‘Phoney War’ is the name given to the period of time in World War Two from September 1939 to April 1940 when, after the blitzkrieg attack on Poland in September 1939, seemingly nothing happened. Many in Great Britain expected a major calamity - but the title ‘Phoney War’ summarises what happened in Western Europe - near enough nothing.

The term ‘Phoney War’ was first used, allegedly, by an American senator called Borah. Winston Churchill referred to the same period as the ‘Twilight War’ while the Germans referred to it as ‘Sitzkrieg’ - ‘sitting war’.

The Phoney War refers to what happened in Western Europe between September 1939 and the spring of 1940. To assume that nothing was going on in Europe would be wrong as Poland was in the process of being occupied with all that brought for the Polish people. However, in Western Europe very little of military importance did take place. In fact, so little occurred that many of the children who had been evacuated at the start of the war, had returned to their families. To many, war had been declared by Neville Chamberlain, but nothing was actually happening.

In fact, things were happening but the public in Britain were not aware of them - or very few were. The sinking of the ‘Athenia’ sent a clear message to Britain that Germany was prepared to sink passenger liners and not just ships of military importance. The sinking of the ‘Royal Oak’ also brought the war home to Britain. Such was the shock to the government of the ‘Royal Oak’s’ sinking that many people first learned about it from the broadcasts of Lord Haw-Haw.

At 09.00 am September 3rd, U-30 attacked the ‘Athenia’ which was bound for Canada. U-30’s commander, Lemp, claimed that he believed that the ‘Athenia’ was a naval boat as it was sailing in a zigzag manner and in the poor light he could not differentiate between a liner and a naval vessel. Of the 1,102 passengers and 315 crew, 112 died. Germany attempted to shift the blame for the attack on the British by claiming that British intelligence, on the orders of Winston Churchill, had placed
a bomb on board ‘Athenia’. In fact, U-boat commanders had been ordered not to attack passenger liners and Hitler himself issued an order that no further attacks should be made on passenger liners unless it was obvious that they were travelling in convoy.

A survivor from the ‘Athenia’

During the Phoney War, Britain was also engaged in ‘bombing’ raids over Germany - but it was not bombs that were dropped but propaganda leaflets. Sir Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for War, called them “truth raids”. The ‘raids’ served two purposes:

- The Germans would read about the evils of Nazi Germany
- It was show the leaders of Germany just how vulnerable their country was to bombing raids.

Millions of leaflets were dropped over Germany. On September 3rd alone, 6 million copies of “Note to the German People” were dropped in just one night - the equivalent of 13 tons of paper. The main result of these initial raids was that the Germans stepped up their anti-aircraft batteries.

While some politicians believed that the raids served a purpose, others in the military did not.
“My personal view is that the only thing achieved was largely to supply the continent’s requirements of toilet paper for the five long years of the war.” ‘Bomber’ Harris writing at the end of the war.

“It is ignominious to wage a confetti war against an utterly ruthless enemy.”

General Spears

It is certainly true that the general public would have liked a more robust response to the attack on Poland. If our bombers were capable of dropping leaflets, it was surmised, then they should be capable of dropping bombs on important industrial targets to let the Germans know that we meant business.

“The smoke and smell of German forests would teach the Germans, who were very sentimental about their own trees, that war was not always pleasant and profitable, and could not be fought entirely in other people’s countries.” Hugh Dalton

When the issue of an attack on the Black Forest was raised with Kingsley Wood, he replied:

“Oh you can not do that, that’s private property. You’ll be asking me to bomb the Ruhr next.”

In anticipation of the war breaking out, in August the Emergency Powers (Defence) Bill had received the Royal Assent. It brought into being

“such defence regulations as appear necessary or expedient for securing the public safety, the defence of
the realm, the maintenance of the public order and the efficient prosecution of any war in which His Majesty may be engaged, and for maintaining supplies and services essential to the life of the community.”

This law brought in

- The arrest, trial and punishment of anybody deemed to have gone against these regulations
- To detain anybody deemed by the government to be a threat
- Taking any property other than land needed by the government
- Entering and searching any property
- Changing any existing law if it was necessary for the war effort

Immediately the war started, the public faced a torrent of prohibitions - what they could not do - and requirements - what they had to do.

