

Section 7: **The National Governments 1931-39 (2) – The Politics of the National Governments**

The history of the 'thirties is dominated by three themes:

- **Party politics: national governments and Conservative dominance. 'Rule by pygmies'?**
- The impact of the Great Depression and recovery: 'Devil's decade'?
- The threat of Fascism and Nazism; appeasement and the road to war. *The Guilty Men?*

Now we have looked at the Devil's Decade and the Guilty Men, we can now look at the politics and, thus, the subject in the round.

This is an area where you need to be strongly aware of the historiography, and of the way in which subsequent British history has affected the way the 'thirties were interpreted. Thus, when you revisit this unit, knowing the history of Britain after the war up until Mrs Thatcher will very much help you understand that historiography.

THE POLITICS OF STANLEY BALDWIN AND THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE 1930s

We must now come to grips with the politics of the national governments and, above all else, with the reputation of Stanley Baldwin. If Chamberlain might be said to have been guilty man in chief, then was Baldwin chief pygmy?

Martin Gilbert writes:

Shortly after the war, when he was asked to send Baldwin, then aged eighty, a birthday letter, [Churchill] declined to do so, writing to an intermediary: 'I wish Stanley Baldwin no ill, but it would have been much better had he never lived.'

When considering what we might call the pygmy question, we might consider the following areas

- Economic and social policy (see above)
- Appeasement (see above)
- Conservative domination of politics in the 1930s
- The Labour Party in the 1930s
- The threat of extremism
- The politics of the Baldwin government

WHY WERE THE CONSERVATIVES SO DOMINANT IN THE 1930s?

Use **Flagship**, pp 129-36

- Look at all the election results in the inter-war period. What were, in terms of seats and the popular vote, the Conservative floor and the Conservative ceiling?
- What made the 1931 election unique? What does the 1935 result show us about the strength of the Conservatives in the 1930s? What had changed since 1929?
- How did the electoral system favour the Conservatives?
- How did Liberal decline favour them? How significant were the Liberal Nationals to the Conservatives?
- How did the party machine help them win?
- How effectively did Baldwin manage his party?

- Why was Baldwin so effective? Is it fair to say that his moderate Conservatism was central to their electoral success? Is it fair to say that he was central to their success?

'The right man for the times.' How far do you think Baldwin was the key to Conservative hegemony between the wars?

THE LABOUR PARTY IN THE 1930s

Use **Flagship**, pp 154-58 and the **blog article on the Labour left**:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/11/29/3358/>

- Outline how the 1931 election was a disaster for the Labour Party
- How far was George Lansbury an inadequate leader?
- How far was Attlee's election a surprise? Why did he win? Why did he seem only a temporary leader?
- Explain how the trade unions became the dominant force after 1931
- Show how Labour had a political hegemony over the British left in the 1930s, and resisted extremism. Explain the significance of the ILP disaffiliation, the end of the Socialist League and the popular front
- The 1930s saw a great deal of political and artistic creativity on the left and from liberals. Did that sow the seeds of later success?
- Show how the 1935 election saw Labour re-established as the alternative government, but were still a long way from being so
- After 1935, Labour formulated fresh socialist economic and social policies
- Labour abandoned its opposition to rearmament in late 1937

Is it fair to say that, just as Baldwin was vital to the commitment of the British right to democracy, so was Labour to the left?

'By 1939, Labour had recovered, but only to an extent, and they were still a long way from power.' How far do you agree?

THE THREAT OF EXTREMISM

The Far Left

- Use **Lynch** pp 141-43 and the **blog article on communism**:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/the-left-in-the-1930s-communism-harry-pollitt-and-failure/>

There was left-wing activism in the 1930s beyond the Labour movement. Look at the roles of:

- The ILP
- The Communist Party of Great Britain
- Communist activists in the trade unions
- The NUWM
- The Jarrow March
- The Left Book Club, left-wing literature
- The International Brigades
- Anti-fascist activism
- The Socialist League
- The Popular Front

- Posh communists: the Apostles

Show how the Labour movement had hegemony over the left, forcing threats to the margins or absorbing others.

Did the surge in left-wing ideas and culture help sow the seeds for 1945?

