

# LIVING MARXISM

September 1989

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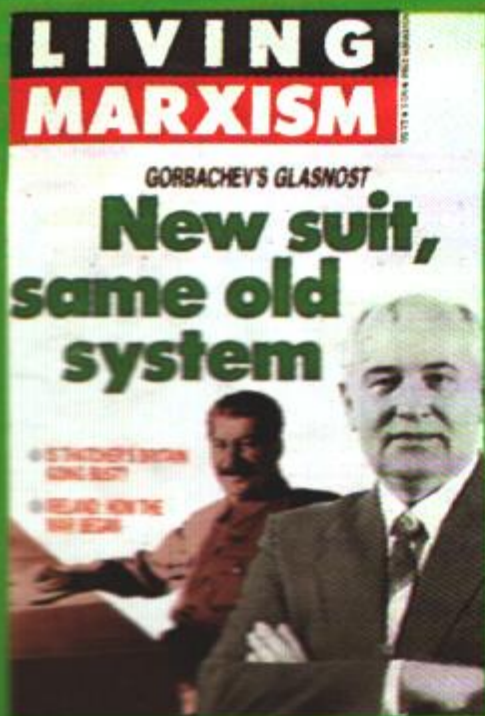
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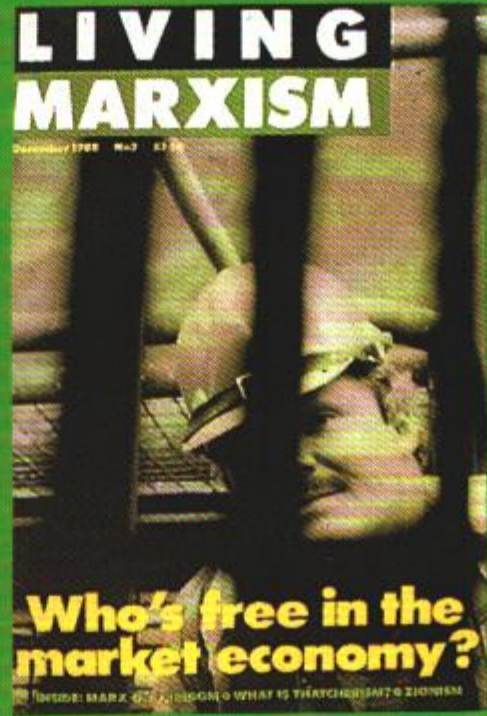
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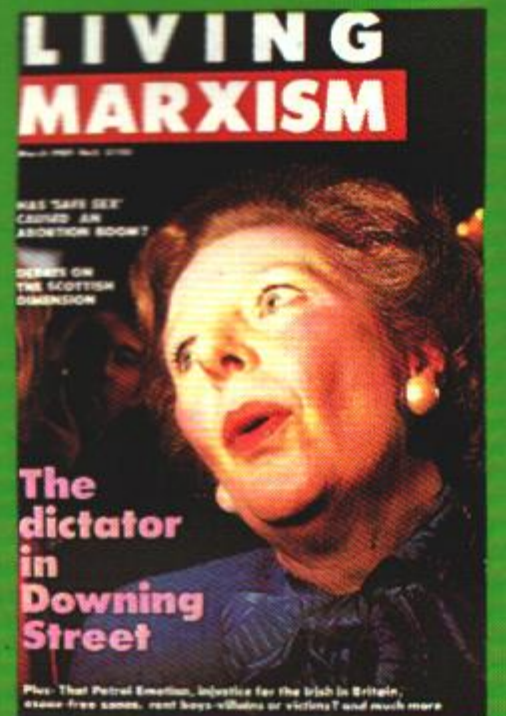
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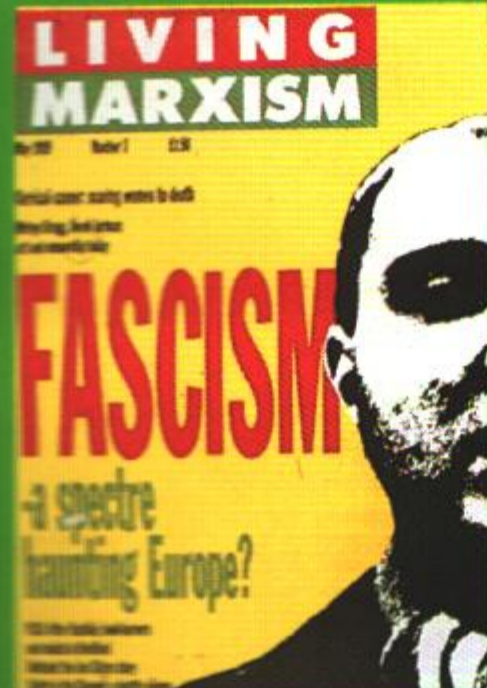
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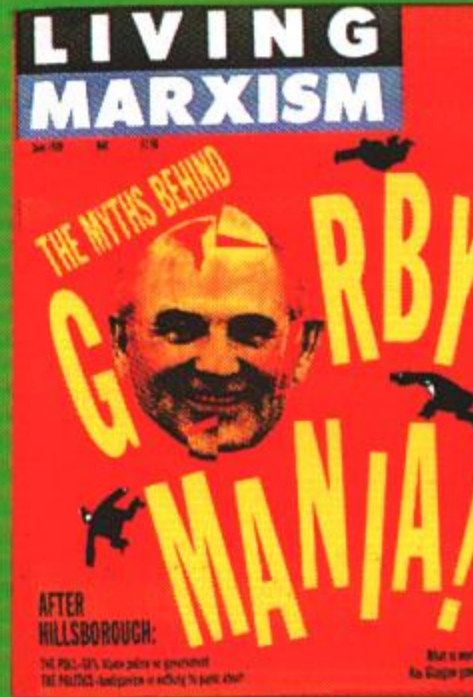
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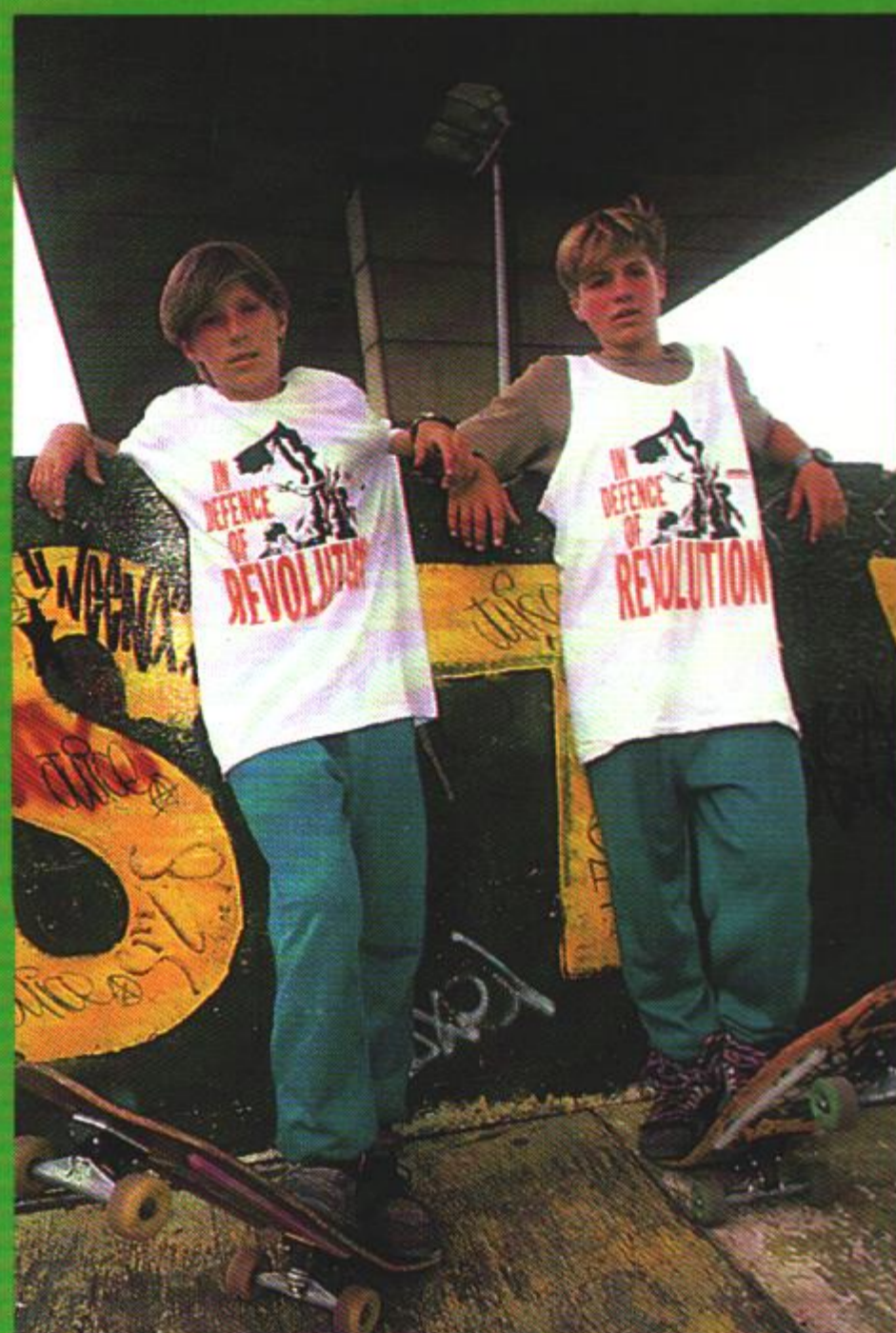
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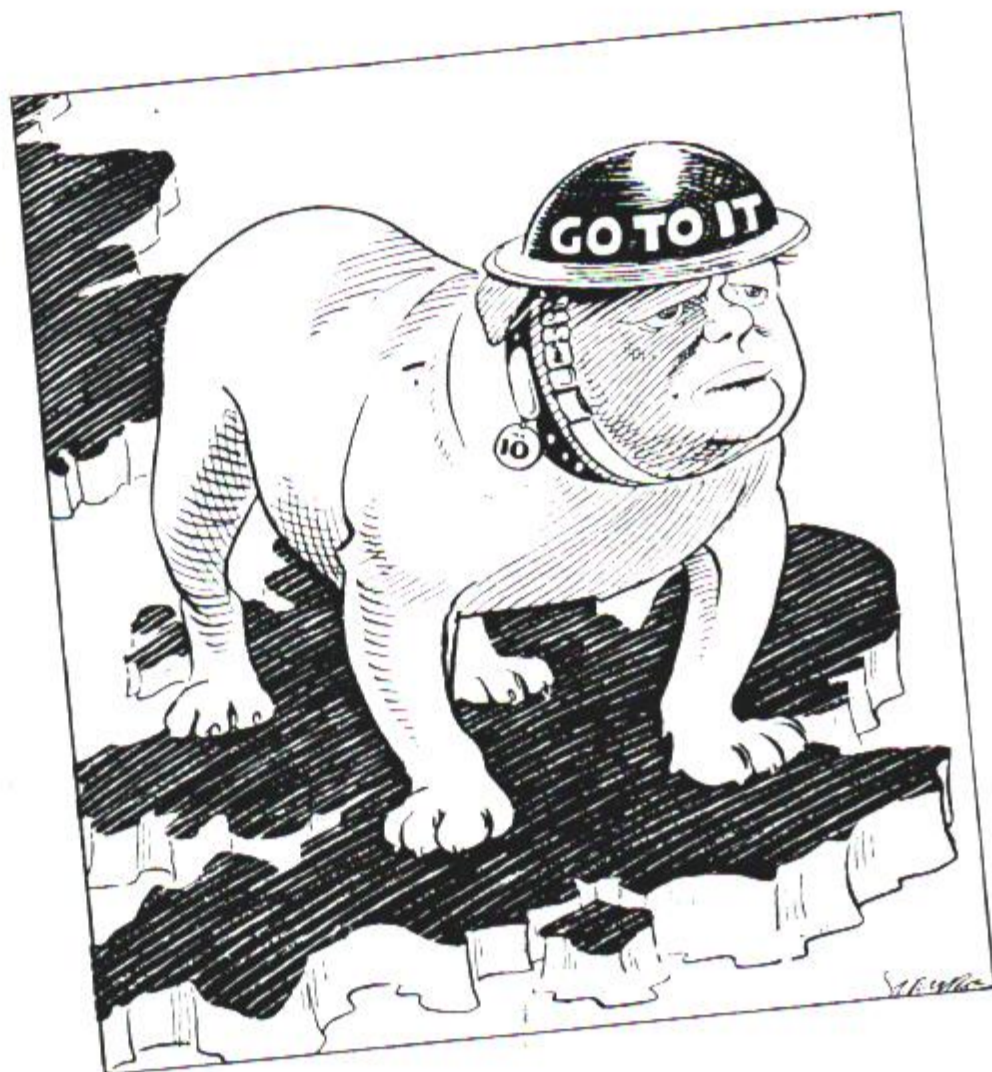
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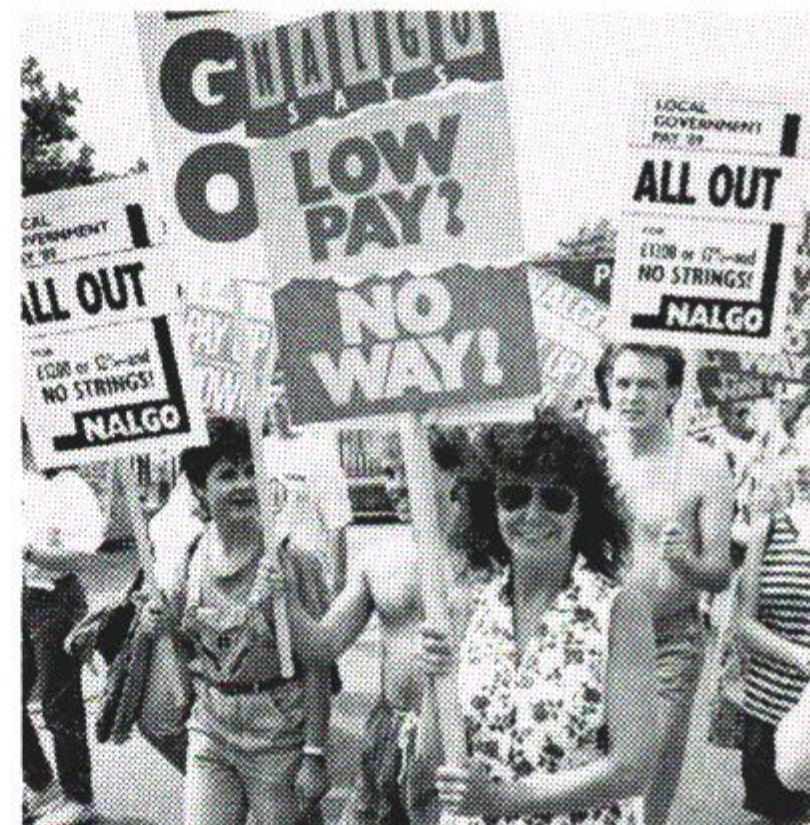


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## LIVING MARXISM

Monthly review of the Revolutionary Communist Party ● Telephone: (01) 375 1702

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Subscription rates: Britain and Ireland £15 ● Europe (airmail) £20 ● Outside Europe (airmail) £27.50 ● Overseas (surface mail) £16 ● (Institutions add £7.50)  
Make cheques payable to Junius Publications Ltd and send to Junius Publications Ltd, BCM JPLtd, London WC1N 3XX; Fax: (01) 377 0346 ● Distributed by Comag Magazine Marketing, Tavistock Road, West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 7QE. Phone: West Drayton (0895) 444055; Fax: (0895) 445255; Telex: 8813787 ● Typeset by Junius Publications (TU) c copyright Revolutionary Communist Party ● Printed by Russell Press (TU), Nottingham ● ISSN 0955-2448 September 1989  
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Nobody ever starts a war.

Nobody invades another country to rob it, nobody slaughters civilians to subjugate a nation. Nobody sinks a ship, bombs a city, or bayonets a wounded man for criminal reasons. These things are done only with the greatest reluctance, for the very best of reasons. Or so they tell us.

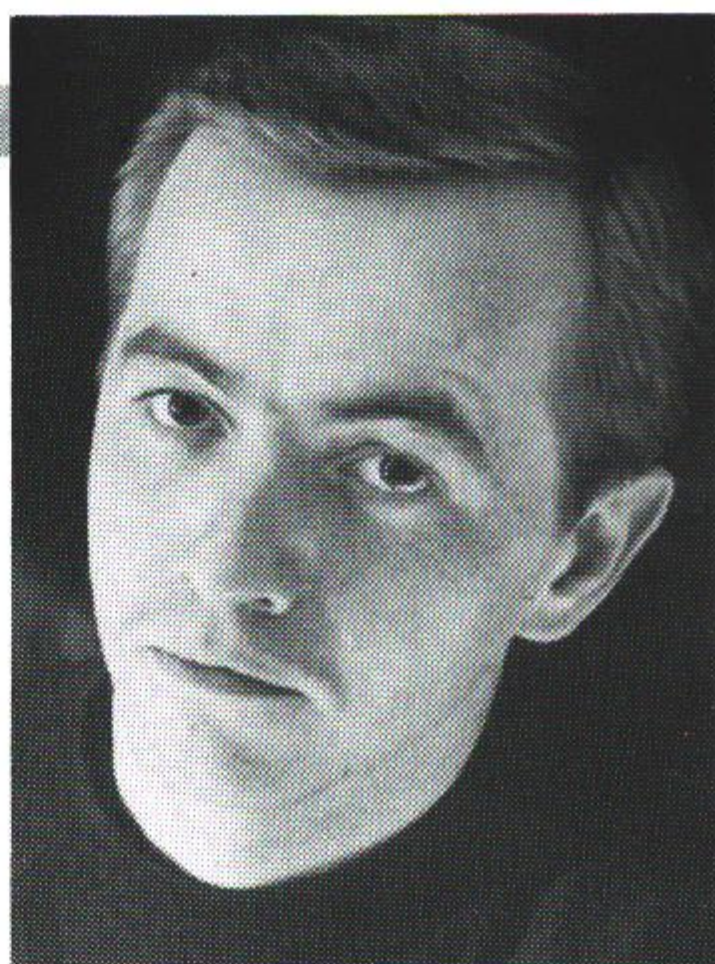
Britain's generals and politicians have had a good excuse for every war that they have dragged the nation into this century. They said that the First World War was fought to stop the Hun ravaging Belgian nuns, that the Falklands War was for democracy and the rights of sheep farmers, and that every conflict in between had similarly wholesome motives.

In time, almost all of these excuses have become discredited. As the flush of flag-waving hysteria passes and the grim toll of war becomes clearer, cynicism and bitterness set in.

Who now believes that the First World War was anything other than a fight among slaveholding empires over which one was to hold the whip hand? How many would still follow Margaret Thatcher's instruction to 'Rejoice, rejoice' over the bloodshed she caused in the South Atlantic? One glaring exception to this trend, however, is the Second World War.

● Fifty years on, the bulk of public opinion continues to regard the Second World War as a victory for British democracy and civilisation over the dark forces of Nazism. Kept alive by countless films, books, comics and ceremonies, the image of a titanic struggle between good and evil is, if anything, even stronger today than it was during the Second World War. But why should this war be considered so different from the rest?

The Second World War is



**MICK HUME:**  
EDITOR

# WHO WON?

often set aside from the rest because of Hitler and the Holocaust. Yet the British government did not go to war to rid the world of the twin scourge of fascism and anti-Semitism. Through the thirties, many members of the British establishment liked Herr Hitler for his anti-communism and his willingness to hammer the working classes. Papers like the *Mail* applauded him, and everybody from King Edward VIII to the England football team gave him the raised arm salute in Berlin. At the war's end, Britain and America spirited top Nazis away to help them in the Cold War and the arms race, while ensuring that the big businessmen who had bankrolled Hitler returned to their pre-eminent positions in post-war Germany.

Nor were the British authorities concerned to prevent the massacre of Jews. They conspired with the Americans to suppress information about the Holocaust until near the war's end. Time and again they refused to accept Jewish refugees from Germany and the occupied countries. 'Save

a million Jews?' snorted a disgusted Lord Moyne when the fate of Hungary's Jewish community was raised in 1944: 'What shall we do with them? Where shall we put them?' Hitler's propaganda man Doctor Goebbels was proved fully justified in his judgement that the Jews were a good target for a Nazi pogrom, because the anti-Semites running the rest of the Western world would not lift a finger to save them.

The manic figure of Hitler, and the harrowing images of the Holocaust, have provided a convenient smokescreen to disguise the true intentions behind Britain's declaration of war 50 years ago this month. It was an imperialist war, caused by the crisis of the world economy, fought between the capitalist giants (with the Soviet Union in tow), each seeking to resolve their problems at their rivals' expense.

As examined in detail in this issue of *Living Marxism*, the events of 1939 were the inevitable result of the inconclusive end to the First World War; a second attempt to stabilise the global order by sorting out which of the

imperialist powers would rule and exploit the Earth. Millions fought and died, not to unlock the door to freedom, but to decide which capitalist jailer was to keep the next generation under lock and key.

The popular idea that the Second World War was different from the first is immediately put to question by the fact that some of the leading players were the same in both conflicts. Winston Churchill is the prime example. The dramatic imagery of Churchill's wartime speeches—blood, sweat and tears, fighting them on the beaches, the few, our finest hour—has provided the enduring accompaniment to the belief that Britain was on a liberation mission. Yet Churchill was an imperialist scoundrel of the first order—and before he became prime minister in 1940, he had been widely recognised as such.

● Churchill was a leading member of the imperial war cabinet which organised the slaughter of 1914-18. He was directly responsible for sending countless thousands of soldiers to their deaths on the blood-stained beaches of Gallipoli in 1915. After the First World War he was behind the terrorism of Britain's Black and Tans in Ireland. In 1926 he was in the front rank of the employers' army which broke the General Strike, editing the notorious scab sheet the *British Gazette*. He was an admirer of Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy, a virulent anti-Semite, and one of the founders of the theory of an international Jewish-communist conspiracy.

Such a figure does not become a champion of freedom simply because his efforts to protect the British Empire bring him into conflict with a German dictator. Was it a concern for the future of humanity which

led Churchill's cabinet to order the firebombing of German cities, killing more civilians than died at Hiroshima or Nagasaki? The difference between Churchill and Hitler was only one of degree; the difference between an axe-murderer who runs amok in broad daylight, and an assassin who kills a little more selectively under cover of night. Each

earlier in the First World War, had prompted a workers' revolution in Russia and attempted revolutions elsewhere.

Yet this time, the opportunity was lost. Despite their initial disquiet, the British people were won over to Churchill's cause behind the British establishment's phoney anti-fascism. It was a victory for British

national service and rationing were examples of socialist egalitarianism. Communists took responsibility for the war drive on the factory floor, cooperating with employers to raise production, convincing militants that they had a duty to break their backs for Britain, damning those who dissented as 'Trotskyite hooligans'.

oppression created by capitalism, it becomes certain that, while the old order prevails, a third world war among the imperialist powers is as inevitable as were the first two.

The clouds are gathering now. The approach to 1939 was marked by the Crash of 1929, the Depression of the thirties, and the life-or-death struggle the crisis created among the capitalists. We have already had the Crash of 1987, and the world economy is on the brink of another recession. History does not repeat itself exactly; but the trend towards another war is clear.

*'Never, in the field of human conflict, have so many given so much for so few.'*

*(With no apologies to Winston Churchill)*

shared a commitment to piling up as many bodies as necessary to secure the interests of the capitalist class they served.

The British working class had no more stake in taking sides in the Second World War than it did in the first. Its real interests lay, not in marching into battle against foreign workers behind the Union Jack, but in turning against its own ruling class and uniting with the oppressed and exploited everywhere in a class battle against the warmongers.

The rise of fascism and the descent into global carnage provide the most damning indictment of capitalism. The war which began in 1939 was a pointed reminder of the need for international revolution, as the only way to free the world from the militarism and racism which are endemic to the status quo. It signalled a crisis of the sort which, just 20 years

imperialism, but a heavy defeat for the British working class—a defeat made worse by the fact that many celebrated the Empire's success as their own.

Churchill's famous rhetoric rings through the years with mocking irony. It was the working class which shed the blood, sweat and tears and fought on the beaches; but it was the capitalists who enjoyed their finest hour. In the Second World War, 50 million died to secure the future of a handful of bankers, businessmen and butchers. Never, in the field of human conflict, have so many given so much for so few.

In Britain, much of the blame for this historic defeat lies with the Labour Party and the Communist Party. Labour leaders joined Churchill's cabinet and helped organise the war effort, telling the working class that such measures as

Today, right wingers like Thatcher are seen as the militarists in society. But it is worth remembering that, last time around, those who claimed the mantle of working class internationalism were the most fervent patriotic advocates of war and sacrifice. We must be ready for such 'socialists' the next time around.

Yes, the next time; for the point of exposing the truth about the past is to prepare for the future. War is as much a part of capitalism as the market. Our rulers boast that the Second World War ushered in '40 years of peace'; those years have been scarred by endless massacres and conflicts. Typically, as this month's anniversary approached, shells fell on the rubble of Beirut, and another child was killed by a plastic bullet in Belfast.

Once we identify the cause of war in the rivalries and

● America is now struggling to protect the dominant status it won in 1945. Japan and West Germany have risen to economic prominence once more, and are seeking to increase their influence at the expense of the USA. British capitalism continues to decline, and the establishment here becomes more bellicose the further downwards its system slips. Nato is fragmenting, and the approach of 1992 brings the prospect of 'Fortress Europe'. Around the world, the seeds of another Holocaust are being sown in waves of reaction against minority communities.

No doubt, when the time for war arrives, the British authorities will have another good excuse for the slaughter. If we are to prevent them getting away with it again, we need to raise the banners of internationalism today, and oppose every militarist move our government makes. One part of that task is telling the truth about the imperialist motives which led to the opening of hostilities in 1939. Let them celebrate the start of the last war; and let us prepare to stop the next one.

Restating the case for progress

# The past holds no answers

**In extracts from his keynote speech to the July Preparing for Power conference, Frank Richards suggests that those seeking solutions to today's problems start looking to the future**

Modern attacks on past revolutions are really directed against popular struggles and the aspiration for change today. Those denouncing the attempt to change society ultimately call into question the very idea of human progress. Implicit in these attacks is the view that existing society is the best that can be achieved. Any attempt to seek radical change is thus at best utopian and at worst malevolent.

The corollary of anti-revolutionary sentiments is the desire to find appropriate solutions from the past. This is what conservatism is all about.

In Britain the Thatcher government's ideological offensive seeks to rehabilitate Victorian values and morality. The Tories explain their success as a victory of traditional standards over the liberalism of the sixties. It was in this vein that they hailed Aids as the penalty for sexual experimentation. In writing about Aids, leading Conservative ideologue Digby Anderson even celebrated the 'arbitrary and senseless' religion of the old morality:

'The old wisdom, displaced by progressive gospel, no longer looks

quite so passé. Its adherents did not question everything but followed religious and social conventions even when these appeared arbitrary and senseless....Desires were repressed by inculcated habit and deterrence. Repression was not then viewed as a bad thing. And a necessary corollary of the rules was guilt, fear, scandal and stigma so denounced and derided by "rational" progressives. They do not appear so obviously ridiculous today.' (*Times*, 5 December 1984)

'Guilt, fear, scandal and stigma' are the values that Anderson wants to encourage. And, ironically, he is right; prejudice and an obsession with convention are once more influential in European society.

Fear of progress means that positive models and values are rediscovered in the past, and new ideas are treated as suspect. Winston Churchill once said that he loved the past, was uneasy about the present, and feared the future. Such attitudes are widespread today. They oblige us to restate the case for human progress.

The idea of progress is very much the product of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Until this period classical thinkers were less than optimistic about the future of humanity. In most religions and philosophies human perfection was located in the distant past, in some golden age. Change was seen as unavoidable but always for the worse—another step away from paradise lost. New ideas were denounced as destructive. The lament of Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament prophet, that 'knowledge increaseth suffering' well expressed the dominant view.

## Age of reason

This backward-looking rejection of human development came under attack with the rise of modern science and of rationalism. As rational discourse revealed the possibilities of human, social and material improvement, the idea of progress began to take hold. Truth was no longer a rediscovery of the wisdom of the past but a product of human reason. The future was now viewed positively, as history was



PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

reinterpreted to mean an endless process of progress towards the realisation of the human potential.

The discovery of historical progress had a revolutionary significance. The recognition of progress and change called into question the durability of the status quo. The idea of endless progress implied that the existing state of affairs would not continue indefinitely. That is why all the major thinkers of the Enlightenment, from Condorcet to Saint-Simon, turned away from the *ancien regime* and supported those who sought change.

More than any single experience, the French Revolution which began in 1789 strengthened the belief in progress. Its example inspired a generation to seek the realisation of the human potential. The idea of progress became the dominant influence in the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Europe. As millions turned towards the future with new hope, the grip of the past was gradually loosened.

Intellectually, the new capitalist class was wholeheartedly in favour of progress at this time. It saw capitalism as the appropriate form of social organisation through which change would be realised. But before long the capitalists began to have serious doubts. If progress was a never-ending concept, then capitalist society could not be presented as the final moment or highest achievement of humanity; progress would sweep it away as it had done with all previous societies. This growing fear of historical transience began to inspire a reaction against the Enlightenment among capitalist thinkers.

### **'Leave it to us'**

Because its interests were bound up with the perpetuation of a specific form of social organisation, the capitalist class could not be consistently progressive even at the best of times. Thus capitalist thinkers recognised the validity of progress in general but argued that there were certain absolute values that would remain true for all time—such as private property, parliamentary democracy, patriotism and bourgeois morality. In practice this meant that social experimentation was discouraged, and people were advised to leave it to capitalism to bring progress into their lives.

