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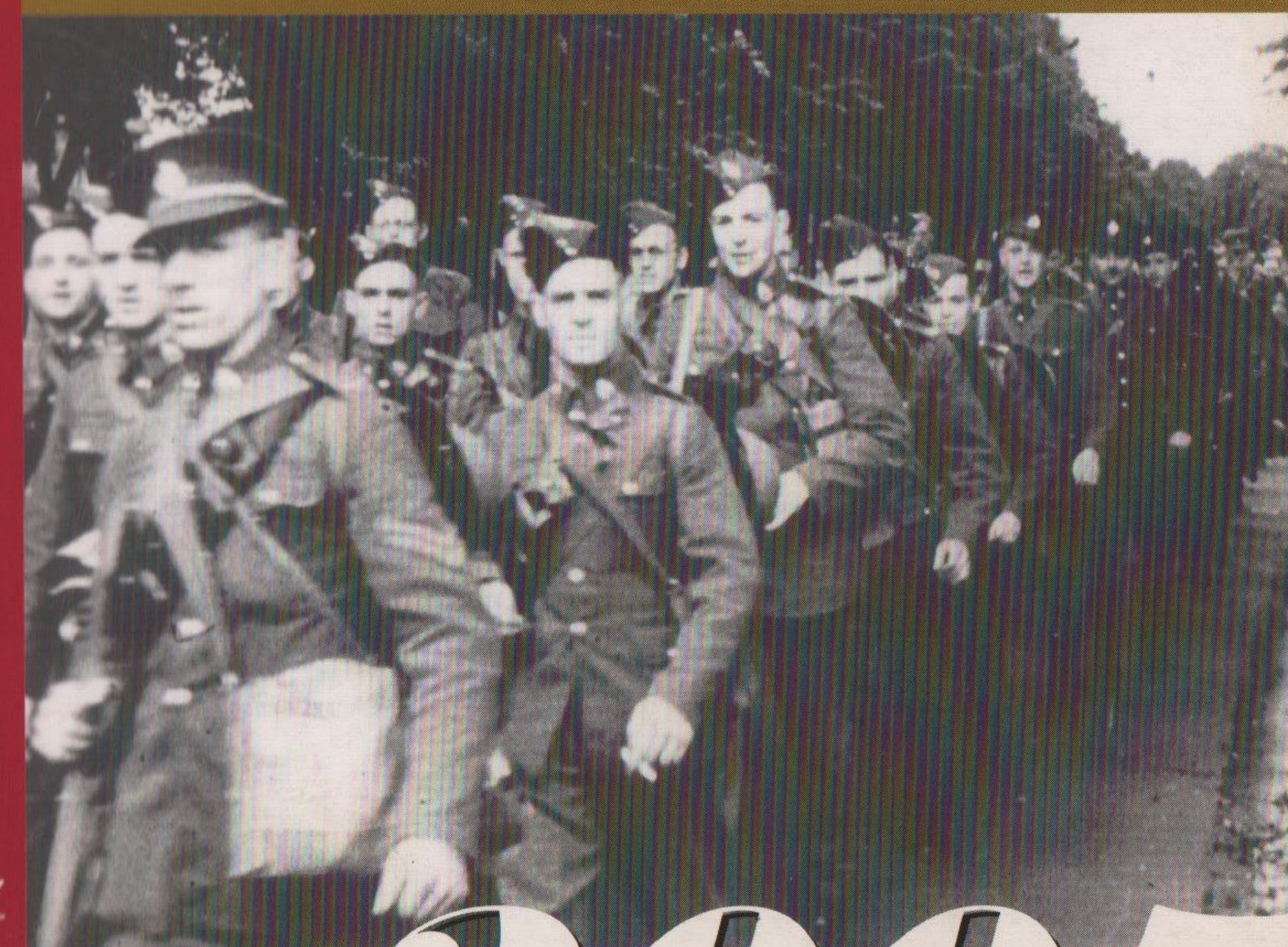
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TRADES UNIONISTS CELEBRATE

# The people, organised

60th ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORY OVER FASCISM



BY PHILIP KATZ



## For Ron Todd

Royal Marine, trade union leader, poet and *mensh*\*

... and his generation who fought a war so that we could build a better Britain, anew, and in peace.

## Written in honour of ...

Sonny (Desert Rat, veteran of El Alemein and D-Day, twice wounded) who progressed from fighting Mosely in east London to fighting Hitler, granddad David (served in the German cavalry 1914-18, ARP throughout WWII in London's east end) uncle Johnny (Rifle Brigade, Italy, POW in Italy and Germany), uncles Leon (Free Polish Army) and Keith (Combined Services Entertainment Regiment) who fought together at Monte Cassino – but at the time did not know it, uncle Pete (Arnhem), uncle Raymond (who escaped from Auschwitz), great aunt Paulette (who survived Auschwitz), great uncle Sam (Printer, officer in the French army, later in the resistance), great aunt Jenny and my then nine month old cousin Paul (all three murdered in Auschwitz), uncle Maurice (evacuated Fakenham, Suffolk) auntie Dorrie (fire watcher at Invicta Radios) and Maurice (D-Day veteran, First Battalion Suffolk Regiment, wounded outside of Falaise in France), aunt Eva (munitions worker Woolwich Arsenal, later ATS, wireless and signals supplies to invasion troops), Wally (Bevin Boy) and my mum Ruth, always an inspiration (evacuated to Buntingford, North Herts, whose dad would not let her join the Army because she was too young!).

\*Yiddish title for a person of fortitude and honour 'a real man'.

## The People, Organised

May 2005 is the 60th anniversary of the victory over fascism.

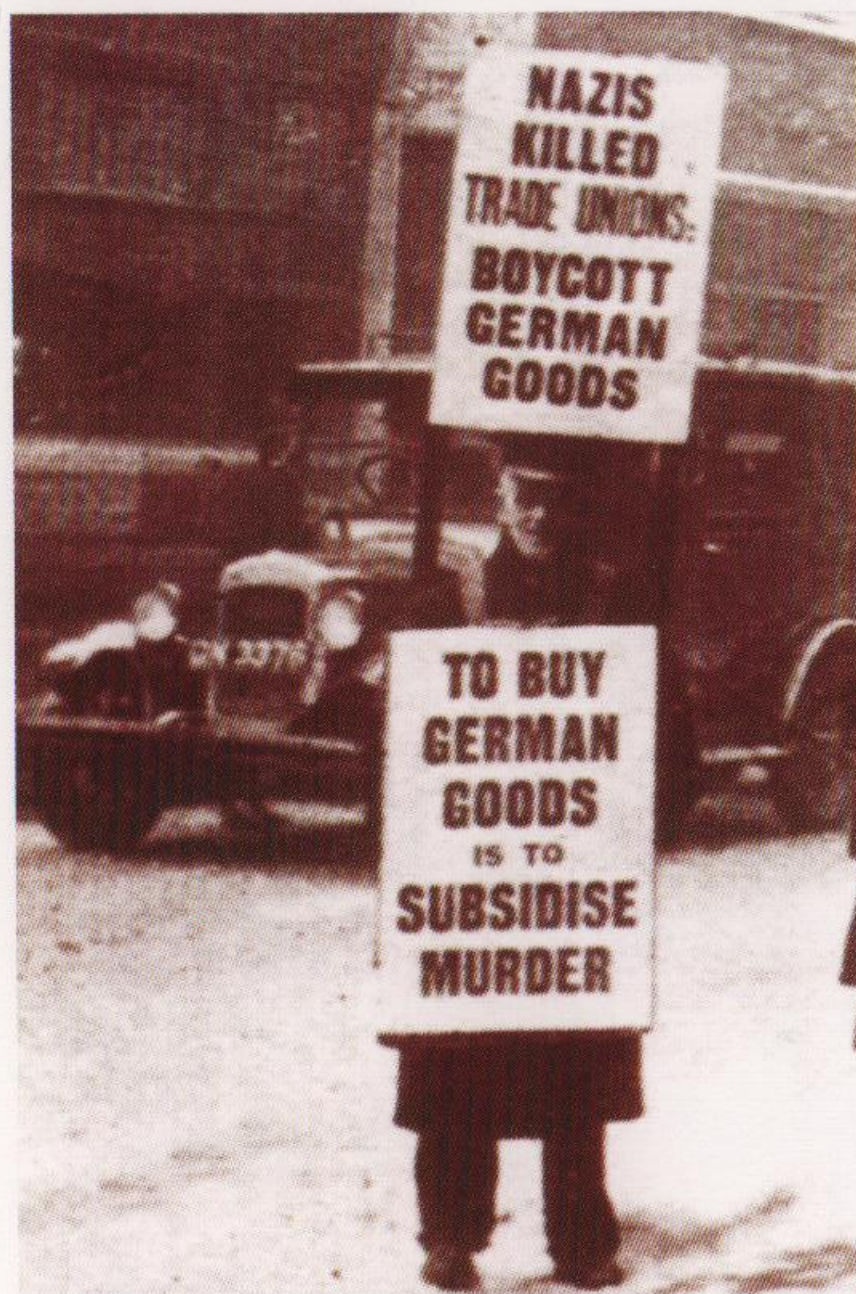
The Second World War (1939-1945) was the People's War, won as much by home front as the war front. It was a Total War based on maximum mobilisation of our nation's resources. So where is the celebration of the people? Where is the celebration and reflection of Britain's trades unionists – the civilian army that ensured that democracy prevailed?

It is amazing that this period, arguably the high point of union power, escapes analysis by trades unionists. No single union has set out to celebrate the event. Yet during the war, membership rose from six to nearly nine million and union influence reached further than ever before (and arguably ever since). The unions created were for citizens, active and conscious agents of national survival and renewal. Each year we pay homage to D-Day and First World War veterans. Their experience moves us; to a man and woman, they denounce war. They are entitled to do so, having watched their comrades die in one. But the photo opportunities will go to governments fresh from bombing Belgrade and Baghdad.

The days of these veterans are getting shorter. Yet successor generations and we their children are charged with taking forward the work of defending democracy, building economic and political nations anew and maintaining the peace. What are we to make of this 60th anniversary? How are we to keep its memory alive when the protagonists are leaving us? What lessons can we learn and pass on?

In none of the events depicted in this short pamphlet were ordinary working class communities mere bystanders. Between 1939 and 1945 workers broke entirely new ground and the organised, trade unionised, made an impact not achieved since Chartism. Workers became citizens. In the following pages is set out some of the milestones and turning points of the war. It is impossible to do the subject justice – it being so broad and multi-layered. But to grasp the essence of the victorious war effort it is necessary to see in it the force of the people, organised, unified and radical in the workplace, at the ballot box and beyond.





