

HIS389Y0: Britain at War, 1914-1945

Prof. Timothy Andrews Sayle

Course Description:

How did Great Britain make war, and how did war make Great Britain?

This course offers an immersive exploration into Britain's wartime history during the First and Second World Wars.

We will study the war through three overlapping frameworks: 1) the British role in these international conflicts, drawing especially on historiographical debates that problematize and question particular strategic decisions; 2) the experience of war both for combatants and for civilian adults and children in the United Kingdom, including the broader social and political change engendered by the war; and 3) the relationship between war and empire, including movement towards decolonization and independence.

In addition to classroom discussion, readings, and written assignments, you will engage with history firsthand through field trips that allow us to see and feel parts of the war's history, and to reconsider and challenge popular myths of the war.

Field Trip Sites:

1. Imperial War Museum (London) and HMS *Belfast*.
2. Bletchley Park, *home of the Second World War codebreakers* and the Imperial War Museum (Duxford), *an airbase from the Battle of Britain*.
3. Imperial War Museum North (Manchester) and the Western Approaches Museum (Liverpool).
4. Cabinet War Rooms (London) and The Mall *and adjacent areas, including the Cenotaph, the RAF Bomber Command Memorial, and other monuments to the First and Second World War*.
5. Various sites in Oxford.

Week 1

Monday

- Classroom Topic: Britain and War before 1914

Tuesday

- Field Trip to the Imperial War Museum (London) and HMS Belfast

Wednesday

- Classroom Topic: Fighting the First World War

Thursday

- Classroom Topic: The Empire at War

Week 2

Monday

- Classroom Topic: Remembering the First World War (Site visit: Commemoration in Oxford – monuments)

Tuesday

- Field Trip to Bletchley Park and Imperial War Museum (Duxford)

Wednesday

- Classroom Topic: In Between the Wars

Thursday

- Classroom Topic: Appeasement (Site visit: Oxford Union debate location)

Week 3

Monday

- Classroom Topic: Fighting “Alone”? (Battle of Britain, Empire, etc.)

Tuesday

- Field Trip to Imperial War Museum North (Manchester)

Wednesday

- Field Trip to the Western Approaches Museum (Liverpool)

Thursday

- Classroom Topic: Fighting as a Member of the Grand Alliance

Week 4

Monday

- Classroom Topic: The “Home Front”

Tuesday

- Field Trip to the Cabinet War Rooms and a walking tour of The Mall and surrounding areas

Wednesday

- Classroom Topic: Victory and Memory (Site visit: Commemoration in Oxford – monuments)

Thursday

- Final Reflection (in-class assignment).

Assignments:

20% Participation.

- This is a discussion-based class, and I will ask you for your thoughts and assessments of the assigned readings.
- Attendance in class is mandatory, but attendance does not constitute participation. Participation includes active and accurate discussion, as well as other tasks from time to time. This might include presenting information individually or as part of a group.

15% Response Paper (Take-Home)

- Note: Future response papers will be hand-written in the classroom, during class time. This is the only course assessment completed outside of class time.
- This Response Paper is similar to the In-Class paper, but here you have more freedom as to how and when you complete it, and you will submit it electronically using Quercus.
- On the first Thursday of class (August 7), I will provide you with a list of questions related to various aspects of our course to date. My goal is to provide you with a range of options. You will select and answer one question, and submit your answer to me by the start of class on Monday morning (August 11).
- It should take you about 1-hour to prepare your answer. For that reason, there should be no extensions required.
- This is a paper, and so your response should include an introduction (with an argument), body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Aim for approximately 500 words. The hard limit on this assignment is 1,000 words.
- We will discuss this assignment in detail, especially as it is designed to help set your expectations and understanding for what is required for the Response Papers (In-Class) in Week 2 and Week 3.

5% Short Description and Presentation

- On Monday, August 7, you will be assigned a soldier. During class-time, you will research more about that soldier, and prepare a short summary of their life (and death). Your short summary will inform your very short presentation to the class about that soldier, and you will submit the summary to me afterward.
- This assignment is graded on a complete/incomplete basis.