There was, of course, always a group of reactionaries hostile to any form of change and secularism. They regarded science as dangerous. They accepted the Faustian paradigm, whereby the individual sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the powers to gratify his desires, and the Frankenstein fable, in which the scientist's advances become a threat to society. Thus humanity can only achieve total mastery over nature and life by sowing the seeds of its ultimate

destruction. Such pessimistic themes have gained tremendous strength this century. Today the idea of progress as a good thing is no longer regarded as self-evident.

The decline of capitalism into a series of deep crises, the latest of which began in the seventies, has encouraged the growth of reaction. Anti-Enlightenment views have gained tremendous force. In recent years conservative governments across the Western world have popularised the virtues of the past and criminalised strategies of social experimentation. Conservative thinkers are now presented as prophets of the past. Traditional values are assumed to be inherently good and new ones are treated with suspicion.

### **'Modern' means tacky**

If it was only a matter of small groups of conservatives criticising progress there would be no need to be concerned with present trends. Unfortunately there is now a more general consensus that looks upon the future with pessimism and which seeks refuge in the past.

There are two main reasons for this pessimism. First, the recent wave of defeats of struggles for change has strengthened a mood of passivity and sense of resignation among many people. Second, many people have experienced progress only in its capitalist form, in which technological change is often destructive and its consequences are not controlled. The very word 'modern' now smacks of tacky, mass-produced commodities. Modern means flash and flimsy: plastic burger-bars, disposable clothes held together with designer labels, high-rise buildings that have created new urban wastelands. That which is modern is assumed to have little regard for the quality of life.

Not surprisingly, the achievements of capitalist society often repel people. Since there is no available vision of change leading to a better tomorrow, this repulsion forces many to look backwards towards the past. Liberal and left-wing ideas have become increasingly anti-progressive. There is a yearning for the old communities, seen as small and more human.

### **Morrissey model**

Even those who rebel have adopted the pessimistic model of an alienated individual hitting out with neither purpose or direction. The posters of James Dean which have adorned teenagers' bedroom walls since the fifties sum this up. A rebel without a cause—cynical, even suicidal, with nothing to live for. A more contemporary example is Morrissey, a world-weary young cynic, appropriately dressed in black. His vision of the future is most

symbolically summed up by his self-proclaimed commitment to celibacy.

Where are the wide-eyed, optimistic and hopeful role models? In today's capitalist society such people would be dismissed as hopelessly old-fashioned, eccentric idealists or—in our case—lunatic revolutionary extremists.

The recent success of the Greens is another sign of the times, based on their coherent rejection of progress. For them the destructive side of capitalism is proof that progress and the development of the forces of production can only lead to an ecological disaster. Instead of seeking control over science and technology, Greens are prepared to retreat into the past. It is now fashionable on the left to criticise the idea of progress and what they call the materialist politics of wealth creation. Presumably they are ready to subsist on a diet of wholesome words and thoughts.

Anti-progress views represent a fear of the future. Those who fear the future feel threatened by change. Thus the contemporary celebration of the past creates a climate that is inhospitable for revolutionaries.

### **To the future**

Marx argued that the working class revolution 'cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future'. For the working class and the oppressed neither the present nor the past offer solutions. Rich capitalists can find solace in the past as they sit on their antique furniture in their modernised thatched cottages, listening to classical music. For the working class, a return to Victorian times means poverty and insecurity. This is why we must redirect people's energies towards a struggle to determine their future, and restate the case for progress.

We need to adopt an orientation that is wholeheartedly modern. Communists must be progressive and experimentative. The answers do not lie in the past. They can only be approximated in the present. It is only in the future that we can be sure that the right questions are asked.

We must begin by attacking our own fears of the future. Fear is not an appropriate instrument for solving problems. To paraphrase an old German economist, we have nothing to lose but our fear. In this age of pessimism the future belongs to those who claim it. The intellectual realisation that human progress is possible will inevitably lead to the conclusion that it is necessary. It is then and only then that revolutionaries will prosper. That's why the political struggle to popularise the case for progress is so important.

'What about us whites?'

# The making of EastEnders

**Kenan Malik reports on what's behind a racist backlash in Tower Hamlets, east London**

'I'm not a racist', says George Landerkin, 'else I wouldn't be talking to you, would I? But I believe in looking after my own'. Landerkin lives in Cubitt Town, the white underbelly of the Isle of Dogs in east London. Last November he organised a petition to keep a Bangladeshi family from moving next door. 'If you sign this', it read, 'you are objecting to Tower Hamlets letting our houses to Pakistani families when our own young couples are being denied the right to be housed in these properties'. Sixty-three friends and neighbours signed it.

'I've nothing against coloureds', says Landerkin, 'but cockneys have to come first. It's like no one takes notice of white folk any more. We've got committees for Pakis and Vietnamese and any coloured person who wants to set one up. But what about us whites? It's everyone's dream to live in a house with a garden. So what happens? It's a Paki who moves in. Sometimes I feel we

have to house the whole of Pakistan before our number comes up'.

Nural Ali is every inch an EastEnders. He was born in the London hospital, virtually within earshot of Bow Bells, has lived all his life within spitting distance of Brick Lane and now works as a machinist in a small factory a hundred yards from where he was born. But he only has to step outside his front door to discover that, however much he may be part of the East End, he isn't 'one of us'. 'These days if you're Bengali you can't walk on your own', says Ali. 'In Bethnal Green Road if you walk on your own at this time of day obviously you're going to get attacked. You know what's going to happen to you—you're going to get a busted nose and a few black eyes.'

Ismot Ali wasn't that lucky. In June he was stabbed to death by a gang in front of his house near Brick Lane. His nephew, Waris Ali, was stabbed repeatedly and is still in intensive care, his pregnant wife was pistol-whipped by the gang. When

the Bangladeshi community organised a protest march, local whites came out of their houses and pubs to shout abuse and pelt the demonstrators with garbage, and the police piled in to arrest 40 Asians. The attack on Ismot Ali came barely three weeks after Sao Miah was kidnapped from his home on the Chicksand estate and burned to death and a Bangladeshi woman was thrown from the balcony of her second-floor flat in Shoreditch. 'It's like a war now', says Nural Ali.

## Born bigots?

Landerkin dismisses such talk as scaremongering. He insists that he himself would never attack his neighbours. 'I might object to them moving in', he says, 'but I'd never force them out'. Yet Landerkin's petition has provided a focus for local racists who have no compunction about using violent methods to get their way.

Nobody knows whether Landerkin is responsible for organising more than just a petition. What is clear, however, is that he is not an isolated bigot. Many white working class people in Tower Hamlets voice similar sentiments. And not a few are looking after their own by organising what amounts to a pogrom against the borough's Asian community.

Why has east London become the scene of a virtual race war? EastEnders aren't born bigots. But they have grown up in a community whose outlook has been shaped by the racism that prevades British society, and especially by the racist policies of the local council. Today many anti-racists point the finger at the Liberal administration in Tower Hamlets which has become notorious for its racism since it took office three years ago. But long before then the local Labour Party had already laid the foundations of East End racism. The Liberals are building on the racist legacy of Labourism.

For decades the Labour Party ruled Tower Hamlets as if it owned the borough. The corrupt mafia that ran the party treated working class people in the area with contempt. This was most clearly seen in the council's housing policies.

In one of the poorest boroughs in

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk





the country, local people rely on the council for housing. A recent council report noted that, for first-time buyers, the average mortgage repayment was four times the average household income in the borough. Eighty per cent of people in Tower Hamlets have to live in council housing. The council admits that 44 per cent of its housing stock is 'unsatisfactory': that is, slums. A quarter of all households lack at least one basic amenity, Tower Hamlets has the highest figure in Britain for official overcrowding and there are still more than 12 000 people on the council waiting list. The number of homeless families has increased fourfold in seven years.

Labour offered local people little more than a chronic housing shortage and slum standards. But with council housing so important to working class people in the borough, they have jealously guarded their access to it. When Asian immigrants started arriving in the fifties, locals regarded them as competitors for scarce resources, a view actively promoted by local Labour politicians and councillors.

The Labour Party blamed immigrants for housing shortages, slum tenements, inadequate social services and deprivation. Stepney Labour MP, Peter Shore, told the *East London Advertiser* that he 'understood' the 'anxieties' of racists who had complained in the paper's letters pages about the 'flow of immigrants' into the borough:

'The fact that they tend to concentrate heavily in a small

number of already densely populated areas inevitably increases the housing and social problems that already exist. This was, of course, one of the main reasons why the Labour government decided to cut back the number of immigrants.' (3 May 1968)

Labour politicians like Shore endorsed the prejudice that Asians were responsible for depriving white workers of basic amenities. At the same time, the Greater London Council, which owned much of the housing stock in Tower Hamlets, as well as the local council, made it clear that white EastEnders could expect the best of what housing was available as their birthright. Asians were ghettoised in the worst blocks on the oldest, most rundown estates.

### 'Deliberate decisions'

A series of reports over the past 10 years has revealed the extent of official racism. In 1982 the Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service reported that on the 10 most desirable estates in the borough, the proportion of black tenants was less than five per cent; on some it was as low as 0.3 per cent. A follow-up report two years later showed that nothing had changed under the left-wing GLC administration of Ken Livingstone. 'Somewhere, somehow', it concluded, 'deliberate decisions must have been taken over which estates they [Bangladeshis] were going to be "allowed" to live on....Nothing said or done by the GLC administration over the past three years has changed this' (SHAPRS, *Bengalis and GLC*

*Housing Allocation in EI: A Follow-up Report*, 1984). Three years later in 1987 an investigation by the CRE came to the same conclusion.

By blaming immigrants for the housing shortage and ghettoising them in slum estates, the Labour Party ensured that people's anger about their housing conditions acquired a racist form. The squeeze on council housing over the past decade has brought this anger to the boil. As their housing conditions have deteriorated, white tenants have become increasingly resentful of Bangladeshis. At the same time the flagrant racism of the current Liberal administration has made bigotry respectable. The result is a racist backlash of unprecedented proportions.

There has been virtually no council housing built in Tower Hamlets since the early eighties. The results can be seen in rising figures for overcrowding, homelessness and those on the waiting list. And while working class people have been squeezed out, the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) has built thousands of luxury homes for sale at inflated prices in the Docklands. The effect has been to make housing in Tower Hamlets today as expensive as in Westminster.

### Yuppie racism

At the same time as putting the local housing market even further beyond the reach of local people, the Docklands development has *reduced* the availability of council housing. Many estates such as Riverside Mansions, Waterlow, Monteith, Lefevre and Lanfranc have been sold off to private developers. The council has also put individual houses on the market. One council house in Tredegar Square was recently sold for £215 000. Right to buy legislation has further diminished housing stock. The neighbourhood housing office in Cubitt Town reckons that 10 per cent of council stock has been lost in this way. And another 450 council homes will soon be lost when the council demolishes the St Vincent estate to make way for the new Docklands Highway.

The authorities have tried to make up some of the losses (and help out developers hit by the housing market slump) by housing a few tenants on the new luxury estates. This has led to new conflicts as the yuppie owners object to living next to council tenants, especially Asian families. On Thomas More Court last month, owner-occupiers formed an association for the sole purpose of organising against the mainly Bangladeshi council tenants who now occupy part of the estate.

The effects of the Docklands development have been particularly felt on the Isle of Dogs. While luxury

When Bangladeshis marched against racist violence, some local whites (left) displayed that famous 'chirpy cockney' community spirit

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



‘The police have been telling whites “Do whatever you like with the Pakis, we’ll help you”’

flats costing more than Islanders would earn in a lifetime go up all around them, the local community has to put up with crumbling pre-war estates. ‘We’ve had no new council housing since 1980 which means there’s no new housing for the children’, says local housing officer Jack Bannister. ‘The majority of people live in substandard housing—cramped, damp flats with rotting windows and asbestos. The locals have always relied on the council for housing. Now they feel betrayed.’

### School segregation

Schooled in decades of Labour Party racism, locals have vented their frustration on the Island’s tiny Bangladeshi community. The first Bangladeshi family in Cubitt Town came in 1985. They were welcomed with shit through the letter box and a pig’s head left on the doorstep. Over the past four years another 14 families have joined them. Nearly all were homeless, with no choice but to move there. But none feels safe.

‘It’s very scary’, says Kutub Uddin, who has been in the area for nearly two years. ‘You never know when you’re going to get attacked. It’s mainly our old people and the children who bear the brunt of the attacks. Many children have been beaten up at school.’ Cubitt Town primary school has responded to the violence by segregating the children. The school now has two playgrounds, one for whites and one for Bangladeshis. Kutub is incensed. ‘They’re treating Asians as second class citizens and they’re teaching white kids how to discriminate.’

‘The Bangladeshis are an obvious scapegoat’, says Bannister. ‘Very often the locals would say to us “We’re not racist, we just want our children to have decent housing”. They pinpoint in on what they see as the best housing going to families from outside the island while their own community can’t get anything.’

‘Most of the people on the island are good, warm, very community-minded people. They want to get on with each other. I don’t believe they’re any different from anyone else. It’s the pressures on the area, the pressures on the children, the pressures of overcrowding on existing families. We’re not building any houses, we’re losing a lot, they know that and they are resentful. Their resentment can’t be directed against the LDDC, they don’t see them. They know the council, they know us individually. Then they see down the street a Bangladeshi family moving in and that becomes the focus of their resentment.’

This resentment has been fuelled by the token anti-racist policies which many council departments pursue. Now that Tower Hamlets is decentralised many Labour-

controlled neighbourhood areas, like the Isle of Dogs, continue to pursue the kind of equal opportunity policies which the central Liberal administration has eschewed. Such policies have done little to improve conditions for the black community. But they have created a backlash among white tenants. Many cannot understand why, after decades of telling them that ‘whites come first’, officials now call them racist when they try to keep Bangladeshis out of their streets. They resent the fact that Asians seem to be getting housed at their expense. And they object to well-paid council officers who don’t have to put up with their housing conditions lecturing them about how to behave.

‘All the local authority ever says is “That’s racist, you mustn’t be racist”’, says Therese Shanahan, a Labour councillor on the Island and an anti-racist campaigner. ‘It never actually does anything. It’s all very well to come down to tenants’ association meetings and say “You all have to behave like this”. But what you have is white middle class people who don’t know what it’s like to struggle, who don’t know what it’s like to be a woman on her own trying to bring up a couple of kids, having the social services come round and threaten to take your kids away because you’re not looking after them properly, having the police come round because the kids are causing trouble, having the local authority come round because you can’t pay your rent. Hassle, hassle, hassle from every institution. And then you have some middle class person come round saying you’re racist when all you’re concerned with is finding somewhere decent to live—no wonder you explode.’

### Sons and daughters

The racist policies which the Liberals have pursued over the past three years have made a bad situation worse. While Labour makes a pretence of providing equal treatment, the Liberals dispense with such niceties. They make no bones about the fact that they are out to protect the white community. The effect of Liberal policies has been to make local bigots more confident about speaking out.

The new administration swept away quangos like the Race and Housing Action Team and the Ethnic Minority Committee. It restored such discriminatory policies as the ‘sons and daughters’ rule, under which people with parents born in the borough get priority housing allocation. It caused a storm by evicting Bangladeshis from bed and breakfast hotels on the grounds that they had made themselves ‘intentionally homeless’—by leaving Bangladesh. The council even

suggested dumping Bangladeshis on to a ship moored on the Thames. Not surprisingly the Liberals have found favour with the likes of George Landerkin.

In the chauvinist climate created by the Liberals, every aspect of life takes a racist form. The effects of the teaching crisis in the borough, for example, have fallen almost entirely on the Bangladeshi community. Last term 280 children were denied school places because of lack of teachers. All but four were Bangladeshi. Up to 1000 may have to be kept at home when schools open this month; nearly all are expected to be Bangladeshi.

The most striking example of the new climate is the offensive the police have launched against the Asian community, as demonstrated by their attack on the July march protesting about the death of Ismot Ali. Nural Ali was one of 40 marchers arrested. ‘The police are the real racists’, he says. ‘They’re the National Front round here. They pick on us everywhere we go. It’s happening all the time and it’s going to happen more and more. Our people are going to have to get used to it.’

### ‘Do what you like’

The police offensive has in turn encouraged racist thugs. ‘The police have been telling whites “Do whatever you like with the Pakis, we’ll help you”, says Ali. ‘If the whites do something they get away with it, if we do something we get charged. Because we are young and we are Bengalis, we have to stand up for our rights and we become criminals.’

Labour hopes to retake the council next year. But will it make any difference? Even Therese Shanahan isn’t sure:

‘I don’t see things changing that much. In terms of what’s available, in terms of housing stock, it’s going to be even worse. But if you take something like the murder in Bethnal Green, there would be a view from the borough, as elected representatives, supporting the community.’

Tea and sympathy from the council won’t be enough for the Asian community. They need practical assistance to help defend their communities against racist thugs, in or out of uniform. And it will take a political campaign inside the white working class to isolate people like Landerkin, and convince other EastEnders that they have a common interest in turning their anger against the authorities and political parties which have sold them short and blamed the problems on Bangladeshis.

## Cold fusion

# Storm in a test-tube?

**Manjit Singh suggests that the furious row over nuclear fusion has as much to do with financial interests as with scientific inquiry**

Scientific experiments rarely make the headlines. Yet since March, when two chemists from the University of Utah called a press conference to announce that they had discovered a process which could provide unlimited amounts of cheap energy, the mainstream media have been full of excited debate about 'cold fusion'.

To those unfamiliar with the workings of the scientific establishment, it may all sound like a highly arcane intellectual discourse. But behind the scenes, the cold fusion affair is a sordid example of the way that capitalist economics and elitism distort and degrade scientific development.

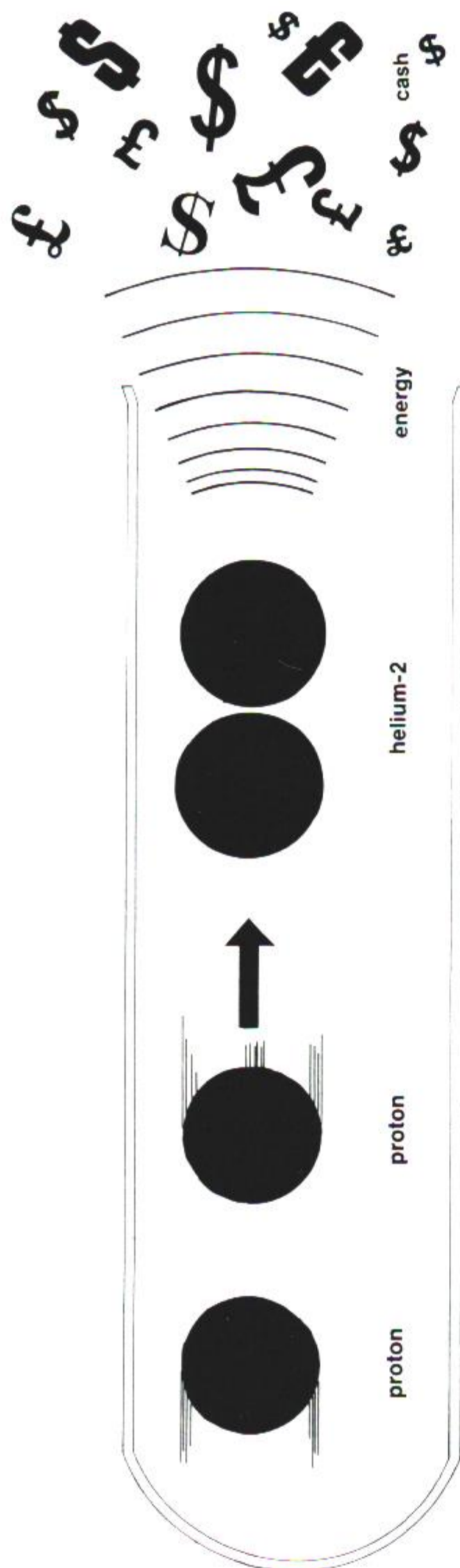
What is cold fusion, and why has the debate around it taken on the dimensions of a soap opera?

Nuclear fusion powers the sun. Two 'light' elements fuse together into a 'heavier' one; for example, the fusion of two hydrogen atoms into one of helium. The mass of the helium atom is not, however, the sum of its parts—it is less than the mass of the two hydrogen atoms. Where has the missing mass gone? Enter Albert Einstein's  $E=MC^2$ , which explains that the mass,  $M$ , has been spirited away as energy,  $E$ . This yielding of energy in the nuclear fusion process makes the sun shine.

## Harnessing H-bombs

Since Hans Bethe worked out how the sun generates its enormous energy in 1938, physicists have tried to reproduce nuclear fusion in the laboratory. They have spent billions of pounds pursuing the dream of fusion to meet the ever-increasing demand for energy, but with little success. Two major problems have persisted. First, how to control nuclear fusion; with an uncontrolled reaction, you get the hydrogen bomb. Second, how to cope with the temperatures of millions of degrees required for fusion; no known material can withstand such heat.

The hope of harnessing the energy of the H-bomb seemed as distant as the sun itself, until Utah's Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann made their shock announcement to the press in March. They claimed that by running an electric current through



two palladium electrodes in a test-tube of 'heavy water', they had produced more energy than they put in. The excess energy was given off as heat. Pons and Fleischmann believed that the palladium metal had soaked up large amounts of deuterium (a form of hydrogen present in heavy water). As a consequence, the deuterium atoms were squeezed together inside the electrode to the point where they fused to create helium, so releasing energy. The experiment was performed at room temperature and was thus dubbed cold fusion.

Scientists rushed to their labs to try to replicate the Pons-Fleischmann experiment. Their work proved difficult, since little data on the original experiment had been made available. This didn't stop some scientists announcing within days

that they had obtained the same results. Others said they had failed to do so. Chemists from the A&M University in the USA captured the air of confusion. They came out in support of Pons and Fleischmann, then issued a retraction, and then retracted their retraction. None of the claims of having achieved cold fusion has been widely accepted.

The ensuing row about cold fusion has not been an educated exchange between disinterested experts. It is infected with self-interest, squabbling over status, and financial greed—just like every other scientific debate in our society.

## Faction fight

Much of the scientific establishment immediately took against Pons and Fleischmann because they had not gone through the 'proper channels'. The convention is that new research is submitted for publication in some suitably worthy scientific journal. It is then passed on to referees, scientists considered pre-eminent in their field, who pass judgement. The scientist submitting the research may then be told to go and do some more work on it—if he's lucky.

The process of submission, acceptance and publication can take a couple of years for a piece of sound conventional work, never mind anything challenging the prevailing wisdom. This is a useful mechanism for keeping the pecking order in place, and ensuring that those at the top of the hierarchy maintain their monopoly on scientific wisdom. When Pons and Fleischmann bypassed the system and announced their experiment at a press conference, they were guaranteed to get an immediate high profile—and to get their work panned by those whose feathers they thus ruffled.

Most importantly, the cold fusion debate is a faction fight between the physics and chemistry wings of the scientific world. At stake are status, recognition and a bigger share of the strictly limited research funds now available.

Physicists who have dominated research into nuclear fusion were furious at the idea of two chemists

The war of words between chemists and physicists reflects the increasingly desperate scramble for limited research funds

making the breakthrough. Many believed that Pons and Fleischmann had no business straying on to their turf and speculating about nuclear physics. At the American Physical Society annual meeting in May, speaker after speaker condemned the experiment in a lynch-mob atmosphere. The loudest applause was reserved for Steven Koozin's declaration that 'we are suffering from the incompetence and perhaps the delusions of chemists'.

A month earlier, on the other side of the divide, Stanley Pons told 10 000 members of the American Chemical Society packed into a Dallas basketball stadium that cold fusion represented 'a victory over the physicists'. Society president Clayton Callis rubbed another big handful of salt into the wound, pointing out that physicists had spent a lot of money and failed: 'Now it appears that chemists have come to the rescue.'

The war of words between chemists and physicists reflects the increasingly desperate scramble for limited research funds. Capitalist governments and corporations can no longer afford to hand out cash for scientific research unless it is going to be an earner or give them a boost against foreign rivals. In the search for fusion, with its megabuck-making potential for producing unlimited energy, the capitalists placed their faith in the physicists. When funds

are given to one group, it's at the expense of the other. Pons and Fleischmann went public to demonstrate that chemists felt they had played second fiddle for too long.

In addition, the universities of Utah and Brigham Young (BYU) are squaring up for a legal battle over who discovered cold fusion first. BYU claims that research carried out by its Dr Steven Jones precedes the Utah team's work. In turn, Pons and Fleischmann have insinuated that Jones stole their idea when asked to vet their application for a US government grant. Each has applied for a worldwide patent. The claims and counter-claims have little to do with any search for scientific truth, and a lot to do with the race to win the obligatory and lucrative Nobel Prize that would go with a proven discovery of fusion.

### Quick bucks

Other researchers are also up in arms because Pons and Fleischmann refuse to release the details about their work. Many believe that their hastily published paper was far too sketchy to allow reproduction. Disclosing too many details would have made a patent application impossible. But some sort of public disclosure was highly desirable to generate research funds. The result was a quick press conference, a

shoddily-written paper—and a decision by the Utah legislature to earmark \$5m for future cold fusion research.

Scientific opinion about cold fusion remains divided. In June, the UK Atomic Energy Authority team at Harwell gave up the ghost after spending £320 000 carrying out 125 variations on the Pons-Fleischmann experiment. For now, it seems more than likely that cold fusion remains a storm in a test-tube, and that the Pons-Fleischmann experiment can be explained by some other, hitherto unobserved, phenomenon requiring further research. But these issues have been almost buried in a debate that exposes the base motives behind the capitalist attitude to science.

The dream of fusion may well elude the scientists today. But those who think that natural, rather than social, barriers make such advances impossible would do well to heed the words of Marx, scientific socialist:

'Mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve; since...the problem itself only arises when the material conditions necessary for its solutions already exist or are at least in the process of formation.' (K Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1981 edition, p21)

# THE BLITZ

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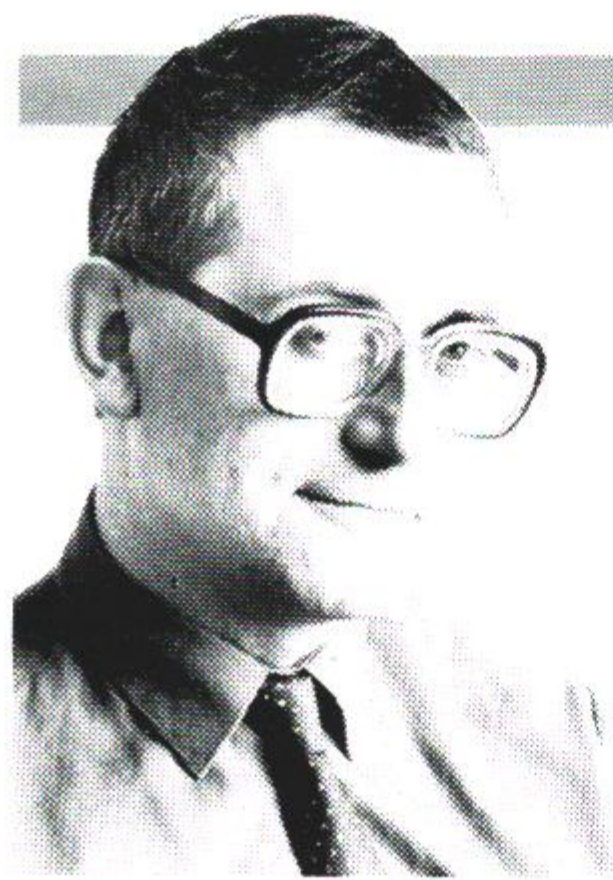
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Don Milligan

# NOT-SO-SOFT SHOE SHUFFLE

**T**hat woman is a menace. Nothing is sacred. She's going to allow solicitors, *without wigs*, to compete with barristers. She's breaking up the civil service and privatising water, wriggly worms and all. Now, most shocking, Margaret is dispensing with the services of the cabinet. Tory backbenchers and Labour spokesmen are squealing in unison; once great offices of state have become cyphers of prime ministerial whim. Cabinet government is undermined. British democracy is under attack; Margaret is being beastly to the chaps on her team. Grown men whimper under the slash of her razor tongue. Ministers expire at the click of her stilettos. Statesmen whine and Kinnock wets himself with admiration at her bottle. Lobby correspondents quiver with vicarious excitement at the carnage.

## *Playing musical mansions*

She does exactly what she likes. She refuses to listen to anybody as she ensures that rivals to her leadership are consigned to oblivion. Margaret Hilda Thatcher, the presidential prime minister, has got completely out of hand. She has sold the family silver, made the son of a trapeze artist from Brixton into the foreign secretary, and given the chancellor's mansion away to the deputy prime minister.

I have watched this process of degenerate squabbling with some interest. I can't help admiring Margaret's fortitude in the face of spineless incompetence. Her slaughter of sacred cows, her determination to see that the investors get a proper return, has certainly impressed me. Most of all, her abrasive style has enabled me to glimpse how we are governed. The mystery is beginning to clear, as the thwack of Mrs Thatcher's firm government provides fresh insights into how things are managed under British democracy.

Until this summer's cabinet reshuffle, for instance, I didn't know that British prime ministers had two country mansions at their disposal. Of course I've known for some time that the door to the little terraced house in Downing Street opens into an enormous palace. I also knew that prime ministers had the use of the country mansion at Chequers. But I didn't know that they had Dorneywood, a mock Tudor house set in 215 acres of Buckinghamshire, and Chevening, an

elegant mansion in Kent.

All this only came to light because Margaret had to get Sir Geoffrey Howe out of the foreign office. This meant that the local boy from Brixton, John Major, had to be given vacant possession of Chevening. Sir Geoffrey had to be evicted not just from the foreign office, but also from the country house. Thatcher attempted to soften the blow by offering him Nigel Lawson's country retreat. Sir Geoffrey accepted, he has now moved into Dorneywood and the chancellor has been reduced to entertaining at the old vicarage in Blaby, Leicestershire.