The Far Right

Use Lynch pp 139-41

- Baldwin faced a threat from his own right-wing, some of whom were less than wholly committed to democracy
 - Over India, especially from Churchill
 - The Empire Crusade
 - Those who sympathised with Fascism and Nazism. See the [blog article](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/hitler-his-british-fellow-travellers-the-most-beautiful-place-in-britain-knoydart/):
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/hitler-his-british-fellow-travellers-the-most-beautiful-place-in-britain-knoydart/>
- How serious a threat were Mosley and the BUF? Why did they fail? See the [blog article](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/03/hurrah-for-the-blackshirts-mosley-and-failure/):
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/03/hurrah-for-the-blackshirts-mosley-and-failure/>

It is tempting to believe that Fascism was, simply, not very British. However, the likes of Philip Williamson would argue that Fascism was a threat, as part of a wider threat to a young democracy, and that the political stability of Britain between the wars is what secured that democracy. That, he argues, was Baldwin's greatest achievement. Do you agree?

THE POLITICS OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Churchill's attack on Baldwin acknowledged a key strength, Baldwin was a supreme political operator. Whenever he faced rivals he found themselves, in John Charmley's phrase, 'scalped by Baldwin'. Baldwin showed his skills of political manoeuvre at the Carlton Club, again after defeat in the 1923 election. He was also good in a crisis: think of his handling of the General Strike. He would show similar skills in handling threats and crises in the 1930s.

Use Pearce and Stewart, pp 401-21

- The India issue and threat of Churchill and Birkenhead.
- The Empire Crusade and the threat of Beaverbrook and Rothermere
- The 1931 crisis, the formation of a national government and the 1931 general election. Is it fair to say that Baldwin found being number two congenial? Why might that have been?
- The dominance of moderates in his cabinet, and the way he used the idea of national government to exclude his own right-wing
- The key role of Neville Chamberlain

Read the [blog articles on him as leader and chancellor](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/tory-leaders-we-have-known-neville-chamberlain/)
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/tory-leaders-we-have-known-neville-chamberlain/>
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/22/the-chancellors-8-neville-chamberlain/>
- The 1935 general election, rearmament & the Abyssinia Crisis
- The Abdication Crisis. Use the [blog article](https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/02/the-abdication-crisis-stanley-david-democracy/):
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/02/the-abdication-crisis-stanley-david-democracy/>

- Was it, as Martin Pugh argues, a more serious threat to Britain's political stability than is usually supposed?
- How well did Baldwin handle it? Was it his last great triumph?
- How far did Chamberlain's succession, and his manner of governing, imply a criticism of both Baldwin and MacDonald? Is it fair to see Chamberlain's fate as 'genuinely tragic'? 'Scalped by Baldwin'. How far is it fair to depict Baldwin as a masterly political operator?

All of which brings us neatly back to 'Rule by pygmies', *The Guilty Men* and the Devil's Decade. Do the national governments deserve their bad reputation? And what of Baldwin. Was Churchill right? Or, have the modern Baldwinians (whether historians like Philip Williamson, or Conservative politicians such as John Major and David Cameron) got it right?

FURTHER READING, LISTENING & VIEWING

Sixth form history needs you to do reading of your own. Already, this guide had given you references to the Flagship textbook, and some other resources. You need to take steps beyond that both online and, of course, by resorting to another revolutionary technology, the book. For modern British history, there is a dizzying array of printed and online resources, of startlingly variable quality. If you do find something not on here that's good, let the rest of us know through the Facebook page or email s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk and we'll add it.

For each topic or area, we have colour coded each book or article:

- Blue is essential
- Yellow means if you want to develop a deeper understanding you should read one or all of these
- Green means this is a monograph, or a sophisticated or highly detailed account. Learn how to dip into real history books, a vital study skill; you might sometimes find full books actually become more engrossing
- Pink is for choices that are more loosely related, and have grabbed someone's interest at some point. Try one or two, they might be fun

A WORD ABOUT ONLINE RESOURCES

Three of the best resources are, of course, the History department's very own Blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)

Beyond that, for the British history course, get used to using one of the best resources available, and for free; the DNB. Any local library card will get you in: anyone can join the City Library via this link <https://eforms.newcastle.gov.uk/popup.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=JVpTDqdaf2o>

Once you have a library card number, got to <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> and fill in your number. You then have access to it all. They vary in quality from the good to absolutely excellent, and they are all written by leaders in the field. The best have a particularly good last section, dealing with how history has viewed these men and women, and their historiography. There are also the **Themes**.

