

Women Anti-Appeasers in the Nineteen Thirties

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On the morning of September 20th, 1938, Blanche Dugdale – stalwart supporter of the League of Nations Union, niece and biographer of A.J. Balfour, and confidante of more than one Cabinet minister – rang Harold Nicolson to talk over the news that Neville Chamberlain’s government would ask the Czechs to concede territory to Hitler in the Sudetenland. The news, she said, had made her sick in the night; after reading the proposed terms in the morning Times, she had gone to the bathroom and thrown up again. Now, she was writing a letter of resignation from the tiny “National Labour” faction on the grounds that she could no longer belong to any political group supporting Chamberlain’s government.¹ Violet Bonham-Carter – Asquith’s daughter, prominent Liberal, and a supporter of Churchill throughout the late thirties – had a similar response. On September 28th, at a meeting of the Executive of the League of Nations Union, she took the Liberal Party leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, very publicly to task for having failed to speak up in the Commons that day against Chamberlain’s plan to meet Hitler, Daladier and Mussolini in Munich to negotiate a settlement.² The following day, at a lunch of prominent government critics, she supported Churchill’s last-ditch (and unsuccessful) efforts to get Eden, Attlee, Sinclair and others to telegram Chamberlain in Munich opposing further concessions at the expense of the Czechs.³ Then, in the 30th (Chamberlain having settled with Hitler and

returned to a hero's welcome), Dugdale joined renegade Tory Bob Boothby, Labour M.P. D.N. Pritt and a third woman anti-appeaser, Parliamentary Independent Eleanor Rathbone, on the platform for a protest meeting.⁴ The Munich peace, Rathbone told the two thousand or so supporters there, was anything but a "peace with honour": instead, it was just the latest in a long series of retreats – Manchuria, Abyssinia, Spain and now Czechoslovakia – in which the government's fear of war and of communism overpowered their commitment to the security conventions of the League.⁵

These were not, in September of 1938, exactly mainstream views. The dominant feeling in the wake of the Munich agreements was overwhelming relief and gratitude; for a time, criticism of Chamberlain was almost ruled out of bounds. The diplomatic historian Donald Cameron Watt, a schoolboy in 1938, recalled the Headmaster of his preparatory school lecturing the boys in the wake of Munich. People might tell them, the master said, that Chamberlain had behaved dishonourably, but they were not to believe them: Mr Chamberlain "had been by God to preserve the peace of the world. What he had done was noble and Christian and we were never to forget that."⁶ Faced with such popularity, even skeptical politicians held their tongue. Sinclair and Philip Noel-Baker, chastised by Violet Bonham-Carter, retorted that speaking against Chamberlain in the House on the 28th would have been "physically impossible";⁷ only a few – Churchill, the communist William Gallacher – remained in their seats and declined to take part in the tumultuous applause.⁸ Once the terms of the agreement were known, criticism did develop, but the Conservative whips succeeded in holding it in check; as we know, there was but a single Cabinet resignation over Munich, and perhaps two dozen Tory abstentions from the resolution supporting the agreement. Indeed, the cost of open opposition was made clear to a fourth woman anti-appeaser two months later. The "Red" Duchess of Atholl, having been deprived of the

Conservative whip for her outspoken support of the Republican cause in Spain, was in the United States raising funds for Spanish refugee children during the Munich crisis. When she returned in October, she was distressed enough by the Government's policy and by the barrage of questions and accusations leveled at her by her constituency party to resign her seat and attempt to regain it as an Independent. The contest quickly became a referendum on Munich, and while the Liberal and Labour candidates stood down, Atholl – a knowledgeable and dedicated M.P. and former Health Minister – lost the seat to a Chamberlainite local farmer.⁹

And if the role of anti-appeaser a dangerous and unpopular one in general, it was a still more unusual (and many thought, unsuitable) job for a woman. It wasn't quite that foreign policy was thought to be beyond women's comprehension – although certainly many in Parliament and even more in the Foreign Office held that view. It was, rather, that any “women's interest” in foreign policy was assumed to be instinctively if rather ignorantly pacifistic. Conservatives and Labour alike believed that women were interested not in diplomacy but in peace, and indeed (as the Conservatives especially discovered), the careful deployment of a language of conciliation and appeasement proved very useful in securing the “woman's vote.” Insofar as women did find a more public role in foreign affairs as experts and activists, then, it was usually within that constellation of interwar organizations and movements designed to secure and uphold peace. There was, after all, a longstanding and honorable argument associating feminism (and female enfranchisement) with peace, and war with masculine dominance. The founders of the Women's International League, Helena Swanwick at the Union of Democratic Control, Catherine Marshall at the No-Conscription Fellowship and Maude Royden on the Women's committee of the League of Nations Union all underscored the view that activist women were unflinchingly dedicated to the cause of peace.