It is interesting to think of Labour

subsidiary of Cable & Wireless which has been trying to recruit Lord Young to its board for some time. These no doubt entirely unfounded rumours were followed by Lord Young's decision to resign from the government to make room for 'new blood'. Margaret was then able to put this unblemished character into Tory central office as deputy chairman of the party. In this position he will be exceptionally well placed to introduce his business associates to the party treasurer.

People at Number 10 spend all day whispering in corners. Bernard Ingham, of the press office, is

ministers have always been prepared to take major decisions without consulting their colleagues.

It is normal for prime ministers to orchestrate constellations of cliques and cabals, ensuring that they are the only ones who know exactly what is going on. What is different about Margaret is that she is prepared to start a plot about the seating arrangements at her dinner parties. Then she leaks to the press the name of the minister who has been punished by having to sit farthest from her presence. No issue is too trivial for Margaret to set up a special committee and take the chair herself. Previous prime ministers have been devious and secretive about declaring war or fixing the bank rate. She can whip up paranoia over the mismanagement of the stationery office.

## *State secrets*

For me, the great advantage of Thatcher's antics is that they have torn the veil. As Margaret struggles to get the state, the judiciary and the political establishment to realise the enormity of the crisis that the British system faces, she has allowed us to see something of how the capitalist dictatorship works. The mythology of state neutrality is in jeopardy; its credibility all but gone. Fewer and fewer people are prepared to believe anything that the authorities tell them.

Behind the paraphernalia and ritual of constitutional forms, the trappings of statesmanship, lies the chaotic and unseemly scramble for ministerial privileges, money and power. Tory grandees and shadow ministers are understandably appalled. As the guardians of British democracy and the heirs to government patronage they are desperate to keep us all in the dark. The lack of imagination, the dismal corruption and the paranoia that cabinet government provokes must be shrouded in secrecy.

I will not join those leaping to defend the supposedly wholesome tradition of cabinet government against Thatcher. I can't imagine many things worse than that big table in Downing Street surrounded by the smug and greedy faces of British ministers. They can cut each other to ribbons for all I care. Nigel Lawson and Gerald Kaufman may want the country to be governed by a harmonious committee of spivs and slysters, but I can do without it.

**'Her critics would have us believe that pre-Thatcher British government was run like a parish council with the PM taking the part of the vicar'**

premiers Jim Callaghan and Harold Wilson handing out these houses to their friends—just think of Denis Healey swishing down to Chevening in his ministerial car to entertain his friends from the labour movement. And think of all the other democratic traditions of cabinet government so publicly displayed in July: the horse-trading, the words-in-the-ear, the promises of chauffeurs, public school fees and private medicine; places on the boards of banks and industrial companies. Behind all that rhetoric about statesmanship, conviction and commitment to abiding values lies this little nest of corruption: cabinet government, the whole thing kept together by threats and inducements.

Thatcher wanted to get rid of her trade and industry secretary, Lord Young of Graffham. He showed no sign of quitting until stories began to circulate that he was corruptly giving ministerial favours to Mercury, a

deployed to undermine opponents with off-the-record chats to correspondents. Lord Willie Whitelaw quietly takes ministers to one side, advising caution, humility and, at times, outright resignation. Margaret has had to sack ministers at the rate of one every four months since 1979.

Left and right seem unanimous: this spiteful, all-powerful harridan is destroying another fine old homely tradition. By implication we are supposed to believe that pre-Thatcher British government was run like a parish council with the PM taking the part of the vicar. We are supposed to forget that Labour's Clement Attlee decided to make Britain a nuclear power without telling anybody in his cabinet. How did Tony Benn, a minister in Wilson's cabinet, learn that the government of which he was a member had deployed troops on the streets of Derry in 1969? By listening to a BBC news broadcast. Prime

Striking in the USSR

# Undermining perestroika

**Gorbachev's perestroika might excite Western commentators but, explains Dave Lamb, it is inciting Soviet workers to strike**

'I don't trust him and don't believe him. Nor does 90 per cent of the population. Five years ago in the era of stagnation it was better than it is now.'

For this Soviet miner and others like him in Siberia and the Ukraine, Mikhail Gorbachev's five years of broken promises have proved too much. What began as a demand for more soap to wash away the coal dust turned into the biggest display of

working class power since the 1920s. Within 10 days of the first walkout in early July, at a pit in Mezhdurechensk, western Siberia, the miners had formed regional strike committees and raised demands which shook the Kremlin to its foundations.

Gorbachev claimed that the strikes were a blow against the hardliners in the bureaucracy and a vote of confidence in his reform programme. He went on television three times to

tell the miners to go back to work to prevent a backlash against perestroika by the conservatives. In fact the strikes demonstrated in the sharpest possible way that, in practice, the working class wants nothing to do with perestroika. Its experience of Gorbachev's reforms is one of price rises, worsening shortages of consumer goods and a crackdown on labour discipline.

## Resisting reforms

The miners were striking *against* perestroika, not to demand more of it as Gorbachev suggested. Indeed, the bureaucracy was able to bring the protests under control only by agreeing to a package of concessions which directly undermines the reform programme. The whole point of perestroika is to do away with the guarantees which Gorbachev was forced to give the miners.

The bureaucracy's fear of strikes spreading to other groups of disaffected workers is now the biggest barrier to the further implementation of perestroika. The mere mention of price reform is enough to flood newspaper offices with letters of complaint. Even the attempt to introduce a private sector in the form of cooperatives has met stiff opposition from workers reacting to the exorbitant prices being charged for goods in short supply. One of the main demands of the striking miners was for the immediate closure of all local cooperatives. Other workers have attacked, firebombed or looted the stores and farms in fury.

## Harder and faster

Until the miners made history on 10 July by making demands on Moscow, strikes by Soviet workers were short-lived affairs usually aimed at local management. Shop assistants, quarry workers, small groups of miners, bus drivers, air-traffic controllers and even policemen have all taken strike action over the past 18 months. These outbursts have been a direct response to the consequences of perestroika. For instance, the plan to give enterprises a free hand in the marketplace has meant giving managers a free hand to renegotiate working conditions across the board. As workers have



The Soviet bureaucracy has promised workers a new, shining society—and failed to come up with a bar of soap

Many Soviet reformers would feel at home at the Tory Party conference, as they vie with each other in the search for more extreme ways of dealing with the labour problem

been forced to work harder and faster to meet the new terms, they have suffered savage cuts in bonuses which make up 55 per cent of the average wage packet.

Reforms in industry are hated by most workers because they have given local management more power to do as they like. Even the much-acclaimed right of workers to elect their factory heads and get involved in workers' councils has done little to alleviate conflict on the factory floor. A survey published late last year revealed that less than three per cent of workers in 120 large factories thought the councils were any use. Just 14 per cent felt they had any say in the decision-making process. The survey results confirmed that it was never a very realistic proposition to expect workers to get excited about the right to vote to give themselves a wage cut.

### 'Give me this'

The crackdown in the factories has been accompanied by an ideological offensive against the working class. In particular, the reformers have blamed the failure of perestroika on what they term the 'levelling mentality'. In language reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's assault on the 'dependency culture' spawned by the 'nanny state', radical economist Vasilii Selyunin argued that the Soviet system had fashioned a layer

of social parasites who expect something for nothing:

'Give me a free mansion, give me as much cheap meat as I want, give me this, give me that, and at the same time get rid of my neighbour, who started working on his own and now lives...the son of a bitch...better than me.' (*Literaturnaya Gazeta*, July 1987)

These prejudices have now become official state policy.

Gorbachev's favoured method of defeating the 'levelling mentality' is to encourage competition between workers on the shopfloor. Since he took over in 1985 brigade contracts have become commonplace. A group of workers is hired by an enterprise on an agreed contract to finish a job in a given time using a set amount of materials, etc. Any savings or bonuses are shared out among the brigade workers according to how the brigade leaders judge their individual performance. Today, more than 60 per cent of manual workers are employed under this system, and Gorbachev wants to extend it to cover the whole workforce.

### No soap

Gorbachev's every reform has aimed at re-establishing the link between performance and reward. The problem is that even if the link is reforged through wage incentives, there is nothing for workers to spend their money on in the shops. The fact that the miners, who earn twice as much as anybody else, came out on strike for more soap testifies to the limits of perestroika.

In the absence of consumer goods, the bureaucrats are toying with other ways of giving workers an incentive to work harder. If the aim is to instil a competitive spirit, what better way to do so than the threat of unemployment? The difference between a radical and a conservative in the Soviet Union these days seems to lie in the size of the reserve army of labour they would like to create. The most radical reformers want to abolish the guaranteed right to work which is written into the constitution. To suggest an unemployment figure over 15m will guarantee you a place at any Moscow dinner party.

Vladimir Kostakov, a labour specialist at the state planning agency Gosplan, expressed impatience at the idea that 'socialism need be synonymous with the absence of unemployment'. He insisted that the right to work should not mean the right to keep a job at any cost (*Izvestia*, 11 January). Many Soviet reformers would feel at home at the Tory Party conference, as they vie with each other in the search for more extreme ways of dealing with the labour problem once and for all.

This is the background to the embryonic working class resistance to the bureaucracy. The strikes of the past 18 months represent a major shift in Soviet society, away from the relative stability of the past to a new form of direct conflict. The working class has no choice but to fight if it is to maintain even a basic standard of living. The past five years of economic collapse, and the attacks of an increasingly desperate bureaucracy, have taught Soviet workers this much.

The speed with which the strikes spread gave some intimation of the depth of feeling in the working class. The conditions in which the miners are forced to live and work are not peculiar to Siberia or the Ukraine. The empty shelves, the endless queues and the rationing of sugar, meat and salt, are part and parcel of everyday life for millions. Today, 54m working class people live below the official poverty level for 1960. The Soviet 'superpower' lies fifty-sixth in the world league table for consumption per head, behind many third world countries. Half of all hospitals are without regular supplies of running water. Life is becoming intolerable for ordinary people.

As well as these insufferable conditions of life, miners are doing a job which has killed more than 10 000 since 1980. If you are a miner living in the Kuznetsk Basin your life expectancy is 10 years below the Soviet average. Your average wage is 350 roubles a month—up to 110 roubles of which is made up of bonuses. One wrong move can lose you your entire bonus. There is no such thing as double time for late shifts or weekend work. This is life for what is supposed to be the elite of the Soviet working class.

### Power politics

The upsurge of strikes by miners across vast areas of the Soviet Union at the start of this summer shows that workers are not prepared to put up with the privations and punishment visited upon them in the name of perestroika. The strike wave also proves that the working class is *the* force for change and progress in the Soviet Union.

For years the Western media have feted the intellectuals and dissidents of the Soviet opposition as the motor of change. Yet in the space of a week the working class put more pressure on the bureaucracy than the middle class oppositionists ever did in a lifetime of protests. The awakening of the Soviet working class is a cause for celebration. As for the Soviet bureaucracy, it would rather have to contend with a million Boris Yeltsins than with the power of the proletariat.

## Confrontation 5

**The death agony of Stalinism—a symposium  
Can Europe be one?—a Marxist perspective  
on 1992**

CONFRONTATION is the theoretical journal of the Revolutionary Communist Party. The new issue, out this month, carries the proceedings of a recent conference on Stalinism, covering everything from the relationship between Leninism and Stalinism to the consequences of glasnost for Western Marxists.

CONFRONTATION costs £3.95 plus 50p p&p. A four-issue subscription costs £15 to Britain and Northern Ireland, £18 by airmail to Europe and Southern Ireland, and £16 by surface mail to other countries. (Libraries and institutions add £10.)

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# CONFRONTATION

## OUT NOW!

PHOTO: Gemma Forest

Up in the mountains, men and women wearing combat fatigues and sunglasses stand guard, some squinting up at the helicopters churring overhead, others scanning the road below. Men in camouflage hold outposts further up the mountains on spine-backed ridges, ready to ambush passing trucks with spiked jacks, dynamite and guns. Others cruise a two-mile stretch of road in pick-ups and cars, waiting for the signal to move into action against convoys attempting the climb from the valley.

A guerrilla war? Very nearly. But this is not Peru or Bolivia. It's West Virginian coal-mining country, deep in the Appalachians. The event? A miners' strike against Pittston Company, America's largest coal exporter.

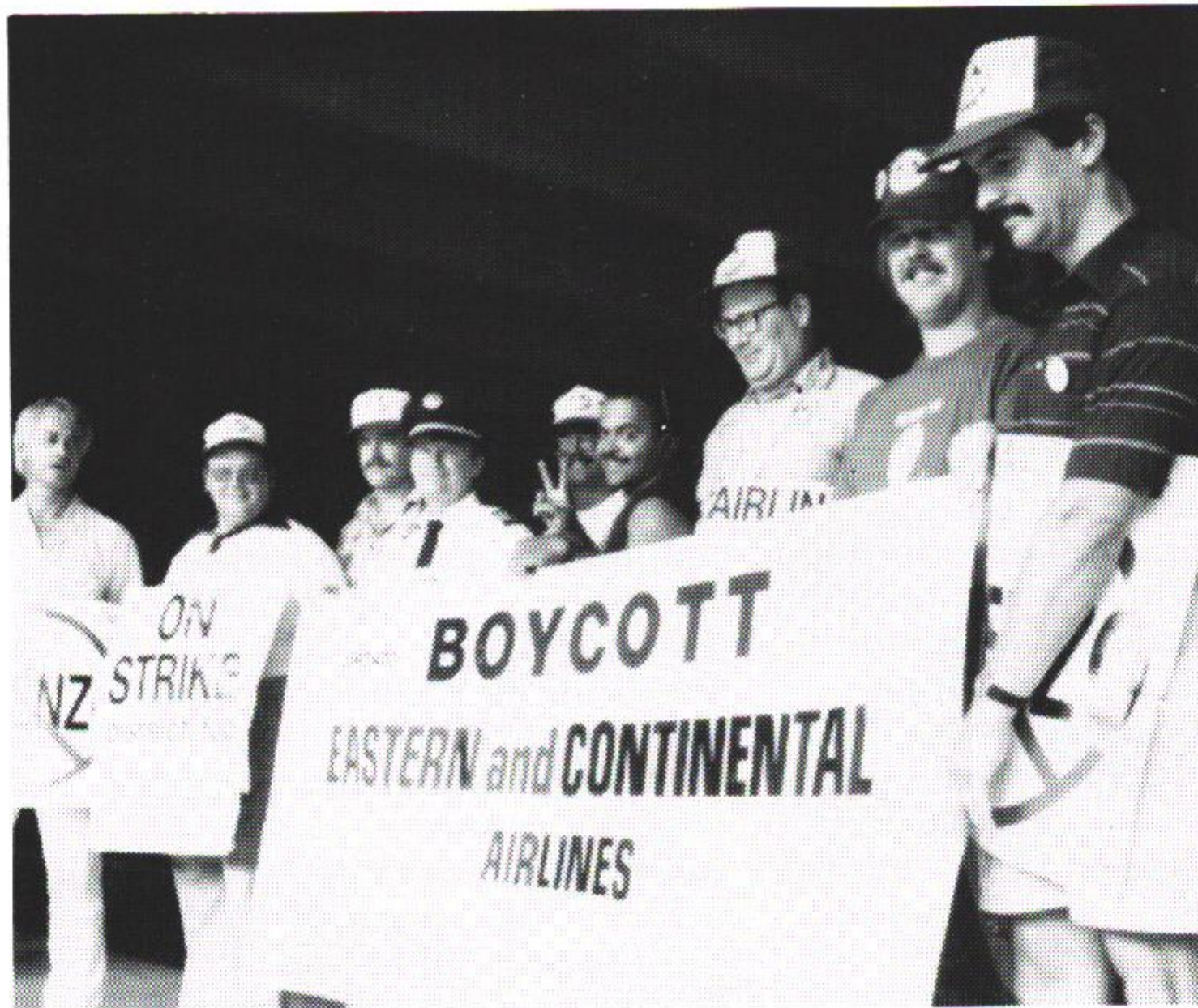
Since the strike began in April, pickets trying to blockade Moss 3 pit-head have confronted state troops and their employers' private army—notorious Vance Security men brought in to protect scabs. While union officials have tried to make it a peaceful, sit-down protest, many strikers have gone for stronger action. They have dynamited a manager's pick-up, hospitalised a coal boss, and issued death threats to managers. Scabs have been beaten up, stoned and shot at—they have to be guarded by troops and airlifted into the mines by company helicopters.

#### More work, less pay

The popular view in Britain is that ordinary Americans are the most capitalist people in the world, all rich and right-wing. But the militancy of the striking miners, riding shotgun in the Appalachian mountains, suggests that American workers are not as passive as they are painted. Several industrial disputes this year, involving miners, airline workers and others, show that the 'classless' USA is not so classless after all.

It is not hard to find the reasons for the renewed industrial unrest. Contrary to popular belief, American workers are far from affluent. Indeed, in the traditional 'rust-belt' manufacturing industries, many workers have had their wages cut in the eighties, through 'give-back' deals between the unions and employers. Today five million Americans are on the legal minimum wage rate of \$3.35 an hour; president Bush recently vetoed an attempt to raise that minimum. Another 10m take home less than \$9000 a year—in a country where the official poverty-level wages for a family of just three are calculated at \$9431.

American workers are also being forced to work longer hours. Since 1973, the average working week in the USA, including time spent commuting, has risen from 41 to 47 hours. On top of this punishing routine comes an increase in accidents, caused by speed-ups and exhaustion. The overall toll on the American working class is so grim that, between 1986



### Striking in the USA

# 'SOMEBODY IS GOING TO GET HURT'

*If there is no working class in America, asks Gemma Forest, then who are those strikers at the coal-mines and airports?*

and 1987 alone, permanent work-related disabilities jumped from 60 000 to 70 000. In a dangerous sector like mining, injuries among underground workers have spiralled by 60 per cent in four years.

The profit-at-all-cost climate in the declining American economy prompted a backlash of strike action this spring and summer. As usual in the USA, the industrial conflicts have often been brutal, no-holds-barred affairs.

American employers have never run their companies through the machinery of union-management cooperation and conciliation that was traditional in Britain, pre-Thatcher. In the USA, the capitalist class has always dealt with the working class directly. In conditions of economic crisis like today that means union-busting and wage cuts, commonly backed up by troops and hired thugs where necessary. And without the inhibitions bred by institutionalised TUC-style trade unionism, American workers are ready to reply in kind—often with shotguns, dynamite and the tactics that they pioneered such as flying pickets and sit-ins. The latest disputes illustrate both the viciousness of management's attacks and the

tenacity of those resisting.

Since March, there has been a nationwide lock-out of 28 000 aircraft maintenance workers ('machinists') at Eastern Airlines, a subsidiary of Frank Lorenzo's Texas Air Corporation. Lorenzo, the model for Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*, wanted to break the International Association of Machinists (IAM) by slashing wages from \$15.65 an hour to \$11.54, halving medical benefits and holidays, making staff pay for their own uniforms, and bringing in part timers at \$5 an hour.

All this Lorenzo has done before, in 1983, with Continental Airlines, smashing the unions to turn it into a low-cost, low-fare, non-union operation. But this time he has not had it so easy. Seeing that their turn was next, the Transport Workers Union flight attendants and Eastern's 3500-strong Airline Pilots Association elected to join the strike. The Eastern strikers have also enjoyed support from passengers who have had their fares impounded by Lorenzo, and from workers in the food, textile, telecommunications and trucking industries. Despite the use of scabs, the strike is effectively solid; Eastern

planes have scores of empty seats, lose money on every trip, and are sent off by jeering picket lines.

In West Virginia, the United Mine Workers' (UMW) members have been slugging it out with Pittston Company over redundancies, unlimited overtime (Sundays included), subcontracting out to non-union labour, and a 20 per cent cut in health benefits to 1500 retired and disabled miners—a cut preceded by more than a year of no benefits at all.

At its height, the strike spread to 11 states beyond Virginia, and enlisted nearly half of the UMW's 65 000 members in solidarity action. Despite multi-million court fines against the UMW, and back-to-work deals between coal bosses and UMW leaders which undermined solidarity, the strikers refuse to give in. The feelings of Walter Meade, a 61-year-old retired miner who lost a son in a mining explosion six years ago, are typical: 'They try to make us weaker and weaker. Instead it's going to make us meaner and meaner. Somebody is going to get hurt.'

#### 'Stand up, America'

The militancy of the Eastern Airlines machinists and West Virginian miners demonstrates that, despite the popular images of America, wherever there is capitalism there is a working class that is forced to fight for its livelihood. Of course there are serious political problems among US workers. The unmediated character of class relations means that pro-capitalist ideas tend to exercise a more direct influence over society. Thus strikers' demands are often couched in the language of the American dream: US democracy, individual rights and the national interest.

Strikers involved in the Eastern Airlines dispute, for example, issued a leaflet appealing to public patriotism against the 'un-American' rapacity of Wall Street. It shows the Statue of Liberty being menaced by Frank Lorenzo caricatured as a vampire: 'Stand up to Lorenzo, America.' For their part, many Appalachian miners have a shameful record of racism. These conservative prejudices have always handed the authorities useful political weapons to use against American workers—by telling them that striking is damaging the national interest, or dividing a workforce along racial and ethnic lines.

Despite these serious political problems, the British working class could learn a thing or two from the Americans. During the hard times of the Thatcher years, industrial relations in this country have moved closer towards the confrontational American model. We have become accustomed to management aggression, court interventions and police violence against workers. As the capitalists get weaker and weaker, they get meaner and meaner. Like the miners in combat gear, we need to do the same.





Beirut: how many Lebanese lives equal one Terry Waite?

PHOTO: Ryuichi Hirokawa

*Behind the hostage crisis*

# THE PRICE OF LIFE

*Daniel Nassim accuses the Western world of hypocrisy in its attitude to life, the hostages and everything*

What is the value of human life? Politicians, priests and philosophers love pontificating on the subject. But if we examine their attitudes to something like the Middle Eastern hostage crisis, their concern for the sanctity of human life becomes less clear-cut.

The hostage crisis has filled countless broadcast hours of television news and documentaries. It has taken up enough column inches of newspapers to stretch from London to Tehran and back many times. Yet all this coverage is peculiarly selective.

Have you ever heard of the three Iranian hostages held in Lebanon? Hossein Musavi, Ahmad Mostafavian and Kazem Akhavan were kidnapped back in 1982—almost five years before Terry Waite. Nor do we hear much about Mahmoud el-Jiar, an Egyptian Muslim cleric, kidnapped in 1988.

The 17 Western hostages held in Lebanon are not the sort of people that somebody like George Bush would normally lose sleep over. There is retired fighter pilot Jackie Mann. After 43 years in Lebanon he speaks no Arabic, hates Lebanese food and insists on a British breakfast every morning. Joseph Cicippio is a former American accountant who went to Lebanon as a convert to Islam. Other hostages include West German aid workers, an Italian businessman and an American book salesman.

In a different time and place, Western governments and journalists would not give a thought to the fate of such men who have no influence in the world. In America they could be

shot, run over or kidnapped without ever appearing on the agenda of a White House meeting. Yet as hostages within Lebanon, the lives of these same people suddenly become immensely important and valuable in the West.

The claim that Western leaders are concerned about human lives does not stand up to the most cursory examination. They have not turned a hair at the vast majority of deaths in the war-torn Middle East.

In the past 14 years of civil war about 150 000 people have been killed and some 200 000 seriously injured in Lebanon. That works out at an average of nearly 30 Lebanese and Palestinians killed every day. But the day-to-day death toll passes unnoticed. It takes an escalation of violence like this summer's battles in Beirut to make Lebanon newsworthy in the West; and even then, the major concern often seems to be with the impact which hundreds of Lebanese deaths will have on the attempt to free a Western hostage.

## State kidnapping

The 600 Palestinians killed by Israel during the current *intifada* in the occupied territories are mere statistics to Western politicians and pundits; we rarely hear their life stories, or see the grief of their families, in the way that we have become accustomed to learning the personal details of American hostages. The shooting down of an Iranian Airbus by an American warship last year killed 290 people; no doubt many of them were also accountants,

book sellers and other unexceptional people. Yet their killing did not prompt Western commentators to deliver sermons to the US navy on the sanctity of life.

It is equally hard to believe that the West has any objection in principle to hostage-taking or kidnapping. Right wingers supported Israel's kidnapping of Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid. None have complained about Israel's capture and imprisonment of 300 Lebanese Shiites in southern Lebanon. During the *intifada* some 5000 Palestinians have been rounded up and detained without even the formality of a sham trial. This campaign of political kidnapping and hostage-holding by the Zionist state is casually excused and accepted as an anti-terrorist operation.

## Play the victim

The truth is that Western leaders will show selective concern about killing and kidnapping when it suits their interests. The killing of a US Marine colonel by Islamic guerrillas in Lebanon is a challenge to Western authority. As such, it demands a hardline, high-profile response. The killing of Sheikh Obeid's neighbour, who tried to defend him against Israeli kidnappers, can be safely ignored; one less 'Mad Mullah' to worry about.

The significance of the hostage issue is that it allows the West to pose as the *victim* in the Middle East. This is an important device for legitimising interference in the region, and covering up the Western powers' responsibility for the conflicts. The

fact that French colonialists created the sectarian Lebanese state, that the West has since fomented the bitter communal divisions there and often backed the Maronite Christian forces, and that the USA has armed Israel to terrorise the Arab world, can all be swept aside in a flood of moral condemnations about the treatment of a dozen hostages.

In the recent period, hostage diplomacy in Lebanon has also provided a convenient opening for the Americans to try to regain some of the influence in Iran which they lost with the fall of the Shah in 1979. Talking about the hostages has been a way of making covert contacts with more pro-Western elements in the Iranian regime. The fact that the hostages are held by pro-Iranian groups provides a convenient pretext.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy, Terry Waite, was a small player in this cynical game. He apparently acted as a go-between during the Irangate deals, in which the Reagan administration sought to get closer to Iran by swapping arms for hostages. Before his capture Terry Waite was being flown around the Middle East in US airforce helicopters. The latest rumour to come out of the Middle East is that he was captured and soon killed because he was found to be wearing a secret communications device that did not fit with his image as a humanitarian missionary.

## Advertising stunt

Western rulers also have domestic reasons for hyping the hostage crisis. It allows them to harangue us about the carnage and barbarity of foreigners—which, by implication, becomes an advert for the virtues of our peaceful, civilised society. In stirring up chauvinist hostility to bloodthirsty Arabs and support for Western interference in the Middle East, the hostage crisis has been a valuable weapon in the propaganda war at home. The media have played their full part in these manoeuvres, preying on public sympathy for the girlfriends and relatives of the hostages to promote a xenophobic backlash.

The hypocrisy of Western attitudes towards life, death and suffering is not confined to the Middle East. The killing of one British tourist in Kenya has received many times more media publicity than the deaths of 100 000 people in Mozambique over 15 years of a war caused by South Africa.

Western cynicism is best illustrated by the latest Irangate revelations. Former US officials have alleged that Bush held hostage negotiations with the Iranians back in 1980, when US embassy staff were being held in Tehran. The Islamic regime was offered \$40m—not to release the Americans, but to keep them locked up until after the 1980 US presidential election, thus ensuring humiliation for president Jimmy Carter and victory for Bush's boss, Ronald Reagan (see *Private Eye*, 4 August).

Why millions died

# A war to redivide the world

**Alan Harding locates the origins of the Second World War, not in Hitler's personality problems, but in the crisis of twentieth-century capitalism**

The standard British explanation of why the Second World War began 50 years ago this month is that Hitler was a power-mad maniac: the Führer dunnit. In so far as any blame is attached to Britain, it is for not doing enough to prevent the resurgence of the German people's 'naturally' aggressive tendencies.

First, we are told, Britain allowed the embittered French to dictate too punitive terms in the Versailles peace settlement imposed on a defeated Germany at the end of the First World War. This treaty then sowed the seeds of national resentment among the German people, from which Hitler was to reap the benefits.

Second, when the Nazis took power in 1933 and began to rattle their sabres, the British government apparently adopted a softly-softly policy of 'appeasement', which gave Hitler a free hand to avenge Versailles by occupying Germany's neighbours and preparing for war. So if the British cabinet hadn't made a couple of wrong-headed and weak-willed decisions, all the unpleasantness of 1939-45 could have been avoided.

This self-satisfied version of events does not stand up to the most

cursory examination. For example, the other 'aggressor' which was blamed for starting the war, and defeated in 1945, was Japan. Since Japan had been on the winning side in the First World War, it had no punitive peace deal imposed upon it. But even without the Versailles factor, Japan still felt the need to invade Manchuria in 1931, the rest of China in 1937, and to attack the USA and the British Empire in 1941. Why?



PHOTO: Hulton

The common dynamic which drove Germany and Japan towards war through the thirties was their shared need to challenge the international status quo, to increase their influence in the world capitalist order. In different ways, each found their development as major capitalist powers constrained by the old colonial empires of France and Britain, and by the growing economic and political might of the USA. Japan was prevented from expanding its influence in south-east Asia and the Pacific, while Germany was denied the same opportunity in Europe, the Near East, Africa and along the Atlantic trade routes. War proved to be their only option for redressing the balance.

### The sensible thing

The bland consensus which blames the war on German lunatics, aided and abetted by a few cowardly appeasers in the British establishment, ignores one simple point: the strategies pursued by both Germany and Britain in the thirties made perfect sense from the point of view of their respective ruling classes.

German capitalism had forged a unified state too late to establish a British-style colonial empire. Germany could only expand its sphere of influence to the east: through Poland and the Balkans, towards the grainlands of the Ukraine and then on to the rich coal and oil supplies of the Caucasus.

