1. Contextual background 1919 - 1932

The background for the study that follows focusses on the social milieu of the interwar years, and the social atmosphere of the period is given some prominence. This was a mood influenced by fresh memories of the immediate past, by some strongly-voiced views about the current state of affairs and by fear of the future.

One of the most pertinent, recently-published accounts of the social and public life of interwar Britain, Overy's *The Morbid Age*, subtitled 'Britain and the crisis of civilization, 1919-1939', with its first chapter called 'Decline and Fall', is an evocative and detailed picture which forcefully demonstrates that this was a period when there was a genuine and, as it transpired, justified fear for the future of civilization.

This predominant mood is also described as 'pathological' and 'neurotic', with strong images of disease, defectiveness and perversions. These terms applied to a general public mood, to a physically-defective population, to the state of capitalism in the West and to a moral bankruptcy. This introspective analysis of the state of the nation was partly stimulated by an increase in interest in psychology, and 'neurosis was accepted as a reality of modern life'. Of all the fears expressed, that of war was the greatest anxiety, especially in the light of technological development in the direction of modern mass warfare. As early as 1934 there was reference to a Second World War, and, as attempts to use science and psychoanalysis to understand, explain and thus avoid war failed, the gloomy inevitability grew. Overy details the frantic activity of anti-war groups, which will be a major focus of this study.[1]

The attempts to avoid future armed conflict were hindered by the deep divisions within British society, making the country ill-equipped to reach a conclusion on interpreting national and international shifts and balances [see Preface above] and find a consensus on finding a future direction.

These divisions encompassed:
- political conflicts between national parties: new parties of the right; the state of Europe; suffrage
- international relations: treaties post-Versailles; Britain and France interwar
- socio-economic conditions; industrial conflict; class; social conditions
- the press

1.2. Political conflicts in the United Kingdom

In George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, written from the near perspective of 1935, Paul Johnson's introduction describes 'the mid-thirties, when the scars of the Great War were still unhealed and the shadow of a new one already visible'.[2] To state the case in simple electoral terms, the Liberal party won a landslide victory in 1906 (49% and 400 seats); by the 1922 election (at the end of the Lloyd George coalition) they received 17.5% of the vote and won 54 seats. The Liberals, though morally and culturally sympathetic to labour and social welfare, could not attack employers over such key issues as a minimum wage for miners. The Great Unrest of 1910-1913 left them caught and destroyed between capital and labour (when groups of workers in Wales and elsewhere fought both employers and their old-fashioned unions' authority to go on strike[3]). They were also in a quandary over women's suffrage and Ireland. The Tories in opposition were happy to take advantage of the Liberals' perceived weakness, especially in Ireland, where they supported a rebellion of army officers (the Curragh Mutiny, March 1914), who refused to implement Home Rule in Ulster. They also used the House of Lords to further their own goals, culminating in political warfare. Dangerfield claims that the pre-war conflicts could have destroyed parliamentary democracy in 1912 and 'England approached revolution and civil war. World War I saved democracy'.[4] There was an assumption, at this point, that Britain was finished as a great power.[5] This assessment is repeated in

---

[1] Richard Overy, 'Morbid Age' p. 3-4, 168, 114, 53, 144, 168, 175, 195, 10, 223
[2] p. 10.
[3] p. 223.
[4] p. 10.
[5] p. 323.

Blake's *The Decline of Power 1915-1964*,[6] who states that the British Empire reached a territorial peak in the immediate post-war period and started to decline immediately.[7]

This significant change in Liberal fortunes presaged the 20-year period of inter-war political instability.