History Today

Beyond that, another invaluable resource is **History Today**. We have institutional access to the entire archive, here: <http://www.historytoday.com/user/login>

Username: Tilbrook

Password: historian

You can search at your leisure, and find all sorts. These guides will flag some up for you.

Philip Allan Resources

Another good resource is Philip Allan Magazines Online, aimed very much at sixth-form students: here <http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Username: j.richardson@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Password: rgs1

The archive is then searchable

FURTHER READING

There is a range of series aimed at sixth form history students. None make for exciting reading, and they vary in quality, but you should always aim to read at least one. The politics of the coalition are pretty well covered in the following:

Michael Lynch, *Britain 1900-51 (Access to History)* (Lon 2008), pp 119-41

Robert Pearce, *Britain: Domestic Politics 1918-39 (Access to History)* (Lon 1992)

Malcolm Pearce & Geoffrey Stewart, *British Political History 1867-2001* (3rd ed, Lon 2002) pp 401-21

Here are some other overviews:

Stuart Ball, *The Conservative Party & British Politics 1902-1951 (Seminar Studies)* (Lon 1996) pp83-95

John Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics 1900-1996* (Lon 1996), ch 5

A breezy account from a Conservative point of view, highly opinionated and very much focused on party politics

Philip Williamson, *The Conservative Party 1900-1939*; in Chris Wrigley (ed), *A Companion to 20th Century Britain* (Oxford 2003), ch 1

Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (Lon 1996)

TO Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History 1906-92* (4th ed, Oxford 1993)

Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1945* (3rd ed, 2002), chs 12 & 13

Pugh is one of the best current writers on the history of Britain in the first half of the 20th century

Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night* (Lon 2009)

Roy Hattersley, *Borrowed Time* (Lon 2007)

K. Laybourn, *Britain on the Breadline* (Stroud 1990)

A. Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford 1992)

Two classic works:

CL Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (Lon 1955)

AJP Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford 1965)

The episode of Andrew Marr's *The Making of Modern Britain* on the 1930s is worth a watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDVmnG1V93s>

Another approach is to read about specific areas, or people.

The DNB entries on Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain are essential, but others are also worth a look

Derrick Murphy, *Baldwin*

Philip Allen 20th Century History Review | Modern History Vol 9 | 4 April 1998

Gabrielle Ward Smith, *Baldwin & The National Government*

Philip Allen 20th Century History Review | Modern History Vol 14 | November 2002

<http://magazinesonline.philipallan.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Duncan Watts, *Stanley Baldwin & the Search for Consensus* (Lon 1996)

Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin* (Lon 1999)

A thematic study rather than a biography, but the most important re-evaluation of Baldwin's politics and place in British history.

John Raymond, *The Baldwin Age* (1960)

A light-hearted survey of an important era in British social and political history, when the Prime Minister set an example of optimism that, despite setbacks at home and abroad, many of his most distinguished countrymen followed

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/john-raymond/baldwin-age>

Baldwin was, arguably, the first British politician to make effective use of the new media of radio and the cinema newsreel. Here is a broadcast made during the 1931 general election:

<https://youtu.be/0UL5AOgqWLO>

Here, the 1935 election, in which he makes much use of his public persona. As a bonus, we get Attlee too:

<https://youtu.be/GBlug65qxvQ>

His valedictory speech:

<https://youtu.be/WVaDn0pS34Q>

There is a blog article on Chamberlain as leader:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/tory-leaders-we-have-known-neville-chamberlain/>

Nick Smart, *Neville Chamberlain* (2010)

A review of Robert Self, *Neville Chamberlain: a Biography*

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/reviews/neville-chamberlain>

Richard Wilkinson, *A Review: Neville Chamberlain* (2010)

A review of Nick Smart, *Neville Chamberlain*

History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/books-blog/richard-wilkinson/book-review-neville-chamberlain>

Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement & the Road to War* (1998)

David Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (Lon 2001)

