

Stand Fast for Peace & Freedom:  
A Study of Foreign Policy of the British Labour Party in Opposition 1931 to 1940

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the evolution of foreign policy within the British Labour Party during its years in opposition from 1931 to 1940. It argues that Labour policy was locked in a bitter divide between idealist and pragmatic forces who both sought a foreign policy which could effectively counter the spread of fascism. In 1933 Labour had a radical turn towards a policy of war resistance and abandoned hope in multilateralism after witnessing the failure of the World Disarmament Conference. Labour would undertake a long and difficult process of gradually shifting away from this radical turn first by trying to revive its faith in collective security through the League of Nations and later by accepting rearmament and a return to the traditional balance of power system. Labour policy reached a turning point in 1938 when it found an honourable cause to defend Czechoslovakian democracy from the reach of Adolf Hitler. It was able to galvanise cross-party support and generate significant public sympathy for its hostility to Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. This stand against the Prime Minister, while unsuccessful, laid the foundation for Labour to return to Government in 1940 during a period of national emergency. The lessons learned from these experiences allowed the Party to help shape the postwar world after it secured a majority Government in 1945.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents Edith and Albert Potter who inspired my love of history and a keen interest to learn all I could about the United Kingdom. Their journey from the working-class neighbourhoods of Bradford England to building a life in Canada has changed the fortunes of my entire family. Edith shared with me a love of reading and the joys of learning about the fascinating events of the past. Albert imparted the importance of hard work and the rewarding nature of a life of learning and teaching from his time as a professor at Conestoga College in Kitchener Ontario. Edith did not get to see the formation of this project, but her influence has been felt throughout and inspired my aspirations of making a career of learning and teaching about all things Britain.

Albert was keenly involved in the project and loved to talk and reflect on the new insights I found about the story of the Labour Party during his earliest years. It was a strange thing for him to have his grandson spending so much time learning about political figures (such as Clement Attlee) who had dominated dinner table conversations with his father during the 1940s. It was a wonderful fact that the research for this project brought me to Bradford in 2019 and gave me the chance to see all the places which I had heard so much about from Albert's youth. The chance to talk about my findings and sight seeing during that trip with Albert during his final weeks brought immense joy to both of us. This thesis is the product of love and encouragement given from Edith and Albert and would not be what it is without their profound influence on my life. They imparted a love of learning, the importance of hard work and a fascination with Britain which will remain with me for the rest of my life.

## Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations .....	ix
Quotes .....	x
Introduction.....	1
“Bolshevism Run Mad" British Labour in Crisis: 1931 to 1932 .....	28
The Acid Test of Socialism: 1933 to 1934 .....	59
1935 and the Year of Pragmatic Revolution.....	104
“Malevolent Neutrality”: 1936-1937 .....	157
“Pacifists Must Take Sides” January to June 1938.....	207
Stand Fast for Peace & Freedom! The Sudetenland Crisis of 1938 .....	247
“A Bellicose Party”: Labour and the Countdown to War.....	310
“To Secure a Swift Victory and a Just Peace” Labour’s War in Opposition.....	348
Conclusion .....	402
Bibliography .....	413
Glossary .....	423



## List of Abbreviations

ACIQ: Advisory Committee for International Questions (Labour Party)

ARP: Air Raid Protection

BUF: British Union of Fascists

CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain

DLP: Divisional Labour Party

ILP: Independent Labour Party

KPD: Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)

LNU: League of Nations Union

LSI: Labour and Socialist International

MP: Member of Parliament

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NEC: National Executive Committee

NJC: National Joint Council (later referred to as the National Council of Labour, NCL)

PLP: Parliamentary Labour Party

SPD: Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)

TUC: Trades Union Congress

UN: United Nations

## Quotes

*Study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.*

Winston Churchill to an American student before a Coronation luncheon in Westminster Hall, 27 May 1953.

*The struggle for the freedom of the individual soul takes different forms at various periods. Here in Britain we have achieved freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of speech and action within the law, freedom for workers to combine together. They are victories which we will not allow to be reversed, but the fight for freedom continues.*

Clement Attlee, broadcast to the nation, 1940.

## Introduction

Opposition politics in the United Kingdom can encompass a remarkably different experience to that viewed from the lens of key Governmental figures. In Government it falls to ministers and the cabinet to enact policy which responds to the problems of the day, and as much as possible, avert future pitfalls. Governing parties are beholden to events and often are tied to the way their policy impacts the state. It is often a more rigid and inflexible position compared to those leading the Official Opposition. The Government's opponents have a greater degree of flexibility in their policy advocacy. They can change positions on a given issue with fewer political consequences than the Government. This is inherent in a job of informing the public what ought to be done, identifying mistakes in policy and always seeking to demonstrate viable alternatives to what the Prime Minister and their cabinet enact. There is also less accountability expected from those in opposition as they are not in charge of Government ministries or dealings with foreign states. The danger of being in opposition is that political parties locked in long periods out of office are prone to radicalisation.<sup>1</sup> Those figures who retain their seats in elections their party loses can hold significant sway over Party policy and shape its responses to Government actions. In particularly brutal elections the ones to retain seats are often from those constituencies which make up the Party base and therefore are often more ideological than those candidates who need to demonstrate broad political appeal to win election.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparative study of radicalisation in British opposition politics between Jeremy Corbyn and George Lansbury see: Patrick Diamond, "Assessing the Performance of UK Opposition Leaders: Jeremy Corbyn's 'Straight Talking, Honest Politics.'" *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2016): 15-24. For more details on how Labour politics has endured periods of radicalisation in opposition see pages 395 and 396 of this dissertation. For an examination of similar contemporary challenges in the Conservative Party see: Tim Bale. *The Conservative Party: from Thatcher to Cameron*. Cambridge. Polity Press, 2016.

Yet, opposition politics is also dominated by attempts to win the ‘next contest’ to return to the halls of power and make good on implementing the ideas developed whilst out of office. The challenge is to use the time in opposition to identify a popular set of policies which better address the problems of the present than the governing party can. To develop political platforms that can have a broad appeal it is often necessary for parties to keep their own radicals in check.

The story of the Labour Party in opposition from 1931 to 1940 encapsulates the challenges that befall many political movements who are out of Government. When one looks at the situation the Party faced in the fall of 1931 it is remarkable that Labour survived as a serious political movement. It had suffered from splits, with some of its key leaders publicly breaking ranks and informing the electorate that Labour had gone mad, claiming it had lost any notion of pragmatism in favour of an adherence to its ideological values. Whether accurate or not, the 1931 election was a disaster which suggested that the public did not believe Labour was willing to put the interests of the country over that of its party or trade union affiliates. The journey back into Government was an effort to learn this lesson from 1931 and Labour was able to accomplish the task when it joined Winston Churchill’s wartime coalition in May of 1940.

### Labour’s Foreign Policy Tradition

The Labour Party emerged from the social changes of the late nineteenth century as trade unionists and socialists felt dissatisfied with inadequate and slow reforms from the Liberal Party. Most frustrating for union members was the lackluster Liberal reaction to a series of court rulings which threatened the right to picket and effectively the right to strike.<sup>2</sup> The Conservatives had minority governments in the 1890s and those in the Labour Movement believed that the

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<sup>2</sup> David Powell, “The New Liberalism and the Rise of Labour,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (1986): 374.

Liberals had little interest in fighting for them as the Tories allowed strike breakers to associate in several industries. In 1899 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) decided to organise a unique political force which would represent their interests (and improve legal protections for unions) in Parliament. The new political grouping was agreed to after a meeting of trade union representatives and prominent social democrats in 1900 where the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was formed. The LRC contested elections soon after its founding and began to develop a clear voting block in Parliament separate from the Liberals. After the 1906 General Election the LRC returned 29 MPs and decided to rename itself the Labour Party.<sup>3</sup> The Party continued to slowly grow its seat count, in 1910 reaching 42 (there were two elections held in 1910 and Labour reached 42 in the second). This was still a small group in Parliament but with the ruling Liberals forming a slim minority Government, Labour support would be necessary to pass critical legislation. Labour expanded its influence when it joined the Government in a wartime coalition during the First World War. After 1918 Labour benefited from the decline of the Liberal Party and replaced them as the chief opponent to the Conservatives in British politics during the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> The Party would go on to form two minority Governments, in 1924 and from 1929 to 1931. Since this formative era in the 1920s, Labour has remained one of the two governing parties in British politics (the other being the Conservatives) up to the present day.

Labour's foreign policy development was often of secondary importance to the Party, especially in its formative years. There was a reasonable logic to the fact that Labour prioritised

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, (London: Palgrave, 2015), 8.

<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding Labour's role in the First World War see; Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* (London: Bodley Head, 2010); G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914*, (London: Routledge, 2020); for key personalities see; David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, (London: Cohen Books, 1997); Chris Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson*, (London: GPC Books, 1990); John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); For more on Labour's political advances in the 1920s see; John Sheppard and Keith Laybourn, *Labour's First Government*, (New York: Palgrave, 2006); John Sheppard, Johnathan Davis and Chris Wrigley, *Labour's Second Government*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

domestic policy as it was most directly impactful on the daily lives of the working class. However, foreign policy could not be completely sidelined if Labour were to become a genuine party of Government.<sup>5</sup> At the start of the twentieth century the United Kingdom remained the pre-eminent global power with an Empire that stretched across the world (containing a quarter of the world's population) and whose economic influence reached nearly every country.<sup>6</sup> Traditional foreign policy practiced by the Liberals and Conservatives centred on the 'continental strategy': the belief that British security was best preserved by maintaining a balance of power on the European Continent. As this system was developed during a time when the world was dominated by European Empires, any policy affecting European stability carried with it global implications. This balance of power was achieved through limited British interventions to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic power which would dominate the continent.<sup>7</sup> At times this also involved Britain entering alliance systems with European partners to prevent the emergence of a dominant power. Labour envisaged a foreign policy which challenged these established norms and embraced new solutions to preserve peace and secure opportunities for economic prosperity.

Labour defined its alternative foreign policy around internationalism. In essence, internationalism provided a means of looking beyond the traditional confines of the 'nation state' to solve global challenges. Labour believed in looking for different institutional mechanisms to

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<sup>5</sup> Foreign policy of the Labour Party has a small scholarship in contrast to general histories of the Party or studies of its members. General examinations of Labour Foreign Policy include, Lucian Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party*, (I.B. Tauris: London, 2016); John Callaghan, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy*, (Routledge: New York, 2007); Kenneth Miller, *Socialism and Foreign Policy*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967); Rhiannon Vickers, *Labour and the World*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Henry Winkler, *British Labour Seeks a Foreign Policy*, (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Michael Gordon, *Conflict and Consensus in Labour's Foreign Policy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969). For Labour Foreign Policy in the 1930s see John Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World: Vol 1*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Most famous of these situations would be when England challenged Spain in 1588-89, France in the War of Spanish Succession, Revolutionary and later Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany in the First World War, and later Nazi Germany.

garner cooperation across the international community. During the First World War Labour hoped that such cooperation could be achieved by the creation of a new international authority to settle differences between states.<sup>8</sup> This led Labour to support American President Woodrow Wilson in the creation of the League of Nations in the war's aftermath. The League represented wider Labour desires for the establishment of multiple international institutions to foster cooperation and enact multilateral solutions to the world's problems.<sup>9</sup>

Labour foreign policy was further developed over the course of the 1920s. Labour brought its internationalist ideas to Downing Street when it formed two minority governments in 1924 and from 1929-1931 respectively. Labour viewed the League of Nations as an institution which could prevent future wars through a policy of collective security between member states. League-levied collective security could provide a genuine alternative to the traditional balance of power politics which had, in Labour's eyes, produced the conditions for the outbreak of the First World War. The Party combined its faith in the League with support for disarmament as the two underpinnings of its 1920s foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> There were both practical and ideological reasons for Labour's faith in disarmament. Practically speaking, Labour (alongside Liberals and Conservatives) supported disarmament due to economic considerations as Britain was deeply

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<sup>8</sup> Vickers, 6.

<sup>9</sup> For general overviews of the state of postwar Britain see; A.J.P Taylor, *English History: 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory*, (London: Penguin, 2004), Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age*, (London: Penguin, 2009); for a recent assessment of British Grand Strategy during the interwar years see; David French, *Deterrence, Coercion and Appeasement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). For an examination of the role of the League in interwar affairs see, Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); for more on the development of the League as an institution see, Ruth Henig, *The Peace That Never Was*, (London: Haus, 2019). To see how the League influenced British political discourse; Kaiga Sakiko, *Britain and the Intellectual Origins of The League of Nations, 1914-1919*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), and Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations, democracy, citizenship, and internationalism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); For the role of the League and the Second Labour Government; David Carlton, *MacDonald Versus Henderson*, (London: Macmillan, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> For more information see; Ashworth, Callaghan, Carlton, French, Gordon, Miller, Naylor, and Vickers.

indebted from its role in the First World War and preferred to inject money into expanded social programs instead of funding an unnecessarily large military.<sup>11</sup> This was embodied in the implementation of the Ten-Year Rule in 1919. It was initially presented by the Secretary of War, Winston Churchill, and proposed that the British military should frame its strategic planning on the assumption that no war would occur between the Great Powers in the next ten years.<sup>12</sup> The rule would later be extended a second time in 1929 as the state of international affairs still showed little potential for Britain to enter a major conflict. Ideological reasons for Labour's policy of disarmament were centred on its longstanding anti-militarism. Labour would act on these concerns with support for multilateral disarmament conferences such as the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 and the London Naval Treaty of 1930. Both proved to be effective examples of arms control as all the Great Powers shrank the size of their naval forces and accepted limitations upon the armour and firepower of the warships they retained.<sup>13</sup> It was through this dual focus on disarmament and faith in the League that Labour framed its foreign policy during its years in office. The chief architects of this internationalist policy, Arthur Henderson (foreign secretary) and Ramsay MacDonald (Prime Minister), had little reason to doubt by early 1931 that such policy would continue to benefit Labour well into the future.

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<sup>11</sup> B.J.C. McKercher, "The Politics of Naval Arms Limitation in Britain in the 1920s," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (1993): 36. Cost cutting was also done for colonial policing by investing in the Royal Air Force, thereby requiring less active ground personnel to fight insurgencies.

<sup>12</sup> It was a reasonable position as Britain's enemies or potential enemies were largely destroyed. Germany, Austria, Turkey, and Russia were all exhausted and had lost much of their military capability compared to their power in 1914.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the political struggles in Britain over disarmament see; Carolyn Kitching, *Britain and the Problem of International Disarmament, 1919-1934*, (London: Routledge, 2016), Dick Richardson, *The Evolution of British Disarmament Policy in the 1920s*, (London: Pinter, 1989), Andrew Webster, *Strange Allies: Britain, France and the Dilemmas of Disarmament and Security, 1919-1933*, (London: Routledge, 2020).



## Methodology

This thesis is organised in chronological fashion as this is most effective for charting the gradualist nature of Labour's shifts in its policy towards matters of war and peace. It analyzes events from the fall of the Second Labour Government in August of 1931 to Labour's return to government with its entry into the Churchill wartime coalition in May 1940. This period in opposition saw Labour radically reform its foreign policy in response to the collapse of the post-1919 world order and the rise of fascism across the globe.<sup>14</sup> This thesis argues that the Labour Party undertook a dramatic radical pacifist turn to embrace war resistance in its foreign policy in the early 1930s due to a lack of faith in multilateralism to mitigate the potential for a future World War. The Party gradually shifted from this radical pacifism as events forced it to reckon with fascism. The Party made a pragmatic turn in favour of alliance systems and bilateralism as by 1938 Labour replaced the Conservatives as the hawkish realists to the danger of Hitler. Labour carried this pragmatism with them when Britain entered the Second World War and aided like-minded Tories in ousting Neville Chamberlain during a moment national emergency. During its time in opposition, like those in Government, Labour had to adapt its policy to meet rapidly changing international dynamics which this thesis could not adequately examine in a thematic approach. Political actors can only respond to events as they unfold in the present and use their past experiences to aid in their decision making.

The thesis makes a number of contributions to earlier scholarship on the subject of Labour foreign policy and interwar British history more broadly. It establishes that Labour suffered under a period of radicalisation in its foreign policy following the dramatic schism of

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<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, foreign and defence policy are considered interlinked. Any change in Britain's military capabilities were directly correlated to its relations with other states and its ability to respond to international challenges.

1931 and continued to struggle with the influence of pacifist leadership until 1935. After ousting its pacifist leadership in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, Labour was able to gradually transition towards a realist foreign policy which understood fascism for the menace it was. Although much attention in the historical scholarship tends to focus on the Party's response to the Spanish Civil War, close examination of Labour policy in 1936 illustrated that the Party suffered from continued growing pains as it was forced to divide its policy aims between its concerns with fascism and desire to show support to its fellow social democrats in France. Instead, it is the events of September and October of 1938 which was the true turning point in Labour foreign policy as it mobilised the anti-Chamberlain sentiment across the country to defend Britain's national honour and support Czech democracy.

