# ‘We will meet again’: Mobilising prosthetic memories of the Second World War During the UK COVID-19 Lockdown.

# Introduction

Throughout the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, from March 23rd 2020 until restrictions began to be eased in early July, references to the Second World War were employed by the British government and media. These references served to generate a prosthetic moral equivalence and continuity with the War and an idealised British subject remembered to have lived through it. This subject is imagined to have been stoic, civic-minded, resilient, broadly supportive of the British government, compliant with its restrictions and confident in its moral positioning. Not only has this construction of Britishness received validation through its circulation during the pandemic, but it has also been projected into the future as an enduring and eternal model of Britishness that is simultaneously suggested to be rooted in history and a-historic in its essentialism and eternalisation. However, the version of the Second World War from which this model is extrapolated is one that exists only in the imaginary of British culture and institutions.

Schudson suggests that memory is often located in institutions rather than individuals and that it is through these institutions that ‘people in the present recognise a debt to the past […] or through which they express moral continuity with the past’ (Schudson 1992: 51). This chapter will examine the ways in which institutions such as the British media, monarchy and primarily the British government have sought to establish such continuity via the mobilisation of prosthetic memories (Landsberg 1995; 2003; 2006) of the Second World War. The occurrence of the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE Day 75) during the UK lockdown lent credibility to this continuity and recirculated discourses of Britain’s fortitude and eventual victory in the Second World War. The similarities between the ideological and participatory frameworks of VE Day 75 celebrations and the weekly Clap for Carers demonstrate the ways in which both were employed as a site of transmission for an “official” narrative regarding the pandemic and the construction of an idealised British subject that is rooted in conservative imaginings of the Second World War. The narrow ideological parameters of this construction are, however, exclusionary, and simultaneously constitutive of a non-British subject. However, this chapter argues that these processes of commemoration also involve implicit practices of forgetting that exclude divergent minority voices and experiences. A growing resistance to these practices and the enduring structures of systemic racism and inequality that they perpetuate has become particularly evident during the pandemic. This is observable not only in public resistance to the co-optation of Clap for Carers by the government but also in the widespread UK Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that have cast light on the erasure of British colonial and imperial violence in modern discourses of Britishness.

# VE Day 75 - a brief period of rejoicing

On 8th May 2020, almost two months into the national COVID-19 lockdown, the United Kingdom commemorated the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE Day). Before lockdown began, the day had been designated as a Bank Holiday by the British government and licensing hours were extended to enable as many organisations, industries, communities and individuals to participate in celebrations as possible. Those participating in VE Day celebrations were encouraged to ‘pay […] tribute to those millions at home and abroad who gave so much to ensure we all enjoy the freedom we share today’ ([veday75.org](http://veday75.org) 2020). The official programme of events, compiled by Pageantmaster Bruno Peek, were intended to run alongside local events and celebrations. The programme was as follows:

2.55pm - *The Last Post* is played by buglers at the summit of the four highest peaks of the UK as well as at Land’s End Cornwall; Lowestoft, Sussex; St David’s, Pembrokeshire, Wales; the Scottish island of Unst, and Enniskillen Castle, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, and the Tan Hill Inn, Richmond, North Yorkshire.

3.00pm - The hour at which Churchill addressed Parliament on VE Day 1945, Pipers on the four peaks, at other locations across the country and around the world play *Battle’s O’er* (unknown n.d)and newly composed tune *VE 75 Years* (Bayes 2020).

Coinciding with the playing of *Battle’s O’er*, thousands of pubs across the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man will ask their customers to take part in The Nation’s Toast to the Heroes of World War Two.

6.55pm (local time) - Town criers and other people across the globe will undertake an international Cry for Peace, the text of which is available to download from the official website for VE Day 75 celebrations.

(information taken from veday75.org 2020).