The four women I am discussing here – Rathbone, Atholl, Bonham-Carter and Dugdale – don't fall entirely outside this framework. All were, for example, firm supporters of the idea of “collective security” and active, at one time or another, in the League of Nations Union. Nevertheless, they did follow a somewhat different path, being consistently more critical of Chamberlainite policies than most of their fellows. Why was this the case? How did these women view foreign policy in the thirties, how did they seek to affect it, and what (if anything) did they accomplish? I want to take up these questions today not only because these women deserve some attention in their own right, but because they provide us with an interesting case through which to look at some of the more general questions I expect we will be discussing today – questions about the gendered nature of political systems, and about the opportunities and constraints women face within them. The women critics of appeasement, I would argue, did not espouse a particular gendered theory of militarism or fascism; nevertheless, when operating within the complex world of foreign policymaking, they fell back on highly gendered forms of political practice. It is the gap, then, between these women's democratic and liberal political theory and the behaviours they were forced into in practice that constitutes the most interesting part of their story—and that in fact tells us something about the gendered nature of politics even in pacific and democratic states.

How, then, did these four women come to be “anti-appeasers”? Certainly they were never simply “hawks” or warmongers. Indeed, with the partial exception of Atholl, who did concern herself more with the maintenance of British imperial hegemony and spheres of influence, all four looked forward to a world of conciliation and disarmament. All four were passionate defenders of the League of Nations and consistently held that peace would be best defended through

“collective security” – that is by common agreements backed up by the threat of collective sanctions or force when individual members strayed. Unlike many in the “peace movement,” however, they were more concerned to defend one political form – democracy – than to maintain international peace generally. Their foreign policy was, then, heavily “ideological,” shaped not by realpolitik and balance of power considerations so much as by their democratic convictions.

Let me make this clearer by offering a few examples. Many liberals and progressives were swayed by Chamberlain’s logic in part because of their feelings of guilt over the Versailles settlement; they were thus sympathetic to proposals for boundary renegotiations and revisions of the treaty and less than eager to defend East European states and borders of which they had been skeptical all along. Yet while Dugdale, Rathbone and Bonham-Carter shared this critique of Versailles in the twenties, their views changed entirely once the Nazis took power. All four of these women were early and fierce critics of the Nazi regime; all four reversed their views about appropriate British policy towards Germany once Hitler took hold. Rathbone took part in the first House debate over Germany in April of 1933, and already that May was warning that Germany only “want[ed] peace just until she has completed the preparations for war.”¹⁰ Violet Bonham-Carter agreed, abandoning the consistently “pro-German” stance she had held during the period of the Weimar republic to condemn the “extinction of Liberalism in Germany” in the strongest terms.¹¹ When Germany pulled out of the League and the Disarmament Conference that October, Bonham-Carter actually felt relieved, since she thought it critically important that the democratic states understand its “mad-dog” character immediately.¹² Atholl felt exactly the same way. Late in 1935, she read Mein Kampf in German, and was shocked to find out that some of the most brutal and explicit passages had been expunged from the English translation. Believing that the democracies needed to know exactly what they were up against, she arranged for a new, complete

translation, and sent both the new and the edited versions to Churchill and Chamberlain.

Churchill read them carefully; Chamberlain did not.¹³

Unlike those who advocated a conciliatory policy towards Germany regardless of its form of Government, then, these women consistently argued that the foundation of British policy – and indeed League policy – should be to preserve and strengthen democratic governments: if governments ceased to be democratic, British policy should change. As a result, on a second question – that of rearmament – they also to some extent parted company from their fellows. “Justice cannot rule this world armed with the scales alone,” Violet Bonham-Carter told a meeting of the League of Nations Union in the Albert Hall in December of 1936, “in her other hand she must hold a sword.”¹⁴ Rathbone, similarly, condemned the Peace Pledge Union, the famous Oxford Union resolution refusing “to fight for King and Country,” and the unwillingness of the Labour Party to vote for defense estimates, on the argument that such unilateral pacifistic actions could only give heart to the dictators. Taking her criticism straight to the enemy’s camp, in August of 1936 she told the students at an Independent Labour Party summer school that they should reconsider their party’s doctrinaire opposition to all armaments and all military conflicts. That policy, she warned them, led dictators to think that Britain lacked all will to resist and strengthened the position of those in the Conservative Party who wished to give Germany and Italy a free hand.¹⁵ That December, she tried (without success) to convince the General Council of the League of Nations Union to pass a resolution condemning the pacifist organizations for, in effect, “encouraging aggressively-minded nations to commit aggression,” thus making war “more and not less likely.”¹⁶