Hitler's policy of giving Germany *Lebensraum* (living space) through expansion to the east was not invented by crazed Nazi ideologues. Similar plans to push eastward had been a cornerstone of German foreign policy since the 1870s. In the thirties, German capitalism was able to pursue this policy by exploiting the weakness and conflict among the East European states created after the First World War. With or without Hitler, German foreign policy would have had to proceed along much the same lines.

### Imperial pacifists?

For the British establishment, appeasement of Germany was the corollary of not wanting to be embroiled in a European war. Britain's unique position as a capitalist power with global interests meant that it could have to fight simultaneously on three fronts—in the Pacific, the Atlantic and Europe—to defend its position against rival powers. Thus Whitehall wanted to postpone a European conflict until it was ready.

The traditional British policy was to assemble a Continental alliance to keep the major European power in check. But the weakness of France between the wars made this strategy more difficult to sustain. The result

was the appeasement of Germany as a ploy to win time while Britain prepared for war.

The pro-appeasement wing of the British establishment was hardly pacifist. It simply took a realistic view of Britain's options in the context of imperial commitments and European instability. As far back as 1919, such an infamous warmonger as South Africa's General Smuts had commended appeasement on behalf of the British imperial war cabinet:

'You cannot have a stable Europe without a stable settled Germany; and you cannot have a settled prosperous Great Britain while Europe is weltering in confusion and unsettlement next door. In our policy European settlement and appeasement of Germany becomes one of cardinal importance.' (Quoted in M Beloff, *Britain's Liberal Empire*, Volume 1 of *Imperial Sunset*, p291)

The 'appeasers' of the thirties took a similar approach, while appreciating that conflict with Germany could not be postponed indefinitely. The National government, a Tory-led coalition run by the 'appeasers', began rearming seriously from 1935. The commitment to war in the British ruling class had nothing to do with a hatred of fascism. Within the upper ranks of British society, there was widespread sympathy for the anti-working class policies of the fascist regimes. But the British establishment knew it would have to fight eventually to defend its position in the capitalist world order.

### Age of imperialism

The debate over appeasement was not one of principle; it was essentially a tactical dispute about when and where battle should be joined. In the thirties, appeasement made sense for British capitalism. It was supported not just by a few faint-hearts, but by the most important sections of the establishment; for example, the BBC and the national newspapers were fully involved in the appeasement policy, deliberately playing down criticism of Hitler in the thirties while Britain rearmed behind the scenes. By 1939, however, all sides of the establishment recognised that conflict could be postponed no longer. It is worth recalling that war was declared, not by Hitler, but by prime minister Neville Chamberlain—now branded the ultimate appeasing villain.

The conventional Versailles-Hitler-appeasement thesis on the origins of the war attributes blame to such intangible phenomena as personal weakness, megalomania, national character traits and so on. Yet, as the brief outline of German and British interests above suggests, there were far more real forces at work in the

run-up to September 1939. The war can only be properly understood if we situate it in the shifting historical context of international capitalism from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth—the age of imperialism.

Lenin's 1916 work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, provides important insights for understanding the major developments in international relations in the twentieth century. Lenin established that the imperialist epoch is characterised by 'the parasitism and decay of capitalism'. In this era of stagnation, the mounting economic problems facing every capitalist power can no longer be resolved through the home market. Thus each has to find international solutions, exporting not just commodities but capital, seeking new foreign outlets for investment and trade and sources of raw materials.

### Other means

There are two important consequences of this development. First, the world becomes divided between a handful of imperialist, oppressor states and the other, oppressed, nations: in its classical version this division takes the shape of direct colonialism, but even in our own 'post-colonial' times the imperialist powers exercise great influence over the third world through economic and political means. Second, the imperialist era is one of increasing competition between the major capitalist nations over spheres of international influence.

At times of economic crisis the rivalry among the imperialist powers becomes ever keener and more ruthless. War is the final resolution of such conflicts, the continuation of economic rivalries by other means.

Lenin described the First World War as 'a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital'. The Second World War can be described in the same way. Its causes lay in the instability and crisis of international capitalism. The contrasting political character of the leading Western protagonists—from the British constitutional monarchy through the American republic to the German fascist dictatorship—should not obscure this underlying fact. Nor should it disguise the way in which every imperialist power played its full part in beginning the bloodbath in 1939.

In the thirties, the major imperialist states were divided into three categories. There were the status quo powers, Britain and France, the old colonialists. The existing division of the world operated in their favour, and their concern was to keep those

When Chamberlain the 'appeaser' promised 'peace in our time' after Munich in 1938, his government was already preparing for war



To establish  
itself as the  
leading power  
in the world,  
America  
would have to  
confront the  
British  
Empire

arrangements intact. Then there were the anti-status quo powers, Germany and Japan. Their development was constrained by the prevailing division of the world, and their survival depended on smashing through the barriers presented by French and especially British influence.

Finally, in a class of its own, was the USA. American imperialism was the rising, most dynamic force in world affairs. It was not directly held back by the status quo in the same way as Germany and Japan. The Americans had far more positive reasons for wanting to alter the international order—to create a new, stable world under US leadership.

In passing, we may note that the Soviet Union played a peripheral role in the unfolding crisis. Unlike the capitalist economies, the Soviet system had no dynamic driving it towards war. Stalin's concern was to make powerful friends, stay out of trouble and protect his power at home. He signed a pact with Hitler in 1939; but when Germany invaded anyway in 1941, the Soviet Union was forced to fight the imperialists. Stalin ensured that it did so, not as an independent force, but as the ally of one imperialist bloc against another.

It is useful to trace the progress of competition among the great powers, against the background of unresolved economic crisis, with particular reference to the decline of Britain, the rise of the USA, and the relationship of Germany to both.

The modern world had been shaped in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1850 world steel production was 88 000 tons of which Britain accounted for half. By 1900 the figure was 28m tons. The tonnage of shipping using the Suez canal (opened in 1869) increased by 300 per cent between 1876 and 1890. The development of capitalism created a world economy, and antagonism between the national parts of that economy. In 1903 the historian Erich Marchs described the mood at the dawn of the century:

'The world is harder, more warlike, more exclusive; it is also, more than ever before one great unit in which everything interacts and affects everything else, but in which also everything collides and clashes.' (Quoted in G Barraclough, *Introduction to Contemporary History*, 1968, p53)

International antagonisms were exacerbated by economic crisis, experienced by all the leading capitalist powers. The new and unstable world economic order gave rise to new political conflicts, at the centre of which was the German Reich, founded in 1871. The newly unified German state had to struggle for space in which to develop. It lacked the Continental home market

which Tsarist Russia and the USA had used (with very different degrees of success) to establish themselves as players in the imperialist power game. And Germany's rise came too late to grab the most glittering prizes in the 'Scramble for Africa', through which the unknown continent was appropriated predominantly by France and Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain had dominated world trade through the productive power of its capital and the firepower of its navy. But as the age of imperialism opened, Britain was cast in a defensive role. To achieve its own place in the sun, Germany had to challenge British supremacy. The result was the German naval drive from the 1890s, and the recognition within the British establishment that Germany was now its main rival. This led British imperialism to establish the Entente Cordiale with its traditional enemies, France and Russia.

Germany responded with the Triple Alliance (which united it with the decaying Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires). Within a few years the old order had been destroyed in the Great War of 1914-18. The First World War was a traumatic experience; even in Britain, which suffered fewer losses than the other powers, nine per cent of men under 45 were killed. It produced a continued malaise within the European ruling classes. To make things worse the war failed to solve the problem of poor profitability, or to establish a new stable balance of power. A deeply troubled capitalist world was shaken further by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the spectre of working class revolts elsewhere.

### The fascist solution

No ruling class was secure. But those most vulnerable to economic dislocation, whose state lacked legitimacy in the aftermath of wartime defeat, and who faced a strong working class, were in the worst position. Germany was the prime example. In such extreme circumstances the capitalist class is prepared to countenance extreme solutions. Thus in 1933 the German establishment called upon Hitler's fascists to take a razor to the working class, and to take the necessary steps for another attempt at establishing the supremacy of German capitalism.

Yet the importance of the 'German question' in the origins of the Second World War is not reducible to the actions of the fascist regime of 1933-45. Its central significance is that it expressed the disequilibrium in European relations after the First World War. The anti-German Versailles settlement rubber-stamped the existence of a power vacuum at

the heart of Europe, which remained a source of profound instability.

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War all the major European powers faced economic and political crises, with revolution sweeping the Continent. But once the insurgent working class had been betrayed by the social democratic parties and viciously repressed by the ruling classes, the intervention of the new imperialist giant, the USA, led to a temporary economic recovery. The war years had turned America from a debtor to a creditor nation, and the chaotic post-war state of its European competitors allowed the USA access to new spheres of influence. The rise of US economic power was to be a crucial factor in the changing balance of international power. Yet, in the twenties, even America lacked the economic strength to sustain the recovery of German capitalism—the key to stability in Europe.

Trotsky summed up the state of affairs in his report to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920:

'The victory of the Entente and the Versailles peace have not halted the process of economic ruination and decay, but only altered its path and forms.

'German technology and the high productivity of German labour, these most important factors in the regeneration of world economy, are being even more paralysed after the Versailles peace than was the case in wartime.

'Fear of Germany's revenge dictates the policy of [France's Marshal] Foch: a policy of ever tightening the military vice to prevent Germany's regeneration.' (*The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol 1, pp108-9)

Germany was at the heart of the dislocation of the capitalist system. With France's national debt running at 300 billion francs, and Britain in hock to the USA, the Americans were the only ones who could do anything to stabilise post-war Germany. After the runaway inflation in Germany in 1923, the USA came up with the Dawes plan of 1924. American bankers poured funds into Europe, seeking to establish outlets for US investment and a market for US exports.

American money, speculation and gangsterism fuelled the capitalist carnival that was the economic boom of the Roaring Twenties. The characteristic features of the period are well captured by contemporary art: the vicious bloated plutocracy in the cartoons of George Grosz, the conspicuous consumption and hedonism of Scott Fitzgerald's jazz age, the corruption and decay of French society in the novels of

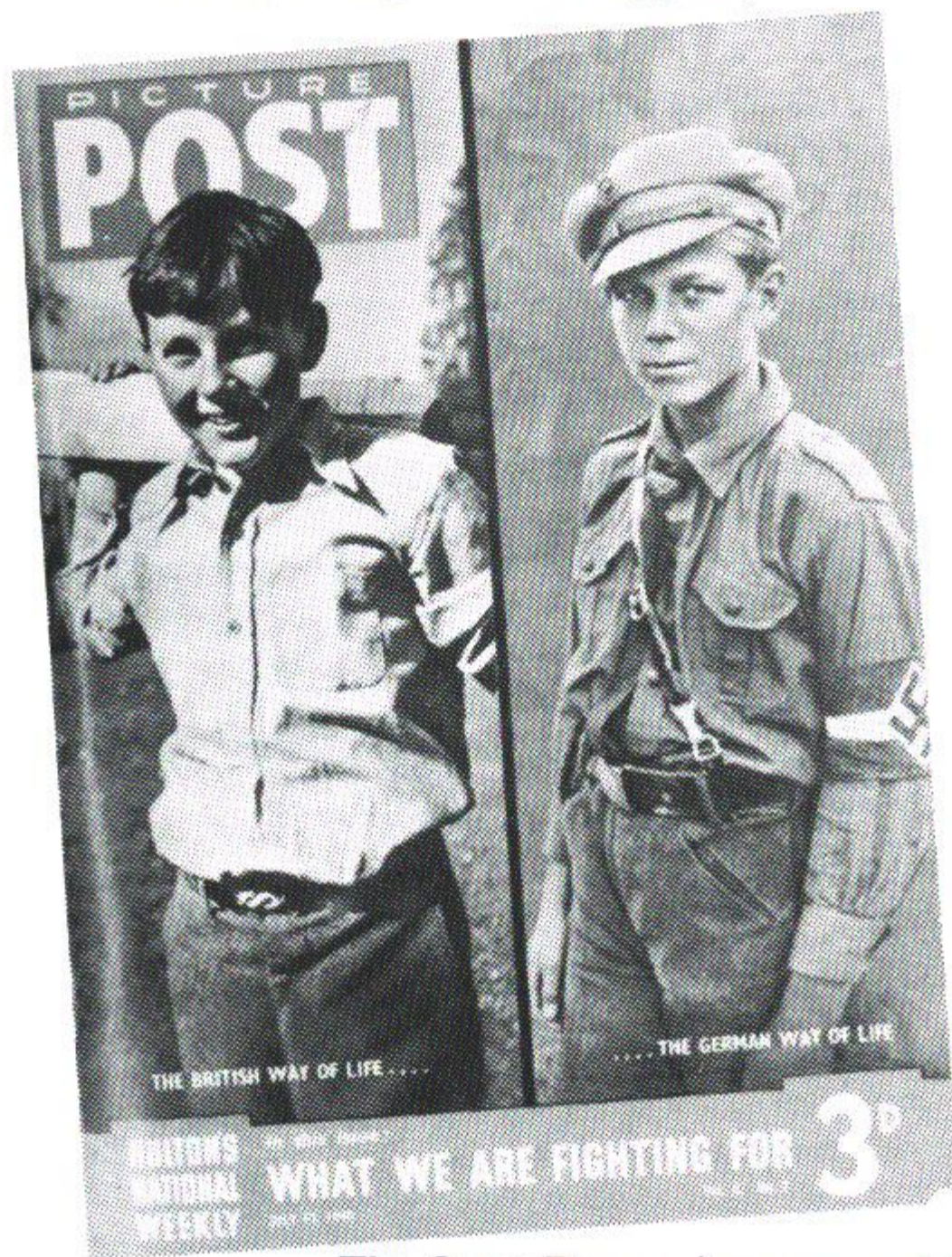
Celine, the ominous emergence of political violence and reaction in Brecht's Arturo Ui.

The expansion of the second half of the twenties could not last because the underlying problem of profitability had not been solved by the First World War. Even in the USA, the economic boom was built more on financial speculation and borrowed money than on the creation of real wealth.

The USA was self-sufficient in all but tropical fruit and a few industrial raw materials. Yet, lacking the strength to revitalise Europe, US vulnerability arose from the absence of export markets except through unsustainable credit:

'Though not immediately perceivable, the sad state of the European economies was bound to affect America's prosperity, for, just as every major crisis arising somewhere spreads over the whole globe, so a state of prosperity cannot be maintained in isolation from the rest of the world.' (P Mattick, *Economics, Politics and the Age of Inflation*, 1980, p118)

**Britain fought for the riches of Empire, not a rural idyll**



The Great Depression presaged by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 proved that, far from being able to guarantee European prosperity, the USA could not even keep its own economy out of recession. The Crash and the Depression were the continuation of the unresolved economic crisis which preceded the First World War. The Great Depression started in America only because in other countries the post-war recession had never really ended. The collapse of the European market after 1929 forced the USA to retreat into protectionism. The renewed economic crisis unleashed the maelstrom in international relations that culminated in the Second World War, which finally reorganised the balance of world power on a more lasting basis.

Thus the economic disequilibrium of the twenties and thirties was inherited from the pre-First World War period. And the unresolved economic crisis spilled over into politics.

'“Tomorrow” looms like a black threat over the exploiters’ world. The imperialist war has completely destroyed the old system of alliances and mutual guarantees which lay at the bottom of the world balance of power and armed peace. The Versailles treaty has created no new balance of power in place of the old.’ (*The First Five Years...*, p102).

The period from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 is 21 years. But there were only eight years between the end of the French military occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. That is a more accurate assessment of the length of ‘peacetime’ in a period of continual crisis management to cope with the unresolved conflicts among the imperialists.

At the end of the first war Europe remained the centre of world affairs, but lacked political weight of its own. In 1918 there were only two world powers: the USA, which was not politically involved in Europe at all, and Britain, which was a global power concentrating on its Empire. The old European power structures had been shattered but not replaced.

No power or group of powers could play a dominant role in European politics. German hegemony was precluded. The traditional Franco-Russian alliance was out of the question because of the Bolshevik Revolution, not to mention the decline of France. The USA was not yet strong enough to exert a decisive political influence and preferred first to establish itself in the Pacific. And despite US encouragement, Britain could not orchestrate European affairs. Preoccupied with the problems of Empire, Britain could no longer afford to finance a Continental alliance that could maintain a balance of power. In the absence of any state capable of policing Continental affairs, the League of Nations arose as a shambolic attempt to counteract the political dislocation in Europe.

The instability in Europe meant that the working out of a new world order continued to be played out in European terms. The necessity to stabilise Europe was the overriding priority for international capitalism. This scenario makes a nonsense of the idea of genuine US isolationism after the First World War. Instead, America adopted a policy of selective intervention.

In 1916, before the USA entered

the war, president Woodrow Wilson made a clear statement of Washington's aims:

'We must play a great part in the world whether we choose it or not. We have got to finance the world in some important degree and those who finance the world must understand it and rule it with their spirits and their minds.' (Quoted in *Economics, Politics and the Age of Inflation*, p116)

Wilson's proclivity for high-flown moral language was scanty camouflage for America's aspiration to dominate the globe. The Americans called it 'Manifest Destiny'. Wilson's demand for self-determination for all nations was designed to give the USA a chance to penetrate the markets controlled by the European—and especially the British—colonial empires. The increasingly intense rivalry between the USA and Britain played a crucial part in the causes, conduct and consequences of the war.

Wilson hoped to use his brainchild, the League of Nations, as the instrument for opening up the world to US influence. But in 1919 congress refused to ratify American membership of the League. The rebuff to Wilson certainly reflected strong isolationist feelings among the more backward-looking sections of the US establishment. But by the beginning of the twenties, real isolation from the rest of the world was not a credible option for America—as the economic intervention in Europe pursued by the Republican administrations of the twenties confirmed.

The USA needed to assert its economic dominance on a global scale. Yet it still had insufficient strength to disperse its influence throughout the world. Wherever America looked it faced the power of Britain. To establish itself as the leading power in the world the USA would have to confront the British Empire.

Despite its financial indebtedness to the USA and its relative economic decline, the British ruling class had had a reasonably good war. Germany was prostrate and its colonies came to Britain at Versailles. The Empire was at its territorial zenith. Britain had control of the sea lanes. The route to India was secure. Britain had secured control of oil in the Middle East. Lloyd George had even managed to keep the USA out of important spheres of influence.

It is not surprising then that relations between the old world power, Britain, and the American young pretender were fraught throughout the twenties. There were two key areas of contention: world financial organisation and naval power in the Pacific.



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A powerful Germany was a dire threat to British imperialism; and a Germany dominating Europe would present the only challenge to the consolidation of US pre-eminence

The Washington conference of 1922 was a decisive moment in shifting the balance of imperialist power. In accepting that the US navy would equal its own power in the Pacific, and agreeing to American demands that it end its alliance with Japan, Whitehall handed Washington pre-eminence in the Pacific:

'To place the defence of Empire in the hands of the Americans was to accept its ultimate demise.... But the working out of the consequences of abandoning the claim to maritime supremacy were not to be visible for some time to come.'  
(*Britain's Liberal Empire*)

Beloff notes that powerful voices within the British establishment were fiercely opposed to any idea of bowing before America's advance. They became the key figures in reorganising the strategy of the ruling class to defend the Empire. Their defeat over the Pacific, a pragmatic decision recognising the limits to British power, did not preclude the pursuit of a more aggressive strategy in other arenas. Thus the British were ruthless in their attempts to subjugate the Irish, Palestinian and Indian masses, and adopted a more assertive attitude at the Geneva conference in 1927 and at the London one in 1930 when the USA threatened British strategic interests.

### Uneasy allies

Britain had been in hock to the USA since the war but had maintained its economic and financial position by linking all Empire trade to sterling. In 1925, however, the chronic weakness of sterling, then fixed at \$4.86, and the growing links between the USA and the richer Dominions of the British Empire, like South Africa and Canada, forced Britain to open its markets via a dollar-determined gold standard. The access this afforded to New York money men and American exporters hit British trade hard.

Britain had lost two decisive battles with the USA. The onset of the Depression postponed America's final victory, but conflicts dogged Anglo-American relations in the thirties. Anglo-American rivalry only took a back seat with the re-emergence of Germany. A powerful Germany was a dire threat to British imperialism; and a Germany dominating the Continent of Europe would present the only challenge to the consolidation of US pre-eminence. Britain, in September 1939, and the USA, in December 1941, were forced to turn to defeating Germany militarily.

Yet this was no partnership between democratic nations revolted by fascism. The coincidence of interests between Britain and

America in dealing with Germany did not remove the antagonism between the allies. Indeed, during the war, Churchill and Roosevelt constantly sought to outmanoeuvre each other as well as Hitler and Hirohito. America's motive in joining battle was not, as Churchill put it, to save 'the old world' from fascism, but to speed the creation of a new world centred on Washington.

Hitler finally went to war as a rational response to the particular form which the international economic crisis took in relation to German capitalism. The Nazis had certainly used savagery to break the organised strength of the German working class, and to victimise the Jews. Yet there was little that was exceptional about their economic policies in the thirties. Nazi policies designed to lead a capitalist revival through high state spending—on rearmament, the autobahns, etc—were very similar to those implemented in other imperialist countries. Germany adopted the role of aggressor only because it had the most pressing need to shake up the world order.

### Out of time

In 1939 British imperialism decided that the time had come to make its unavoidable stand against German domination of the Continent. As noted earlier, the policy of appeasement was not the result of craven fear or pacifism. It was designed to keep Europe secure while Britain consolidated its interests in the Far East, opposed US expansion and dealt with colonial unrest.

Czechoslovakia was sacrificed at Munich in 1938 while Britain prepared for war. The fate of European Jewry was of no concern to Britain's rulers, as their refusal to take in Jewish refugees or later to bomb the rail link to Auschwitz testify. The only criterion was the readiness of the British war machine. The disaster at Dunkirk soon showed that that machine was still not in a position to match Germany. But the confrontation could be postponed no longer.

When war broke out Germany confronted an economically and politically weak Europe. France crumbled before it, and imperial Britain could not have defeated the Third Reich alone. The turning points came when Germany tore up the Hitler-Stalin pact and attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, and most importantly, when the USA entered the war at the end of the same year.

Although the war had been on for two years before the USA entered the fray, American involvement had been on the cards from the start. The US establishment could not tolerate German domination over Europe. America is traditionally depicted as

having been dragged into the war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. In fact Roosevelt always appreciated that America could not stand aside from a battle for world domination. He helped Britain survive the early war period, and provoked Pearl Harbour through imposing an economic blockade on Japan.

That attack finally silenced the popular isolationist voices in US society, and gave the administration its excuse to go to war. Despite the fact that their first clash was with Japan, US strategists were aware that Germany posed the more important threat. At the start of 1941, the US and British chiefs of staff had already agreed to fight the war on a 'Europe first' basis.

### Pax Americana

Thus the immediate conflict which sparked the war was between the powers which needed to preserve the status quo, Britain and France, and those which had no choice but to try to smash it—Germany and Japan. But the real victor was the USA, which used the war not only to put down German imperialism, but to put the British Empire firmly in its place.

The Americans manipulated the conduct of the war, spinning it out and allowing the Soviet Union to bear the brunt, to ensure that the USA emerged in a position of unchallengeable power. From the signing of the Lend-Lease agreement in 1941, America exacted a heavy price for its aid from the British ruling class, forcing Britain to hand over bases, spheres of influence and overseas assets. At the war's end, with Germany, Japan and France in ruins and Britain bankrupted, the USA was able to remould the international order to suit its interests.

The instability and conflict which had dominated the twentieth century were resolved through the Second World War, and the US-led capitalist world soon entered a period of prosperity. But the resolution was only temporary. In the imperialist era, the effects of the stagnation of capitalism cannot be held at bay for long. Now the world is moving towards another deep economic recession. American capitalism has slipped from its post-war position, and finds its status challenged by West Germany and Japan.

The heightened economic and political tensions among the Western powers today signpost the coming of a third struggle to redivide the world. As another historic crisis point approaches it is important to locate the causes of world wars—in the operation of international capitalism, not the workings of a maniac's mind.

## The Blitz Spirit on the home front

## 'One big, thumping lie'

**Toby Banks looks at how the wartime authorities bottled and sold the famous Blitz Spirit to an initially reluctant British public**

On the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Second World War, the authorities and the media are trying hard to revive public pride in the Blitz Spirit, the who-do-you-think-you-are-kidding-Mr-Hitler attitude which apparently sustained the British people through long years of suffering and sacrifice in the service of King and country.

Such sentimental harking back to the good old bad old days is not just a nostalgia trip. The image of Britons at war as one big family, pulling together and tightening belts in the best interests of all its members, is presented as the ideal to which we should aspire. Indeed, the attempt to recreate a sense of united national purpose is something which preoccupies the British government today, as we approach the gravest economic and social crisis since 1945.

But the reality of the war years was not as simple as suggested by the images of a nation bound together by the selfless ethos of the Blitz Spirit. The advent of 'total war', with the civilian population integrated into the war drive, heightened tensions within British society. This proved a source of worry for the establishment, which was obsessed with the possibility of a collapse of morale on the 'home front'.

**'Shoot Londoners'**

At the same time, despite the bombs, back-breaking war work and the lack of food and basic amenities, there are many examples of heroism, self-organisation and solidarity. This is the Blitz Spirit which the authorities like to glamorise today. But the rosy picture they paint ignores the fact that the working class survived on the home front largely by its own efforts, and often in direct conflict with officialdom. Certainly, by the end of the war in 1945, the authorities had succeeded in popularising firm support for their cause. Yet when war began, that success seemed far from certain.

The months after Germany invaded Poland became known as the phoney war, when the British issued gasmasks and put up blackout curtains, but didn't fire a shot. In

these circumstances, people at home were confused and then annoyed by the restrictions they were forced to live under. Some 750 000 elderly people, mothers and children had been evacuated from London. Disgusted by the cattle-market of billeting, and by the snobbery of the Home Counties, where many were treated as skivvies or made to sleep in sheds while the householders pocketed billeting allowances, over half had returned to their homes by Christmas 1939.

In London the petty restrictions of the blackout were fraying nerves, preventing floodlit dog racing and reading on buses, making women frightened to go out, and causing one in five people to suffer some kind of accident, from walking into lamp-posts to dying in road crashes. By 1940 the Metropolitan Police warned that morale was so low that air raids would lead to panic, looting and riots. Thousands of troops were already on hand to support the police; but the Met requested extra riot troops.

Frank Whipple joined up as a reserve policeman, and found that he could be ordered to turn his gun against fellow Londoners:

'We were trained to use arms in case of an emergency in London. They took us out on the Metropolitan Police range and we were firing old Canadian 1914 rifles. I remember saying to the inspector, "Who are we going to use these on, the invader?" and he said "You'll use them on Londoners if you have to. If they get out of control when the invasion and the bombings come you'll have to use them on them". I remember being quite shocked at the time.' (Quoted in J Mack and S Humphrey, *London at War*, 1985, p21)

For some reason, those concerned to eulogise the heroic spirit of a people at war today never mention the government's contingency plans to shoot Londoners on the streets.

Instead of a people united in moral fervour behind the war effort, the government was faced at first with a

spirit of sullen resistance. After the humiliating defeat of the British forces in Norway in April 1940, which ended the phoney war, the Tory Party ousted discredited prime minister Neville Chamberlain and brought in Winston Churchill. Yet still the government stumbled from disaster to crisis and the population grew more discontented. In the freezing winter of 1939-40 there were still 1.6m people unemployed, and the government's Christmas message was greeted with stony silence in pubs.

Churchill launched campaigns to try to drum up some national spirit. The government set up Local Defence Volunteer ('Home Guard') groups, started a panic about fifth columnists working undercover for Hitler, and reluctantly interned Sir Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists. But all this had a limited effect. The Home Guard was widely seen as a reactionary gang of middle class 'Little Hitlers' and ageing officers from the First World War. Its early efforts turned it into a national joke: wires laid for invading tanks caused motoring accidents and motorists were shot by mistake. It was some time before working class men joined up in large numbers.

The situation facing the government in the early period of the war was described years later by Lord Clark from the ministry of information in a letter to Tom Harrison of the pioneering social survey organisation Mass Observation:

'In retrospect the only interesting feature was the amount of evidence that came in on how low morale in England was, much lower than anyone has ever dared to say. But there was obviously nothing we could do about it, except to hope that by some miracle we could win a few battles.' (Quoted in I McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, 1979, p10)

Morale had been singled out as a key problem long before war was declared. In 1935 the authorities made plans for a ministry of information (MOI) to operate in time



of war. The model was Goebbels' ministry of propaganda. Its main functions would be releasing official news, censoring the press, and disseminating propaganda to the enemy and to Allied and Empire countries.

Once war began, the new ministry trawled every source of information on public opinion: police duty room reports were analysed, and monthly reports were compiled by Postal and Telegraph Censorship based on 200 000 letters. Tom Harrison's Mass Observation team was hired to investigate everything from gasmask-carrying to anti-German feeling. Such was popular suspicion of the official media that Mass Observation was

funded by the secret services under the auspices of the London School of Economics to preserve its independent image.

The ministry of information used the double-talk which George Orwell was to immortalise shortly after the war as the Newspeak of 1984. The MOI pledged to gain the trust of the population by giving them 'the truth'. But what was the truth?:

'We must adopt a pragmatic definition. It is what is believed to be the truth. A lie that is put across becomes the truth and may, therefore, be justified. The difficulty is to keep up lying...It is simpler to tell the truth and, if a sufficient

emergency arises, to tell one big, thumping lie that will then be believed.' (MOI memorandum, 13 September 1939)

To make the important lies look more like truth, the MOI used apparently neutral channels to get the message across, such as the popular magazine *Picture Post*; none of its 5m readers knew it was funded by the government.

The new ministry feared working class unrest and understood the need to develop a 'common touch' that could reach people with a populist pro-war message. But this proved problematic for a body staffed by members of the upper classes. For example, its proposal for the first war poster justified the image of a long-bow archer from the Hundred Years War on the grounds that he would be drawn from the lower classes: 'The dress of the archer should make this point clear.' (Home office enquiry paper, 9 May 1939) The poster was a disaster. Its slogan 'Your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution will bring us victory' conveyed an 'us and them' attitude. It confirmed suspicions that the poor were once again being used to fight a war for the rich.