Local communities were encouraged to participate remotely in these activities and to hold street parties and gatherings. The emphasis on recreation and reenactment is clear in this programme and invites participants to imagine a convergence of past and present centred around 3pm, the hour of Churchills original speech in parliament. The Nation’s Toast also offers an opportunity for individuals to participate in a devolved and collective act of Remembrance.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdown resulted in the cancelation of the majority of the celebrations planned in local communities and a scaling back of officially planned events. Via an announcement on the VE Day 75 website, Peek expressed his own disappointment at the cancelations and encouraged:

the people of our great country and abroad to stand at 3pm within the safety of their living rooms, front or back gardens, outside their front doors or balconies […] and undertake the Nations Toast to the Heroes of WW II, using the following words. “TO THOSE WHO GAVE SO MUCH, WE THANK YOU,” using this unique opportunity to pay tribute to the many millions at home and abroad that gave so much ([veday75.org](http://veday75.org) 2020).

The emphasis on the hour of 3 o clock is retained here, as is the exhortation for remote participation in a national act of collective commemoration.

English Heritage, a charitable organisation that manages more than 400 monuments, buildings and sites of historical significance, also encouraged people to celebrate VE Day at home and offered a downloadable VE Day pack that included: lyrics to songs *The Lambeth Walk* (Noel Gay 1937)and *(There’ll Be Bluebirds Over) The White Cliffs of Dover* (Walter Kent 1941) that were popular in the 1940s as well as a Spotify playlist of other contemporary songs; instructions on how to dance the ‘Lindy Hop’ a swing dance that gained popularity in the UK in the 1940s; recipes for 1940s snacks and drinks such as ginger beer and carrot scones ([English Heritage](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/ve-day/) 2020). The downloadable pack offered a framework for people to recreate “authentic” wartime activities, foods and music and thereby participate in a kind of active nostalgia, or what Landsberg terms an ‘experiential event’ (2006: 288). Such events:

offer strategies for making history into personal memories. They provide individuals with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they either did or did not experience (Landsberg 2006: p288).

These experiential relationships, Landsberg suggests, have the potential to forge connections between past and present that are based on a kind of artificial empathy (2003:146). Such events and activities:

bridg[e] the temporal chasms that separate individuals from the meaningful and potentially interpolative events of the past. It has become possible to have an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live (Lamdsberg 2003: 148).

VE Day, as it has traditionally been constructed and celebrated by British culture, is a prime example of this type of event. VE Day constructs and memorialises the Second World War as a successful and triumphal national endeavour. It also re-articulates the relationship and connections between present and past generations. However, this discourse is somewhat closed off to British citizens who do not have British ancestry, or whose families arrived after the Second World War such as the Windrush Generation.[[1]](#footnote-1) The evolving politics of Remembrance in the UK has introduced a normative dynamic to events such as VE Day and Remembrance Day, in which non-participation is figured as un-British.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The specific circumstances of VE Day 75 and the need to adapt and respond to what has been configured as an enemy and existential threat to the nation, namely COVID-19, adds another dimension to this experiential relationship and the empathy that it creates with the past. The circumstances in which VE Day celebrations were forced to take place align with popular perceptions of one of its main objects of celebration: the stoicism and resilience of the British home front during the Second World War. Wartime slogans such as ‘Make do and Mend’ as well as the more apocryphal ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ have been adopted into the British cultural vocabulary as emblems of the qualities and characteristics that are represented as inherently British and which are perceived to have allowed life to continue on the home front despite the privations and dangers of war.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite the restrictions of the national lockdown, the British public was encouraged to make do and carry on with an alternative form of VE Day celebrations. In this way, VE Day 75, in both its cultural symbolism and the practical considerations involved in facilitating its celebration, became an imaginative terrain in which the memory of the Second World War and the contemporary imagination of COVID-19 bled into one another.