1916-1922	coalition government led by Lloyd George
1922-1924	Conservative government led by Bonar Law 1922-23 led by Baldwin 1923-24
Jan-Nov 1924	Labour minority government led by MacDonald
Nov 1924 - 1929	Conservative government led by Baldwin
1929-1931	Labour minority government led by MacDonald
1931-1935	National government led by MacDonald[8], in which there were National Labour, Independent Labour, Liberal National, Liberal and Independent Liberal
1935-1940	National government led by Baldwin 1935-1937 led by Chamberlain 1937-1940

1.3. Female suffrage

A significant factor in the political changes in the post-WWI era was the agreement on giving women the vote, finally passing into law in 1918. Prior to 1914 attempts had been made by Asquith's Liberal government in the fractious House of Commons of 1912. Women's suffrage was generally opposed by the Tories and the debates often focussed on the age and financial status of women. The 1918 Representation of the People Act, while introducing universal male suffrage over the age of 21, awarded the vote to women over 30 who owned £5 of property (or who had husbands who did). 'Equality with men was never seriously considered as it would have enfranchised 14,000,000 women and would have outnumbered the number of men able to register'.[9] In the event 8.4 million women were able to vote for the first time. After failing to do so every year from 1919, in 1928 an Act was passed to introduce equality in voting age. Many Tory MPs were concerned about the 'flapper vote' and advocated reducing the age only to 25, but the age of 21 was finally agreed on.

1.4. International relations

The rapid fall from power of the Liberal party in the UK was rather sedate in comparison with much of the rest of Europe at the outset of Hobsbawm's 'Age of Catastrophe (1914-1945)'. 'All across the Western world, mainstream politicians had to face the possibility of revolution'. What they feared in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were 'workers' republics [which] sprang up in Bavaria and Hungary. Germany headed off a socialist revolution only through far-reaching reforms at the outset of the Weimar Republic … 1919 saw the seizure of factories in Italy, strike action bordering on insurgency in both France and Scotland, general strikes in Seattle and Shanghai'.[10] 'Survivors from the nineteenth century were perhaps most shocked by the collapse of the values and institutions of the liberal civilization whose progress their century had taken for granted'.[11] 'In 1918-20 legislative assemblies were dissolved or became ineffective in two European states, in the 1920s in six, the 1930s in nine, while German occupation destroyed constitutional power in another five during the Second World War. In short, the only European countries with adequately democratic political institutions that functioned without a break during the entire inter-war period were Britain, Finland (only just), the Irish Free State, Sweden and Switzerland'.[12] 'The forces overthrowing liberal-democratic regimes were … against social revolution … authoritarian and hostile to liberal political institutions … tended to favour the military and foster the police [whose] support was essential for the

---

[6] 1985
[7] See Gary Younge's reference to 'Britain's downwardly mobile 20th century' (Guardian website 3/2/2018)
[8] described by Blake as a government of individuals not a coalition of parties.
[9] House of Commons Research Paper 13/14 2013 p. 45.
[10] Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism,* 2015, p. 63-4.
[11] Eric Hobsbawm *Age of Extremes*, 1994, p. 109.
[12] p. 111.

right to come to power. And all tended to be nationalist, because of resentment against foreign states, lost wars or insufficient empires'.[13]

The most significant foundation of this interwar period that fostered the resentment, reminded the losers of the lost war and stripped them of their colonial possessions was clearly the Treaty of Versailles and its various clauses, finally signed in the Hall of Mirrors in June 1919. Its chief architect, UK prime minister David Lloyd George (the 'Welsh Wizard') saw himself as the prime mover in the victory in 1918 over the German nation and largely responsible for bringing the victorious powers together to bring lasting peace to the continent.

Any consensus in 1919, which would have consequences for the next two decades (and for far longer, it could be argued), was hard-won and required all of his wizardry and subterfuge. His main adversary among the victors was the French delegation, led by Georges Clemenceau. They naturally wanted to ensure that Germany would be contained geographically and militarily by binding international agreement guaranteed by the major powers, chiefly Britain and USA. They needed assurances that Germany would never again be in a position to threaten its neighbour, with conditions which included the removal and sharing out its colonial territories, chiefly in Africa, and those of the other defeated combatants, such as the Ottomans.

Lloyd George's own position as prime minister of a coalition government in 1916-1922 found him caught between the promises he had made in the election of 1918 'to make Germany pay',[14] his need to keep the French sufficiently content to sign the treaty and his belief that 'you may strip Germany of her colonies, reduce her armaments to a mere police force and her navy to that of a fifth-rate power; all the same, in the end, if she feels that she has been unjustly treated in the peace of 1919, she will find means of exacting retribution from her conquerors'.

