

Reviews

In place of fear?

John Hills, *Good Times, Bad Times: The welfare myth of them and us*, Policy Press, 2015, 334 pages, paperback ISBN 9781447320036, £10.39

Mary O'Hara, *Austerity Bites: A journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK*, Policy Press, 2014, 320 pages, hardback ISBN 9781447315605, £15.99

One million people in Britain, one of the wealthiest countries in the western world, regularly rely on charity donations to put food on the table. Millions more struggle to heat their homes. Deciding whether to eat or heat defines their daily existence. What is the government's response? It accuses them of wanting something for nothing, 'food for free' and has redefined 'fuel poverty' so that far fewer appear to be left in the cold. Two powerful but very different books are essential to understanding how this has happened, with the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government deliberately dismantling the welfare state over the last five years as part of its planned 'austerity' measures.

Many of the cuts the Coalition has made have been justified on targeted cost grounds: in the case of the welfare state '...the poor got too expensive'. At the same time, it has convinced the public that 'we' (the tax-paying 'strivers') are shelling out in taxes to maintain a feckless, unchanging dependent underclass. Seen from this perspective, redistribution, a central feature of the welfare state, is an unjustifiable handout: cutting back on 'welfare' is both essential and 'fair' to everyone. Award-winning *Guardian* journalist Mary O'Hara's shocking account of the personal impact of these attacks on the poorest, shows the devastating human cost of a range of vicious Coalition austerity measures while John Hills' meticulous, highly accessible analysis of the British welfare state goes much further – demolishing Coalition myths designed to divide and antagonise 'us' from the deliberately stigmatised 'them'. He demonstrates that the Coalition's approach has been costly, regressive and profoundly inept.

The poorest have been hit the hardest by cuts in welfare benefits and local government services but there are wider ramifications for all of us. The future of the welfare state as we know it is now seriously under threat from a government that wants permanent austerity and the minimal state.

Mary O'Hara was grant-aided in 2012 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and the charity Locality, to travel the country

interviewing those most directly affected by cuts in benefits and services. She produced 18 audio-visual reports on this work which are available on the JRF website. Her book *Austerity bites* was written to provide a wider context to those reports and to give voice to people who wanted to be heard but who believe they are being deliberately ignored by the politicians who are wreaking havoc on their lives and their communities. As ‘Annie’ from Birmingham said:

‘I can’t think straight when the government cuts certain things. I don’t know how they come to these decisions. I don’t think they live in the real world. They’re cutting benefits people need to survive.’

Hundreds of hours of interviews have been condensed into chapters which focus on the rise of food poverty and food ‘banks’; the growth of financial insecurity for people in low-paid jobs, often with zero-hours contracts or sham self-employment; the advent of ‘Wongaland’ and escalation of borrowing from illegal loan-sharks; the devastating effects of welfare benefit ‘sanctions’ on people left with no money for weeks at a time; the communities where social housing now stands empty because families have been forced out because of the bedroom tax with no-one suitable on the waiting list to move in; and the appalling treatment of sick and disabled people under the government’s flagship ‘Work Programme’. One example:

Work Capability assessor: ‘Are you suicidal?’

Benefits claimant: ‘Yes’

Assessor: ‘Well then, why haven’t you achieved it?’

There is much more. O’Hara not only reports from across the UK. She also has tapped into a wide range of academic and policy reports to provide a broad picture. The book was prepared in late 2013 so has to be updated by the reader in some instances but that by no means detracts from each chapter. For example, more recent substantial criticisms of the Work Programme now abound in the press and Parliament.

John Hills is a Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. The work on which his book, *Good Times, Bad Times*, is based has been funded by a prestigious research institute and is focused on the design of policy relating to the welfare state. Consequently, Hills retains most of his direct political criticism to the last chapter but, inevitably, he has to start his account of the role of the welfare state by first discussing the way in which Coalition politicians have created the divisive language of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (‘strivers’ and ‘skivers’/ ‘Benefits Street’ versus ‘alarm-

clock Britain’) which they use to justify significant policy changes and substantial reductions to welfare benefit entitlements or ‘welfare’, as they choose to describe our welfare state. This is an Americanism that is an indicator of how Coalition politicians would like the British welfare state to substantially reduce to a stigmatised version of the US system.

Two fictional families are used by Hills throughout the book to show how the welfare state works in more detail. Wealthy Henrietta and Stephen Osborne live in an owner-occupied home in prosperous Alderley Edge in Cheshire. Struggling Jim and Tracey Ackroyd live in their council home in Salford, Greater Manchester. Their extended families, including children and grandchildren, were first created for ITV’s *World in Action* ‘Spongers’ (1989) and took the form of a spoof game-show designed to reveal the real welfare state ‘spongers’. Surprisingly, in 1989, over their whole lives, the ‘university educated, opera-loving middle-class’ Osborne family proved to be the winners. But who would win now after five years of austerity?

Accounts of each families’ fortunes over time are used as an introduction to each chapter: specific generations of each family vividly demonstrating their financial gains and losses, from their earned income and tax liabilities, any welfare benefit entitlements, the use of other welfare state services, like NHS hospitals (which are costed for this exercise), and their savings and wealth accumulation more generally. These are discussed in much more detail in each chapter, making extensive use of survey data from a wide range of sources (including large government surveys) to show whether these fictional circumstances are typical or atypical. This broad way of analysing what the welfare state does for particular families at different ends of the income distribution are designed to capture the idea that the safety net or redistributive role of the welfare state, including welfare benefits and state pensions, NHS health and state education, operate over different time scales and in varying circumstances. These distinct chapters are followed by a more wide-ranging discussion about the ever-changing backdrop of the economy (specifically the effect of inflation, economic growth and recession) and societal change (especially increases in the numbers of older people).

Despite all the political rhetoric claiming that the poor are too expensive, the wealthy Osbornes receive by far the most financial help from the welfare state (and the state generally through favourable tax treatments) across their lifetimes compared to the Ackroyds, whose low income skirts the poverty line for most of their lives. Hills takes the long view in considering these families, and for the Osbornes includes favourable tax treatment of property ownership (the now-abolished

mortgage interest tax relief), pension saving and other investments, as well as the money they save on otherwise expensive private education and hospital treatment. This moves us away from simple snapshots of benefit entitlements which have been deliberately distorted by the Coalition (often including housing benefit which is used to pay the landlord's rent) to make them look more generous than they are and to justify cutbacks or caps.

