General introduction

This study will focus on British popular and political attitudes towards some of the key movements in Europe that led to the Second World War, as reflected in such contemporary sources as journalism (from a range of political standpoints), diplomatic correspondence, political documents, public opinion and personal accounts. In particular, it will examine the part played by the Spanish Civil War in shifting or confirming British opinion towards political extremism and towards the fear that political conflict would degenerate into a renewed violent confrontation between national armed forces. It will attempt to assess how public opinion towards these somewhat alien forces influenced the state of Britain in the late 1930s.

The context for these events is seen as the political instability of the post-WWI years, leading to the rise of Fascism, the growing external influence of Communism and the eventual eruption of total war across the continent. With the benefit of hindsight and knowing the catastrophic consequences by 1939, the attempts at defending democracy in many parts of the region might seem to have been doomed to failure in the face of these overwhelming and competing anti-democratic forces. Additionally, the Catholic Church played an influential, though ambiguous, role as a third force in some parts of the continent. The study will examine how events in the rest of Europe were seen from the British perspective and how they affected the policies of political parties of the left and right, official inter-government relations (for example, through the League of Nations) and popular attitudes. Domestically, there is a further trinity of shifting forces: Fascist alignment with Nazism, pacifist appeasement and calls for re-armament. The way in which these movements competed for political and popular influence could be seen as determining how Britain stood in 1939. In Europe the most dramatic and alarming indication of the failure of peace efforts was the Spanish Civil War, where the forces of Communism (and other leftist groupings such as anarchists) confronted Fascism and the Catholic Church. This conflict will be used as a focus for illuminating British attitudes and policies.

Almost uniquely among major European nations, Britain entered the second half of the 1930s as a moderate democratic state, though to what extent it was truly politically stable is open to question, considering such confrontations as the pitched battles between political adversaries seen in London in the middle of the decade. Historians have debated how close Britain came to embracing (or being embraced by) Fascism, and there is extensive documentation of top-level government concern over the threat of domestic unrest.[1] At the contrasting level of individual responses to these dangers, much is known about how high-profile British intellectuals and working-class activists involved themselves in Spanish events and helped to publicise the threat posed by international Fascism to world peace.

The organisation of the arguments that follow will be based on key events and political and public reactions to them covering 1932-1938. These cover, firstly, the peace movements 1932-1935 (including the League of Nations, disarmament and the Peace Ballot), secondly, the activities of the British Union of Fascists in the middle of the decade, and thirdly, events surrounding the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), by which time hope of a peaceful resolution to European diplomatic conflicts were abandoned and peace appeared to have definitively failed. In each section primary sources will be examined for evidence of contemporary views in Britain alongside modern historians' analysis of their significance.

Richard Overy wrote in 2009: 'The impact of the Spanish Civil War on British opinion has seldom had the attention it deserves,[2] but its role as a catalyst in shaping British attitudes towards contemporary crisis was direct and substantial'. The present study aims to explore this relationship. 'The Spanish crisis even more than anti-Fascism, with which it was closely connected, was appropriated by important areas of British society as prologue to a terrible drama in which they too might be forced to play a leading part'.[3] Among these 'important areas of society' are the political parties, government departments, journalists, press owners and the public in general, whose views are found in the sources that this study will examine.[4] Its principal aim is to identify significant interconnections and to

[1] e.g. The Public Order Act, December 1936, brought in to ban para-military uniforms.
[2] But see, for example, Tom Buchanan, *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: war, loss and memory* (2007).
[3] Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* p. 319.
[4] A small number of literary sources will also be quoted as evidence of a mood rather than as authoritative commentary.

explore features of both settings that can illuminate the context for the European war that in some quarters was viewed as inevitable by 1936 (and in the opinion of some people earlier than that).[5] A major question will be posed: in the light of the attempts to secure international peace, to what extent and how did the tumultuous events in a not so far-off country impinge on domestic affairs at political and popular levels of society?

Two contemporary commentators, committed politically to the opposing sides in Spain, provide contrasting pictures of British attitudes. George Orwell, in *Homage to Catalonia*, published in 1938, wrote 'during the first year of the war the entire British public is thought to have subscribed to various 'aid Spain' funds about a quarter of a million pounds – probably less than half of what they spend in a single week on going to the pictures'.[6] Peter Kemp, who published his memoir of fighting for the Nationalist cause in 1957, wrote of the 'initiative and vitality of Republican propaganda in Britain ... the Spanish Civil War aroused in ordinary Englishmen an intensity of interest and [pro-Republican] partisan feeling unusual in a people notoriously indifferent to the affairs of other countries'.[7] Neither writer can be used as a dispassionate authority on British public opinion, but in their own way each highlights a moral response, either sadly lacking or misguided. Their diametrically opposed views will be seen to typify the whole debate.