### The hungry thirties

Our story starts with the slow turn into the 1930s, against a backdrop of the Wall Street Crash and the receding memory of the trenches in Belgium and France, followed by partial reconstruction after 1918. The promised renaissance never quite happened as the stop start economic fortunes of the twenties folded into a five-year collapse across Europe and to an extent in the colonies. The 1930s became identified with unemployment and gathering war clouds. The opening shot of the Second World War has been variously described as the Japanese invasion of Manchukuo (1932) and then the

full invasion of China, the Italian assault on Ethiopia (then Abyssinia), Hitler's repudiation of the disarmament clauses in the Versailles Treaty (March 1935), his military occupation of the Rhineland a year later and the civil war in Spain, which became in fact a German-Italian invasion. It could have been the Anschluss in which Hitler invaded and annexed Austria (who it has to be said did not put up too much of a struggle) or his peaceful capture of the west of Czechoslovakia (given to him on a plate by Britain and behind the backs of the Czech people and government). If the assassination of an Archduke in Sarajevo really set the fuse for the First World War, the fuse that lit the second must have been one of the slowest burning ever. Any one and all of the above qualify as trigger. For the 1930s was a decade when crisis and intervention, civil war, plotting and counter-plotting, was an everyday event.

Themes dominated the 1930s that continued with little respite until full-scale war broke. Uppermost was the turning of a blind eye on the part of the ruling classes of Britain and France to the advance of fascism, in the wish that Hitler would turn east rather than west. All the warnings were there for those who cared to look. The destruction of Nanjing was less a precursor of the bombing of Guernica or the blitz on London, more like the genocide practiced by the Hitlerites on the Jews and the peoples of the east. In Asia, no

force could be found to check the growth of Japanese militarism though the British foreign office held onto the belief that a deal could be struck between Britain and Japan, both countries reliant on the seas for their imperial power. Across Latin America, governments flirted with fascism, whilst the USA looked on. Mussolini and Franco dreamed of African empires. In Britain a 'National' government appeased the fascists, squandered diplomatic and material advantage and connived, against the national interest, to appease Nazism. It was a very tricky game, which backfired spectacularly, and to the detriment of the people.

Because of Chamberlain and those around him, a generation of working class men and women were to spend up to seven of the best years of their lives in foreign and alien lands, enduring untold suffering and were, in order to survive and prevail, forced in turn to dish it out. Still some of the bravest go

officially unrecognised especially those who sailed in the merchant navy in the north seas shepherding supplies to the USSR. There is a special irony in this. So many of these seamen were serving on ships transporting goods to Russia paid for by trade unionists through the TUC's own 'Help for Russia' Fund. Some of which was coordinated through the close contact established in 1941 by the Anglo Soviet Trade Union Council. This aid was brokered by the general secretary of the TUC Walter Citrine who bravely flew to Russia to deliver the solidarity message of the British workers. The high loss of life on these runs required a special kind of bravery.

### The destruction of Mosely

In the mid thirties, the threat of fascism to Britain was homespun. Historians have recently played down the threat that Mosely once represented. There is no doubt that there are powerful families in the capitalist class, even today, who are tainted by their promotion of this man and have a vested interest in portraying him as an anachronistic and slightly dotty character. If Mosely never became a





force to divide workers on any significant scale and go on to rule Britain, it was not through want of trying. He purported to put Britons first. Yet his was an alien ideology imported from abroad, he idolised foreign political models and subsidised his British Union of Fascists party with funds secretly procured from Mussolini. He even preferred to marry abroad with Hitler as his witness. Mosely did not become a force partly because his ideas ran so counter to the view of the common man and woman in Britain. He was physically prevented from promoting it by mass action on the streets and in working class neighbourhoods. He was blocked in Tyneside and Glasgow; he was exposed at Olympia and subdued by the east end of London. In Bermondsey, the catholic dockers acted so that he would never be taken seriously as an option for taking power by those who preferred Hitler to democracy and wanted to destroy Britain's unions. Many of his upper class supporters withdrew silently in to the background in the hope that Hitler would do the job for them. Others in the ruling class despised Mosely but held similar views. Lord Halifax (then Leader of the House of Lords) wrote in his diary on meeting Hitler in 1937 "Although there was much in the Nazi system that profoundly offended British opinion, I was not blind to what he had done for Germany, and to the achievement from his point of view of keeping communism out of his country." The concentration camps were at the time stacked full of trade unionists. When, early in the war, Mosely was arrested there were precious few public voices minded to protest. The threat had moved from internal to external.

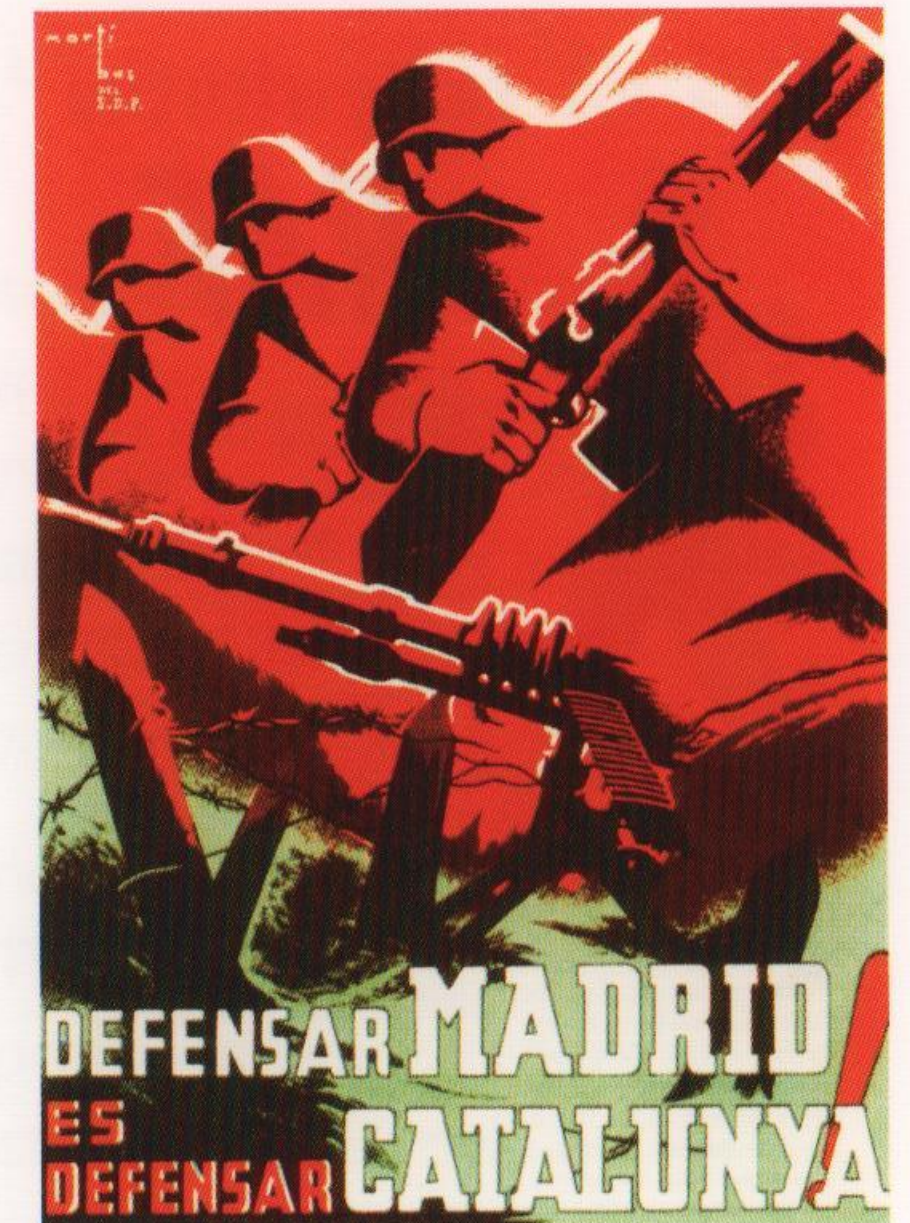
### Spain

In 1936 a fascist uprising against a legitimate and freshly elected government was led by Franco, a second rate general, who drew inspiration from Germany, Portugal and Italy. To this conflict the unions in Britain, especially the miners, sent some of their best organisers to take part in an International Brigade. All volunteers, these men and some women, took up what arms they could to defend freedom and the social advance that the new republic represented. They came from all over the world but were disproportionately represented by volunteers from the UK, America and Germany. This presented the British government with a conflict

in the sense that, although it was not at war with Franco or anyone else for that matter, thousands of its citizens were leaving the valleys of Wales, the docks of Liverpool and Clydeside, or the clothing factories in the Mile End Road in east London and forming fighting units complete with officers, systems of rank, uniforms, training bases and insignia. They were supported and financed by millions more. They engaged the enemy in well-publicised offensives. In west London, engineering factories worked voluntary overtime to make mountings for motorbikes that could later be converted as machine gun carriers. Nurses and doctors volunteered. Some worked with the Canadian, Norman Bethune, who pioneered the use of blood plasma. There was even a flying corps. Many of these men returned to Britain and told their fellow unionists what was really happening. Some went on to hold senior union office amongst textile, transport and engineering workers and the miners.

### August 1939

All false starts came to an end in August 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland. It was an invasion too far, following closely on the betrayal of Czechoslovakia at Munich and the abandoning of Spain. What followed was to be a war of armies, and a war of industries. It was the industrialisation of war. Those who volunteered and those later taken in to the armed forces, were a quite different generation from the one which had fought in the trenches in World War One. The first volunteers were drawn from amongst the most class conscious of workers. The experience of the Thirties had groomed this generation for such a role. Where their fathers had fought for King and Country, son and daughter would fight for democracy and nation. There was little need to gear them up with tales of German atrocities as with WWI. Guernica was evidence enough. Lidice was still some way off. Whereas serving King and Country implied that all Britons were in the same boat and even had a shared interest, fighting for democracy and nation in 1939, meant something





## He's off to fly with the **RAF**



### reserved men can volunteer as Pilot or Observer

He's heard the call. He knows that, however important the work he's doing now, there's another important job waiting for him—a flying job with the R.A.F.—a job which only younger men can do. And, like other "reserved" men, he's free to volunteer as Pilot or Observer, so he's off to the R.A.F. Recruiting Office to take the first step.