Labour was not free of growing pains after this crisis ended, as the mistaken policy of rejecting conscription in the spring of 1939 demonstrated. Yet, Labour met the moment when Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the Party provided the hawkish message necessary to ensure that Prime Minister Chamberlain would follow through on the Polish Guarantee and not once again abandon an independent European state to its fate. This thesis also challenges existing scholarship by widening the temporal scope to examine Labour's policy during the Phoney War when Britain was at war with Germany but Labour was not yet in government. The consideration of events between September 1939 and May 1940 sheds light on the battle Labour had with communism to defend its support for the war on moral grounds, rather than the left narrative that the war was fought for imperialist desires. It also provides important context for the role Labour played in ousting Chamberlain and aiding Churchill's accession to the Premiership at a moment of maximum danger to Britain in May 1940.

This thesis also brings an examination of Labour foreign policy during the interwar years in-line with current trends in the scholarship of the Second World War. The Japanese invasion of China in 1937, and increasingly its annexation of Manchuria in 1931, is now understood to be the true start to the Second World War. This challenges the Eurocentric interpretation of the Second World War being a European conflict and is also relevant to Labour's own foreign policy development. Examination of Labour's China policy in the 1930s is also useful as China attempted to settle its conflict with Japan by using the very institution (the League of Nations) which was setup to end war without bloodshed. China provided an important case for Labour to grasp the weakness inherent in the League structure and its first chance to challenge the imperialist ambition of aggressor states (well before the actions of Germany and Italy).

The use of the term pacifism also warrants a definition as it was a phrase which shifted in meaning even in the interwar years. As the historian Martin Ceadel argued, in the interwar years there were two types of pacifism or anti-war view points which were widely categorised under the same label as pacifist. The first was that war is always wrong and should never be an option for governments to utilize, even in the case of self defence. The second use of the term pacifist was ascribed to those advocates who believed that while war might sometimes be necessary (such as in self defence) it was always an irrational and immoral way to settle disputes, therefore its prevention had to be the over-riding priority.<sup>15</sup> While both interpretations were commonly labeled as pacifist, I will be using the term pacifist to represent the views of only those political actors who viewed war was always wrong and unjustifiable.<sup>16</sup> Where I am discussing Labour or

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of A Faith*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3.

<sup>16</sup> This interpretation is also shared by John Shepherd who argues that the shortened form of the term pacifism, that war was always immoral and irrational, had become the most common understanding of the word in the 1930s. John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 316.

fellow peace campaign actors who fall under the later definition of pacifism yet were commonly known to be pacifists in their own time, I will identify their embrace of that more policy fluid pacifism, that war might at times be necessary.

I have made a conscious choice to focus attention on Labour's public statements of policy, and largely (but not entirely) left out secretive internal debate between key Party figures. The reason for this decision is to reflect Labour policy as it would have been received by both its political rivals and the wider electorate. Policy stances determined behind closed doors could not have influence on Government policy or on the public consciousness. The only way to effect political change (especially when in opposition) would have been for Labour figures to share their alternatives to Government policy in Parliament, the press, at public rallies, or in by-election campaigns. It is these forms of political expression which mattered most as Labour sought to challenge the existential threats of fascism and communism while generating public support (an essential thing if Labour ever wanted to return to Government) for its alternatives. Conversations held in private or in small groups could have influence on what policy the Party promoted but would have no effect on international affairs on their own.

Labour was also an incredibly diverse Party made up of a vast array of personalities and ideological groups. I have attempted to reflect the diversity of thought that existed from the Party's grassroots in affiliated organisations, constituency parties, and from the very top with key individuals in the Party leadership. At times these forces reflected a close alignment in policy whereas at other moments disagreements could produce significant cases of infighting which threatened the Party's stability.

It is with the aim of highlighting the diversity of thought within Labour that significant focus in each chapter is placed on the annual Labour Party Conferences. These gatherings

allowed for the Party and its constituent members to debate matters of policy and determine its response to the pressing issues of the day. The value of these debates is that they represented a wide array of responses to matters of concern, and for recurring issues such as the Party's peace policy. Prominent Parliamentary members, local constituency Party representatives, and trade union leaders, among others, all had the opportunity to express their desired shifts (or consistency) in policy at Conference. The gatherings also deserve scrutiny because divergences in the Party which emerged in debate were (on hot button issues) given significant press coverage and seized upon by Labour's political rivals. Most important of all, critical issues had the chance to be clearly voted up or down by Party membership, which allowed for clear depictions of Party backing of policy to be publicly displayed. Therefore, ignoring the diverse nature of many Conference debates on matters of foreign policy means ignoring contributions from other constituent parts of the Labour Party.

In this thesis, the thorough use of Conference debate provides an essential counterweight to examinations of policy which are all too often dominated by a few key individuals. Nonetheless, this author is conscious of the need to not view decisions at Conference as inherently correlated to actions done by the Parliamentary Labour Party. The Labour Party determined that Conference decisions would be acted upon by the methods and timing desired by the Parliamentary Party (the so called '1907 Formula'), thereby not binding them to Conference decisions.<sup>17</sup> As will be seen throughout the thesis, significant deviation from decisions at Conference on matters of foreign policy and defence rarely occurred.

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<sup>17</sup> Vickers, 23. The 1907 Formula was named after the decision of the Labour Party's 1907 Conference to establish a principle of Parliamentary Party supremacy over the means and timing of implementing decisions made by the broader Party.

This study makes consistent reference to the role of key individuals within the Labour Party. For those political actors central to Labour's journey, fear of war and a desire to protect the peace of 1919 was of tantamount importance regardless of where they might stand on questions of pacifism or interventionism. Many had experienced the horrors of modern warfare for themselves. Clement Attlee, Labour Party leader from 1935 to 1955, had fought in the bitter battle of Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia, suffering a bullet wound in the later campaign. Others such as Hugh Dalton, one of Labour's chief speakers on foreign affairs in the 1930s, had fought on the Western Front. Even prominent pacifists such as George Lansbury, leader of the Labour Party between 1932 and 1935, too old and far too ideologically opposed to war to serve in combat, toured frontline positions in France to see for himself and inform the British people of the horrific conditions' soldiers were facing each day. These were men (and they were almost all men) who understood the costs of war and were united over the course of the 1930s in their determination to not see a new generation of British youth thrown onto the field of battle.<sup>18</sup> It is also worth remembering that the bulk of the British population had suffered some loss from the First World War; it was nearly impossible not to have family or friends who fought in the conflict. Many had lost loved ones to the war or had family who carried physical and psychological damage for the rest of their lives.<sup>19</sup> When debating questions of war and peace in

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<sup>18</sup> The Labour Party was active in recruiting women members and ran several women candidates in the 1930s some of whom received significant Party backing in their campaigns. Nonetheless, women only made up a handful of MPs in this period. Only Ellen Wilkinson received significant and consistent public attention and none of the Parliamentary leadership of the Party were women between 1931 and 1940.

<sup>19</sup>For more on the social changes wrought by having millions of wounded young men return home in the 1920s see, Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75, No. 3, (2003): 557; Carolyn Malone, "A Job fit for Heroes? Disabled Veterans, the Arts and Crafts Movement and Social Reconstruction in post-World War I Britain," *First World War Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2013): 201-217; and Joel Morley, "Dad 'Never Said Much' But...Young Men and Great War Veterans in Day-to-Day Life in Interwar Britain," *20<sup>th</sup> Century British History*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (2018): 199-224. For the role of key individuals in the rebuilding of Britain in the early 1920s see: Roy Hattersley, *David Lloyd George: The Great Outsider*, (London: Little Brown, 2010); Richard Toye, *Lloyd George & Churchill: Rivals for Greatness*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the 1930s, the bulk of the British population clearly knew the cost of entering a new World War, and their response to fresh challenges to peace should be understood as reflecting these experiences.

### Socialism and Foreign Policy

It is the contention of this author that Labour foreign policy in the 1930s was primarily driven by personalities rather than socialist theory. Nevertheless, socialist theory was important to the foundations of the Labour Party. Socialist thought framed how Labour actors approached policy formulation and ensured that clear distinctions were made between Labour's democratic socialist tradition from that of liberalism and communism. Labour's socialist thought was dominated by an adherence to morality, democracy, and gradualism. The mainstream of Labour socialist thought was grounded in Fabianism which advocated for this gradual development of the labour movement. Communist notions of revolutionary change and rejection of class-collaboration were antithetical Labour thought.

Early Labour foreign policy thought was largely isolated to the contributions of a few individual leaders in the Party. Keir Hardie and Ramsey MacDonald both attempted to move beyond traditional liberalism and embraced ethical socialism (some scholars such as Callaghan note that in Britain the boundaries between socialism and liberalism were porous in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) where morality would be a guiding force in foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> Fabian influences on Labour foreign policy grew out of the events of the First World War and dominated the Party's approach to international affairs in the 1920s. Leonard Woolf and Arthur Henderson were central to this change as they became powerful advocates for collective security

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<sup>20</sup> John Callaghan, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 16.

and military sanctions all organised through new international institutions to avert war.<sup>21</sup> They proved successful in guiding the Labour Party to embrace the League of Nations as the international institution which could achieve the dream of protecting the peace. This was secured with the Labour Party's 1918 constitution committing to the establishment of a "Federation of Nations for the maintenance of freedom and peace for the establishment of suitable machinery for the adjustment and settlement of international disputes..."<sup>22</sup> While Labour was committed to backing the establishment of the League it remained divided over its structural ability and moral authority to enforce international arbitration and disarmament through economic and military sanctions.<sup>23</sup>

Casper Sylvest argues persuasively that Labour socialist theory was divided into four camps in the 1920s in its efforts to find a common socialist approach to foreign policy centred on the League. The first group were pragmatic liberal internationalists such as Arthur Henderson, Hugh Dalton, Leonard Woolf, Norman Angell, and Ernst Bevin. This group was heavily influenced by liberal international thought and were the strongest advocates for the League, believing it had incredible potential as a political institution which could avert war in a modern way.<sup>24</sup> This would be achieved with the use of sanctions to preserve peace and further global disarmament projects.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Callaghan, 36. Fabianism was the most popular strand of socialist thought in the Labour Party. It was defined by its adherence to gradualism and unwavering support for democracy. These values made Labour more appealing to disaffected Liberals and Conservatives in Britain than any of the more radical left movements such as communism.

<sup>22</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Conference*, (London: Labour Party, 1918), 141. quoted in Lucian Ashworth, "Rethinking a Socialist Foreign Policy: The British Labour Party and International Relations Experts, 1918 to 1931," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 75, (2009), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ashworth, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Casper Sylvest, "Interwar Internationalism, the British Labour Party, and the Historiography of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, 48, No. 2, (2004), 424.

<sup>25</sup> See page 34 for discussion of the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-1934 which attempted to build a global agreement for arms control in contrast to more targeted efforts in the 1920s.



The second group were pacifists which were divided by religious (George Lansbury) and practical (Lord Ponsonby) motivations. Labour pacifists believed that the League could be a useful moral force for suasion but rejected the imposition of sanctions as they could drive desperate states to resort to war as the only way out of their struggles.<sup>26</sup> The idea of the League as an international policeman was also rejected as pacifists feared that the organisation might have to resort to so called “League wars”, to stop aggressor states which ignored its sanctions.

The third group which included Labour members who would either leave the Party or see their influence diminished in the 1930s were the isolationist liberal internationalists which included figures such as Ramsey MacDonald and E.D. Morel. Sylvest viewed this group as those in the Labour Party who understood the League to merely be another political arena, a forum where individual states could exert their will rather than a significant institution force in its own right.<sup>27</sup> Sanctions imposed by the League to correct international wrongs were viewed by these theorists as inconsequential on their own as it would be up to individual states if they chose to act upon League sanctions or simply ignore them.

The fourth group were adherents to socialist internationalism such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP), H.N. Brailsford, Stafford Cripps, and Ellen Wilkinson. These socialist theorists understood the international system to be anarchic because of the influence of capitalism. As debate over preventing war intensified some of these members of the Labour left would come to prominence in the early 1930s. Under this anti-capitalist framework, the League had no use as it was merely an institution which represented the influence of capitalist and imperialist states.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Labour would only achieve a peaceful world if the menace of

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<sup>26</sup> Ashworth, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Sylvest, 424.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

capitalist influence, especially in the armaments industry was tackled with nationalisation. The profit motive had to be removed from armaments production and imperialist ventures. If capitalists could not profit off of war or the acquisition of territories then institutions such as the League of Nations would not be necessary. In contrast to Labour pacifists and isolationist liberal internationalists, sanctions were deemed acceptable as a way to punish aggressor states but they had to be implemented outside of a capitalist League as only then could there be no commercial incentive for the outbreak of war.<sup>29</sup>

These four camps of socialist international theory did not meld into one cohesive force at the end of the 1920s but it was clear that the Labour Party was dominated by the influence of the pragmatic liberal internationalist faction going into the 1930s. As the international system began to fracture in the early 1930s the influence of this faction was challenged by the others who tried to bring forward their policy solutions to preserve international peace. These theoretical underpinnings are influential for key Labour personalities but could be jettisoned as the pace of events dictated realistic policy change by the end of the 1930s. It is for this reason that socialist theory is largely absent from the Labour Party debates which are at the heart of this dissertation.

### Literature Review

Labour foreign policy has received limited attention from scholars. The examination of foreign policy in the 1930s is even smaller. This lacuna is the result of two problems which impacted Labour policy priorities in this period. The first was that Labour was in opposition and so had no ability to control the actions of the British state. The second was that the Labour Party,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid

and subsequently its history, were far more focused on changes to domestic social and industrial policy being enacted by the National Government.

Scholarly assessment of the Labour Party in the 1930s has generally been unkind. Labour is viewed as misguided and ineffectual in its time in opposition.<sup>30</sup> There is significant truth in this interpretation as Labour struggled throughout the 1930s to effectively meet the threat of fascism, something which was immediately recognised as dangerous but ineffectively countered. The popular response has been to debate where to lay the blame for Britain's plight in 1940 on various group mistakes in the 1930s. In the 1940s blame was most attributed to Neville Chamberlain and other Conservatives known as the 'guilty men' who embraced a deeply flawed policy of appeasement of fascist dictators.<sup>31</sup> Labour members had very different interpretations with some like Clement Attlee declaring at the Party's 1941 Conference that "if our policy had been followed you would never have had this war."<sup>32</sup> By contrast, prominent trade union leader and future Labour foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin noted:

If anybody asks me who is responsible for the British policy leading up to the war, I will, as a Labour man myself, make a confession and say 'All of us.' We refused absolutely to face the facts. When the issue came of arming or rearming millions of people in this country, people who have an inherent love of peace, we refused to face the real issue at a critical moment. But what is the good of blaming anybody.<sup>33</sup>

Scholarly work of the 1960s was not as blunt in their assessment of Labour's role in the road to war. John Naylor argued that Labour moved slowly in accepting that a war between Britain and the fascist powers was necessary. He believed that Labour was genuine in the Attleean

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<sup>30</sup>French, *Coercion, Deterrence, and Appeasement*; Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*, (London: Penguin, 2004), Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age*, (London: Penguin, 2009); in Labour historical literature, Thorpe, Pugh, Callaghan, Cole.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Owen, Michael Foote, and Peter. Howard. *Guilty Men*. [pseud] (London: V. Gollancz, 1940). Michael Foote would go on to lead the Labour Party and struggle to stem the tide of Thatcherism in the 1980s.

<sup>32</sup> Clement Attlee, Labour Party, *Report of the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (London: Transport House, 1941), 133.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Bevin, quoted in, Vickers, 141.

interpretation that it provided a viable alternative to Conservative policy. More importantly, Naylor provided an important idealist versus pragmatic framing of Labour's policy debate in the 1930s. This theme remains a staple in the literature as it was how Labour actors themselves framed internal disagreements.<sup>34</sup> The other critical contribution from Naylor was to ascribe a key turning point in Labour foreign policy thinking to actively support bi-lateral diplomacy over failed attempts at multilateralism (such as with the World Disarmament Conference). He placed it as late as September 1939 when the Party backed the bi-lateral Polish Guarantee (a promise to defend Poland from any invader) and subsequently supported the British declaration of war upon Germany for its invasion of Poland.<sup>35</sup>

Naylor's "idealism versus pragmatism" framing for Labour's foreign policy debates is shared by Michael Gordon. He added to Naylor's work by focusing on how Labour sought to genuinely change the entire foreign policy system (centred on maintaining a balance of power) which it believed was broken under Liberal and Conservative guidance. Labour's faith in the League of Nations as a new mechanism by which to ground British foreign policy was a genuine attempt to change the system and needed to be understood as such. Gordon's greatest divergence from Naylor was that he identified the 'turning point' for Labour policy as happening far earlier in the 1930s, with the Party deciding to shift away from a principle of war resistance at its 1934 Conference. Gordon believed that while Party statements were not a blatant repudiation of its 1933 decision to reject British participation in any war, Labour leadership provided "a deliberate

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Wrinkle continued this framing in his 2005 study, *British Labour Seeks a Foreign Policy*, (London: Routledge, 2005), xii; but uses new words 'principles and practice' which in effect are the same framing given by E.H. Carr in, *Twenty Years Crisis*, (London: Macmillan, 1946), and others for idealists versus pragmatists. It is in a similar vein to contributions from Vickers, Naylor, French etc.

