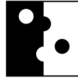

British Society During World War II
An Interview with Michael Foot

by Norma DENNY

Described as "unique in British politics, more in the mould of heroic reformers of the last century than the frequently grey politics of today" [Mervyn Jones, Michael Foot *(London: Gollanz, 1994)], Michael Foot is said to have had a career as a statesman, orator, writer and polemicist which reflects the history of the British Left since the 1930s. Born in 1913 into a political family noted for their liberal reformist standpoint, by the outbreak of the Second World War he was an outstanding journalist, recommended to the newpaper publisher Lord Beaverbrook for the post of editor of the* Evening Standard *by Aneurin Bevan of the Labour Party. He was the joint author of the famous critique of appeasement* Guilty Men*, and sole author of two more political pamphlets in the war years. He entered parliament in the "silent revolution" of 1945, and became a cabinet minister, the Leader of the House of Commons, and finally the Labour Leader in the 1980s. Michael Foot is best known however for his association with the "Keep Left" group within the Labour Party and his connection with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. This has earned him the epithet "the conscience of the Left through the years of the Aldermaston marches and the Vietnam War" (Jones,* supra*) and "The Incorruptible" (Anthony Howard).*

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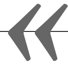
The interview was conducted in the offices of the left-wing newspaper *Tribune*, at King's Cross, London, on September 24, 1996.



The recent 50th anniversary of the Second World War has highlighted the huge amount of diaries and journals written by British people in that period. It has been suggested by Ronald Blythe in Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War *(1991) that war provided a huge stimulus to writers. Did war encourage you to become a journalist, or had that particular part of your career already begun?*

I'd already started out as a journalist before the war, but of course, the war gave a tremendous opportunity to journalists, and especially for people who were working in London. By that time I had joined *The Evening Standard*. It was right in the war from the beginning, especially, of course, when it became involved in the Blitz and the war itself was in London, and London journalism became of great importance. So, I was seeing it right from the beginning.

Historians like Gilbert, Calder, Roberts et al are constantly revising, and to some extent rewriting, the history of Britain between 1939 and 1945, particularly at the levels of individual politicians and of popular experiences. As someone who lived through these years and observed British society with the trained eye of a journalist, what are your views on the "London Blitz"?

Philip Ziegler is a very fine reporter on these matters—not just a biographer/journalist; he has also got a special eye for the way people and communities behave, which he's written in some of his books. But 1940 was, I think, the most exciting year in British history in the whole of this century. It was the turning point for Britain, because up till that point we'd been pursuing a highly dangerous policy of so-called *appeasement* of Hitler and Mussolini and the forces of fascism in Europe. And right up until the twelfth hour, as you say, almost the thirteenth hour of 1940, they'd been running that policy but, at last, they threw out the terrible government we had then, one of the worst governments we've ever had in British history, to compare only with the British government that lost the American colonies many, many years before. They had put the country in a terrible plight, but the British people themselves, when they got the chance, revolted against this kind of procedure. From the change of government in 1940 there was a tremendous excitement in London itself, in the other cities that were under attack too, but in London especially because London was the most important place where the battle was being fought. So I don't believe there is any exaggeration in the talk about what happened there and the importance, from Britain's point of view as well as for the whole future of Europe and the world, of what happened then. I do believe that that resistance was of tremendous support, and of course that people themselves, the people of London, played a very big part in it.

Just after the Blitz started—the real attack—I remember going down to the reporting, down in the East End of London, and going through the streets then, and seeing the devastation that was being spread by the bombing, and it looked as if that kind of attack could succeed. But within a matter of a few weeks, almost, the British people, especially the Londoners who had, we thought, great gifts of improvisation, were looking after themselves and their families, liberated from the belief that they were going to be beaten in the war. That was when they decided to go into the Tube, to take over the Tube, and for the next four or five years that was where a lot of people spent their working nights, in preparation for the work they were going to do during the day, and London did save the world in that sense. It did give a tremendous example to the rest of Britain, to the other cities that were attacked, like Plymouth, my own home town of Plymouth, or Coventry, which were furiously attacked, but in those places too, people recovered within a few weeks, by improvisation. The British people are very bad at some things, but they are very good at improvisation at the last moment, and that's what they showed during the war.

