

## Reflecting on war, grief, and Covid-19

Although the 75th anniversary of VE Day on the 8th of May was scaled down owing to Covid-19, the Government had clearly intended to use this event to celebrate past glory, invoke national endeavour, and, subliminally, reawaken support for its Brexit 'victory' over Europe. The Prime Minister, in particular, sought to cast himself as the Churchillian saviour of the nation at a time of crisis.

Whilst many may endorse this overt myth-making, the parallels between the pandemic, war, and Brexit are misplaced. Covid-19 is an infectious disease that is not 'fought' by soldiers and weapons; it is treated and cared for by healthcare workers and vaccines. It will not end on a particular day when an unconditional surrender is declared, but stretches into the future, with many thousands globally dying every day. It will not be overcome by 'standing alone', but by collective care, social solidarity, and international co-operation.

At precisely the same moment as the anniversary of VE Day, I published an article analysing a powerful [memoir](#) written by my grandfather, ruing the death of his only son, cut down by a machine-gun three months before the end of World War II. Back then, displays of individual grief were officially discouraged, and overshadowed by a wider concern for mass bereavement. But my grandfather's extended lament expresses a range of deep feelings: love and care for a son he had not seen for years, guilt at sending him away to boarding school, loss of faith in (Christian) religion, and a sense of worthlessness and personal failure. In line with prevailing social norms, his deep grief remained private, and as such, unaddressed.

As we emerge from the ravages of Covid-19, most of us will return to some kind of 'normal', albeit changed by going through this experience. But my connection to this highly personal family story makes me reflect on what we need to do now - and into the future - to support those who are grieving or long-term sick, unemployed or marginalised. What is clear is that they don't need military metaphors, or veiled collective silences. Nor commendations and medals, posted in cardboard boxes (as my grandfather received). Rather, we should recognise that grieving is a natural and useful process, and that openly identifying and 'naming' attachments and losses – whether deaths, livelihoods, relationships, or sources of self-worth - can help people cope with them. Maintaining social connections and support, perhaps long after lockdowns have ended, is also critical in assisting people to move on with their lives and avoid becoming 'stuck' in their grief. This much we have learnt from the experiences of those affected by the traumas, disasters, or conflicts of the past.



Sandy Ruxton, 03/12/20