**X** If you are 17, and not yet 33, you can follow his example. To join the war Britain needs thousands of young men for flying duties in the R.A.F. This is the only fighting job open to "reserved" men. Go after it.

To Air Ministry Information Bureau, Kingsway, London, W.C.2. Please send me latest leaflet, giving details of Flying Services in the R.A.F.

NAME.....  
ADDRESS.....  
P.P.23/8

different. Although there was a shared danger, the working class realised that it could not wait for any other class interest to protect it. They would have to do it themselves. They joined the armed services to find that it did not have sufficient armaments to give them. Tens of thousands of key workers in reserved occupations, such as agricultural work or mining, were mistakenly allowed to volunteer. Lack of preparation was chronic.

Having spent so long hedging their bets on turning Hitler eastwards against the USSR, Britain's government had been criminally

slow to re-arm, hesitating to commit fully, even with the declaration of war. One of the reasons advanced for this lack of preparedness was that Britain did not know whom she might be required to prepare to fight. Hitler was only added to the list of prospective opponents in 1934 and Italy in late 1937. Yet *Mein Kampf*, the book that set out Hitler's detailed plan for domination was printed in 1923. Troops desperately needed in France to fight the *Wermacht* were instead sent to prop up the fascist Mannerheim regime in Finland preparing to oppose the Soviet Union. Even when, weeks before war did break out, a possibility existed of an alliance with the USSR against German expansionism, it was squandered, leaving the USSR no option but to come to a separate agreement with Hitler. This was unpalatable, and no one in the USSR pretended otherwise, but it bought precious time and space. This act – long criticised by British politicians, obscures another simple fact. There were four signatories to the conscious betrayal of the Czechs at Munich: Edouard Daladier, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Neville Chamberlain. The Russians were not invited, nor were the Czechs!

### Churchill and Bevin

If only the government had paid attention to the mass demonstrations called by the TUC to support the Czechs, in spite of the risk of war. The 1938 TUC Congress adopted a special resolution

recommending that Britain unite with France and the USSR. The call fell on deaf ears.

At first under the leadership of reluctant anti Hitler forces, Britain only fought a 'phoney war'. It was Hitler making the entire running. He brought the 'phoney war' to an end with an invasion of Denmark and Norway, then the Low Countries and finally France in April and May of 1940. Britain had declared war but seemed reluctant to fight it. But there was absolutely nothing 'phoney' about Hitler's intentions.

Chamberlain, appeaser of Hitler and friend to Mussolini was removed from office in October of 1940. The unions played an important part in his fall from grace. He had promised peace in our time, which really made war inevitable. Winston Churchill, one of only two members of parliament who had voted against the Munich sell-out – the other being Willie Gallacher the communist MP from Scotland, replaced him. Labour participated as a full partner in the coalition Government. Churchill had a pedigree as an anti-worker, militant anti-trade unionist. He had been head of the Treasury and champion of the gold standard which had made the

clash with the miners inevitable in the early twenties. Earlier, at the admiralty, he ordered gunboats to sail up the Mersey to intimidate strikers. Later as the First World War disintegrated and the Russian Revolution emerged, he organised, from his position in the War Office, an illegal intervention in an attempt to "strangle Bolshevism in its cradle". Now, in the new war cabinet, he struck up an alliance with Ernie Bevin founder and first general secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union. He had come across Bevin before. During the Russian intervention, the ship *Jolly George* was brought in to the East India Dock in London, to be used to ship armaments to Poland for deployment against the Red Army. Churchill was determined that the ship should be loaded but Bevin courageously refused. Bevin was Chairman of the Hands Off Russia committee, which, supported by





the TUC, threatened a general strike to prevent intervention against the fledgling Soviet state. Bravely, Bevin stood firm. So did the dockers and the *Jolly George* was never loaded. Critically this act made intervention very risky and Britain stopped her attacks on Russia the following year.

When Atlee and Greenwood entered the coalition cabinet, no Labour politician had held such high office for twenty years. Bevin was a Minister of Labour but outside the cabinet. The experience was to prove invaluable. Churchill learned to respect his working class opponents and knew that the war could not be won without its full and conscious cooperation. Indeed, he gave way to a war effort led by the working class and only too late in the day tried to put back in the bottle, the power he had sought to co opt. The forces that went to make up the anti Hitler front in Britain are epitomised in the relationship between Churchill and Bevin. Bevin's first act as Minister? To restore to the dockers the wages they lost during the wage cutting round of the early twenties. In so doing he signified the appearance of labour as the key factor to be reckoned with in the war effort. Soon after, the hated Means Test was abolished.

At a special meeting of the TUC held in May 1940, Bevin had said ... "if our Movement and our class rise with all their energy now and save the people of this country from disaster, the country will always turn with confidence to the people who saved them." Under his guidance workers were to assume, often with the support of the law and always with the support of the majority of the people, a new level of power in the economy never before experienced (or since). "I have to ask you", he went on, "to virtually place yourselves at the disposal of the state. We are socialists and this is the test of our socialism. It is the test whether we have meant the resolutions we have so often passed."

Any who doubted him needed only to glance at events across the Channel where a collaborationist French government was disbanding unions and imprisoning unionists. It was time to reinforce core principles with open and new thinking. If looking across the Channel were not enough, they could consider what lay beneath it. Britain was an island nation. More vulnerable than most because of

that. The early success of Nazi u-boats against merchant shipping sharpened all minds. It was not until Bevin's intervention that a serious attempt was made to end competition for labour that was undermining the war effort. There had been such a lack of serious planning during the 'phoney war' that critical workers, such as coal miners (80,000 or a tenth of the workforce by March 1940) and agricultural workers (50,000) had been allowed to volunteer and enrol in the army. Production in both sectors was affected. Henceforth Ministries were to bring in planning in the deployment of labour and machinery, use of factory space, raw materials, fuel and foodstuffs.

### **Dunkirk and Brave Pilots**

Dunkirk was one of those rare and most underrated moments in history, when a government is lost and won again by the action of people. With Churchill locked in a minority in cabinet, with scheming and treachery all around, as the British Expeditionary Force was being driven back towards the coast in France, there emerged a real threat of invasion. Britain stood alone against fascism. Churchill was resolute. Some in Government put out feelers to Mussolini to conclude a separate peace with Hitler that would leave the French occupied and enslaved. Atlee, Bevin and Churchill stood firm but they did not stand alone. From every harbour and port on the south and east coast, the people rallied and sailed to Dunkirk to rescue the troops and marooned sailors.

The story of individual valour is well known and well should it be told. What is not so well known is what the government was doing at the time, the hesitation and prevarication. If the people had not risen to the challenge we can only begin to envisage the outcome. These were mostly working people, who gained their knowledge of traversing the Channel because that is how they earned their living. For the same period we rightly pay tribute to that cosmopolitan group of brave young fighter pilots who, in the Battle for Britain, kept the skies clear of fascist aeroplanes and made invasion, first, less likely, then permanently postponed. They came, many as volunteers, from America, Australia, South Africa, Canada and Poland. They included the Free French.





## The Home Guard

Dunkirk demonstrated and was evidence of the power of mass action. Under the leadership of wartime giants as Tom Wintringham, there emerged, pressure to form a Home Guard that was armed. Wintringham argued persuasively for the setting up of factory militia – which was done in some areas – and arming of 100,000 trade unionists. He began to import 'Tommy' machine guns from America (18,000 in a single effort). The authorities panicked and scrambled to gain control of this movement.

He opened a training college at Osterley

Park for Home Guard officers, training some 5000 in three months, in the principles of guerrilla warfare. The Government envisaged Home Guard as a Dad's Army. Wintringham wanted it to be trained in active defence and the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare pioneered in Spain where he had served as an International Brigade Commander, and in China. Arms caches were buried around the country. Osterley instructors were drawn from the International Brigades. The authorities tried repeatedly to close it down.

At the same time, the Air Raid Precaution, ARP, emerged. Workers guarded their own workplaces against sabotage whilst the civilian population forced the government, through direct action, to open the underground shelters to shield them against bombing. Some shelters took as many as 7,000 people in an evening and became underground communities. There could be as many as ten air raids over London in one evening. Throughout the war, such raids occurred, on average, once every 36 hours. In most cases, in working class areas, there was little choice of hiding place. The government inspired Anderson shelters were fine for those with gardens or space to situate them. Everyone else had to look elsewhere. In major cities this meant tube stations and outside the cities, farmland and open fields.

## Coventry, Portsmouth, the East of London

There was never before, and has fortunately not since been, such a test of the mettle of urban communities in the UK as in the time of saturation bombing. Each town would have its own story; in Liverpool it was the Durning Road disaster; in London, Bethnal Green tube, Stoke Newington library and the Savoy hotel. In Coventry, too many to recall. In 1940 and again in 1941 an average of 40,000 civilians were killed. This fell to an average of 17,000 for subsequent years of the war. About half the deaths were in London.

There were another 86,000 serious injuries and wounded. This compares with the quarter million soldiers killed. Night after night, starting in autumn, throughout 1940 and 1941, came waves of planes using phosphorus bombs and high explosive – night after night the skyline would glow red and orange as warehouses, workplaces and homes burned. Some were buried alive and dug out more than once. No street went untouched. Then, in 1944 and 1945, followed the V1 and V2 bombs, unmanned and unannounced, the latter silently fell. The terror this brought can only be imagined falling at random and taking out whole blocks of tenements. Yet people battled on. In some cities it was only the unions in factories who would know the true extent of the bombing. In Coventry, International Brigadier Jack Jones, future general secretary of the TGWU and Ernie Roberts of the engineer's union AEU, later an MP, would speak regularly by special phone line with Churchill to update him on which factories could be relied on to keep production going. When civil and military communications broke down, Coventry's trade unionists kept daily contact via a system of bike riding messengers. It was the workers who kept the war effort on track.





## Bombed, but not subdued

How did communities survive this onslaught? One powerful source of inspiration came through a feeling that (nearly) all were playing their part in the war effort. Contributing, and therefore, suffering hardship equally. They suffered equally and demonstrably with the introduction of rationing in 1940. Rationing started with food but was extended to clothing in March 1941. Only some of the rich relocated to the south coast and southwest.

Whilst rationing and cutting back was a source of shared hardship, it is estimated that a third of the population previously classified as poor actually had an increase in their income and the quality of their food during the war. Across the country there was a move to conserve. Private use of cars was curtailed then halted altogether in an attempt to preserve stocks of fuel. Even the manufacture of matches was cut (yet the consumption of cigarettes rocketed during the war) in an attempt to preserve timber. Iron railings were cut down for use in industry and recycling as armaments. Aluminium scrap was collected and paper was made from rags (a practice not seen for centuries). Newsprint was cut and whilst the number of books grew, print runs fell. Much of the shortfall in raw materials and consumer goods was made up by imports from America under the lend lease arrangements.