<sup>35</sup> John Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 278.

smoke screen to conceal the extent of the rupture with the past.”<sup>36</sup> Gordon viewed this shift as gradually changing Party attitudes to rearmament, as demonstrated convincingly in 1937 when Labour opted to cooperate with the Government on necessary defence spending.

Since the 1960s scholarship on Labour foreign policy has broadened beyond the confines of the 1930s. Nonetheless, scholars have been unable to ignore Labour policy shifts in the 1930s as many of the political actors from that decade would go on to play critical roles in both the Churchill War Ministry and in the Labour Government of 1945-1951. Since 2000 most scholars have continued to disagree on when the turning point in Labour policy was, but certainly believe there was a turning point. Some such as Matthew Worley view the turn as a gradual process beginning in 1935 with the ousting of the pacifist Lansbury from Party leadership and a slow recognition that the League of Nations and the Conservative strategy of appeasement both failed to stop the advance of fascism.<sup>37</sup>

Rhiannon Vickers argues that Labour policy in the 1930s must be seen not simply within an “idealism versus pragmatism” framework but as a split between pacifism and realism. Vickers viewed pacifism as widespread in the Labour Party in the early 1930s, expanding the traditional definition of who was a pacifist to much larger elements of the Party than those who viewed themselves as pacifists (such as Lansbury or Lord Ponsonby).<sup>38</sup> Vickers viewed the Party as being broken into four groups: absolute pacifists (Lansbury), national pacifists who believed in only League of Nations use of military force (Clement Attlee), class pacifists (Stafford Cripps)

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Gordon, *Conflict and Consensus in Labour's Foreign Policy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 69.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 215.

<sup>38</sup> Lansbury was a well-respected member of the Labour Party and was rarely attacked for his genuine pacifist principles. Lord Ponsonby by contrast led the Labour Party in the House of Lords during the early 1930s and was frequently confrontational when urging others in the Party to embrace his pacifist principles.

made up of members of the Labour left who believed in working class solidarity, and realists (Hugh Dalton, Ernest Bevin, Walter Citrine) who wanted Labour to support rearmament in a bid to counter fascism across the world.<sup>39</sup> Vickers asserts that Labour was in the grip of these variations of pacifism until the middle of 1936, which prevented any evolution in Party policy. It was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 that finally destroyed pacifist influence and led to support for British rearmament.<sup>40</sup>

Few historians give attention to the events of 1938 and Labour's response to the Sudetenland Crisis which brought Britain and Germany to the brink of war. For John Callaghan, the Labour response to the plight of Czechoslovakia was of little consequence. Although the Party was blatantly hostile to Hitler in 1938, Callaghan only views policy towards the use of alliances as genuinely shifting in 1939 after Chamberlain's use of appeasement had become an obvious failure.<sup>41</sup> Andrew Thorpe in his history of the Labour Party does give some weight to the events of 1938 as being important to the shift in Labour policy but provided little explanation for this change.<sup>42</sup> It was simply evident the Party moved to openly oppose appeasement. Thorpe is also dismissive of Labour's radical turn at the 1933 Party Conference viewing its apparent embrace of pacifism as being merely the product of proceduralism rather than an acceptance of

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<sup>39</sup> Vickers, 109. Vickers builds upon E.H. Carr's realism/idealism argument from, *Twenty Years Crisis*, (London: Macmillan, 1946), Closer analysis shows deep flaws in this interpretation as Attlee never supported pacifism and those on the left were ardently opposed to fascism.

<sup>40</sup> Cole, French, Pugh, Thorpe, Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, (London: Penguin, 2021); Lewis Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left*, (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007); Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); K.W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976); for pacifism in Britain see, Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), among others.

<sup>41</sup> John Callaghan, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 135.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party: Fourth Edition*, (London: Palgrave, 2015), 102.

radical policy.<sup>43</sup> This interpretation is problematic, as only by acknowledging the significance of Labour's turn in 1933 can the events of 1938 be appreciated.

This thesis intends to complement the long-established view of Labour foreign policy in the 1930s as being a story of idealism versus pragmatism. It differs from earlier work by shifting the temporal scope beyond the outbreak of war in September 1939 to include the period of Labour's time in opposition during the Phoney War (between September 1939 and May of 1940). This change is necessary to provide the full context of Labour's policy diversion during its time out of Government. Labour's turn towards a policy of aggressive hostility to fascism was clearly demonstrated in those first months of war, when Labour advocated for a bold prosecution of Britain's war effort compared to the timidity displayed by the Chamberlain Ministry.<sup>44</sup> It also makes two additional contributions to the existing scholarship by providing a thorough analysis of the climactic year of 1938 which, it is argued, was the true turning point in Labour's foreign policy development. The vigorous public campaign waged by the Labour Party for the British Government to stand by Czechoslovakia in the face of Hitler's aggression represented a defining moment in the history of the Party as it was willing to go to war on a matter of national honour.

The second enhancement of the existing literature this thesis provides is to bring greater appreciation of the place in Labour's foreign policy of Japan's campaign of conquest in China. The Japanese disregard for Chinese sovereignty is increasingly recognised as the true start of the

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<sup>43</sup> Thorpe, 95.

<sup>44</sup> For examination of the activities of the Labour Party and its leaders during the Second World War see; Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); T.D. Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler's War*, (London: Deutsch, 1976); Robert Crowcroft, "What is Happening in Europe?' Richard Stokes, Fascism, and the Anti-War Movement in the British Labour Party During the Second World War and After." *History*, Vol. 93, No. 312, (2008), 514-530.; Martin Farr, "The Labour Party and Strategic Bombing in the Second World War," *Labour History Review*, 77, No. 1, (2012), 133-153.; for the Churchill Wartime Coalition see: Kevin Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics, 1940-1945*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

Second World War, in contrast to the Eurocentric interpretation that the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 was its real beginning.<sup>45</sup> China's struggle against the Japanese beginning in 1931 also held deep significance for the Labour Party as conflict in Asia represented the first serious test for the post First World War international system. China's response to the initial acts of Japanese aggression, by appealing its case to the League of Nations, was exactly how Labour envisaged all states should address acts of aggression being inflicted upon them. Labour's reaction to the war in China is a key, if often ignored, part of its foreign policy development and it is addressed here.

### Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into eight chapters which explore the development of Labour foreign policy from the crisis of 1931 to its return to Government during the Battle of France in 1940. It examines how Labour suffered from a radical embrace during its first years in opposition by adopting a firm policy of war resistance and unilateral disarmament under the leadership of avowed pacifists, to becoming the voice against the appeasement of aggressive dictatorships in Europe and Asia. It was a contest between often competing notions of morality and idealism versus pragmatism.

Chapter 1 explores Labour's period of disaster between 1931 and 1932. It covers the aftermath of the Party's split from its Parliamentary leadership over the unemployment and financial woes captivating Britain in the fall of 1931. Labour's limited discussion of foreign policy in the General Election is covered with the Party's determination to continue its

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<sup>45</sup> Examples of Second World War literature which has placed the story of China from 1931 into the narrative includes, Evan Mawdsley, *World War II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Johnathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War*, (Princeton University Press, 2021); Sean McMeekin, *Stalin's War*, (New York: Basic Books, 2021); Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, (London: Allen Lane, 2021).



internationalist policies tied to the League of Nations. It then explores the Labour response to the war in the Chinese province of Manchuria and the failure of the international community to intervene to halt Japanese aggression. Such weakness appeared amid the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva which provided the chance for Labour's dreams of global disarmament to be realised. The rapid stagnation of the Conference would quickly prove disheartening to Party centrists and embolden radicals who believed that multilateral efforts to protect the peace were inherently flawed.

Chapter 2 considers the point of greatest radicalisation in the Party between 1933 and 1934. Labour was forced to deal with the rise of Hitler and renewed Japanese aggression in China, both of which damaged the credibility of the League of Nations to preserve peace. Labour was quick to grasp the real-world danger that Nazism presented but proved unable to effectively respond to the new German regime. Such challenges were made worse with the final collapse of the Disarmament Conference and with it, Labour's dream for a multilateral approach to peace. The Party's response was to embrace a firm policy of war resistance, including a plan for a general strike in the event of Britain going to war. Attempts in 1934 to pull back from such radicalism proved lackluster as pacifist and left-wing elements sought to stymie shifts towards a policy of collective security through the League of Nations.

Chapter 3 covers the dramatic events of 1935 when Labour faced serious internal strife between its trade union elements and its pacifist Parliamentary leadership. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 demonstrated the imperialist desires of fascism and required a stern response. Labour supported a robust use of sanctions enforced by the League of Nations to pressure Italy to end its war of aggression. The public disagreement between the broader Party and its leader George Lansbury over the use of sanctions damaged Labour's credibility. The decision at

Conference to remove Lansbury showed deep divisions within the Party but allowed for a shift away from pacifism to begin, even if it was too late to salvage Labour's fortunes in the 1935 general election.

Chapter 4 examines the period of transition as Labour witnessed the outbreak of war in Spain and China. Labour needed to respond to an increasingly violent world and an emboldened Germany which was flagrantly disregarding the Treaty of Versailles and the postwar settlement. The Spanish Civil War proved to be a moment of significance for Labour as that country became the battle ground between opponents and supporters of fascism. Labour's reluctant decision to support its French partners in a policy of non-intervention proved difficult to accept for some Party members and caused deep internal divisions. Labour sought solutions which avoided sending weapons to end conflict in Spain and China, but by 1937 this position was no longer viewed as tenable. As it became increasingly clear that Italy and Germany had no interest in halting their support for Spanish rebels and Japan was not going to stop its invasion of China, the Labour Party abandoned its rejection of rearmament.

Chapter 5 considers the first half of 1938. The events of that critical year are split in two chapters to illustrate where Labour placed its attention for foreign policy debate. In those first months, pacifists in the Labour Party, although less influential, continued to organise campaigns to rally the country behind a policy of peace. For the bulk of the Labour Party, attention was focused on pressuring the British Government to aid the Spanish Republic in its struggle against fascism. Events in Austria soon diverted attention as Germany became an increasingly dangerous power on the European continent. The Anschluss of Austria alarmed Labour as it showed that Hitler was willing to extend his hostility to Versailles beyond the confines of Germany and the resulting weakness of Britain's response was viewed as a dangerous misstep.

Chapter 6 provides a thorough examination of the Labour Party's response to the threat of war in the fall of 1938 when Hitler demanded Czechoslovakian territory. Labour met the seriousness of the moment with a dramatic stand in support of Czech democracy and showed blatant hostility to Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. Through nationwide campaigning, close collaboration with the country's trade unions, and fierce debate in Parliament, Labour attempted to defend national honour, a clear break from earlier policy which focused on international cooperation. The Party backed the creation of new alliance systems and a return to the balance of power foreign policy which had served Britain effectively over the course of its history. In the disastrous aftermath of Britain's abandonment of the Czechs, Labour carried on its campaign with a series of by-elections fought on the question of appeasement. Several Labour victories showed the Party it had public support with its turn to an active foreign policy which accepted the League of Nations was a spent force.

Chapter 7 examines the first months of 1939 when Labour worked to show the British people it stood ready fight against fascism when the next violation of international norms occurred. It continued with its pragmatic turn in policy but struggled from growing pains as its traditional fears re-emerged of anti-union policy which could threaten its political base. Labour organised a misguided campaign of resistance to conscription, to protect its trade union interests, which dominated the final pre-war months. Labour regained its place as the Party to properly recognise the danger of fascism with its stern response to the Polish crisis at the end of August 1939. Labour was adamant in its demand that Chamberlain declare war in defence of Poland when it appeared he was dithering. Labour showed itself to be the hawkish pragmatists that the Tories refused to be.

Chapter 8 covers Labour's actions during the Phoney War as it struggled with Chamberlain's ineffectual leadership of Britain's war effort. The Party was alarmed with the timidity demonstrated by the Chamberlain Ministry with its unwillingness to aggressively prosecute the war against Germany. At the same time Labour fought a stern anti-communist crusade as it faced opposition to the war from the left. The Party asserted its faith in democracy by challenging British communists and showing its support for Finland in its fight for freedom during the Winter War of 1939-1940. British failure to aid Finland and its inability to save Norway from German invasion provided the final breaking point when Labour organised effective resistance to the Prime Minister's leadership. Labour followed this tumultuous moment with a decision to join in a coalition government for the duration of the War under the direction of Winston Churchill. This end to its time in opposition showed the culmination of the Party's journey to guide Britain in its stand against fascism.

Together these chapters will demonstrate Labour's gradual evolution in foreign policy during its years in opposition. It will show how the Party made a pragmatic turn in the fall of 1938 by both calling for a strong stand against fascist imperialism and finding an issue in which the public showed strong sentiment. Not only had Labour's ideas changed but it had secured significant public backing for its policy and would not abandon its realist turn as it returned to Government in 1940 and 1945.

Yet, the challenges of the 1930s seemed far off for any observer of international affairs at the end of the 1920s. Labour ended 1929 under an air of optimism. Politically, the Party had seen its fortunes dramatically change as it went from being a fringe movement to replacing the Liberals as the largest opposition to the Conservatives. Labour had entered Government twice and demonstrated its competency as a party of government. Its foreign policy, while aspirational

in wanting to create a better world than the one which had seen Britain go to war in 1914, was in line with those of the other Parties which also sought disarmament and wanted to see the League of Nations experiment succeed. What the Party was not to know was that by the summer of 1931 the long-term economic ramifications of the 1929 Wall Street Crash were about to devastate the British economy.

## “Bolshevism Run Mad” British Labour in Crisis: 1931 to 1932

### Introduction

The period between 1931 and 1932 was one of rebuilding and soul searching for the Labour Party. It had suffered from a disastrous schism amongst the Party’s front bench over splits in Labour’s response to the economic crisis of 1931. The divide in the cabinet of the Second Labour Government created a rift which tore Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden from the bulk of Labour’s leadership and the trade unions. The great betrayal of MacDonald and company joining ranks with Conservatives and Liberals to form the National Government cut the head from the Labour Party and left it in an unpopular position of appearing to be putting party over country at a moment of economic emergency. The Party was quickly thrust from Government and faced a general election without the support of some of its most prominent leaders.

Those Labour members who survived the election had to chart a path which could ensure the Party would not be a mere footnote in British political history. In foreign policy this meant attempting to keep Labour wedded to its internationalist principles painstakingly honed in the 1920s. World disarmament would remain the central aim with faith placed in the 1932 World Disarmament Conference at Geneva to create conditions which could eliminate war and build on the progress already attained in naval disarmament at the 1930 London Naval Conference. Yet, it would be affairs in China, not Geneva, which would provide an early test for Labour’s aspirations in international policy.

### Manchuria and “Actions which might Disturb the Peace”

The Versailles settlement faced its first significant test on 18 September 1931 when a bomb exploded on a railway line near the Chinese city of Mukden (Shenyang today) owned by

the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company. The blast was attributed to Chinese dissidents by Japanese authorities but was in-fact done by Japanese officers in the Kwantung Army without the knowledge of civilian authorities in Tokyo.<sup>46</sup> The attack served as a pretext to launch a sweeping campaign of conquest in northern China. Manchuria was a valuable target for Japanese imperialist ambitions as it “had been the industrial heart of China, supplying 90 percent of China’s oil, 70 percent of its iron, 55 percent of its gold supplies.”<sup>47</sup> Within a matter of months, the entire Chinese province and its 30 million inhabitants were under the control of Japan, in clear violation of international law.

Both China and Japan were members of the League of Nations and had their territory guaranteed. Chinese representatives took the Manchurian matter to the League and demanded collective action under Article 11 of the League of Nations Covenant to have Japanese troops withdraw. Article 11 required the whole League membership to declare a war a matter of concern for the entire institution and compel the League to take “any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations.”<sup>48</sup> Key players within the League were largely preoccupied with domestic issues; in the British case it was economic emergency and the decision to withdraw from the Gold Standard. The League dithered and eventually settled on a policy of advocacy for Japan and China to negotiate a settlement. On 30 September the League passed a cowardly resolution which said it was “convinced that both governments are anxious to avoid taking any actions that might disturb the peace.”<sup>49</sup> Japan had promised it would withdraw its troops after ensuring Japanese property was secured but once its forces were established in the

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<sup>46</sup> Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*, (New York: Mariner Books, 2014), 56.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War 1931-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Covenant of the League of Nations. The Avalon Project. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp)

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of the Sixty-Fifth Session of the Council, Seventh Meeting, 4 p.m., September 30, 1931 (Geneva), League of Nations Official Journal (1931): 2307–08. quoted in, Huang Tzu-chin “Embracing mainstream international society: Chiang Kai-shek’s diplomatic strategy against Japan,” *Chinese Studies in History*, 49. No. 4 (2016), 201.

region they refused to leave. Through a combination of aerial bombing and ground assaults, the Japanese were able to make steady progress against poorly equipped Chinese troops of the local warlord Zhang Xueliang, completing the annexation in March of 1932 with the declaration of the new state of Manchukuo.<sup>50</sup>

The Chinese continued to utilise the tools within the League system to rally the international community to its aid. China believed correctly that their case was clear cut and could best be settled through a process of international arbitration and demanded the League undertake such a policy. The Japanese skillfully countered Chinese appeals with a call for the League to send a fact-finding commission to Mukden. The plan was readily accepted by the League membership as it provided a path for peaceful resolution to the crisis and on 10 December the Lytton Commission was formed to establish the truth.