Against these alternatives of appeasement on the right and pacifism on the left, then, these four women argued consistently for a policy of democratic defense, if necessary through force of

arms. In 1933, Rathbone told the Proportional Representation society that she had become convinced that “the only safety for democracy lies in a defensive alliance...of the free democracies of the world.”¹⁷ The only specter of such an alliance in the thirties was, however, the alliance of the League of Nations, and all four of these women consistently argued for a strong defense of the principles of the League. Rathbone and Bonham-Carter were both shocked by the Cabinet’s indifference to the Italian occupation of Abyssinia (a fellow League member) in 1935. There must not be “one law for the strong and another for the weak, one law for the white and another for the black” Bonham-Carter told a League of Nations Union audience at the Albert Hall in October of 1935. “We cannot make licensed brigandage in Africa the price of peace in Europe.”¹⁸ She and Rathbone strongly supported economic sanctions against Italy (Rathbone becoming, in the words of one historian of this crisis, “the strongest sanctionist among M.P.s¹⁹); Dugdale, similarly, dissented from the view that Hitler’s occupation of the Rhineland was a trivial matter and thought Britain and France should have insisted on immediate withdrawal.²⁰ Both Rathbone and Atholl viewed British policy towards the Spanish conflict – which combined a commitment to non-intervention with an unwillingness to insist on a similar commitment from the fascist states – as entirely morally bankrupt. If the democracies were unwilling to defend a democratically-elected government themselves, they argued, they should at least stop preventing the Spanish Republic from arming itself against what had become an internationally-supported fascist aggression. “Unless we, the free democracies of the world, who are still loyal members of the League, are prepared to stand together and to take the same risks for Justice, Peace and Freedom as others are prepared to take for the fruits of aggression,” Bonham-Carter warned in December of 1936, “then our cause is lost – and the Gangsters will inherit the earth.”²¹ The League of Nations, all four women thought, must become less of a talk-shop and more of an

armed alliance of democratic states – a kind of NATO alliance avant la lettre.

By the late thirties, however, they were willing to admit the Soviet Union to this anti-fascist club. This was not because any one of them was even marginally pro-Soviet. While Atholl became known as the “Red Duchess” for her stance on Spain, in fact she never deserved that label: at no point did she find communism even remotely attractive and had to be restrained from making unpopular anti-Soviet remarks at the pro-republican rallies at which she spoke.²² Bonham-Carter also found the Soviet system repellent, and Rathbone admitted that there was “much that we may legitimately fear and dislike there.”²³ Yet all four saw Germany and Italy as a much greater threat to international peace and all came to accept the need for pragmatic alliance, Dugdale and Rathbone even speaking publicly in the late thirties at meetings in favor of a rapprochement with the Soviets.

In sum, then, if the “appeasers” promised to preserve peace by meeting dictators’ territorial claims halfway, these women argued that dictators could be restrained only through the credible threat of war. The coherence of their views rested on their sharp distinction between democracy and fascism, between Parliamentary government and fascist states. The power of this distinction overwhelmed all others. And, importantly for our purposes, it overshadowed questions of domestic inequalities between the sexes, and equally the usefulness of a gendered analysis of fascism, as well. True, Rathbone occasionally spoke of the threat of fascist views on women – yet neither she nor any of the other three thought that foreign politics should be approached from a “woman’s point of view.” The feminist credentials of two of the four were suspect anyway: Violet Bonham-Carter’s loyalty to her father had precluded any identification with the suffrage movement, and Katharine Atholl, more strikingly, had been an “anti.” Yet even Eleanor Rathbone, who had spent years in the feminist movement, identified herself publicly and

proudly as a feminist, and crafted one of the most insightful theories of the gendered structure of the economic system, rarely spoke of foreign policy in gendered terms. Unlike (say) Virginia Woolf, whose pacifism stemmed from her appropriation of an identity as “outsider,” all four of these women identified themselves firmly as Britons and as citizens. Also unlike Woolf, then, none would have likened British men’s clubby misogyny to fascism or claimed that British women were fighting fascism by combating masculine dominance at home. To the contrary, the fact that British women were constitutionally and legally free meant that they were just as obliged as men were to defend their democratic freedoms.²⁴