When considering the complex ways in which the welfare state interacts with different families at different times, Hills demonstrates that the redistributive element of the welfare state partly flows within families (families benefit roughly in line with their tax contributions over their lifetimes) as well as between generations (younger working age households contribute to the welfare benefits and services used by the older generation such as social care, but will themselves benefit in turn likewise). And, of course, redistribution also takes place in a more straightforward sense, too, from richer households to the poorest through progressive taxation.

Why do those on average and middle incomes feel they have lost out? John Hills shows that, despite the welfare state, Britain remains one of the six most unequal countries in the industrialised world (only Chile and Ireland are worse in relation to income inequality). The different arms of the welfare state (health, education, social care, housing, pensions, welfare benefits) all struggle to make an impact in reducing inequalities because there is so much to do compared to other countries. The situation has worsened recently but that is not because the poor have become too expensive. The proportionate value of welfare benefits and public services to the poorest fifth of the population (about 13 million people) has stayed much the same since 1979. In fact, since then, the overall income distribution has been decreasing for four-fifths of the population (which includes the poorest up to those with middle incomes). It will now be no surprise to learn that the share in income of the top fifth of the population has increased (from 35% in 1979 to 42% in 2010-11) and most of that increase has gone to the super-rich 1%. The reality is that middle incomes have not been squeezed by the poorest but by the richest. The richest continue to gain enormously from investment income and favourable tax arrangements, have not contributed through tax on a par with everyone else, and have not been affected by austerity measures. If anyone has become too expensive for the country, Hills argues, it is the very rich.

Both authors also discuss what Mary O'Hara describes as the Coalition's 'relentless vilification' of the poor and vulnerable, which has affected public opinion. She writes a blistering analysis of the impact of this and has a specific chapter on how it has affected sick and disabled

people. She makes the point strongly that the government's barrage of negative description and deliberate distortion has been taken up by most of the mainstream media. She refers to a *Guardian* newspaper analysis in April 2013 of the previous year's government communications, which found increasing use of pejorative and value-laden language when referring to benefits and welfare. The media were equally culpable. During the same time, the term 'benefit cheat' was used 442 times in national newspapers, an increase of almost two-thirds compared to the 12 months up to the change of government in 2010.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that the attitude of many of those working in stable employment or on good retirement income has hardened, while many of the poorest have despaired. Most of the public have no idea how the welfare state works, who it is helping and, most importantly, the extent of fraud in the system. For example, it is now widely believed by the public that far more is paid in Job-Seekers Allowance (JSA) for the unemployed than state retirement pensions. JSA actually makes up 3% of total welfare benefits expenditure while expenditure on state pensions is 15 times more (£4.9 billion compared to £74.2 billion). People surveyed by IPSOS Mori in 2012 had no realistic idea of the extent of fraud either: the average amount that people thought was fraudulently claimed from all benefits and tax credits was £27 in every £100. The Department of Work and Pensions' official figure for fraud is 70p in every £100 (£1.7 billion for the whole benefit system including pensions while £1.6 billion was under-paid as a result of official error). As Hills points out, this puts us behind only Turkey, Italy, Greece and Poland in our belief that our compatriots are on the fiddle.

Why does this matter? It matters because the Coalition has created and used a simple narrative that has been taken on board by the media and many of the British public. It suggests that the welfare state is overblown and too expensive, riddled with 'dependency', and used simply by people who want 'something for nothing'. This prepares the ground for even more swingeing cutbacks, all in the direction of the completely inadequate US system. All of us will lose out, including pensioners, if that happens. John Hills' book provides an accurate and long-overdue detailed analysis of the welfare state, but it may only be read by policy specialists and people in academia. Mary O'Hara's book provides the emotional counterblast to Coalition myths, foregrounding real people whom these cuts are affecting now. It makes for powerful and profoundly upsetting reading, but will politicians and their advisors read it? Many she spoke to believe that politicians are out of touch and are not interested in the damage that is

being done to individuals, families and communities up and down the land. As one person commented:

'When Aneurin Bevan and his people were setting about the task of ensuring that we could all live in a safe community their phrase was "in place of fear". What we have returning now is fear – fear of the unknown, fear of destitution and fear of poverty.'

But she also found that many believed that there was a limit to cutbacks that could be made. People could only bear so much and many were angry even as they struggled on. Her last chapter discusses some of the campaigning that had taken place up to 2013 and which continues: national, regional, city wide, specialist and profoundly local opposition to cuts and sanctions. The last word in the book goes to Sharon from Croxteth:

'There's the prime example of the ants and the polar bear. The ant comes over and says "Excuse me, can you move?" And the polar bear just [ignores him]. So he goes away and comes back with 3,000 of his friends and he says "Excuse me!" and the polar bear gets up and moves. And I think that's what it is with people. People feel they are on their own and they're not going to get listened to. They need to get together to make people listen to them.'

Cathy Davis

Killer Asbestos

Jan Cremers, Rolf Gehring (editors), *The long and winding road to an asbestos free workplace*, International Books, European Institute for Construction Labour Research (CLR Studies 7), 2013, 160 pages, paperback ISBN 9789057271069, £24

The title of this book pays a little homage to pop culture of the 1960s and that, you would expect, is as close as this subject can get to celebrity culture. Then, in a section entitled 'a workers' disease' it finishes with

'The media coverage of asbestos is equally illuminating: the death of Steve McQueen ['Bullitt', 'The Thomas Crown Affair' and other films: reviewer's inclusion, for information only], who was exposed to asbestos in his youth working on dismantling ships, attracts more headlines than the millions of workers killed over nearly 150 years.'

This highlights in a single snapshot the ongoing tragedy and indiscriminate

nature of deaths from exposure to asbestos regardless of who you are. This is only the second book I have read cover-to-cover on this subject. The first was *Asbestos, Killer Dust* (BSSRS Publications), which set out the case against asbestos and how best to fight this hazard. It examined the record of government, industry, unions, scientists and doctors in this regard. Most of its case studies and information were gleaned from UK experience.

