable refugeless and homeless (oh, I won't be able to post this letter!) [she feared the wrath of the censors, but posted it anyway]. Shura was at the front. Whether or not she was married there, she returned with a child. Ah, Mayusha, you can't imagine how people look at such girls, and what a hard time they have. She is a little older than I, completing her second year when the war began. She has neither friends nor acquaintances, only the university. She was allowed to start in the third year and given a place in the hostel. The baby is four months old, a girl who cries day and night. She needs dry nappies, yet Shura possesses only the clothes on her back. She needs to be washed, but the water freezes in her room. We drag home every piece of wood we can find. Yesterday, I spotted a huge board by the wall on my way home. It was a theatre advertisement, in red letters on black background: 'Othello'. [They used it for firewood.] This means that for a couple of days Shura will be able to unwrap the little girl's blankets, dry her nappies ... Dusya, my namesake, helps Shura in everything. She is also a student, although she must be nearing forty ... If it wasn't for her, the little girl would have been long dead from cold and hunger. Aunt Dusya works as a loader at the bakery, and secretly brings some flour in

her pockets. Shura makes soup from it, eats herself and feeds the little girl. People say that Dusya's own children were killed by bombs. She talks to no one, is very thin, dark, dresses like a man and smokes *makhorka* [shag tobacco].

Only a quarter of us are men, and even they are cripples. For some reason legs are the limbs most often hit – and they are cut off. Every second man here is without a leg. Most amputations are made very high. Petya (who sits next to me in lectures) has no legs at all, [only] artificial ones. He has trouble moving about. He can't get used to them, and anyway he is weak. He has a very sweet, shy face, and his eyes are very blue. His voice is soft. How could he have commanded a platoon? It becomes especially hard for Petya to move about when our bread ration arrives two or three days late. His face turns grey, cheekbones sharper, eyes bleaker ... When we get very tired cutting and collecting firewood Petya jokes a lot, trying to amuse me and the girl next to me. His stories are not particularly funny, but we laugh and laugh at them.

Damn this war ... One sees only cripples ... To my mind the most wretched is a captain, a sapper. He has no face, but instead just a terrible blue, purple and green mask. It is fortunate that he is blind, and so cannot see himself. People say that, before the war, he was a handsome man. Even now he is tall, slender, and neat. We think that if he had a child he would be born again in it, and everyone would see what he once was like. If only this damn war would end. They are killing and maiming the best. We need to be very strong, to survive it.

One of Evdokiya's fellow students was a young man named Vitya, once very handsome, now deeply embittered by the loss of a leg. She wrote that he had become hardened, 'turned to stone'. He refused to see his family, even his mother, though he wrote to them. In one such letter, Vitya described the life of their town, where he had learned to ride a bicycle: 'I push the pedals with one foot, and manage fine. The streets are empty, there are wrecked houses everywhere, empty shells. Evenings in the town park are unimaginably peaceful, there is even music. There are lots of girls, all blonde, and our officers are having a good time with them ... as if there was no war now. These young ladies are nicknamed "German shepherds" because they are indifferent to whether their men are Russian or German. I said as much to one, and she replied: "You are jealous? Someone'll turn up for you too, my poor cripple, but not as good." I threw my crutch at her.'

All the combatant nations deployed women as nurses, a role many found rewarding. Dorothy Beavers was twenty-two in 1942, daughter of an Ohio small farmer whose mother still drove a horse and buggy, with no phone at home. She worked in a little local hospital, and suggested to her father that she should join the army medical branch. Her two brothers had already gone to the service, and after some thought he said, 'Maybe you should go and take care of them.' She married an army doctor in Winchester, England, the night before sailing for France in June 1944, and landed on Utah Beach still clutching her bridal bouquet. 'The job came naturally to me,' she said. But it was a revelation to find herself treating eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who had lost not only limbs, but sometimes their buttocks or 'whole chunks of their hips'. No one could call Lt. Beavers and her kind publicity-seekers, but they all appreciated recognition back home. She was thrilled when a little paragraph about herself and a photograph appeared in the *Ohio State Journal*.

The Russians and Yugoslav partisans were the only fighting peoples to deploy women for combat functions. The British dispatched a small number of female agents to occupied territories under the orders of SOE, and women fulfilled vital administrative and support functions for Allied and Axis armed forces. They were treated with condescension by most senior officers, born into the nineteenth century. Western Allied commanders, if not their Soviet counterparts, deplored the intrusion into service relationships of sexual temptations and tensions, actual or potential. Nimitz, at Pearl Harbor, declined to accept any female on his staff. Sir Arthur Harris of Bomber Command said, 'I always believed that women in uniform should either be so beautiful that they felt no possible threat to themselves from any other woman, or so old and ugly that they were past it.'