These were our anti-appeasers’ views: how, then, did they apply them? Unsurprisingly, given their strong belief in parliamentary and democratic methods, all four sought to “rouse public opinion,” and hence pressure the Government into a tougher stance. All four were regular speakers for public meetings on Abyssinia, Spain or the Czech crisis; all authored pamphlets or articles, with Rathbone in particular firing off a regular stream of letters to the Manchester Guardian and the Times. The two M.P.s – Atholl and Rathbone – also spoke regularly in Parliament on foreign policy questions and kept up a barrage of parliamentary questions: Rathbone, for example, asked 31 questions on Abyssinia alone in the 1935-6 parliamentary session and 48 questions on Spain the following year. All four also played a prominent role within the interwar panoply of liberal and internationalist organizations. Rathbone acted as President of the Abyssinia Association and served (with Atholl) on the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children’s Committee; Dugdale was a committed Zionist and became closely involved in the work of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. And, in the late thirties, all four women served on the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union – the

organization that brought democratic internationalists together across party lines.

At first glance, this flurry of activity looks quite impressive: but what did it accomplish? These women assumed that the joint pressure of public opinion and rational argument would persuade the Cabinet to shift their views: but did it? If we look at the workings of British politics in the late thirties, we can find some flaws in this reasoning. First, of course, there is the problem that “public opinion,” in the thirties, was by no means opposed to the policy of appeasement – and that even those indications latter cited as evidence of opposition were so ambiguously worded as to be open to entirely different interpretations. Take, for example, the famous “Peace Ballot” organized by the League of Nations Union in 1935. This survey – to which there were some 11 million responses – did reveal a majority of about three-quarters willing to contemplate the use of force in defense of League agreements, but this modest endorsement was embedded in a “vote for peace” that revealed essentially unanimous support for disarmament, abolition of national air forces, and other rather utopian goals.²⁵ Small wonder, then, that both politicians at the time and historians afterwards found the League of Nations Union to be a frustratingly woolly-minded operation, and much more likely to be seen as favoring peace-at-almost-any-price than a robust response to the dictators.

And if public views were unclear and most likely pro-appeasement, a second problem is that such “public opinion” rarely played the role liberals assumed it would in policy-making anyway, especially after Chamberlain’s accession in 1937. Baldwin had shown extraordinarily sensitivity to public opinion and made every effort to cultivate cross-party support; Chamberlain, by contrast, had, as Donald Cameron Watt remarks, a real “distrust and dislike of public opinion.”²⁶ He assumed, quite simply, that the public was ignorant (which was his view as well of most of the M.P.s in the House), and quite calculatingly sought to sway rather than respond to

such “opinion”—an enterprise in which he was greatly aided by the presence of the convinced “appeaser” Geoffrey Dawson at the Times.²⁷ Not that he – and the Government – were entirely indifferent to criticism and advice, but real consultation happened only within very narrow circles. Even the Cabinet was divided into various secretive grouplets or factions, with an “inner circle” of Chamberlain, Hoare, Simon and Inskip and a small group of moderate critics (Hore-Belisha, Elliot, Winterton, de la Warr) ringed by others of no fixed ideological abode. Surrounding them, of course, were other grouplets of ex-Ministers or would-be Ministers – the “Eden Group” (or the “Glamour Boys”), Churchill’s tiny “Old Guard,” Archie Sinclair and his coterie of waffling, high-minded Liberals. Most of these in fact refrained from much strenuous public criticism, instead contenting themselves with intriguing and the illusion of “consultation.” The Labour Party, by contrast, did favor a culture of open debate and collective decision-making, but since that had led them, by the late thirties, to the absurd position of strenuous opposition to fascism coupled with a total unwillingness to rearm (a position Rathbone warned was both logically contradictory and practically harmful), their views were (with reason) ignored. Only Churchill made a point of speaking above party and from a realistic assessment of both strategic interests and practical capacities, but – as we know – his influence before Munich was limited. British policymaking was not, in other words, characterized by open debate and rational argument, but rather by clubbiness, secrecy, and party intrigue.