Although the Manchurian crisis should have been a perfect test case for Labour's foreign policy cultivated in the 1920s, initial Labour responses were limited to support for a League resolution to settle the territorial dispute. The Party was instead focused on rebuilding in the aftermath of the formation of the National Government and preparing for a General Election in few weeks time. The need to centre Party attention on these more pressing matters meant that Labour could not give appropriate attention to the plight of China until early 1932.

#### “Keeping the Swords Bright for the Militarists”: The 1931 Labour Party Conference

In the aftermath of formation of the National Government, Labour reconvened at its annual Conference on October 5 to 8 in Scarborough to settle its policy response to the economic

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<sup>50</sup> Overy, 33. Manchukuo was merely a puppet state entirely beholden to Japanese interests until its dissolution following a Soviet invasion in 1945.



crisis gripping the country. The bulk of proceedings were centered on attacking the National Government and the betrayal of MacDonald and Snowden. The Party needed to distinguish itself without some of its most prominent leaders at the helm. Priority had to be centred on addressing these challenges in preparation of its general election campaign as the country would go to the polls at the end of the month.

In this context of Labour in crisis, foreign policy was given scant attention at the Party Conference. The one area that generated some dialogue amongst Party members was disarmament, as the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and its new leader Arthur Henderson had worked diligently through the 1920s to establish a World Disarmament Conference where the nations of the world would meet to secure peace through a common policy of arms control. Henderson would become a critical voice of moderation during Labour's struggles in the early 1930s as A.J.P. Taylor fittingly described him, "by no means a pacifist and as near a realist as a Labour man could be."<sup>51</sup> Henderson envisioned a future where international peace was assured through an expansion of successful disarmament efforts in the 1920s. Primarily that had been achieved in the form of naval limitation agreements. Henderson's disarmament goal was demonstrated to the Labour Conference when Hugh Dalton, speaking on behalf of the National Executive Committee (NEC: the chief administrative body of the Labour Party), introduced a motion on the matter which:

reaffirms its [Labour's] belief that the present expenditure on armaments by the nations of the world is a danger to peace and to the security of the peoples...It welcomes the opportunity afforded by the World Disarmament Conference...[where] this country should put forward at that Conference proposals for drastic and far-reaching reductions, by international agreement, in the numbers and equipment of all armed forces and in military, naval, and air expenditure.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 319.

<sup>52</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1931), 184.

Dalton believed that this motion was a mere formality for the Party as it reflected longstanding Labour values which sought a “great march forward towards a state of international affairs in which all fear of war should be banished.”<sup>53</sup>

The motion was seconded by Sir Ben Turner representing the National Union of Textile Workers, who provided a clear articulation of the trade unions attitude to Henderson’s foreign policy. Turner believed that Labour’s ideals provided a true alternative to the “old-fashioned school” which was always focused on preparation for the next war. Instead, Labour appealed to the “peace lovers who want international and gradual disarmament.”<sup>54</sup> Turner clearly rejected irrational ideas floating in pacifist and ILP (Independent Labour Party) circles calling for unilateral disarmament but clung to an element of idealism believing in a future where total world disarmament could be achieved.

Following Turner’s expression of trade union support for NEC policy, an ILP amendment to the motion was introduced which was far more radical. The ILP wanted to delete the words “by international agreement” and add that Britain “should proceed at once to give a lead to other nations by substantial cuts in armaments with a view to reaching total disarmament as rapidly as possible.”<sup>55</sup> The ILP was proposing unilateral disarmament, a policy far out of step from the position of the NEC and trade unions. This challenge from the ILP represented a wider shift in its relationship to the Labour Party as economic crisis radicalised its members.

Lucy Cox of the Sevenoaks DLP defended the amendment as she and others in the ILP believed that Labour’s limited disarmament policy had “already proved futile” with earlier

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 186.

attempts at other disarmament conferences failing to curtail arms spending across the globe.<sup>56</sup> Cox was convinced that if Labour continued to accept the maintenance of Britain's armed forces it would merely be "keeping the swords bright for the militarists" with the assumption being that once the Conservatives returned to Downing Street they would be "landed sooner or later in another war...[which] if its comes, means the end of Western civilization."<sup>57</sup> She concluded with an appeal to members' patriotism, stressing that pacifists too are patriots, ones who seek the honour of Britain leading the world into disarmament. Such appeals to the centrist elements of the Labour Party would be necessary to have any hope for the Conference to support the amendment. Yet, the ILP position was an example of dangerous idealism, playing into Conservative narratives that Labour harboured irrational ideas which would endanger the population and their freedoms to the whims of aggressor states.

Henderson pushed back against the ILP amendment with an appeal to rationality. Disarmament could only provide a lasting peace if it was achieved through international cooperation. Labour had placed its faith in the League of Nations and sought the chance to demonstrate its ability to preserve peace through the Disarmament Conference in 1932. Subsequently the ILP initiative was voted down "almost unanimously."<sup>58</sup> Although debate on disarmament policy was a minor part of the 1931 Conference, the determination of Henderson and other NEC and trade union members to show a clear commitment to multilateral action through the League represented the first step in a decade long effort to maintain Party support behind an internationalist foreign policy. The ILP challenge was the first of many over the 1930s

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 187.

which aimed to radicalise Labour's message. The battle to curtail such radicalism would be critical to the development of the Party which would return to Government in 1940.

### The 1931 General Election

Parliament was dissolved on 7 October and the General Election campaign was under way. Foreign policy was largely ignored in the General Election as Labour focused its campaign on domestic issues. Above all, the Party sought to justify its continued governance without core members of its leadership which had joined the National Government, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden being the two most prominent figures to abandon Labour over its refusal to serve in coalition. Solving Britain's economic challenges were central to the campaigns of both Labour and the National Government and foreign affairs were largely limited to a commitment to fully support the World Disarmament Conference which would begin in February of 1932. A Labour Government would lead by example at the Conference with Britain dramatically cutting its spending on the armed forces.<sup>59</sup> This was consistent with Arthur Henderson's efforts in the Second Labour Government as foreign secretary which had worked to secure further naval disarmament with the London Naval Conference of 1930. The problem was that Britain had already cut its military strength significantly through the Ten-Year Rule and had little room to make further limitations without harming imperial security.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, Labour was better able to respond to popular national sentiment when it came to the question of disarmament than that of the National Government. Civil society groups were remarkably effective in the interwar years at promoting the cause of peace on the national stage and forced political parties to respond. The League of Nations Union (LNU) was foremost

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<sup>59</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *Labour and the World: Volume I*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 100.

<sup>60</sup> This will be explored in greater detail in discussion of the British role at the World Disarmament Conference.

among these non-partisan civil society groups. By the fall of 1931 it had over 400,000 dues-paying members and worked diligently to keep disarmament at the forefront of British politics.<sup>61</sup> The LNU promoted strong British participation in the League of Nations believing, like many in the Labour Party, that this new institution created in the aftermath of the First World War could be utilised to protect the peace in a new way from traditional ideas of Britain maintaining a balance of power through a system of alliances. The LNU wanted to achieve a twenty-five percent reduction in armaments budgets worldwide within five years and would actively campaign at home and in support of the World Disarmament Conference to achieve it.<sup>62</sup> The LNU's response to the fall of the Second Labour Government, which was more in favour of the LNU's mission than the Conservatives, worked to keep the issue of disarmament central to British political discourse. The strength of the organisation forced the National Government to also constantly state its support for the League and the coming conference in Geneva. Such a response may have contributed to Labour's challenges in the election as the Party's foreign policy could not be easily distinguished from that of the National Government.

In the end, the election was settled on economic questions as the country sought to address the balance of payments crisis (which had brought about the collapse of the Second Labour Government) with a clear path forward. Labour and Liberal members who stood against the National Government struggled to define their opposition to national solidarity for voters. It simply did not seem to David Lloyd George and his Liberal supporters, or the Labour Party, that the 'crisis' facing Britain necessitated the response of forming an emergency coalition. Both Parties also suffered from the lack of significant vote splitting as most ridings had only two

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<sup>61</sup> Andrew Webster, *Strange Allies*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 292.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* The LNU's activities will be explored in detail in chapter three when examining the Peace Ballot.

options. Labour had previously benefited from splits between Conservative and Liberal candidates, but with many Liberals joining the National Government there was no divide for Labour to exploit in most constituencies. The Party also suffered from attacks by its former leaders that its program was too radical. Philip Snowden described Labour economic plans as “Bolshevism run mad” and it proved difficult to fight the man who had been Labour’s own Chancellor of the Exchequer a few months earlier.<sup>63</sup> Most of all Labour suffered from a lack of a clear answer to growing unemployment which had increased from 1,164,000 in 1929 when Labour entered Government to 2,880,000 in 1931.<sup>64</sup>

The result was one of the most dramatic landslides in British political history. Labour was nearly wiped out with a reduction from 288 seats in 1929 to 52. The National Government won 554, with the majority being Conservatives at 473. Labour’s vote share had not mirrored the collapse in seats but due to Britain’s First Past the Post system the fall from 37.1% of the vote in 1929 to 30.6% in 1931 resulted in calamity.<sup>65</sup> Labour’s front bench was almost entirely cleared out with the only prominent Labourites to survive the ballot being George Lansbury, Clement Attlee, and Stafford Cripps.<sup>66</sup> Arthur Henderson, who had run the election as interim leader, was retained as leader of the Party but had no seat in the House, Lansbury was re-elected as Chairman and Attlee as vice-chairman.

Labour had endured the loss of its old right-wing leadership with MacDonald and Snowden forming the National Labour Party and had seen the defection of Oswald Mosely and a few others to his so-called New Party earlier in the year. Following the election rout, the ILP and

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<sup>63</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 261.

<sup>64</sup> Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Aneurin Bevan also survived but was not prominent in the Labour ranks in 1931.

others on the Labour left assessed defeat and found that the loss “merely confirmed their belief that the Labour Party had run its course.”<sup>67</sup> The result was that James Maxton and other leading figures in the ILP embraced radical and for some, revolutionary ideas to solve Britain’s predicament. Tensions between the two groups were already demonstrated both with ILP objections to a League centric disarmament policy at the Labour Party Conference and during the election campaign where nineteen ILP candidates remained unendorsed by Labour.<sup>68</sup> It was impossible in these circumstances to hide the growing divergence between the two from the public. The two sides were never able to reconcile their differences and the ILP would vote for official disaffiliation from Labour at a conference in July of 1932.

Labour had ended 1931 as a wounded political force. The fact that the Party survived was an achievement in and of itself, having lost its leadership and seeing the defections of right and left elements. The next few years would be focused on solidifying its trade union base and rebuilding its credibility as it now acted as the only significant opposition to the National Government.<sup>69</sup> In foreign policy, the Party was now out of power and had no chance of influencing MacDonald’s programme with such a small Parliamentary voice. Yet, its leader Arthur Henderson had been the architect of global disarmament efforts and would have the chance to carry his vision to the World Disarmament Conference scheduled to begin in February 1932.

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<sup>67</sup> Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 142.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> There was a very small number of Liberals who remained as a separate opposition Party cut off from those that had opted to join the National Government.

## World Disarmament Conference: “The Most Momentous Event in the History of the World”

After nearly seven years of preparation the World Disarmament Conference opened in Geneva on 2 February 1932. It had wide attendance with representatives from fifty-nine states including the Soviet Union and the United States: the two powers Labour believed needed to be active in international affairs to provide lasting stability. Only a year earlier the Labour Party had called the coming Conference, “one of the most momentous events in the history of the world, and especially of European civilization.”<sup>70</sup> Yet, for all the hope and aspiration carried to the Conference, a cloud hung over the event. The opening was delayed by one hour as the League of Nations debated a possible response to the outbreak of violence between Japanese and Chinese forces in Shanghai on 28 January and which continued to escalate in the following days.<sup>71</sup> The day of the League debate would see a Japanese naval squadron bombard the city in the fiercest artillery operation which had been conducted at anytime since the Armistice of 1918.<sup>72</sup> The League would reach an impasse and fail to punish Japan for its act of aggression. Such impotence would be replicated during the debates over international disarmament.

Back in May of 1931 the League of Nations Council invited, then foreign secretary, Arthur Henderson to chair the Disarmament Conference. It was a fine reward offering the potential to show the world that Henderson’s faith in internationalism could bear fruit. Yet after the formation of the National Government, Henderson would have to attend the proceedings as a private individual rather than as a government minister. Although he was serving as the leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) he was in the awkward position of being without a seat in

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<sup>70</sup> *Report of the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference*, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Webster, 307.

<sup>72</sup> John Naylor, *Labour’s International Policy*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 35.



Parliament and as a result of the Party schism, had a bitter relationship with Prime Minister MacDonald who viewed him as an enemy.

To the dismay of the Conference's supporters, Prime Minister MacDonald lacked a clear vision of Britain's objectives in the Conference and was more focused on addressing perceived German grievances with the Treaty of Versailles. At a cabinet meeting in December of 1931 MacDonald made clear that he did not want Britain to make a firm commitment to German or French interests as "we need at Geneva a policy quietly pursued without turning off our way to right or left."<sup>73</sup> The lack of a clear vision from the National Government meant that Britain's contributions to the Conference would in Labour's eyes damage the entire proceedings.

Henderson opened the Conference in his role as President with a speech on the aims of the gathering, something that represented both his own desires and that of the wider Labour Party. Henderson declared, "The world wants disarmament. The world needs disarmament. We have it in our power to help fashion the pattern of future history. Behind all the technical complexities regarding manpower, gun-power, tonnage, categories, and the like, is the well being of mankind, the future of our developing situation."<sup>74</sup> What Henderson could not know was that other member states did not share his enthusiasm for arms reduction. Some members such as Germany had entered the Conference with an expressed desire to see other states disarm to a similar level to that of the restrictions placed upon their military by the Treaty of Versailles. If such a lofty ambition could not be achieved; Germany at the very least sought parity in military

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<sup>73</sup> Marquess of Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny*, 56. quoted in; Carolyn Kitching, *Britain and the Problem of International Disarmament* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 139. This abandoning of the French would have lasting consequences as it weakened the ability of the two democracies to counter the rise of totalitarianism later in the decade.

<sup>74</sup> League of Nations, *Records of the Conference, A, I*, 40-7. As quoted in Webster, 307.

forces with France.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, France and Poland were already aware of the secret German rearmament efforts underway well before the start of the Conference and so were reluctant to allow parity to publicly recognised German levels. This gap in and of itself would be enough to limit the effectiveness of the proceedings but the conference also quickly got bogged down in proceduralism as the British delegation proposed a policy of qualitative disarmament where all ‘aggressive weapons’ would be abolished.<sup>76</sup> The problem of finding a common agreement on what aggressive weapons should be forced the establishment of committees to explore the matter and stalled all other proceedings.

Grassroots elements of Labour reacted negatively to this proposal from the National Government as the very notion that a weapon could be defensive in nature was seen as an absurdity. The editors of *Labour Magazine* spoke for many in the Party when they declared: “When are weapons of war mainly defensive in character? This insoluble crossword puzzle...befuddled the experts of three commissions at Geneva...The experts only kept their sanity by holding grimly to the goal of no disarmament, qualitative or quantitative.”<sup>77</sup> Of course, the belief that weapons could not be defensive in character did not match leading Labourite attitudes which had supported the expansion of the Royal Navy’s cruiser force in the 1920s. The response by the Party to the idea of defensive and offensive weapons would have long-term repercussions both for Labour’s support of the Disarmament Conference and wider debates on the policy of British disarmament.

Tensions between Germany and France came to dominate the Conference with the French deeply concerned that any measure of military equality with Germany could jeopardise

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<sup>75</sup> Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 766.

<sup>76</sup> Kitching, 140.

<sup>77</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Labour Magazine*, 11. 121 (July 1932), As quoted in Naylor, 36.

French security. French politicians understood the desire of their people to prevent a third German invasion and a repeat of the slaughter endured at Verdun during the Great War. German leaders sought instead to rehabilitate their national image on the world stage and produce a clear revision to the Treaty of Versailles and a reversal of the humiliation tied to it. Germany sought to secure reforms with international recognition of an equality status with other Great Powers. Labour and the trade unions had already made clear at the 1931 TUC Conference their support for rehabilitation of Germany and supported general equality of rights and duties between them and the rest of the leading states. That same Conference saw the TUC vote in favour of a 25% reduction British arms expenditure to provide an example for others to follow at the upcoming Disarmament Conference.<sup>78</sup>

As for Britain's reaction, Prime Minister MacDonald did not see Germany as dangerous and believed the French were overplaying their hand as he expressed in May of 1932, "I cannot imagine any German Government which will not be reasonable at the present time. It is all very well to make high-falutin' speeches with a dummy pistol in your hand, but when you have not only got the real pistol but also the responsibility of leadership of a battle, nature makes your feet cold and grace keeps your head cool."<sup>79</sup> The reality of course was that Germany was already secretly rearming, and had been collaborating with the Soviet Union in military training and research programs since the signing of secret portions of the Treaty of Rapallo (which officially had normalised relations between Germany and the Soviet Union) in 1922.<sup>80</sup> At this stage, in the final days of the democratic Weimar Republic, Germany was being torn asunder by drifts towards Communism on the left and the right which viewed a partnership with the Nazis as a

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<sup>78</sup> Naylor, 36.