Primary sources

The aim of the analysis of primary data is to provide a picture of how British public and political opinion interacted with international events in the 1930s, which appeared deeply fractured though they ultimately united to defend the country successfully against Fascism.[8] For this purpose, a variety of contemporary sources need to be examined to build up a deeper picture than can be achieved by any single type of evidence, such as print journalism: official documents, records of political debate, news reports from a range of print sources and expressions of public opinion. Wherever possible, sources will be identified that can offer a multiple perspective: for example, news reports that reflect public opinion as well as the proprietor's or editor's viewpoint. It is recognized that each has its strengths and limitations as historical evidence, which will be considered in the following analysis.

A first source will be identified from the very sizable archives of official documents from a variety of governmental organizations, such as the Foreign Office. Secondly, sources of political opinion include *Hansard*, which provides a very large online archive, easily searchable for parliamentary debates on key issues of the day, such as major events in Spain and political party general election manifestoes in 1929, 1931 and 1935. Thirdly, news reports will be taken from the mainstream British national newspapers of the period, which vary in the ease and method of access:[9] for example, *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian*, the *Daily Mirror*, and the *Daily Express*. Publications with a more restricted circulation include the *Daily Worker* (Communist), *Blackshirt, Action* and *The Fascist Week* (British Union of Fascists) and the *Catholic Herald*.[10] One of the most specialist and relevant titles is the *Fighting Call*, published very briefly by British left-wing supporters of the Spanish Republican cause.

A final source, possibly the most difficult to acquire systematically from primary data and analyse reliably, is the expression of public opinion. This is also hard to distinguish from press reporting or political speeches, as these may claim authority derived from what the population at large (or their supposed audience) think or say on a particular subject. A strong case may be made for 'Letters to the editor' being authentic public opinion, which can be found in most news publications. Among the range of journalistic genres the editorial or leader column may be the most ambiguous, claiming to present, as it often does, the voice of the people, particularly in the popular press. For example, while

[5] 'War is coming soon … The electric drills in our streets presage the rattle of machine guns. ... Only a little while before the aeroplanes come. Zoom, bang! A few tons of TNT to send our civilization to hell where it belongs'. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, (1936), p. 246.
[6] George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, (1938), p. 212.
[7] Peter Kemp, *Mine Were of Trouble*, (1957), pp. 201-2.
[8] Charles Mowat, *Britain between the wars 1918-1940*, (1955), p. 578.
[9] Some are available free online (e.g. *The Times*); some for a fee (e.g. the *Daily Express*); some can be read in specialist libraries. At the time of writing those held at the British Newspaper Library at Colindale (e.g. the *Daily Mail*) were in the process of being digitized and were unavailable.
[10] The Church of England's principal organ, the *Church Times*, although first appearing in 1863 and still issued today, was not published between 1889 and 1939.

editorials in the most polarized newspapers (*Daily Worker* or *Blackshirt*) may be indistinguishable from their news reports, the *Daily Mirror* can make a case by appealing to a wide range of opinion: 'disarmament commends itself … to the whole mass of unthinking and easy-going people whose children may be born only to be massacred'.[11]

However, the attempt to gauge public opinion should not be dismissed as futile in understanding British attitudes towards events in Europe. In 1937 Harold Nicolson provided a useful analysis of how public attitudes towards foreign policy were shaped and should be understood in the mid-1930s. Having identified the British establishment's 'legend' of 'the sound political instincts of the British people'[12] (derived from native 'tolerance', 'trustfulness', 'patience', 'good temper', 'caution' and 'sense of humor'), he suggested that, in the face of 'the whole principle of democracy … being challenged', some were claiming that 'the whole theory of democratic instinct is a Whig fantasy'.[13]