Finance was a major concern for the main participants, though each had a different viewpoint. The British had incurred crippling debts to the US in waging the war, which President Wilson was unwilling to waive. If these were not recovered from Germany then they would 'be in a more favourable position for commercial competition than Great Britain'. The arguments over German financial liability (for example, France and Belgium wanted payment for the full costs of the damage they had incurred) consumed several months of the negotiations. Lloyd George eventually persuaded the French of future British guarantees (which included a proposal to build a tunnel under the Channel to facilitate British military support). The Americans were not themselves concerned with reparations from Germany, as they had profited from the war through loans to the allies, and would benefit from the UK's much weakened position in world trade. Lloyd George, to placate the French and divert them from their insistence on occupying the Rhineland, offered an Anglo-French treaty and persuaded Wilson to sign a parallel Franco-American treaty. The former stipulated that 'Great Britain agrees to come immediately to her assistance in the event of any unprovoked movement of aggression against her being made by Germany'. Very soon the limitations of British commitment appeared: the length of time the guarantee would last, whether what was meant by 'Britain' included the Empire, would Britain be the sole arbiter of what was 'unprovoked'. It also transpired that the Anglo-French guarantee depended on the ratification by the US senate of the Franco-American treaty. The final draft included the additional word 'only': 'The Anglo-French alliance would come into force *only* when the latter is ratified'. The US senate rejected the alliance and 'Britain would not be bound to do anything'. [15]

This diplomatic sleight of hand soured UK-French relations for the future: the French were persuaded to accept the *status quo* in the Rhineland and Britain had an agreement that committed them to very little. The critical relationship between Britain and France between the wars was therefore not built on mutual trust from the beginning and focussed on differing attitudes towards Germany's future relative power. 'How strong could Germany be permitted to become without menacing the vital interests of the two countries?'[16] French security was seen to depend on limiting Germany to the strengths set out at Versailles. Britain, on the other hand, saw an advantage to itself in Germany regaining its pre-war forces, 'satisfying Germans to a reasonable extent, … might prevent a great explosion which would

---

[13] p. 113.
[14] Antony Lentin *Lloyd George and the Lost Peace: from Versailles to Hitler, 1919-1940*. 2001. p. 12.
[15] Lentin p. 10, 14, 48, 54, 55, 58, 59
[16] Arnold Wolfers *Britain and France between Two Wars: conflicting strategies of peace from Versailles to World War II*. 1940. p. 381.

carry Germany beyond permissible limits'. Furthermore, while France was concerned to protect Poland and Czechoslovakia from any German eastwards expansion (a pro-Slav solution to 'the age-old conflict between Teuton and Slav in Eastern Europe'), Britain's attitude was that 'the East was an ideal place for making concessions to Germany'. [17] These differences set the scene for 20 years of an almost balletic series of alternative alliances and treaties (each involving a different configuration of Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, the Soviet Union, the USA and Japan), which seemed to recognize that Versailles had not brought in a peace that would last.

1.5. International treaties 1919-1932

If the Treaty of Versailles did not provide lasting diplomatic post-war calm, nor did its establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 provide a neutral, safe forum for the resolution of conflict. Instead, a series of bilateral and multilateral pacts, treaties, plans and protocols were entered into to tackle specific worries among the major European powers, the USA and Japan. There was little foundation for strong alliances. 'Since the Allied victory in 1918, the US had retreated into isolationism, Britain had turned its attention to safeguarding its empire, the Soviet Union was immersed in revolution, and Germany was bent on revising the Treaty of Versailles. France had been left to uphold the postwar order virtually alone'.[18] Some pacts attempted to promote security through disarmament: for example, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, by which the USA, Britain, France, Italy and Japan agreed to limit the size and strength of their navies, the Geneva Protocol of 1925, prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, when 45 countries, including Germany, agreed never to use war as an instrument of national policy[19], and the 2nd Geneva Naval Conference in 1932. These multinational agreements demonstrated a lack of commitment to the League of Nations and to the notion of collective security that would become critical in Britain in the 1930s. The limitations of these agreements was the lack of any mechanism for enforcement and the number of conditions and exceptions that individual countries introduced. Some were only formally ratified decades later, if at all.