<sup>79</sup> *Simon Papers*, FO800/286, MacDonald to Simon, 31 May 1932. As quoted in Kitching, 144.

<sup>80</sup> Ian Ona Johnson, *Faustian Bargain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

bulwark to anti-capitalist forces.<sup>81</sup> The potential for a more radical regime to secure power was clear to any observer of German politics who provided only a modicum of attention.

The one aspect of disarmament which received significant consideration from those at the Conference and remained central to Labour disarmament discourse for the remainder of the decade, was the question of controls on the militarisation of the air. Aerial bombing of large urban centres had already been attempted during the First World War and for the first time provided a means of bringing war directly to a civilian population, far from the frontlines. Aircraft technology had undergone rapid advancement in the 1920s and alarmed policy makers as range and carrying capacity improved, making the threat far more serious than the limited damage bombing had done to cities in 1917-18. Maurice Hankey, speaking on behalf of the British delegation at Geneva captured the public sentiment when he told the Conference: “The form of armaments that most imposes the element of fear on the population of Europe is aviation...compared with bombing aeroplanes, the public interest in such matters as heavy guns, tanks or whether a battleship should be of 35,000 or 25,000 tons, is almost negligible.”<sup>82</sup> Hankey believed that this issue of air-disarmament could be a battering ram into the wider efforts of disarmament as a lack of military aircraft would negate the need for anti-aircraft defences for urban centres, the army, and for future warship construction, ship sizes could be smaller as there would be no need to provide ever larger deck surfaces for anti-air batteries and deck armour.<sup>83</sup> Stanley Baldwin (leader of the Conservatives) would echo these comments in cabinet showing that such ideas had cross party appeal. While the topic had far more relevance to the general

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<sup>81</sup> By 1932 to call Weimar democratic maybe over generous as rule by decree had already eclipsed the role of parliament in determining policy. Yet, authoritarian forces had not officially secured the influence needed to end democratic practices as would happen a year later.

<sup>82</sup> *Simon Papers*, Hankey to MacDonald, 5 May 1932. As quoted in Kitching, 144.

<sup>83</sup> Kitching, 144.

populace, the Conference would not be able to come an agreement on the matter. Many parties to the Conference, including Britain, did not want to prohibit air bombing, primarily due to its perceived cost effectiveness (specifically its ability to keep costs of colonial policing to a minimum) compared to other forms of warfare. Yet, the ideas illustrated so clearly at the Conference would remain a key part of Labour's disarmament policy well into the 1930s as the Party sought to rehabilitate the ideas set aside at Geneva.<sup>84</sup>

The World Disarmament Conference would continue to struggle until Germany withdrew in October of 1933. Although the Conference would attempt to carry on for a further year, the writing was already on the wall, and it ultimately adjourned for the final time in November of 1934. The French had refused to disarm in the face of open German actions to rearm which represented a clear violation of the Treaty of Versailles and jeopardised French security. This marked an end to comprehensive multilateral efforts to achieve disarmament. Labour would continue to advocate for a revitalisation of the project or the establishment of a similar comprehensive initiative for the next few years, refusing to abandon its orthodoxy until events made it positively futile.

### 1932: Disarmament "The Greatest Experiment the World has Known"

Disarmament was the central focus for Labour foreign policy in 1932 both with the aspirations the Party held for a positive outcome of the talks at Geneva and the crisis brewing in Asia. Such international challenges did not always receive the attention that they deserved as Labour also had to tackle the legacy of its schism at the end of 1931. The Party had to reckon with splits from its left-wing elements in the ILP which had opted to disaffiliate a few months

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<sup>84</sup> This theme will be explored in greater detail in the chapters covering the events of 1935 and the Sudetenland Crisis of 1938.

earlier. Although some elements of the ILP opted to stay within the Labour Party others opted to break away and run the ILP as a separate political party which would contest future elections against Labour candidates. However, the Labour Party had benefited from some members returning to its ranks from the breakaway New Party led by Oswald Mosely. Mosely had been a prominent member of the Second Labour Government but had turned away from Labour in 1930 with a desire for radical reforms to solve Britain's economic challenges. After learning of attempts to court disgruntled Labour Party members to join his so called 'New Party' the NEC officially expelled Mosely on 10 March 1931.<sup>85</sup> By the first months of 1932 Mosely had become enamoured with fascism (following a meeting with Mussolini in April) and reformed his New Party in an authoritarian direction, turning it into the British Union of Fascists (BUF) which alarmed Labour members who had joined in early 1931.<sup>86</sup> In this way Labour now had to respond to new enemies which had emerged out of infighting from within its own ranks.

1932 also saw Labour appoint George Lansbury as Party leader. This was a logical move as Henderson lacked a Parliamentary seat and so could not lead Labour in the Commons. Henderson also had to devote most of his time to leading the proceedings in Geneva for the Disarmament Conference. There were sound political reasons for Lansbury's appointment as he had been the most prominent Labourite and only former cabinet minister of the Second Labour Government to have survived the 1931 election. He was well known for his strong oratory skills which had allowed him to draw crowds which rivaled Prime Minister MacDonald.<sup>87</sup> He was also widely respected for his strong and lifelong devotion to Christian Socialism which shaped his

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<sup>85</sup> Matthew Worley, *Oswald Mosely and The New Party*, (Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2010), 7. The 'New Party' formed a few days prior to Mosely's expulsion from Labour on 5 March.

<sup>86</sup> Worley, *New Party*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> Taylor, 328.

thinking for both domestic and foreign policy. As a result, he built a strong reputation as a fierce defender of the poor and sought to avert a repeat of the First World War with a strict adherence to pacifism. This firm pacifist belief strained intraparty relations for Labour as Lansbury was known for his uncompromising attitude on matters of principle.<sup>88</sup> Yet, in 1932 the potential for a war between Britain and Fascist powers was not centre stage in the national dialogue. For the time being, Lansbury's pacifism would fit well with Labour's radical foreign policy turn and did not become a serious burden until the threat of war dominated the country's discourse in late 1935.

In foreign affairs, the Party was concerned with the rise of totalitarianism in Germany and expansionist activities of Japan in China. Both issues represented serious threats to Labour's wider aspiration of a successful disarmament conference which eliminated the viability of war as an effective mechanism for states to address grievances. On the eve of the November 1932 German election Labour issued a message of support for the German SPD who were attempting to "fight for Socialism, Freedom, and Peace" in a desperate bid to hold back the political extremes of the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Nazis.<sup>89</sup> Labour's statement demonstrated remarkable foresight of the danger of Nazism:

You [the SPD] have striven to stem the turbulent flow of Fascist reaction, which is threatening to submerge the young Republic and drive the German people back to spiritual, political and economic servitude...now the decisive hour of battle approaches...Amid closed factories and the desolation of world-wide unemployment, the sinister forces of counter-revolution – with peace on their lips but with war in their hearts, preaching freedom, but plotting oppression, promising social justice, but preparing class domination – have rallied for the final onslaught...you [the SPD] are

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<sup>88</sup> Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 22.

<sup>89</sup> Germany had two elections in 1932. The first was in July and resulted in a hung parliament where Chancellor Franz von Papen failed to build a governing coalition. He was forced to ask President Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag in September prompting the last free election in Weimar Germany in November. For more details see pages 290-303 in; Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, (New York: Penguin, 2003).

fighting not only the battle of the German workers, but our battle – the battle of Socialism the world over.<sup>90</sup>

For Labour, the fate of Germany represented the next frontier in the fight against the forces of fascism after seeing the collapse of Italian social democrats from the forces of Mussolini.

Concerns about political shifts in Germany would only increase in importance to Labour policy as the postwar order faced mortal danger as the decade wore on.

Far more pressing in 1932 was the matter of Japan. Labour was deeply concerned with the way the League had proven incapable of putting a stop to the illegal annexation of the Chinese province of Manchuria and the Japanese assault launched on the city of Shanghai. The official response by the TUC and PLP to Japanese activities in China was formulated in a statement by the National Joint Council (NJC) in early 1932.<sup>91</sup> The brutality of Japanese actions against Chinese civilians (particularly through the bombing of Chinese urban centres) and its blatant disregard of League condemnation represented “one of the most critical moments in postwar history.”<sup>92</sup> Japanese activities were understood by Labour to be driven by capitalist interests as Manchuria was rich in agricultural and mineral resources which Japan lacked. Labour’s interpretation was given further credibility when a Japanese naval squadron entered Shanghai harbour threatening “the commercial capital of China” in early 1932.<sup>93</sup> Labour believed an alternative to military action was possible which could meet Japan’s desire to secure steady access to raw materials. The answer lay in an embrace of free trade policy as it could

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<sup>90</sup> Walter Citrine, George Lathan, and George Lansbury, “To Our Comrades of the German Social Democratic Party,” as produced in *Report of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference*, 61.

<sup>91</sup> The NJC was the coordinating body between the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress. Its aim was to ensure that political policy was as consistent as possible between the two groups. It would later be renamed the National Council of Labour (NCL) both terms would be used in the early 1930s interchangeably to refer to the same organisation.

<sup>92</sup> *Report of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference*, 68.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*



ensure Japanese access to the necessary resources to support its industrial development. Such methods of economic growth simply needed to be given the opportunity to succeed.

Labour was inclined to support China on both moral and ideological grounds. The moral reasons were clearcut as Japan showed no qualms with bombarding civilian centres from land, sea, and air. The bombing of Chinese cities provided a horrifying example of what might (and of course did in 1940 to 1941 during the Blitz) befall British cities in the event of war. The ideological reasons for Labour's view were tied to the condemnation of the Japanese acts by the League of Nations and the fact that "China has put her case in the hands of the League and agreed to accept its proposals for a peaceful settlement provided in the Covenant."<sup>94</sup> Japan had wilfully abandoned international institutions and systems which prohibited violation of Chinese sovereignty which in Labour's eyes, justified protest and a requirement to do all it could to pressure the British Government to foster collective action against Japanese militarism.

The Party could also point to a longer process of international recognition of Chinese sovereignty and economic rights. Japanese claims that their actions were justified due to internal disorder had no merit as Japan had pledged in the Nine Power Treaty of 1922 to "provide the fullest and most unembarrassed opportunity to China to develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable Government."<sup>95</sup> Britain had already demonstrated that the status quo could be mutually beneficial as a strong trading relationship had been developed after a wilful abandonment in 1926 of the notion that "economic and political development of China can only be secured under foreign tutelage."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

The invasion of China had widespread implications as the first significant test of the League of Nations as Japan and China were both member states and supposed to have their territorial integrity protected through the institution. As a result, a conflict on the far side of the world could not be simply written off as a far away affair with little impact upon Britain or the wider international community. Labour believed that in this age of internationalism:

Wars cannot be localised – British lives and property are already in danger: the range of their influence cannot be limited. If the nations of the world take no action to uphold the Covenant of the League of Nations they will thereby destroy this collective system of world law; they will be unable to appeal for its aid in one part of the world if they allow it to be defied in another; they will leave armed force as the determining factor in Asia, and elsewhere; they will gravely increase the existing sense of international insecurity; they will shatter all hopes for the reduction of armaments in the West, as well as in the East. Other wars will then become inevitable.<sup>97</sup>

Therefore, with the threat to the entire world demonstrated by Japanese actions, the NJC memorandum called upon the British Government to pressure the League to act swiftly to challenge Japan. The NJC did not seek war but hoped that the League could implement alternative measures to force Japan to end its use of armed force. Ideally this would be achieved through “measures of financial and economic constraint” in other words, sanctions.<sup>98</sup> It would be with these non-violent means that a chance for peace could be made possible.

Labour’s support for China was validated as the country worked diligently over the first months of 1932 to secure a peaceful settlement through the League, which by mid February accepted that Japan’s violation of Chinese territory was the crux of the dispute. The League continued to move closer to recognition of Japanese culpability when on 3 March 1932 a meeting was convened to respond to China’s appeal under Article 15 of the League Covenant,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

the first time it had ever been invoked. Article 15 required the League of Nations Council to “endeavour to effect a settlement” of a dispute between members which could not be settled via arbitration.<sup>99</sup> On 4 March the League called for a ceasefire between the two belligerents and began mediation talks on 11 March. The League’s efforts bore fruit and a ceasefire was finally reached in Shanghai on 5 May which halted Japanese expansion into China for the time being.

The League had succeeded in ending hostilities but not in ensuring a Japanese departure from Chinese territory in Manchuria. It would not be until 28 November 1932 that the League would receive the Lytton Commission’s report regarding the origins of the conflict. The League accepted the Report which found Japan to be the aggressor, refused recognition of the puppet state of Manchukuo and demanded the return of Manchuria to Chinese rule. The Japanese response was to simply refuse to recognise the findings. By February of 1933 the League was forced to accept that mediation was impossible as Japan refused to abandon its new territories. Japan responded to League pressure by declaring that it “has now reached the limit of its endeavors to cooperate with the League of Nations” and announced it would leave the organisation on 27 March 1933.<sup>100</sup> The departure would represent a stinging blow to Labour’s aspirations for the League to be a modern tool to settle foreign disputes if aggressor states could simply withdraw from the system and face no significant consequences.

#### The 1932 Labour Party Conference: “To Maintain Peace is to be Ready for Peace”

Amid the drama at Geneva, Labour had its annual Conference in Leicester from 3 to 7 October 1932. It was the first gathering of the Labour Party in the aftermath of the 1931 General

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<sup>99</sup> Covenant of the League of Nations. The Avalon Project. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp)

<sup>100</sup> Seventeenth Plenary Meeting of the Assembly, 10.30 a.m., February 24, 1933 (Geneva), Text of the Debates, 4 (1933), 23. As quoted in Tzu-chin, 203.

Election. Therefore, with the Party was still intensively fixated on identifying the reasons for the defeat and resisting National Government reforms. Although Labour was concerned with the “lukewarm advocacy of Disarmament” from the National Government, the bulk of its Conference discussions centred on opposition to protectionism and de-nationalisation.<sup>101</sup> Foreign affairs were of limited concern with pressing domestic economic challenges having a direct impact on the well-being of the working-class and trade unions.

The Labour Conference largely focused its foreign policy debate on the fate of the World Disarmament Conference as a reduction in arms was believed to be the best chance to avert a future war between the Great Powers. The NEC blamed stagnation in Geneva on the National Government wanting to retain arms and displayed significant pro-German sympathies when assigning guilt for the challenges in securing a common disarmament agreement. The trade unions took a similar line with clear displays of support for the Germans at the expense of French security interests. More important to the future, the 1932 Conference saw an alignment between pacifists and the left emerge over fears that Labour was drifting too far towards a liberal international policy rather than a socialist one. Both groups believed that the situation at Geneva could not be salvaged, and Britain should instead lead the world by example with a policy of unilateral disarmament. Arthur Henderson was able to hold off these challengers from the fringes by arguing that the Geneva talks needed more time to achieve success. It was enough for the Party to fall in line in 1932 but radical unrest was growing, and it appeared doubtful that Henderson could hold them off if the World Disarmament Conference continued to be ineffectual for another year.

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<sup>101</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1932), A3.

Opening the Party's debate on foreign affairs on behalf of the NEC, J.R. Clynes introduced a motion to the Conference on Labour's attitude towards the fracturing of the Geneva talks.<sup>102</sup> Clynes argued that the British Government had facilitated the deterioration of the League of Nations and disarmament efforts due to the "narrow nationalism of its outlook, by its desire to maintain inflated armaments, and by its indifference."<sup>103</sup> The NEC echoed its attitude from 1931 which "condemns the doctrine that armaments give security and declares its unqualified hostility to the rearming of any country in any circumstances."<sup>104</sup> That final point, that Labour would be hostile to rearming under any circumstance was an early example of the radicalism which would come to dominate the Party's thinking in the years to come. The blatant aggression shown by Japan towards China already made Labour values of preserving the international status quo ineffectual as the Party had no qualms with China defending itself. The next logical step for China resisting invasion would be for it to acquire ever increasing quantities of armaments unless the League of Nations could force Japan to negotiate under economic pressures. Labour placed its faith in non-violent multilateralism to save China but ignored a serious gap in its own policy in favour of advocating for an ideal world.

More important to the talks in Geneva, the NEC weighed in on the Franco-German divisions at the centre of the stagnation in disarmament negotiations:

the victors in the last war cannot evade their solemn responsibility and obligations towards the former Central Powers and the world. If Great Britain and France continue to reject any substantial measure of Disarmament, their responsibility for a situation which may have the most serious consequences will be very grave... the [Labour] Conference is of [the] opinion that loyal and effective co-operation with the United States at the Disarmament Conference on the basis of President Hoover's proposals is in the highest interests of world peace and true economy, and calls upon

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<sup>102</sup> Clynes was a prominent member of the Party having served as Labour's Parliamentary Leader between 1921 to 1922 and was the Home Secretary during the Second Labour Government.

<sup>103</sup> *Report of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference*, 228.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*

the Government, at this critical moment, to give a bold lead to the Disarmament Conference and thus endeavour to avoid catastrophe of incalculable gravity.<sup>105</sup>

The NEC were asking the Conference to embrace multilateral disarmament as the only means of preserving peace, especially in the face of Japanese aggression which had placed the world at a crossroad. Either states could embrace rearmament to ensure security, or they could act to strengthen institutions such as the League of Nations to avert calamity.