The conflation of the anniversary of Victory in Europe and the UK lockdown, this chapter suggests, mirrors what Silverman (2003) proposes as a model of palimpsestic memory in which different spatio-temoral traces are condensed on top of one another. This is can be read in two key ways. Firstly, the foremost image of the Second World War that was made available to the British public was of its conclusion and of Britain’s ultimate victory. Secondly, the forced cancellation of local and national celebrations in the interest of a general public good offered easy discursive parallels with the resilience, civic-mindedness and ‘Blitz Spirit’ that characterise popular imaginings of the Second World War. Indeed, at 3pm on 8th May, the hour that Winston Churchill addressed the nation on VE Day 1945, an excerpt of his speech was broadcast on BBC One: ‘we may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, but let us not forget for a moment the toil and efforts that lie ahead’ (*BBC News* 2020). The original context of the remarks was the immediate post-war need for reconstruction across Europe, but the words and their sentiment are easily mapped on to the present moment; VE Day celebrations, although they may be curtailed, provided a moment of celebration in the midst of the pandemic. The implied equivalence of these two moments establishes a moral continuity between past and present and offers reassurance that, as a nation, the UK is uniquely equipped to respond to and triumph over moments of crisis and hardship. More importantly, the model of British citizenship and subjectivity that is conjured by these allusions, is one that, as well as being stoic, resilient and civic-minded, is supportive of a version of the British state that erases the colonial violence and eugenicist history of the British State.

Churchill’s persona, speeches and the narrative of his leadership during the Second World War are familiar to the vast majority of the British public thanks to their recirculation in the media and their commodification in what Watson describes as Britain’s Remembrance industry (2014). Recent films that are set during the Second World War such as *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan 2017), which dramatises the evacuation of British soldiers from Dunkirk in 1940, and *Darkest Hour* (Joe Wright 2017), which depicts Churchill’s first days as Prime Minister of Great Britain and his refusal to seek a peace treaty with Hitler, have re-articulated narratives of the war that show hardship and potential disaster staved off by British ingenuity, character and leadership. However, the fact that the majority of those participating in VE Day celebrations and of the audience for films such as *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* were not alive during the Second World War means that the version of the war that they “recall" and with which they have been invited to interact during the pandemic is one that exists only in their individual imaginations and in the British cultural imagination more generally.

Landsberg’s notion of prosthesis is an important one here. She argues that:

whether […] memories come from lived experience or whether they are prosthetic seems to make very little difference. Either way we use them to construct narratives for ourselves and visions for our future’ (1995: 186).

In medical terms, prosthetics are objects that are inherently artificial but which facilitate, restore or imitate natural function. If this is applicable to the way in which images of the Second World War have been mobilised during the UK COVID-19 lockdown, it suggests that these memories and the visions of our future that they conjure have, or are perceived to have, an important role in the continued functioning of our nation. It also foregrounds their artifice.

In a column for the *Telegraph* that was published on 14th March 2020, Health Secretary Matt Hancock compared the ‘test’ faced by ‘our generation’ in the current moment to that faced by ‘our grandparents’ during the Second World War:

when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic effort (Hancock 2020).

The use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ and the position Hancock occupies as a government minister suggest that he is speaking on behalf of the nation to a familiar collective experience. However, in 2018 government statistics show that 50% of first-time grandparents were born in 1955, ten years after the end of the Second World War (Office for National Statistics 2019). Hancock’s statements belie the temporal distance between the Second World War and the lived experiences of the majority of UK citizens, making it seem far closer than in fact it is. The shared experience to which he refers and the memory of the Second World War that he invokes are largely imaginary and yet is one that has achieved enduring centrality (Popular Memory Group 2011: 255). As the Popular Memory Group note, the reasons that certain representations of the past endure whilst others are marginalised and silenced have little to do with truth, but rather, ‘dominant representations may be those that are most ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth’ (2011: 255). In terms of COVID-19 and the Second World War, these are those that confirm the stoicism, reliance and eventual triumph of the British nation and which confirm these intergenerational “memories.”

The equivalence created between the cancellation of VE Day celebrations and the privations and restrictions of the war itself also works to erase the temporal distance between the war and the present day. At the same time, it suggested a model for future memorialisation of the current moment. It suggests a vision for our future in which we have overcome COVID-19 and in which traditional constructions of Britishness are not only intact but are remembered as vital to that victory. The discursive equivalence generated by instances such as Boris Johnson’s referral to his government as a ‘wartime government’ and the steps taken to contain the virus as ‘unprecedented since World War Two’ (Johnson 2020) suggest that this moment will be remembered in the same way as its historical referent.