The RAF employed some German-speaking women to monitor enemy voice-radio transmissions. Most enthusiastically embraced the role, though a few displayed genteel scruples. Air Vice-Marshal Edward Addison, commanding the RAF's electronic counter-measures group, received a protest visit from a WAAF, daughter of a pre-war bank manager in Hamburg, who recoiled from the demands of eavesdropping on Luftwaffe night-fighter conversation. She said she was embarrassed by the obscenities, common to aircrew of all nationalities, that echoed across the airwaves. Most women were more robust. Working alongside combat personnel, or in the various branches of civil defence, they adapted to both the disciplines and the horrors. RAF pilot Ken Owen dismissed

sentimental stereotypes about the relationship between crews and female ground staff at bomber stations: 'It's bloody rubbish all that stuff about the WAAFs waving us off and so on. They became as callous and phlegmatic as we were.'

For some girls, war proved as much of an adventure as it was for eager young male warriors: daily life acquired an exciting urgency. German aristocrat Eleonore von Joest said, 'I was young, I found it really interesting. I thought, "All this is life."' After von Joest, then aged nineteen, took part in the horrific 1945 mass exodus from East Prussia, her mother declared sardonically, 'My daughter even managed to have fun on the trek.' The barriers of sexual licence were dramatically extended. Many women of all nationalities felt a sentimentality, even a duty, towards fighting men on the brink of the grave. British land girl Muriel Green wrote one day in 1941 about her newly discovered passion for a French Canadian soldier: 'I am ... almost in love! Or is it in love with love? What it is to be young and foolish! It certainly is good for morale in wartime to be made love to! ... He is lonely and so am I. We are both away from home and friends ... I am not quite sure whether I promised to go back to Canada with him or not! I will be his friend anyway! I blame the war for this.' A few weeks later she described how she unwillingly allowed a Scottish soldier embarking for overseas to kiss her on their last date: 'I did not want to really ... but they were going away ... and I may be the last girl he will kiss before he goes, maybe the last girl he will ever kiss. Bless him. He is too nice to be killed.'

Green, who was twenty-two, expressed deep unhappiness early in the war, as quoted above, but exulted in pleasures she later discovered, romance notable among them. She looked back on 1944 as 'one of the happiest [years] of my life. I have had good health, good friends, good working conditions with money to spend (if there had been anything to buy) and a jolly time. The war has progressed and left many scars. I am one of the lucky devils who have no scars ... Hostel life has changed nearly all the girls here to wife-pinchers ... Eligible bachelors are so short ... We all blame the war and go on enjoying life as it comes which in this place is life with other women's husbands.'

The reverse of the coin, of course, was that men serving overseas were troubled by fears about the fidelity of their loved ones at home. S/Sgt Harold Fennema wrote from Europe to his wife in Wisconsin, 'Honey, it's pitiful the number of times you hear fellows say that their last letter mentioned someone back home who is having a baby, and her husband

has been overseas for a year or more. Unfaithfulness is probably the soldier's biggest cause for worry.' Captain Pavel Kovalenko of the Red Army wrote in similar vein in July 1943: 'The war has shaken all family values. Everything has gone to the dogs. Everyone lives for today. One needs a lot of strength and endurance to resist human temptations, to remain unstained. I have to resist, the honour of one's marriage is sacred.'

Few husbands were as strong-minded as Kovalenko, amid the sexual opportunities of war, and the strains of long absences from home. As for wives and daughters, those in occupied countries who succumbed sexually to their invaders, whether voluntarily or under duress, almost invariably experienced social ostracism in their communities if they survived until the liberation. If some women enjoyed new freedoms, responsibilities and rewards, many more suffered grievously and were exploited mercilessly. The pregnant wife of an Italian in hiding described the misery of her daily existence in 1943: 'I would sometimes queue from seven in the morning to three in the afternoon ... I had to take my two small children with me. I found a place selling "*sanguinaccio*" [blood sausage], which I found disgusting but my little girl ate. I had boils on my legs which I was told were caused by lack of vitamins. My husband was desperate for cigarettes and I found a tobacconist who supplied me. When I got home exhausted, all my husband wanted to do was make love. He would jump on me while I still held the shopping bag. When I refused, he accused me of having a lover.' Some young warriors discovered compensations in conflict – adventure and a test of manhood – denied to most women, who recognised only its miseries and horrors. If the war dramatically expanded women's opportunities and responsibilities in some societies, it also intensified their exploitation, above all sexual, in a world arbitrated by force.