In February 1940 an MOI memo warned of a dangerous mood: 'Among the less informed classes a passive, negative feeling of apathy and boredom is apparent. Associated with this is a reaction to grievances and discomforts.' The MOI policy committee advised an urgent search for anything that might bring 'a diversion of present public attention away from domestic affairs towards the enemy' (quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p35).

Alarming reports came in that people were saying openly that 'Hitler won't hurt us—it's the bosses he's after' and 'We'll probably be better off when he comes'. The MP EM Cobb received this interesting letter from a constituent in June 1940:

'My charwoman gives me the views of the working class people around here, many of whom, I know, work in the English Electric Aircraft Factory. A remark which is constantly made is "Well at any rate, one good thing about Hitler is he robs the rich to help the poor". Would it not be possible to arrange for some speakers who would appeal to the masses, such as a North End footballer or some similar "hero" to counteract this Nazi propaganda. One cannot help feeling there is much of this sort of thing in the whole of Lancashire.' (Quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p94)

The fact that some people were initially prepared to see Hitler in a reasonable light, and that many more

**The London Underground, classic image of the Blitz Spirit; they don't tell us today that the authorities banned people from sheltering in tube stations**



PHOTO: Hulton

The ministry of information stressed that propaganda stories about Nazi atrocities 'must deal with indisputably innocent people...And not with Jews'

could see little difference between him and the authorities at home, reflects the level of popular hostility to the British establishment and the early lack of enthusiasm for the war against Germany.

As the authorities recognised that effective propaganda required a clear objective, there was a growing clamour for a statement of war aims which could convince more people that they had a stake in seeing Britain win:

'In times of war the progressive elements are eager to see the ideals for which the nation is fighting translated into concrete pledges of government action home and abroad. No one claims that the present social system is perfect. One effective remedy for possible discontent and disaffection in this country would be the adoption of a striking social policy.' (Memo from minister of information, no date, quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p59)

The objective was to give people something to fight for. These were the cynical motives behind the state's promotion of the idea of a 'People's War' for a 'Better Britain'.

Later in the war, the theme of promoting a 'striking social policy' to win public support would assume added importance. The government's promise of a new Britain in which a welfare state would put an end to disease, poverty, illiteracy and bad housing became a considerable factor in consolidating mass backing for the war effort. But the initial discussion of a declaration of war aims was cut short in 1940 by the Battle of Britain and the start of the Blitz, which finally gave the authorities what they needed: 'A diversion of public attention away from domestic affairs towards the enemy.'

### No thanks to them

The popular response to the Blitz, the German bombing of British cities, is the major source of the official image of a nation under siege surviving through cooperative endeavour and stoical resistance. In fact it was the dire inadequacy of official provision which forced people to help themselves. And when they did so the authorities responded as to civil war, interpreting working class organisation as an internal threat to the state at a time when it was assailed by an external foe.

During the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, German planes bombed London. The RAF retaliated with a mass-bombing raid on Berlin. The papers boasted of German civilian casualties. Then the Luftwaffe returned the compliment, razing working class districts of London to the ground.

The Blitz eventually turned out to be a godsend for the British

authorities. In military terms, the Luftwaffe's decision to switch its attention from destroying airfields to bombing cities is widely regarded as a strategic blunder which let the RAF off the hook and turned the tide in the Battle of Britain. And in political terms, the Blitz was to provide the lasting propaganda image of national pride: 'Britain can take it', as the posters declared. But before the authorities could consolidate that image, they had to deal with the working class anger and unrest which the Blitz provoked.

all film showing casualties was burnt and all footage of streets had to end with buildings intact.

It is ironic that the communities of homeless people who took refuge in the London Underground are now the subject of official nostalgia. At the time the authorities put up every barrier possible to prevent people improvising their own protection. The Underground stations were banned as shelters, so people bought the cheapest tickets and stayed inside, and left wingers organised break-ins at closed stations.



The authorities had been organising contingency plans for air raids since the summer of 1939, producing 200 000 collapsible coffins and preparing mass graves. But they had made no provision for mass homelessness, and food, water or money shortages.

The Anderson air raid shelters were cheap, shoddy structures; they filled with water and shook about and their steel doors became burning hot. When people tried to escape from target areas like the East End and Docklands, troops redirected them to places where they were killed. Before long there was a huge refugee population. The ensuing panic was covered up by the media;

Some 350 000 people were living in tube stations, but the borough authorities refused to employ outside contractors to repair houses. Nor would the government authorise the requisitioning of houses in rich areas that had been vacated by their owners. Luxury shelters under West End department stores were out of bounds to riff-raff. The latter had to put up with shelters that were either boiling hot or freezing cold, and impetigo, scabies, bronchitis and lice were endemic.

The homeless were treated under the Poor Law Act means test. On top of the trauma of losing their homes, members of their family and often their jobs, they had to prove they

were penniless and sufficiently near death from exposure before they were granted a pittance. The example of the Tilbury railway arches in Stepney shows the contempt with which working class people were treated.

The Tilbury shelter was a disused warehouse that held 16 000 people. It contained *four* earth buckets which served as toilets. In the worst corners—where the Indians, Maltese, West Indians and Jews invariably ended up—the floor was covered in excrement and rotting margarine. Mass Observation officials described it as a ‘hell hole’.

However, Stepney had a reputation for working class organisation, and was regarded as a Red stronghold by the establishment. These two factors were illustrated by the activities of a three-foot hunchback called Mickey Davis, and by the reaction they elicited from the authorities.

### Booing the King

Davis took charge of the Stepney shelter, organising rotas for sanitation and first aid, tickets for sleeping accommodation with priority for the elderly, mothers and the sick, and campaigns to force the government to cough up funds for proper facilities. A shelter committee was set up, and a spirit of cooperation grew. But so did official disquiet about working class people organising themselves in this way. A government observer describes what happened when the shelter committee led a modest initiative to try to improve things:

‘The people were so angry they decided to take a deputation to the ARP [Air Raid Patrol]...with certain demands like decent sanitation, bunks with proper tickets and bunk allocation—that kind of thing, very simple things. Well, when they got to the ARP, there were about 40 of us. I went along with them. All of a sudden we find that we’re being charged by mounted police. They came pouring through the entrance wielding their batons, and I remember one of them got hold of a man with a bandage round his neck and began beating him up. And then a number of people were taken to the police station, and that was the end of our delegation.’ (Quoted in *London at War*, p84)

Such was the reverence in which the authorities held the Blitz Spirit at the time.

It was hardly surprising that the working class got angry. George Orwell remembers how, in September 1940, a youth told him that Churchill had visited the devastated Elephant and Castle area and declared that it was ‘not too bad’. The boy said, ‘I’d have wrung his bloody neck if he’d

said it to me’ (*Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol 2, 1968, p422).

The King and Queen were booed when they visited the debris of the East End. Fortunately for the authorities, Buckingham Palace was bombed soon afterwards, and the opportunity was immediately spotted for a cynical publicity coup, as a MOI memo from JH Brebner, director of News Division, shows:

‘Reports were received of the complaints of the people in this district, that “it is always the poor that gets it” and the ill-feeling arising from this belief began to cause anxiety. Then Buckingham Palace was bombed, and the opportunity was presented of counteracting immediately the bad feeling in the East End....Arrangements were made for more than 40 journalists...to visit the palace to see the damage. The theme “King with his People in the frontline together” was stressed with the journalists.’ (Quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p92)

Such manipulative media stunts helped to give the royal family the status which it enjoys in Britain today. They were also important aids in turning the mood from one of popular discontent towards one of national unity.

But it needed more than media trickery to finish the job. The consolidation of a chauvinist climate in British society was a crucial political factor in winning the population over. Originally the government had been at pains to appeal to anti-fascist sentiments, stressing that its quarrel was with Hitler’s regime, rather than the German people. But justifying the bombing of German civilians, and forging a more fiercely nationalistic mood among the grumbling British people, required a shift of emphasis.

In October 1943 (when the RAF had dropped three bombs on Germany for every German bomb dropped over here), Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris, who ran Bomber Command, declared that the aim of his offensive ‘should be unambiguously stated as destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers and the disruption of civilised community life throughout Germany’ (quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p161). By then, crude anti-German propaganda had already become the order of the day.

A typical wall-text written by ‘leftist’ broadcaster JB Priestley listed the bestial traits of all Germans:

‘When their madness comes upon them, out leaps a primitive, barbarian, beast-like instinct. They kill without pity, rejoicing in blood, as animals kill. They know no law, as animals know no law.’ (Quoted in *Ministry of Morale*, p146)

That was surely a more accurate description of Bomber Harris than of the average German. Yet in the patriotic atmosphere promoted by both right and left wings of British politics, such chauvinist sentiments came to exert a strong influence over public opinion, helping to turn popular anger away from the authorities at home. The proportion of Britons blaming the German people, rather than Hitler, for their suffering rose from six per cent when the war began to 50 per cent at the height of the Blitz.

Today we are told that Britain fought the war out of some high-minded concern for the freedom of all peoples. Yet in the war years the dominant propaganda became one of hatred for all peoples who weren’t on the side of the British angels—and even hatred for some who were. The Jews, whom the British authorities later claimed to have saved from the final Holocaust, were among the victims of the bitter chauvinism which infected British society during the war.

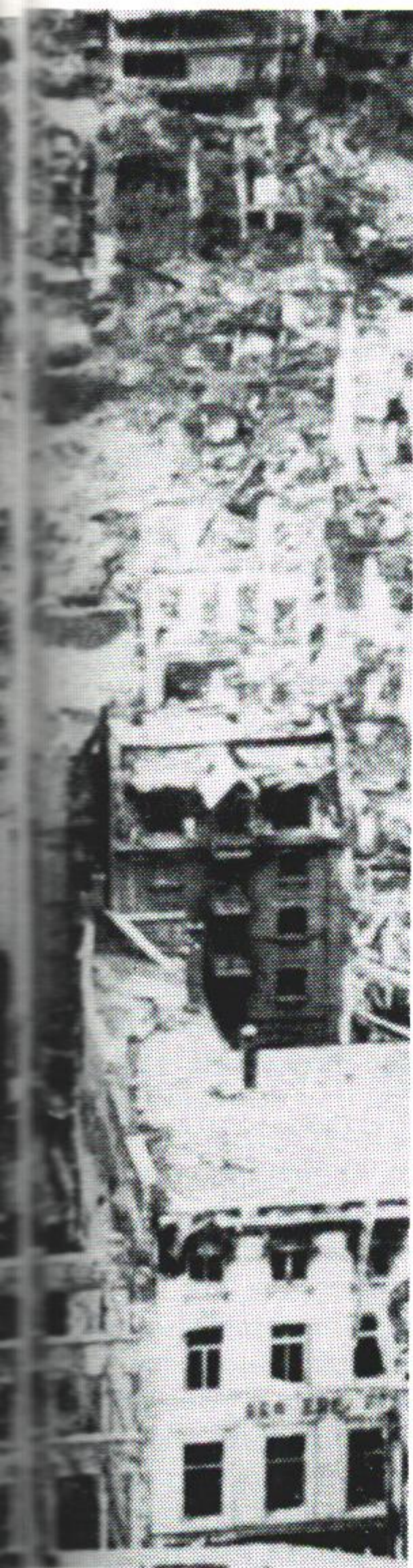
The influx of German and Austrian Jewish refugees became the focus for an anti-Semitic campaign. Boarding houses put up signs saying ‘No Germans, No Jews’, and there was constant grumbling about having to fight a ‘Jew’s war’. These sentiments were fostered from the top down. The government extended internment to cover many more people than known Nazi sympathisers. In June 1940 15 000 Jews were rounded up on Churchill’s ‘collar the lot’ instructions. They were stuck in concentration camps, treated as criminals and deported: 600 internees were killed when the SS *Arandora Star* was torpedoed in the Atlantic.

### Oysters and onions

Jews were scapegoated as cowardly and un-British. Because one of the first areas to be Blitzed was the Jewish quarter of Whitechapel, East End Jews who dispersed over London were accused of running away. A bitter joke about the poster exhorting people to ‘Be a Man’ was that it was a mistake to print it in English. The other ‘good thing about Hitler’, it was said, was that he ‘put the Jews in their place’.

The authorities consistently indulged anti-Semitism as a useful diversion for working class disquiet. The MOI went so far as to issue instructions for the use of atrocity stories about Nazi Germany in propaganda. The memorandum stressed that such stories ‘must deal with indisputably innocent people’. In other words, ‘Not with violent political opponents. *And not with Jews*’ (planning committee, 25 July 1941).

The myth of the Blitz Spirit also involves the notion that a sense of



The other Blitz: what the RAF did to Cologne

national unity was engendered by the sacrifices which *all* sections of society had to make. In reality inequality of sacrifice was a source of complaint throughout the war. Rationing made little difference: the rich could eat in restaurants, which were not affected. They could drive about to shop where the goods were, and they could afford to pay black market prices. Their ample wardrobes left them well-equipped to survive clothes rationing (adults were allowed one set of underwear every *two years*).



**ABOVE:**  
The government didn't just demand workers' support—it wanted their wages, too

When the government reluctantly restricted restaurant meals to one course, and later imposed a maximum charge of five shillings, there were always loopholes. Cover charges of seven shillings and sixpence suddenly appeared, allowing the rich to continue feasting on oysters, caviare and other luxuries. The working class had to make do with recipes like 'Nothing Cake', simulated fried egg (half a tinned apricot fried in bacon fat), and other revolting ideas popularised in the press. Onions were so scarce that they were used as prizes at socials.

Nor did British workers give their all for the war effort in a spirit of altruism. They were coerced and conscripted into performing back-breaking work in the munitions factories, coal-mines, docks and other industries. The war forced the capitalist class to reorganise production along military lines. Hours increased dramatically to compensate for the shrinking workforce. The labour shortage caused by male conscription brought

a huge influx of women into the factories, necessitating the provision of nurseries and canteens—though women still had to fight for these facilities. The labour shortage also pushed up wages: to get round this the government used conscripted labour, soldiers and prisoners of war as what was effectively scab labour. The Women's Land Army was often used as slave labour by farmers.

The 1940 Emergency Powers Act allowed transport workers' union leader and labour minister Ernest Bevin to conscript conscientious objectors and young boys into unpopular jobs like mining. Regular workers were not allowed to leave these 'reserved occupations', which meant wages in important industries were artificially constrained. One conscientious objector recalls life at a Lancashire coal-mine:

'The thing that impressed me most was the feeling of solidarity amongst the workers. There was, I remember, a big poster up at the pit-head as you got into the cage. And it said "You are the commandos of industry". And I remember the sour remarks the older men, the colliers, used to make. They'd say "Oh yes, that's not what they said to us before the war. We were the scum of the earth if we didn't do a decent day's work, we'd lose our jobs and many of us did". There were lock-outs and really appalling conditions. So they were very, very cynical about it.'

(Recorded interview, Imperial War Museum)

High factory attendances in industries where labour direction was left to market forces—such as munitions—are usually cited as proof of the popular determination to beat Hitler. But if the alternative was sitting in the dark in a derelict house with no power or water supply, it is not too surprising that most people preferred a warm factory. It also offered high wages for the times. Even so, there were important strikes in industries like mining.

### Moral collapse

As the war went on, the labour shortage led the bosses to crack down on attempts to get out of conscripted or low-paid jobs. There were prosecutions for refusing to take jobs and absenteeism in mines, docks and shipyards. From 1944, those breaking Bevin's ban on strikes in 'essential services' faced five years in prison.

Perhaps the most far-fetched of all the invented images of Britain at war is the attempt to depict the war years as a period of high moral standards, when pure-of-mind British people suppressed personal desires in the cause of pursuing a crusade. Thus the government's present attempt to recreate the Blitz Spirit merges with

its championing of Victorian values.

In fact the war prompted a breakdown of all social conventions. Elsewhere in this issue Ann Bradley discusses the dissolution of traditional standards of sexual propriety, especially in relation to women. The collapse of accepted standards and the acute shortages caused by the war also started a boom in crime. Day-to-day life carried on against a background of looting, theft, spivs on the black market, forgery rackets and fraud.

Wartime looting was far from anarchic. Those in the best position to loot were those responsible for keeping order; an Auxiliary Fire Serviceman remarked that 'everybody loots...the ARP wardens, demolition men, the police' (quoted in N Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, 1971, p134). The most common form of theft was casual pilfering from the workplace, especially docks and warehouses. Just about everybody from the shopfloor to management was implicated. A Shoreditch warehouse supplying police canteens suffered one of the highest rates of theft.

Theft tended to increase during 'backs to the wall' periods, when the spirit of national unity and common purpose was supposed to be strongest. For example, when the police were concentrated in bombed-out areas (keeping out the competition for spoils), breaking and entering soared in the middle class suburbs.

When we survey the experience of those millions of men and women who lived and died through the war years it is apparent that the reality of war on the home front does not square with the myth that has grown up around it. The powerful image of the Blitz Spirit, of common sacrifice for a common cause, is the 'one big, thumping lie' which the establishment propagandists eventually succeeded in getting people to believe. After all the privation, suffering, death and disenchantment imposed on the working class, hundreds of thousands came out on the streets in 1945 to celebrate VE day as a victory for the British people.

As the authorities seek to recreate the patriotic siege politics of the Blitz Spirit, in preparation for the new conflicts to come, exposing the myths about what happened in Britain during the Second World War is a task with immediate relevance for today. Understanding the bitter truth about the last war will help us to prepare people for the approach of the next one, and to ensure that working class anger against the authorities is not twisted into anti-foreign chauvinism and flag-waving again.

The war and the working class

# How the left did Churchill's dirty work

The carnage of 1914-18 had generated an anti-war feeling in the working class so strong that Winston Churchill alone could not have shaken it. Paul Flowers explains how the Labour Party, the left and the Communist Party led the working class into the carnage of 1939-45

## Labour: 'make war not peace'

'Are we going to believe that arms in the hands of the British government are to be used against fascism, when this government refuses to suppress Hitler's lieutenant, Sir Oswald Mosley?' (*Labour Party Annual Conference Report*, 1936, p191)

This left-wing delegate's rhetorical question, put during a key Labour Party conference debate in 1936, was a timely warning of the dangers of supporting the British state's rearmament programme on the pretext of combating fascism. But the warning was ignored, and Labour launched into the task of preparing the working class for the slaughter of another world war.

The 1936 Labour Party conference took place against the backdrop of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia (October 1935), and Hitler's fulsome support for Franco in the Spanish Civil War (which began in July 1936). With Europe drifting towards all-out war, Labour abandoned its traditional policy of supporting gradual, reciprocal disarmament through the League of Nations.

### 'Doubtful ally'

The conference called for something stronger, considering it 'urgently necessary' to form 'a strong group of peaceful nations, firmly pledged to non-aggression and to mutual assistance against any aggressor', and 'to maintain such defence forces as are consistent with our country's responsibility as a member of the League of Nations, the preservation of the people's rights and liberties, the continuance of democratic institutions, and the observance of international law' (*Annual Conference Report*, 1936, p182).

Some on the left of the party disagreed with this shift of emphasis. Traditionally pacifist, they were extremely suspicious of supporting rearmament under the unpopular National government, a Tory-led coalition. But the most influential left wingers made important concessions to the new rearmament line. Sir Stafford Cripps, leader of the Socialist League, was one of them:

'It may be that in some circumstances one is driven to seek even the most doubtful ally, and the problem we have to settle at this conference is the problem of whether we are prepared to seek the British imperialist government as an ally against the possible aggression of a fascist Germany.' (*Annual Conference Report*, 1936, p201)

Cripps left little doubt that he would be ready to call on the working class to back the British imperialist government in a war against fascist Germany.

Such equivocation from the left gave the Labour leadership a free hand to line up in defence of British imperialism and to popularise support for rearmament. Ultimately, the Labour Party and the left succeeded in doing what Winston Churchill alone could never have done: transforming working class hatred of fascism into an identification with British imperialism's war against Germany.

Labour continued to criticise the National government, but from an increasingly nationalistic point of view, especially as international tensions increased during 1938. Japanese troops were carving their way through China, German tanks rolled into Austria in March, and in September at Munich the British and French premiers, Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier, gave Hitler the green light to invade large chunks of Czechoslovakia. Through all of this, the Labour leaders complained that the National government was letting the British side down:

'The whole standing of our country in the world has been gravely damaged....British interests in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Far East, are being sacrificed, without heed to the consequences; British diplomacy has suffered a series of shattering defeats in Manchuria, Abyssinia, Spain, China, Austria, Czechoslovakia; Great Britain has abandoned her historic position as the champion of freedom

and of the rights of small nations, and thereby has thrown away the respect and the support of many nations and peoples.' (*Labour's Claim to Government*, 1938, p4)

In the conflicts erupting around the world in 1938, it was the Chinese peasants facing Japanese firepower, the Abyssinians using spears against Italian mustard gas and the Spanish republicans being bombed by the Luftwaffe who were truly 'being sacrificed' and suffering 'shattering defeats'. Yet, through the patriotic eyes of the Labour Party, the most important victim of these bloodbaths was 'Britain's interests'.

### Camp followers

Labour's message was that it could do a far better job defending Britain's 'historic position' than had Neville Chamberlain. Unfortunately, this historic position had nothing to do with being 'the champion of freedom and of the rights of small nations', and everything to do with being the leading colonial power. Defending it meant defending the Empire. Thus, whatever motives it proclaimed for seeking rearmament, Labour found itself in league with the most hardline imperialists.

In the late thirties the British establishment was split between Chamberlain and the 'appeasers' and the pro-rearmament Tories around Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan. Both sides were committed to the defence of the Empire, and neither camp offered anything to opponents of imperialist war. Yet the increasingly patriotic stance of the Labour Party led it to take sides in the debate, drawing it into the orbit of the 'anti-appeasement' faction of the ruling class which was more bellicose in its defence of Britain's imperial holdings. In October 1938, Labour leaders Hugh Dalton and Clement Attlee held a secret meeting with Churchill to discuss the possibility of a common parliamentary front against the 'appeasers'.

Labour's criticisms of Britain's preparations for war were couched in

the language of sympathetic advice to the establishment, warning that militarisation was not being implemented efficiently enough. Thus, when the National government imposed conscription in April 1939, the Labour leadership's complaint was that a scheme for mass voluntary enlistment would make it easier to win over the working class to the cause:

'Conscription will not effectively increase the defence power of our country, but, on the contrary, will

introduce undesirable controversy and generate harmful disunity at a time when aggressive dictators should be confronted by a resolute and undivided people. It will also seriously disrupt the economic life of the country.' (*Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1939, p3*)

Labour leader Herbert Morrison went further, proclaiming that a pro-enlistment policy was a symbol of socialism: 'There ought to be no objection from a socialist point of view to the term "National Service",

for National Service is a literal expression of socialist faith.' (*Annual Conference Report, 1939, p282*)

When war was declared on 3 September 1939, the Labour Party leadership did not hesitate to back the war effort. All of its half-hearted opposition to compulsory military service and its calls for trade union rights for servicemen disappeared. The Labour leadership declared itself His Majesty's loyal opposition, with the emphasis on loyal.

## Communists for imperialism

When veteran left winger Harry McShane died in Glasgow last year, his friend Raymond Challinor recalled one episode from his early political career in the Communist Party of Great Britain. McShane was involved in an anti-war demonstration in Glasgow which suddenly became a pro-war march half-way through the city, after news came through of a change in the Communist Party line in response to the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 (see *Revolutionary History*, Autumn 1988). It was not the first time that the Communist Party leadership had executed a clumsy 180-degree political turn: in the years up to 1941 it changed its position on the war four times, sowing confusion among its working class supporters, and sabotaging the potential for a revolutionary anti-war movement.

By the 1930s the official communist movement had become little more than an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. In 1935 Communist Party general secretary Harry Pollitt argued in *Labour Monthly* that defence of the USSR must mean supporting 'everything the Soviet Union does in its foreign policy' (October 1935).

After the ascendancy of Hitler the threat to the Soviet Union was seen as German militarism and its designs on Eastern Europe. The Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin set out to forge a collective security agreement with the other European powers to forestall any German threat. Throughout Europe the Communist parties were instructed to enlist their respective rulers in a Popular Front crusade against fascism. On 2 May 1935 Moscow signed a mutual assistance pact with France against Germany. The British government refused to follow suit despite Moscow's pleading.

The twists and turns of the British Communist Party in 1935 mirrored the changing shape of East-West diplomacy. In the May edition of *Labour Monthly*, written before the



RIGHT: After June 1941, Communist Party members turned from opponents of the war into the labour lieutenants of British imperialism

Soviet pact with France, the Communist Party leadership asserted that it would never support British imperialism:

'We must be absolutely clear that under no circumstances can we support any kind of war that is waged by British imperialism....Even if circumstances force British imperialism into going into war alongside the Soviet Union, this would not alter the fact that British imperialism was waging a war to defend its Empire.'

By August it was 'absolutely clear' that this was wrong: now the chief task of the Communist Party was to mobilise opinion in favour of Britain entering into a collective security agreement with France and the Soviet Union against the Nazi threat.

In the desperate search for allies around this objective, the Stalinists began casting their net wider and wider. At the 1938 Communist Party congress Pollitt pointed to the 'growing disillusionment inside the Tory and Liberal parties' in the face of German aggression and British appeasement:

'It is politically very short-sighted not to recognise these developments and to ignore the importance of bringing all these sections of the people and their organisations into cooperation with the labour movement.' (*For Peace and Plenty*, 1938, p55)

To win over such disillusioned Tories and Liberals, the Communist Party played up the patriotic credentials of its Popular Front alliance.

Pollitt was vociferous in condemning the National government for 'betraying the interests of the British people, surrendering strategic positions to the fascist states, and lowering Britain's prestige in the eyes of the peoples of the world' (*For Peace and Plenty*, p37). The fight against Neville Chamberlain's government was turned into a patriotic crusade:

'To that end every Englishman, who loves his country, who is proud of and anxious to preserve the democratic traditions of the British people, can, without distinction of party or creed, work. Indeed it is a patriotic obligation to do so.' (*International Press Correspondence*, 2 April 1938)

Winston Churchill couldn't have put it better. Indeed the Communist Party soon extended its definition of the Popular Front to embrace Churchill and the most militarist sections of the establishment. In the Perth by-election of December 1938 the Communist Party called on the Liberal candidate to stand down to

allow a straight fight between the official Tory and the Stalinists' favoured candidate—the Duchess of Atholl, a Tory landowner who supported collective security.

The extent to which the policies of the Communist Party were shaped by the Soviet Union is best illustrated by the dizzying speed with which it changed its line on the war in the years from 1939 to 1941. Having failed to conclude a lasting alliance with France, or one at all with Britain, the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Germany on 23 August 1939. The Communist Party retained its demand for a Popular Front against Germany right up to the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact. Even a month later when Germany invaded Poland, the Communist Party condemned it as a Nazi aggression against which the British people must wage war. Within another month, however, the Stalin-Hitler pact had worked its magic, the war had become an imperialist one with Britain as the aggressor, and confusion reigned about the Communist Party policy.

There was some resistance to the new line, especially from the party general secretary Pollitt, who argued on the central committee for a continuation of the Popular Front policy:

'We have to face facts. Labour cannot form a government that can win this war on its own. My personal opinion is that you can't win this war unless you have in the new government not only representatives of Labour, but men like Lloyd George, Eden, Churchill and Duff Cooper—all imperialists. But we have to win this war and to win it with people who are going to be ruthless.' (J Mahon, *Harry Pollitt: A Biography*, 1976, p251)

Ever sensitive to the demands of the Kremlin, vice-chairman Rajani Palme Dutt proposed that the party's policy be adjusted to suit the new situation and oppose Britain's war effort. It took all of Dutt's powers of persuasion, and confirmation from Moscow that the war was indeed imperialist, before the leadership accepted that the party could no longer support the war. Even so, when the final vote was taken, Pollitt and *Daily Worker* editor Johnny Campbell voted against the new line, and were stripped of their posts.

Donning the general secretary's hat, Dutt swiftly produced a pamphlet putting matters straight:

'This is an imperialist war, like the war of 1914. It is a sordid exploiters' war of rival millionaire groups, using the workers as their pawns in their struggle for world domination, for markets, colonies and profits, for the oppression of peoples.' (*Why This War?*, 1939, p12)

The anti-war line was certainly less popular than the pro-war position, but the Communist Party managed to build a working class following around it. In January 1941, the party-sponsored People's Convention attracted 2234 delegates from 1304 organisations, who voted for 'defence of the people's living standards' and 'defence of the people's democratic and trade union rights'. Despite the weakness of its populist programme, the People's Convention showed the potential that existed for a working class anti-war movement.

Within six months that potential had been extinguished. On 22 June 1941 German troops invaded the Soviet Union, and the Communist Party came out immediately in support of the war, thus ending a period which has been a source of embarrassment to it ever since. Now, with Pollitt back in the general secretary's seat, it was class collaboration all the way:

'The speediest victory of Britain and Britain's allies over Hitler is not the special interest of one class or section of the nation, but the common interest of all classes and sections of the nation.' (R Palme Dutt, *Britain in the World Front*, 1942, p197)

Neither the class nature of the war nor the motives of British imperialism had changed from six months earlier when the Communist Party had stated that it was an imperialist conflict. It was simply that once the Stalin-Hitler pact was in ruins after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Britain was Moscow's new-found ally. From this time forth, the British Stalinists acted as de facto agents of Churchill, breaking strikes, cheer-leading production drives and slandering strikers as 'Hitler's agents'.

The Communist Party's final pro-imperialist policy shift repelled the best anti-war militants and deprived them of a focus for political activity. The party became very unpopular on the shopfloor, as its members became staunch supporters of production speed-ups and lackeys of Winston Churchill's war effort.