It is small wonder that the people came from their houses to cheer thousand bomber raids going in the direction of Germany. The extent of bombing on communities cannot be underestimated. Its impact was material, psychological and spiritual. And it had the opposite effect Hitler wanted. Between 1940 and 1943 about 4.5 million houses were damaged, a quarter million of which were totally destroyed. This means that about two in every seven houses in Britain were in some way affected by enemy action. London soaked up about half of the pressure. In the administrative county of London, only one in ten houses escaped any kind of damage. In Bermondsey only four in every hundred houses emerged from the war without incident. Outside of London, coastal towns such as Newcastle, Cardiff, Swansea, Liverpool, Bristol and Plymouth were affected. In Plymouth, 8 percent of houses were destroyed and a

## This is the tale of a Nazi crime And how it was crushed in the nick of time



1 This is the cunning Nazi lout  
Who carefully worked the whole thing out



2 And this is the dirty, Quisling rat  
Who stood cap in hand on the Nazi mat



3 This is the poisonous fascist brew  
With which they hope to split Gentile and Jew



4 And this is the sort of simple soul  
They count on to swallow the poison whole



5 These are the workers, Abe and Mick,  
Who see in time the fascist trick



6 And this is how they clearly show  
They recognise their common foe

The moral of this little rhyme  
Is very plain to see—  
Let Jew and Gentile fight as one  
The common enemy

The fight's the same for all of us  
For Cohen, Jones and Brown;  
So close the ranks, together strike  
To bring the fascists down

P.T.O.



further 16 per cent damaged. By the end of June 1941, nearly 2.25 million people had been made homeless by bombing for periods between one day and a month. In the same period nearly a fifth of all schools had been damaged. The high proportion of civilian death and casualty, of destruction of habitat, was, of course, no accident. It was the fascist way of conducting war. In the past, war had been fought for the acquisition of land and, on victory, occupying it. With the advance of capitalism, war was fought less for land, more, for the acquisition of commodities. The victor was the one able to either capture a greater share of the opponent's economic power or destroy it. It was but a short leap to seek to capture or destroy the opponent's most precious commodity – people.

One reason why working class living standards generally rose during the war results from the fact that many more were now employed, employment was more regular and the number of hours worked rose dramatically. Rent was controlled, as was the price of coal, electricity and rail journeying – important as the private use of cars was circumscribed and families often followed round their loved ones in the services stationed away from home. The largest subsidy went to farmers to encourage them to grow more and allow the costs of food to be kept stable.

Drawing on the lessons of 1914-18, the government promoted the ploughing up of grassland for the growth of cereals and potatoes. Many individuals 'grew their own' as a result of the 'Dig For Victory' campaign. In addition to squeezing consumer spending to free up resources for the war effort, there was a postponing of maintenance of machinery and repatriation of overseas investment. Each made a significant contribution to the war effort.

### Home fires

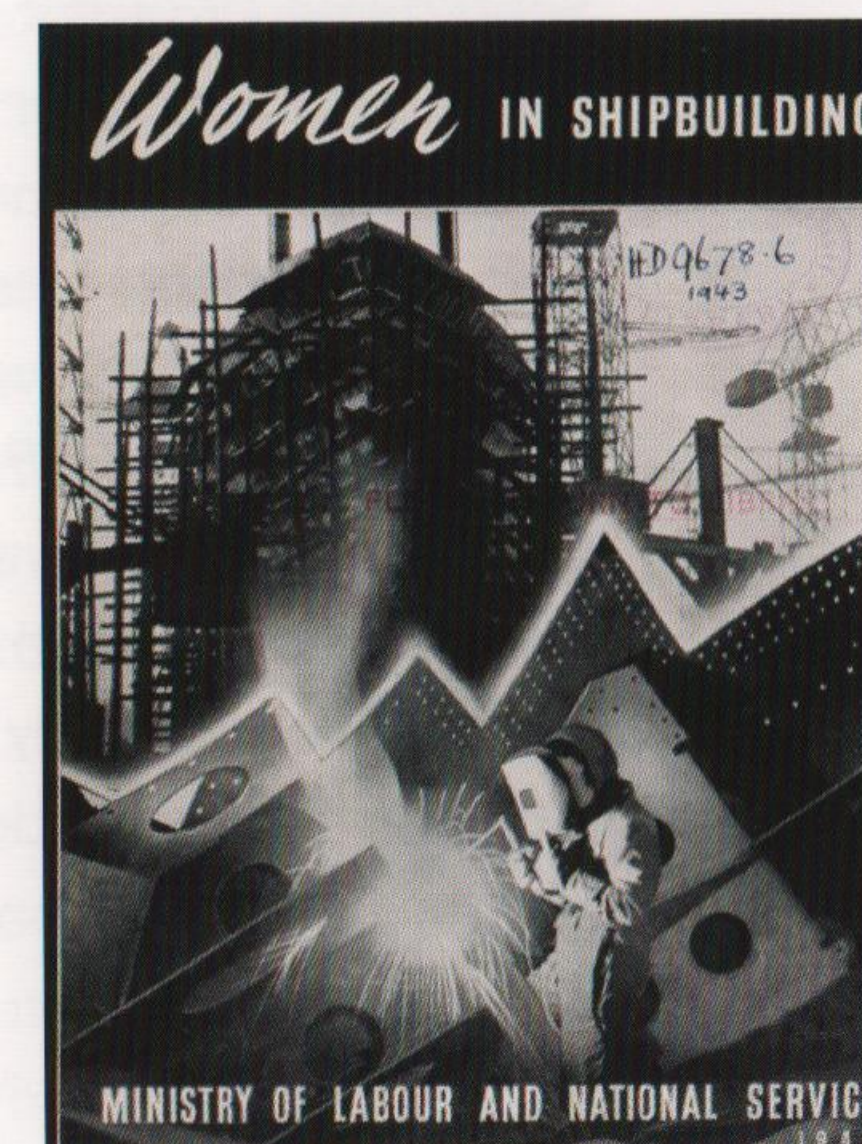
No civilian had experienced war in quite the same way as in 1939. Indeed, no war had killed such a proportion of citizens since the Norman invasion in 1066. The Home Front was a relatively recent concept, raised in World War One to convince people of their stake in the outcome of that godforsaken bloodbath. By 1939 it was to mean something different. For a start, millions were conscripted into

the army, others into essential industry. All citizens between the ages of 18 and 60 were to be involved in some sort of national service. The biggest ever direction of population in British history was the movement of women into the workforce and armed forces. A third of the 23 million engaged in some form of national service was female and this does not include the one million women working in the voluntary services. The government considered this one of their boldest achievements of the war. It gave an irreversible boost to the claim for equality and became a central feature of trade union activity in the next half century.

Unions argued and lobbied for equal pay. Conscription was one thing, compulsion another and it is a tribute that the moves to conscript labour were more a framework than a plan of compulsion with many voluntarily working in difficult and sometimes dangerous occupations. Others left a day's work, put on tin helmet and kept fire watch through the night. Night after night. The sheer volume of armaments required to fight the war and other materiel meant that more were involved in the armaments industry. The accuracy of the weapons used and the speed with which they could be invented rested entirely on the skill of Britain's engineering base. After 1940, the war would require mobilisation of home front and military front. Men and women. Young and old. The evidence is that when most thought that the sacrifice was equally shared out, they willingly took part.

### Shared out, but tough all round

Never before had the state so intervened in the daily life of individuals. Movement was curtailed and controlled. Fear of food shortages and price rises led to measures to control the import and production of food with stringent checks on quality and price controls. Propaganda invoked changes to the way of life from warning against gossiping to neighbours, to telling one how to





prepare meals amidst shortages of food and utensils. Neighbour was encouraged to report on another neighbour who may have said something that sapped morale. They equally looked out for each other whilst one was at work and the other at home.

Gas masks were a legal requirement and reminder that all were committed to the war effort. To many, they were the first real sign that war was at our doorstep. 38 million had been distributed by September 1939. If it was not the gas masks or the gas attack drills, it was the sandbag or taped up windows. The Black Out was aimed at thwarting aerial bombardment and vigorously enforced by civilian air raid wardens. Members of Parliament who did not share the nation's war aims were put in prison along with Mosely. The Treachery Act of 1940 was used but with great discretion and discipline. Between about 5-8000 German, Italian and Austrian nationals, by no means all fascist sympathisers, were interned in Port Erin and Port St Mary on the Isle of Man. Many were released as the invasion threat receded. The fight for freedom included restriction and encroachment on certain rights.

### Exodus

The evacuation programme, which had been developed in secret since 1933, was implemented in September 1939. In an extraordinary feat, codenamed, Pied Piper, 1.5 million children, their schoolteachers and pregnant mothers were evacuated from major cities to the countryside, in just three days. The waves of evacuation lasted a number of years and reflected the degree of invasion threat and the impact of aerial bombing. Evacuation abroad was never implemented despite offers from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and America undertaking to foster 200,000.

Not all evacuated children were welcomed and evacuation could be a sharp lesson about the existence of a class divide in Britain. It could also produce many happy times for disturbed and disorientated children. It produced some humorous moments too as when the author's grandmother Anastasia (a Russian whose English was never brilliant) visited her youngest son and found him not at his lodgings. She was directed to the local church where she found Maurice,

dressed head to tail in choirboy regalia, singing hymns at the top of his voice (he still recites them word for word to this day). An extraordinary event given that he was Jewish and spoke Yiddish at home when communicating with his mum and would normally expect to be found in a synagogue.

### The State

In 1940, Britain, island nation beleaguered and surrounded by u-boats, defined her nationhood in two ways. First in facing an external threat, defending democracy and asserting morality. The second, internally, by uniting around the state and, in the process, transforming it. People responded to this latter development in two ways. Firstly they accepted state intervention because it was perceived to be for the general good and then they incorporated it into their outlook on how a country should be run – in health or education, nationalisation of the mines and relations between unions and employers. It is true to say that the state became an accepted fundamental tenet in the social outlook of the nation. It was a short step to make the state an indispensable feature in the minds of millions of what socialism might be like. Whilst this may not be socialism, it was a very long way from the capitalism of the twenties and thirties.