30% (15% x 2) Response Paper (In-Class)

- On the Thursdays of our second and third week (August 14 and 21) I will provide you with a list of questions, including options to reflect on an aspect of the history we have read about or to write about one of our field trips. You will choose one of these questions to answer. The last hour of both Thursdays will be set aside for you to write an in-class response to the question you select. Paper will be provided, but please bring pens or pencils.
- This is a paper, and so your response should include an introduction, with an argument, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- There is no word count.

30% Final Reflection Paper.

- The Final Reflection is like a double Response Paper (In-Class). You will have two (2) hours to complete the assignment in the class room. Preparation for this reflection paper will be accomplished by your course reading and your participation and attendance in class. Paper will be provided, but please bring pens or pencils.

Late Penalty:

Almost all course work is completed in class time, and so there is no need for a late policy for those assignments.

For the Response Paper (Take-Home), the paper must be uploaded by the start of class on Monday, July 11. I urge you to submit your assignment before Monday (but I leave the early Monday morning open to you, just in case). Once class begins, papers will no longer be accepted.

Learning Goals:

By the end of the course, students should:

- Have a deep knowledge of the assigned scholarship on Britain at War, and able to communicate that knowledge orally and in writing
- Present historical information to their peers and instructor in a short presentation
- Be able to offer oral and written reflections on the meaning of the war for the British state, empire, and people
- Be able to offer oral and written reflections on how the First and Second World War have been commemorated (or not) in Britain

Plagiarism (This language provided by Faculty of Arts & Sciences):

“Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University’s plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool’s reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).”

ChatGPT and Generative AI (Adapted from language provided by Faculty of Arts & Sciences):

Generative AI is not required to complete any aspect of this course. The work you submit for this assignment must be your own, and may not include any content from generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

Reading List:

Week 1

Monday: Britain and War before 1914

Period 1: Introduction

- *No assigned reading.*

Period 2: Ideas of War and Strategic Thought

- Kennedy, Paul M. “The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy 1865–1939.” *British Journal of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (October 1976): 195–215. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500116699>.

Period 3: The July Crisis and the Outbreak of War

- Wilson, K. M. “The British Cabinet’s Decision for War, 2 August 1914.” *British Journal of International Studies* 1, no. 2 (July 1975): 148–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500116481>.
- Mombauer, Annika. “Sir Edward Grey, Germany, and the Outbreak of the First World War: A Re-Evaluation.” *The International History Review* 38, no. 2 (March 14, 2016): 301–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2015.1134622>.

Tuesday: Field Trip – Imperial War Museum (London) and HMS Belfast

Pre-Trip Reading

- Kavanagh, Gaynor. “Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no. 1 (January 1988): 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948802300105>.
- Malvern, Sue. “War, Memory and Museums: Art and Artefact in the Imperial War Museum.” *History Workshop Journal* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 177–203. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/2000.49.177>.

Wednesday: Fighting the First World War

Period 1: Britain's Decision to Enter the War

- Ferguson, Niall. *The Pity of War*. London: Allen Lane, 1998. pp. 56–81.
- “Was WWI the Error of Modern History?” TVO interview with Niall Ferguson (2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYlrcxFP6Fo>.

Period 2: Combat Experience and Battlefield Narrative

- Keegan, John. “The Somme.” In *The Face of Battle*, 183–284. London: Jonathan Cape, 1976.

Period 3: Trench Social Dynamics

- Foyle, Peter. “‘Kitchener’s Mob’, Myth and Reality in Raising the New Army, 1914–1915.” In *Redcoats to Tommies: The Experience of the British Soldier from the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Kevin Linch and Matthew Lord. Martlesham: The Boydell Press, 2021.
- Manning, Frederic. *Her Privates, We, by Private 19022*, n.d. [PDF available.]

Thursday: The Empire at War

Period 1: Strategic Importance of Empire

- Darwin, John. *The Empire Project*, pp. 321–374.

Period 2: Imperial Forces and Fighting Outside Europe

- Jack, George Morton. “The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914–1915: A Portrait of Collaboration.” *War in History* 13, no. 3 (July 2006): 329–62. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0968344506wh344oa>.

- Martin, Gregory. “The Influence of Racial Attitudes on British Policy towards India during the First World War.” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14, no. 2 (January 1986): 91–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086538608582713>.