Clynes believed that the Great War was a profound example of the need for a conceptual challenge to traditional ideas around international security. Through reference to the arms buildup before 1914, Clynes noted that most political leaders believed “the sure way to maintain peace was to be ready for war.”<sup>106</sup> Labour provided an alternative philosophy that to “maintain peace is to be ready for peace and to operate through the agency and structure of the League of Nations.”<sup>107</sup> Clynes also articulated the strong pro-German sentiment within the ranks of the Labour Party which argued that Germany was justifiably angry with the lack of disarmament by other states when it had been forced upon them. Therefore, “Disarmament does not consist in the powerful and victorious imposing disarmament upon the conquered. It is therefore essential that the winners in the war should follow the example of the losers.”<sup>108</sup> It was a clear statement of Labour support for the German demands made at Geneva.

There was also a second reason to support disarmament as it could free up vast sums of money spent on the armed forces to address other aspects of social disparity such as health and housing which would have a significant impact on the quality of life for working class people. In this way, Labour’s resolution matched the longstanding belief that the Versailles Treaty had been

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

unjustly harsh towards Germany and was driving radicalisation in that country, and arms spending diverted resources from other areas which could do a social good. The problem, of course, was that if Britain cut back more than it already had on defence spending, it would be jeopardising imperial security and put the well being of millions in flux.

Representatives of the trade unions embraced a far more Germanophile assessment of the driving factors behind the political discord in Germany and the difficulties it brought to Geneva. George Ridley of the Railway Clerks' Association passionately defended German hostility to disarmament proposals through a recounting of the experience thrust upon Germany since 1918 by Britain and France, "the compulsory confession of war guilt under duress, an imposed disarmament...an army of occupation that gravely offended every canon of international decency, a reparations policy as vindictive as it was stupid, these things have all produced their inevitable repercussion." The result of these impositions was a new adult population in Germany "which refuses to remain subservient to the rest of Europe."<sup>109</sup> Ridley believed that the British response to this logical development of German hostility was a "denial of the desire for disarmament."<sup>110</sup> Instead the National Government had endangered the entire disarmament effort through ridiculous ideas of distinguishing defensive versus offensive weapons with a plan to ban the latter. Ridley's criticism had some merit as certain weapons such as battleships or tanks could be used for both functions while bomber aircraft was designed for offensive action. The problem was that Ridley and other trade unionists with sympathy for the German's ignored reasonable French grievances as it had been their country which experienced the horrors of the First World War on their soil.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

More radical responses came from Labour's pacifist wing which rejected the NEC's adherence to internationalism even if it could acknowledge the goal to end war as a noble one. Lord Ponsonby, speaking on behalf of the pacifists, believed that the motion before the Labour Party was a troubling display of liberalism as the resolution was one "which could be passed quite easily by any branch of the League of Nations Union."<sup>111</sup> Ponsonby believed that Henderson and other members of NEC were dragging Labour away from its true history of being a Party which "will meet any threat of war, so-called defensive or offensive, by organising general resistance, including the refusal to bear arms, to produce armaments or to render any material assistance."<sup>112</sup> By forgetting this tradition of war resistance and embracing a League-centric policy, Labour was setting itself up for failure as a future conflict could easily bring a repetition of 1914 where the working class embraced calls to serve King and Country when conflict erupted. Ponsonby also identified League-centric policy as bound to fail because it aimed to achieve disarmament within the confines of the capitalist system. The League itself was made up of capitalist states which had within them private arms manufacturers who would seek to expand their profits even if that came at the expense of working-class lives. Ponsonby's anti-capitalism was a clear example of wider pacifist sentiments that future wars could only be averted if no one could stand to profit from it.

For all the bravado, Ponsonby was careful to qualify his stance as not being an attack against the key architect of the disarmament conference, Arthur Henderson. Referring to Henderson's work in Geneva Ponsonby noted: "we intensely admire the efforts he has made, and is making still, to try to get from that Conference something that will give the world some

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. Ponsonby was Labour leader in the House of Lords and so held great distinction within the Party's leadership.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid



hope.”<sup>113</sup> The only way Geneva could hope to achieve its stated purpose of preserving peace would have been for Britain to lead by example with a pledge at the start for unilateral disarmament a chance which was now lost due to an unwillingness to abandon the British armed forces.<sup>114</sup> For pacifists, the Disarmament Conference was unlikely to achieve its wider aim of ending war as an instrument of policy but it had a noble aspiration. Ponsonby’s challenge to NEC policy represented a significant divergence from the attitudes of the trade unions which were careful to not express support for war resistance. Yet, Ponsonby’s war resistance calls were qualified with proclamations of support for Henderson and his work. This display of loyalty represented an important balancing act in an environment where Labour suffered from divisions which threatened the stability of the Party. Ponsonby represented a divergence from the means to attain lasting peace from that of the NEC, but both shared the same end goal. Ponsonby’s overriding concern was Party unity not rebellion.

Ponsonby was followed by other skeptics of the Disarmament Conference, this time from the Labour left. Foremost amongst these were Lucy Cox who had expressed a lack of faith in Henderson’s plan at the 1931 Labour Party Conference when she supported an ILP objection to a fresh attempted at negotiated disarmament. She believed that the stagnation of the Conference vindicated her earlier fears: “I think it would be a great catastrophe if this resolution going out to the world from this Conference [Labour] carried with the suggestion that the Labour Movement is not bitterly disappointed with the achievements of the Disarmament Conference up to date.”<sup>115</sup> Although Cox was quick to qualify her statements with an acknowledgment of the hard work done by Henderson to find success at Geneva she believed that “we have to face the fact that

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

despite all the efforts that he [Henderson] has been making, the achievements of the Conference are going to be something very much less than some of us had hoped they might be.”<sup>116</sup>

Disarmament efforts had failed due to widespread mistrust as each proposal for disarmament, whether by the Soviet Union, Italy, or the United States, were all disingenuous in nature. The only option left for Cox, as with Ponsonby, was for Labour to acknowledge that the current process was untenable and that the Labour Movement, “should go forward with the policy of disarmament by example.”<sup>117</sup> Ponsonby and Cox illustrate how for the pacifists and the Labour left, the only way forward was through an abandonment of multilateralism, in essence a rejection of the policy Henderson had diligently crafted.

Henderson’s response to these challenges represented remarkable even-handedness. With an emphasis on maintaining Party unity, he acknowledged Ponsonby’s reservations but reminded the conference that a call for war resistance was still Party policy in the event of a conflict breaking out so pacifist attacks on the efforts at Geneva were unnecessary. Yet, the fact that Henderson believed that the question of war resistance needed to be addressed at all illustrates concerns that Labour was shifting away from such a policy were widespread.<sup>118</sup> Next, Henderson turned to the criticisms of Cox and other members of the Labour left. He argued that calls for Britain to lead the way by unilateral disarmament were unrealistic and encouraged the Party to abandon longstanding associations right when its policy ideas were being tested on a world-wide scale.<sup>119</sup> Regardless of its imperfections, Labour had the chance to effect genuine and lasting change if it was given the opportunity to work through the challenges at Geneva. The Party

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> It would not be lost on older members that Labour had been bitterly split over its response to the First World War where Henderson split from MacDonald and led the Party in joining the wartime coalition.

<sup>119</sup> *Report of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference*, 232.

needed to remember that the World Disarmament Conference was a unique moment in global history. Henderson declared: “I regard the Disarmament Conference as the greatest experiment the world has ever known...Do you remember we have been living for ages under, not a peace mentality, but under a militarist mentality, and to expect that all at once...total and complete disarmament in one stroke? Things are not brought about in that way.”<sup>120</sup> Henderson’s practicality combined with a commitment to return to Geneva with a desire to achieve a lasting settlement won support amongst Party members. His request to have the NEC motion backed unanimously, regardless of disagreement, would give him the best chance to effect change and the Conference remained true to its longstanding policy with a unanimous vote in favour. Yet, even if the result represented a victory for Henderson’s pragmatism, seeds of dissent were clear, and they would not disappear from Labour discourse for years to come.

### Conclusion

The Leicester Conference marked the end of another harrowing year for the Labour Party. The events of 1931 and 1932 had proven to be dramatic with the abrupt and brutal end to Labour’s experience as a party of government in late 1931 and further factional splits in 1932 left its political future incredibly bleak. In foreign affairs, Labour was able to stay the course with Henderson keeping the Party wedded to his ideas for international policy developed in the 1920s. All hopes were placed on a successful outcome for the talks in Geneva which were the ultimate expression of Labour’s internationalism. Yet even World Disarmament efforts opened with the challenge of a war of aggression by Japan against China. The Chinese had utilised the mechanisms of the League to stem the invasion, exactly as it had been intended by proponents of

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid

the League of Nations. From the very start there were signs that the system was ineffectual without a strong desire by member states to act on a violation of the international status quo.

Labour continued to monitor the situation in China but were remarkably reluctant to let a conflict in Asia derail a larger attempt at global disarmament. The World Disarmament Conference was quickly met with arguments over categorisation of weapons and disputes between France and Germany over a fair settlement which could satisfy both states' security concerns. Labour met the challenge with a remarkably Germanophile outlook. In part, this was a product of solidarity with Germany's SPD and a longstanding belief that Versailles had been unjust. The latter point was shared across the political spectrum, but Labour wilfully ignored genuine French concerns which would have lasting consequences. The Party was quick to note the danger that the Nazis presented but like those in the National Government, lacked a unified response. Such intra-party disunity could only hinder Labour's prospects of winning the next General Election. Above all, the most important shift in Labour was the selection of George Lansbury as leader. Although he was the most experienced choice amongst a lack of viable alternatives, having a devout pacifist at the helm meant that when matters of war and peace came to the forefront of British politics, Labour would face an existential crisis. It would not be long in the making.

## The Acid Test of Socialism: 1933 to 1934

### Introduction

The Labour Party began 1933 having established itself as a political force that was here to stay. It had succeeded in preventing further factional splits since the departure of the ILP at the start of 1932 and was determined to see its foreign policy vision achieved in Geneva. The accession of Lansbury to the leadership provided an experienced hand to guide the Party as Henderson was focused on keeping the World Disarmament Conference on track. Yet, Lansbury's unwavering faith in Christian pacifism would pave the way for a radical turn in the Party's response to questions of war and peace. It was already clear in late 1932 that the democratic system in the Weimar Republic was on the brink of a final inglorious collapse. Japan showed a complete disregard for the League of Nations and a strong desire to continue its aggressive expansion in China. The question was, could the world come together to stem the tide of violence and despair, or would there be a retreat to splendid isolation as pacifist elements of the Labour Party wanted?

### Democracy v. Dictatorship

Tensions in Europe came to a head in early 1933 as supporters of fascism, communism and democracy were forced to respond to increased instability and the arrival of new political forces to the forefront of global politics. The bulk of public attention had shifted from concern over Japanese aggression in China to matters closer to home with new developments in Germany. Germany's repression of communists, social democrats and trade unionists in the first months of 1933 prompted a response from left-wing movements across Europe and the Labour Party was no exception. Soon after Hitler's accession to the Chancellery the German government began restricting the socialist press, the right to public meetings and the ability to organise for

left-wing organisations. Communist leaders were arrested and many of the leading figures in the Social Democratic Party were forced into exile. It was in this context that in late February 1933, the Executive of the Labour and Socialist International, which the British Labour Party held close affiliations with, promptly called for all working-class groups to join in the fight against fascism. Labour's NEC supported such anti-fascist efforts but were quickly forced to respond to Moscow's call for communist parties to seek out 'United Fronts' with other socialist parties to unify anti-fascist efforts.

While Labour could support collaboration with other social democratic parties across Europe, collaboration with the communists was a bridge too far. The CPGB and the ILP came to a deal for coordination on 17 March and this prompted the NCL to meet on 21 March to decide the response of the Labour Party and the TUC to both the deteriorating situation in Germany and the activities of the CPGB and ILP.<sup>121</sup> The NCL summed up its attitude in a manifesto titled *Democracy v. Dictatorship*. The NCL asserted its belief that cooperating with communists was antithetical to democracy as states which had experienced a growth in support of communism had promptly fallen victim to fascism, merely trading one authoritarian ruler for another. Examples could be seen in Hungary where the existence of a communist dictatorship had justified its replacement with the authoritarian rule of Admiral Horthy or in Italy where Mussolini had justified his seizure of power as a means of halting the growth of Bolshevik influence. Germany had exhibited a similar trend with the Versailles settlement and the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Rhineland in the 1920s creating the "economic and psychological conditions favourable to aggressive Nationalism and the growth of communism in Germany, and

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<sup>121</sup> The NCL was also concerned with the increasing influence of dictatorships in Poland, Hungary, and Italy which provided an earlier repudiation of the liberal democratic post war settlement.

finally the triumph of Hitler's dictatorship."<sup>122</sup> Labour had consistently stated its desire to address German grievances from the Treaty of Versailles and eliminate economic barriers to trade. It believed that economic protectionism could encourage German militarist ventures as a means of accessing necessary raw materials to grow its economy, and free trade could provide the panacea. The emergence of Hitler appeared to justify such concerns and in Labour's view, demonstrated a need for its policies to be embraced to avert the chance of other states suffering a similar fall into the hands of fascism.

The NCL believed that the protection of democratic traditions was a necessary precondition to long-term economic and social prosperity. Only by embracing democratic principles at home and abroad, could the cycle of authoritarianism be broken. The status quo was inherently flawed as the economic crisis prompted the "reaction of the upper classes throughout Europe [which] has strengthened the demand for dictatorship of the working-class. The fear of dictatorship from the Working-class in turn has evoked the iron Dictatorship of Capitalism and Nationalism." The result had been a surge in violent repression across central Europe with the ballot being "destroyed by the bullet."<sup>123</sup> In the view of the NCL, British Labour had already shown its ability to break this flight to the political extremes by retaining the support of the bulk of the working-class in the face of defections by the Labour right to join the National Government in 1931 and on the left with the disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932.<sup>124</sup> Therefore, the NCL identified three ways that the British Labour movement could regain power and export its ideas to the world:

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<sup>122</sup> The National Council of Labour, "Democracy v. Dictatorship," quoted in, *Report of the Thirty-Third Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (Transport House: London, 1933), 277.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*

Workers everywhere should strengthen the Trade unions – the bulwark against Capitalist tyranny in Industry.

Workers everywhere should strengthen the Co-operative Societies – the movement created by workers to counteract private profiteering.

Workers everywhere should strengthen the Labour Party – the spearhead of political power against Dictators, Fascist or Communist.<sup>125</sup>

If British workers could stand firmly behind the forces of democracy, then socialism could be achieved, the alternative of working with extremist movements would only perpetuate the cycle of violence and embolden reactionary forces.

The NCL manifesto illustrated how in the view of Labourites, the driving force behind domestic and international instability was economic inequalities. Democracy could solve these challenges but only if Labour held firm in its resistance to dictatorship. The ideas encapsulated in *Democracy v. Dictatorship* would be central to the trade union base of the Labour Party who embraced a “middle way” in its foreign policy for the next six years. This adherence to democratic socialism was demonstrated in Labour’s repeated efforts to shut out the Communists and its own left-wing which repeatedly called for the creation of a “united front” and pacifist voices which clamoured for an isolationist embrace. Instead, the bulk of Labour’s membership would reaffirm its support for collective security through the League of Nations as the best means of halting the spread of fascism and communism.

### Discord over Disarmament

By the start of the summer of 1932, it was apparent to any observer that the World Disarmament Conference was in crisis. President Herbert Hoover had introduced a plan in June to reconcile the divisions between French desires for security and Germany’s goal to achieve

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 278.



equality of status, that is to maintain an army of relative strength to its neighbors. The plan became bogged down as Britain and other states refused to provide clear security commitments to France as means of making up for any decline in French military strength. The impasse prompted Germany to withdraw from the Conference in late July 1932 until an equality of rights clause was clearly included in any finalised resolution. MacDonald and the bulk of the British cabinet were determined to find a way to bring Germany back to the Conference. This was easier said than done as Neville Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, astutely observed “everyone was afraid of reducing their armaments without some security that Germany was not re-arming while they disarmed.”<sup>126</sup> Germany was brought back into the fold, in December of 1932 by a proposal to give Germany full equality of rights as part of a multiparty commitment between Britain, France, Italy, the United States and Germany, to never resort to the use of force to settle differences between each other. This allowed the Conference to reopen on 2 February 1933.