In the period after June 1941, when its allegiance to the Soviet Union corresponded to its patriotic commitment to Britain, the Communist Party came into its own as the most vociferous champion of imperialist war within the working class. The services it performed on behalf of the Soviet bureaucracy and British imperialism during the war years are still remembered by the Communist Party as its greatest triumph. We should remember this period as the greatest political defeat inflicted on the working class movement in Britain.

Love, sex and working women

# What did you do in the war, Mummy?

**Ann Bradley on how British women really kept the home fires burning**

When I was 16 and agonising over whether to 'do it' for the first time, I poured out my woes to an elderly neighbour. She heard me out and sighed: 'The problem with you young people is that you think sex was invented in the sixties. What's all the fuss about, that's what I'd like to know.' I concluded that my confidante, pushing 60 and married for 30 years, could tell me little on the subject of sex, which she and her contemporaries clearly considered too boring to bother about.

It was only years later, at her funeral, that I discovered she knew rather more than I gave her credit for—among the affectionate stories shared about her was one of a wartime lover, a shotgun marriage, a divorce and an adopted son. All that drama concealed behind suburban lace curtains. For somebody raised on the standard images of the Blitz Spirit, complete with home fires burning till the boys came home, it was hard to imagine women of the war generation giving way to lust.

## All change

Today two images prevail of women in the war years. First we have the 'Mrs Minivers'—purer than pure, middle class types who thrived on church fetes and waited bravely for their fiancés with upper lips as stiff as their starched collars. Then we have the picture of the harassed young mother, struggling to balance job, children and ration book. Both scenarios have a morally uplifting tone. While the men were at the front fighting for their country, these women were trying to hold the nation together. They stood for everything that was decent, everything that Tommy Atkins was fighting for.

The reality was different. Far from reinforcing moral values of home and family, the war threw everything into uncertainty. The lives of ordinary men and women were transformed overnight, and the old codes of conduct made irrelevant.

The men who went off to fight woke up in barracks governed by

new rules where they lived a day away from death. And life changed just as dramatically for the women they left behind. They were confronted with new levels of material and emotional insecurity—and now they had to cope with it on their own. Times had changed, and women's lives changed with them.

Women worked harder than ever before. In 1941 the ministry of labour estimated that more than 80 per cent of single women between 14 and 59, and 41 per cent of wives and widows, were at work or in uniform. This gave them an independent income for the first time and opened many women's eyes to the world outside the home. But their new independence had a high price. The long hours of war work in the factories (often 60 a week) shattered the cosy notion of hearth and home. The *New Statesman* outlined the impossible hardships faced by working women in December 1941:

'In an industrial centre such as Birmingham, a number of shops close at five o'clock, or even earlier, which makes it impossible for those employed on a normal working day to do any shopping. In the London area it was found that over half the women shopped on Friday nights, and two thirds of them on Saturday afternoons. Half the women had difficulty in obtaining their meat supplies...because they could not go to the shops in the mornings. The great majority of women questioned had to do their own shopping, and normally had to queue....And an even greater difficulty than the shopping problem arises if the women have any children. Creches and nursery schools are seldom available, and meals are not obtainable at a considerable proportion of the schools.'

The disruption this caused to the stability of family life was noted with concern by the establishment. In 1942 a Mass Observation report on women at work warned that, 'while

winning the war is the only big consideration, if the bonds of family and continuity are weakened beyond a certain point, the morale, unity and work effort of the country is weakened'.

But government concern could do little to conceal the fact that the war had blown the family apart. Women still had endless work to do in the home—and less time and goods to do it with. But the other side of family life, the comfort, companionship, and sex, had been torn away. So women requiring a little love, attention, excitement or even just a good laugh had to take their needs elsewhere.

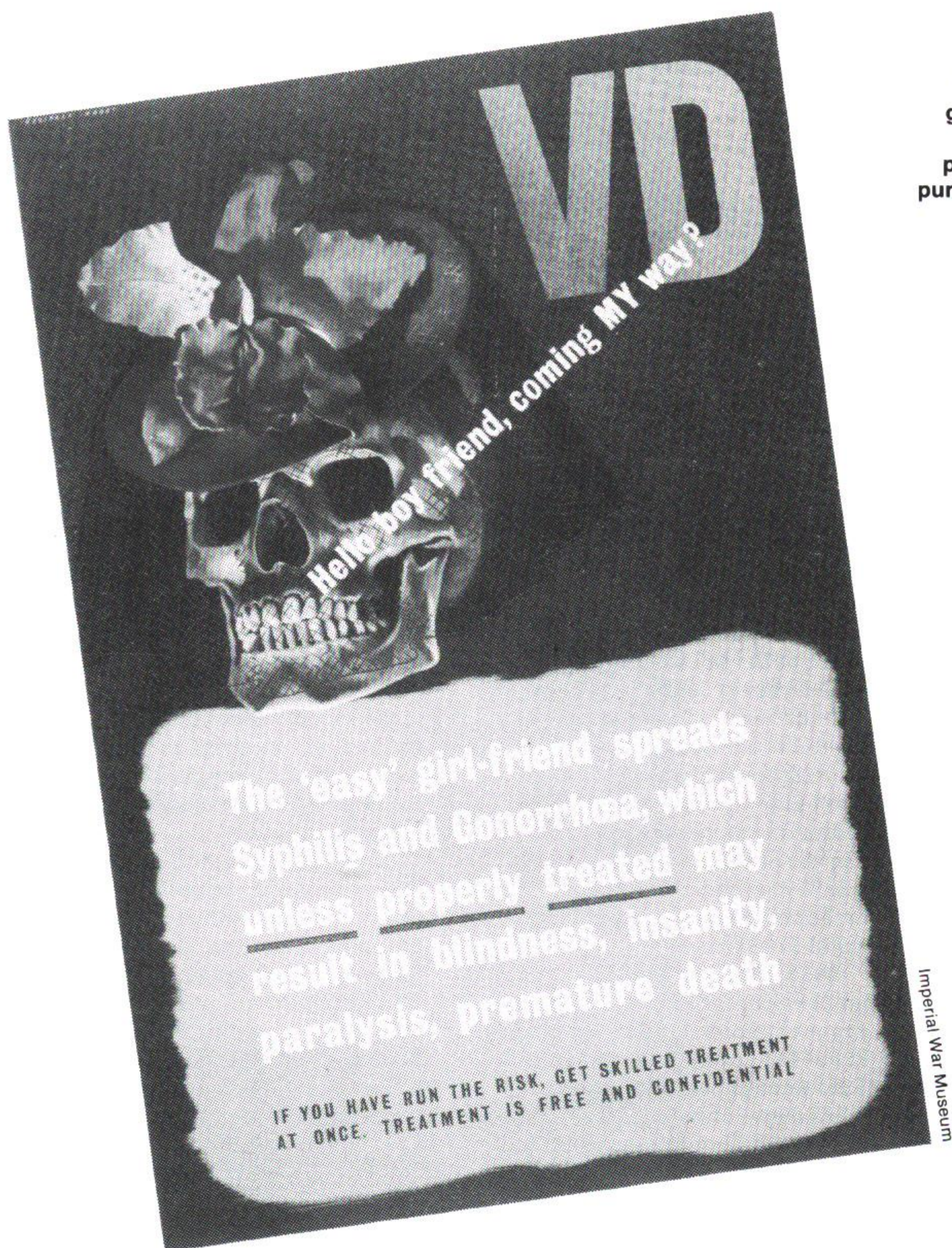
The entertainment industry cashed in on the wages boom and began to provide new forms of entertainment. Covent Garden Opera House installed a dance hall over its seats. Jitterbug marathons and swing contests were held at the Hammersmith Palais. Chain dances like the Lambeth Walk created a party atmosphere and slow waltzes gave people a chance to snuggle up to a stranger.

Barbara Cartland, acting as wartime welfare counsellor, and not known for her progressive moral views, admitted that it was hard to condemn women for going astray:

'It is very easy to say what a woman should do or should not do when she hasn't seen her husband for four years....They were young, their husbands were not fluent letter writers—they started by not meaning any harm, just desiring a little change from the monotony of looking after their children, queuing for food, and cleaning the house with no man to appreciate them or their cooking.

'Another man would come along—perhaps an American or an RAF pilot....He is lonely, she is lonely, he smiled at her, she smiles back, and it's an introduction. It is bad luck that he is married, but he means no harm, nor does it cross her mind at first that she could ever be unfaithful to Bill overseas. When human nature





A wartime poster suggests that the government didn't believe its own propaganda about pure British maidens

'Getting enough sex was all part of the dare that the war represented to us women'—ATS corporal

takes its course and they fall in love, the home is broken up and maybe another baby on the way, there are plenty of people ready to say it's disgusting and disgraceful. But they hadn't meant it to be like that, they hadn't really.'

In fact government figures suggest that while plenty of people were ready to point the finger, fewer and fewer could do so from a position of moral superiority. Britain had become a nation living in glass houses.

The number of children registered as illegitimate rocketed in the war years. Of the 5.3m British babies delivered between 1939 and 1945 over a third were illegitimate. And the 'bastard boom' was not just attributable to inexperienced teenage girls 'getting caught'. Most illegitimate children were registered to women aged between 20 and 30. And as children of married women were presumed to be legitimate unless declared otherwise, the figures are probably an underestimation.

Of course, the number of unwanted pregnancies was far higher than illegitimate births. Abortionists were in big demand. Although the

operation was illegal and frequently dangerous, official estimates suggest that one in five pregnancies were aborted.

Changing moral attitudes also affected younger women. By 1943, London and other large cities were crowded with GIs, Canadians and other foreign troops. They provided an often irresistible attraction for many young girls who saw them as a means of escape from the deprivations of wartime. An emergency home office study blamed the glamour of the GIs' Hollywood image for arousing the passions of British teenage girls:

'To girls brought up on the cinema, who copied the dress, hairstyles, and manners of Hollywood stars, the sudden influx of Americans, speaking like the films, who actually lived in the magic country and who had plenty of money, at once went to the girls' heads. The American attitude to women, their proneness to spoil a girl, to build up, exaggerate, talk big, and to act with generosity and flamboyance, helped to make them the most attractive boyfriends. In addition, they "picked up" girls easily, and even a comparatively plain and unattractive girl stood a chance.'

The alarming rise in VD rates was blamed on the promiscuity of 'military personnel' with young girls. By the middle of 1941 the national statistics for VD showed an increase of 70 per cent. In some sea ports it had risen by 400 per cent. So many merchant seamen were reported infected in Britain's main ports that the British Shipping Federation suspected a Nazi plot.

The changed standards for women at home were even more stark for women in the forces. One Auxiliary Territorial Service corporal remembers: 'While in mixed company women were submissive and accepting the role that men expected them to play, in our barracks we were something completely different. We played dangerously and talked dirty....Getting enough sex was all part of the dare that the war represented for us women, because it allowed us to express our liberty and rebelliousness from the male-set archetypes of loving wife and mother that they had always tried to tie us to.'

### Live for the day

Many writers have tried to explain away the promiscuity of the war years as 'war aphrodisia', or a link between the urge to kill and the urge to procreate. What is really revealed is the adaptability of moral standards and the pragmatism of people faced with crisis. Women at home in the war years 'managed' however they could, living for the day in a way unthinkable before the war. The war brought tremendous hardships. But for many women, it may also have offered more opportunities and freedom than they had ever experienced before.

The decline of family life in the war years was of great concern to the establishment. In March 1943 Winston Churchill broadcast to the nation that if Britain was to 'maintain its leadership of the world and survive as a great power that can hold up against external pressures, our people must be encouraged by every means to have larger families'. Perhaps wartime promiscuity was a way of regenerating the British race. Perhaps not.

'What we need', my grandmother often used to say, 'is another war to bring this country together'. I always thought she was talking about labour discipline, but now I can't help wondering if she didn't mean something else.

For an excellent account of women and the Second World War see John Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, Collins, 1985

A new mood rising

# Not the woman she was

**Pat Roberts examines the anti-Tory shift in British politics**

Suddenly the British political landscape looks interesting again. Until very recently political observers faced a perennial problem of finding something new to say. The Thatcher government looked invincible, the Labour opposition looked hopeless, and everything in between was fairly predictable.

Since the Conservatives lost the June Euro-elections, the set pattern of the past decade has been disrupted. The most significant symptom of the changing political climate has been a new round of industrial action. Strikes hitting the BBC, docks, local government, British Rail and London Underground do not yet mark a new wave of militancy. But they do reflect changing attitudes.

The railworkers' strike was particularly significant in exploding

the myth of Tory invincibility. For the first time since Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, the government failed to defeat a targeted opponent. During the early phase of the rail strike, the Conservatives confidently launched into the usual anti-union campaign. Ministers accused the railway unions of irresponsibility and threatened to enact new anti-labour laws. The media was mobilised in an attempt to win the public to the government's side. Every effort was made to orchestrate a commuter backlash against the strike.

But for the first time this decade, a government-inspired hate campaign against strikers flopped. If anything, it was the government and British Rail management that appeared provocative and unreasonable. As the Tories' anti-union campaign

backfired, their main concern was a quick settlement to leave the bad experience behind.

In terms of tangible benefits, the railworkers did not achieve very much. They won an improved pay offer and succeeded in slowing down management's plans to destroy national pay bargaining. And yet this strike may well turn out to be one of the most significant post-war industrial disputes.

Unlike a famous dispute like the miners' strike of the early seventies, the rail strike neither brought down a government nor unleashed a wave of militancy. However, also unlike the well-known strikes of recent decades, this one went against the previous pattern and for the first time forced a hitherto confident government on to the defensive.

At the very least, the railway strike



**RIGHT:** The rise of industrial action and public disquiet suggest that Thatcher might have popped her last champagne cork

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



showed that the Tory government is far from omnipotent. To many it also demonstrated that the government can be beaten even at its own game.

No sooner was the rail strike over than the Tories found themselves in more trouble. The cabinet reshuffle was a disaster and no Tory contender has emerged from it unscathed. As Tory MPs set off for their holidays their sense of unease was almost palpable. They appear to have lost their touch.

The disarray in the Tory camp has provided the media with an opportunity to comment on the changing complexion of British politics. In general they have wasted that opportunity. Most commentaries emphasise the difficulties caused by Thatcher's regal style and her failure to be flexible in a new situation. This focus on personality problems fails to explain why the same style appeared to be so effective for a decade. Why is something that worked in the past causing problems today?

The more ardent supporters of the government provide explanations of the Tories' troubles which border on the insane. According to the editor of the *Sunday Times*, the government is merely paying the price of being too successful in restoring prosperity:

'There is now a majority view that Britain has become a wealthy enough country to afford more for its underclass, invest more in improving its public services and spend more in cleaning up the environment. The British political agenda is now determined by such problems of prosperity.' (30 July)

Oh, the 'problems of prosperity'! It appears that the British public has more money than sense and is now looking for politicians who are prepared to give it all away.

To find the real reason why the Tories are facing so many difficulties, it is first of all worth considering what they have achieved in the Thatcher era.

First impressions can often deceive. The image of an all-powerful Thatcher regime held in popular esteem by the masses never corresponded to reality. Despite appearances, the Tory share of the vote in the 1979, 1983 and 1987 general elections remained remarkably stable. Thatcher never won a majority of votes cast. She succeeded so easily because the opposition was divided.

Thatcher's failure to reach beyond the traditional Tory constituency also casts doubt on the proposition that her arguments have won widespread popular support. Opinion polls indicate that the views of the electorate have not shifted to create a new Thatcherite consensus. A Mori poll published in May was only the latest of many to confirm that most

people reject the main values associated with Thatcher's enterprise culture.

So what has been the secret of Thatcher's durability? It has rested upon several separate but mutually reinforcing factors.

Probably the most significant feature of British politics during the past decade is the disintegration of Labourism. The capitalist recession which began in earnest in the seventies seriously undermined the credibility of the Labour Party. Traditionally this party has attempted to reconcile two conflicting tendencies; managing capitalism while providing the public with a measure of benefits and services. By the late seventies it was no longer possible to carry out this double-act. British capitalism required a single-minded commitment to the restoration of profit regardless of its social cost.

### Incredible Kinnock

The Labour Party failed to realise that the post-war tradition of consensus politics had come to an end and acted as if nothing had changed. Its old policies appeared more irrelevant as the years passed. By the mid-eighties, Labour had become the victim of its past. Its sole role was to make the Tories look good by comparison with its own incompetence. As Labour became less credible, the idea of Tory invulnerability took shape.

The collapse of Labour provided Thatcher with the breathing space necessary to get on with rescuing British capitalism. Through a resolute and often aggressive stance, Thatcher succeeded in firming up her party's traditional base of support. After the uncertainties of the sixties and seventies, when the Tories lost four out of five elections, the mobilisation of the Conservative constituency behind Thatcher's capitalist crusade meant that the British right finally acquired a momentum of its own.

Until recently almost every one of Thatcher's important policy initiatives could be supported by the entire right wing. Since these policies appeared essential for the survival of the capitalist class there was little dissidence in the Tory camp. This unity gave the Tories their new coherence.

The policies of mass unemployment, cuts in social spending, anti-union laws, the crackdown on law and order and the curtailing of civil rights have enjoyed the wholehearted support of the capitalist class. They went with the grain of British capitalism, and so seemed plausible to anyone who accepted the logic of the system. That's why the parliamentary opposition parties—who fully accept such logic—found it so hard to oppose Thatcher's policies effectively.

Even the government does not dare to claim that selling off water will provide an answer to inflation, soaring trade deficits or falling investment in industry

The mobilisation of hardline Tory supporters into a crusading force, in the context of the disintegration of Labourism, inevitably changed the political balance. In the absence of any contending options, the Thatcher government's policies became the only alternative. It is now clear that many observers confused the support which the government enjoyed from its traditional constituency with that of society as a whole.

This confusion is understandable. Once the government had disposed of its critics it could establish some degree of trust, even among people who were critical of many aspects of its politics. Thus, by the time of the last general election it was widely believed that, whatever its other faults, the Thatcher government was doing a good job with the economy and that prosperity was just around the corner. The myth of the British economic miracle took off, and until the recent outburst of bad inflation and trade figures, it constituted the strongest card in Thatcher's hand.

### Not just luck

Until very recently no one seriously questioned the viability of perpetual Tory rule. Arch reactionary Woodrow Wyatt kicked the year off with the confident assertion that 'the eighties belong to Mrs Thatcher. The nineties will almost certainly belong to her too' (*Times*, 3 January). It seemed as if the Tories could make as many mistakes as they wanted without facing any negative consequences. An inept and discredited Labour Party guaranteed the future of Thatcherism. Tory wet MP Ian Gilmour complained in February that 'the impotence of the Labour Party enables the government to do whatever it likes' (*Guardian*, 16 February). That was in February.

By March, the first serious reservations about the future of the Thatcher regime were being aired in public. Even loyal hacks like Ronald Butt expressed fears that the government was no longer 'seen as being competent' (*Times*, 16 March). Another press hack and leading Thatcher acolyte Bruce Anderson put it all down to the actions of Lady Luck and the operation of Sod's Law: 'Since Christmas, luck has deserted the government. Almost everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 26 March)

But it was more than bad luck. By March the government hype about economic prosperity sounded increasingly hollow. Bad trade deficits, lack of improvement in Britain's competitive position, but above all else the return of a high rate of inflation indicated that 10 years of Thatcher's 'miracle' had done nothing to improve the underlying state of the economy. High interest

rates and mortgage payments reminded even the middle classes that what was around the corner was unlikely to be prosperity.

Changing public perceptions about the state of the economy posed the first serious problem for the Tories. Unfortunately for Thatcher, these perceptions coincided with what appears to be an even more profound difficulty. To put it bluntly, the old crusading spirit is now gone. The policies which were relevant to the needs of British capitalism have all been tried, tested and exhausted. Now the Tories have used up all their important policies and are uncertain about future direction.

For some time now the Thatcher government has failed to come up with any policy initiatives that can tackle real problems. During the past two years it has devised no serious policies to confront economic or social issues. More and more, it seems that the government's legislative programme is inspired entirely by the motive of appearing to be doing something.

None of the major government initiatives of the moment can claim to be serious attempts to resolve serious problems. The poll tax, the privatisation of water and electricity, the reforms of the NHS, education and of the legal profession do not add up to a coherent programme. Even the government does not dare to claim that selling off water will provide an answer to inflation, soaring trade deficits or the declining rate of investment in manufacturing industry. Unlike the earlier attacks on the unions, these policies cannot even mobilise the traditional Tory constituency. The poll tax seems unlikely to inspire. The government's initiatives now have little purpose for securing the long-term interests of the capitalist class.

### Uneasy establishment

Whereas in the past the Thatcher government's policies enjoyed the wholehearted support of her class, today they are the cause of profound disquiet and unease. Consequently the traditional Tory constituency has lost its dynamic, become demobilised and is even experiencing its own splits and divisions. The defection of some Tory voters to the Greens and the apathy of many more in the Euro-elections illustrates the problems facing Thatcher.

It is the growing crisis of confidence within the right-wing bloc that explains why the political climate has changed. Traditional Tory voters and sections of the middle classes are now experiencing directly the negative effects of Thatcher policies. The revolt of the doctors, lawyers and teachers against proposed reforms shows that Tory policies can no longer count on automatic backing even from

hitherto loyal supporters.

In these circumstances the government faces a crisis of policy. After 10 years it is forced to rethink its strategy with no obvious solution at hand.

Of course, despite Bruce Anderson's fears, the government's luck has not entirely run out. It still faces an opposition that remains cowardly and politically inept. The Labour Party can be relied upon to make the government look decent by comparison. As long as it confronts a Labour Party led by Neil Kinnock, the Tory government can only be defeated by its own mistakes.

In a sense electoral calculations are far from decisive. Whatever happens in the next general election, the Tories are unlikely to regain the reputation they enjoyed during Thatcher's first decade. They have lost their trump card—the myth of economic prosperity. Their constituency is no longer mobilised—it is apathetic and lacks confidence about the future.

### Another Falklands?

This is the background to the new mood emerging in British politics. Alongside Tory unease, there is a consolidation of resentment against the government. The public sympathy for the railworkers was very much an expression of this resentment. It is now much more common to hear the Tories apologise and their critics take the offensive. Although this reaction is as yet nothing more than a mood, it creates important opportunities for those seeking to popularise anti-capitalist politics.

At present nothing is decided. The Tories are a force without a cause—but they are still a force and remain the most credible party of government. They don't have to do very much so long as they are competing with Labour.

Nor can we expect the Tories to give up without a fight. They must be busy searching for an issue that could replicate the triumphs of the Falklands War and secure them a fourth term in office. No doubt they will raise the stakes once more in the year ahead and attempt to get in a pre-emptive blow against their opponents.

The new mood in British politics represents a serious challenge. Marxist ideas can help transform a mood into a coherent viewpoint and an alternative. Between now and the next Falklands-type adventure there is a lot to be done to prepare the political ground. Above all, this anti-Tory mood needs to be shaped and directed into a popular working class offensive, and activated into something more than silent discontent.

In the summer of 1988 the Labour Party was 10 points behind the Tories in the polls. In November the Scottish National Party overturned a 19 500 Labour majority in the Govan by-election. Neil Kinnock was said to be suffering from nervous depression and thinking of quitting. While the pundits speculated about who would take over as Labour leader, some MPs put themselves out of the running by deserting the sinking ship to become Sky TV interviewers or Italian university lecturers.

In the summer of 1989 Labour scored its first-ever victory over Thatcher in the June Euro-elections. It also beat off the SNP challenge in the Glasgow Central by-election, and moved ahead of the field in a series of opinion polls. Kinnock was said to have become a sharp-witted orator and astute tactician, and leading Labour MPs began lining themselves up for jobs in the first Kinnock cabinet.

So what has Labour done to turn things around? The short answer is: nothing. Labour's recovery is almost entirely due to the Tories' decline. Kinnock's only significant contribution has been to avoid making so many public gaffes as last year.

#### Five per cent

On the day of the Euro-elections, National Opinion Polls asked voters who shifted to Labour why they did so. Almost half said it was simply a reaction against government policy or Thatcher herself. Just five per cent said they changed to Labour because they thought it was moving in the right direction.

The Tories have lost support rather than Labour winning it. Surveys confirm that the key to Labour's success has been the near-collapse of public confidence in Tory economic policy. A Mori poll published in July notes a strong correlation between economic optimism (the margin between those who expect the economy to improve over those who expect it to worsen) and government support. In the 12 months to June 1989, this index moved from being positive to minus 30. Tory support has fallen along with economic optimism.

The importance of the economic factor in the recent shift is confirmed by the fact that much of the swing to Labour has come from owner-occupiers—not because they are impressed by Kinnock's conversion to council house sales, but because they blame the Tories for soaring interest rates. In July Labour trailed the Tories by 11 per cent among home owners, compared with 21 per cent just three months earlier.

Labour spokesmen claim that their revival is largely due to public enthusiasm for their recently completed policy review, which presents a New Realist programme for Britain. But the idea that millions have studied and been impressed by the latest



Why celebrate Labour's revival?

## THE ALTERNATIVE TORY PARTY

Jon Hann finds the revived new-look Labour Party even less appealing than the old one

glossy document from Walworth Road is a fantasy. Nobody has read the policy review. And that is a pity.

Anybody who is seriously looking for an alternative to the Tories would do well to take a look at the policy review document *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*. They will find that the challenge Kinnock has met is the need to adapt Labour policies to the demands of modern British capitalism. And the change he has made is to bring his plans into line with many of Thatcher's policies.

On defence, Labour, like the Tories, now believes in retaining Polaris and Trident nuclear submarines and any other nuclear weapons America may choose to station at its British bases. In the past Labour talked of saving money on defence to spend more on health and social services; now Kinnock proposes to spend more money on the Royal Navy. The organisation which once boasted of its reputation as the 'peace party' now seeks to distinguish its defence policy from Thatcher's by promising to ensure that the navy is ready for the next South Atlantic-style war.

Labour still says it will increase public spending, but Kinnock now qualifies this commitment by saying that the increase 'will have to match the growth in the economy' (*Sunday Times*, 7 May). Labour used to argue that increased spending created growth and could ward off recession. Now it agrees with the Tories that increased spending is a drain on the economy and a luxury to be forsaken during recession. In this context, Britain's economic decline means that a Kinnock government would be as tight-fisted as any Thatcher administration.

Labour used to be committed to repealing Tory anti-union laws. But its new policy pledges to keep the unions chained by legislation. For example, a Labour government would ensure that the right to take secondary action was curtailed. Secondary action will be legitimate only if 'workers have a genuine interest in the outcome of a dispute' (*Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*, p25). Since it will be the gentlemen in wigs and gowns who decide this question it seems certain that most solidarity action will, as

under the Tories, remain illegal.

The policy review reveals that Labour has come to terms with the kind of policies necessary for managing capitalism in the nineties. British capitalism can no longer afford the Labourist policies of yesteryear, such as high spending and management through consultation. Today the increasingly shaky system requires cutbacks and ruthless exploitation. Since Kinnock has explicitly stated that his intention is to run capitalism better than the Tories, he has had to shape his policies to suit the system's needs. The result is simply an alternative brand of Thatcherism—different packaging, but much the same inside. This is the main message of Labour's policy review.

#### BR boss

The consequences of the shift in Labour policy are already becoming clear. Kinnock's attempt to establish his credentials as a respectable, mainstream statesman involves reducing the influence of the unions within the Labour Party—and distancing Labour further from the working class in the outside world. Thus in the rail strike, stung by Thatcher's accusation that he was 'the strikers' friend', Kinnock appointed himself chairman of British Rail and told the strikers to accept the pay offer and get back to work.

So palpable is Labour's contempt for its traditional supporters today that even the Tory press has been moved to comment on it. At the start of the docks dispute in April the *Sunday Telegraph*, which usually rants about union barons pulling Labour puppets' strings, remarked on the changing times: 'Today's Labour grandees regard the working classes moving centre-stage with all the enthusiasm of a *nouveau riche* family contemplating a visit from low-life cousins.'

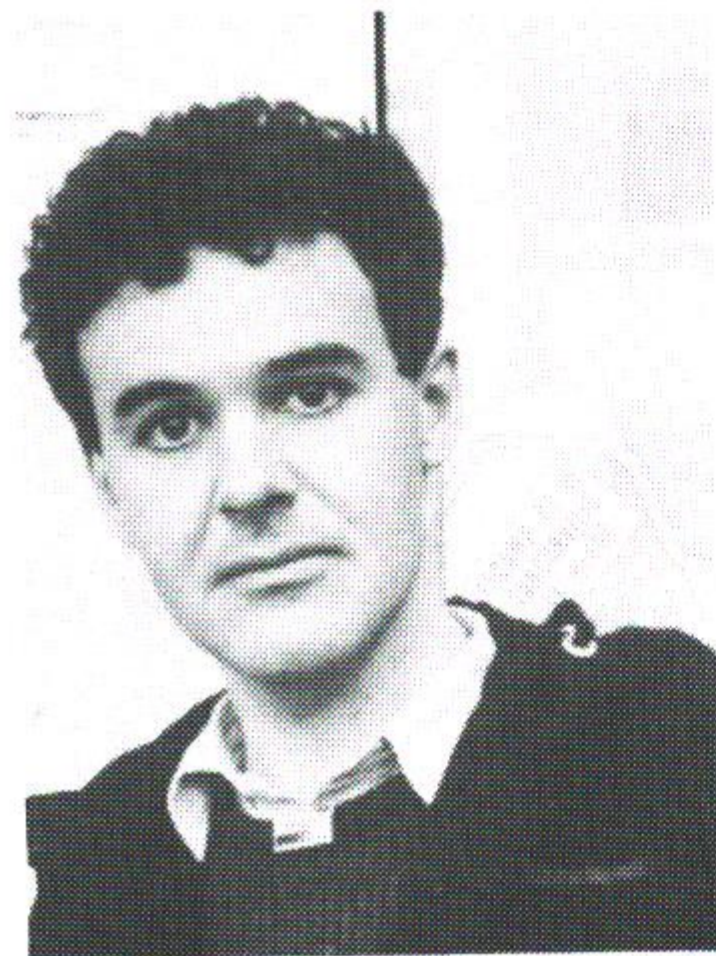
These are the policies and orientation which we will face under any future Labour government. We shouldn't be blinded by the smart suits, red roses, professional TV broadcasts and the other decorative aspects of Labour's new, efficient image. They are tricks to disguise the unappealing character of Labour's basic message—pay the poll tax, go back to work and accept low pay, prepare for more cuts in real public spending, support the strengthened police force and military, etc. No wonder the *Financial Times* recommended the policy review to the City as 'without qualification momentous stuff' (12 May).