It was a real spirit of comradeship, I believe. I didn't know my wife then, she was working up in Hampstead where they were running the air-raid shelters and the rest. All the different sections of the community came out there—the crusty, old lawyers and God knows what (I don't know if lawyers are the most crusty), but there was a whole assembly of different lots of people who came out, and were trained in the air-raid precautions. Very often they found that leaders of the air-raid precautions were working people who had natural abilities of leadership, and all these people came out in the war. So I think the London Blitz was of paramount importance. I also learnt at the same time, of course, what was happening in the actual Battle of Britain. I did know many of the pilots who were flying then. One of them was Max Aitken, son of the proprietor of *The Evening Standard*. He had already gained more flying experience before the war than any other pilot. He said this was one of the reasons why he survived the war-training. He kept flying all through that critical period. He was going out night after night and then coming back and reporting to his father, who by that time was in the War Cabinet, what were the realities and dangers of the situation. So, we in *The Evening Standard* thought we were "in the thick of it": partly we were seeing what was happening in the Blitz, partly we were seeing what was happening on the streets, and partly also we were hearing the reports of what was happening in the aeroplanes.

Together with journalist friends you expressed your criticism of the conduct of the war in pamphlets written anonymously, notably Guilty Men*, by "Cato", in July 1940. Who were the men singled out for blame in this pamphlet, and what exactly did you and your friends think them "guilty" of?*

It was because of all that happened that we wrote the book called *Guilty Men*. In 1940, the British army was thrown out of the continent of Europe, thrown out of Dunkirk, scrambled back into this country. It was a terrible military defeat, but it was a military defeat which the British turned into a kind of victory. That is to say they saw the shame of the defeat and made something out of it. They were not going to surrender. It had exactly the opposite effect. And so it was out of that—hearing the reports of what had happened to people on the beaches of Dunkirk, and hearing what had happened to that British army that was straggling back—that we wrote the book. Three or four of us sat down one afternoon at *The Evening Standard* office (we used to go up onto the roof there because we could see London), and decided to write the book. It was critical of the existing government while praising the ones who were really doing the job of saving us—Churchill was number one amongst these, and Beaverbrook himself. He had not had a good pre-war record on appeasement, but in the war he had a good one, and he was in the Cabinet, so we were naturally favourable to him[1]. The "guilty" men were those whom we thought should not be allowed still to stay in the government, because of

their appeasement records before, and because of their incompetence then to deal with the situation, and of course because of the new people who were coming in, who should really be taking over the job.
Several of the new faces were Labour ministers who had come into that government—Herbert Morrison[2], Ernest Bevin[3] and some of the others. But all we wanted to do was to clear out some of the most guilty. The head of our list was Lord Halifax, who was still in the Foreign Office then, and who was still, although we didn't know it at the time, thinking of a negotiated peace. And of course, some of the historians who wrote much later about it, in particular Andrew Roberts, a very clever historian, confirm that Halifax, even after the change of government in 1940, when he was Foreign Secretary, was still arguing in favour of a new peace with Hitler. If we had known it at the time, if the British people had known it, his house would have been torn down, I'm sure, because, by that time, the British people were absolutely resolved to fight the war and win the war, in the spirit that Churchill represented.
My memories of it are very exciting. I had been a journalist beforehand, but I hadn't thought of writing a book like this. *Guilty Men*, when it came out, was thought a disgraceful book. And there were some people who tried to suppress it, including Smith's who were the distributors, i.e. W.H. Smith, the bookseller. They were trying to stop the distribution. But they couldn't succeed and when they tried, we sold the book on barrows, up in Fleet Street and elsewhere. And so the book *Guilty Men* did represent, I think, the spirit of the time, the spirit of resistance. It was not only an attack on the guilty men, it was saying how we could fight and win the war.

Also, as someone who lived through 1939-1945, how do you react to the continuing debate upon the strengths and weaknesses of Churchill as a war leader?