This state was seen to be more modern, effective and efficient than production in private hands and the war experience seemed to bear this out. The popularity of the theories of Keynes, which required a strong, and interventionist state, provided the rationale. Where locally the state could not provide, people resorted to their natural agility and art of improvising. Neighbours shared tools and even suits to get married in, exchanged goods, loaned each other items, took in other people's children, and took in complete strangers. Complaints were reserved for and directed against those who used money or influence to get a better deal. A Saucepan for Spitfires was a popular campaign, which sought aluminium (though much of it went unused) to use in the manufacture of planes. Make Do and Mend encouraged fixing clothes and extending their lives. The ingenuity used being an example of improvisation at its very best.





### Worker citizens

What emerged was a kind of shop floor citizen. When war first broke, it appeared that little had changed. After all one went to work perhaps in the same industry and worked every hour available. But the rationale of work changed as Total War took a grip. It accelerated when Chamberlain was cleared out. Where, in the past, work was performed in exchange for wages with which to feed a family, work now took on a bigger meaning and a more politicised one. Attitudes hardened amongst workers. After all, it was work for the war effort, so a lazy worker was a dangerous worker

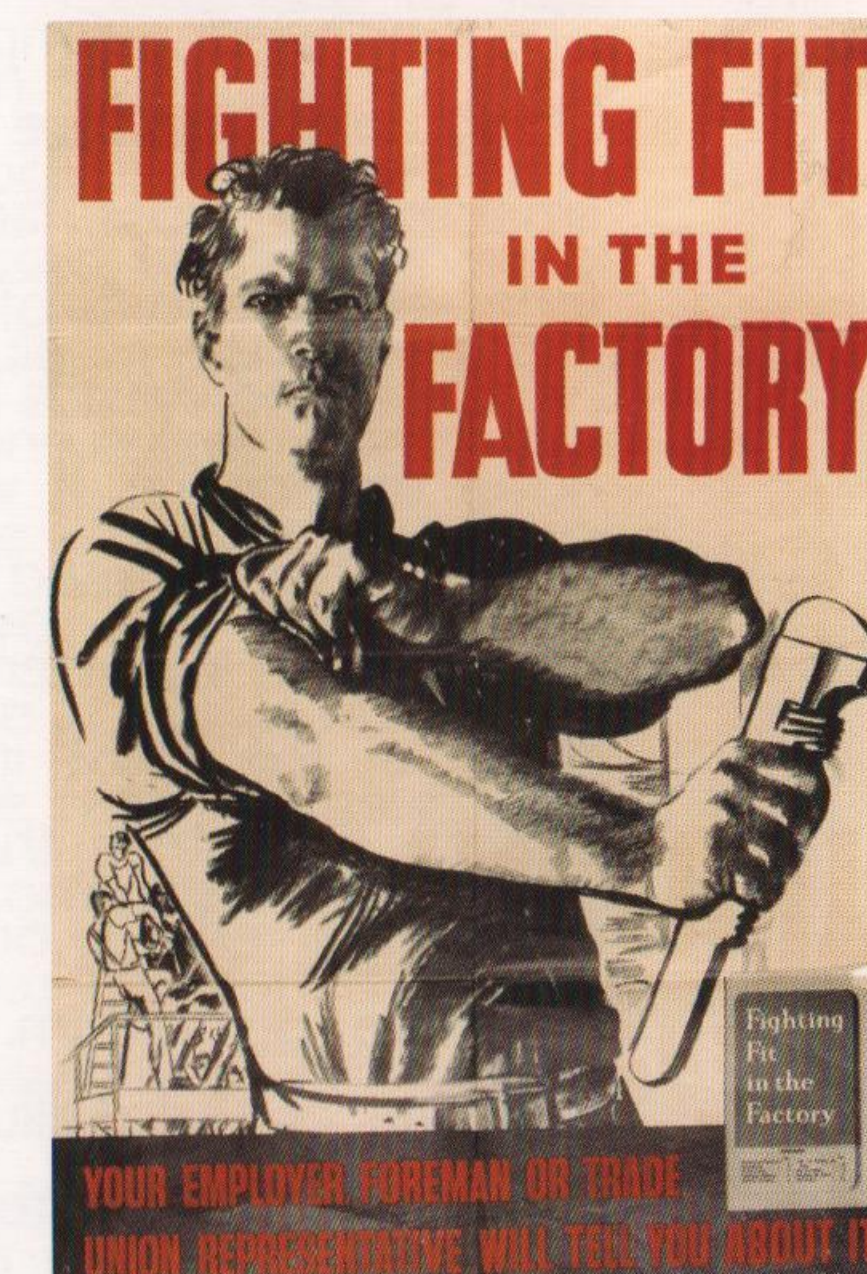
endangering his workmates who had to work that much harder. Meanwhile, the soldier at the front risked his all. Work and responsibilities at the place of employment were taken very seriously and in some of the best trade unionised companies, no-strike agreements were signed and maintained despite employer provocation. Britain's slow start in the economic race to defeat Hitler came as a result of decades of neglect and underinvestment by private employers. Now they were called to book. Early on in the war, employers were subject to an Excess Profits Tax (September 1939). Initially this was set at 60 per cent but rose to 100 per cent a year later. A further boost to revenue was the introduction of a system of taxation automatically deducted from wages and salaries. This came to be known as Pay As You Earn or PAYE as we know it today. A purchase tax was introduced in an attempt to raise revenues and offset inflation. It covered alcohol, cigarettes and entertainments.

Having captured the Ministry of Labour, organised workers began to take up the opportunity of making up for lost time. Talking about how to maximise production, Bevin said, "Do not worry about what it costs ... you can easily rebuild wealth, but you cannot create liberty when it has gone. Once a nation is put under another, it takes years and generations of struggle to get liberty back". There were

more strikes during the Second World War than the first, they were shorter in duration and involved fewer people. Indeed one industry, coalmining (indeed just a few regions of the mining community) accounted for 42 per cent of all strike activity. Most workers used their power to negotiate change. Between October 1938 and July 1945 average weekly earnings for industrial workers rose by 80 per cent. Women's average wage in industry rose by 94 per cent. Wages rises occurred, though not at such a high rate, in agriculture and coal mining. Some suffered, especially those widowed or whose husbands were fighting in the forces. But the unions acted to raise Service wage rates even for this category – many of those fighting in the armed forces being formally union members.

### Trade Unions fit for citizens

Under Chamberlain unemployment had remained at over a million even a year after the declaration of war. As workers were absorbed into industry and unemployment fell, unions were inevitably strengthened. Government and employers were losing their main weapon in industrial policy. By July 1943, and coinciding with the high point of union power, Britain experienced something very rare in the capitalist world – full employment. Only 63,000 were unemployed in that month across the nation. The stabilisation of prices underpinned the voluntary restraint on wages. Joint Industrial Councils were established which, within a year of Churchill's accession as Premier, covered 15.5 out of 17.5 million workers. Unions, which had struggled through the hungry thirties, now met employers, nationally, on equal terms. The most effective role of these councils was at factory and workplace level. In engineering alone in 1943 there was established 4,169 joint works councils covering two and a half million workers. These councils brought together unions and employers at local level for the planning of the war effort. They varied in effectiveness, but where





unions were strong and class conscious, recalcitrant employers were dealt with. This is one of the first and few examples of a curious alliance between organised labour at factory level and the state. In the knowledge that employers, especially in mining and engineering could be slow, indeed resistant to change, and had been very tardy in switching to war production requirements during the phoney war, the state effectively sought to by pass them and apply pressure by empowering the unions. The joint councils were, on the surface, an example of partnership. Below they really were an example of the gloves being taken off of the unions whilst employers felt the pressure from above. To win the war, private and sectional interests had to be subservient to the collective good.

The unions, collective to the core, took to this challenge with ease. The Engineering Employers Federation found it very difficult to block union initiative and concentrated its resistance instead, to limiting the cross factory and regional attempts by unions to federate the efforts of joint councils. For the shop stewards, 'labour's NCOs' as the Webbs had called them; work in a joint council was a novel experience. It was in effect another kind of new unionism. Stewards were raised on a diet of conflict and class struggle, which now took on a different form. Most stewards would be socialists and many of the most influential were communists. Their collective outlook was that the destructive nature of capitalism and its deleterious effects on working class people would make these receptive to socialism. The path to socialism would be via the many negatives of and disillusionment with capitalism. This had produced defensive thinking. Yet now the workers were organising and involved in strategic partnerships and solidarities. Their socialism and the 1945 victory would arise from a positive and engaged approach. As a result of these councils they had direct experience of the power of unions to make change.

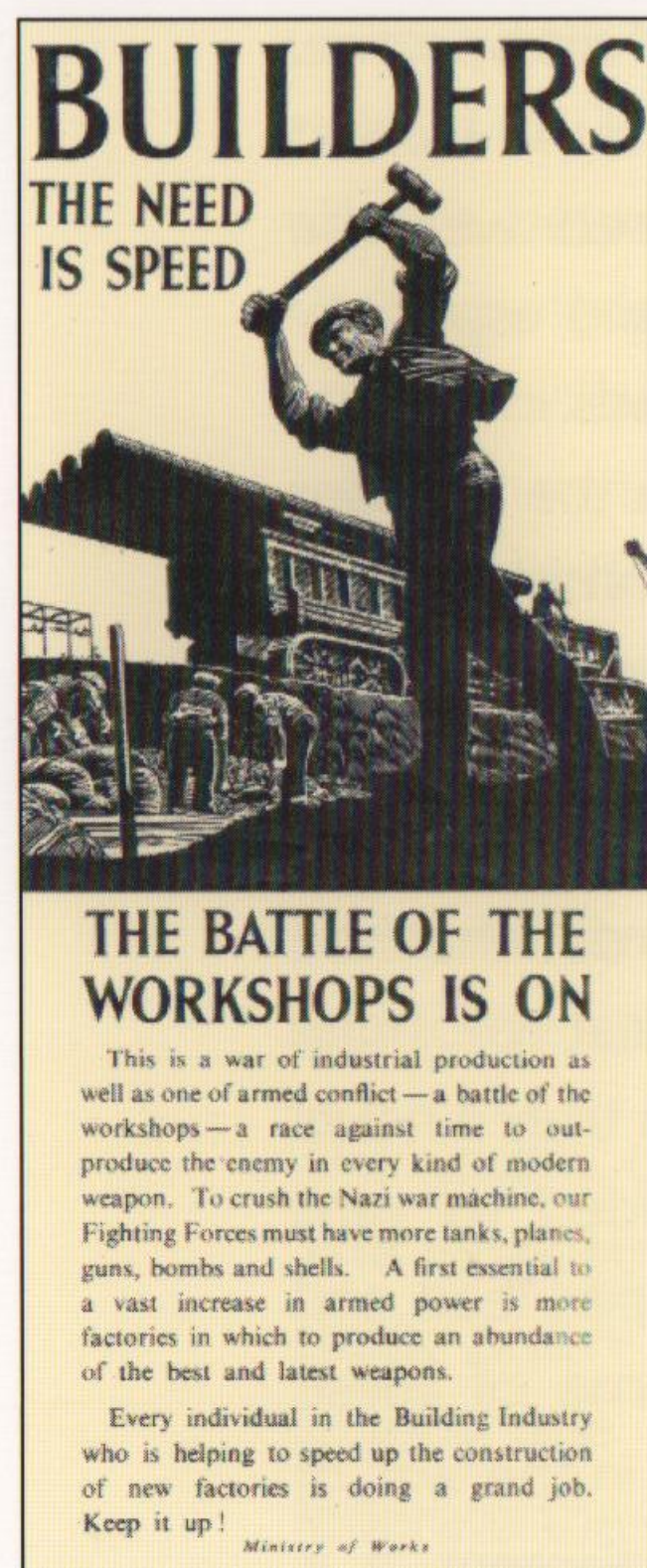
### Union power

Union members were changing too. Often female, they were more assertive of their rights and confident as a result of their voluntary and collective role in the war effort. Occasionally a general such as Montgomery would drop in to the factory or a Pathé news feature