This was particularly significant for the women I’ve been discussing here, for if most men found it difficult to gain a hearing in these closed political circles, women were, almost by definition, excluded. Enfranchisement had won entry for women into the formal chambers, but not the informal corridors, of power: within the cabals and grouplets of the Commons and Whitehall, they were scarcely to be seen. Within formal discussions and regular meetings, they

found a place, but insofar as politics operated through discussions in the smoking rooms of the Commons, in political clubs, and in private drawing rooms – and it still, to a considerable extent, did so – women were disadvantaged. After all, confabulations of this sort happen because of affinity, personal as well as political – and few elite male politicians felt much sympathy for a crusading renegade like Atholl or a formidably intelligent spinster like Rathbone. A seeming contradiction thrown up by my research is made comprehensible when this political culture is taken into account. Rathbone and Atholl’s political papers, and indeed the papers of many prominent politicians, show how active these women were in foreign policy debates, yet the political memoirs of those same politicians rarely mention them. And this is because – whatever their knowledge and views – they were never part of the clubby insiderish world of British high politics, and hence weren’t thought to matter.

But they did in fact matter: the signal accomplishment of these four women is that they were able to have some real impact on the politics of their time. How did they do that? They did so, first, by adjusting to and even learning to exploit the culture and proclivities of Parliament and Whitehall, and, second, by using their own status as women and as outsiders to exercise either a more “gendered” or more independent form of influence. Let me spend the rest of this talk, then, exploring the nature of that accomplishment.

Rathbone, certainly, was the person who played the first game – that of exploiting the culture of secrecy in Whitehall and Parliament – best. She knew perfectly well that Cabinet ministers or under-secretaries didn’t usually want to discuss policy towards Spanish refugees or Czechs trapped in the Sudetenland with her, but (having always done her homework) she could use the threat of parliamentary questions or other political exposure to force them to listen.

Understanding that she could easily be seen as a scold or a nag, she also worked in Parliament very largely through other people, feeding information and questions to sympathetic allies. She had the wit to cultivate independent sources of information outside Whitehall, mobilizing her feminist contacts in Palestine and Eastern Europe. Both she and Atholl were also able to persuade dissident figures in Whitehall to help with specific plans: Basil Liddell-Hart thus agreed to verify Rathbone's estimates about armaments when she wrote War Can Be Averted; Vansittart encouraged Atholl to attempt the trip she made with Rathbone and Dorothea Layton to Eastern Europe in February of 1937; Hugh Seton-Watson briefed them before the trip. Finally, aware that "insiderism" could render them marginal, both Rathbone and Atholl helped to set up cross-party informal parliamentary organizations through which they could make their voices heard.

Rathbone established, in succession, a Parliamentary Committee on Spain, a Parliamentary Committee for Refugees, and, in the early days of the war, a cross-party Parliamentary Action Group. Groups of this kind – being more formal than dining circles or Cabinet factions but much less public than bodies like the LNU – appealed mostly to those who (for whatever reason) saw themselves as outsiders, but they did provide Rathbone with a set of like-minded contacts and allies. Rathbone's secretaries remember, especially, her collaborations with "the Victors and the Harolds" – with Victor Cazalet and Victor Gollancz on refugee questions, Harold Macmillan on economic planning and social policy, and Harold Nicolson on efforts to rescue Jews. Moreover, one of Rathbone's groups – the Parliamentary Action Group she established with Clem Davies of the Liberal Party shortly after the war – did play a central role, sustaining an anti-Chamberlainite faction of Liberals and Tories until the group fragmented (or came into office) on Chamberlain's fall.²⁸ Activity of this kind never turned Rathbone (and still less, Atholl) into a political insider, but it won her the admiration of her fellow M.P.s and the grudging respect of officials in

Whitehall, who privately admitted that she had sometimes caught them out.