This idea of future memorialisation or memory-in-the-making is also apparent in Queen Elizabeth’s address to the nation, made on April 5th 2020, less than two weeks into the UK lockdown. The address constructs a temporal equivalence between the current COVID-19 pandemic and the Second World War as both are figured as ruptures, as times ‘of disruption in the life of our country’ (Queen Elizabeth II 2020). This equivalence establishes both the current moment and the Second World War as moments apart or, to use Thomson’s terminology, as moments of trial (2006:58), in which core British characteristics are made apparent. Recalling her first broadcast to the nation, which she made in 1940 when she was 14 years old and which was addressed to child evacuees, Queen Elizabeth discussed the harshness of lockdown restrictions:

today, once again, many will feel a painful sense of separation from their loved ones, but now, as then, we know deep down that it is the right thing to do (Queen Elizabeth II: 2020).

The use of the pronoun ‘we’ discursively affiliates the audiences of both speeches so that no distinction is made between the two despite the 80 year interval. Elements of Silverman’s model of palimpsestic memory are at work in Queen Elizabeth’s address, in which one moment of history (the evacuation of children in 1940) is transposed onto another (the UK lockdown). The desired equivalence is particularly apparent in the following passage:

I hope in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge, and those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any, that the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet, good-humoured resolve, and of fellow feeling still characterise this country. The pride in who we are is not a part of our past, it defines our present and our future (Queen Elizabeth II 2020).

The characteristics described are offered both as cultural benchmarks and objects of affirmation and pride for the audience. By conjuring a future generation with the capacity to recall the current moment with satisfaction and pride, the address not only assures the current generation of their survival but also offers them the chance to be remembered and celebrated in the same way as those who lived during the Second World War. Implicit is the condition that they embody and conform to traditional constructions of British subjectivity. As a carefully crafted rhetorical and political device, Queen Elizabeth’s address invokes and generates a prosthetic equivalence with a moment in Britain’s collective past that allows her people to imagine a place in history and which projects the desires and dominant constructions of contemporary Britishness into an imagined secure future.

Queen Elizabeth ended her address by quoting Vera Lynn, and reassuring the nation that ‘we will meet again’ (Queen Elizabeth II 2020). Referring to *We’ll Meet Again,* a song written by Ross Parker and Hughie Charles and made famous by Vera Lynn in 1939, the song and this phrase in particular have become emblematic of British stoicism and optimism during the Second World War. It is likely that few members of the audience of the Queen’s address may know that the song was originally the closing number of Lynn’s weekly radio programme *Sincerely Yours* (BBC *Forces Programme* 1941-1942).[[4]](#footnote-4) However, due to its frequent reiteration in British film, television and radio since the end of the Second World War, most *will* be aware of the intended connotations of stoicism, endurance and optimism that the song has come to represent. As with all references to the Second World War during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning here is generated dialectically between the song’s original historical context and its present manifestation. Barthes’ conceptualisation of mythology is useful here, which he categorises as a ‘second-order semiological system’ (1991: 113). The song itself ‘has its own value, it belongs to a history’, however that history is held at a distance and used to establish the song’s new meaning in the present: that Britain and her people will endure (Barthes 1991: 116-7). In this second-order semiological system, the new meaning takes precedence over the old.

The coincidence of VE Day 75 and the UK COVID-19 lockdown gave weight to the prosthetic equivalence between the contemporary moment and the Second World War that was established by the British government. It re-circulated discourses of British stoicism and victory and re-articulated a construction of ideal British subjectivity rooted in that historical moment. It also offered clear and normative structures for participation in this act of national commemoration and for understanding non-participation.

