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TEENAGE YEARS IN THE 30's.

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My tenth birthday was my first significant birthday milestone and, once passed, it seemed no time at all before I was wanting to leave school. Jobs for school leavers were the least of the employment problems in those days, ^Wages for school leavers were so low that employers were quick to snap up the best youngsters.

The range of available jobs, as with educational opportunities were very limited, while a large proportion of available jobs were rightly designated as 'dead end'. This simply implied that as you got older and needed more wages you were replaced by a school leaver. You took your place on the adult employment register. The dead end job denied you the chance of serving an apprenticeship which normally lasted five years.

My sister had finally decided to become a hospital nurse and had taken a job in a hospital in the Midlands. She never returned to live in the North East but kept in touch with home by letter and, as my mother was also an avid letter writer, contact was closely maintained. From her letters we knew that she found her ability as a pianist a great asset. Wherever she went, a good pianist was welcome and, although an accident to her hand had given her some ligament trouble, which slightly affected her playing, she remained an interested and practised player. She often told me that she never regretted the family discipline which led her to practice hours every day.

My mother was trying hard to enthuse me by extolling the virtues of farming ^{and} suggesting the good life that could be mine, if I went to work in Cumberland for her only brother, Tom. She eventually accepted that I was an urban character and ^{changed} her ideas.

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She began to suggest that I look for a job in a hotel, ^{If} I succeeded and 'stuck in', ^{it} might offer me the opportunity to meet influential people.

"Who knows, you might get a good job with some of the richer families and in that way see the world." I was unimpressed, although I understood that her own experience in domestic service with the Lonsdale family had been a valuable experience for her. On one thing we all agreed. I would never go to work down the pits. The opportunity which gave me my first real chance to do something that interested me came by chance.

My mother, along with most working class mothers, utilised 'money clubs' to buy needed family clothes and household goods. She secured credit from a selected agent, which ^{be} could spent at a nominated shop and then repaid the money, together with the interest, by weekly payments.

Our regular weekly 'money' callers included the insurance men, with which we had 'death' policies on us all ^{through} the Pru, Refuge and Co-operative Insurance Companies. One penny a week gave a lump sum payment of £12. on death. I still retain two paid up policies as much for family historic and sentimental reasons as for relevance to the 'investment'.

The insurance collector was a sign to the neighbours that we were a wise and prudent family. In addition and ^{As} death was not an unfamiliar caller in those days, ^{you} were not going to be ruined by the tragedy of a sudden death and the related costs.

Club collectors were in the same category as the 'pawn shop' man and had a much lower rating than the insurance men. They were a necessary part of every day life but dealings with them required greater discretion.

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In order to prevent the club collector being added to the list of weekly callers my mother made an arrangement for me to pay the weekly repayment at the agents' home.

On one of these weekly visits, the door was opened by the agents' son, who asked me if I would like a job-trial in the office where he was employed as a draughtsman. An office job had been beyond my wildest dreams.

The job turned out to be post boy in the front office of Wigham, Richardson's, a Wallsend Ship Repairers Yard, and, as I was not fourteen years of age, I had been required to get permission from the school to take up the job.

Dressed in my Sunday clothes, I turned up at 8.30.a.m. on the morning of the appointed day. As the day progressed I was constantly reminded that I had to answer questions from my 'superiors' with the words 'Sir'. I persistently failed to do so and so it was no surprise, even though it was a near disaster, when I was told I was not suitable and found myself out of work. Worse still, I was also out of school.

I dreaded the reception which would await me when my mother returned from work, and I knew she would be 'wild', when she learned that the reason for my being considered unsuitable was my failure to say 'Sir'. It was a strange mixture of political radicalism that made her politically progressive and yet believe that young people should pay deference to older people by calling them 'Sir'. Or so it seemed to me.

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But more worrying than that, ^{were} ~~was~~ the kind of comments to which I would be subjected by my school mates if I had to go back to school after holding a job down for only one day.

So immediately following my 'sacking' I followed up with vigour every advertised vacancy. I still ^{re}member having a feeling of near-market-place slavery, when I waited among hundreds of others, on the banks outside of Swan Hunters Shipyard, while the foreman looked into the crowd and selected those he wanted. I also felt the tremendous strength that existed when thousands of men converged on the Yard gates at one time. They all hurried to clock in before the half past seven buzzer wailed out the news 'when I stop blowing the gates are shut! In that mood the men were an irresistable force and any traffic gave way before them.