Churchill did represent the spirit I mentioned above in a special way—in the way in which he spoke throughout the whole of the Blitz period, and also in the way in which he had gone to France, and spoken to France, where he had friends, just as we [the Left] had associations with some of the French people who were also leading the Resistance, such as Léon Blum. He was of course tried by the Vichy régime, and we in *The Standard* were attacking that régime. When De Gaulle came to London, he got a good reception from us (i.e. from *The Evening Standard*) and from most of the British people, although there were some who were critical of him for other reasons, but nobody could doubt that he was a symbol too of fighting Nazism and Fascism, and trying to restore a decent Europe. There was plenty of kindred spirit. I, as a journalist, while writing about the English Resistance, was also reading about the French Resistance—that is, the French Resistance at the time of the French Revolution, and how the whole course of the French Revolution had been altered by popular Resistance. We thought something similar was happening in our

London at that time, and we had lots of parallels drawn between our resistance in that period and the French Resistance to invasions during the Revolution. I read Michelet. There was a tremendous inspiration to be drawn from the way in which he wrote about French patriotism and how popular patriotism had saved the Republic. In the same way, I think, the English popular public revolt against Hitler, against the appeasement policy, did save us too.

French readers who know your name from the post-war Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.N.D.) might presume that you did not fight in World War II because you were a Conscientious Objector to war. In fact this is not the case. Serious health problems prevented you from being a volunteer or a conscript. Had the situation been different, given the British people's tremendous determination to fight, do you think you might have served in the armed forces?

Yes indeed. I went along as soon as the war was declared, but I was turned down because I had asthma, chronic asthma. Yet I was in London throughout the whole of the Blitz, and I was doing, I think, an important job. I was not a Conscientious Objector because I had never been. I respect Conscientious Objectors, but I'd never taken their view about war resistance. In the First World War, those who refused to participate had, I think, a much stronger case.

As far as resistance goes, I had been part of the Labour Party which was in favour of a much earlier resistance to Hitler, and had been opposed to the Munich agreement, and indeed in *Tribune* we had great headlines across saying that Hitler's Germany meant war and that we must resist it, and the only way we could resist it by then was by military means. The same at the time of the Spanish Civil War. We in the *Tribune* had all been strongly in favour of supporting the Spanish Republic against the fascist attack, and so there was no doubt about my position or our position on that matter. "Nuclear weapons" is a quite different question, in my opinion. They involve the destruction of everybody and the whole of the universe, and so we always drew a sharp distinction between a proper use of weapons in the Second World War to resist Hitlerism and the nuclear weapons which have got to be abolished altogether if the world is going to be saved.

Historians have been writing recently about the treatment given to the conscientious objectors and indeed to aliens. One particular article of yours, I noticed, was entitled "Why not lock up General De Gaulle?"... Did you feel at the time, then, very sensitive to this question of the treatment of foreigners?

Yes. What the British government did was all the more reprehensible as some of the people who were doing it were people who themselves had been

appeasing Hitler and apologising for Hitler and Mussolini in the previous years, like the chap Anderson, who was the Home Secretary for a while. And so, when he locked up a lot of people overnight in the crudest possible manner and sent some of them off to the Isle of Man—most of these were Jewish people, though not solely Jewish by any means—we thought it was quite improper. There were large numbers of people among them who helped us in the war and who, once released, were eager to help us again: they should never have been locked up. So we on *The Evening Standard* attacked the whole of this policy of locking up our friends and doing it in such an indiscriminate way, and that's why we had the headline "Why not lock up General de Gaulle?". De Gaulle was just arrived as a very popular leader from France, and of course, he was a symbol of resistance: so we said "Alright, if you're locking up these other people, you might as well lock up de Gaulle himself." That was how fiercely and strongly we were attacking our own government for its misdeeds during the war itself, and I think that people who now look back at the whole story will see that we were right in that objection. You see, sometimes they tried to compare the situation in that war with what had happened in the previous war, in 1914. At the outbreak of the First World War, there was a deep suspicion—not a proper suspicion in my opinion, but a deep one—of anybody with a German name who was living in this country, and lots of them were locked up, lots of them were pilloried.

This was an international war. There was a big division in France, just as there was in this country, between the people who wanted to appease Hitler, and the people who wanted to resist him, and we wanted to make it clear that our association was with De Gaulle, and those who were carrying out the resistance, although we knew there were some others, as well as De Gaulle, who were carrying out the resistance. There was very close interest in what was happening in France and what was happening here, and Churchill, to do him credit, was conscious of that, and, at one stage during the time when he was trying to keep France in the war, he suggested that we should establish a joint citizenship between Britain and France, which was a pretty revolutionary proposal at the time, and a very good one.

