Northern Ireland WAR MEMORIAL Museum

VE Day Resource

Every year, on 8th May, we commemorate the end of the Second World War in Europe, otherwise known as "Victory in Europe Day", or "VE Day". In this resource, created by the Northern Ireland War Memorial Museum, you will learn what the end of the war meant for the people of Northern Ireland and how they celebrated VE Day.

Newspaper Article
Belfast Telegraph

MAY 1945

The Battle of Berlin was the last major battle in Europe during the Second World War. It resulted in the end of Adolf Hitler's rule and the surrender of the German army in late April and early May 1945. A BBC announcement on 7th May, 1945 alerted people to the fact that the Germans had signed an armistice to end the conflict, and that it would take effect on the next day, Tuesday 8th May. For the next two days, schools would close and workers would be given paid leave to allow them to mark the occasion and enjoy the festivities.

These two days would not just be a celebration, however, but also an opportunity to remember how the country had contributed to the war and the hardship endured.

What did VE Day mean to everyone?

Throughout the war, shipyards in Belfast had built and repaired many ships, while factories all over Northern Ireland had produced tanks, aircraft, parachutes, ropes, munitions, and uniforms. Across the country, people had been "Digging for Victory" on gardens, parks and farms, just as the

Belfast Telegraph

government had requested. Even the Queen's University Quad in Belfast was converted into a fruit and vegetable patch!

Everyone had accepted rationing and the new rules it brought, learning many new recipes to make sure they could put enough food on the table. They had made do without their favourite fruit such as bananas and oranges, and became used to eating alternatives to fresh products, such as tins of pure

QUB Quad was used to grow fruit and vegetables. Queen's University Belfast

dried eggs. Many children were evacuated, and they had adjusted to a new life, a new school and all the strange smells of the countryside.

Tin of Pure Dried Eggs NIWM collection

The streets had been in darkness every evening since 1st September, 1939 when the blackout began to help protect Northern Ireland from air raids. Sadly, this was not very effective. People living in Belfast had suffered greatly when four air raids were carried out in April and May 1941, which became known as the "Blitz". On one occasion, Bangor, Derry/Londonderry and Newtownards were also targeted. These four raids resulted in the death of almost 1,000 people in total. Over half of the houses in Belfast, around 56,000, were damaged or destroyed, and an estimated 220,000 people had left the city by May 1941.

Many people from Northern Ireland volunteered to serve in the Navy, Army and Air Force and sadly, some never returned. On VE Day some people attended church services to remember those who had died on duty and in the air raids of 1941. The end of the war brought so much relief and while there was some sadness, people had a lot to celebrate.

High Street, Belfast city centre, after an air raid in May 1941. Belfast Telegraph

How was VE Day celebrated?

Plans were put in place across Northern Ireland to mark the
end of the war in Europe. It had been expected for some time,
so across Northern Ireland, people began getting ready to
celebrate by making decorations and saving food rations for
street parties. Blackout restrictions were gradually lifted, so
everyone was overjoyed to see the streets lit up brightly again.
There was no longer the threat of an invasion or an air raid
and no need to carry a gas mask anymore. Evacuated
children could return from the countryside as well as
servicemen and women from overseas.


Victory Newspaper article
Northern Whig

Children's fancy dress party in east Belfast
Belfast Telegraph

Dancing around a bonfire in north Belfast
Belfast Telegraph

On *VE Day* 1945, houses were decorated with homemade bunting and
paper chains, and tables were arranged in the shape of the letter "V",
for "Victory". Celebrations broke out everywhere as men, women and
children rejoiced. A newspaper reporter watching the celebrations
reported that Belfast became 'a city without strangers', with people
who had never met hugging and dancing together. The streets filled
with crowds singing. We interviewed a woman named Margaret, who
remembered people making rings by holding hands and dancing in and
out of the circles they had made together.