Yet these women didn't simply learn the ropes of a political system structured against them, they also learned to take advantage of their very "difference," of their obvious femininity in an overwhelmingly masculine world, in a number of different ways. All four, for example, took advantage of the fact that women were expected to have a particular affinity for philanthropic and humanitarian causes to interest themselves closely in the refugee crisis of the thirties. Blanche Dugdale spent much of the thirties and the early war years battling the Colonial Office over visas for Jews to go to Palestine; Bonham-Carter also helped to raise money for the support of Jewish refugees and, in 1939, intervened to arranged passage for one Jewish family from Czechoslovakia to Britain.²⁹ Atholl and Rathbone likewise worked with the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Children's Committee to raise funds for food and medical supplies, and helped to organize the reception of some 4,000 Basque children in England. For Rathbone, this was just the beginning of about ten years of work with refugees, with those from Spain joined by Czech and German social democrats, and Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. The Parliamentary Committee for Refugees she established worked not only to ease restrictions on entry and liberalize policy, but also – importantly – took up the cases of individual refugees, thus giving the friendless and isolated some advocates in high places. All four women held British policy in part responsible for the danger in which republicans, democrats and Jews found themselves, and they were (to the intense irritation of Home Office officials) indefatigable in their efforts to supply these threatened people with refuge. When that same Home Office interned those Jewish or social democratic refugees as "enemy aliens" during the invasion scare in 1940, it was thus Rathbone's committee that not only led the public agitation for their release but also did the painstaking work of advocating for particular cases. And when news of the extermination

camps in Poland reached Britain in 1942, Rathbone's parliamentary committee again launched the agitation for "rescue."

Refugee work thus offered these women an appropriately female and humanitarian framework through which they could both ameliorate individual suffering and criticize Chamberlainite policies, but these four also exploited their position as women in two other ways. Here, however, one must distinguish between the activities of Dugdale and Bonham-Carter on the one hand, and of Atholl and Rathbone on the other. Blanche Dugdale and Violet Bonham-Carter were both married women with children (and hence reassuringly domestic); they were also – simply by birth – political "insiders" in a way Atholl and Rathbone were not (the former's aristocratic connections and the latter's impeccable Liberal genealogy notwithstanding). Neither Dugdale nor Bonham-Carter ever succeeded in entering parliament; they were, however, able to exercise political "influence" in a more traditional gendered way. Family connections and political intelligence combined to make them into ideal confidantes and (almost) salonnières; in a sense, they played a role analogous to that assumed by Nancy Astor for Lord Lothian and the Cliveden set. Bonham-Carter had been, from girlhood, on a first-name basis with most of the Liberal leadership, and she never hesitated to tell them what she thought: Archie Sinclair's criticism of Chamberlain in the debate following the Munich agreements is probably partly due to her influence (although Sinclair voted in support of the government anyway). Dugdale was friendly with several somewhat critical members of the Chamberlain cabinet and spoke with Walter Elliot almost daily. She tried hard to convince both Elliot and de la Warr to join Duff Cooper in resigning from the Government after Munich; when she failed, she broke off personal contact with Elliot for a time.³⁰

Atholl and Rathbone responded very differently, but also in ways determined in part by

their sex. Instead of falling back on opportunities for influence traditionally available to women, they used their “outsider” status to carve out new and independent political roles. First, working against the culture of party loyalty, they consistently crossed party lines. Of course, this was inevitable for Rathbone, who had left the Liberal Party in her girlhood over its lack of support for women’s suffrage, and had served for years in local politics as an Independent. When she stood for an English Universities seat as an Independent and (against expectation) won, she cleverly used the anomaly of university representation and her own reputation for intellectual rigor as an argument for parliamentary independence, not only holding her seat with ease until her death but also “setting a fashion for independence” in the University seats more generally. She thus spoke what she saw as the truth on foreign policy (sometimes against her constituents’ wishes), criticizing equally the Conservatives craven kowtowing to dictators and the Labour Party’s irresponsible pacifism. If Rathbone was able to work with members of all parties with impunity, however, for party members like Atholl such behaviour could entail real political risks. Members of Parliament were supposed to follow the party line, and while many faced occasional trouble for insubordination, few renounced government protection to follow an independent line. Churchill, of course, had done so on India, and Atholl (an unapologetic defender of the Raj) had followed him; in April of 1938 she was again deprived of the Conservative whip for her criticisms of appeasement. Churchill, in trouble with his own constituency association, advised Atholl to hold on and not resign, but Atholl – the soul of honor in such matters – did so anyway. So seriously did Conservative Central Office treat the subsequent by-election that even Tory allies like Churchill and Boothby were persuaded not to speak publicly in her favor, and Chamberlain professed himself personally delighted by her defeat.³¹ Always on the margins of Tory politics, Atholl showed herself willing to run political risks that no male anti-appeaser would run; the

Churchillians admired her grit, but never rewarded her with another parliamentary seat.