# Clap for Carers: Public acts of Commemoration, Participation and Narrativisation

Thomson (2013) describes the utility of national commemoration of the First World War for shaping and perpetuating the significance, meaning and legend of the ‘Diggers’ (the nickname given to members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC)), in modern society. Thomson notes that national commemoration events such as ANZAC Day in Australia, and this also applies to Remembrance Sunday in the UK, are ‘a powerful way to disseminate ideas about war and nation’ (2013: 148). At such events, individuals have the chance to participate in a collective act of remembrance from which they may extract a consensus regarding the meaning and significance of a historical event. As Thompson suggests:

annual memorial ceremonies […] facilitate intense involvement in collective practices that are intended to be stirring and inclusive, and are thus potent occasions for identification with ideas about war and national belonging’ (2013: 148).

Such events make this collective remembering and consensus available to those with no direct experience of what is being commemorated as well as those who lived through it, as discussed previously.

There are salient parallels between Thomson’s description of these ‘rituals of commemoration’ (2013:148) and the UK Clap for Our Carers Day, which was founded in the UK by Annemarie Plas. What initially began as an expression of ‘our united public affection’ for, and an acknowledgement of the risks faced by, care workers during the pandemic shifted over time into a performative pageant of affected ‘caring nationalism’ (Wood and Skeggs 2020: 641-642). Via similar participatory structures to those apparent in VE Day 75 commemorations and Remembrance events more generally, the weekly clap became a channel for the transmission of a prosthetic consensus about the pandemic and the UK lockdown.

Plas states that she was initially inspired by similar activities in the Netherlands (her home country) and across Europe where members of the public took to balconies and doorways to applaud healthcare workers (*BBC News* 2020a). The first Clap for Our Carers Day (later referred to as Clap for Carers) took place on March 25th 2020 and then continued weekly on Thursday evenings at 8pm, until Plas herself called for it to end on Thursday 28th May. The event’s website describes the clapping as ‘a round of applause around the country,’ with the following dedication:

Doctors, nurses, healthcare workers, emergency services, armed services, public transport staff, delivery drivers, porters, shop workers, teachers, waste collectors, manufacturers, postal workers, cleaners, vets, engineers and all those who are out there making an unbelievable difference to our lives in these challenging times … [sic] bravo, you are amazing! ([clapforourcarers.co.uk](https://clapforourcarers.co.uk) 2020).

In their legal disclaimer, Clap For Our Carers is described as:

a not-for-profit movement created to enable structured community-wide thanks to be given to NHS staff, key workers and all those working on the front line in the UK and across the world’ ([clapforourcarers.co.uk](https://clapforourcarers.co.uk) 2020).

As with VE Day 75, the Clap for our Carers website constructs an idealised subject to be celebrated and offers structured encouragement and methods of doing so.

Mirroring English Heritage’s downloadable VE Day 75 packs, the clap for our carers website offers downloadable packs of posters to ‘stick up in windows and walls,’ family activity packs including ‘colouring activity sheets’ and ‘personalise-the-name thank you cards and posters,’ as well as social media packs offering ‘profile pictures, social posts and videos to help you share the message,’ ([clapforourcarers.co.uk](https://clapforourcarers.co.uk) 2020). Thomson notes that it is precisely ‘the participatory nature of public commemoration [that] is the key to its effectiveness’ (2013: 148) and in these ways the website provides structured guidance and normative prompts for participation in this act of ongoing commemoration. Images of political leaders such as Prime Minister Boris Johnson, opposition leader Sir Kier Starmer and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon participating in Clap for Carers lend validation to the notion of clapping as a state endorsed act of commemoration ([Patel & Catling](http://www.apple.com/uk) 2020). Indeed, Hamad notes that:

news media footage of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak standing either side of the door at 10 Downing Street clapping for NHS workers […] has quickly become an iconic image of Britain in the time of Covid-19 (2020).

