

Myths and legends about World War II exposed at Australian SEP public meetings

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party in Australia held public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne this month on “Seventy years since World War II: lessons and warnings”. Audiences of workers, students, unemployed, professional people and retired workers, originally from many parts of the world, listened with great interest to the main report, delivered by Nick Beams, the SEP national secretary and a member of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (the text of Beams’s lecture is posted here today).

Beams systematically laid bare the myths that the Second World War—which had erupted just 20 years after the end of the first—was fought by Britain and the US for “democracy” against fascism. His presentation included telling displays of pre-war quotes by Winston Churchill, who was to become Britain’s war-time prime minister, expressing enthusiasm for the Italian and German fascist regimes’ quest to combat the supposed “world-wide” Jewish “conspiracy” and “cancerous growth of Bolshevism”. Behind the initial “appeasement” policy of the British ruling elite was the hope that Hitler would, as he had foreshadowed in *Mein Kampf*, seek to focus Germany’s expansion to the east, against the Soviet Union.

Turning to the material economic interests that ultimately drove the war, Beams presented an equally revealing quote from a British official, explaining that Britain was seeking to defend its global empire from its rival Germany. Whereas Britain, in the words of First Sea Lord, Sir Ernle Chatfield, was in “the remarkable position of not wanting to quarrel with anybody because we have got most of the world already,” the United States had eventually entered the war in order to reorganise the globe under the domination of American business and production methods.

Drawing the political lessons of the world wars, Beams underscored the analysis made by Lenin and Trotsky that under capitalism periods of peace were no more than interludes, in which the shifting power relations between the major economic powers inevitably prepared new conflagrations. Beams warned that this was not an abstract question, with American imperialism—the dominant power since 1945—now seeking to offset its protracted economic decline by using military might to boost its geopolitical position.

Beams emphasised the conclusions drawn by Lenin and Trotsky on the need for revolutionary parties and a new international to unify and mobilise the world working class against the nationalism and

opportunism that had led to the collapse of the Second International in 1914. Today, another descent into global barbarism can be prevented only by “the entry of the masses” to take political power and reorganise the world along rational, socialist lines. Beams stressed that the failure of the largest global antiwar marches in history, to stop the invasion of Iraq in 2003, demonstrated the futility of trying to pressure any capitalist governments or the UN to peacefully change course.

Many questions were asked at both meetings, including about the reasons behind the US entry into World War II, the implications of the global financial crisis and the decline of the US dollar against gold, and the underlying cause of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Others related to the emergence of the Chinese working class and historical issues such as the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Popular Front of the 1930s and the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939.

After the Sydney meeting, the WSWS spoke to Mike, a first-year Arts student at the University of Sydney, who has been reading the WSWS for about two years. This was his first SEP public meeting, which he decided to attend after reading the notice on the WSWS.

Mike described the SEP’s analysis of history as “three dimensional”. A “two dimensional” view of history, which could be found in various history textbooks, took “at face value” the myth that World War II was “a war of democracy against dictatorship”. The SEP’s analysis went “deeper” than this to examine the conflicting interests of the rival powers, including the opposed agendas of Britain and the United States.

“A two dimensional point of view will basically say Britain and the US were democracies and it stops there ... What came out here [in the lecture] was no, that’s not what they actually wanted to do. America was interested in shaping the world to suit her own interests. Britain was more interested in fighting the war on the defence of her own empire.”

Fariba, a mature-age university graduate, originally from Iran, said she found “many interesting things” in Nick Beams’s report, as she had at previous SEP public meetings. She had found out about the meetings from the WSWS, which she reads often.

“What I found most valuable is the scientific approach and the historical analysis of events that concern the whole world, like the world wars and their underlying economic causes. By the end of the report you have an overall picture or framework. You can make the

connections between economics, politics and history.

“I knew that behind World War I and World War II was capitalism seeking markets, and the economic crises, but the lecture gave me a lot of detailed information about the causes, and also about how the social democrats diverted the working class from the right path.”

Fariba said the discussion had great relevance for the current political ferment in Iran. “We have a crisis of leadership today in Iran, with the people who oppose the regime trapped politically behind [Mir Hossein] Mousavi and nationalism. Because of the different levels of development in the world, socialism can only overcome the problems on a global scale.”

Lien, originally from Vietnam, said: “I attended the meeting because the topic really interested me. I had studied World War II when I was in high school and I wanted to see if the reasons for World War II outlined at the meeting were different to what I had been told.

“I was surprised by Nick Beams’s report of the American firebombing of Tokyo. He said that more people died in the firebombing of Tokyo in a six-hour period than ever in the history of mankind. I knew about the firebombing but I didn’t know they had killed so many people. It was a big shock. Before the meeting I read David North’s report on the WWSWS about World War II and his statistics on the numbers of people who died. That was a lot of people!

“I was also surprised when I heard Nick Beams say that war could be prevented by a revolution of the working class. I know that powerful countries start wars but I didn’t think that wars could be prevented.”

Marz, a member of the International Students for Social Equality at the University of Newcastle, found particularly revealing Nick Beams’s exposure of the myths that had grown up around the entry of Britain and the US into World War II. Beams had shown “the actual interests of the capitalist powers and the political ideology that serves their class interests”. Marz had not previously seen the anti-socialist, anti-Semitic quotes from Winston Churchill to which Beams referred in his lecture. “It was very close to what Hitler was preaching.”

Marz said the media picture that Beams had displayed of Australian Defence Minister John Faulkner awarding US General David Petraeus an honorary Order of Australia “shows the ‘left’ parties’ political agenda, where they stand, and who they support when times get tough.” In the US, Barack Obama “claimed that he was against war, was anti-war, but when he got into power he became pro-war, just like Bush, because he serves the class interests of the financial elite.”

At the Melbourne meeting, Jasmine, a librarian, said she had been looking for a long time for a socialist perspective on world war. “Conventional accounts of the Second World War are severely lacking. I thought Nick’s lecture was brilliant. I believe there has been a lot of mythology about why the war happened. I also think there are definite warnings [about another world war], so I came along here expecting to hear things that would be pointed out paralleling the present-day international geo-political situation.

“I became disillusioned with the Labor Party. It’s probably taken

me a long time to realise that the Labor Party is a manager of capitalism, trying to stop the harder edges of capitalism but not wanting to change capitalism radically in a direction that would give people more control over their lives.

“I went on all of the demonstrations against the war on Iraq. I was just devastated when the invasion went ahead. I thought there were so many people marching. I didn’t realise what a bunch of gangsters were in the White House. I have been involved in intense reading ever since. That was when I started rethinking a lot of things.

“People were hoping to stop the invasion of Iraq—an absolutely criminal enterprise. There were things we didn’t realise, such as that the UN had become totally subordinated to the US. It was a broken reed. It was used to try and give some sort of cover to the US invasion.”

Mary Nemeth, an arts writer, said: “A friend brought me, but I came to the meeting because I think it is a very interesting topic. I lived through the war but how much do I actually know about it in terms of a continued appraisal or analysis of what was happening? It is satisfying that such a structured analysis is available and where the threads make even more sense than if you were trying to pick through disparate happenings after the last 50 to 60 years.

“Capitalism has been dying for a long time; that process has been underway already and hopefully this will speed the revolution. Young people will come to an appreciation that there is the possibility for a different type of life. As a child growing up, politics was around our table all the time. There are a lot of lies out there and it is becoming clear who the liars are. They are myth-making for very negative political purposes.”



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