A second group of treaties concerned borders, the most significant and complex was the series of seven Locarno treaties signed in 1925. These covered, firstly, the 'Western' territories of Belgium, France and Germany, guaranteed by Italy and Britain. The 'Eastern' agreements covered the borders of Germany with Poland and Czechoslovakia. Disputes or modifications were to be resolved by arbitration (i.e. with no guarantees). On the signing of the system Germany was admitted to the League of Nations, and it had a positive effect on international relations up to 1930. It was a major target of Hitler's dissatisfaction with the post-WWI settlement and he quickly repudiated it when he invaded the Rhineland in 1936.[20] Both Poland and Czechoslovakia felt unprotected from future German expansion, with no strong commitment from the West. Indeed, they were expected to hand over peacefully territories claimed by Germany.

A third group of plans (mostly put forward by the USA) focussed on economic and financial arrangements for reconstruction and dealing with the payment of German reparations: Genoa Conference 1922, Rapallo Treaty 1922, Dawes Plan 1924, Young Plan 1929 and the Hoover Moratorium, 1931. Clearly most of these arrangements were overtaken by events after Hitler came to power in 1933.

Social conditions

This domestic and international political situation formed the background for the social unease and sense of gloom that Overy describes. There was a dissatisfaction with social conditions[21] and an awareness of radical solutions to economic problems in other parts of Europe. There was some

---

[17] Wolfers p. 381-2, 383

[18] Isabel Hull 'Anything can be rescinded'. Review of 'The Internationalists and their plans to outlaw war' by Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro. In LRB 40/8 26th April 2018. p. 25.

[19] 'Kellogg realised he could satisfy [US] opinion … without abandoning isolationism if the agreement were general in its language, devoid of enforcement mechanisms and universal, rather than bilateral'. Hull p. 25.

[20] The Eastern agreement was also weakened by the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance signed in 1935.

[21] Overy, p. 288.

admiration for the USSR, and 'many saw the potential of development and planning'[22] along Soviet lines. J.B.Priestley's comment on the provision of decent living conditions for factory workers at Bourneville was 'What has been promised in Russia … has been actually performed here'.[23] On the other hand, there were admirers of Hitler in the early part of the 1930s, though the vast majority of the population were anti-Fascist, and early opinion polls showed that a much larger proportion of respondents in Britain were more pro-Soviet than pro-German.[24] The British Fascists, while making a big enough noise to concern the government, peaked in support early in the decade and anti-Fascist demonstrators easily outnumbered Blackshirts by the middle years.

Debates over political solutions to economic malaise focussed attention on class, with a seemingly growing intolerance and hardening of attitudes, and Ross McKibbin portrays class warfare on a level of explicitness that later generations would find shocking. The middle class, caught between the power of capital and the unions, developed an anti-labour mythology concerning the comforts enjoyed by the unemployed on the dole.[25] Dean Inge provided some of the most forceful instances of this prejudice, reported by George Orwell, who commented that 'the Rev. W.R.Inge … accuses miners of gluttony'.[26] 'I remember articles in the Sunday papers about beggars who have two thousand pounds sewn into their trousers'.[27] H.G.Wells was the butt of Dean Inge's venom (as a socialist and social liberal) and what Wells called his (Inge's) 'downward class hatred'.[28] Inge accused Wells of being 'permanently embittered with the genteel classes, at the sight of real ladies, deer parks, the stately homes of England and the clergy. … He [Inge] is saturated with animus against common people and against any legislation or any social forces that seem likely to diminish to any degree their inferiority to himself'.[29]

Middle class hostility to organised labour was clearly tinged with fear of Soviet-inspired revolution. 'There is no disguising the fact that the country is in a state of chronic civil war, and that the forces of law and order are on the defensive against anti-social organizations which have no aim except to wreck the State and destroy our existing civilization'.[30] Christopher Isherwood remembered 'how deeply entrenched the class system was. ... The Poshocracy had won, as it always did, in a thoroughly gentlemanly manner'.[31] Other commentators regarded self-interest as the strongest reaction: 'the public's hostility to being inconvenienced outweighed much of the sympathy they might have felt for the miners' plight'.[32]