broadcast to remind them of just how important they had become. Involvement in planning was a quite different battleground to that experienced by the older stewards who remembered well the 1930s. There can be no doubt that during the war and especially between 1941 and 1944 unions made significant inroads into what were once known as 'management prerogatives'. Given the broader definition of working conditions, local production committees and councils would discuss issues such as worker welfare, including childcare for employees on shift work or the provision of works canteens. They would also gain the right to hold union meetings in work hours and on work premises. For those stewards who had learned to organise despite the ever present threat of mass unemployment in the inter-war years, it must have been truly a novel experience. The joint council experience was extended to yard committees in shipbuilding, pit committees in tin, copper, lead and coal mining and site committees in construction. Some of these councils were so effective that Bevin was accused, later in the war, of fostering corporatism and subverting the rule of parliament. It is certainly true that the Minister's Joint Consultative Committee including the employers, the TUC and the Ministry of Labour oversaw every major decision on manpower and labour policy. In 1941 prototype regional organisation of the TUC was established to mirror the Government's twelve defence regions. These were formalised as the TUC Regional Advisory Committees in 1945. In 1941 a Women's Consultative Committee was established meeting fortnightly along similar lines to the Joint Consultative Committee.

In addition to manpower, advisory bodies were established in engineering, and other major construction industries to advise on training needs and the planning of technology development. The Unions had come a long way since the barren mid thirties when they could only knock on government doors by marching thousands in protest in the major cities. The scale of the projects on which they worked was hugely impressive. For example, under operation Bolero, British workers built accommodation for one and a half million allied troops to be stationed in preparation for D-Day, in secrecy. An extraordinary achievement given that Britain already housed two and half million of her own troops in the UK.





Use of Essential Works Orders was another way in which the function of employers was circumscribed. Under Bevin's direction employers who wanted to contract work from the government or undertake 'essential' work had to register with the Ministry of Labour. In return they were expected to conform to standards they would never previously have considered. Terms and conditions of those they employed had to be at or above agreed standards. Welfare arrangements for workers had to be in place including canteens and, often, crèches for the children of their employees.

Quality training had to be provided too. The Orders, applied first to the Royal Ordnance Factories, was soon extended to those working on contracts for the navy and air force, the merchant navy, in the docks and on building sites. By the end of 1944, some 67,000 establishments, employing 8.5 million

workers, came within the jurisdiction of the EWO. An army of inspectors ensured that the Orders were implemented. Union membership was growing at a faster rate than ever before yet there were really very few strikes. The reason for this is that unions were finding other ways to exert leverage. Unionism now influenced a wider range of establishments with an impact on a broader range of issues than ever before. In new industries such as chemicals and plastics, unions had new spheres to influence and new agreements to promote. With many union full time officials drawn into the armed forces and pressure to raise production through local inputs, local representatives in the form of shop stewards, became the mainstay of the unions. Though later pilloried for having too much power in the sixties, it is true to say that during the war, most people thought they did not have enough.

### Changing horizons

Attitudes towards work, relations between workers and with employers and the role of the state in industry radically altered during the war years. Where once white-collar worker and blue

collar worked for the same employer in the same industry but considered each group a breed apart, shared values and common concerns of the war years brought them together. For every bullet fired there was a fitter or turner or riveter at labour and a coal miner digging. Active citizenship takes its concept from this period. Many working class people experienced new horizons, the children sent for protection from city slums and poverty into the fresh air of the countryside, the soldier who's first ever trip abroad was on a troop ship to Burma, the men and women joined in relationships that might be broken at any moment by posting or injury or death, the organised education of troops nearly all of whom had been forced to leave school at 14 to go to work. Each emerged stronger and with a world vision. Pubs across Britain had maps of Europe on which they stuck pins denoting where battles took place, collecting warm clothing for people they had never met, in countries they had never visited.

This extended camaraderie was especially felt for those who had a comparable experience of war. Great affection was extended for the people of Malta, Singapore, Crete and Hong Kong. In 1942, the George Cross was awarded to the people of Malta, also a strategic island, for their ability to withstand a bombing campaign conducted in a similar manner and extent to that experienced by Britain's towns. Other sea changes occurred. Despite the parliamentary truce, the political life of the country was enhanced, with substantial rises in working class membership of political parties and active participation in local government.

### Women: breaking new ground

One historian estimates that, for every single fighting soldier, there were as many as nine others, working on everything from planning to supplying and keeping the fighting soldier healthy. Civilians took part in the planning of the war and played a role in the logistical struggle (which for an island nation is both key and a major challenge). Many of these





were women. Hundreds of thousands of women workers took a role in Civil Defence, Air Raid Precautions, the Women's Land Army (which numbered 80,000 at its height in 1943), the Auxiliary Fire Service and in the Local Defence Volunteers. By the middle of the war, the WVS, Women's Volunteer Service, numbered one million. The range of skills and energy of this force was remarkable. WVS members could work in hospitals or clinics, serving food to the homeless or escorting, and overseeing car-pooling where petrol supplies ran low and in logistics for D-Day. They ran Ministry Departments and organised broad social and political campaigns. In the WVS, only organisers were paid, all others were unpaid volunteers, many of whom held down a full time job and sought to keep a family together. Altogether seven million women worked in industry. In some, where they already had strong historic ties such as chemicals and explosives, they constituted more than half the workforce. 1.5 million worked in engineering. A further 450,000 were in the armed services proper. By 1944, fully 85 per cent of women working in the engineering and allied industries were categorised as skilled and semi skilled labour. They joined the unions by the hundreds of thousands.

Female labour became more and more important and women showed conclusively that very few jobs would, could or should remain the exclusive preserves of men. Women drove trams and buses, cranes in docks and turned lathes. They built ships and tanks; they became the mainstays of industries such as textiles and food manufacture. The Land Army even had a Women's Timber Corps. This was the first time that union bargaining strategies became feminised. The dramatic increase in workplace nurseries and rising interest in occupational health arises from this fact.

### Science for the people

As a modern war, science came to prominence in ensuring that the army was equipped as a most modern fighting force. The mystery of science indulged by men in tweeds in remote universities changed. Science and industry, especially chemicals, plastics and metal-engineering became intertwined. Some companies employed so many scientists that their conditions and organisation of labour

appeared similar to that of any production line company. A number of their representative bodies came together in 1946 to form a world-first trade union for scientific workers.

One way in which the influence of scientists was to impact on the war effort was in combating disease. Despite the destruction of sewers and water pipes by bombing, an outbreak of typhoid was evaded. National immunisation programmes, for example against diphtheria, successfully reduced infection. Milk given to children and babies was fortified with vitamins and given out generously in a subsidised milk scheme. A vitamin welfare scheme was established in December 1941. This was a time when publishers were producing (when they could find the rationed paper to print on) books such as *Mathematics for the Millions* (Lancelot Hogben) and cheap popular Penguin series abounded on everything from natural sciences and architecture to Shakespeare and how to teach oneself modern warfare. They took new, often science influenced subjects, to a wider audience. Scientists found a powerful rationale as boffins for the people in the service of the war effort. Workers were encouraged to experiment with new techniques and new ways of working. Special mention should be made of JBS Haldane who pioneered the use of deep shelters to protect civilians from air attack. Others such as doctors fought in the medical units in the army and mixed freely with working class conscripts. With the coming together of science and industry and the emergence of an industrialised white collar worker, a much broader definition of working class emerged.

### Industrial welfare for warfare

During this period, attitudes to industrial welfare changed. The Factory Inspectorate and the Factory Acts were relocated to Ministries where their functions could be expanded to include questions previously called "industrial health". Now health and safety and welfare became prime concerns aimed at helping to overcome sluggishness in supply of labour, labour turn over and improving welfare at work. Factories and mines suddenly had medical services. Industrial health committees were elected by workers in factories. Unions campaigned to set them up. Once established, the



committees were swiftly colonised by the unions and included in their portfolio of interests. Schemes to promote safe working were run in tandem with schemes to promote healthy eating and the provision of food in workplaces. Within a year of the establishment of the programme there were 8000 nurses working in industrial establishments. The British Medical Association established a Committee on Industrial Health. All this work was included in the 1942 White Paper on a National Health Service. "Industrial Health" was not going back to the Home Office. It was during the war that millions of workers received paid holidays, supported by law, for the first time.

### The Cairo and Singapore parliaments

A high point in political maturity came through the establishment of the army parliaments. Yet few at home even knew these existed. In the early years of the war, the average war aim of the average soldier was to survive, by engaging the enemy. In 1940, defence of the homeland had a truer ring to it than the use to which it is put today. The desert war, Bevin's increasing influence over the home front and the emergence of Montgomery resulted in a new kind of confidence and this was transformed by the Soviet victories in the East. The army represented the biggest social mix ever in Britain, northerner and southerner, Norfolk man, Cornishman and northern Irishman, men and women together and even with the arrival of colonial troops and the Americans, black and white, all in a pressure cooker environment. Why were they fighting? Out of loyalty? Yes. In this sense they shared this with combatants of the First World War. But the loyalty was conscious, and became, in time, attached to a set of social war aims that gave substance and put an inner core into the fight for liberty and freedom. The ruthless barbarism of fascism was the perfect counterfoil. In it one could see both the realisation of tyranny and the potential for its opposite.