The problem was that the Conference reopening occurred only days after Adolf Hitler secured the German Chancellery. Franco-German divisions were on the cusp of reigniting as Hitler was hostile to French desires for verification protocols to ensure any further disarmament which was agreed to was implemented. To avoid any fresh stagnation of the Conference, or any prospect of the whole project collapsing, Prime Minister MacDonald and the foreign secretary, John Simon, travelled to Geneva with a fresh plan to settle Franco-German divisions. The MacDonald Plan included a commitment to tackle Labour’s longstanding belief that the Versailles Treaty had been unjustly harsh towards Germany. The Prime Minister pledged to give equality of status to Germany in the negotiations which would allow Germany to build up an

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<sup>126</sup> Neville Chamberlain, CAB23/72, Cabinet Conclusions, 56(32), 31 October 1932. As quoted in Kitching, 152.

army far closer to parity with France and eventually, would be able to reach parity in equipment with the French except in the air.<sup>127</sup>

When MacDonald's proposals were introduced to Parliament for approval a fierce debate ensued over the trustworthiness of Germany and whether equality of status was the best means of salvaging the Conference. While MacDonald could find support amongst some Government members, Winston Churchill, now out cabinet but still a famous figure in British politics, was deeply alarmed by proposals which required pressure to be placed on France to further disarm. Churchill feared that if France were forced to shrink the capabilities of its armed forces it would create greater European instability with renewed fears of German militarism emerging from Hitler's accession to the Chancellery. It was in this context that he uttered the famous quote "Thank God for the French army," but what he said after showed far more appropriate understanding of the danger the new German regime brought compared to that of French insecurity. Churchill noted that Germany made the British people "watch with surprise and distress the tumultuous insurgence of ferocity and war spirit, the pitiless ill-treatment of minorities, the denial of the normal protections of civilised society on the ground of race."<sup>128</sup> He feared that French concerns were justified if a violent regime like Hitler's were allowed to expand its hatred beyond the confines of Germany to other corners of Europe. Churchill's Francophile stance showed that Labour would not be alone in its concerns over the Prime Minister's plan.

Joshia Wedgwood expressed some of the strongest criticisms from the Labour benches towards MacDonald's plan to treat Hitler's Germany as an equal. Wedgwood believed that

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<sup>127</sup> Kitching, 158.

<sup>128</sup> Winston Churchill, "European Situation," *House of Commons Debate* (23 March 1933), Vol. 276. cc. 543.

whilst the Prime Minister had been touring the continent he was “absent from that psychological contact and change which has come over public opinion.... a fortnight ago all our bright young things were passing resolutions that they would never again fight for King and country. Now they are muttering that if these German supermen go much further then “We shall tackle them.”<sup>129</sup> Wedgwood also identified an important change which Churchill had just demonstrated in his own Francophile statements as “what has taken place in Germany has completely converted a pro-German England into a pro-French England.”<sup>130</sup> Wedgwood believed that French concerns about Germany were justified and should have been appreciated by the Prime Minister as German socialists which he himself had worked with in the past were now suffering from Nazi oppression.

Specific reference was made to the plight of Otto Wels, the chairman of the SPD, who was earlier that same day threatened with imprisonment. In the presence of SA (Nazi paramilitaries) thugs and Hitler himself, he bravely stood alone as the only member of the Reichstag to speak against the Enabling Act. The Act represented the final death blow to the Weimar Republic as it allowed Hitler to make and enforce laws without the need for parliamentary approval and invalidated the constitution. Wedgwood feared for Wels and other prominent SDP members that MacDonald knew personally such as Rudolf Breitscheid (who would soon flee to France) who were “now being hunted and bludgeoned like rats.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Joshia Wedgwood, “European Situation,” House of Commons Debate (23 March 1933), Vol. 276. cc.563. Wedgwood was referring to the infamous Oxford Union debate where a motion asking members to refuse to fight in a fresh war was firmly supported and inspired similar anti-war statements from other university students across the country.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, Breitscheid had been a prominent member of the SPD and of the German delegation to the League of Nations.

Wedgwood, and the bulk of the Labour Party, supported MacDonald's longstanding desire to revise the Peace Treaties (Versailles and Locarno) and settle perceived German grievances. MacDonald had on his recent trip to Geneva met with the French Prime Minister to discuss the idea lifting restrictions upon Germany and brought up the matter with Mussolini a few days later, all the while hoping the new German regime could be reasonable negotiators. There were however, two problems which MacDonald displayed in Wedgwood's eyes, first a dangerous ignorance and trust in the new German regime, and secondly a disregard for the fact that any attempt to address territorial grievances would come into conflict with the various states of central Europe who held their own territorial ambitions. Wedgwood's assessment demonstrated remarkable foresight:

Hungary is hungry, Rumania is anxious; Yugoslavia, under a dictatorship, is no doubt peculiarly susceptible to squeezing; Czechoslovakia, about the only country in Europe which has really managed to pull through the post-war period with success, is one of those countries, unfortunately, which embraces at present, possessions most coveted by its neighbours; and Poland is more anxious than anyone else. Directly we hear of a four-power plan between England, France, Germany, and Italy, who are going to revise the peace treaties, I think we shall have more anxiety to get inside the charmed circle of the Great Powers than will make for the contentment and the amicable discussion of the issues raised by them.<sup>132</sup>

The other serious problem was that if treaty revisions were on the table Mussolini would be bound to take advantage. Italy's territorial ambitions were well known, and Wedgwood feared that any negotiation could result in concessions to Italian aspirations for more African colonies.

To have any hope of success in MacDonald's proposal Wedgwood believed that American involvement would be necessary. Only with a combined effort by Britain, France, and the United States could success be achieved in "the responsibility of trying to keep these

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 566. Wedgwood's assessment of the plight of Czechoslovakia was shared by many in the Labour Party, for more detail refer to the chapter on the Four Power Munich Accord of 1938.

revivified nationalisms in Europe from cutting each other's throats." In the long run European stability would only be achieved when "The League of Nations, under a new name, revising those treaties which no honest man can honestly support, a new union of the great Powers which should take part in that effort, might, if it included an honest Germany, a liberal-minded Germany, as well as America, really be the starting place for an era of peace and good feeling in the world."<sup>133</sup>

Other Labour MPs such as Jack Jones echoed Wedgwood's concerns with MacDonald's plan to work with the fascist dictators but focused instead on the need to also address economic grievances. A removal of trade barriers might be the only means left to diminish the militaristic ambitions of Hitler and Mussolini as access to raw materials would invalidate their need for territorial expansion.<sup>134</sup> This would remain a recurring theme in Labour discourse over the rest of the 1930s as many in the Party believed that lasting peace could only be achieved if a desire for raw materials could be satiated through free trade as it would eliminate the need to fight over what markets would provide.

Stafford Cripps soon followed Wedgwood speaking on behalf of the Labour left. Cripps echoed the views of Wedgwood and other Labour members that urged the Government to recognise that Disarmament efforts were only one condition necessary ensuring sustainable peace. Cripps believed that the Disarmament Conference was on life support because it had been dominated by nationalist tendencies, each state sought to retain as much power as possible while demanding "for the others a liberal measure of disarmament."<sup>135</sup> Therefore, MacDonald needed

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, Wedgwood's vision for a new League which included a liberal Germany, and the United States would become the bedrock of European stability in the post-1945 world.

<sup>134</sup> Jack Jones, Ibid, cc. 580.

<sup>135</sup> Stafford Cripps, Ibid, cc. 607.

to embrace unilateral action, “negotiations must proceed on the basis of seeing how much we can give up in order to make the biggest common appeal; and we shall never achieve that position if we start from the position that we have already given up so much that it lies with other people to do the giving up. I believe that if that attitude could be adopted it might be possible to arrive at some arrangement for disarmament.”<sup>136</sup> This stance was indicative of wider views on the Labour left which had significant alignment with prominent Labour pacifists, including the Party leader George Lansbury, who would continue to call for unilateral disarmament for the remainder of the 1930s.<sup>137</sup>

Even discussion of what should be restricted under the terms of the conference gravely concerned Cripps as negotiations had produced numerous gaps. The absence of limitations was rife for exploitation as there were no “budgetary limitations at all, it allows unlimited expenditure on the smaller unprohibited arms, it contains practically no naval disarmament...and it contains no abolition of aircraft – I am talking about the total abolition of aircraft, and not their cutting down.”<sup>138</sup> Cripps’ anti-capitalism is also shown through his criticism of the lack of serious consideration of the profit motive in arms production. He pointed to the recent use of arms embargos upon Japan as proof that morality could, where the will existed, halt the “taking of blood-money in respect to the manufacture of armaments.”<sup>139</sup> Yet, morality could only be a temporary check on such capitalist motivations, only by implementing “both national and

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid

<sup>137</sup> Cripps’ commitment to unilateralism was a continuation of Labour left policy from the 1931 and 1932 Labour Party Conferences.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. Members of the Labour Party would continue to call for the abolition of national air forces well into the 1930s as a response to the horrific expectation that cities would be flattened by aerial bombardment within hours of war being declared.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, cc. 608

international control over the manufacture of and traffic in armaments” could peace be assured.<sup>140</sup>

When turning to the proposal for a four-power meeting to secure a wider European settlement Cripps believed that such an idea represented all that went wrong in 1914. The four powers of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy could easily become “a great menace to the League of Nations, because either it will form a small inner cabinet of the League of Nations which will control the League by the concerted action of those four great powers.”<sup>141</sup> Attempts to settle disputes with only a few big players could do lasting damage to the credibility of the League as smaller members could quickly determine that the organisation was unnecessary, over time it could destroy the internationalist system developed over the course of the 1920s.

Indeed Cripps, as with Wedgwood, could see that Europe was on the cusp of renewed crisis. Cripps believed that Britain needed to be cautious in establishing any further commitments to an increasingly armed continent:

Germany...has, temporarily we hope, gone mad. The Jews are being hounded and persecuted as they were in the Middle Ages, and Socialists and Catholics are being treated equally badly...Italy has already seen the complete suppression of political freedom, and it is hoped that a Four-Power Pact with these two Governments as members is going to lead Europe to a peaceful and understanding justice?<sup>142</sup>

To Cripps it was already evident that the fascists could not be trusted and represented a genuine danger. Therefore, the Labour left believed that the only logical path forward would be to shore up the League. Yet, the MacDonald proposal risked upending the best hope for peace by throwing aside multilateralism in the face of adversity.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, cc. 609.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, cc. 613.

Due to the overwhelming number of MPs for the Government compared to Labour and the Liberals, the outcome of the debate was not in question. The MacDonald Plan was passed and presented to Geneva but failed to make headway. What Labour did not know was that MacDonald himself knew that the plan was unlikely to succeed, even telling the King in a letter that the entire venture was merely a “stop-gap” to save the Disarmament Conference.<sup>143</sup>

Nonetheless, the Parliamentary debate on the MacDonald Plan is telling as it highlights two voices of the Labour Right and Left respectively, and some of Labour’s key values are demonstrated in this juncture when Hitler had entered onto the stage of world politics. Already in March of 1933 various elements of the Labour Party were alarmed by the sudden and cruel repression enacted by the Nazis against Jews, Socialists and others they deemed undesirable. Both Labour figures demonstrated a deep mistrust of the fascist dictators, seeing them clearly for the dangers they were, and gave a voice to those experiencing repression under their systems. Where Wedgwood and Cripps differed most was in their faith in the League’s ability to respond to these new threats to European stability. Cripps believed the League could be strengthened through unilateral British disarmament (aligning the left with the long-avowed pacifist position) If democracies could take the lead in demonstrating what ought to be done, then the League could rebound. For Wedgwood, the League was already doomed, hamstrung by its original flaws, the inclusion of ethnically divided central European states who had an appetite for territorial change and especially its lack of American membership. The best option instead was to capitalise on an emerging anti-fascist sentiment being displayed in the public consciousness. The bulk of the Labour Party would marry these contrasting responses from Wedgwood and Cripps. The Party held onto its twin pillars of faith in international disarmament, unilaterally, if

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<sup>143</sup> Kitching, 159.



need be, and a desire to see the League of Nations remain a viable tool for settling global disputes. A few months later the Party would get the chance to test its ideas in the minds of electorate.

### Clay-Cross By-Election

In July of 1933 the serving Labour MP for the riding of Clay-Cross suddenly died prompting a by-election. Clay-Cross was a safe Labour seat which was dependent on coalmining and had strong ties to the Mineworkers Federation. Therefore, the opening prompted great interest as it could be a chance for prominent Labourites who had lost their seats in 1931 to return to Parliament. After some debate within the local Labour Party, it was decided that their candidate would be former Party leader and Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson. Although Henderson was still pre-occupied with his task of leading the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva; the stagnation of negotiations provided an opportunity for him to take on the task of serving on Labour's front bench.

Henderson sought to make the contest a referendum on the question of disarmament. He highlighted his experience in foreign policy and work in Geneva as clear reasons for voters to show public backing for the process when it appeared Britain would need to take a lead in bridging Franco-German divides. As Henderson put it at a rally:

In some newspapers the fear has been expressed that this by-election would interfere with my work as president of the [disarmament] conference. I am convinced that far from making my influence less in the name of world peace, my return from Clay Cross with a thumping majority would show the people of other nations that I have been given increased power from my own country. My influence over the conference will be stronger.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> "Clay Cross For Peace," *Daily Herald*, (3 August 1933), 2.

This sentiment was shared by Lansbury who aided the campaign with appeals for the residents of Clay Cross to wage a mighty fight against “enemies of disarmament and world cooperation.”<sup>145</sup> For Labour, the contest in Clay Cross had far reaching implications for strengthening efforts to defend world peace.

This focus on international arms control differed significantly from the focus of Henderson’s rivals. The CPGB believed that Labour was vulnerable at Clay-Cross and nominated their leader Harry Pollitt to contest the seat. Pollitt centred his campaign on domestic issues, arguing Labour was out of touch with the miners as they had failed to secure a seven-hour workday for them and appeared to have “peacefully accepted the means test.”<sup>146</sup> Labour would fight back against communist narratives by stressing Pollitt’s rejection of democracy. Ebby Edwards of the Mineworkers Federation campaigning on behalf of Henderson outlined Labour’s view when he declared to a rally: “cut out the camouflage and you will find that he [Pollitt] represents the Third International of Moscow...he is answerable not to his constituents but to the Communist Party.”<sup>147</sup> In a seat with such strong trade union ties, anti-communism was a larger priority than fighting the Conservatives.

The Conservatives took a similar line to the CPGB with its candidate John Moore, a Liverpool businessman, calling the campaign a “bread and butter election” which would emphasise the unemployment problems during the Second Labour Government and the National Government’s efforts to expand coal exports to Scandinavia. In Stanley Baldwin’s address to the constituency, he stressed a similar message noting that the Tories were “fighting for the cause of

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid

<sup>146</sup> “Clay-Cross By-Election,” *Sheffield Independent*, (5 August 1933), 5.

<sup>147</sup> “Clay Cross Polling This Week,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, (29 August 1933), 7.

national unity, sanity, and common sense...to see this country advance along the road towards greater prosperity.”<sup>148</sup>

Labour was resoundingly successful in holding the seat and returning Henderson to the Party’s front bench. Labour won 21,931 votes to 6,293 for the Conservatives and 3,434 to the CPGB.<sup>149</sup> Upon hearing the results, Henderson declared that:

above all, I regard the result as a clear and decisive declaration against war and competitive armaments. I have kept the question of world peace and universal disarmament to the very forefront during the contest. I was determined to make it a principal issue and I succeeded in doing so. I say, without hesitation, that the special significance of the result is that it represents a great triumph for the policy of peace, disarmament, and international cooperation. It is also an important declaration of approval of my continued efforts, as President of the Geneva Conference to secure a convention of real disarmament.<sup>150</sup>

Pollitt passed the victory off to the fact Henderson was viewed by “Tories and Liberals as safe for capitalism.” Meanwhile, the Tories merely viewed the result as unsurprising in a riding which had a long history of standing by the Labour Party. Therefore, the by-election was not a resounding confirmation (to those outside of Labour) that there was still strong public backing for a policy of multilateral disarmament, but Labour victory did not harm their case either. The most important outcome from Clay-Cross was a return of Labour’s strongest advocate for League-centric foreign policy to Westminster.

### East Fulham By-Election

While Henderson was fighting to hold Clay-Cross, Labour fought a second and more consequential by-election in East Fulham. It was called in late August in the aftermath of the death of the riding’s Conservative MP Sir Kenyon Vaughan-Morgan, who had held the seat since

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<sup>148</sup> “Baldwin’s Message to National Candidate,” *Gloucestershire Echo*, (24 August 1933), 1.

<sup>149</sup> “Mr. Henderson an MP Again,” *Northern Daily Mail*, (2 September 1933), 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*

1922. Transport House believed the London borough was ripe for change and devoted significant resources to the contest. It selected John Wilmot, a promising young candidate at the age of 38, with the hope of flipping the seat. George Lansbury, Arthur Greenwood, J.R. Clynes, Hugh Dalton and other prominent Labourites campaigned with Wilmot to bring national attention to the campaign.

Disarmament and foreign affairs initially were only a minor part of a campaign centred on housing and poor relief. An early address on the matter of foreign policy was made on 11 October when the Conservative Candidate and former mayor of Fulham, Alderman Waldron, made his views on disarmament and future Conservative policy in a speech to the local Conservative association. Alderman stated his support for The World Disarmament Conference's efforts to create a binding agreement but was careful to qualify his support with hostility to continuing a policy of unilateral disarmament, "I feel that we have gone to the utmost lengths in the direction of one-sided disarmament. The well-being of this country, and indeed the British Empire, necessitates a strong Navy and Air Force. In my opinion we have not today a margin of security sufficient to defend our seaborne trade, upon which our very existence as a nation depends, and to insure adequate protection from aerial attack."<sup>151</sup> Wilmot countered this narrative by focusing his campaign on the two 'great evils' plaguing Britain, "the menace of war and the shame of poverty."<sup>152</sup> Wilmot believed that the National Government's apparent unwillingness to lead the world by example with wider disarmament efforts created similar conditions to that of 1914 when Europe was plunged into calamity.<sup>153</sup> Such conditions merely

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<sup>151</sup> "East Fulham By-Election," *The Fulham Chronicle*, (13 October 1933), 5.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>153</sup> Wilmott's embrace of unilateralism echoes Stafford Cripps arguments in Parliament made back in March.

benefited the “international arms racket” which would profit from any increased expenditure on arms.