The long and winding road to an asbestos free workplace can clearly be stated to agree with the assertions of the earlier title, and develops its own arguments and insights into not only the asbestos industry of the UK, but also from a truly global perspective. There is a huge amount of work underpinning this slight volume and an equally huge story to be told. The attitude of the asbestos industry is no surprise and is forensically laid out here, where their goal is money, money, and more money, and hang the cost. Sadly, they are not the only parties subject to a deeply critical analysis, as trades unions, workers and governments worldwide are exposed as having been indifferent, slow and, in some surprising instances, obstructive to the implementation of at least some safety measures.

It is usually the case for trades unions to campaign to protect jobs, and for workers to be concerned if their role is threatened. But I was shocked at the lack of insight into the bigger picture of worker health, with some almost not wishing to know the harsh reality of working with asbestos. However, when people are elected to political positions and become part of government they are supposedly charged with a duty of care for the population of their country, not just economically, but also with business and worker health. It is therefore deeply disturbing to see governments actively pursuing the reckless reintroduction of asbestos by attempting to exploit new and emerging markets, where there is not the regulation to offer protections to the workers, who will therefore become the next generation of cancer sufferers as a direct consequence of exposure to asbestos. This book underlines and reinforces all the great and hard work done by campaigners against asbestos from the newly awakened trades unions, government departments, and some workers.

The one abiding point is that this campaign has been both local and global at the same time. *The long and winding road to an asbestos free workplace* clearly outlines that the campaign has not been a single march to a bright new future; more an ebb and flow of success and failure as the asbestos industry has put in place organisations and individuals to obfuscate the arguments, obliterate ideas and, when that fails, simply to stall and delay by legal process any action that could stem its business 'success'.

This book explains in a simple, clear, unemotional way how, when governments, trades unions and workers campaign and fight, both locally and globally, they can successfully take on the clearly failing neoliberal capitalist agenda. Should anyone now believe that ANY business in ANY market should be left to regulate itself, then look at this book and the examples it exposes of the conduct of national and international business. Fundamentally, neo-liberalism is about filleting all and any governmental administration, legislation or regulation that limits, controls or stops any business from maximising its profits. Neoliberals neither care about nor are concerned for their workers' welfare. They have no concern for the damage they do to the planet, and have no interest in mitigating their actions, as that would impact on their profits. *The long and winding road to an asbestos free workplace* elegantly lays that bare in the asbestos industry. Where the actions of the asbestos industry are shown here to circumvent, stop and damage any opposition to their objectives, you can see a model of behaviour and a formula that has either been used or garnered from other industries to apply across all industries.

The attacks on workers' health in the asbestos industry result in killer cancers such as mesothelioma. We are yet to see all the damage other workers may suffer from different businesses using the neoliberal model. Governments and some trades unionists may be as laid back in their initial approaches as they were in the asbestos case, as shown here. None the less, once their campaigns begin, there are millions of conscientious, hard-working people who will vigorously oppose their colleagues and their own damage at the hands of these criminal industrialists.

Robert Baer's book *See No Evil*, about his time in the CIA, was turned into the superb film 'Syriana'. Could we find another Grant Heslov and George Clooney to do the same with this book? It has the same up-close and personal stories such as Wilf Penney, head of The Asbestos Information Centre, a propaganda unit for asbestos manufacturers and producers, who after decades of denouncing arguments opposed to the use of asbestos felt he had to declare to Stephen Hughes MEP, on the opposite side of the argument, that he was right, as Penney was dying of mesothelioma. This was a very sad and personal irony, indeed.

The long and winding road to an asbestos free workplace is, first and foremost, a book about the asbestos industry and the global campaigning and opposition to the use of asbestos. It is also, in its own small way, an exposé of the conduct of the neoliberal business model with its one and only concern, profit at any cost.

Dave Putson

Fear and Loathing

James Delingpole, *Watermelons: How Environmentalists are Killing the Planet, Destroying the Economy and Stealing Your Children's Future*, Biteback Publishing, 2012, 320 pages, ISBN 9781849544054, £9.99

James Delingpole writes a regular column for *The Spectator*. His polemic, *Watermelons*, is an interesting if unpleasant book. He hates the green-ecology-environmental movements. He loathes the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth. He scoffs at the idea of earth warming and climate change because of our super-production of carbon. Understandably, he objects to being called a climate change denier because of the overtones of 'Holocaust denier'.

Just follow the evidence, he says, rather than the money and pseudo-science. 'Green', he argues, is a huge industry, corrupted by huge vested interests. Those not on his side, he contemptuously calls 'greenies'. Yet, he provides a lot of evidence, obviously the result of a good deal of research, which I would like to see honestly, properly and scientifically refuted before I reject his point of view. That means proper evidence as against smears, though he is no mean smearer himself.

Delingpole denounces Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* and the campaign against and the prohibition of DDT insecticide. All nonsense, he says.

'Yet Gore and his ilk seem blissfully ignorant of the Environmental Protection Agency's seven-month hearing (and more than nine thousand pages of testimony) prior to the ban being enacted in which EPA Judge Edmund Sweeney concluded:

"DDT is not a carcinogenic harmful to humans... DDT is not a mutagenic or teratogenic hazard to man... The use of DDT under the regulations involved here does not have a deleterious effect on freshwater fish, estuarine organisms, wild birds or other wildlife."

Well, blow me over with a hammer. I had always believed that DDT weakened egg shells so birds couldn't breed successfully, and entered mother's breast milk and wasn't good for baby. He claims the prohibition of DDT is a kind of genocide because it has caused the deaths of millions from malaria and dengue fever, which could have been prevented.

Still, it is always good to have one's cherished beliefs and opinions challenged. I read *The Spokesman* to confirm them, not unsettle them; it broadens and deepens my life view. Yet, I go along with James because so

many of my own sacred cows, through personal experience and research, have been found to have feet, legs and thighs of clay.

Delingpole has a message worth listening to, but he also has his own agenda. He wants to go on living the good life. He dismisses oil spills. A few thousand oil-soaked birds die – so what? He mentions, in passing, the loss of livelihoods for fishermen and seafood restaurateurs, but it's no big deal. Like all middle-class intellectuals, he knows all about poverty, but nothing of it.