And then, I remember it all so vividly, when action was taken in France by French people to stop the French fleet from leaving Toulon—actually there were some people there who were on our side—we wanted to celebrate. And so we had an issue of *The Evening Standard* one day which printed the "Marseillaise" on the front page, in order to show our solidarity with the French Resistance which was, of course, of great importance to us as well.

The wartime diaries of ordinary British men and women reveal that, irrespective of their political viewpoint, they recognised a great deal of government-inspired propaganda for exactly what it was, yet tolerated it as an inevitable aspect of wartime life. (One thinks of Mrs. Milburn's Diary, *Maude Ceeley's* The Wartime Diary in Town and Country*, and especially the journals of*

George Beardmore.) What was the journalistic attitude to propaganda in general, and the efforts of the Ministry of Information in particular?

At the very start, we were very critical, in *The Evening Standard*, about the Ministry of Information. We didn't like the interference and the censorship and all the rest, although we knew there had to be forms of censorship because of the military precautions. But we did have writing for us on *The Evening Standard* some of the leading military commentators of the time, Commander Liddell Hart and General Fuller, who himself had a very long-standing record of having been one of the people who discovered and devised the tank in the First World War. So our military comments, we thought, were more apposite and justified to be published than many others. We were really scrupulous in trying to give a proper, military account of what was happening. *The Evening Standard's* circulation went up, it was a wonderful paper during the war. The other papers were quite good too, but we thought we were better still, because we were really the "London paper", we were really telling what was happening in London, and we had indeed recruited a whole range of people who were bringing a new kind of information to bear on the subject.

There was Wingate, General Wingate, who wasn't a famous general then at all (he was almost thrown out of the British army because of his misdeeds, but was finally promoted). But we knew him in *The Evening Standard*: he had been writing for us and we had been writing about him before he was even a General. The same applied to Deutsche, Issac Deutsche, who wrote eventually the authoritative work on Trotsky. He had come from Poland, and he was writing about what was happening in another part of Europe. We indeed, in *The Evening Standard*, were not only reporting what was happening in London, although that was very important, but we also had access to what was happening across the world. We did have several leading articles, some of which I wrote, which were saying that this was not just a national war, but an international civil war. We had allies in some places across Europe and we must make sure that we looked after them. In particular, we had some very important allies in France and in Italy, and the latter eventually overthrew Mussolini in 1943, because we had kept contact—not only us, but the government. The British government at that time did have some too, after a while: there had been a hysteria, say, in 1940, in the earliest period, but they overcame the hysteria after a while, and they did so partly because people were writing about all these things from very different perspectives. We had people of all nationalities—Poles, Italians and the rest—writing for the paper, showing that it was an international civil war, and it was because the British government, though it took some time, finally had the intelligence to fight the war in that way that we eventually won it. Another person, by the way, who came to advise us in *Tribune* office on these matters, and who advised the British government on it too, was Juan Negrin. He had been the Prime Minister, the resistance Prime Minister in Spain, and had led the opposition to

fascism in his own country. When he was defeated, he came to Britain. He wouldn't attack the British government here, although sometimes exiles in such circumstances would. No, he came and said to us: we've got to fight this war properly and win it, and we're going to do anything we can. And he gave very intelligent advice to us all about how we could learn from the Resistance and how our action should be associated with the Spanish Resistance too. The war had become a real international crusade.