Although the General Strike in 1926 only lasted nine days, from 3rd to 12th May, it had an impact at the time and for decades later in Labour and trades union history (or perhaps mythology) way beyond its brevity. Partly this was because of its place as the climax after 20 years of industrial disputes (with a hiatus from 1914 to 1918), including the Great Unrest of 1910-1913. The focus had been on the three great employee groups: miners, dockworkers and railwaymen, who had become strongly unionised in recognition of their national economic strength. The growing power of coalmining landowners, ship owners, made wealthy through trade with the colonies, and railway companies made their workforces vulnerable to recessions and exposure to international competition though they would generally not benefit when the competition was in the UK's favour. The major points of conflict during this period, especially between private mine owners and miners, were over an agreed minimum wage (in order to even out incomes during fluctuations in the price of coal) and, the corollary, the refusal to accept wage reductions when prices went down.[33]

---

[22] p. 283.

[23] J.B.Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 97.

[24] see Gallup poll results below.

[25] Ross McKibbin, p. 58.

[26] George Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 35.

[27] George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p. 114.

[28] *The Common Sense of War and Peace*, p. 37

[29] p. 38.

[30] Dean Inge, *England*, 1927, p. 261.

[31] Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows*, 1938, p. 111.

[32] Susan Pedersen 'Triumph of the Poshocracy', *London Review of Books,* 35/15 (2013), p. 20.

[33] There was a fear that cheap coal imports from Germany, as part of their reparations, would undermine the UK coal industry. [Margaret Morris, *The General Strike*, 1973, p. 91.]

When one industrial group was hard hit, solidarity could increasingly become effective in supporting all. This group could naturally be interpreted or portrayed by the government, employers and other classes (for example, in the Tory press) as politically (i.e. Bolshevik) motivated. In reality, the 1926 strike was engaged in by very few with a revolutionary motive,[34] though £1 million was donated by Soviet miners.[35] The short-lived action highlighted some of the prevailing social policies of the time. The financial relief paid to the families of strikers was in the form of a loan (under the 1834 poor law). Some miners were still paying this back until the debt was abolished by the Labour government in 1948.[36] 632 miners were imprisoned, a sizable proportion of Communist Party membership. In the end, after the strike was called off, there was victimization, and some workers were blacklisted or accepted back on worse terms and lower wages. Memories of the strike were long and divisions could still be felt at the time of the 1984-5 miners strike.

Although there were serious discussions about forming a People's Front government in 1936 and what McKibbin calls 'folk-Marxism in factories',[37] not all commentators take this gloomy view of interwar society. Susan Pedersen refers to the political culture 'prioritis[ing] social harmony, even if that meant differences were swept under the carpet'.[38] She quotes Beatrice Webb's diary: '"What a *sane* people the British are" ... the 'British workman' could never be turned into a 'Russian Red', or the 'British businessman and country gentleman into an Italian Fascist'. British culture was immunised against the Continental viruses of open class antagonism and political extremism',[39] though as we shall see it was quite severely tested.

1.6. The press

The divisions outlined above were reflected in and made more contentious by a polarised press. There is no attempt here to resolve the eternal debate over the direction of cause and effect. However, the fact that a sizeable proportion of the British national daily and Sunday press was owned by a small number of owners (mostly with legislative rights in the House of Lords), with strong personal political preferences, and some (such as Max Aitkin, Lord Beaverbrook) with direct involvement in government, suggests that they were not merely followers of public opinion in this period but had an interest in directing it. The list of newspaper owners in the 1910-30 period with titles of various kinds is impressive: Northcliffe, Rothermere, Harmsworth, Beaverbrook, Southwood, Astor, Camrose, Kemsley, Iliffe, Riddell and Pearson. The Harmsworth clan was the most extensive. Alfred Harmsworth (1837-1889), a barrister, had 14 children, five of the seven sons acquired titles of some degree. The three most prominent were the Lords Rothermere, Harmsworth and Northcliffe, whose main possessions were the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail*. Northcliffe also owned *The Times* until he sold it to Lord Astor, and he passed on the *Daily Mail* to brother Rothermere on his death in 1922. The 'Report on the British Press'[40] reported in 1938 that 'The two largest combines, the Harmsworth and Kemsley groups, own between them 10 morning, 19 evening, 8 Sunday and 12 weekly newspapers in Great Britain'.[41]