Of course, there is climate change. The climate has always been changeable. He points to the medieval time of global warming (there were no smoking factories) and, nearer to our own times, 'The Great Cold', when the Thames froze over and fairs were held on ice. I can also remember smog so thick that I had to grope my way along a road and often found myself feeling my way up a strange garden drive. It was really that bad. It seems that the clean air acts did a good job clearing up this environmental mess, and deaths from respiratory distress among the very old and young declined. Remember, there were several million coal fires burning.

Mr. Delingpole denies that the clean air acts made much difference: the smog wipe-outs were on the decline anyway. This is an argument that interests me because it is one I have often used myself against vaccinations, e.g. polio was long in decline before Salk came along and the vaccine actually exacerbated the problem as polio re-adjusted itself to attack on another front. So, maybe, I should think again.

But then the author spoils his case by starting to get nasty. In the first half of the book he marshals a lot of evidence against global warming. However, like most technical evidence, it tends to be dry, boring and heavy going. So he tries to lighten it up by playing 'the cheeky chappie'. It doesn't work – he can no more bring it off than I am Max Miller. Obviously, he is afraid of being a boring, plodding intellectual who may have something important and interesting to say, so he goes into attack mode in the second half of the book and, I would say, spoils his own argument.

He is strongly anti-left; hence his unpleasant title, *Watermelons* (green on the outside, red on the inside) – apparently, all lefties are 'greenies' and all 'greenies' are 'lefties'. Is that true? Ask Prince Charles, whom he mocks mercilessly for his organic farming.

And this is when the author's smears really get going: the Nazis were 'greenies' too, not just the lefties. Hitler liked his soggy bowl of muesli for breakfast instead of a manly plate of bacon and eggs. Himmler was a

vegetarian (so, are all vegetarians Nazis?) What on earth does this have to do with his argument? It's like saying Stalin smoked a pipe so all pipe-smokers are Stalinists.

Delinpole should get his own house in order: admit that he likes his own, comfy, professional, middle-class lifestyle (as we all do) and is not too bothered about the suffering masses who make it possible. It suits him, see. He should stick to the scientific facts he is keen on and not muddy them with his own prejudices, fears and loathing.

*Nigel Potter
Honduras*

Malaya Emergency

Christopher Hale, *Massacre in Malaya: Exposing Britain's My Lai*, The History Press, 2013, 432 pages, hardback ISBN 978 0 75248701 4, £25.00

This book is an exhaustive study of the British involvement in Malaya up until the inception of Malaysia, and is a useful addition to our knowledge of the reality that was the British Empire. It also questions aspects of the dominant narrative that the British military had some special expertise in counter-insurgency as exemplified by their conduct in the Malayan Emergency context. It goes without saying that this was a brutal war, like other liberation struggles which linked political with economic independence. The reviewer recalls a remark by Ken Coates that his decision to work as a face-worker in the Nottinghamshire coalfield was guided, in part, by his desire 'not to be sent to kill Malayan communists'.

Surprisingly, given the title of the book, the massacre at Batang Kali forms only one chapter, with most of the text devoted to a fascinating and extensive political history of Malaya, concentrating on the period from the Japanese invasion to the end of the Emergency. Britain had important economic interests in Malaya and, after dislodging other European rivals, was initially content to leave the administrative oversight to the East India Company. As long as its trading and extractive activities were undisturbed, then the Sultans (titular heads of the internal Malayan states) who formed 'a compliant "native" elite', together with a British advisory 'resident', could see to the exploitation of this great colonial asset.

These assets were gold, tin, tapioca, gambier, pepper, coffee and, later, perhaps the most lucrative of all, rubber. Chinese migrants fleeing from the

turmoil in southern China worked in the tin and gold mines, and working in the plantations were Tamils and poorer Malays. In general the life of these workers was one of gross exploitation: forced, indentured labour was common. Malayan society was therefore ethnically divided and this was reinforced by the racial division of labour.

By 1895, Malaya had become a federated Crown Colony with a Federal Council: its earlier relationship with the East India Company ended in 1858 with the Indian Mutiny. The corollary of this was the development of oppositional nationalist elements, sadly often on an ethnic basis. The Chinese formed the backbone of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which was not formally established until its first congress in 1930, facilitated by a certain Comintern agent, one Ho Chi Minh. However, the party had the unfortunate handicap of electing as general secretary, Lai Tek, a triple spy. 'Turned' by the French, he informed for both the British special branch and later for the Japanese, and then for the British again. Although idealised by party members, he connived in the murder of many of them. In fact, *Massacre in Malaya* has quite a lot to say about the role of Lai Tek, Mr. Wright to the British.

The limits of British power were graphically exposed by the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, in 1942, and whilst, initially, the conquerors were prepared to indulge the 'native' Malays, this was not the case with the persecuted Chinese. The Chinese formed the majority of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which was MCP instigated (later, many of its cadres were to form the Malayan National Liberation Army or MNLA). The returning British found a situation fraught with race riots against the Chinese by 'native' Malays and strikes, on which, strangely, Hale comments little. The British War Cabinet agreed to 'reform' the pre-war constitutional Federation, fearing that radical elements would capitalise on the disenfranchisement, the poverty, and lack of political power of the Chinese, Tamil and aboriginal minorities. They attempted to nullify the power of the Sultans and 'native' Malays and place *all* citizens on an equal footing. The opposition to such proposals was vociferous and included the old colonial British mine and plantation managers and owners. So strong was the opposition that the new Union had to be abandoned, with a reversion to the old statutes, which conferred alien status on the Chinese and Tamil citizens. Of course, imperialist powers have a partiality for utilising ethnic divisions ('divide and rule'), and this was a factor in Malaya's history, but it was to become a handicap when the need for a pliant, post-colonial independent nation was required.

On their return to Malaya, the British were keen to nip any communist

insurrection in the bud and made preparations to suppress the Malayan Communist Party – the Emergency was no knee-jerk reaction. Could the nationalists have seized power before the British came back, as happened in neighbouring Burma? The new party leader, Chin Peng, was probably not disposed to such a policy, given the disunity of the various shades of nationalism. After three years of Japanese occupation, food was in short supply, unemployment was widespread, wages low, and inter-ethnic tension ran high. The MCP was not fully prepared for insurrection, which was pre-empted by the killing of three British plantation managers. This was the stated reason for the imposition of the ‘Federal Emergency Regulations Ordinance’ banning the MCP, in 1947.