Period 3: War and Imperial Politics

- Frenz, Margret. “Of Expectations and Aspirations: South Asian Perspectives on World War I, the World, and the Subcontinent, 1918–2018.” In *Writing the Great War: The Historiography of World War I from 1918 to the Present*, edited by Christoph Cornelissen and Arndt Weinrich. Berghahn Books, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.17381516.8>.

Week 2

Monday: Remembering the First World War

Period 1: Discussion of Commemoration

- Imperial War Museums. “Why We Wear Poppies On Remembrance Day.” Accessed June 17, 2025. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/why-we-wear-poppies-on-remembrance-day>
- Gregory, Adrian. *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946*. Chapter: “Lest We Forget: The Invention and Reception of Armistice Day.”

Period 2: Worcester War Dead

- Prepare for student presentations on individuals named on the Worcester College War Memorial.

Period 3: Site Visit – Commemoration in Oxford

Visits to:

1. Worcester College War Memorial
2. Oxford City War Memorial (St Giles’)
3. Christ Church War Memorial Garden

Tuesday: Field Trip – Bletchley Park and Imperial War Museum Duxford

Pre-Trip Reading: Bletchley Park

- Hinsley, F. H., and Alan Stripp, eds. *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
 - Stripp, “Enigma,” 83–88
 - Payne, “Bombes,” 132–138

Pre-Trip Reading: RAF Duxford

- Hillary, Richard. *The Last Enemy*. London: Macmillan, 1942. Excerpts. [Full PDF available.]

Wednesday: In Between the Wars

Period 1: 1920s Defence and Foreign Policy

- Ferris, John. “Treasury Control, the Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919–1924.” *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 4 (December 1987): 859–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00022354>

Period 2: Cultural and Political Response to WWI

- Ceadel, Martin. “The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934–5.” *The English Historical Review* XCV, no. CCCLXXVII (1980): 810–39.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/XCV.CCCLXXVII.810>

Period 3: 1930s Rearmament and Rising Threats

- Wark, W.K. “British Military and Economic Intelligence: Assessments of Nazi Germany Before the Second World War.” In *The Missing Dimension*, edited by C. Andrew and D. Dilks. London: Palgrave, 1984. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-07234-7_5

Thursday: Appeasement

Period 1: Context and Strategic Constraints

- Punch Archive. Search “appeasement” at <https://punch.photoshelter.com/gallery-list>
- Kennedy, Paul M. “‘Appeasement’ and British Defence Policy in the Inter-War Years.” *British Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 2 (July 1978): 161–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500117176>

Period 2: Historiographical Debate and Case Study

- Cato. *Guilty Men*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1940. [Full PDF available.]
- Aster, Sidney. “Appeasement: Before and After Revisionism.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19, no. 3 (September 17, 2008): 443–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290802344962>
- Martel, Gordon. “The Revisionist as Moralist: A. J. P. Taylor and the Lessons of European History.” In *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered: A. J. P. Taylor and the Historians*, 14–25. London: Routledge, 1999.
<https://books.scholarsportal.info/uri/ebooks/ebooks2/taylorandfrancis/2013-03-10/1/9780203010242>

Week 3

Monday: Fighting “Alone”?

Period 1: Chamberlain and the Phoney War

- Imperial War Museum. “Britain’s ‘Phoney’ Start to the Second World War.”
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/britains-phoney-start-to-the-second-world-war>
- Summerfield, Penny. “Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War, 1940–58.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 4 (October 2010): 788–811.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009410375260>

Period 2: Churchill and the Possibility of Negotiation

- Churchill, Winston. “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech (4 June 1940).
<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/>
- Lukacs, John. *Five Days in London: May 1940*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
Chapters 1, “The Hinge of Fate,” and 7, “Survival.”

Period 3: The Blitz

- Clapson, Mark. “Air Raids in Britain, 1940–45.” In *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911*, 123–41. University of Westminster Press, 2020.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvggx2r2.9>.

Tuesday: Field Trip – Imperial War Museum North (Manchester)

- *No assigned reading, but see below.*

Wednesday: Field Trip – Western Approaches Museum (Liverpool)

Pre-Trip Reading: Battle of the Atlantic Overview

- Imperial War Museum. “The Battle of the Atlantic Explained.”
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-battle-of-the-atlantic-explained>
- Imperial War Museum. “What You Need to Know About the Battle of the Atlantic.”
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-battle-of-the-atlantic>

Thursday: Fighting as a Member of the Grand Alliance

Period 1: Anglo-American Ties and Argentinia Conference

- Costigliola, Frank. *Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. Chapter 3.

