The ‘Phoney War’ is the name given to the period of time in the Second World War from September 1939 to April 1940 when after the Blitzkrieg attack on Poland in September 1939, nothing seemed to happen. Although the great powers of Europe had declared war on one another, neither side had launched an attack, and there was little fighting.

Many in Great Britain expected a major attack and took the necessary precautions to protect civilians.

The term ‘Phoney War’ was first used, allegedly, by an American senator called Borah. Winston Churchill is said to have called it the ‘Twilight War’. The Germans referred to it as ‘Sitzkrieg’ – (‘sitting war’)

In anticipation of the war breaking out, the Emergency Powers (Defence) Bill had been introduced in August 1939. This brought in a lot of new restrictions which included the authorities being able 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

Bombing raids over Germany

During this period Great Britain launched ‘bombing raids’ over Germany. Leaflets were dropped instead of bombs. These raids were known as ‘truth raids’ and their purpose was so that:

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

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

-- disputed origin
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.

During the Phoney War, the blackout was rigidly enforced. Gasmasks were issued and children evacuated to the countryside.

1. When have you regretted inaction? Why? What should you have done?

2. Would you enlist if someone invaded the United States? Why yes or why no?

3. The Emergency Powers Act gave a lot more power to the government to create Defence [sic] Regulations, which regulated almost every aspect of everyday life. Do you think that the U.S. government should do something like this in times of war? Why yes or why no?

4. On a scale of 1-10, 1 being apathetic and 10 being passionate, how would you rate your interest in what’s happening internationally?

5. On a scale of 1-10, 1 being apathetic and 10 being passionate, how would you rate your generation’s interest in what’s happening internationally?

6. Look at the quote at the beginning of this worksheet. What do you think it means for society?

Works Cited: Adapted from: https://www.britannica.com/event/Phony_War