How could freedom be achieved? By adopting the first lesson of service in an army: sticking together. It was the same lesson that has underpinned our trade union movement and gone some way to civilising capitalism these past two centuries. Into this atmosphere the army parliament movement emerged. The army established

'mock' parliaments in Cairo and Singapore so that the time of soldiers stationed abroad could be occupied in enlightening themselves. The first motion at the Cairo Parliament called for the nationalisation of the retail industry. It was passed overwhelmingly. Regiments elected MPs and working class parties such as the Labour Party, Communist Party, Co-Operative Party and Commonwealth, dominated. The troops took these parliaments too seriously and the government tried quickly to shut them down. Having made the ultimate sacrifice of laying their lives on the line, they would never take mindless orders from managers and foremen again. The working class in and out of uniform emerged from the war stronger and more combative than ever before.

### Tobruk and El Alemein, Leningrad and Stalingrad

In 1941 shortly before the infamous Japanese surprise attack on the American fleet in Pearl Harbour, the allies had defeated Rommel. Britain had fought both Italian and German troops across the eastern Mediterranean for the oil fields and control of the Suez Canal. Churchill could see very quickly the implication of the nefarious Japanese attack, it was followed swiftly by a German declaration of war on America. With the USA now in the war, the British Prime Minister declared that a victorious outcome was certain, only the timing unknown.

At the same time as Hitler faced strategic defeat at the hands of the British in north Africa, he suffered a first strategic defeat in the east, at Stalingrad. In many ways Tobruk and Stalingrad have come to epitomise the war even though they were each smaller in scale than the battle of Kursk or the assault on Berlin. Slandered and denigrated as a totalitarian state where people only did what they were told to or allowed to do, the defenders of Leningrad withstood a 900 day siege and at Stalingrad fired the imagination of workers everywhere





and on all continents. At one point holding just a hundred metre stretch on the mighty river Volga and with only one tenth of the city in its hands, the Red Army held on. Obsessed by the city named after the Soviet leader, Hitler drained his resources and weakened his own assault on the Caucasian oilfields. He did not take either Leningrad, Stalingrad or the bulk of the Russian oil. It thus became impossible to take Moscow. The names of Russian generals became household names in Britain: Chuikov, Rokossovsky, Voroshilov and Zhukov are names to be never forgotten. It was the Red Army and the volunteer partisans fighting behind enemy lines that Churchill claimed "tore the guts out of Hitler". The sheer doggedness and resilience of the Red Army inspired all in the anti fascist camp. It was Total War in Russia too.

Troops and militias of armaments workers stopped the first German assaults on the city. The Mamaev mound changed hands eight times, the Central station, fifteen times. Russian troops 'hugged' their attackers making aerial assault very difficult. In the most extreme example it took the Germans 59 days to capture one fortified house. It was yard-by-yard, hand to hand combat and the whole world held its breath. Hitler, just as Napoleon in 1812, thought that victory was assured. He could not conceive of defeat and claimed that one of his Vice Marshals would never surrender, but in 1943, Von



Paulus along with a quarter million soldiers of his Sixth army (and 23 generals) did just that. Outflanked and overrun in the most audacious and tactically brilliant manoeuvre of the war. The King of England presented the people of Stalingrad with a commemorative Sword of Honour.

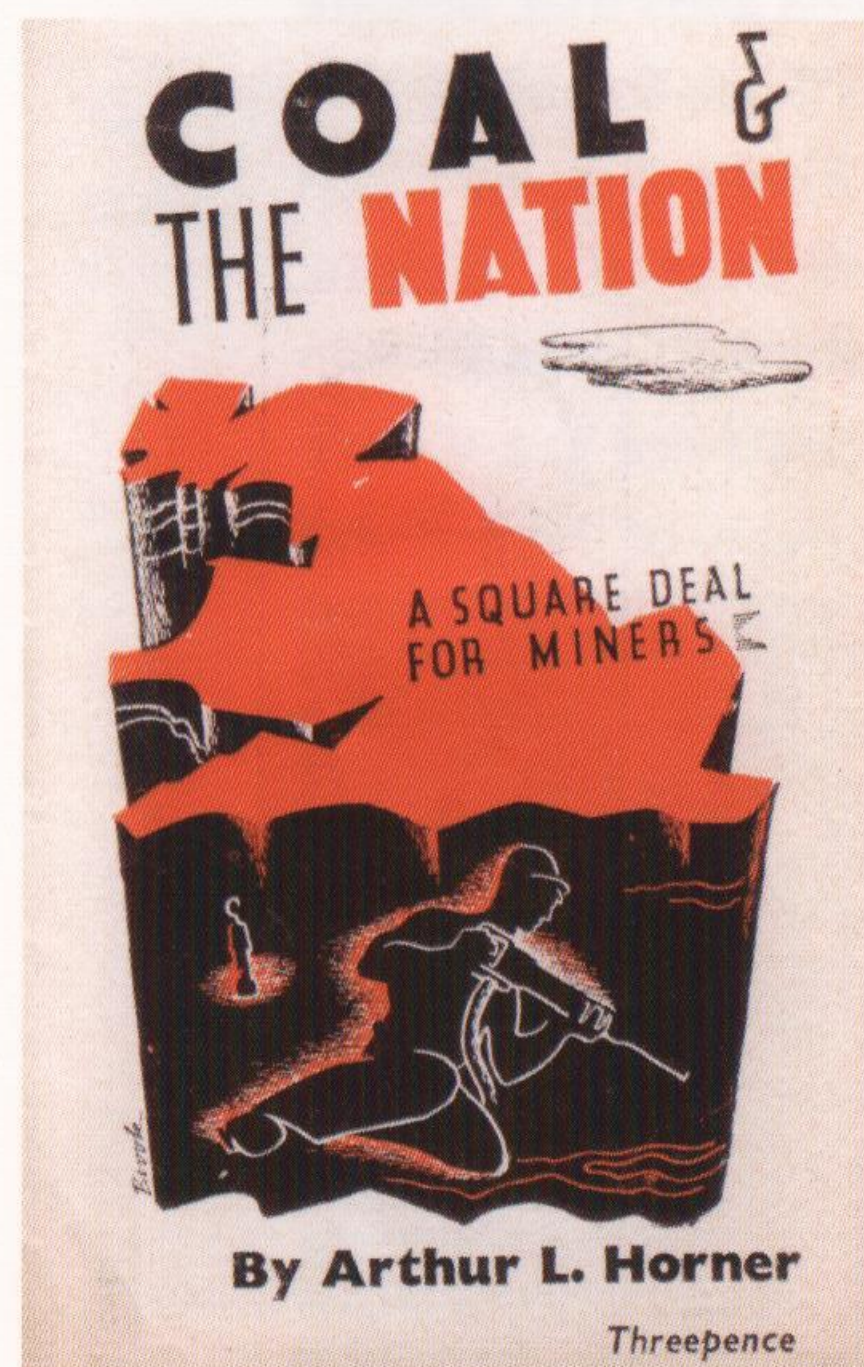
### **The second front and Kursk**

No other campaign during the war so captured the imagination and mobilised such a broad alliance of influential organisations, including the trades unions, as that for the opening of a Second Front. Unless Hitler was stretched and forced to do the unthinkable in military terms, engage two enemy forces simultaneously, he would not be crushed. The campaign had a deeper rationale. Suspicion lingered in the population at large, that even in the war cabinet, there were those in 'high places' who were dragging their feet in opening up a second front against Hitler, letting the Soviets soak up the pressure. Many trades unionists shared these suspicions of a class that, despite the national effort to win the war, continued to refuse to abolish the much despised Trade Disputes and Trades Unions Act of 1927 enacted to press home employer advantage after the general strike. The second front would, by definition, mean an alliance with the USSR. It would mean an alliance based on deed not just words. So the campaign for a second front brought out many of the pre war prejudices and trade union suspicion of vested interests. The USSR was more than just an ally based on convenience. She had borne the brunt of the Nazi aggression, was suffering terribly and her commitment to the defeat of Hitler was unquestioned. The campaign for the second front drew in radicalised elements that were also campaigning to socialise the war effort, to make it more effective.

When D-Day arrived it had more than a military impact. It began to re divide the nation. Bevin records that, as he and Churchill visited troops embarking for Normandy, some who had spotted him called out "what happens after this Ernie, is it back to the dole?" Memories were long, consensus was beginning to break down and party lines began again to stiffen. This came to the fore over the debate on Industrial Policy. It was quite different from the cross party support



for Beveridge. In industry, the question was being asked, how could the interests of one class who supported private ownership and anarchy in production, remain allied in peacetime, to that of a class whose interest was in socialism and the planning of production for the common good? The battle of Kursk, the biggest land battle and clash of armour ever, involving some two million men, saw the Soviets victorious. After Kursk the strategic initiative went to the Russians who never again lost it. Thereafter the Germans fought only defensive battles right back to Berlin. It opened up the Balkans and central Europe for the allies. D-Day took the initiative in the west. Defeat was now a certainty for Nazism. By January 1945, the Red Army was but 100 miles out of Berlin. On 30 April the Reichstag fell. On 2nd May, Berlin surrendered. Hitler was dead, his country, along with his vision of a New Order, lay in ruins. But 1 in 3 Russians had no father.



### **New challenges – and a new agenda**

By the time the labour movement met in its various wartime conferences and in the TUC to discuss future policy, much of it was already blatantly obvious. Indeed it was being implemented. Ideas shaped by the trade unions as early as the nineteenth century such as socialisation of production, nationalisation and intensive farming were implemented as logical steps to organise production and bring the workers into management of the industrial war effort. Whilst Bevin was Minister, unions who spotted an employer dragging his feet implementing the agreed industrial strategy,

could go over his head and appeal direct to the ministry. And the ministry intervened. The war time agreement was more a 'stand-off'. Employers were regrouping and planned a different post-war reality with many of the gains rolled back. Whilst a range of industries from energy to road transport had been brought into state ownership,

mechanisms were not established which would allow workers to exercise real strategic, or day to day control, over decision making. Where there were attempts to establish such mechanisms as in mining, it was the unions which short sightedly spurned the responsibility, preferring to leave it to technocrats and 'management'.