Ahead of the second Clap for Carers on April 2nd, ITV and the BBC announced that there would be a break in their programming at 8pm to allow viewers to participate. ITV programming was replaced with a Clap for Carers ident that also encouraged viewers to contribute to the NHS Charities Together (Griffin 2020). ITV Chief Executive Carolyn McCall said that the pause in programming was to allow viewers to ‘applaud the heroes within the NHS for the remarkable efforts they are making and raise as much money for NHS charities as we can’ (Griffin 2020). In this way, clapping was structured in to the evening schedules of viewers of ITV and BBC channels, both of which saw a surge in viewership numbers during the UK lockdown (Hussain 2020).

Although Clap for Carers did not perhaps take on the “sanctity” of events such as Remembrance Sunday in the UK, there was nonetheless a perceptible normative dimension to participation. Certainly in the early stages of the UK lockdown, non-participation was defined by some as disrespectful (Thomson 2013: 148). For example, *Sky News* reported that a woman who had ‘inadvertently failed to take part in [Clap for Carers] despite having done so in previous weeks’ had been ‘“named and shamed” by neighbours’ (Williams 2020). The report refers to a post that was uploaded to a community Facebook page stating that the woman had ‘showed up the street’ and claiming that ‘if I can’t spend a minute showing my appreciation I don’t deserve to use the NHS if I or my family get ill’ (Williams 2020). In May comedian Will Hislop tweeted a parody video that satirises this kind of moral policing. In the video Hislop appears to stand on his doorstep and clap whilst talking to an imaginary neighbour, first about those failing to clap and later about those breaking lockdown restrictions. Over the sound of clapping he mouths, ‘Number three. Couldn’t make it? HATES NURSES […] Number 11? Not surprising. Doesn’t wear a poppy either’ (Hislop 2020, original emphasis). Here Hislop facetiously but saliently draws a comparison between the backlash faced by those choosing not to participate in Clap for Carers and those who choose not to wear a poppy as part of the annual British Legion Poppy Appeal.

The number of people opting not to purchase or to wear a poppy has increased in recent years, with both members of the public, celebrities and journalists facing considerable backlash for choosing to do so. Although red poppies were originally worn to commemorate members of the armed forces who died during the First World War, the British Legion’s Poppy Campaign has since expanded to commemorate ‘those who lost their lives in active service in all conflicts; from the beginning of the First World War right up to the present day’ (British Legion 2020). Here again, participation and non-participation are closely bound up with constructions of Britishness and non-Britishness.

Hall suggests that:

the red poppy is thought to have lost its original identity. Many people see it as a sign of patriotism, a true mark of how British you really are. And if you don’t wear it? You aren’t proud to be British and you don’t support the soldiers protecting you (2017).

This sentiment is remarkably similar to those reported in the Sky News article, that in failing to publicly demonstrate her support through clapping, the woman in question has failed to demonstrate her support for the NHS and consequently forfeited her right to its protection. This sentimental and moralistic framing of clapping problematises non-participation by equating it with ingratitude towards and an unwillingness to acknowledge the risks and sacrifices faced by care workers during the pandemic.

However, despite the initial popularity of the weekly claps, there was widespread and increasingly vocal resistance to its politicisation and particularly its perceived co-optation by members of the Conservative government. It was this political co-optation of Clap for Carers, signified most clearly by the image of Johnson and Sunak mentioned previously, that prompted Plas’ call for an end to Thursday night clapping. She stated:

I share some of the opinions that some people have about it becoming too politicised. I think the narrative is starting to change and I don’t want the clap to become negative (*The Guardian* 2020).

Elaborating on her reasons for calling for an end to the clapping, Plas noted the appropriation of the gesture by the government and suggested that their performative participation masked a continuing lack of support for the NHS and care workers from the Conservatives:

A Clap is something normal people can do, showing our appreciation. But the power is not with us. We can give them respect, but we are not signing the cheque — that falls on another desk (*The Guardian* 2020).