Big occasions, especially those such as the Wembley Cup Final are ^{still} a reminder to me of that feeling of 'man' strength and they still have the same traffic stopping potential. Drivers all know that if they moved forward and hit someone they would risk being torn limb from limb. I have never seen anyone hit by a vehicle in that kind of situation. Therein lies the potential of picketing.

I secured my second job opportunity quickly and it determined my whole working life. The job I secured was in answer to an advertisement 'Painters Apprentice Wanted.' I hurried nervously to the interview and met Mr. Moore the owner of E. Moore, Decorators, Wallsend. He was a quiet man, dressed in a grey tweed suit and wore a trilby hat.

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The interview was brief. He asked the minimum of questions but looked me up and down. I guessed that I got the job on size and apparent strength rather than on my job interest or relevant qualifications, which were nil.

Elated, I hurried home and broke the good news to my father. "Why go for a job like that, you're sure to get lead poisoning". My somewhat crestfallen reply was simply "At least it is a job" I did not know that in those days lead poisoning was a health hazard or that later I was to suffer a mild lead poisoning attack myself. I also developed a T.B. spot on one lung.

1930 came and with its arrival I would soon be fifteen years old amidst talk of worsening depression. The local evidence of depression was clearly seen all around. People were standing about especially on the street corners, living evidence of underfeeding and poverty. Employment was hard to keep and even harder to find. I could not understand how Britain, with such a mighty Empire, of which we had been told at school to be proud, could treat its people so badly. No one could tell me either.

I found painters to be a strange group of men. They had no deep trade union tradition and only in the shipyards was trade union membership necessary for a job. Those who were 'strong' unionists were normally Labour supporters and active in the party. Most of them were hard drinkers, the theory being, that the drink was a good antidote to lead poisoning!!

I was quickly introduced to Robert Tressell's book The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist. I read it with almost as much interest as if I was given a leading acting part in the stage production.

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Major industrial bosses were demanding longer hours and reductions in pay and, in the worsening conditions, union men were compelled to operate against the background threat of unemployment. It was a great factor for making non-militant workers comply with bosses demands for the curtailment of trade union interference and for agreeing worsening working conditions.

Certainly every painting contract I worked on was agreed against some production target, hang 8 rolls of paper a day, paint so many sets of railings, ceilings, doors, windows, outsides, in eight hours or else!

Those first months in work, found me working five and a half days a week of forty four hours and, as I was paid five shillings a week, after two-pence oftakes, it gave me just over one penny an hour. My sole activity in the early days was to load and unload materials and scaffold on and off jobs. If the job was located towards Newcastle the road was fairly level, ^{but} if it was towards the coast, there were the twin evils of a steep bank on which to hold the barrow back and then the effort to push it up the other side. That work was really cruel and almost killing.

The workshop joke version of the barrow job was simple, "Open your trousers front, You work like a horse, you might as well look like one" or "Don't go to the toilet, I want some manure for my leeks". I did not think it funny.

My spell as 'senior' barrow boy was completed when a new boy moved in and took my place. It gave me a 'promotion' to the job as painter of miles of railings around hundreds of council houses built under the 1923 Housing Act. They were painted with 1 coat red lead, 1 coat undercoat and one Coat of Privet Green Gloss.

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The railings were used as scrap metal in 1940⁵⁰ the work of 'preserving' them was wasted in any case. The tenants of the council houses were mostly from families who had been moved from the unbelievably bad slum houses, long since past any fitness as dwellings for human habitation. The people were the victims of a campaign that carried on for years after they were moved, a campaign common to all people rehoused from 'inner city' slum clearance areas.

Depending on the location and whether the estates were served by bus, tram, or trolley bus, the conductors would shout, "African Village". It was supposed to be funny, and for some it was, yet it annoyed me because it was unjust: The people had never been responsible for the conditions in and surrounding the slums they had left behind them.