At a time when more people are turning against the consequences of 10 years of Thatcherism, the last thing we need is a warmed-over version of the same thing from Labour. With the policy review completed and the image polished up, Kinnock now hopes to sit tight, do nothing, and sneak into government thanks to Tory blunders. If he succeeds, we will have no cause for celebration.

# living

## BATTLE OF BRITAIN (Rpt)

*As TV viewers brace themselves for a blitz of programmes about the Second World War, John Fitzpatrick talked to BBC producer Adam Curtis about the difficulties of making historical documentaries on the subject of great national myths*



Curtis: 'The mood today is don't challenge the myths of the past'

Television loves anniversaries, and it is going to commemorate the outbreak of the Second World War in style. Thames TV is reshooting its epic series *The World at War*. The BBC has a major new series *The Road to War*, tracing the different paths which eventually led each country to take up arms. The most expensive television production ever, *War and Remembrance*, promises to continue the preposterous adventures of Robert Mitchum as an American admiral.

Adam Curtis knows about the

perils and pleasures of television history, having produced *An Ocean Apart* for BBC1. First shown last year and just repeated, *An Ocean Apart* was one of the best TV documentaries of recent years. It had a sensible subject, the transfer of world power in the twentieth century from Britain to the USA, and it dealt with it in a professional, authoritative manner in the best BBC tradition.

The series tended to view events like the war through the eyes of famous protagonists, and to take the Americans in particular at their idealistic word, but we are talking about the BBC, so you don't expect historical materialism. Curtis defends his corner: 'I think it is impossible to decide what was self-interest and what was genuine idealism in the Second World War. The Americans more than the British really did believe you could have self-interest and idealism at the same time. Looking at America's history subsequently it would seem that it just doesn't work, and in that sense I would agree with you.'

### Written by victors

Curtis is excited, and apprehensive, about the forthcoming programmes on the Second World War. 'Here we have one of the great moments of twentieth-century history coming up for reconsideration for the first time since television became self-conscious. Twenty years ago there would have been a straightforward history. *The World at War* is the classic. It was brilliant in that it assembled all this archive material for the first time and told the story of a great battle. But it didn't judge anything, it didn't challenge anything. It saw its function as simply portraying an accepted series of facts.

'Of course you have to get some basic information across. But when you do this you often find yourself putting across the received view and you have to decide whether to challenge that. Then you are constrained by the material. On television you are going to use archive footage, old photographs and documents and interviews. You quickly discover the truth of the old adage that the history of wars is written by the victors. Newsreels tell you history in a certain way and you have to be careful about using them without challenging them. On the other hand the research sometimes turns up a new emphasis you will want to include.

'We knew for example that in 1940, before America joined the war, Britain desperately needed arms. The Neutrality Act prevented America from exporting arms to countries at war. The government wanted to help, and so allowed arms to be bought in the States and taken away by the purchasers. They could say that they were not exporting arms. I sent a film researcher to Washington and after a lot of work he came up with one minute 40 seconds of mute film of

The war we know: Kenneth More as fighter pilot Douglas Bader



carhorses dragging aeroplanes across the Canadian border in a snowstorm. That took us to a tiny town in North Dakota. The residents said "Yes, we remember that. Day after day you'd see these planes flying in, being handed over and then the horses dragging them across the border".

'That border town was a good place for presenter David Dimbleby to stand when he explained the fight going on in congress about American involvement in the war. Including this piece of film was a good way of giving proper weight to the division in America about the war.'

### Black and white

What does Curtis think of the way the war is usually represented on television? 'We have not really moved on from the image of Kenneth More and fighter pilots and heroic battle scenes. Our ideas about why we fought the war are stuck around those images, and that's terrible. We still live under the shadow of the propaganda of the Second World War, and I don't mean that was necessarily bad propaganda. It might be true, it might not, that is still very difficult to discern.'

'One of the problems now is that we see that past in black and white film. It wasn't until 1969 that we got colour TV. I think it gives us an idea of the past as another country, as a simple, quiet world. It makes it easier to keep on thinking those propaganda myths. The myths which helped win the war

were presented in simple, stark terms. The old material very much supports that.'

Curtis also believes that the general climate of opinion is not conducive to new approaches. 'It is acceptable to say that the First World War was a nasty bunch of corrupt old empires slogging it out to a standstill, but the received wisdom is that the Second World War was different because it was a good war. I can't think of another received attitude which has as much strength. It was a good war because you beat Hitler and as you beat him you discovered that he was more evil than you thought, with the concentration camps and so on. Of course nobody could argue that Hitler was a good man.'

No, but you could argue that Churchill wasn't a good man either from the point of view of the British working class, the Irish and all the other people who felt the hot end of his cigar. 'Churchill is the crucial person to look at if you're going to defeat those myths, no not defeat them, that's prejudging the issue, but examine them. Churchill, maybe it was necessary at the time, sold a war of dreams to his country. He sold the image of a glorious country with a glorious past and, if successful, a glorious future. The real question is whether he was actually selling a phoney image of his past, and whether we have a phoney image of our past because of Churchill.'

'It will be very interesting to look at the outpouring of programmes to see whether they are going to fight to reach a new understanding of why the war was fought. You could turn the prism a bit and say it wasn't a fight for freedom, but survival, and then the question is whose survival? Or if you say we were fighting for our freedom, then the question is what freedom did we have in the thirties, the freedom to be unemployed? These are some of the questions which need answering. There is a film being made in the BBC about Bomber Harris. I hope they're going to point out that Churchill and the war cabinet ordered the bombing and then tried to use Harris as a convenient scapegoat.'

### Two steps back

Ironically, Curtis sees the general explosion of historical material on television as a backward step. 'The funny thing is that at the very moment the world is changing massively around us TV retreats more and more into history. I am as guilty as anyone else in that. Of course you look back to the past as a way of analysing the present, particularly in a period of change. That's sort of true. The real problem is that TV documentaries don't know how to deal with the present. They can make fly-on-the-wall documentaries, but they don't know how to judge the present. They can't make a narrative of it, which is what they try to do.'

'They don't know where history, which is traditionally presented in a more impersonal, objective way, ends and current affairs, which is more obviously authored and editorialised, begins. The present is changing so much that people are frightened and they are retreating into history. The BBC *By Lines* series which are supposed to be authored, opinionated programmes, seem to be all about the past.'

Curtis links this situation to a wider feeling of apprehension in television. 'The mood today is don't challenge the myths of the past. Partly because there's been sloppy journalism. But that said, there is a mood where you do not question the myths of the past because if you do you will be shot down by very powerful forces who know how to do it. Melvyn Bragg has already quoted the *Death on the Rock* example to you. He's right, the government rubbished the Windlesham report within hours of it being released. There is a malaise at the BBC, a lack of confidence about what it's there for. A lot of that can be traced back to the ban on Sinn Fein and management giving in. The BBC was not seen to protest about that, and the government was seen to get away with it.' But then, when it comes to war, whether it is the Second World War, the Falklands War or the Irish War, the government has always had its way with the BBC.

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Toxic waste

# BRITAIN IS A DUMP

'We have the technology', said the Tories. They were defending the toxic waste disposal industry, during the row that blew up in August over the importation of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) to be destroyed at British plants.

Britain once had the technology to produce and export manufactured goods around the globe. Now others do that, while Britain boasts the technology to clean up after them. John Bull, engineering craftsman, has been demoted to bonfire attendant. The workshop of the world has become the slagheap of international capitalism. We have the technology, and the leukaemia.

A debt-ridden former colony like Nigeria doesn't want them, but the once-mighty imperial state has welcomed PCBs and the profits they bring. Imports of hazardous wastes into Britain are up from 3800 tonnes in 1981 to 80 000 tonnes last year, coming in by train, boat and even plane from the workshops of the modern world, like West Germany and Japan. No doubt these rich nations also have the technology, but they prefer to pay to send their waste over here for disposal; after all, a duke and a dustman may be equally capable of emptying bins, but only one of them feels compelled to do it.

British capitalism is in such a sorry state today that it cannot turn down

the prospect of getting £1600 billion from Bonn for a decade's worth of toxic waste disposal. The shovelling of poisonous shit is perhaps the one true boom industry in Thatcher's Britain. While factories have been closed and demolished across the industrial belt, two new toxic waste disposal plants are being built in north-east England. When the boat comes in there in future, the locals will have something more than a fishy on a little dishy to sing about.

But, say the Tories, don't worry, we have the technology. A government that cannot keep shrimps and sewage out of the water system, that presides over filthy streets and public services held together with a piece of string, stands atop the slagheap and pronounces that all is as safe as houses. As secure as house prices is more like it.

The toxic waste importation boom is another example of how low British capitalism has sunk, in line with the conversion of former industrial plants into tacky theme parks, and the way that, from London to Glasgow, rivers and canals which

were once the gateways to Empire have become building sites for overpriced yuppie apartment houses.

As it happens 'we' do have the technological potential to solve the problems of dangerous waste and many other environmental dangers. But a decaying social system dedicated to the ruthless pursuit of profit is not capable of committing the necessary resources to clean the place up.

One other point. After the Greenpeace protesters in dinghies stuck their death's head banner on a shipload of PCBs, Britain's port bosses made the PR gesture of refusing to handle the cargo. Days earlier these same port employers had smashed the dock strike, through court action and summary sackings, and set about imposing punitive pay deals and hazardous working conditions on the dockers who remain. Now environmental campaigners want us to applaud the bosses at Tilbury and Liverpool as pioneering champions of the public good. We are not all that green.

Eddie Veale

Lord Justice Taylor's interim report on the Hillsborough disaster was a big embarrassment for the police. But they will get over it. And in the longer run, his conclusions will work far more to their advantage than to that of football fans.

Taylor's inquiry into the deaths of 95 Liverpool supporters at the FA Cup semi-final game in April concludes that 'the main reason for the disaster was the failure of police control'. His criticisms of the way South Yorkshire police handled the murderous crush on the Leppings Lane terrace have caused ructions within the Force. The officer in charge on the day, chief superintendent David Duckenfield, has been suspended, and South Yorkshire chief constable Peter Wright offered to resign. The families of Hillsborough victims were relieved that the report attached little blame to Liverpool fans. But what are the likely consequences of Taylor's deliberations?

### Call dogs, not doctors

The key word in Taylor's criticism of the police is 'control'; the police, he says, did not have enough of it. The conclusion must be that more police are needed, with wider powers and better technology, to get a tighter grip on the crowd. But that will do nothing to avoid another Hillsborough—because the measures the authorities already take to control football crowds were responsible for the tragedy in the first place.

Hillsborough, as we said at the time, was not simply caused by the undoubted incompetence displayed by senior police officers on that Saturday afternoon. It was the



PHOTO: Pandora Anderson

### Hillsborough report

# CONTROL EXPERIMENT

culmination of a long-running political campaign, orchestrated at government level, to criminalise football fans and use them as convenient guinea-pigs for an experiment in high-profile, heavy-handed policing.

Taylor criticised media reporting of initial police claims that Liverpool fans at Hillsborough were drunken, robbing, hooligans. Yet that is the official attitude towards football supporters endorsed by the government and encouraged among the police. That is why they impose

something approaching martial law at every big game. And that is why they herded the Liverpool fans into the overcrowded Leppings Lane pen, then pushed those who first tried to climb out of the crush back into the killing cages like escaped animals.

Taylor's report expresses surprise that, as the bodies piled up, Duckenfield 'continued to treat the incident as a threat to the pitch and public order', and called for dog squads rather than doctors. But the chief superintendent was simply imple-

menting the policy which assumes that anything involving football supporters is a criminal riot.

In the context of this continuing policy, Taylor's interim recommendations can change little or nothing as the new season begins. Most clubs' perimeter fences will be left up, thus preventing escape from any future crush. Taylor says the gates in these fences should be left open, but it will be up to the police to decide whether people can use them—the same police force which decided to form a battle-line across the Hillsborough pitch while people were being crushed to death in front of them.

Taylor wants more police on duty at matches, to monitor the safety situation. But Hillsborough provides stark evidence that having more police is no solution, since their priority is with imposing public order, not protecting public safety. Police were not thin on the ground in Sheffield; there were 800 officers on duty. Putting more on duty will only mean more military-style herding of away fans, more petty arrests, and more practice in the surveillance and control methods of a police state.

Taylor said that the aim of his interim report was to 'achieve a proper balance in crowd control between prevention of disorder and maintenance of safety'. In the hands of the Tories, the judges and the police chiefs, such a balance is impossible, since the 'prevention of disorder'—even if, as at Hillsborough, it only exists in their authoritarian imaginations—will always take precedence over matters of life and limb.

Sharon Clarke



Not cricket

# THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

*Kenan Malik suggests that it's entirely appropriate for English cricketers, the ambassadors of Empire, to visit South Africa*

How times have changed. In 1968 the South African authorities offered Basil D'Oliveira—the 'Cape Coloured' all-rounder forced to come to Britain to play cricket—£40 000 *not* to go on an MCC tour of South Africa. The English cricketing establishment was desperate for him to accept the pay-off. When D'Oliveira refused, he was dropped from the England touring team—despite having just scored 158 in a Test match against Australia. Only a public outcry and a string of injuries forced the authorities finally to pick him. South Africa's subsequent refusal to grant D'Oliveira a visa led to its isolation in world cricket.

Twenty years on, South Africa offered black players like Philip DeFreitas twice as much if they *would* tour. The English authorities were relieved when they finally refused the offer. White South Africans like Robin Smith and Allan Lamb now form the backbone of the England team and are concerned to avoid any action that could jeopardise their Test places. And with players like Zimbabwean-born Graeme Hick waiting in the wings, the England team may soon consist almost entirely of white players from southern Africa—while black British players might find themselves banned from the England team for making a living in South Africa. Keep politics out of sport? It's about as likely as England winning a Test series.

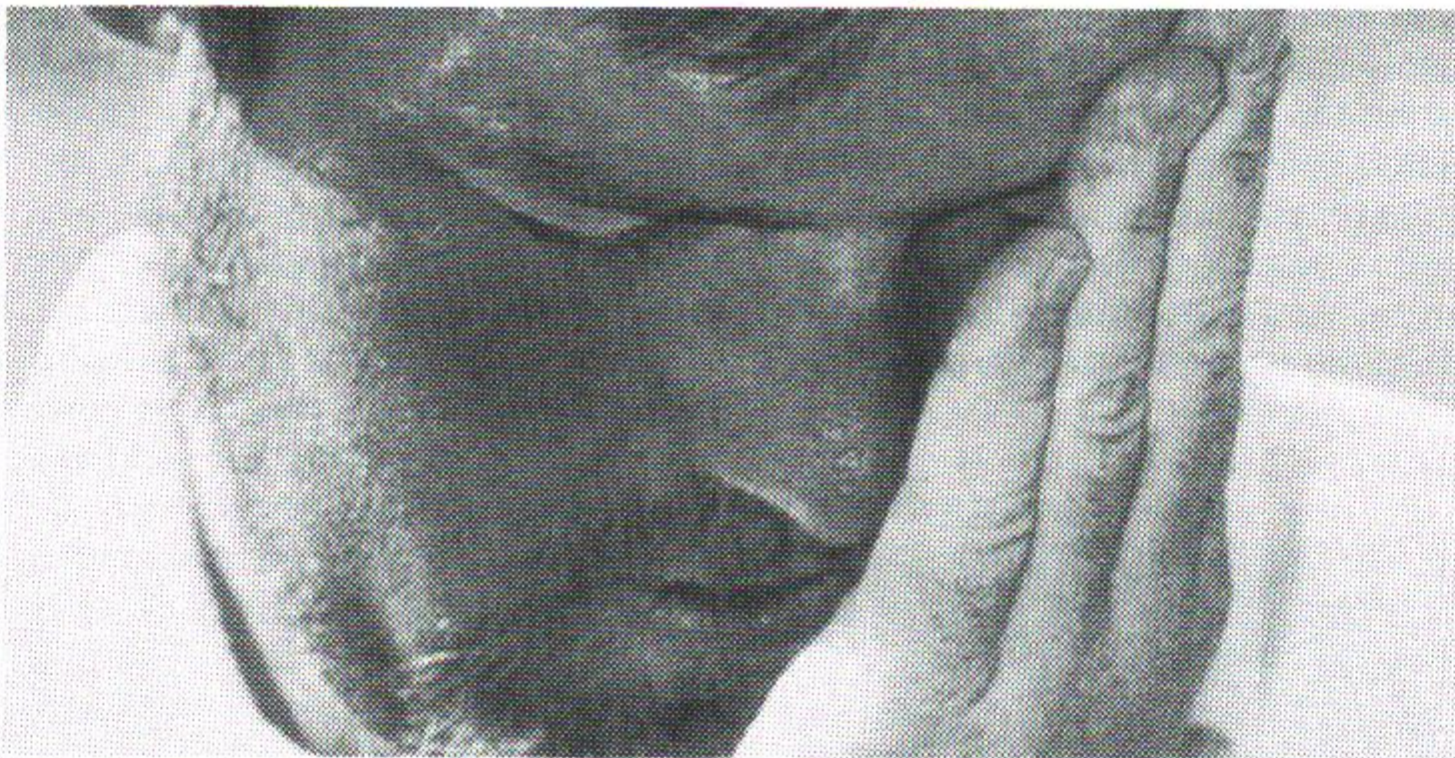
Perhaps more than any other sport, cricket has been immersed in politics, and particularly the politics of Empire. For 150 years cricket has, for the ruling class, been the embodiment of all that is England. When the Rev James Pycroft wrote the first history of cricket in 1851 he noted that 'none but an orderly and sensible race of people would so amuse themselves'; and while 'English settlers everywhere play cricket', there was no cricket club which 'dined either on frogs, sauerkraut or macaroni'.

Above all, cricket was an embodiment of the glories of Empire. Today the map of the world may no longer be coloured red, but the spirit lives on in the game. 'When we gave up our Empire and the white man's burden', former *Daily Telegraph* editor WF Deedes noted recently, 'we

passed much of the load on to our cricketers'. And that's what makes England's cricketing humiliation in recent years so hard to bear.

For Deedes, England's particularly pathetic performance against Australia this summer was not simply a case of an atrocious cricket team being routed by a mediocre one. The inability of English batsmen to play a single orthodox stroke reflects a deeper malaise in our society:

'Orthodoxy, if we think about it, is not enjoying a tremendously good innings just now in any main department of our lives. Within the church it is sharply questioned. Modern architects condemn it. More relevantly, in education it has been under persistent challenge....If our schoolchildren are taught that Shakespeare does not repay study, being irrelevant to the needs of these times, why should a young cricketer feel impelled to model himself on Trumper or Hobbes or Rhodes or Bradman?'



'Rebel' tour leader Mike Gatting: a Player of whom Gentlemen could be proud

According to the Deedes school of cricket sociology, the game has progressed from rustic innocence to a golden age at the height of Empire followed by a decline, the result of a moral collapse in society itself. The welfare state has brought us immigrants, union barons, the permissive society—and David Gower.

The Victorians gave cricket its special status in English life. For nineteenth-century policy-makers, sport became the means both of transmitting the values of discipline and national pride to the new working class and of training the ruling class in its role as the guardians of Empire.

In its distinction between Gentlemen and Players, cricket embodied a social code that was invaluable to the Empire-builders. Unlike in other sports, the demarcation between amateur and professional in cricket was not a question of payment but of social status. The amateurs—the Gentlemen—were the aristocracy—both in society and in the game. The professionals—the Players—were the plebs. From the playing fields of Eton to countless village greens, cricket's internal code taught Gentlemen how to deal with Players in the real world.

The distinction was officially maintained in the game until 1963 and was rigidly enforced. Gentlemen and Players used different dressing rooms and different gates to enter the pitch. Professionals had to wait for amateurs to enter and leave the field first. Only amateurs could be captain. Any deviation from this code was regarded as a heinous sin. A visitor to the Oval in 1924 describes the shock of being witness to loose conduct:

'We saw Fender, the Surrey captain, lead the Gentlemen members of his team to the professionals' quarters and bring his team out on to the field in a body, just for all the world as if they were all flesh and blood. It was a painful sight and many of us closed our eyes rather than look upon it. We felt that Bolshevism had invaded our sanctuary at last.'

The Victorians used the game to maintain social decorum at home and as a building block of Empire. The great Indian cricketer, KS Ranjitsinjhi, thought cricket was 'amongst the most powerful links that keep our Empire together', while MCC secretary

Lord Harris argued that it had 'done more to consolidate the Empire than any other influence'. As governor of Bombay in the 1890s, Harris introduced cricket to India to teach 'moral lessons to the masses'. In the West Indies, a strict hierarchy of clubs was established based on caste and colour. All Test captains were white and black players were often left out because they upset the racial balance.

Cricket may have been useful in imbuing the black masses in the colonies with a sense of the glory that was England, but for the administrators it has always been a white man's game. The 'real' Tests took place between England, Australia and South Africa. And for many within the Long Room at Lords, apartheid was an admirable effort to maintain a proper social order that had long since been abandoned in England.

## Team spirit

In the 20 years since the D'Oliveira affair forced South Africa into isolation, English cricket has maintained its special relationship with apartheid. The guest list at South African cricket's centenary celebrations in Port Elizabeth last year reads like a *Who's Who* of English cricket. Ted Dexter, the England supremo seemingly so outraged by the winter tour, used to commentate on South African radio. Ali Bacher, the South African cricketing supremo who arranged the trip, was the main speaker at the spring meeting of the English Cricketers Association. Far from Mike 'I-don't-know-anything-about-apartheid' Gatting leading a 'rebel' squad, he is upholding the best traditions of English cricket.

## The sun sets

Cricket's role as the embodiment of the values of England and Empire has meant that defeat has repercussions outside the game. When the English football team was bundled out of the European championship last year, newspapers by and large confined their comment to the sports pages. Editorial columns were more concerned with the antics of the hooligans. This summer, however, every newspaper from the *Sun* to the *Guardian* has felt obliged to pontificate on England's cricketing humiliation. Abandoning the white man's burden requires some explanation.

Equally, it's not just Aussies who've had cause to celebrate this summer. CLR James used to argue that the West Indian masses took to cricket because it gave them a sense of tradition and identity. It's probably simpler than that. For those who have lived under the colonial yoke, any spectacle that ensures an English humiliation is good for the soul. And cricket's very Englishness makes every defeat so much sweeter. Yes, it's been a pleasure watching Gower, Gooch and Botham this summer.

These are three of many histories of the women's movement that have appeared over the past 12 months, in different guises, but with much the same message. Sheila Rowbotham's *The Past is Before Us* is a thematic examination of the issues taken up by the women's movement since the sixties. '68 '78 '88: *From Women's Liberation to Feminism* edited by Amanda Sebestyen has more than 30 women explaining what they were doing in those years. Angela Neustatter's *Hyenas in Petticoats* gives a chronological 20-year account of events and debates.

All the books have a slightly dewy-eyed air of 'those were the days' about them. It's easier to reminisce than to face up to today, especially when feminism is confronting considerable problems. The early women's liberation movement at least had a vision of what it was fighting for. Today's feminist writers are suffering an identity crisis. In a recent issue of *Feminist Review* Loretta Loach issued a *cri de coeur* that has been taken up at many women's movement conferences:

'We are uncertain where the women's liberation movement actually is now. Over the last few years we have had mixed feelings of nostalgia and discontent. Something has been lost but we're not sure what. We still call ourselves feminists; there are more of us now than there were before, and it is safer and easier to claim the name. But we are less sure what we actually belong to. Feminism has diversified beyond what we ever imagined it would, yet there is no autonomous movement to centre us any more. There are feminists in different places and at different times and now and again our interests may converge.'

I hoped that the grand-dames of feminism currently cashing in on their memories might provide some insights

Feminist histories

# MEMOIRS ARE FOR THE RETIRED

Anne Burton reviews the state of feminism 20 years on

Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, Pandora Press, hbk, £15

Angela Neustatter, *Hyenas in Petticoats*, Harrap, hbk, £12.95

Amanda Sebestyen (ed), '68, '78, '88: *From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, Prism, pbk, £5.95

into what has gone wrong or at least give us a heady account of the days when women were sisters and men were worried. But these histories share Loretta Loach's trepidation and confusion.

This is a shame because there's much inspiration to be drawn from the early days of women's liberation, when the marches and conferences held up a vision of future equality, bringing women together to confront their day-to-day problems. They suffered discrimination in education and at work, so the WLM organised around the struggle for equal pay and against sex bars. Women were trapped by the responsibilities of home and family. So the WLM campaigned for free contraception and abortion on demand, and for free 24-hour childcare.

The demands struck at the foundations of the way capitalist society is organised around the family—and thousands of angry women fought for them. The present mood of the women's movement is different. Things that seemed obvious 20 years ago are now questioned—even the need to change society seems to be in doubt. And that means that the role of a campaigning women's movement is under fire too.

PHOTO: Jessica Tappenden



Sheila Rowbotham: 'is it worth it?'



PHOTO: Oily Hoeldden

Angela Neustatter: issues are arbitrary

Today it is unpopular to blame society for our problems. The Tories have shifted responsibility for social problems on to individuals. They are no longer seen as things to campaign about, but things we have to cope with ourselves. When Thatcher lectures us about individual and family responsibility, there is no great outcry at the idea that the sick, the poor and the elderly should rely on charity and the unpaid work of—usually female—relatives. Today many feminists join the Tories in calling for more community care, apparently forgetting that the women's liberation movement was set up to struggle against family responsibility. The notion of campaigning to force the state to meet our needs is something that these three historians of the women's movement see as rather odd and ultra-left.

Amanda Sebestyen's subtitle 'from women's liberation to feminism' is not simply semantics. There is a difference. The women's liberation movement of the seventies campaigned for just that—the liberation of women, particularly from the responsibilities of home and family. By contrast, the feminism of today takes up 'women's issues'. What are women's issues? Anything and everything that affects women.

Angela Neustatter's book has chapters on 'the politics of appearance', 'feminism in theatre and the visual arts' and 'women in journalism'—an arbitrary selection of things that women are involved in. The relative importance of issues is incidental because her book doesn't aim to give any political direction.

This is a problem. Individuals can be concerned with anything, but in the real world some things are much more important to us than others. A New Woman moving into a gentrified inner-city house might be just as preoccupied with the problem of crime as the single mother in the council flat across the street is with the problem of childcare. But demanding 24-hour nurseries will do a lot more to alter the position of women in society than calling for more police on the streets. Indeed the latter can only make things worse, by strengthening the hand of the state that enforces oppression.

Instead of examining the lessons we can draw from the past to aid the struggle today, these three histories combine nostalgia with resignation and demoralisation. Most of the women's essays collected by Amanda Sebestyen plot the same path: from militancy through lifestyle politics to coping with mortgage and kids. One

former revolutionary feminist writes of her feelings today:

'But this is 1988....Not a time to be positive about anything for very long. I am scared. We will not have another child—we can better protect one against what is coming. What I miss most from 1968 is a sense of optimism. We believed we could and in fact did change society. I am a little short of that sort of belief nowadays. I no longer know how to be politically effective outside work—I even joined the Labour Party—I wouldn't call that effective. At least going to demonstrations and meetings makes me feel less isolated, less scared, even if they change nothing.' (p140)

All very poignant, but the important issue is how have we gone from the optimism of the early seventies to this? And what are we going to do about it? These questions are not raised, far less answered, by the feminist historians. They write out of a frustration with the present. But there is no ambition to work through the issues and draw conclusions. This is particularly disappointing from Sheila Rowbotham, a veteran of the women's liberation movement and an accomplished writer.

Rowbotham's book is informed by a wealth of material gathered from the heart of the struggles she writes about. She is also aware of the demoralisation amongst the dispersed and dejected women like 'Penny Holland' quoted above. But she offers nothing to them. She notes in her final chapter, 'The question is there *sotto voce* among feminists, Is it worth it after all?' Since she offers readers no alternative course of action to consider, the answer is likely to be 'No'.

It is excusable to provide no answers—maybe these writers have none—but not to make a virtue out of your failing. To justify her fence-

sitting Rowbotham claims that not knowing where you are going is a natural part of political activity. 'Anyone who has been an active participant in politics knows people do not all sit solemnly reading a book and then march off to make strategies and programmes. There is a less conscious process of political thinking in a movement, untidy for historians to be sure, but fascinating nonetheless.' (ppXIII-XIV)

It may be fascinating for Rowbotham, but it's a tragedy for women in general. The collapse of the women's liberation movement is a direct consequence of the lack of conscious political thinking. The absence of a strategy has allowed the very issues on which women need to fight—like abortion rights—to be shelved. To put them back on the agenda we will need a clear political programme and an organisation to fight for it. Here too, Rowbotham cops out.

'Organisation', she concludes, 'even the semi-permeable membrane of modern feminism, cannot keep up with the movement of the people, any more than planning or policy can adequately express the spontaneity of uprisings and the complexity of desire'. If organisation hobbles behind the movement of the people then presumably activists are doomed to wait for that movement's emergence. There is nothing to be done.

