



David Low (1891-1963)

ANGUS CALDER, THE PEOPLE'S WAR, 1969

Auden, in a famous phrase, called the 1930s “the low dishonest decade”. They were also the golden years of David Low, the cartoonist. Chamberlain, with his winged collar, with his rolled umbrella, with the face of a nervous eagle, was only one of nature’s gifts to Low. After all the reassessments, all the “facts” then taken for granted which have turned out to be dubious or false, Low can still evoke for us the political creatures of that time as a worried, radical contemporary saw them. Mussolini’s puffed-out chest; Hitler’s mean mouth and satanic forelock; porcine farmer Baldwin; the dapper, boyish Eden; Franco, afflicted with five o’clock shadow; and fouler still the odious little Laval and the swollen, bemedalled Goering. In the background, Churchill, but not yet the British bulldog, merely another grotesque aberration of history.

From the horrors of the First War, Europe drove pell-mell towards the worse horrors of the Second. The Russian Revolution, a threat to the rich, an example to the poor, hung over the internal and external politics of the nations which assembled to “make peace” at Versailles in 1919; even then, it seemed wise to appease Germany, for the sake of another ally against Leninism. The League of Nations, then fathered, groped towards failure from the start. Soon, Mussolini made his disenchanted Italy a prototype for barbarism. In 1931, Japan shredded the pretences of the League, attacking China with impunity. Fifteen years of economic and political chaos in Germany culminated with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.

[...]

It fell to Anderson’s Lord President’s Committee to find ways of squaring the vicious circle. Anderson and Bevin agreed on draconian new measures. Call-up should be extended downwards to eighteen-year-olds and upwards to men aged fifty-one. All “block reservations” for the reserved occupations were scrapped. Instead, individual deferments would be introduced for key workers and each case would be judged on its own merits. All people, of both sexes, from girls of eighteen to old men and women of sixty, would be obliged to undertake some form of Civil

Defence and other essential tasks. Most momentously of all, women were to be conscripted, for the first time in any civilized nation.¹

[...]

But if Churchill found his sanctimoniousness irritating, he was in no danger, early in 1942, of underestimating either [Sir Stafford] Cripps's talent or his ambition. "The trouble is, his chest is a cage in which two squirrels are at war, his conscience and his career," Churchill once remarked to Stalin.² He now strove, eventually with success, to play one squirrel off against the other until conscience triumphed.

Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, St Albans: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1971 [1969], pp. 25-26, 308, 313.

¹ H. M.D. Parker, *Manpower* (HMSO, 1957), 109-15, 167.

² Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill - The Struggle for Survival 1940-1965* (Constable, 1966) 74.