Stories abounded... they kept coal in the bath and rabbits in the oven...they weren't fit to have 'decent' places to live in!! I thought back to the return of the soldiers from the war and the promises made "Homes fit for Heroes to live in". At least this was a start in providing better homes for poorer people and with a garden 'thrown' in. Heavily curtained windows were evidence of their appreciation of the better houses.

In reality, apart from a very small feckless minority, the wives of workers were quickly taught to cook and manage a house. As young girls at home, they were encouraged into domestic service, and taught to assume the role as 'second mothers' in larger families.

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The food they cooked was simple and apparently wholesome. Bread, soup, suet puddings, meat, heart, liver, kidney, tripe and offcuts providing the meat content of the meal. The more affluent families had a joint for Sunday, the less affluent were lucky to get a meat based dinner on Christmas Day.

Alas, there were far too many who were undernourished and starving, living constantly below the poverty line. As many were marginally just above it.

Dozens of children went to school barefoot but, as I remember, it was mainly the boys. I remember only one barefooted girl in my childhood. Holes in your trousers were the cause of constant argument. Mothers would demand to know what you had been doing to wear in the hole and you were concerned to have it patched to hide your 'feelings'. Today young people cut holes in jeans for reasons I still fail to appreciate.

'Bait time', the name given to the lunch time break on the building sites, was taken at the best available place on the site, there being no proper provision. Tea was brewed by the youngest apprentice of each trade, on a series of brazier fires, lit by offcuts of wood, over which cans were heated. By constant daily use the cans were certainly burned and blackened, but reputedly matured in the process. There was little hygiene ^{then not} but plenty nostalgic memories of well brewed and good tasting tea.

If the building site you happened to work on was one of many beginning to emerge in the mid thirties to meet the rising demands for cheap houses for sale, lunch time talk always centred on how small was the amount paid to us all in wages compared with the selling price of the houses.

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Modest as the selling prices seemed to be.

The arguments seemed to me to be completely valid, and today, fifty years later, when I pass some of the houses I then worked on ^{and} which have changed owners many times since, I recall those simple discussions on inflationary 'economics'.

Allowing for all the work ^{done since} on the properties to maintain, repair and modernise them, what a small part of the collective selling value, and more so of the mortgage and interest values created around these properties, accrued to the craftsmen whose work has kept them as good homes.

The appreciation in the value of the properties accrued by the many owners illustrates and contrasts with the lack of any appreciation to the wage earner of rising property values.

I never regretted the 'accident' that caused me to serve a five years apprenticeship as a house painter. My boss's son Stan was a slave driver, who died of a lung complaint in his thirties. ^{He} had one ambition which was 'to make money for his old man'. He was also an enthusiast, for just as we worked hard all day, many evenings we would go out together to roller skate, ice skate, and certainly we would play football, cricket, or whatever sport was available and in season. Winter nights also took us into the billiard halls where we became proficient in that working class game.

With few exceptions we backed horses, although corner-end betting was illegal and the corner-end bookies were constant fugitives from the 'Bobby' on the beat.

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The Bobby was also on the look out for the drunk. These two police functions laid the basis of some hostility between the 'People' and the 'Policeman'. As I was six foot tall, I looked 18 years old and went into the pub with the men and felt 'big' when I did so.

One of the side benefits of being a house painters' apprentice, apart from the additional money I brought into the home, was my developing ability to decorate our Portugal Place home, long since sold by the Coal Company to a private landlord.

My first home decorating job was to paint the front room, a combined sitting and bedroom, in order to make it 'nice' for a Durham cousin of mine who, with her husband, was going to spend her honeymoon with us.

It required extensive preparation, The ceiling had thick coatings of old fashioned whitewash ^{oh it} then used in most homes and it was to remove, and then re-painted with a new material, Walpumur Water Paint. The woodwork was to be grained Mahogany and the walls papered....Stan Moore came to do the graining and, in the process, to teach me some of his own skills as a grainer. He also showed me how to hang wallpaper, having already made me into a competent wallpaper paste-lad.

Graining was but one of the many aspects of the decorating trade and it was remarkable how 'ill educated' painters' apprentices were able to recognise any timber they were shown on furniture, doors, floors, or any wooden object. In this way it became possible for us to learn how to imitate the grain of woods in paint. If you became highly proficient, as a small minority did, you imitated woods to look better than the real as you only 'imitated' the best wood grains, whereas much real wood was of a low grain quality.

