

Ireland isn't invited to the VE Day 80th anniversary celebrations, but the losses we suffered should never be forgotten

As many as 4,983 deserted the Irish Army to fight against fascism, with little thanks

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Europe is having a significant celebration next week and we're not invited. The 80th Victory in Europe Day party is purely for those with scars that still run deep and are tender to the touch. Neutrality in World War II means we're not part of that club.

Fair enough. But while our flag won't be raised and saluted next Thursday, the many thousands of Irish who died fighting fascism, or were simply collateral damage in a war not of their making, deserve to be remembered.

We still have a very narrow sense of what constitutes patriotism, or sacrifice, in our historical narrative. As if there has only ever been one way of dying for Ireland. Simply, if you didn't do it fighting the British, it was hardly worth your while.

Those Irish who died in World War II, either quietly going about their lives or purposely engaged in the struggle against tyranny, deserve to be remembered on VE Day – a celebration that has more to do with us than we like to let on.

The war got intimate with us fairly sharpish, jolting rural Ireland out of its peace and tranquillity on the dark winter's night of January 2, 1941.

The war for civilisation being fought somewhere else came to Co Carlow when a blundering Luftwaffe Dornier dropped surplus bombs on to the slopes of Mount Leinster.

One of them landed on a small cottage in Knockroe, leaving three women dead – sisters Bridget and Mary Ellen Shannon and their niece, Kathleen. The injuries Michael Shannon sustained would claim him a few years later.

It was immediately obvious that Bridget was dead, but neighbours dug frantically in the rubble after hearing the moans of the other two casualties. Local curate Fr James Darcy administered the last rites.

Ireland was neutral, of course, but a war setting the world on fire had found them anyway.

They weren't the first Irish victims of the Nazis and far from the last, but they were surely among those who



Dublin's North Strand the morning after the German bombing on May 31, 1941 that damaged 300 houses. Photo: Getty

felt safest from the reach of a conflict occasionally alluded to on Radio Éireann and covered as some sort of foreign imperialist adventure by the likes of Éamon de Valera's *Irish Press*.

A few months later, 28 more would die under rubble created by German bombs. In total, 300 houses were blitzed on Dublin's North Strand that night, May 31, 1941.

Three generations of the Brown family were wiped out in a moment. Up to 90 of their neighbours lay wounded. A war that was none of their concern had come for them too.

When war was declared in September, 1939, world shipping withdrew from domestic ports. The Irish merchant fleet was then solely responsible for the transport of supplies to and from Ireland.

They paid a heavy price for feeding the homeland, being regularly bombed or torpedoed to the depths.

Casualties were heavy. Although never more than 800 men were serving the fleet at any time, 136 of them died and 16 Irish ships were lost.

In addition to these fatalities, 14 fishermen were killed aboard two trawlers.

The names of the seamen killed on Irish cargo vessels are remembered on a striking memorial on Dublin's City Quay, by Seán O'Casey Bridge – an overdue recognition of the bravest and most selfless of men.

Then to the dirty fighting itself. It is hard to definitively state how many Irish citizens died. According to Dr Yvonne McEwen of Edinburgh

University, as many as 7,500 lost their lives serving in Commonwealth and Dominion Forces between 1939 and 1945. In total, a remarkable 66,000 from the Republic served and 64,000 from non-neutral Northern Ireland.

Historian Richard Doherty explains their reach, saying: "Irish soldiers fought in France and Norway in 1940, in the Middle East and Burma, Italy and in the campaign to liberate Europe. Irish sailors hunted the Graf Spee and Bismarck and protected convoys from U-boats while Irish airmen protected the UK in 1940 and took the war to the skies over Europe, the Middle East and Far East."

As many as 4,983 deserted the Irish Army to enlist. After the war, an unforgiving Fianna Fáil government court-martialled each and every one, stopped modest pensions and black-listed them from public sector jobs.

These enlisters included men such as Joseph Mullally, from Westmeath, who died on a beach at Normandy in June, 1944.

This piece of vindictive blundering

was only rectified in 2012 when then justice minister Alan Shatter issued a long overdue pardon.

In the cities and towns of occupied Europe, other Irish men and women fought in a lethal war of resistance, sabotage and espionage. Joseph O'Connor's *My Father's House* and *The Ghosts of Rome* fictionalise the extraordinary courage of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty and Delia Kiernan. Proper page-turners.

Clodagh Finn brings together, among others, the stories of Janie McCarthy and Catherine Crean, in her recent book, *The Irish in the Resistance*. Both were integral parts of a history that we can no longer studiously neglect or undervalue.

Wars are always terrible, but sometimes they have to be fought. Surely none was more necessary than the one against Hitler and his Axis allies.

We should proudly remember the Irish who contributed to that fight, or died in the random brutality it unleashed, on this special VE Day.

Patriots by any other name.

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