Here's Chamberlain's 1936 budget Broadcast:

<https://youtu.be/3UGWpplS6el>

There are blog articles on the chancellors:

Neville Chamberlain

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/01/22/the-chancellors-8-neville-chamberlain/>

Sir John Simon

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/24/the-chancellors-11-sir-john-simon/>

And the home secretaries:

Sir Herbert Samuel

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/10/07/the-home-secretaries-5-herbert-samuel/>

Sir John Gilmour

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/03/27/the-home-secretaries-12-sir-john-gilmour/>

Sir John Simon

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/10/02/the-home-secretaries-4-sir-john-simon/>

Sir Samuel Hoare

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/27/the-home-secretaries-13-sir-samuel-hoare/>

And the foreign secretaries:

The Marquess of Reading

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/03/20/the-foreign-secretaries-7-the-marquess-of-reading/>

Sir John Simon

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/03/23/the-foreign-secretaries-8-sir-john-simon/>

Sir Samuel Hoare

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/the-foreign-secretaries-9-sir-samuel-hoare/>

Anthony Eden

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/23/the-foreign-secretaries-10-sir-anthony-eden/>

Lord Halifax

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/27/the-foreign-secretaries-11-lord-halifax/>

David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (Lon 1977)

Until Marquand's brilliant biography, MacDonald was all consigned to the rubbish heap of history. Marquand wrote his book at a time when the Wilson and Callaghan governments were in constant crisis, and after which he became one of the founders of the SDP. His DNB entry on MacDonald further refines his views in the light of the rise of Tony Blair.

There are also some good clips of MacDonald. Here, in the 1931 election (contrast his style with Baldwin's): <https://youtu.be/8vIFREOWvl4>

Robert Pearce, *Churchill: the Wilderness Years* (2007)

History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/churchill-wilderness-years>

Paul Addison, *Churchill: the Unexpected Hero* (Oxford 2005)

Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (Lon 2001)

The Abdication Crisis is covered in this blog article:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/02/the-abdication-crisis-stanley-david-democracy/>

The threat of Fascism in this blog article:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/03/hurrah-for-the-blackshirts-mosley-and-failure/>

And the threat of fellow travellers in this:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/hitler-his-british-fellow-travellers-the-most-beautiful-place-in-britain-knoydart/>

The 1931 election gets some thoughts in this blog article:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/04/22/snap-elections-we-have-known-1923-1931-1951-1966-and-1974-october-oh-yes-and-2017/>

The story of the Labour left is told in this blog article:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/11/29/3358/>

And here:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/09/13/left-wing-labour-leaders-we-have-known-michael-foot-george-lansbury-kier-hardie-and-yes-jeremy-corbyn/>

The story of the far left here:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/the-left-in-the-1930s-communism-harry-pollitt-and-failure/>

Max Beloff, *Leo Amery, the Last Imperialist* (1989)

'A life of action and constant fidelity to a set of ideas': a fresh look at the career of Leo Amery with the publication of the latter's second volume of diaries – a man by no means the stereotype of an inter-war Conservative politician

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/max-beloff/leo-amery-last-imperialist>

Michael Bloch, *Philip Guedalla Defends the Duke* (1979)

Philip Guedalla became the Duke of Windsor's most trusted supporter in England. Michael Bloch describes how this historian, wit and failed Liberal politician conceived a brilliant public defence of Edward, which ultimately came too late

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/michael-bloch/philip-guedalla-defends-duke>

Anne Sebba, *Edward VIII: Backing the Wrong Duke* (2011)

Anne Sebba revisits Michael Bloch's article, first published in History Today in 1979, on the historian Philip Guedalla's enthusiastic but misguided support for his friend, Edward VIII.

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/anne-sebba/edward-viii-backing-wrong-duke>

Juliet Gardiner, *Digging into a Decade: the 1930s* (2010)

Juliet Gardiner explains why her new book examines a short period of the 20th century and she attempts to achieve a panorama of experiential history that gives readers a real feel for a slice of time.

History Today <http://www.historytoday.com/juliet-gardiner/digging-decade-1930s>

Graham Goodlad, *British Conservatism*

An overview

Philip Allan 20th Century History Review | Modern History Vol 10 | 1 September 1998

<http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>