Now, you also wrote another anonymous pamphlet entitled The Trial of Mussolini *(1943). It attacked the politicians who had encouraged Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. Hoare, Simon, Halifax, Hore-Belisha—and also Churchill who had visited Rome in 1927. George Orwell's comment on your pamphlet was that "the attitude of the Left towards the Russian régime has been distinctly similar to the attitude of the Tories towards Fascism." One could also add that this was hardly "news". What therefore were the aims and objectives of this pamphlet?*

Well, the *Trial of Mussolini* was just like the other things we had written then, like *Guilty Men*, although more deliberately emphasising the international scale of the war. There had been a lot of people in our country who had been grossly misleading the public about Mussolini and the nature of his régime. It is true that Churchill had been guilty of this wrong too. So when we were writing about Mussolini, we did include that in our book. It wasn't because we were wanting to attack Churchill himself—we actually believed that he was doing a very fine job in the war—but we did manage to combine writing that and writing an ending of the book which Churchill himself would have approved of. *The Trial of Mussolini* aimed at underlining afresh the international character of the war and how we must continue to resist the reappearance of fascism. There were some people who were saying you can just prop up Mussolini or have the Italian monarch established there. Sometimes Churchill was a bit fond of some of these kings, the one in Italy and the other one in Greece, where we got into further trouble a bit later on.

So what we were doing, and I think quite rightly, looking back on it now, was to emphasise the international dimension of the war and how there was a fight between the democratic and the fascist forces in probably every other country in Europe. Sometimes the British government was sensible enough to realise it, sometimes it wasn't. Greece, I'm sorry to say, was a tragic example of this: because the British government was not fully aware of the nature of the Greek resistance, we sent in British troops, and British troops were involved in battles with the progressive forces there. Some of them were communists—there is no doubt about that—and were engaged in activities that the British government did not like, but it didn't alter the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people in Greece who were resisting fascism were the same people who had

resisted Hitler when the first attack was made on Greece. It was therefore pitiful that even our own leaders had not learnt that lesson then.

Now, in 1944 you moved from Beaverbrook newspapers to work more on newspapers like The Daily Herald *and one of your first columns there spoke about the guilt of "much scorned idealists vis-à-vis the realist appeasers who held power in the thirties." With the benefit of hindsight now, what could or perhaps should have been done by the idealists?*

We could have combined a bit sooner. There were differences, many differences amongst those in the Labour Party. Some of them should have been recognised earlier, about Spain, for example. At the time of the Spanish Civil War and then the outbreak of the war, the Labour Party, or sections of it, were slow in understanding how strong the resistance was. Eventually that was changed, because Atlee himself, leader of the Labour Party, went to Spain and gave absolute support to the Spanish Republic. It is true that, looking back, we could have been stronger in our resistance earlier, but I think it doesn't alter the fact that the "left" in Britain and the "left" in France and several other countries in Europe had a much better record of resistance to fascism than the right wing. And if it hadn't been for the existence of the appeasers and the traitors, as we believe they were in the way they were approaching this grave problem, we could have solved it earlier.

Towards the end of the war you wrote another pamphlet, Brendan and Beverley *(1944). To whom exactly did this refer, and what was your purpose in writing?*

Brendan and Beverley was a continuation of the attack upon the Conservative leadership of the country. Brendan was the name of Brendan Bracken, who was one of Churchill's close advisers, and Beverley was Beverley Baxter, who had been the editor of one of Beaverbrook's papers earlier, but who had now become one of the apologists for the Conservative Party. The two of them, then, Brendan and Beverley, were apologists for the Conservative Party, and therefore the book was written as a kind of satire on the Conservative Party and of how incompetent either of them would be to deal with the post-war problems. By that time, of course, the prospects of what we could do after the war were beginning to dominate or become more and more influential in our discussions, although we, on *Tribune* and *The Standard*, never let them dominate altogether, because we wanted to win the war successfully too, and that was the first objective. So *Brendan and Beverley* was trying to combine those two things. It finishes up with a speech that Churchill might have presented to us at the coming General Election. It is a kind of parody of a Churchill speech, but it's not a fake. My reply is the speech of the Labour, of how Labour could answer. Most of what I said, I think, was adopted by the

Labour leadership later, but not all of it, because I said several things in that document that carried the argument a good deal further, in particular about India.

We were deeply concerned about the failure of the British government at the time to understand, particularly as we were supposed to be fighting a war for freedom, that the Indians had as much right to freedom as anybody else. And so, the idea of locking up some of the Indian leaders at the same time was, we thought, outrageous. So *Brendan and Beverley* was partly a protest about that kind of policy, but also a way of declaring that the new Labour government would certainly, as one of its first tasks, carry through the liberation of India, independence for India, a plan which had been in the Labour Party's programme before, but which Churchill had previously done his best to thwart. That book, I think, was prophetic in that sense too.