If we cannot influence the future then these accounts of the past are useless except as personal memoirs and academic record. 'The past is before us, the future is behind us.' This is apparently a Buddhist saying which Rowbotham remembers from a Hackney Young Socialists meeting 20 years ago. In remembering it she chose the most apt title of all these reminiscences. It only leaves us to ask: what do we do about the present?

## Agony aunts



# A SHOULDER TO CRY ON

Sara Hardy probes the problem pages

Nearly every women's magazine and tabloid newspaper has one: an agony column. If *Living Marxism* had one, you'd probably have read it already. Don't lie. They are immensely popular. Agony auntie extraordinaire Claire Rayner receives 40 000 letters a year. She's always got a word of advice, on anything from loneliness and stress to premature ejaculation and the G-spot.

The first agony aunt was Marie Stopes. Her books *Married Love* and *Wise Parenthood* (1918), and articles in magazines like *John Bull* drew a massive correspondence. Most letters sought advice on sexual matters: orgasms, frigidity, impotence, premature ejaculation, masturbation, premarital sex, and help in getting abortion and contraception—much the same as can be found in any agony column today (see *Dear Dr Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, ed R Hall, 1978).

Stopes was prosecuted for obscenity for promoting contraception; the prosecution condemned an illustration in *Wise Parenthood* because there was no proof that the finger inserting a vaginal pessary belonged to the woman concerned. Today, queries and replies on all matters sexual are printed in full and few bat an eyelid. But why are the problems still the same? And why do so many want to read about them? We don't

just read them to laugh at the misfortune of others, although it can be comforting to find someone worse off than you, but because the problems represent worries and insecurities that we all face. They fall into three categories:

- Sex: the biggest part of Rayner's postbag, with questions about pregnancy without penetration, worries about being promiscuous, non-enjoyment of sex, not having orgasms, etc.

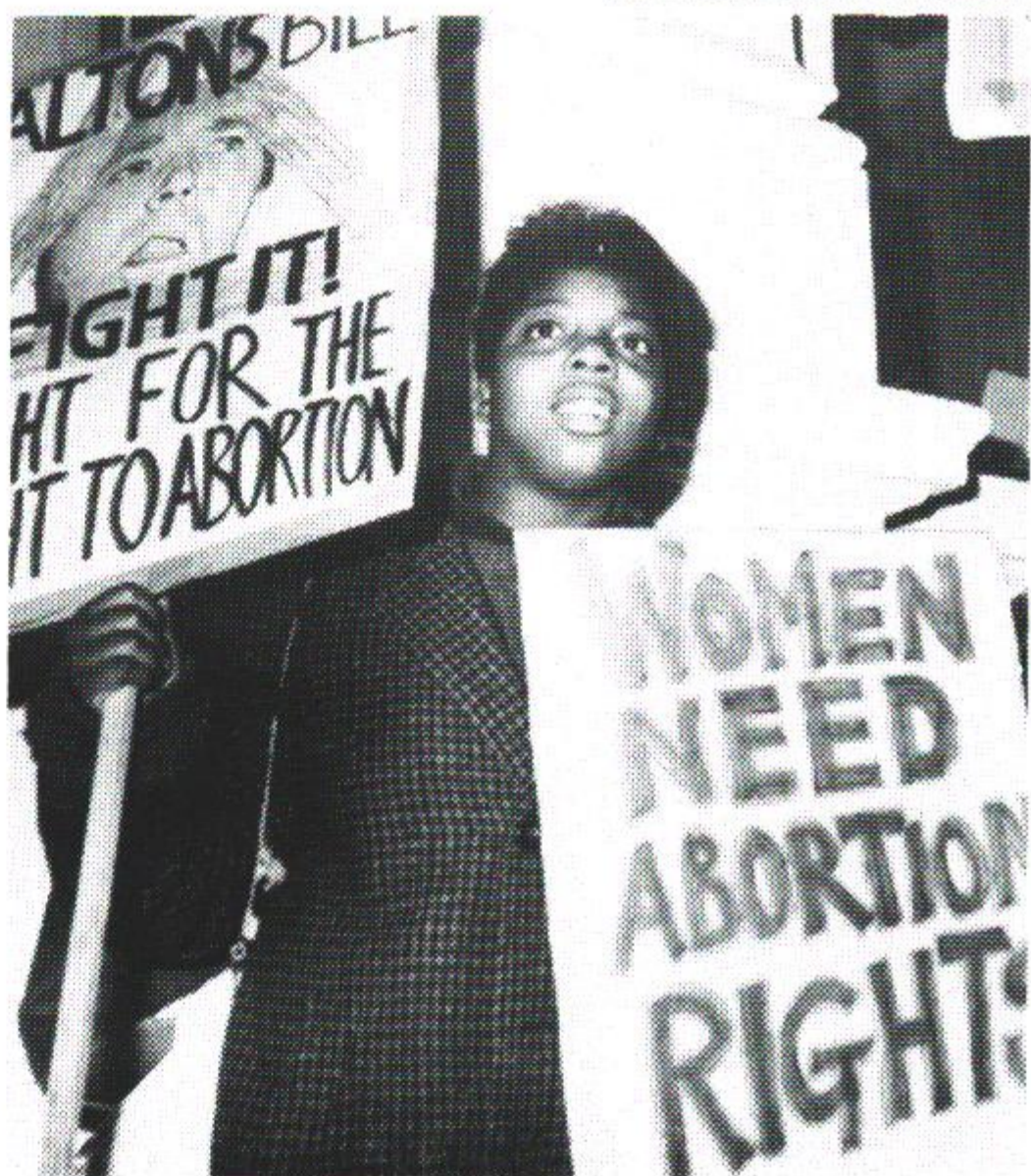
- Health: 'embarrassing' problems that you would rather not discuss with GPs, friends and family. Questions about the safety of the pill are very frequent, also Aids, thrush, cystitis and sexually transmitted diseases.

- Relationships: with lovers, with family, often expressing feelings of inadequacy and guilt: 'Why am I such a terrible mother/lover/friend?', 'My bloke won't settle down, is there something wrong with me?', 'Should I leave my husband and kids?', and worries about the perils of promiscuity.

It is noticeable how similar the subjects are; they are mostly about the unsatisfactory nature of personal relationships and the insecurity, fear and worry associated with sexual relationships. And the vast majority of these letters are from women.

Men's magazines such as *GQ* and *Arena* don't carry problem pages. The

PHOTO: Pandora Anderson



Campaigning for abortion rights must be more than a memory



August issue of *Cosmopolitan* offers to analyse your lovemaking; tells you how to have it away and come home again, and what to do when you can't get his ex out of your mind; offers day-long workshops on ending relationships and tackling social phobia; and has two agony columns as well. The articles in men's mags, from fishing to style, are much more about the outside world than the realm of personal experience.

Women experience personal problems more intensely and consciously than men. We are forced to. Our role at the centre of family life brings home the divergence between the idealised image of personal relationships in our society and the hard reality. Furthermore, the fact that the family cuts most women off from full participation in the life and work of society, from independence and power, means that we are forced constantly to turn in and observe ourselves.

### *It's not natural*

Ninety per cent of the population still marry, 60 per cent in a religious ceremony. We are all encouraged to aspire to family life—with women at the centre of it. The family is an ideal unit for capitalism, within which a woman performs housework for free: cooking, cleaning and looking after the worker, turning him out for the next day's work and fitting in some poorly-paid part-time work of her own between the unpaid domestic chores. It doesn't cost the employers or the state a penny. And all the while we bring up new workers for free.

Little wonder, then, that the authorities work so hard at promoting family life. Apart from ensuring that contraception, abortion and childcare facilities are inadequate, they present

the family as a natural, eternal set-up, and glorify the morals and values which support this idea. They say we should stick to one bloke, have a couple of children, be a perfect wife and mother; this is our natural role. If we don't like it, we're made to feel that there's something drastically wrong with us.

### *Broken hearts and bones*

But behind the wholesome images, the reality of family life for women, when it is not murder, rape or violence (eight per cent of men replying to a *Cosmopolitan* poll said it was sometimes justifiable to force women to have sex), is routine drudgery and taking the strain of trying to sustain a relationship between people who inhabit different worlds—the world of the home, and the world of work and society at large. Women bear the brunt of it when the family goes wrong. Mothers worry about their children long after they have left home. Women deal with every crisis that faces other family members, from broken hearts to broken bones. And all this from a situation of profound isolation.

Nor is it easy to escape. Even 'liberated' women who have no intention of ever washing anyone's socks but their own, or of getting pregnant, are treated by society as if they are about to give birth any minute. Those who infringe the rules of the family, lesbians and gays, single mothers, even unmarried women, are regarded as socially deviant.

These are the pressures that make women bring the problems of their unsatisfactory personal lives to the agony aunts. But what sort of answers are they getting? If you leave aside the titillatory, soft porn brigade (Deidre

in the *Sun* or Fiona in the *Sport*) there are two camps: the overtly reactionary, like Claire Rayner in *Woman*, Audrey Slaughter in *She* and Marje Proops in the *Mirror*; and the quite progressive, like Melanie McFadyean, ex-*Just Seventeen*, Irma Kurtz in *Cosmopolitan* and Paula Yates, *Sex With Paula Yates*, (Sphere Books, 1987).

You know where you are with Rayner and Proops, self-professed upholders of the British Way of Life. Rayner tries 'to concentrate on the normal end of the continuum' (she means monogamous heterosexuality) and champions family values: 'We are programmed to relate closely to one mate while men are less strictly governed by that particular biological imperative (in other words men usually find it easier to flit from partner to partner, and find them all exciting, while women tend to need one partner who can and does arouse them in a way no other man can.)' (*Woman*, 14 March)

### *'The Greatest'*

Marje Proops, billed as The World's Greatest Advice Columnist, and picked in a poll of other agony aunts last month as the shoulder they would cry on, recently advised a husband worried that his wife is 'into household slavery in a big way': 'Do your best to get her pregnant which will be the first step to a more normal approach to the home. Persuade her to give up her job.' (*Mirror*, 1 August)

Progressives like Kurtz and McFadyean present themselves as feminists; pro-women, anti-moralism and in it for our sakes. They often give sensible advice: get contraception, abortion isn't all bad, leave a bloke who beats you up. The problem is

that their advice sometimes ignores women's real circumstances.

Women, especially with children, cannot walk out on their means of subsistence, cannot face a life of poverty and social stigma. So the aunts are often driven back to the old remedies: 'I must recommend you give [marriage guidance] a try.... Divorce is rarely a simple, clean break, never when children are involved.... Life for a single parent is rarely free from social, economic, emotional and sexual problems.... To marry in haste is dangerous; to divorce in haste is worse.' (Irma Kurtz, *Cosmopolitan*, November 1988)

### *Misleading advice*

They rarely stray far from the conventional morality. Paula Yates tells us that 'love is the best aphrodisiac' (*Sex With Paula Yates*). Irma Kurtz writes disapprovingly to a woman worried about sleeping around that 'desperation is unattractive and promiscuity reveals desperation for love, for company, for sexual pleasure, for something a woman is not getting' (*Cosmopolitan*, August). The agony aunt ritual, with its implication that there is a solution to every problem, and that the solution lies in the (properly directed) attitude or behaviour of the person writing in, is profoundly misleading. Emotional and sexual misery are caused by barriers to women's equality and fulfilment in society, not by psychological inadequacies or personal shortcomings. So long as those barriers remain, so too will the problems, and there is very little the aunts will be able to do about them—except to give us a laugh and a little reassurance that we're not the only ones in agony.

The solid square building which dominates one end of Ridley Road market in east London ('not the bagel shop end', they told me) is occupied on its ground floor by the Turk Gida Market, a scene of frantic Levantine bustle. On the third floor high above the stalls and the throng are the offices of the Black Audio Film Collective. John Akomfrah, a 31-year old founder member of the collective, is very conscious of the building's history. 'The Poles had it first at the end of the nineteenth century, then the Jews, then the Dutch with their West Indian connection, and now it's owned by Turks.' The immigrant spirits of the place and its location in the heart of Hackney make it a fitting base for film makers whose priority 'is the development and the extension of a black independent film presence in Britain'.

*Film on 4*

The collective formed in 1983, the members having come together in A-level days at the City and East London College and then at Portsmouth Polytechnic. The GLC, Hackney council and the Gulbenkian Foundation set them on their way, but Channel 4 provides the big commission money now. Akomfrah and Reece Auguiste are the directors, Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson the producers, Eddie George writes scripts, Trevor Mathison is the musician and David Lawson is in charge of production. Late on a hot Friday afternoon in August the offices were still abuzz with phoning and viewing and reading and talking, much of it no doubt directed at promoting their first feature film, *Testament*.

Their first major work, *Handsworth Songs*, also directed by Akomfrah in 1987, brought them international fame and seven awards including the prestigious Grierson Award from the British Film Institute. The film situated the 1985 Handsworth riots not only in terms of the current conditions facing black youth but also in the context of the original 1950s immigration. It was distinguished by the use of striking, almost arty images and a self-consciously poetic commentary, which set up a space for reflection between the viewer and all the traditional images of riot footage from the inner city.

*Bumping into Rushdie*

Salman Rushdie criticised its experimental, imaginative mode for not rendering a true image of black people in Britain. Akomfrah is still not sure what he meant. 'We bumped into him in a restaurant some time later, and he just congratulated us on the film. We were grateful for the publicity to tell you the truth.' He defends the film against those who think it provided insufficient detail on the immediate causes of the violence. 'We shouldn't be the people who have to justify or explain. It was a film which in the end had to say we empathise, we understand why these things are happening.'

Akomfrah says that the collective don't just want to make films, but 'in the beginning the idea was, in a rhetorical sense, to invent a black film culture which also means creating an infrastructure—journals, seminars, courses, a debate around the cinema, in other words an audience'. He fears that their work, which looks set to be funded (like *Testament*) by television, will 'disappear into television and

become part of all the other material. If it found the intelligence and heart it could become part of the cutting edge like other currents from *Z Cars* to Dennis Potter. But if you want to create programmes of ideas, and create a dialogue about them, TV is not a good outlet. We want to exist at the interface between cinema and TV'.

What is it that they want to talk about? 'The crucial issues of cultural production for us are questions around identity, nationality, memory, location and sense of place.' I could detect here the voice of radical academic Stuart Hall, whose support and inspiration Akomfrah readily acknowledges. I asked him whether following Hall's emphasis on ideological and cultural phenomena, removed from the political struggle, wasn't avoiding the real and pressing issues facing black people in Britain. He was familiar with the debate.

'Yes, some black political activists say that what we are doing is a retreat, that the growth of all the work around identity and culture is a symptom of a retreat from politics. That's slightly reductionist and economistic, to see any cultural expression as a deviation, as an attempt to substitute aesthetics for politics. What we are sure about is that that frame in TV and cinema is an important point of intervention.'

'We are ambivalent about conventional politics. In some ways one is allied to the general project of the left, but on the other hand one wants to distance oneself from that. We'd rather not choose for example

between the analysis of racism put forward by *Race Today*, the Communist Party and the RCP. The differences are real. Our task is not to choose the correct tendency. What we do is valuable for any movement which wants to use it.'

As an example of this intervention, he cites 'taking *Handsworth Songs* to a festival like "UK LA" in the States, which Prince Andrew attended. There were all these mainstream films taken there in a package by the British film industry. Our film made clear part of what it means to be black in Britain in the 1980s'. But surely the fact that their film could be happily included in a package patronised by Prince Andrew indicated the limitations of their intervention? 'We're not just celebrating blackness, the richness of our identity and so on. The difference between a political intervention and a cultural intervention is that the latter has as its main aim the problematising, disrupting and disarticulating of the assumptions of what it means not only to be black but to be British at the end of the twentieth century. We want to be disobedient and dissident, aesthetically and culturally.' I felt a bit problematised and disarticulated myself by this stage.

*'Testament to defeat'*

It is hardly surprising that Akomfrah should have turned to the story of Kwame Nkrumah as the background to his new film. Akomfrah's father was a member of Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party, and a diplomat for the CPP government which came to power in 1957 when the British colony of the Gold Coast became Ghana. His father died in 1963 and the family moved to London after the successful army coup against Nkrumah in 1966.

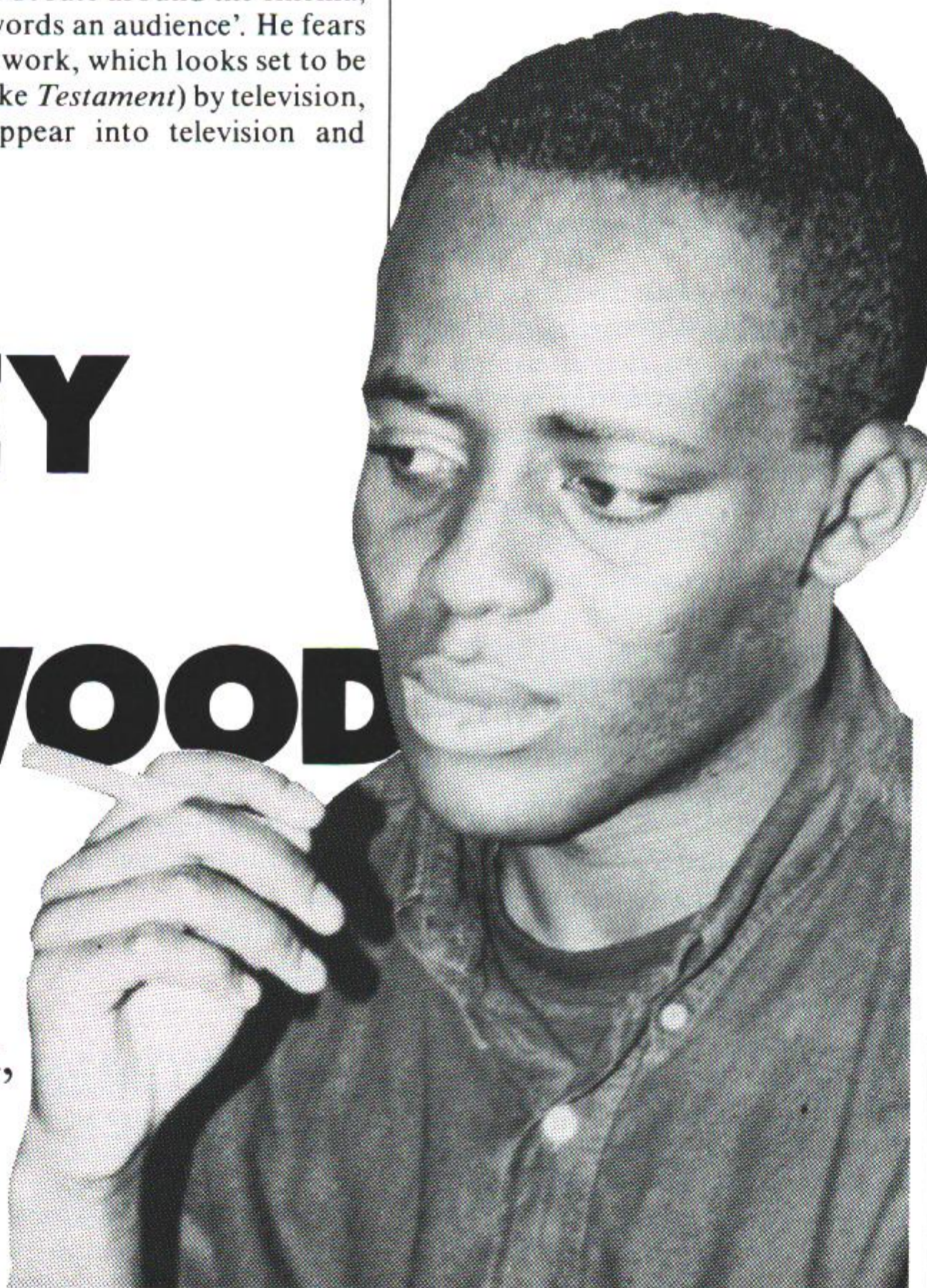
*Testament* is not about Nkrumah but about a woman who returns to Ghana in 1987 to make a TV documentary about the making of *Cobra Verde* there by German director Werner Herzog. She never gets to make that film but instead wanders around the country visiting and remembering the unfortunate circumstances which led to her flight after the coup in 1966. Akomfrah wanted to undermine certain Western notions about Africa 'as a space of simplicity and harmony which is disrupted by the West. Even on the left there's an idea that Africans aren't conscious of their plight, as if we have to engineer something for them.'

'I wanted it to be an odd, haunting, poetic film about memory, and mourning and loss. This is why it is told from the point of view of a defeated person. I wanted to pinpoint the complexity of identity, particularly for the exile, and to widen the vocabulary to describe African personalities. The film is a testament to complexity, confusion and defeat, and a yearning for an answer'.

*Black Audio Film Collective*

**HACKNEY MEETS HOLLYWOOD**

*John Fitzpatrick spoke to John Akomfrah (right) of the Black Audio Film Collective whose new new film, Testament, which has already won five international awards, opens in London on 1 September*



# Letters

We welcome readers' views and criticisms of *Living Marxism*. Please keep your letters as short as possible and send them to The Editor, *Living Marxism*, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX.

## THE OTHER IRISH QUESTION

Whilst I agree with Mike Freeman that Britain still exercises control over the Twenty-six Counties his explanation of how that was achieved does not make sense. He writes: 'Once it [Britain] is seen to lose its grip over one part of its declared national territory, its collapse will be accelerated everywhere.' So if the Twenty-six Counties as part of this 'declared national territory' is seen to be independent, the British state will start to collapse.

The last thing you would expect, therefore, is for Britain to go around *advertising* that it has lost control. Yet Mike argues exactly that: 'It [partition] was particularly successful in the South, as London and Dublin colluded in promoting the myth of an independent state.' Myth or not, if Britain has managed to convince the world that Southern Ireland is independent (and it clearly has), then this apparent weakness should, according to him, lead to its own destruction.

Either I am missing something, Mike Freeman has not explained this properly, or the British state is suicidal. Somehow I don't think it is the latter.

**Martin Clifford**  
London

Sean Thomas provided a coherent assertion that the South of Ireland remains under British domination ('Al Capone for premier', August). But it remains an assertion nonetheless.

While it is easy to point to the reactionary nature of Southern Irish political leaders and their collaboration with the British war effort in the North, it does not necessarily follow that the South remains oppressed. Many European countries have extradited republicans to face trial in Britain—yet no one would claim that

Holland is dominated by Britain.

Thomas confuses the identity of class interests between the British and Irish ruling classes. The likes of Charles Haughey fear the spilling over of the war in the North in the same way that Thatcher fears the intransigence of the nationalist community and the effect that would have on her reputation of invincibility. Thus Haughey is pursuing his own class interests, not doing the bidding of his British 'masters'.

There are numerous examples of Irish governments pursuing policies which contradict the needs of British imperialism. In the Second World War under Eamon de Valera, the South followed a policy of neutrality which incurred the fury of Churchill and the war cabinet. And at the outbreak of the present troubles Haughey himself was involved in a plan to smuggle arms into the North for the IRA. This is hardly the activity of a puppet regime.

What does explain Southern Irish backwardness and domination is, as Thomas points out, foreign capital. In the fifties and sixties the economy was opened up to foreign capital, under terms which made it one of the most profitable in the world, and broke the British monopoly on investment. As a result the South is bowing to foreign bankers and is at the mercy of the whims of foreign capitalists—not British capitalists. The South is an independent backward capitalist country in tow to foreign capital and the world market.

There is no material reason why the British should wish to remain in control of a country they make little money out of, and one which sympathises with its presence in the North anyway. If we fail to understand this then we search fruitlessly for the British ghost in the Irish machine, and ultimately we let the likes of Haughey off the hook.

The focus for opposition in the South is not the unresolved national question, but the social issues

presented on their own terms. Historically the republican movement's activity in the South has failed miserably—a sure indication that the national question has no relevance to Irish working class people.

Thomas does not mention the role of the class struggle in the South and thus fails to notice the current trends. The June election showed a distinct shift among the working class to the Labour Party and the Workers Party, with both of them picking up seats. This shift had nothing to do with Gibraltar or the North but their alienation from Haughey's austerity policies and a willingness to fight back. Both the Labour Party and Workers Party advocate parliamentary and constitutional change as the way forward, and thus cannot pose any real solution. But the priority given to these issues is the way forward for Irish socialists.

**Dennis Kelly**  
Dublin

## DON'T MENTION THE WAR

While I enjoyed many of the articles on Ireland in August's *Living Marxism*, a refreshing change from the coverage in the media, I could not help thinking that the war was glorified. In particular the editorial 'The people who applaud the IRA' went overboard in stating the case for freedom and failed to strike the right balance.

We should remember that we are trying to end the war and bring peace, not urge people here to follow the IRA's lead. Comments like 'the Bogsiders are people like ourselves who have declared war on our government' can only alienate potential supporters of Irish freedom. I'm sure that many readers would have balked at these comments, and though they may have enjoyed the rest of the magazine, it may well have put them off doing something about what they read.

Most people in this country unfortunately don't share your (and my) sentiments about the bravery and spirit of resistance of the nationalist community. So we should be careful not to put up too many barriers to people understanding such a controversial issue.

**Jane Williams**  
Slough

## NEW WOMEN AND OLD JOKES

Women and men in liberation struggles throughout the world have long abandoned the notion that

women should devote themselves solely to the main struggle, and that come the revolution all their problems will automatically be sorted out. It is surprising therefore to find Anne Burton in her faintly patronising article ('The New Woman: an old wives' tale?', July) covertly promoting just such an idea and taking a position which would be laughed out of the room at any real discussion of women's rights. She herself falls into the post-feminist trap when she suggests, not that all the battles have been won, but that they will be won when abortion and childcare are freely available. This kind of simplistic utopianism went out with the ark, I'm afraid.

**Liz Chaston**  
London

## HOME OF THE FREE EMBRYOS?

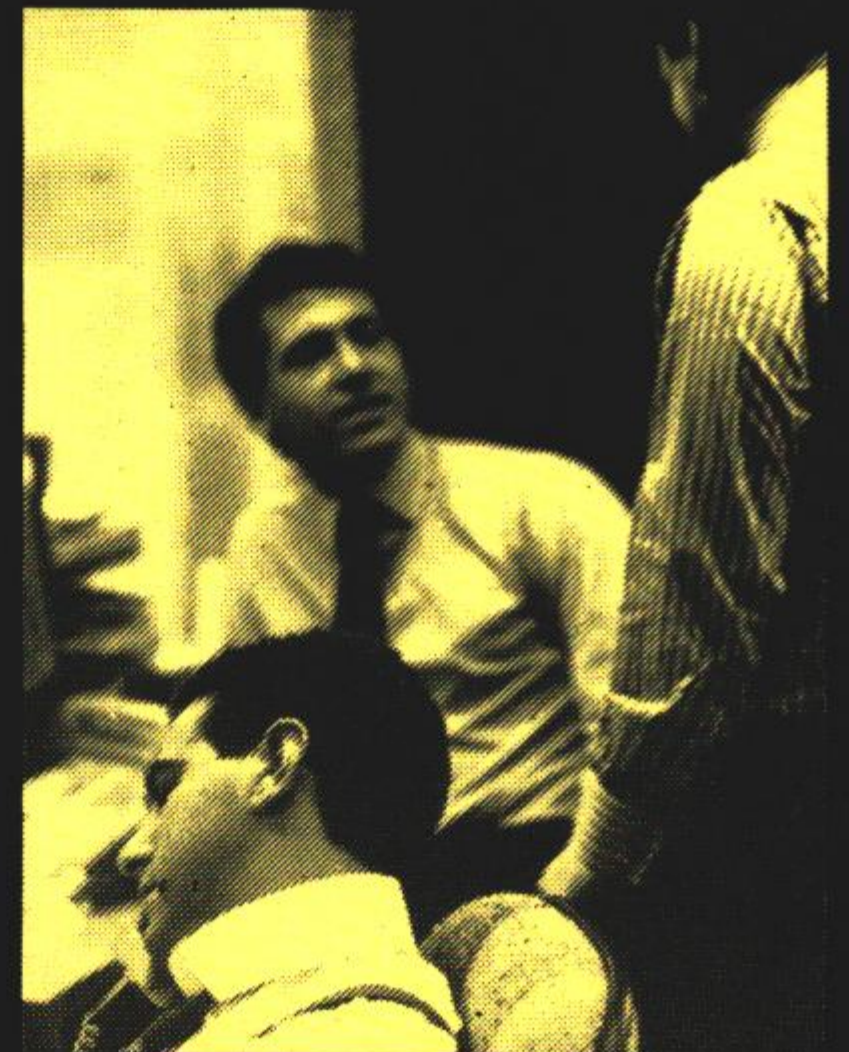
The politics of abortion is now centre-stage in Canada as well as America. The debate in the USA has moved on a little since Nancy Morton's letter (August). Now, as well as the straight pro/anti debate, particularly around the elections in California, there is the public battle of soon-to-be divorced couple, Mr and Mrs Davis, over the future of seven frozen embryos.

Mr Davis is anti-abortion but does not view the embryos as human life. He just wants to keep them so he can control their potential. Mrs Davis, on the other hand, views these embryos as her children. She is backed up on this by a university professor who has testified that it is possible to have a parental bond with embryos. (What the professor has overlooked is that it is also possible to have a parental bond with your teddy bear.) This case is currently awaiting the court's decision on whether the embryos are human life or property.

In 1986, a Louisiana statute defined a frozen embryo as a legal person whose interests could be represented by an attorney in a court of law, but Louisiana also allows abortion up to 12 weeks. This contradiction is precisely the one that the anti-abortionists will exploit.

Any discussion of embryo rights denies women's rights. Embryos can exist frozen on their own, but to grow they must be inserted into a *woman's* body. The two recent cases in Canada, of boyfriends taking out injunctions to stop their pregnant girlfriends from having abortions, show the direction things will go in if we give an inch on embryo rights. Women need access to abortion as one of the preconditions for us to even begin to take part in society on equal terms with men.

**Sheila Phillips**  
London



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