This sense of disingenuity and hypocrisy on the part of the government has been criticised by scholars and NHS workers alike. Wood and Skeggs (2020) note that, as well as ‘swathing cuts to health and welfare accompanied by the encroaching grip of financialization and the privatization of provision’ in the NHS, in 2019 Conservative austerity policies were ‘to blame for 130,000 preventable deaths’ (642). Citing the implementation of competitive tendering under Margaret Thatcher, the introduction of Private Finance Initiatives by John Major and the 2012 Health and Social Care Act ratified under David Cameron, Hamad argues that ‘the Tories have been attacking and eroding the NHS […] for decades’ (2020). Hamad makes specific reference to ‘the NHS workforce’s dependence on BAME people — who live and work under a government whose party is openly hostile to [them]’ (2020). It has been noted that while Black and Minority Ethnic people account for approximately 21% of NHS staff, they account for 63% of COVID-19 related deaths among NHS staff (Cook, Kursumovic & Lennane 2020). Hamad also indicates ‘the entrenched devaluation of nurses’ (2020) by the Conservative government. Wood and Skeggs point out that the Conservative government has:

voted against a pay rise for nurses numerous times, most recently in 2017 and […] withdrew nursing bursaries while charging nursing students £9000 per ear in tuition fees (leading to a drastic reduction in applications) (2020).

In October 2020, the Chief Executive of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Howard Catton revealed that 1,500 nurses across the world are believed to have died from COVID-19. Catton stated that this ‘is the same number of nurses who died in the First World War’ (Bodell 2020). The equivalence of fatalities among NHS workers with the casualties sustained during the Second World War through ‘pseudo-wartime posturing’ (Hamad 2020) projects the same image of selfless sacrifice that is celebrated and commemorated during Remembrance events onto the deaths of NHS workers. The designation of hospitals as the front line in the fight against COVID (*The Guardian* 2020a) belies a feeling amongst many NHS workers that ‘they are being asked to sacrifice themselves due to the failings of others’ (ITV 2020). Writing anonymously in *The Guardian* one NHS doctor asserted, ‘I don’t work “on the frontline” because there isn’t one; I’m not in the army and we aren’t engaged in military combat’ (Anonymous 2020). After decrying a lack of adequate funding and a lack of appreciation for immigrant workers in the NHS, the author states, ‘what I […] really don’t need, is people clapping. […] I don’t care if people clap until their hands bleed’ (*The Guardian* 2020b). For this doctor, clapping ‘is a sentimental distraction from the issues facing us’ and, echoing seriously the satirical observation of Hislop’s video, they assert that ‘even those who liked it at the beginning are becoming wary of the creeping fascism, the competition to make the most obvious and noisiest display, the shaming of non-clappers’ (*The Guardian* 2020b).

This resistance to a perceived attempt to establish an official narrative of the pandemic that favours the conservative (big and small C) establishment in the UK mirrors a growing and international resistance to practises of historical commemoration. In the UK this resistance manifested in the toppling of a statue commemorating slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol city centre, which led to ‘a searching nationwide debate about slavery and colonialism’ (Wall 2020). The statue was torn down during a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest on June 7th. The BLM movement began in the USA in 2013, but widespread protests broke out this year in the USA after the death of African-American George Floyd in police custody on May 25th 2020 in Minneapolis. Similar protests were held across the world, with more than 260 towns and cities in the UK holding protests across June and July (Mohdin and Campbell 2020). The events in Bristol brought debates regarding the commemoration of British Historical figures such as William Gladstone, Cecil Rhodes and Robert Milligan, all of whom had ties to the slave trade, to the fore (Mohdin and Campbell 2020). During a BLM protest on June 9th a statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square Westminster was sprayed with the words ‘was a racist’ amidst a recirculation of some of his most racist beliefs, statements and actions. Examples include his view that the displacement of indigenous people in America and Australia was justified ‘by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race […] has come in and taken their place,’ and his exacerbation of the Bengal famine by insisting that rice exports to the UK continued despite widespread starvation across India (Heyden 2015). In a video for the BBC, activist Shola Mos-Shogbamimu described the ways in which Churchill ‘used his privilege, power and influence to cause untold misery and atrocities on non-white nations’ (*BBC News* 2020b). However, the version of Churchill that exists in mainstream British cultural memory is frequently absolved for his racist beliefs and for acts of colonial violence because of his wartime leadership and the perceived role he played in Britain’s ultimate victory. In 2019 Finkelstein wrote a column for *The Times* entitled ‘Winston Churchill was a racist, but still a great man.’ Citing Churchill’s refusal to seek a peace treaty with Hitler, Finkelstein argues that ‘Churchill was indispensable to victory’ and concludes, therefore, that ‘even though the wartime prime minister was a lifelong white supremacist his strengths far outweigh his weaknesses’ (2019). This is indicative of the ways in which not only the experiences and voices of BAME people are excluded from dominant histories, but so also historic acts of violence and oppression committed against them are excused and forgotten. Finkelstein’s article also implicitly suggests that challenges to the dominant construction of Churchill as national saviour stem from a lack of historical understanding, gratitude and patriotism. The imbrication of practices of Remembrance and narratives of the pandemic simultaneously closes down avenues for critical engagement and reevaluation of either. This dual silencing reenforces the prosthetic moral continuity between Churchill’s wartime government and the current conservative government.