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Marbling was another aspect of the painting craft and we also learned the names and grains of different marbles from across the world. *As I* add to that knowledge and experience, which widened with the passing years, *and learned to* know the different periods depicted by plaster cornices, moulds and centre pieces *and* the different door and window mouldings and designs. I became fascinated by buildings, their architects and builders, and I responded enthusiastically when Stan Moore invited me to go to night classes in September.

I enrolled at Rutherford Technical College for the classes. Monday was a 'Fine Art' Class, and I was not sure what that would entail.

Thursday and Friday evenings were designated as 'Practical', and I correctly guessed that those classes related to doing the things you would need to know if you were to become a good tradesman.

I enjoyed almost every minute of my night school experiences, and am sure, that by the time I had completed my apprenticeship, I had acquired a standard of applied practical knowledge which, even 50 years later, causes me to marvel when I recall that our 'practical' teachers worked as painters through the day, were untrained as teachers, and that they were also dealing with young lads, like myself, of poor academic standard. There were thousands of young craftsman in all kinds of trades, who learned all kinds of skills in a similar manner,

No matter what our personal or group defects were, there was never any doubt that within our collective creative ability, there existed the *skills* to produce ships, trains, engines, buildings, and all things connected with them and we knew the difference between the good and the shoddy.

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The years between 1930 and nineteen thirty-six were *my* worst peacetime years in the North East and in that time I had to change jobs many times in order to keep in work. I had experienced life on the Means Test on one occasion and, with my father, learned every kind of survival trick. Most young lads did the kind of things which today would head them into Borstal, *such as* picking up potatoes, turnips and other vegetables from the farmers' fields. Out of work, we played cards for matches, gambled on motor car numbers for match sticks, and got odd jobs picking potatoes or helping out during hay making. *A*s schoolboys we *delivered* papers, bread, groceries, and meat on bicycles with a metal carrier on the front. For a regular delivery job, two nights and Saturday all day, we got paid about two shillings and sixpence a week.

We could not vandalise the property we lived in, or the near derelict ill maintained areas around us, *became* the landlords of the day did that by sheer neglect.

In one period, *when Z was* out of work and under 18 years old, the Government introduced a measure which compelled *me* to attend a 'Dole School' on three afternoons a week in order to qualify for dole money. For a shorter period *I* also had to prove to the 'dole' that every morning *Z* had been out looking for work, and this meant *me* asking each firm *Z* had visited to sign *my* dole card.

Employers became increasingly unwilling to agree to the senseless practice and it was discontinued. Behind the move had been the thought that 'work shy men' should not be allowed to lie on in bed if they were out of work!

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Procedures at the dole school were equally senseless. I was in my second year City and Guilds Painting and Decorating Course when I went to the Dole School. The school was located in Jarrow and it seemed to make sense that I should be able to do my night school work during the day. No such thing. I could choose between becoming a trainee hairdresser or a joiner.....Fortunately, after one disastrous hairdressing attempt I settled for woodwork and admittedly did learn some new skills.

Football was played on one of the three afternoon sessions and this was a pleasurable afternoon combined with the journey by bus and river ferry crossing. Jarrow was made famous by its Hunger March and at that time by its ^{ed} ~~red~~ ^{ed} ~~lead~~ M.P. Ellen Wilkinson.

One of our Dole School jokes was to speak in a 'posh voice' and pretend that Heaton another training centre, and Jarrow were in fact Eton and Harrow and that we were being educated in institutions of great privilege, which was far from the reality.

Increasing political awareness, contrasted with decreasing opportunity, made us talk of the 'ruling class' and how we understood their dislike of phrases such as the 'class war'. We did not like the reality of class war - but we certainly understand what we meant by the conflict in life styles between the rich and ourselves.

My family's political background was the seed bed for developing a hatred of political and hereditary privilege. As I watched my mother prematurely aging, I laid the blame where I felt it belonged; on those who had made it necessary for her to keep on 'flogging her guts' out in order to keep the family going, on even a minimum level.

I began to be more impressed by the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and to read Left Book Club books and other agitational pamphlets.