The Emergency was to last, off and on, until 1989, but the major phase ended about four years after an unsuccessful attempt at a settlement in 1956. Initially, following the Maoist dictum, the MNLA established two ‘liberated’ safe areas, but they were unable to sustain them for any length of time. MNLA tactics therefore relapsed into hit and run attacks, emerging from the jungle to kill informers, and attack troops and police from ambush positions when possible. The British were to mount search and destroy forays into the jungle, but they were often unsuccessful and meant they became involved in actions against civilians such as the massacre of 24 plantation workers at Batang Kali. This massacre, on 19 March 1948, took place when a platoon of British soldiers entered the Chinese ‘squatters’ camp and, having systematically divided the women and children from the men, the latter were executed for no identifiable reason. The relatives of the murdered men instigated investigations and legal actions in Malaysia and the United Kingdom.

In 2009, the British Government rejected a call for a public enquiry. Subsequently, the High Court ruled that, although culpability lay with the UK, owing to a conflict in law between the House of Lords case law and the European Court of Human Rights, it could not agree to a public inquiry as the families of the victims desired.

The question as to who ordered the massacre is still unclear, but the two sergeants leading the platoon were interviewed by *The People* newspaper, and, in 1992, the BBC broadcast a documentary on the massacre called *In Cold Blood*. Perhaps a quotation from Sir Gerald Templar, ‘The Tiger of Malaya’, High Commissioner for part of the period of the Emergency, sets the matter in the context of the times:

‘the hard core of armed communists in this country are fanatics and must be, and will be, exterminated.’

Templar was the replacement High Commissioner for his assassinated predecessor, Sir Henry Gurney.

The conflict between the Chinese and the 'native' Malays weakened support for the MNLA: they had to rely on support largely from the so-called Chinese 'squatters'. As a result, the 'squatters' were resettled away from the areas of MNLA activity and placed in 'resettlement camps', which had barbed wire perimeters and armed guards. Isolated from support, the MNLA troops slowly began to starve. This had a drastic effect on morale, and was a factor leading to disputes on tactics and also to criticism of the party leadership and their perks. Criticism of the leadership was not silenced with the 'semi-judicial murder of one of the party's most admired and eloquent theoreticians'. New tactics were formulated in the so-called 'October Directives', when the party was instructed to abandon 'violent tactics which have antagonised peasants and workers'. The disaffection in the MNLA ranks cannot have been helped by the problems of communication and isolation between the party and MNLA fighters. The heavy fatalities must all have affected morale – in 1951, MNLA troops numbered 8,000: this fell to 2,000 by 1957. Of course, the latter were drastically outnumbered by Commonwealth troops and local police.

The Malayan Emergency is often quoted as the textbook example of how to defeat an insurgency and, certainly, the Americans in Vietnam took it as a model. But, as *Massacre in Malaya* makes clear, this is not as straightforward as it appears – there existed a number of special factors that applied to the Malaya Emergency only. Of course, the Americans copied the resettlement idea in the form of the infamous 'strategic hamlets' policy in Vietnam, and the Emergency saw the first use of the toxic 'Agent Orange' defoliant. Unlike Malaya, the Vietnamese had the benefit of a relatively homogenous population and safe zones in Cambodia and the border with North Vietnam, whereas the MNLA was surrounded by hostile powers or physical barriers.

Massacre in Malaya is a veritable mountain of information, but I am afraid the sequencing of events leaves something to be desired, and a tendency to digress does confuse. The author is to be congratulated for the mighty labour of research he must have done, but I would suggest a non-specialist reader must have a sound grasp of the territory under discussion before launching themselves into the text. Finally, it would have been most helpful to be able to refer to a chronology of the major events and to a list of acronyms. A selection of maps to enlighten the reader is available at <http://malayan.blogspot.de>.

John Daniels

The European Theatre

Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, I. B. Tauris, 2014, 320 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784530648, £18.99

When Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Ukraine's prime minister, told a German TV station recently that the Soviet Union invaded Germany, was this just blind ignorance? Or a kind of perverted wishful thinking? If the USSR really was the aggressor in 1941, it would suit Yatsenyuk's narrative of current geopolitics in which Russia is once again the only side that merits blame.

When Grzegorz Schetyna, Poland's deputy foreign minister, said Ukrainians liberated Auschwitz, did he not know that the Red Army was a multinational force in which Ukrainians certainly played a role but the bulk of the troops were Russian? Or was he looking for a new way to provoke the Kremlin?

Faced with these irresponsible distortions, and they are replicated in a hundred other prejudiced comments about Russian behaviour from western politicians as well as their eastern European colleagues, it is a relief to find a book on the Ukrainian conflict that is cool, balanced and well sourced. Richard Sakwa makes repeated criticisms of Russian tactics and strategy, but he avoids lazy Putin-bashing and locates the origins of the Ukrainian conflict in a quarter-century of mistakes since the Cold War ended. In his view, three long-simmering crises have boiled over to produce the violence that is engulfing eastern Ukraine. The first is the tension between two different models of Ukrainian statehood. One is what he calls the 'monist' view, which asserts that the country is an autochthonous cultural and political unity and that the challenge of independence since 1991 has been to strengthen the Ukrainian language, repudiate the tsarist and Soviet imperial legacies, reduce the political weight of Russian-speakers, and move the country away from Russia towards 'Europe'. The alternative 'pluralist' view emphasises the different historical and cultural experiences of Ukraine's various regions and argues that building a modern democratic post-Soviet Ukrainian state is not just a matter of good governance and rule of law at the centre. It also requires an acceptance of bilingualism, mutual tolerance of different traditions, and devolution of power to the regions.

More than any other change of government in Kiev since 1991, the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich last year brought the triumph of the monist view, held most strongly in western Ukraine, whose leaders were determined this time to ensure the winner takes all.

The second crisis arises from the internationalisation of the struggle inside

Ukraine, which turned it into a geopolitical tug of war. Sakwa argues that this stems from the asymmetrical end of the Cold War, which shut Russia out of the European alliance system. While Mikhail Gorbachev and millions of other Russians saw the end of the Cold War as a shared victory which might lead to the building of a 'common European home', most western leaders saw Russia as a defeated nation whose interests could be brushed aside, and which must accept US hegemony in the new single-superpower world order or face isolation. Instead of dismantling NATO, the Cold War alliance was strengthened and expanded in spite of repeated warnings from western experts on Russia that this would create new tensions. Long before Putin came to power, Yeltsin had urged the West not to move NATO eastwards.