However, as evidenced by public resistance to the government’s co-optation of Clap for Carers and manifest in BLM protests and action there is a growing recognition of the ways in which dominant modes of commemoration silence minority voices. This resistance indicates an acute need to redress traditional power structures that perpetuate systemic racism within British history and the modern British state.

# Conclusion

During the UK COVID-19 lockdown, the Conservative government has mobilised references to as well as images and collective imaginings of the Second World War to impose a narrative on their response to the pandemic. These images and references have also resulted in the construction of a version of ideal British citizenship (Thomson 2006: 58) that responds to traditional and conservative readings of the war. The occurrence of the 75th anniversary of VE Day during the UK lockdown recirculated discourses of British resilience, stoicism and triumphalism stemming from the Second World War and bolstered the discursive construction of a prosthetic moral equivalence between now and then. The participatory nature of VE Day celebrations and Clap for Carers not only offered normative prompts as to how current circumstances in the UK should be understood, but also established a framework for the ways in which this moment should be remembered and commemorated in the future. In this way, the conservative version of Britishness that has been celebrated and transmitted during the UK lockdown is also projected into the future.

The version of the Second World War from which these images, references and equivalencies are drawn exists only in the British cultural imagination and is shaped and structured by media representations of the War, as well as state sponsored Remembrance events and the sprawling Remembrance industry. The narrow ideological parameters of this version of history silence voices that would seek to challenge it and erase the experiences of minority groups that diverge from it. This erasure is mirrored in the “official” narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, which denies the devastating damage done to the NHS by long term Conservative policies of austerity and the disregard for and disproportionate death rates among Black and Minority Ethnic NHS workers.

However, there are increasingly public and powerful attempts to resist these official discourses. From those who refused to participate in and opposed the hypocrisy of the politically co-opted weekly claps to those who tore down Colston’s statue in Bristol, there are a growing number of people committed to challenging and exposing the inequality of traditional practices of commemoration and dominant versions of the past. The fact that statues and icons of Britain’s colonial past have been the focus of much of this resistance elaborates the ways in which the past and its commemoration and memorisation, is the immediate terrain of this struggle. Close analysis of the ways in which memories of the Second World War have been mobilised and the prosthetic nature of those memories are key to understanding the contemporary political moment.

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1. The term Windrush Generation refers to members of the British Commonwealth from Caribbean countries who arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1973. It was revealed in 2017 that many of these citizens had been denied legal rights and that many others had been wrongly detained and deported ([jcwi.org.uk](http://jcwi.org.uk) n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of the troubling links between Remembrance (particularly the red poppy which is discussed later in the chapter), nationalism and xenophobia see Mayne 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For further discussion of the Keep Calm and Carry On phenomenon and its origins see Hewgill 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The programme was structured as a letter to soldiers fighting overseas and their families at home with letters, announcements and anecdotes interspersed with songs and music. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)