The political allegiances of the major national dailies analysed in the report were *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Express* - Conservative; *Mail* – right-wing Conservative; *Daily Herald*, *News Chronicle* – Labour, Left or radical; *Daily Mirror* – anti-Fascist; *Daily Sketch* – Independent. The report describes the last two as 'giving little space to politics'. It also comments that 'The entry of a new competitor in the national daily and Sunday Press is a very rare event. Except for the *Daily Worker* (1930), no new national daily has appeared since 1919'.[42][43]

---

[34] Morris p. 92.

[35] ibid p. 91.

[36] ibid p. 90.

[37] Ross McKibbin, p. 139.

[38] Susan Pedersen, p. 19.

[39] ibid.

[40] published by the thinktank 'Political and Economic Planning'

[41] p. 96.

[42] p. 112.

[43] The report also states that 'There are at present no British newspapers under foreign ownership, and only a few periodicals, such as Mr Hearst's *Good Housekeeping* and the Condé-Nast *Vogue*'. p. 113.

The most controversial example of the political partisanship of the press at this time (overshadowed by their support for British Fascism in the 1930s, see a later chapter) was the *Daily Mail's* publicity at the time of the 1924 election for the Zinoviev Letter, 'a provocative forgery purportedly written by the head of the Communist International to British activists – in a bid to discredit the Labour Party'.[44] On the other hand, Beaverbrook together with Rothermere attacked Baldwin on the basis of their championing of Empire Free Trade. 'They used their papers to launch and support a United Empire Party which put up opponents against Conservative party candidates'.[45]

Northcliffe told the *Daily Mail* staff in 1919 'that too much space was being devoted to the post-war peacekeeping conferences: what the public wanted this morning was more of the horses. They are not talking about St Germain, but about Epsom'. Readers 'found foreign politics to be one of the least-liked categories of news'. Bingham charts the methods of the *Daily Mail* and other organisations in the early 20th century to promote 'the belligerent patriotism and casual racism that have been recurring features of much of the popular press' which 'are a direct consequence of this reluctance to offer detailed reporting from abroad or to examine the complexities of foreign affairs'. 'As a result many newspapers underplayed the deepening international crisis'.

1.7. Conclusion

The substance of the following study moves towards the catastrophe that erupted in 1939, via British attempts to avoid war, the conflicts stirred by the British version of fascism and finally Britain's attitude to events in Spain. As this study hopes to demonstrate, these strands of British public life eventually had to confront what Overy calls 'the last chance to save civilization or there would be a second world war'[46]: the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. He links Spain with the 'complex ideas of war, peace and civilization' that are his major themes, in particular 'whether the fear of war might provoke it'.[47] Rather than look solely at British involvement in the war by either journalists or volunteers on both sides, this study will focus on what effect events in Spain had on British public and political opinion.

Since the focus of memories post-1945 has been to a great extent and particularly more recently on the fate of European Jews, it is instructive to look at the work by Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl (1998)*. This examines the history of a small predominantly Jewish town in Poland, Brańsk, which culminates in the interwar period leading to its destruction. She focuses on Polish-Jewish relations and portrays Polish anti-semitism in a quite subtle way. She concludes her history by saying 'In recent decades, we have seen repeatedly how quickly and unexpectedly dormant ethnic tensions can be inflamed into hate and violence. Moral ideas about prejudice seem to evaporate in the heat of ideological passions'. However, 'the more hopeful lesson of Polish-Jewish history may be that when conflicts of interest are not exacerbated or extreme, when fanatical notions are not wilfully fanned, the instinct of tolerance, surely as basic as that of prejudice, can find breathing space'.[48]

---

[44] Adrian Bingham, 2005.
[45] Bingham
[46] p. 316.
[47] p. 318.
[48] p. 254, 256