Such a move did attract a considerable amount of criticism even within Parliament. Imprisonment without trial and the effective suspension of Habeas Corpus were, indeed, controversial. Dingle Foot, MP, said that Britain was fighting two wars: Nazi aggression abroad and Nazi tendencies at home.

During the Phoney War, blackout was rigidly enforced until it became obvious that problems on the roads had to be resolved. In December 1939, Westminster allowed low-density street lighting to help solve the issue of pedestrian/road accidents. Other areas soon followed. But no night time lighting of any description was allowed within 12 miles of the south-east coast. It was only on January 22nd, 1940, that the familiar car headlamps of World War Two were introduced along with a 20 mph speed limit in built-up areas.
By the end of September, Germany and Russia had defeated Poland. Everyone expected Hitler to attack western Europe with his ‘blitzkrieg’ tactics, but nothing happened (indeed, on 6 October, Hitler offered peace).

Meanwhile, Britain and France made no effort to attack Hitler. A British Expeditionary Force of four divisions - 158,000 men with 25,000 vehicles - left for France on 11 Sept, but it was too small and poorly-equipped to challenge the Nazi army. And France’s strategy was dominated by the Maginot line, a defensive super-trench on the border, which French generals believed would keep France safe from Nazi attack).

The period came to be called ‘the phoney war’. Britain was able to consolidate its preparations for war (Source A). Barrage balloons were deployed to force the Luftwaffe to fly higher - so their bombing would be less accurate. Pillar boxes were painted with yellow gas-sensitive paint (38 million gas-masks has been distributed during 1939 - cinemas refused admission to people without a gas-mask). 400 million sandbags were piled round the entrances to shops and public buildings. London zoo put down all its poisonous snakes, in case they escaped during a bombing raid. There was a wedding boom, as many couples married hurriedly before the man was called up - one man committed suicide when he found out he was too old for national service. The Queen told women: ‘You are talking your part in keeping the Home front stable and strong’, urging them: ‘we, no less than men, have real and vital work to do’.

Source A

3 Sept: 827,000 children and 535,000 pregnant mothers have been evacuated from the towns to the country.

4 Sept: a Nazi U-boat sinks the SS Athena - 112 passengers died.

9 Sept: RAF drops 12 million propaganda leaflets on Germany.

15 Sept: the first convoy sets sail from Canada.

22 Sept: petrol rationing introduced.

30 Sept: The Nazi cruiser the Graf Spee sinks a British cargo ship.

10 Oct: 25,000 women join the Women’s Land Army.

20 Nov: the Nazis drop magnetic mines, which start to sink British shipping.

17 Dec: Graf Spee destroyed.

31 Dec: New Year revellers shining torches are arrested.

1 Jan: 2 million men aged 20-27 are called up to join the armed forces.
8 Jan: butter, sugar and bacon are rationed.
22 Jan: newsreels are censored by the government Ministry of Information.
30 Jan: a national campaign is organised to collect scrap metal, paper, and food waste (for pig-swill).
6 Feb: Ministry of Information launches its ‘Careless Talk Costs Lives’ campaign.
12 Feb: paper rationed.
11 March: meat rationing.
3 Apr: Lord Woolton appointed Minister of Food.

Source B
This David Low cartoon in the Evening Standard (31 October 1939) showed the German war effort - despite its ‘secret weapons’ and ‘super-frightfulness’ as an

Source D
This Evening Standard cartoon of 18 Sept 1939 shows a woman, lost among the sandbags,
‘Interminable Overture’ (the music before the show starts.)

By Spring 1940, many people had decided that war was never going to happen, and they followed the advice of the newspaper headline which suggested: ‘Forget Hitler - take your holiday’. They stopped carrying their gas-masks. Six million people every night tuned in to

Extra
1. Was Britain serious about the war Sept 1939 - April 1940? Support your answer with evidence from Source A.
listen to ‘Lord Haw-Haw’, the British Nazi who broadcast on the wireless from Germany...

... until, suddenly, on 9 April 1940, Nazi forces attacked Denmark and Norway.

2. What can an historian learn from sources B and C about British attitudes to the Nazis during the Phoney War?

3. What does Source D suggest about the degree to which people’s lives were changed during the Phoney War?

4. How useful is Source E in telling us about British attitudes during the Phoney War?