And if Atholl ran some unusual political risks, both she and Rathbone ran some personal risks as well, undertaking some difficult foreign travel to proselytize for democracy and to judge complex international situations for themselves. Much was made at the time of Neville Chamberlain's fortitude in undertaking – at a relatively advanced age – tiring airplane trips to confer with Hitler in Bad Godesburg and Munich, but Rathbone and Atholl (both in their sixties) certainly undertook much tougher journeys. In February of 1937 they endured a grueling fourteen days of enormous public meetings punctuated with overnight train journeys through Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia in an effort to strengthen those countries' resistance to fascism; two months later, they came under fire in Valencia during a fact-finding trip to Republican Spain with former League of Nations official Dame Rachel Crowdy and Labour M.P. Ellen Wilkinson (who was already in trouble with her own party for collaboration with communists³²). Rathbone's campaigns in favor of Indian women's franchise in the early thirties had taught her the need to "see for herself" on foreign policy questions, and she never forgot that lesson: in January of 1939, she spent a week herself in Prague trying to sort out visas for refugees. In essence, having (to their minds) shown the government's foreign policy to be both politically dangerous and morally bankrupt, Rathbone and Atholl spent the late thirties trying to operate an alternative democratic foreign policy of their own, complete with diplomatic missions, alliance building, and foreign aid. In one or two cases, they even found themselves skirting the boundaries of legality – as, for instance, when Rathbone, almost frantic with worry about the likely fate of Republican activists as Franco's forces advanced, simply tried to hire a ship to run the blockade and take refugees stranded at Valencia to safety. The Foreign Office blocked her efforts and the Republicans were duly executed, adding another few thousand names to the list of victims Rathbone laid at the

Foreign Office's door.³³

Why did these four women find Chamberlainite policies so appalling, and why did they run these risks? In reading through their correspondence and speeches, one would have to conclude that they were driven in part by shame. Violet Bonham-Carter, who had a visit from Jan Masaryk (son of Czechoslovakia's first President) the day after Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement, vividly recalled "her own burning shame" in his presence; similarly, when the war finally came, Baffy Dugdale recorded in her diary, "the shame is over."³⁴ Rathbone, Mary Stocks recalled, also felt a kind of relief when the war finally came: "Britain," she wrote, "has expiated her sins."³⁵

What such language reveals is not simply the depth of their dislike of appeasement, but equally the power and character of their patriotism. That patriotism had two sides, with love of country linked always to a commitment to democratic forms. Believing absolutely in Britain's promises of moral leadership, they were sick with shame when those principles – and vulnerable foreign populations -- were betrayed; as citizens of a democratic state, moreover, they held themselves and their fellow-countrymen responsible. Citizens of democracies, they felt, whatever their party or sex, were answerable both for the actions of their governments and the defense of democracy more generally – and while that responsibility brought with it political risks, they did not think these avoidable. After all, as Violet Bonham-Carter told one large gathering, democracy was "the one cause still left worth dying for."³⁶ They were not warmongers: a friend of Lloyd George's who once accused Rathbone and her ally Margery Corbett-Ashby of being willing to throw away "millions of young lives as if they were ordering a chicken to be killed for dinner" could not have been more wrong.³⁷ Bonham-Carter had lost a brother during the first World War

and lived in terror of losing her son in the second; Rathbone refused to leave London during the Blitz because she felt so strongly that she too should risk her life.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is tempting to let these women just a little bit off the hook. After all, they themselves had never underestimated the threat posed by fascism, and had been untiring in their efforts both to alert their fellow countrymen to that threat and to aid its victims. Moreover, as we have seen, the British political system was not quite as democratic as they thought: whatever their efforts at influence, Chamberlainite policy making remained secretive and closed, and even the circles of Commons insiders almost entirely male. Yet, while these women came to understand that political landscape, they moderated their strategies and not their arguments: at no point did they argue (as did, for example, Woolf) that Britain was just another masculinist and undemocratic state, and that women – as outsiders – were absolved from its defense. Instead, having accepted that enfranchisement entailed responsibility, they sought other – and sometimes more traditionally gendered – means of making their influence felt. They were hard on the men around them, and still harder on themselves – but there are people around today who owe their lives to the fact that these four women, against the political culture of their times, insisted on their responsibility for the foreign policy of their nation.