Even today at this late stage, a declaration of Ukrainian non-alignment as part of an internationally negotiated settlement, and UN Security Council guarantees of that status, would bring instant de-escalation and make a lasting ceasefire possible in eastern Ukraine.

The hawks in the Clinton administration ignored all this, Bush abandoned the anti-ballistic missile treaty and put rockets close to Russia's borders, and now a decade later, after Russia's angry reaction to provocations in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine today, we have what Sakwa rightly calls a 'fateful geographical paradox: that NATO exists to manage the risks created by its existence'.

The third crisis, also linked to the NATO issue, is the European Union's failure to stay true to the conflict resolution imperative that had been its original impetus. After 1989 there was much talk of the arrival of the 'hour of Europe'. Just as the need for Franco-German reconciliation inspired the EU's foundation, many hoped the Cold War's end would lead to a broader east-west reconciliation across the old Iron Curtain. But the prospect of greater European independence worried key decision-makers in Washington, and NATO's role has been, in part, to maintain US primacy over Europe's foreign policy. From Bosnia in 1992 to Ukraine today, the last two decades have seen repeated occasions where US officials pleaded, half-sincerely, for a greater European role in handling geopolitical crises in Europe while simultaneously denigrating and sidelining Europe's efforts. Last year's 'Fuck the EU' comment by Victoria Nuland, Obama's neocon assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, was the pithiest expression of this.

Sakwa writes with barely suppressed anger of Europe's failure, arguing that instead of a vision embracing the whole continent, the EU has become little more than the civilian wing of the Atlantic alliance.

Within the framework of these three crises, Sakwa gives the best analysis yet in book form of events on the ground in eastern Ukraine as

well as in Kiev, Washington, Brussels and Moscow. He covers the disputes between the ‘resolvers’ (who want a negotiated solution) and the ‘war party’ in each capital. He describes the rows over sanctions that have split European leaders, and points out how Ukraine’s president, Petro Poroshenko, is under constant pressure from Nuland’s favourite Ukrainian, the more militant Yatsenyuk, to rely on military force.

As for Putin, Sakwa sees him not so much as the driver of the crises but as a regulator of factional interests and a temporiser who has to balance pressure from more right-wing Russian nationalists as well as from the insurgents in Ukraine, who get weapons and help from Russia but are not the Kremlin’s puppets.

Frontline Ukraine highlights several points that have become almost taboo in western accounts: the civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine caused by Ukrainian army shelling; the physical assaults on leftwing candidates in last year’s election; and the failure to complete investigations of last February’s sniper activity in Kiev (much of it thought to have been by anti-Yanukovych fighters) or of the Odessa massacre, in which dozens of anti-Kiev protesters were burnt alive in a building set on fire by nationalists.

The most disturbing novelty of the Ukrainian crisis is the way Putin and other Russian leaders are routinely demonised. At the height of the Cold War, when the dispute between Moscow and the West was far more dangerous, backed as it was by the danger of nuclear catastrophe, Brezhnev and Andropov were never treated to such public insults by western commentators and politicians.

Equally alarming, though not new, is the one-sided nature of western political, media and think-tank coverage. The spectre of senator Joseph McCarthy stalks the stage, marginalising those who offer a balanced analysis of why we have got to where we are and what compromise could save us. I hope Sakwa’s book does not itself become a victim, condemned as insufficiently anti-Russian to be reviewed.

Jonathan Steele

With grateful acknowledgements to The Guardian

Here Comes the Bribe!

Nicholas Gilby, *Deception in High Places: A History of Bribery in Britain’s Arms Trade*, Pluto Press, 2014, 240 pages, ISBN 9780745334264, £14

For a book on a decade-spanning, convoluted subject, *Deception in High*

Places puts its point across quite directly. Nicholas Gilby opens with a brief chronicle of his research labours, explaining that all material used is available in the public domain in various, and sometimes unusual, locations (e.g. private papers of Lord Caldecote, a name from the British Aircraft Corporation's past). It sounds as if he encountered some resistance in making some of this information more accessible. Considering the impact this catalogue of misdeeds could have, you can imagine why this might be.

The relationships between British arms manufacturers and Saudi Arabia and Iran stand out as perhaps the most prominent in this book, but the influence of the UK arms trade also spreads out far across Europe, and even into Asia. While the details of the transactions underpinning these relationships are generally kept secret, *Deception* reminds the reader of the media fallout when dirty deals have come to public attention, and how companies have avoided convictions thanks to the deliberately abstruse way in which deals are brokered.

My impression was that *Deception* was very statistic-heavy, but these accounts could hardly be presented any other way. When one hundred-million pound figure began to merge into another, I began to appreciate the subtext. Such 'possibly life-changing' sums of money were not only meaningless to me: they were, and are, essentially meaningless to the moguls conducting these deals. The price itself is meaningless, at least – the deals attached stand for security, partnerships between buyers and suppliers, which the suppliers hope will endure. Touches such as the scaling-up of figures from 1970s deals, and the Saudi royal family tree/lists of eminent persons came in very useful.

The use of middleman agents, in countries where suppliers have no firm link with prospective (and often prestigious) buyers, swiftly becomes a familiar element. Almost as swiftly comes the understanding of just how vital a role these agents play – examples illustrate prospective British sales which fell on deaf ears, whereupon another country wangled a deal very soon after. According to Gilby: 'Agents could fulfil a number of legitimate roles ... However they were also central to bribery schemes'. This vague possibility of the 'legitimacy' of their services forms part of the obfuscation when attempts are made to prosecute over suspicious transactions.

On a pragmatic level, the commissions these agents receive for helping negotiate a successful contract, generally a percentage of the final selling price, seem predictable given the high-stake nature of these proposals, though the ethics of their services are not as easy to condone. I need not

comment on the principles of the industry itself.

On a scale as vast as that of international arms deals, bringing bribery into the proceedings means that many matters besides the basic sale must be attended to. Speaking about 'internal politics within a customer government', Gilby points out how 'if some well-connected people were paid off, and their rivals were not, then the agent's actions could make Britain's relations with some highly influential people very difficult'. So intricate was the game between Britain and Saudi Arabia in the late 1960s that Willie Morris, a British ambassador on the scene, kept information drolly described in the book as a 'Who pays whom' file.