*The "myth of the Blitz" debate features an old school of 1940s and 1950s historians, who stress the social unity and consensus encouraged by the war effort and common determination to fight to win, and a younger generation who, like Ziegler, have pointed to continuing class divisions and even the existence of a blackout-assisted crime wave during the Blitz. You were telling me earlier that you profoundly disapproved of the historical revisionists who make light of the dangers to Britain in 1939. I wondered what your opinions are therefore of the historical revisionists who talk about the "*myth of the Blitz*" in terms of stressing the way in which a mythical social unity and consensus seemed to disguise profound social divisions and a real need for a Welfare State?*

What happened in the Blitz itself was a most astonishing development, especially in the light of the failures of the previous government to prepare properly for such a war. But there was no doubt at all about the solidarity of the British people as a whole. What the poor people of the East End of London had to stand up for—and I was reporting what they were up to all through the war—was, of course, much worse than the rest: they could not protect themselves as the rich could. But nonetheless there was a real, much greater understanding of solidarity between different sections of the community and, indeed, the rising strength of the Labour Party symbolised that growing power of the popular feeling during the war. I'm not saying it was idealist, it was a real thing as well. But, speaking as a Socialist, the way Britain behaved during that period, between 1940 and 1945, was the nearest thing I've ever seen to Socialism; in my opinion, it was a real combined effort to try and achieve a good result, and to do that for high community purposes. And we did it. Now, at the same time, we were also trying to make decent preparations for what happened afterwards, and it was during that period that the ideas of the so-called Beveridge Report and the National Health Service were born, and especially the idea that, when we came to a new society, it should be one

where there was full employment, not one that would go back to the mass unemployment which we had known in the previous inter-war years. All that spirit, I think, was coming forward too. I don't think it was a fake, I think it was real. Of course it wasn't translated into the full legislative implementation that everybody would have liked afterwards. But what was implemented was pretty considerable and the Labour government of 1945 did have great social achievements to its credit, in part because of what had been arranged in the war.

Now some people say that it was all fixed up by the Ministers behind the backs of people during the war. That is a very strange tale. It was much more due to the pressure from the Labour Party, to its efforts to sell, for example, the National Health Service,[4] an institution which was founded and carried forward on much more far-reaching socialist principles than had been thought of during the war. Indeed, there were tremendous arguments about it inside the Labour Party itself, if only because Aneurin Bevan,[5] who was the most radical and revolutionary of the Labour leaders, had charge of that task, but he carried it through so well that it still prevails, even though some would like to try and weaken it now. But, originally, I do think the social impulse that was unleashed in the war was the real thing. It did not carry through everything we wanted, and no doubt there were defects in it, but it was a very big driving force.

Concerning the revisionists, they seem to be directing a lot of their hostility and criticism towards Churchill himself, trying to suggest that Churchill could have behaved differently. All that is a very deep kind of recrudescence or recreation of the old Chamberlainite appeasement idea that there could have been a settlement in Europe without the resistance. That's all wrong in my opinion, and I think that the more people look at it, the more they see how Churchill did play a very important part in enabling the government to be carried through successfully, but also in enabling many of the best liberal instincts, to use the word in its best general sense. Churchill had in him streaks of liberalism, as well as his toryism. He was to some extent a tory, but when it came down to it, he had a deeper sense of what had to be done for the sake of the British people. He didn't know much about how British people lived, because he had hardly ever seen it. He lived in places that were so different. He used to talk about the British people living in their "cottage homes", and thought that every working person lived in a cottage home. Well, it was not the case, and many of those "cottage homes" had been destroyed, by the way, in the war. Churchill was unrealistic in that sense; he was romantic almost, and I'm using the word partly as criticism, partly not. He was romantic in the way he looked on these matters. But still, so desperate was our situation in 1940, that a touch of romantic idealism was necessary too. And, to do him credit, he dragged the rest of his wretched party into doing what it should have been doing long before—that is, a real, proper, coherent, democratic resistance to the attack on democracy that was happening in Europe.