He set this pessimistic view against the opposite tendency of self-satisfactory complacency in the context of the specific foreign policy issues of interest here: firstly, in response to the Peace Ballot of 1934-35. While recognizing the numerical strength of the response, he highlighted the ambiguity of the results and what they indicated about public attitudes towards war. Did the Ballot confirm support for the League of Nations covenant and its commitment to the defence of member states or was it 'a demonstration that the British people were overwhelmingly pacifist'? Quoting electoral campaign literature of 1935, he pointed out the 'self contradictory nonsense' of lobbying both for the League covenant's collective security (i.e. commitments to military action) and at the same time avoidance of 'any entanglements in Europe'. The ambiguity arose, in his view, from an inability to distinguish between 'what people wanted to *happen*; it didn't express what people were prepared to *do*'.[14]

Secondly, in relation to the Spanish Civil War, his analysis identifies no firm basis for consensus. On the Left Marxists saw the issue as Imperialism/Fascism against their Republican comrades in Spain. The far Right equally hoped for a final reckoning between the two extremes. Between them the fundamentalist positions destroyed the 'old unity' based on patriotism. Even though the 'most ardent Tory' dreaded the expansionism of Germany and Italy, any middle ground proposed by the British Government was easily dismissed by the 'LEFT' and Centre as appeasement of Fascism. In conclusion, Nicolson, even as late as 1937, was 'confident that in a few years we shall recapture our former equanimity' and that public opinion would be driven 'back into our natural habit of compromise, gradualness, and the middle path between extremes'.[15]

The final source of public opinion, opinion polls, first came into use in Britain during this period. The data from monthly Gallup Polls, published in the *News Chronicle*, are available from January 1937, though with a small sample of only 1,000 adults and based initially on very few questions.[16]

Interpretation

Clearly, these diverse sources have to be treated with some care in building up a reliable picture of the period. Firstly, in terms of partiality and bias, a contemporary analysis of the press and radio reporting of the Spanish Civil War published in 1937, pointed out that 'it ranges all the way from a scrupulous effort to be impartial and quieting to deliberate provocations to participation in the war'.[17] Many claims of impartiality need questioning. British Catholic expressions of support for Franco and the Spanish Nationalists may have been principally motivated by a wish to protect co-religionists and by condemnation of atheist Communist attacks on Church property and lives. However, there may not

[11] *Daily Mirror*, 01/02/1932, UK Press Online <http://www.ukpressonline.co.uk/ukpressonline> [accessed 26 March 2013].
[12] Harold Nicolson, 'British Public Opinion and Foreign Policy', *The Public Opinion Quarterly,* 1.1 (1937), 53-63 (p. 54).
[13] Nicolson, p. 53.
[14] Nicolson, pp. 59, ibid, ibid.
[15] Nicolson, p. 63.
[16] *Mass Observation*, which commenced its surveys in 1937, provides very little useful data for this study.
[17] O.W.Riegel, 'Press, Radio, and the Spanish Civil War', *The Public Opinion Quarterly,* 1.1 (1937), 131-36 (p. 132).

always be a clear distinction between the defence of faith and admiration for Fascism as a political ideology.

Secondly, queries surround the balance that might be sought among unequal volumes of usable data. Should the public and political material studied be of similar quantities, or political documents weighted against press reports? Sampling will inevitably be necessary, but to do this by any quantitative measure is hardly likely to prove effective, as individual documents are of very different lengths and significance. A letter to a newspaper may be very short (a couple of paragraphs), while the transcript of a House of Commons debate on the same topic will cover several pages. However, the former might provide more of an insight into public attitudes than the debate does of a political standpoint.

The four categories of primary sources overlap and can be regarded as a continuum. At one end of the scale, official government documents can be seen as the most authoritative, the result of lengthy discussion and debate (for example, legislation). To the public they may be factual records to be taken at face value. Secondly, records of political debates (in either house of parliament, for example) may be produced by members of the government, so there is overlap in the *dramatis personae*. The third category, newspaper reports or editorials, have a clear and in some cases direct connection with party politics, and the proprietor may have a strong identification with a party or even have a role in government (e.g. Lord Beaverbrook of the *Daily Express*). Finally, the link between public opinion and the press hardly needs elaboration: with letters to the editor published in most papers and reference to what the people say or think used as the basis for editorial positions. In the most politically-committed press (e.g. the *Fighting Call* on the left or the *Blackshirt* on the right) there is hardly any attempt to demarcate between news reporting, editorials and diaries or letters to the editor; all would be printed to re-enforce the standpoint of the publisher on any subject. For this reason, strict or balanced sampling of these different sources (which would not be achievable in any case) is not regarded as essential in providing an overall picture or political and public opinion.

