The Depression

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain was the most powerful industrial nation. But by the 1920s, all the countries Britain exported to started buying from fast-growing America instead. This hit British industry hard.

And as the saying goes, "When America sneezes the whole world catches a cold", so with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, The Great Depression spread across the world, and Britain felt the ripples.

By 1932, British exports had halved, and unemployment had risen.

Since 1920, unemployed people had received financial support while they job-hunted, nicknamed the dole.

The dole's means-testing system was intrusive, and the money was barely enough to live on. Even those lucky enough to be employed were paid peanut and all this contributed to the mounting national mood of desperation.

But British communities weren't going to take it lying down. Oh no.

In the 1930s, thousands of working class people protested, presenting petitions and marching on parliament, like in the Jarrow March of 1936.

But protesters were always met with the cold shoulder.

By 1936 the mood in Britain was stormy. 9.5 million people were malnourished - half of these, badly so. Mothers were the least healthy, sacrificing themselves for their families.

People's desire to escape from the Depression is one of the reasons that radio and cinema became so popular. By 1939, three-quarters of families had a radio, and cinema trips were becoming more and more common.

As old industries were shrinking, new ones, such as the manufacture of light bulbs, were springing up, providing employment, and bringing more light relief.

The government wanted to ensure that these industries benefited areas that'd been hit hard by the Depression, so they introduced the Special Areas Act of 1934, which encouraged business-owners to found factories - and so provide jobs - in the worst affected areas.

But during this time, a dark force was also stirring on the continent. In 1934, Hitler became Führer.

After Germany's defeat in World War One, he wanted to restore the country's former glory by claiming back lost land. In particular he had his sights set on Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.

Believing that Hitler had good intentions, and that he'd stay true to the peace agreement, other European nations appeased him by letting him have Sudetenland.

But when Hitler's true intentions to conquer surrounding nations became clear, Britain had no choice but to prepare for war.

In 1938, war seemed ever more likely, so Britain started collecting metal for ammo, recruiting air-raid shelter wardens, distributing gas masks, installing anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons, and building warships.

All this work meant Britain was suddenly very busy, as there were so many jobs to be done, which helped drag the country out of Depression.

In September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, a country Britain had sworn to protect. So Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain finally declared war.

Britain was well prepared. But sending almost every man aged between 18 and 41 to combat was very difficult.

There's no doubt, 20 years of upheaval and Depression had taken its toll on the whole country.