We should have learnt the lesson before, we should have learnt it *again*, by the way. In that respect, the United Nations Charter was one of the best things that came out of the war. It wasn't perfect, but one of the main objectives of the Charter was precisely to stop aggression, and to have a definition of aggression which would really work. I remember vividly going as a journalist to the 1945 government conference in San Francisco, which set up the United Nations Charter. We were arguing then, and other countries were arguing, how you could make an effective charter against aggression. To some extent, that happened, although of course the divisions between us and the Soviet Union made it very difficult to work out. But still a framework was set up.

In a recent Times *interview, Lady Glendevon, daughter of the writer Somerset Maugham, said "we partied throughout the 1930's [...] Then the war started, and nothing was ever the same again."*[6] *The extent to which the Second World War, or indeed any war, can constitute a complete watershed, emphasising change rather than underlying continuity, however, is the subject of great historical controversy. On a personal level, a common sentiment in wartime reminiscences is the impression that adulthood, or "real life", began for many people with the outbreak of war in 1939. Yet your own career as a politician really began more with successful candidature for the Devonport parliamentary seat at the end of the war in 1945. Do you regard the war years as a catalyst in your own life, or in any sense a watershed for British Society?*

I certainly think it was. It was a very important event. Even though the crimes and follies that are being committed by our leaders in recent times are pretty considerable, they are not as great as what was perpetrated in the 1930's. That's why some of us felt so strongly about how we got into the war, how necessary it was to fight the war, how dangerous it was for people to think that we didn't have to do it, and that we could have avoided it. And when I read historians trying to write as if the war itself could have been avoided—usually in an attempt to excuse the way in which the British governments and French governments, I'm sorry to say, behaved in the 1930's—my view is that there is no excuse for what they did. There were some people then who realised the dangers of the nature of fascism and said the only way to do it was to resist. Not only the Spaniards, although they were very good and gave a lead to us, but also the Austrians. The Austrian socialists resisted the imposition of fascism in their country; they did not succeed, but resisted it, and showed us indeed that, if you're going to stop it, you've got to fight, and if you don't, then you're going to be plunged into a dictatorship. We should have learnt this, by the way, from the First World War, so horrific was the killing and the destruction in that conflict. And some people did.

H.G. Wells, for instance, who wrote about it right in the midst of the 1914 war, was warning us of how we could avoid another war, and of the necessity to

establish an international authority of sufficient strength in order to do it. We've had people in our country, and in France too, advocating this as a lesson from the First World War. And if we had learnt it properly there would never have been a Second World War. It looks as if we've got to preach those same doctrines again, and get converts to it again, because we're drifting again into a situation where people say "Oh, you don't have to worry about what's happening in the Balkans or Africa or other places, because that's a long way away." It's not a long way away. Also, coming back to the question which you put to me right in the middle about the nuclear weapons, I would say that one of the reasons why some of us felt so strongly about them was that the only solution regarding nuclear weapons is their being held by an international authority—their being held by an international authority or their being destroyed, or the two together (maybe one is interchangeable with the other). Anyhow, it seems that the great powers have abandoned even that objective. That's insanity. Absolute insanity! And the same rule applies to the other kinds of aggression, to the other wars that are taking place: we must have a much greater international authority than so far our rulers have been prepared to contemplate. And when I see British governments, Foreign Secretaries, showing no interest in this subject at all, and indeed sabotaging the real kind of agreement that should be got on these matters, I think it's most deplorable. They should go and read some proper history!

1. Beaverbrook, 1st baron, title of William Maxwell Aitken (1879-1964), the Canadian-born newspaper owner associated with *The Daily Express* and *The Evening Standard*. A Conservative politician, he became Minister of Information (1918) and Minister of Aircraft Production (1940-41).

2. Morrison, Herbert Stanley (1888-1965), later baron, a British Labour statesman, Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security during 1942-1945.

3. Bevin, Ernest (1881-1951), British Labour statesman and trade unionist behind the creation in 1922 of T.G.W.U. (Transport & General Workers' Union), and postwar Foreign Secretary (1945-1951).

4. Created in 1948.

5. Aneurin Bevan (1897-1960), known as Nye Bevan, a Welsh-born British Labour statesman, noted orator, and the 1945-1951 Minister of Health.

6. *Times* (19 Aug. 1996): 15.