Behind my anger and reading was a confusion of Dicken's Micawber with his advice on budgetting and the advice of Jesus, to do a fair days work for a fair days pay.

I met my future wife at a local ballroom dancing class in the early winter of 1935. Her formal schooling was similar to mine, but she seemed to me to be very well read and had a remarkable knowledge of the English Language. University Challenge normally leaves me struggling for an answer to every single question, Ada never fails to find a high proportion of correct answers.

Neither of us had much money of our own and we both had the certainty of inheriting nothing of any worldly value from our families. I had Marx and Lenin, she had books, theatre and ballet. She was 16 years old and I was 20, but we both had reasonable jobs with a chance of making progress as the economy picked up. The worst days of post war Britain seemed to be behind us.

My understanding of things political was deepening, and the more it deepened the more I became aware of the complexities associated with the most elementary problems. Yet I still found it too easy to pronounce on the most involved International issues. They seemed to be all largely black and white issues. Socialist v fascist issues.

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For politically conscious young people like me, issues were live and mainly international. Franco and Spain, Mussolini and Italy with his invasion of an equally reactionary Ethiopia. Towering above all other issues was the arch evil Hitler who epitomised all the worst features of capitalism centred on a deep hostility towards the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had begun the internal political purges which threw me into complete confusion and developed in me a hatred of the Stalin regime which I never lost.

The British Empire was being put under increasing strain abroad with India and other colonies pressing for their independence under powerful leaders of which Ghandi and Nehru were internationally known. They had developed political support in Britain through our own movement for Colonial Freedom.

I was a member of the League against Imperialism and worked in support of the Colonial people. I saw the Colonial people as even greater victims of the same 'bosses' who had victimised my parents.

Demands for slum clearance, for better housing, health and welfare assumed a new importance, Wallsend had been one of the first local councils to become Labour controlled and had built a high proportion of Council houses. It was a surprise for me to learn that Newcastle City had been controlled by the Tories under different guises but without interruption since modern local government began.

Ada was non-political and her family was politically divided, they mainly voted Liberal for Sir Robert Aske in Newcastle East, where 'Tea Party Bob' reflected the nature of Liberal policies in Byker in those days.

I had begun to attend classes organised by the Workers Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges all on relevant economic or political subjects and I was learning the skills of debating and of public speaking.

For our recreation, Ada and I enjoyed with each other the theatre and music and we joined the International Friendship League, formed to encourage the interchange of young people between European countries at a time when modern cheap holidays were largely beyond the aspirations of many young people.

Through the International Friendship League we were able to show Swedish, Norwegian, German, French, Danish and a host of other young nationals the beauties of Northumberland and Durham and on weekends or at holiday times, spend time together walking, talking, and then dancing at the nearest village 'hop' on the Saturday evening.

It was through the International Friendship League that I first met and got to know Lord Glenamara (then Ted Short, school teacher) and it was in the International Friendship League that he met his wife.

One of the great sadnesses for me was to see how quickly the International Friendship ^{League} was dispersed at the outbreak of war in 1939.

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My attitude towards the war when it came was the biggest single issue I had been called upon to face during the whole of my life time. My family influence had directed me towards the belief that bombs and violence in themselves were unintelligent and could only produce unintelligent solutions, and I had been converted in 1937 to signing the Dick Shepherd Peace Pledge, 'We renounce war and pledge ourselves never to take part in it'.

Dick Shepherd as part of his peace campaign in that year came to Newcastle to address a City Hall Public meeting and then met a group of us to discuss the setting up a Newcastle Branch of the Peace Pledge Union. Present at that meeting were men who had been punished for conscientious objection during World War one but still had no doubt that the line of opposing war was the right one. Some were Quakers and many opposed war on religious grounds. We took the decision to set up a local branch of the Peace Pledge Union, which later became *the* Newcastle War Resisters and which did great work for those who found themselves for any reason taking an anti war stand.

The North East had done more than its share to help Spanish and Czech refugees and especially the child refugees who were already victims of *F*ascism. 'Guernica' had become another symbol of brutal indiscriminate bombing to which would soon be added the names of Coventry, Hamburg and seemingly limitless other towns and cities in the warring countries. Finally, the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were the victims of our own brutality. *Through* The most brutal air bombings ever perpetrated on mankind.