Agents with particular political affinities whom they might support using their commission is another point of interest. The author has diplomatic words to say regarding an agent in Lebanon in the early 1970s, who was a strong supporter of a supposed pro-British electoral candidate in that country: 'Although I have seen no evidence that the British Government was actively trying to influence the outcome of these elections, the commission arrangements were politically convenient.' Plausibly, then, British weapons manufacturers may exert degrees of political influence in places largely unobserved by the British public.

The swift punch of a concluding chapter sums up reams of shady cases from the history of the modern arms trade in a few deeply disheartening pages. Some harsh, memorable juxtapositions in this section suggest that even this comprehensive work only scratches the surface of the issue:

'In South Africa, for example, the Government claimed in 1999 [the arms deal described] would cost \$5 billion. At the same time, President Thabo Mbeki said South Africa could not afford anti-retroviral medication for the more than 5 million South Africans living with HIV/AIDS.'

Gilby also damns the Western business tendency to play corruption off as 'part of [developing countries'] way of life'; those who would use this phoney attitude as an excuse ignore the existence of anti-corruption laws in Saudi Arabia, and in what could be called the frequent buyer countries. Having said that, we see from *Deception in High Places* that even when suppliers initially defer to the law, their contacts within the country of proposed sale may try to persuade using a variation of this notion, i.e. that all deals brokered use agents anyway, regardless of the official stance.

What surprised me was the assessment of US reform. Gilby rates America as more willing than other nations to provide proof of their work towards reducing corruption. The Organisation for Economic Co-

Operation and Development, a peer review group, produced a 136-page report on steps taken by the US between 1998 and 2011 to bring their dealings in line with recommended policies. For perspective, Britain's was a paltry five pages.

In the case of Britain, the author does not deny that progress that has been made over the years, acknowledging for instance that 'Britain now has one of the strongest anti-bribery laws in the world', and that such developments have been achieved thanks to 'external pressures'; we are to assume, however, that the prospect of creating a conducive mindset within government bodies is a different manner of beast. The number of and scale of the 'scandals' exposed is testimony to this.

Righting where the system has gone wrong is a daunting task. Gilby suggests imposing significant fines on companies operating corruptly, and a reform of ever-suspicious offshore banking as initial steps to reducing underhand practices. Sensibly, he admits that we can never hope to completely eradicate what is essentially a human compulsion, but in order to dissuade powerful entities from it, the penalties imposed must actually pose a threat to the perpetrators' future credibility or financial viability.

Nicole Morris

Absent Genocide?

Ian Barnes with Malise Ruthven, *Crossroads of War – a Historical Atlas of the Middle East*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 224 pages, hardback ISBN 9780674598492, £25.95

A flamboyant volume indeed, with some hundred pages of brilliant maps and another hundred of history of wars, instruments of war, devastated countries and cultures, incessant assassinations of power holders and their families, mass exterminations, religious intolerance and murderous conflicts, destruction of temples, villages, towns and cities. In a nutshell, war tales of the Middle East, all through the last five thousand years – an impressive scholarly achievement for sure. And all because, as one of the authors explains in the Introduction:

'Throughout recorded history the Levantine Corridor has seen the movement of armed forces, as those who controlled this vital strip commanded the whole Near Eastern region.' (p.6)

After reaching the end of the war narratives, and having endured the

macabre tales, I somehow felt the need of an Epilogue, to better understand the real and moral *raison d'être* of such an awesome endeavour, having in mind the turbulent world in which we live. I sincerely wanted to know if the authors, having accomplished their task, do somehow believe or not that another world is possible. And if positively so, I would have felt enriched to know how they envisaged the transformation of that possibility into a probability. In case of a negative stance, then, alas, 'vanity, all is vanity'. The distinguished authors of this unique historical atlas left my queries unanswered.

But then, I remembered a reassuring thought I read in another atlas-book, which had filled my heart with a distilled joy, and a feeling to share it with everyone:

'Homo sapiens has been around for at least 250,000 years. Yet war and military might have been known only in the last 5,000 – 2% at most of our history. War is neither a part of human nature nor, necessarily, of civilised life.'

The Gaia Peace Atlas, Editor, Dr Frank Barnaby
Quoted in *Alternative World*, by Nares Craig. (p. 160)

In one of his impressive volumes, Bertrand Russell diagnosed the malaise of power, saying:

'Throughout history, great nations have been led to disaster by unwillingness to admit that their power had limits.'

Has Man a Future? (p.45)

Crossroads of War totally reaffirms Russell's diagnosis. Regarding both the tragedy of the Jewish people in the aftermath of World War Two, and the diaspora of Palestinian refugees, the authors admit that:

'The movement of many people to Palestine, and later the State of Israel, solved some problems for the Jews but, in turn, displaced Palestinian Arabs became refugees, forced to live in camps in other countries where they were not assimilated.' (p. 178)

An apt juxtaposition, for sure, but I remain shocked not to find mention of the word '*Genocide*', when most of the mass and cultural annihilations mentioned by the authors do cry out to be acknowledged as such. It is worth remembering the *raison d'être* of Raphael Lemkin's coinage of the word *Genocide* (see *Spokesman* 93). Lemkin was adamant in saying that *Genocide* 'happened so many times'. Curiously enough, '*Holocaust*' is mentioned once, only to label the Jewish survivors, those who dared survive the magnum crime.

It's worth pointing out that the word *Holocaust* was used during the massacres of the Armenians in the 1890s to underline the religious aspect of the tragedy – Christian Armenians massacred by Moslem Turks and Kurds – as a large mass of Armenians were burnt alive in the Urfa Cathedral in 1895. Hence the word 'Holocaust' was used by the noted missionary, Corin Shattuck, to visualise and characterise this horrible event.

Etymologically, *Holocaust* = 'Whole-Burnt', and is intrinsically linked with the act of sacrifice – a sacrificial offering which is completely consumed by fire, whereby cleansing from sins and, ultimately, purification is expected to be attained, functioning as an atonement, or indeed: 'an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD'. (*The Holy Bible, authorised King James Version, Leviticus, 1:17*)

Does genocide 'taketh away the sins' of the murdered community, whether massacred, gassed or burnt? Or does it, perhaps, cleanse the sins of the murderers for the bliss of purification? God forbid. With all respect to all concerned, it must be said that *Holocaust* is an erroneous and misleading coinage of the reality it is hoped to illustrate and define.