Notes

1

Entry for Sept. 20, 1938, Baffy: The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale, 1936-1947, ed. N.A. Rose (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1973), pp. 99-100; Entry for 20 September 1938, Harold

2 Check date for LNU meeting. Birn, citing Baffy Dugdale's diary, gives it as 28 Sept. My notes from LNU papers say 29 Sept., and Pottle's account in Champion Redoubtable says same. Pottle cites Baffy Dugdale, though – and this is clearly dated 28th.

3 Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1914-1945, ed. Mark Pottle (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), pp. 190-91.

4 Entry for Sept. 30, 1938, Baffy, pp. 109-110.

5 Rathbone Papers (R.P.), Liverpool University Library, XIV.3.58, Speech Notes for a Meeting on the Czech and German Crisis, Friends House, 30 Sept. 1938.

6 Donald Cameron Watt, How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 76.

7 Entry for 28 Sept. 1938, Baffy, pp. 107-8.

8 Arthur Salter, who quite honestly admits that he wished he had remained seated but did not, rightly says that the response to Chamberlain's speech is only comprehensible with the help of crowd psychology; Members were simply swept away. Salter, Slave of the Lamp: A Public Servant's Notebook (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), pp. 140-2.

9 S.J. Hetherington, Katharine Atholl, 1874-1960: Against the Tide (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), pp. 201-9.

10 R.P. XIV.3.11, Notes for Speech to the P.R. Society, 10 May 1933.

11 Speech to the Liberal conference in Scarborough, May 18, 1933, quoted in Champion Redoubtable, p. 181.

12 Violet Bonham-Carter to Mark Bonham-Carter, 15 Oct. 1933, quoted in Champion Redoubtable, p. 182.

13 Hetherington, pp. 169-70.

14 Violet Bonham-Carter, speech to the League of Nations Union on 4 Dec. 1936, in Champion Redoubtable, pp. 188-9.

15

R.P. XIV.3.34, Speech to the ILP Summer School, 3 Aug. 1936.

16 BLPES, LNU papers, I.3, General Council Minutes, 15-17, 1936, p. 24.

17 R.P. XIV.3.11, Notes for Speech to the P.R. Society, 10 May 1933.

18 Cited in Champion Redoubtable, p. 186.

19 Daniel Waley, British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War, 1935-6 (London: Maurice Temple Smith), p. 45.

20 For Rathbone's views on Ethiopia, see R.P. XIV.3.32, Speech to LNU meeting at Albert Hall, 8 May 1936; also (book on Br and Abyss.). For Dugdale, see her entry of March 12, 1938, in Baffy, p. 8.

21 Violet Bonham-Carter, speech to the League of Nations Union on 4 Dec. 1936, in Champion Redoubtable, p. 189.

22 Jim Fryth, The Signal was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-39

(London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), pp. 201-2.

23 R.P. XIV.3.58, Speech on the Czech and German Crisis, Friends House, 30 Sept. 1938.

24 Compare, for example, Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas (New York, 1938) with Rathbone's War Can Be Averted (London: Gollancz, 1938); for which, see, Susan Pedersen, Women's Stake in Democracy: Eleanor Rathbone's Answer to Virginia Woolf (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, 2000).

25 Birn, ch. 7.

26 Watt, How War Came, p. 78.

27 Cite Lockhart and Liddell-Hart memoirs.

28 Both Boothby and Amery recall the importance of this parliamentary group, which held regular sessions on the conduct of the war for about a year. See,

29 Champion Redoubtable, pp. 182-3, 193-4.

30 Baffy, pp. 109, 112.

31 Robert Rhodes James, Bob Boothby: A Portrait, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), pp. 184-9 ; Chamberlain to Margesson (Conservative Chief Whip), quoted in R.A.C. Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 190.

32

Betty D. Vernon, Ellen Wilkinson (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 168-9.

33 See R.P. XIV.2.12 (8) and (55) for Rathbone's efforts to remove these refugees and find a host country for them, and F.O. 371/24154/WWW6012 for her bitter correspondence with R.A. Butler, then Undersecretary at the Foreign Office, after the reprisals and executions.

34 Champion Redoubtable, p. 192; Baffy, p. 150.

35 Mary Danvers Stocks, Eleanor Rathbone: A Biography (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), p. 267.

36 Violet Bonham-Carter, speech to the League of Nations Union on 4 Dec. 1936, in Champion Redoubtable, p. 189.

37 House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers, Box 11, File 6, G/11/6/61, A.P. Laurie to Miss Stevenson, Mar. 31, 1936 (check).