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War is never able to satiate its demands for more and more terror, when the merchants of death are in the ascendancy.

The very naive quickly adjusted their thinking and accepted that the people who, for so long, had looked upon Hitler as the 'saviour' and who had kept quiet while thousands of German Socialists and democrats had been put to death or ^{were} interned in concentration camps were sudden converts to democracy. That their aims and mine suddenly coincided *was hard for me to believe after 25 years of bitter experience to the contrary.*

I was certain that the main aim of capitalism must remain that of containing and defeating the Soviet Union. *Yet* I had witnessed so many treacherous political acts by the Soviet Union which in had played a part in consolidating Hitler.

The evil 'social fascist' policy which led to communist party members in Spain attacking members of P.O.U.M. and other minority groups. *I saw no long term solution to our social and economic problems emerging from the politically right wing government than in Coalition Power in Britain*

Ordinary people were clearer in their aspirations and were in no mood to keep on retreating before Hitler or reactionaries at home. There was no clear socialist alternative on offer in the years preceeding the outbreak of war. This meant, that when war broke out in 1939 and as I had made up my mind to be anti-war and to campaign against the politicians who I saw as the 'friends of Hitler', I faced *of* best, a long hard, bleak and isolated political future

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I was bitterly anti-fascist, ^{and} It was simply a matter of how best to fight fascism at the same time, working towards the creation of a world that would not repeat the poverty years which had been the lot of previous generations.

I admired, Maxton, Brockway, Lansbury, Buchanon, Bevan, Lee, Carmicheal, Taylor and others and locally there were many characters who were equally committed to work for a socialist Britain, even in war time, and with whom I shared my belief.

To be anti-war in war time was an extremely unpopular line. I often felt ^{as Soviet disidents must do} when they oppose the State and when the public atmosphere ^{is} intolerant and narrowly patriotic. Few people are concerned about democratic rights and expect ^{individuals to} submerge ^{their} ideals beneath the waves of popular patriotism.

We built up a unique war resisters movement in Newcastle and I spoke at open air and indoor meetings and argued with some success that the only way to create a free progressive society, and prevent the spread of Fascism was to insist on the war aims of our leaders to be something more than simply 'you dying to win the war'.

People were sacrificing their lives and sacrificing years out of their lives, ^{At} least there should be no repetition of the political betrayals that followed the first world war. I also believed that one of the best ways to undermine the blind faith of the politically indoctrinated Italians and Germans and to encourage the people of the already occupied countries, was to demonstrate that we, like them, did not want to maintain right wing reactionaries in power under equally reactionary Monarchies, but that we were together with them in ^a desires for radical change.

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The war years of blackouts, food rationing, and general strain, were long years and *along with* the political work in which I was deeply immersed, I had been 'drafted' *to* work as a coach painter. *First* of all in the company of *an* anti-war friend and later in the Co-operative Wholesale Society Coach Works. I had been medically classified as Grade 4, because an attack of Scarlet Fever in 1937 had left me almost completely deaf in my left ear.

As the war dragged on, and with the main political parties agreed on a political truce, my political associates saw a role for us in fighting by-elections whenever they occurred in the kind of seats where people were likely to be attracted to listening to the line that we were pursuing. As each month passed, people became more and more receptive to political discussion about their future and the slogan 'break the coalition' gained more and more support. The Communist Party members in particular were voiciferous in attacking us as 'Hitlers Agents' and could only call out for more and more support for 'our Soviet Brothers.' Their *bed* fellows ranged from outright *political* right wing *reactionaries* to the left. No mention of the Stalin - Hitler pact which had been conveniently swept by them into the political bin.

I took the line that Stalin and his regime had beheaded the leadership of the Soviet Army by the Moscow purges and as a result had decimated their *country's* defences. The dramatic defeats which their armies suffered at the hands of the German Armies in the early period of the war *were* inevitable after the Moscow Purges, and lay at the door of the 'Great Stalin'.

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I also believed that the power of the Soviet People was irresistible and could, in the long run, destroy the German Army which was fighting a war about outdated nationalism which meant Dictatorship, Slavery and Persecution, based on the realities of life in *Germany*.