The solution to most of these issues is to triangulate material, supporting an argument with evidence from a range of differing and independent sources that can corroborate or contradict each other, an ‘attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint’.[18] This multiple perspective helps to identify bias and propaganda. However, coverage will continue to be partial, since not all opinions will be represented in every case.

The discussion above of primary sources raises the issue of the extent to which historical judgements can be based on such ephemera as daily newspapers aimed at a popular, miscellaneous readership. The approach taken here follows the views expressed by Adrian Bingham.[19] He focusses on the increased accessibility in recent years of newspapers through the digitization of archives and at the same time recognizes the ‘widespread scepticism’ over their value and ‘doubtful accuracy’. Although in the past ‘scholars working on the central themes of modern British history have rarely used newspapers as a significant source’, following ‘”the cultural turn” and the increasing scholarly interest in language, representation and meaning, there are few who deny the value of newspaper content for understanding politics, culture and society’. However, he points out that ‘digital archives only provide us with newspaper content: they do not offer information about the production of newspapers or about their reception by actual readers’. To understand their significance, it is necessary to consider ‘the political, social and cultural contexts that the newspapers were operating in’.[20] For this reason, it is desirable, where possible, to read the broader content of newspapers over and above the digitally searched and excerpted extracts. In this respect, we are more interested in newsprint as cultural and political artefacts rather than as corpora for textual analysis, and consider the connections between the various genres on a single topic.

Referring to an earlier historical setting, John Robertson commends Franco Venturi’s volumes of research on the European Enlightenment (published between 1969 and 1990) for their broad scope and the sources used. One type ‘consists of the journals and newspapers through which Italians were

[18] Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, *Research Methods in Education*, (2000), p. 254.
[19] Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians', *Twentieth Century British History,* 21.2 (2010), 225-31.
[20] Bingham, pp. 225, 226, 225, 230.

informed of events elsewhere in Europe'.[21] These sources 'provide … the "prism" through which the crises and struggles of others are observed and comprehended'. However, he warns that this prism is 'perhaps also a dangerous one, for the light that emerges from the prism is decidedly variable'.[22] Evidence is partial and usually second-hand. Although it is not possible to compare directly Venturi's sources with those used in the present study, there is a similar range and we can perhaps see the *Mass Observation* file reports, for example, as modern-day versions of the personal journals of the eighteenth century, and diplomatic dispatches can be seen as valuable sources in both periods.

Where Bingham refers to a 'cultural turn', Raphael Samuel speaks of the 'deconstructive turn in contemporary thought', which 'put all of history's taken-for-granted procedures into question' and 'invites us to see history … as an invention, or fiction, of historians themselves'.[23] One result of this conception of history is to see social class (along with other 'fabricated' categories) as a 'chimera'. However, it does not seem reasonable to deny the significance of class (as interpreted at that time) in interwar Europe. Not only was there explicit, and publicly conducted, class warfare in British society, the Spanish Civil War itself has been seen as an instance of class struggle on an international scale, again waged in very explicit terms on both sides. What is useful in this fundamental scrutiny of the nature of history from a cultural angle is the notion of 'history from below', which Samuel applauds for 'rescuing the poor from the "enormous condescension of posterity" … [and for offering] a much wider field to explore'. Samuel presents the contrasting methods of 'fact-grubbers' (empirical historians), on the one hand, and 'mind-readers' (discourse analysts and semioticians), on the other. His conclusion is valuable for the present study.[24]

For good or ill, history is idiographic, excited by, even if not limited to, a 'specific place, a definite time, a particular situation'. It must concern itself with 'befores' and 'afters' as well as 'now' and 'then'. It would be extremely unfortunate if, in deference to current intellectual fashion, historians were to become shamefaced about the pursuit of knowledge. Getting up stuff is what we are good at.[25]

Among the 'stuff' to be examined in this study are the views from below of participants in political strife and the places, times and situations that provided the context.

[21] John Robertson, 'Franco Venturi's Enlightenment', *Past and Present,* 137 (1992), 183-206 (p. 193).
[22] Robertson, p. 194.
[23] Raphael Samuel, 'Reading the Signs: II. Fact-Grubbers and Mind-Readers', *History Workshop Journal,* 33 (1992), 220-51 (p. 220).
[24] Samuel, pp. 221, 227.
[25] Samuel, p. 246.