Period 2: Strategic Agreement and Divergence

- Sainsbury, Keith. “‘Second Front in 1942’—A Strategic Controversy Revisited.” *British Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 1978): 47–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500114512>
- Kimball, Warren. “The Bomb and the Special Relationship.” *Finest Hour* no. 137 (2007). <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-137/the-bomb-and-the-special-relationship/>

Period 3: Allied Relations of Another Kind

- Rose, Sonya O. “The ‘Sex Question’ in Anglo-American Relations in the Second World War.” *The International History Review* 20, no. 4 (December 1998): 884–903.
- Veterans Affairs Canada. “Canadian War Brides.”
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/en/remembrance/history/second-world-war/canadian-war-brides>

Week 4

Monday: The Home Front

Period 1: Evacuation and the Children’s War

- Freud, Anna, and Dorothy T. Burlingham. *War and Children*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943. [Full PDF available.]
- Cook, Philip H. “Evacuation Problems in Britain.” *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* (1903–) 44 (April 3, 1941): 343. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3624901>
- Ellmann, Maud. “‘Vaccies Go Home!’: Evacuation, Psychoanalysis and Fiction in World War II Britain.” *Oxford Literary Review* 38, no. 2 (December 2016): 240–61.
<https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.2016.0194>

Period 2: Women and War Work

- Harris, Jose. “War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War.” *Contemporary European History* 1, no. 1 (March 1992): 17–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077730000504X>
- Smith, Harold L. “The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War.” *The Historical Journal* 27, no. 4 (December 1984): 925–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00018161>
- Ministry of Labour Poster, “Women of Britain – Come into the Factories” (1941).
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/38928>
- Search for “poster” and “women” at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections>

Period 3: Blitz, Civil Defence, Morale

- Jennings, Humphrey. *London Can Take It!* (1940).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLgfSDtHFt8>
- Clapson, Mark. “Air Raids in Britain, 1940–45.” In *The Blitz Companion*, 123–41. University of Westminster Press, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvggx2r2.9>
- Postgate, J. R. “The Psychology of Fear and Courage. By Edward Glover. 128 Pp. Penguin Special. 6d. No Index.” *Tribune*. London Publications Ltd, October 1940. [PDF available.]
- Overy, Richard. “Why the Cruel Myth of the ‘blitz Spirit’ Is No Model for How to Fight Coronavirus.” *The Guardian*, March 19, 2020.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/19/myth-blitz-spirit-model-coronavirus>

Tuesday: Field Trip – Cabinet War Rooms and The Mall

Pre-Trip Reading: Churchill’s Leadership and Public Memory

- Taylor, James. “How Churchill Led Britain to Victory.” *Imperial War Museums* (2020).
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-churchill-led-britain-to-victory-in-the-second-world-war>
- Lelyveld, Joseph. Review of *Did Churchill Let Them Starve?*, by Madhusree Mukerjee. *The New York Review of Books*, December 23, 2010.
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/12/23/did-churchill-let-them-starve/>

- Lelyveld, Joseph, Madhusree Mukerjee, and Brian Chatterton. “The Bengal Famine.” *The New York Review of Books*, February 24, 2011.
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/02/24/bengal-famine/>

Wednesday: Victory and Memory

Period 1: The Britain War Made

- Hennessy, Peter. *Never Again*, pp. 56–86
- National Archives Blog. “The Beveridge Report: Foundations of the Welfare State.”
<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/beveridge-report-foundations-welfare-state/>

Period 2: Postwar Crisis and India/Decolonization

- Darwin, John. *The Empire Project*, pp. 514–540.
- Wheatcroft, Geoffrey. “Little Britain.” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2008.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/books/review/Wheatcroft-t.html>

Period 3: Contemporary Remembrance and Monuments

- Edgerton, David. “How the Myth of ‘Britain Alone’ Overshadows VE Day.” *New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2020/05/ve-day-britain-second-world-war-victory-solo-island-uk>
- NPR. “Statue Of Winston Churchill Is Covered Up In London.”
<https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/12/875731303/statue-of-winston-churchill-covered-up-in-london>

Thursday: Final Reflection

- *No assigned reading.*