DID YOU KNOW?
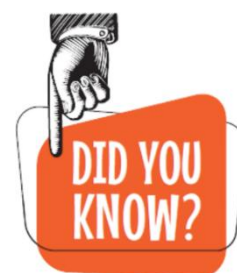
**From VE Day, people were
once again able to read
weather forecasts. Weather
reports were kept secret
during the war, in case
enemy bombers took
advantage of good conditions
and carried out an air raid**

Elsewhere, street parties, bonfires and competitions took place during the celebrations around the country. We interviewed a man named Jim who won a lambeg drumming contest in Lisburn, and also remembered the end of the First World War, despite only being aged 4. Another man named Robin remembered sitting in the back of a jeep playing a trumpet as the jeep was driven around Belfast City Hall again and again as people cheered. Those who did not have instruments clattered bin lids on the ground!

Sailor with crowds of people playing musical instruments. Belfast Telegraph

Elizabeth with 'V's on her hat, dress and bicycle. NIWM collection

Elizabeth (above) told us that she wore a hat which her mother had sewn buttons onto. The buttons represented the Morse code for "V". She also told us: "I had little "V"s stuck on the bicycle, so when the wheels went around the "V" went around as well!"

Crowds gathered outside Belfast City Hall on VE Day 1945. Belfast Telegraph

In Belfast, a crowd of thousands gathered around the City Hall, eagerly awaiting a big announcement. In our museum, we are incredibly lucky to have a scrapbook in our collection that was kept by Betty Porter. She was 22 years old in 1945 and worked in City Hall as a bookkeeper. On VE Day, she was able to get a great view of the celebration from inside the City Hall looking out. In her scrapbook she collected photographs and she wrote that "the world had gone mad with joy!"

At 3pm, on 8th May, an address from the Prime Minister Winston Churchill played through loudspeakers, announcing the end of the war in Europe. VE Day was not just a celebration, as Churchill would remind everyone, but a time to remember the sacrifices made as well as the fact that the war with Japan was still to be won.

For now, however, the next two days would be public holidays, allowing everyone to celebrate peace in Europe. As the announcement ended, factories' and ships' horns sounded, and church bells rang out. That Sunday, a Victory parade took place in Belfast and was attended by servicemen and women of all forces. Flags of all the Allied nations were displayed and many thousands of spectators attended.

The war with Japan continued for three more months and when Japan surrendered, there was another celebration, "Victory over Japan Day", or "VJ Day", on 15th August, 1945. In Northern Ireland, rationing continued for nine years as there were still food shortages. Now was the time for people to start rebuilding their homes and their lives once again.

DID YOU KNOW?

Church bells were not allowed to ring during the war until 1943. Before then, they would only ring out to signal an enemy invasion, which luckily never happened!
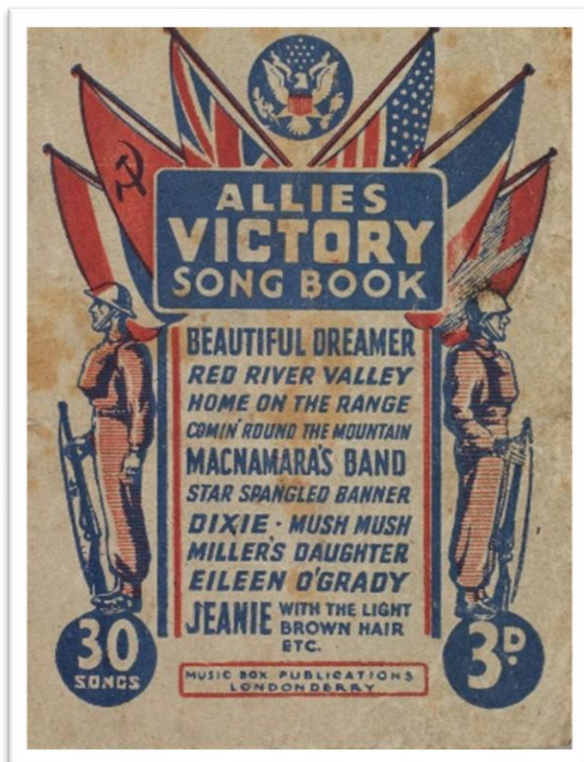
Allies Victory Songbook. NIWM Collection

*Victory parade in Belfast on the 13 May 1945.
Belfast Telegraph*