Nazis committed the ultimate crime against humanity, rightly expressed with Lemkin's more precise, politically pristine and religiously unbiased word – *Genocide*.

Perhaps the neglect of the term *Genocide* in Barnes & Ruthven's book is a subtle way of refuting Lemkin's superb trove, especially when the distinguished linguist was adamant to remind us all that in the 20th century *Genocide* happened 'First to the Armenians, then after the Armenians, took action'. (*History of the Genocide*, by V. Dadrian, p. 350)

The Glossary on p.218 of the *Crossroads of War* defines 'Holocaust' as:

'Systematic mass murder or genocide of some 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies.'

Obviously, the authors have cleansed the word *Holocaust* of all its original, religious attributes. When referring to the mass movements of refugees of the Middle East, it is negligent of historical data not to mention the survivors of the Genocide of the Armenians, who were uprooted from their ancestral homelands in Anatolia, as a result of the meticulously planned magnum crime executed by the proto-Nazi government of the Young Turks. Hence, starting in 1915, hundreds of thousands of Genocide survivors became the first Diaspora of Armenians in the Middle East.

This year, 2015, is the 100th commemorative year of that Genocide of the Armenians. Let us hope the authors of this formidable atlas will not be

charmed by the zealots of the camp who blindly refuse to acknowledge the veracity of that historical truth.

In the last paragraph of the Introduction to *Crossroads of War*, Malise Ruthven draws a parallel between the Frankish Crusaders, also named as Outremer (from the French ‘*outré mer*’), and the ‘new group of settlers’ – meaning the Jewish ones – ‘whose project for an occidental state in the Levant carries numerous echoes of *Outremer*’ (p. 13). She concludes:

‘Today a new *Outremer* remains, all-powerful, like its medieval predecessors. But there is no guarantee that in an increasingly hostile environment it can maintain this pre-eminence indefinitely.’ (p. 13)

Today’s *Outremer* resides not in the Levant, but beyond the oceans – an *Outre-mer* indeed.

Khatchatur I. Pilikian

Benn and the IWC

Ruth Winstone (editor), *The Best of Benn*, Hutchinson, 2014, 260 pages, hardback ISBN 9780091958923, £20

In the late 1960s, the Institute for Workers’ Control (IWC) became deeply engaged in providing support to the struggle of those employed by Arnold Weinstock’s General Electric Company (GEC) against the mass redundancies this expanding multinational was planning to impose. It had recently been engaged in the takeover of a number of competitors and was determined to impose ‘rationalisation’ to cut costs.

During the dispute, Tony Benn, Minister of Technology in the Wilson Government, was invited by the management to visit the GEC factories on Merseyside which were under threat. Ken Coates gleefully described at a subsequent meeting of the IWC Council (of which I was Secretary) how Benn had allowed himself to be ‘captured’ by the shop stewards on site to be shown round the works and given their side of the story. Coates was not only amused but also greatly encouraged by this development. He suggested that Benn might well prove to be a good ally in the developing movement for workers’ control and industrial democracy.

We were not used to having good friends in the high places of the political wing of the Labour Movement, so many were very sceptical of Benn’s potential to help our cause: at best they thought him to be an able, well-meaning social democrat; at worst, an ambitious careerist.

However, in 1971, with Labour out of office, a storm broke over the Clyde. The Heath Government retreated from Labour's earlier support for reconstituting the shipyards as Upper Clyde Shipbuilders and adopted plans for total rundown and closure. Aware of the recent resistance and occupation of their factories by the GEC workers, and led by imaginative and determined shop stewards such as Jimmy Reid and Jimmy Airlie, the shipyard workers voted to occupy their own yards and work-in to defend jobs.

Tony Benn, now a leading light in the Labour opposition, gave full and enthusiastic support to the UCS workers. It gained enormous publicity and support, and triggered a whole series of sit-ins and work-ins at workplaces, large and small, throughout the land, which were threatened with redundancies. All this upsurge underpinned and fuelled serious radicalisation of the Labour Party. It stimulated the rapid development of detailed plans for the expansion of public ownership, support for workers' co-operatives and compulsory planning agreements with large multinationals, with the close engagement of trade unions.

All this promised a massive extension of industrial democracy. Doubters amongst IWC activists were delighted, even if they had some difficulty in keeping up with Benn in his rapid evolution! Alas, the sceptics were proved right in their doubts about what a new Labour Government might achieve; not because Tony Benn defected from the path of fundamental change or fell short in the determination and commitment it demanded. Far from it! It was the timidity and shortsightedness of the party leadership that took us on another course.

After defeat in the Common Market referendum of 1975, Benn was removed from his key position of Minister of Industry by Harold Wilson. Thereafter, James Callaghan and Denis Healey concentrated their efforts in following the diktats of the International Monetary Fund, confining trade unionists in the ever-tightening bands of the prices and incomes policy.

The selection in this book from Benn's speeches, diaries, articles and so on from his long and rich political life seeks to be representative of Tony's many concerns and involvements with individuals as well as political causes. Ruth Winstone worked closely with Benn for more than 25 years and edited all his published diaries, so she is well placed to have made a good and informative selection. But with such a large field to cover, she is not easily able to convey the excitement of the early '70s when Benn was probably at his most creative. Thereafter, sadly, he became, in the words of the section headings, 'caged' and a 'lost leader'.

Winstone's collection does feature one small piece on UCS and a long

extract from his address on workers' control to the Engineering Union in 1971 (reproduced in full in *Speeches* by Benn, recently reprinted by Spokesman). But those who want to know more about the man and his politics need to visit or revisit his diaries and writings. They should be encouraged to do just that and I am sure they will. After all, Tony Benn never turned back. He remained a shining example of cheerfulness and perseverance in the face of adversity. He continued to give people hope and inspiration to the very end.

Ken Fleet



**If nuclear technology is
so safe, why don't we have
reactors in Westminster?**

**Mick Whelan
General Secretary**

**Tosh McDonald
President**

**ASLEF the train drivers' union
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