The unions promoted, in the name of reconstruction – which began to gather force in 1943 and coincided with the first joint Anglo-USA operation in Italy – many positive ideas. Planning would continue. Decision-making would be integrated and accountability of economic management to the authority of Parliament improved. There was to be investment in renovation of major ports and the retention of dockers in a docks' labour scheme. A National Housing Corporation, which would support the building of housing and extension of mortgages to working class house buyers would be established. National Savings Certificates could be used to fund rebuilding projects. A National Hire Purchase Scheme to support purchase of furniture and household goods would be put in place. Extensive Public Works Schemes would be developed. School leaving age would be raised to 16 and the pensions age lowered, with retirement being compulsory.

Compulsory arbitration over wages would end, largely under pressure from the mineworkers. All this would take place against the biggest move from war to peace employment and demobilisation and repatriation of troops. There began a struggle over the question of independence of India and Malaya, Palestine and countries in the Middle East. Minds turned to world government. Key milestones in the reconstruction plans were the Education Act (1944) which raised the school leaving age to 15 and provided grammar, technical and modern schools, with grants for university students as well as those to be demobilised from the armed forces and the Beveridge report. The Catering Wages Bill, union sponsored, sought to set fixed standards and wage rates for those employed in catering. The employing class opposed this Bill (which was passed) line by line, seeing in it – correctly as it turned out – a thin end of the wedge that would tie the hands of employers in the domestic and service industries and reshape industrial and class relations.





### 1945 Vote for Victory?

Given the above it can be no surprise that, despite his towering role, it would be Atlee rather than Churchill who signed the Potsdam agreement with Stalin and Truman, dividing Germany into four occupation zones. There is one sense in which the outcome of the election was difficult to guess. As a result of the suspension of normal political life and general elections, in 1945, no one under 31 years of age had had an opportunity to vote. Superficially the history is often paraded as follows. 1939, war breaks out because Mr Hitler made bad choices. During the war a report by Beveridge spelt out the outline of a welfare state. There was disagreement about it and so implementation was shelved until after the war. There was also an Education Act. War ends. Labour is elected. Yet as we have seen, Beveridge may have been shelved, but the unions were forcing its implementation in industry and in workplaces. Beveridge reflected the union programme and was all the more popular (or disliked by some) because of this.

The troops left Britain having only previously been on council holidays to Bognor Regis. They returned from Asia, north Africa or northern Europe, broader of vision and experience and with a determination that things would not return to the 'thirties'. There is a story recited by Stalin's translator, Valentin Berezhkov, about Potsdam. The conference is adjourned so that Churchill can return to fight the election and Stalin turns to him and says, "we will see you next week on your return". To which Churchill responded, "I do not think so." So, Atlee replaced Churchill to sign the final agreement. Given what we know now about life in Britain during the war, it is difficult to conclude that the election would result in anything other than one which put the greatest possible distance between the generation that won victory, and the 'thirties'.

What then is the significance of 1945? Part of the significance is in the range and coming together of the anniversaries we celebrate. In May, the victory over fascism. In June the victory for Labour, the first majority workers' government. In October, the formation of the United Nations, followed by the Paris congress to establish the World Federation of Trades Unions. The world congress united trades unionists from 65 countries. Some 70 million workers. It is the



only time that the trades unionists of Britain, America, Russia and China have united in the same workers' international. The WFTU secured preferential rights to have a say in part of the UN post-war reconstruction plans, helping to draw up legislation in victor and defeated country alike. The WFTU was called for and initially hosted by Britain's TUC. It temporarily healed the rift between the Second and Third Internationals. Big projects, big vision. Each interlinked and reflecting the power of the peoples, organised.

### Capitalism on the backfoot

1945 was a year of real advance with very real inroads made into capitalist exploitation. The working class that went in to war emerged quite different in 1945. Gone was the National Government, with its starched collars and Lords and Lady's this and that. In their place a new technocratic breed that had run industry

and civilian life in the most extreme circumstance and proved that state intervention worked. It had been difficult to argue that one had to keep one's 'below stairs staff' when the war effort most required, mass collective labour. Having proven that they could survive without their servants it became even more difficult for the upper classes to argue for their return especially as it looked likely that their wages might be fixed at a rate designed to allow their staff sufficient to feed their families. Confidence grew. Experience of the totality of the emotions of living and loving, raising and keeping families together and of loss through bombing or enemy action, was

immediate and very real. The war affected every family. For example, malnutrition, which was rife during the 'Hungry Thirties', disappeared. Gone were much localism, parochialism and the parish pump. Gone too the cloth cap. The class divide did not disappear, far from it. When forced to share a bathroom with General Smuts from South Africa and Bevin, Churchill expressed amazement that the working

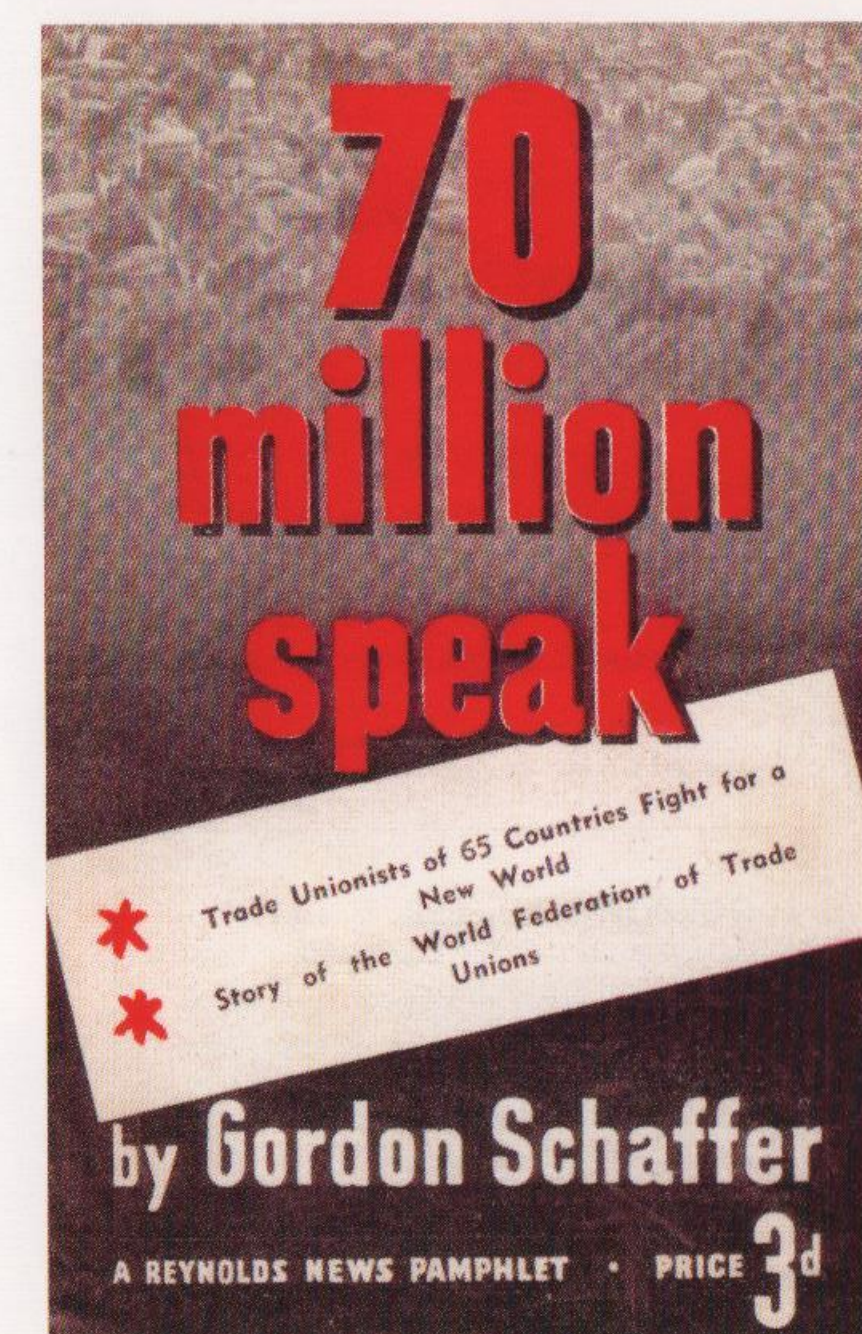


class Minister for Labour still cleaned his own shoes. "Old habits die hard" he responded. In 1939, the priest, capitalist, landowner and landlord held sway. In 1945 this was no longer true and Britain was a sight better for that. Bevin understood what was happening better than most. At a meeting of Labour candidates in October 1940, he said, "Immediately a nation is involved in a great crisis of this character it has to act collectively, and that brings in to play great social forces. Individualism is bound to give place to social action, competition and scramble to order... There is no other way a nation can save itself... Thus we will defeat Hitler. We can at the same time create conditions upon which a new advance is possible."

### Anniversaries to be proud of

In place of the dominance of the old narrow colonialist influences there emerged a working class with a worldview and a concern for world events. Yet it was a worldview without an empire. The war had seen Britain in hock up to the eyeballs, surrendering Empire territories or being forced out of them by burgeoning national liberation movements. After the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan it became a world grappling with USA imperialism. Full employment became a national target for all economic policy and stayed that way for 25 years. It took until 1979 for the reactionary forces in Britain to regain their composure

and attempt to roll back the substantial advances made by the unions during the war years. In World War One, Britain drew on her reserves in an attempt to maintain an impossible position in the world pecking order. In the second she drew on her reserves to survive at all. More Britons may have lost their lives in the First World War than the second, but the economic damage of the Second was infinitely greater. There is a sense in which the First World War was deeply unpopular because it was seen as a war of unequal contributions and vested interests (the King, the Tsar, the Kaiser and the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were all family





related) and as one badly mismanaged, especially in the field, by the military command. After 1940 neither was the case. Britain survived and then overcame because of the age old discipline of her industrial workers and the steadfastness of her trades unions. This was the strength behind industry. It was the force behind the local campaigns to recruit citizens into Civil Defence, Salvage and providing emergency billeting, Staffing Nurseries, Home Guard, blood donations, war savings and Anglo-Soviet Aid. It gave confidence for those fighting and risking all. The victory of 1945 flowed directly from the years of sacrifice and struggle during which a vibrant political life in parliament and outside, and especially in the forces, had honed a vision of a future that pinched the shoes of capitalism. It became crystallised in Let Us Face the Future and at the ballot box.

Unions today have power and popular support but a self-limited national role and a timidity of talking through a bigger vision. Yet the workers are still Britain and the unions could do so much more to provide national leadership and direction. If we are to ensure that the '60 years' becomes centuries of peace and progress, then as Britain's trade unionists, we need to reflect more on our history, looking to act radically and boldly to secure the future.



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