Foreign affairs became a central component of the campaign when on 14 October, Germany withdrew from The World Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations. This dramatic event less than two weeks before polling day captivated both Conservative and Labour electioneering efforts. Labour’s foreign policy proved beneficial for the campaign as the Liberal Party did not run in the contest. The local Liberals went further in assisting Labour with the former Liberal Candidate J.H. Greenwood campaigning alongside Wilmot and encouraging supporters of all parties to back Wilmot’s peace policy as the only means to avert conflict in Europe. The backing of the Liberals for Wilmot gave Labour an important edge in the contest and may have been the decisive factor in the eventual Labour victory.<sup>154</sup>

The results of East Fulham were shocking for both sides. Turnout was relatively high for a by-election at nearly 60% which seemed to suggest strong public engagement on the issue of foreign policy.<sup>155</sup> Labour won the seat with 17,790 votes to 12,950 for the Tories which represented a 29.1% swing towards Labour from that of the 1931 General Election.<sup>156</sup> The result sent a shockwave across the country. Labour’s role as the ‘defenders’ of the disarmament conference appeared to be vindicated.

Lansbury illustrated Labour’s interpretation of the results in East Fulham when speaking at a rally in the constituency of Bow East. Lansbury believed the near 30% swing in favour of

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<sup>154</sup> Martin Ceadel, “Interpreting East Fulham,” *By-Elections in British Politics*, (London: UCL Press, 1997), 100.

<sup>155</sup> Martin Ceadel and other scholars have tended to interpret the East Fulham results as primarily a repudiation of the Means Test rather than a strong endorsement of Labour foreign policy. Nonetheless in public both sides believed the vote had been a clear referendum on foreign policy.

<sup>156</sup> Ceadel, 94.

Labour was an overwhelming vote of confidence in a policy of peace and disarmament, “The people...will have no truck with any agreements that directly or indirectly mean more war.”<sup>157</sup> He went on to note that MacDonald and Baldwin needed to demonstrate an unshaking support for disarmament akin to declarations made by Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.<sup>158</sup> The Government appeared concerned enough with the sentiments Lansbury expressed as in the days after the results of East Fulham were declared, Lord Hailsham, the Secretary for War, responded to Lansbury’s speech and desire for unilateral disarmament by rather tepidly defending the existence of the armed forces: “Everyone admits that we must have some force, not, of course for aggression, but for the necessary policing and protection of our great Empire.”<sup>159</sup>

Lansbury responded to this statement the following day with a renewed call for the establishment of an international police force to preserve peace as an alternative to continued reliance on national military forces.<sup>160</sup> How this force would be manned was unclear as Lansbury encouraged British youth to keep out of the armed forces, if Britain was to contribute to an international force, then it would necessitate some British youth participating in the organisation. Nonetheless, Lansbury’s interpretation of East-Fulham was shared by the Government front bench with Stanley Baldwin continuing to interpret the results as late as 1936 as being centred “on no issue but the pacifist.”<sup>161</sup> He believed it was indicative of a widespread pacifist sentiment that gripped the nation in 1933. In this way both Labour and the Government believed that any response to increased aggression from the dictators would have to be limited in scope.

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<sup>157</sup> George Lansbury, “People Ready to Turn Government Out,” *Daily Herald*, (27 October 1933), 2.

<sup>158</sup> Lansbury was similar to many of his contemporaries in believing the dictator’s claims of support for peace to be genuine. He did leave room for doubt, noting that if they were bluffing about disarming, then Britain should call their bluff with a strong example for the world to follow.

<sup>159</sup> Lord Hailsham, “People Ready to Turn Government Out,” 2.

<sup>160</sup> George Lansbury, “Mr. Lansbury’s Reply,” *Daily Herald*, (27 October 1933), 2.

<sup>161</sup> Stanley Baldwin, House of Commons Debate, 12 November 1936. As quoted in, Ceadel, 96.

## The 1933 Labour Party Conference: “War is the Acid Test of Socialist Conviction”

The 1933 Labour Party Conference allowed the Party to navigate its response to perceived collapse of multilateral disarmament efforts. The apparent failure of the World Disarmament Conference gave credibility to left-wing and pacifist members who had long called for a unilateral response to the growing threat of war. They would succeed in encouraging the bulk of the Party to back a radical policy of war resistance. Labour came incredibly close to embracing a pacifist foreign policy (in line with the values of its pacifist leader George Lansbury). This included a plan to have a general strike in the event of war, the same policy which had failed to avert the outbreak of the First World War. There were few who would object to this radical turn, Ernest Bevin being a lonely voice of resistance, even longstanding Labour pragmatists such as Hugh Dalton fell in line with the spirit of radicalism which overtook the Party. It would take years to pull Labour back towards a policy of collective security; one which was too late to stem the tide of fascism.

To say that the Hasting’s Conference opened under a cloud of despair would be a serious understatement. In a run up to the Conference, the NEC released a report on Party activities for 1932 to 1933 which focused Party attention on three international crises threatening Britain and international stability. The hard-won postwar settlement of 1919 appeared to be in jeopardy with Germany allowing discontent to give way to “a despot [who embraced] the opportunity to invoke medieval methods of terror, torture and racial persecution.”<sup>162</sup> State repression conducted by the Nazis against Jews, trade unionists, and social democrats deeply shocked the Labour Party, but it was unsure of how to respond. At home the actions of the National Government demonstrated

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<sup>162</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the Thirty-Third Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (Transport House: London, 1933), A3.

“sheer self-satisfied stolidity” with slow reaction to the economic problems facing the working class and an apparent stagnation in the World Disarmament Conference to make a breakthrough for international arms control.<sup>163</sup> In the United States the Great Depression continued to limit the international involvement of the world’s largest economy in efforts to preserve the peace. Yet hope could be found for many Labourites in the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States where that Government was embracing an active role in driving economic recovery by compelling “employers to conform to radical proposals respecting hours and conditions that organised Labour has hitherto failed to accomplish.”<sup>164</sup> Roosevelt’s New Deal appeared to provide a model for state activism in the economy which could be employed in a similar fashion by Labour to solve Britain’s economic recovery. It was concern over these three challenges, the rise of fascism in Germany, the creation of a viable response to the National Government’s domestic and foreign policy, and a desire to learn from the apparent American embrace of government intervention which dominated Labour’s discourse at the 1933 Conference.

The Conference opened with an address by the Party Chairman Joseph Compton giving an assessment of the state of Britain and Labour’s attitude to the policies of the National Government. Labour’s assessment of two years of National Government foreign and imperial policy was made abundantly clear: “It’s attitude towards peace has been, at the best, merely lukewarm. Both at home and abroad it has lost prestige by vacillation, drift and lack of definite purpose.”<sup>165</sup> Compton noted Japanese aggression in China and the arrival of the Nazi regime in

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

<sup>165</sup> Joseph Compton, “Chairman’s Address,” *Report of the Thirty-Third Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (Transport House: London, 1933), 134.



Germany as the two great threats which required, in the absence of any stern response from Ramsay MacDonald or other members of the cabinet, a strong response from Labour.

Japanese annexation of Manchuria and its expression of desires for further expansion in China were of grave concern. In the aftermath of the Manchurian venture, Japan had continued its campaign of conquest. On 17 February of 1933 over 20,000 Japanese troops invaded the Chinese province of Rehe and between March and May the Japanese embarked on the Great Wall Campaign which saw sporadic battles with Chinese troops near Beijing.<sup>166</sup> Fighting only died down once the Japanese had secured the Chinese city of Tanggu and turned it into a staging point for further operations in the country. Such a rapid turn of events in China alarmed Labour with Compton telling the Party Conference that the Japanese action reflected the “incredible barbarity of her military aggression” as constituting “one of the blackest pages in the history of international brigandage.”<sup>167</sup> The fact that Japan had been able to achieve its goals without a significant League of Nations response (and the blatant disregard Japan demonstrated towards the organisation by its earlier exit) showed that “Governments of the world have all been accessories to the crime... On one pretext or another they have wriggled out of their responsibilities, leaving peace to its fate, and China to her ravishers.”<sup>168</sup> The League had demonstrated a dangerous impotence and Labour held the British Government as having “played the chief guiding part.”<sup>169</sup>

Greater attention was paid to the accession of Hitler to the German Chancellery and his eradication of Parliamentary Governance. Nazism was both a geographically closer danger to the

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<sup>166</sup> Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2021), 40.

<sup>167</sup> Compton, “Chairman’s Address,” 134.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*

British Isles but also more ideologically significant as repression of trade unionists and social democrats in Germany represented an attack on longstanding European partners for many in the upper ranks of the Labour Party and the TUC. Even at this early stage of the life of the Third Reich, Labour already understood Hitlerism for exactly what it was as in Germany: “Political and racial intolerance reigns supreme. The Germany of today is a vast concentration camp to all who refuse to “Hail Hitler” and salute Fascism.” Nazi sympathizers were nothing more than “willing tools of a fanatical and unscrupulous despotism.”<sup>170</sup> Compton explained how in the span of a few months Hitler had succeeded in eradicating the decades long process of building up robust trade unions. Compton expressed the fears of many Labourites that:

The tragic happenings hold for us a momentous warning. The uprising of Fascism will mean the downfall of Democracy. But it is the failure of Labour that will mean the success of Fascism...Fascism stands for Capitalism, for Subjection, for Dictatorship, for War. We stand for Socialism, for Freedom, for Democracy, for Peace. There can be no compromise on these great antitheses, no half-way house accommodation. We must fight Fascism without fear and without faltering.<sup>171</sup>

This moral and self preserving crusade would be consistently demonstrated for the remainder of Labour’s time in opposition and was central to its desires to join the Churchill coalition in May 1940. Hostility to fascism and communism would be expressed in every element of Labour’s foreign policy, and its domestic relationship with the CPGB. On the domestic front Labour would have to balance its resources with competing desires to “pursue its work of emancipation from the old Capitalist system of economic dictatorship without having to divert even a part of its energies to fight new forms of political dictatorship.”<sup>172</sup> The question of how firmly the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid

<sup>171</sup> Ibid

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 135.

constituent elements of the Labour Party supported anti-capitalist values would be central to its planning for the most effective means to avert a repeat of the Great War.

In response to the apparent failure of the World Disarmament Conference, the Labour Party embarked on a radical overhaul of its war and peace policy. On the second day of the Conference debate ensued on a motion from the left-wing Labour MP Sir Charles Trevelyan to commit the Party to a radical peace policy. Trevelyan sought a commitment that in the event of Britain going to war, Labour and its trade union affiliates would engage in a general strike. It was believed that if a multilateral response to disarmament failed at Geneva, then individual Government's would be compelled to retain and strengthen their stockpiles of armaments.<sup>173</sup> Therefore, the motion put before the Conference sought to avert British rearmament through two methods. The first was to “launch vigorous propaganda” to counter domestic militarist sentiments and stymie “imperialist and capitalist rivalries” which encouraged the growth of fascism.<sup>174</sup> The second means of hindering rearmament was to embrace a pacifist approach to any attempt to drag Britain into conflict by pledging Labour “to take no part in war and to resist it with the whole force of the Labour Movement” including with the use of a general strike in the event of war.<sup>175</sup> This pledge to call a general strike to resist war repeated idealistic desires for widespread strike action in 1914 which failed to materialise in Britain or continental Europe as the working class readily mobilised to fight the First World War. In Labour's eyes, the policy could succeed in the 1930s as the country had witnessed the brutality of modern war through a baptism by fire.

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<sup>173</sup> *Report of the Thirty-Third Annual Conference*, 186.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*

Trevelyan explained his support for a policy of war resistance as being a logical response to the apparent diminution of the capabilities of the League of Nations. He believed that while the League might one day evolve into an effective institution it provided “no final safety now.”<sup>176</sup> This position represented an attempt to reconcile differences between the Labour left and pacifists from the Henderson branch of the Party which strongly supported a League-centric foreign policy. Labour would not be abandoning the League under the Conference motion, but rather rationally responding to the institution’s weakness with unilateral action. Trevelyan believed that if the British Government was unwilling to use the League to check Japanese aggression how could it prevent future disregard for the international status quo.<sup>177</sup> Nonetheless, Trevelyan’s motion represented a radical, near pacifist, change from Henderson’s foreign policy.

Prominent trade unionist Herbert Elvin expressed to the Conference support from the trade unions for a policy of war resistance through a general strike. Elvin believed that the matter was central to the Party’s entire philosophy, noting: “I believe that war is the acid test of Socialist conviction. Because the various Socialist parties of Europe in 1914 failed in that test the Second International broke. I believe that in this country in the next few years the acid test of the British Labour Party will be its attitude on war.”<sup>178</sup> Elvin believed that Labour’s support for war resistance should be rooted in moral convictions to protect British youth from slaughter and that Labour’s anti-war propaganda would be essential to “correct the balance” as the capitalist system was always tipped in favour of supporting war. Trade union backing for war a policy of war resistance made its acceptance by Conference all but inevitable.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid

<sup>177</sup> Ibid

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 187. Elvin is referring to the failure of trade unions to enact general strike s across Europe to avert war in 1914.

Protestation from centrists were limited to meager appeals to not drop the League entirely from Labour policy. Philip Noel-Baker took this line by urging the Party to remember that once a Socialist Foreign Minister was in office the League could be made to work.<sup>179</sup> Hugh Dalton, acting as a representative of Labour's NEC, also supported the motion with a stern anti-war message. He praised the Party's engagement with wider public attitudes (something that appeared justifiable with the East Fulham results a few months earlier): "we rejoice to see the rising flame of the hatred of war."<sup>180</sup> Yet, he did have some criticisms with the resolution not going far enough as "it does not commit us to the economic and financial boycott of any war-mongering State – Hitler, or any other person who may disturb the peace."<sup>181</sup> Both Dalton and Noel-Baker attempted in their statements to gently remind the Party that the League still played a central role and could not be forsaken in any anti-war effort as a general strike would only have relevance in Britain and impact MacDonald's potential response to an international crisis. Dalton's specific focus on the use of economic and financial boycott would remain relevant as the Party sought to block the expansionist desires of Italy, Japan, and Germany in the next few years. Nonetheless, the Party unanimously carried the motion pledging to support a general strike in the event of war.

The unanimity of the vote did shroud the fact that there were some who had the foresight to see that a policy of war resistance would be a mistake which could hamstring the Party when a fresh international dispute emerged. Dalton later acknowledged a lack of resistance to the policy was "a bit brash."<sup>182</sup> Ernest Bevin, the General Secretary of the powerful, Transport and General

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>182</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), 53.

Workers' Union, saw the futility of a war resistance policy when one simply looked at the state of trade unionism across Europe. As a result, he reacted fiercely to Labour's adoption of the utopian notion that war resistance was genuinely feasible:

Who and what is there to strike? Trade unionism has been destroyed in Italy and Germany; practically speaking...while there is no possibility of a general strike against the Russian government in the event of war. What is left? Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark and Holland; virtually, these are the only countries in which any strong trade union organisations exist. Ought we, in light of these facts, to go on talking glibly, misleading the people and ourselves as to what we could do with the general strike weapon in the event of a world war?<sup>183</sup>

Bevin could already see that war resistance adopted in 1933 would have the same impact that trade unions had achieved in 1914 in stopping the descent to war. It would die a quite inglorious death in the face of conflict. Nonetheless, in 1933 Bevin was a rather lone voice of dissent in the face of radicalism.

Following its dialogue on the question of war resistance the Conference then moved to debate its stance on disarmament one of the twin pillars of its foreign policy since the 1920s. Arthur Henderson, speaking on behalf of the NEC opened discussion with appeals, possibly to refocus the Party and subsequent press attention away from the concentration on a general strike, to "make it clear beyond argument or doubt to public opinion both here and abroad that the maintenance of the new peace-keeping system is the corner stone of our policy."<sup>184</sup> Henderson sought to keep the League central to Labour policy with a lobbying effort in the current Parliament, and a plan to implement in the event of a future Labour election victory, to pass a Peace Act.

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<sup>183</sup> Ernest Bevin, as quoted in John Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 73. Bevin's mention of Russia is an important indication of his staunch anti-communism. He accepted earlier than others in the Labour Party that the Soviets were as dangerous as fascist regimes, to British democracy.

<sup>184</sup> *Report of the Thirty-Third Annual Conference*, 190.

The Peace Act which Henderson envisaged would be a sweeping piece of legislation that sought to radically redefine longstanding principles of national sovereignty. In essence it would prevent Britain from being able to declare wars or conduct military action unless it was purely defensive in nature.<sup>185</sup> Henderson's goal with the act was to demonstrate Britain's unwavering support for the League and its efforts to ensure international stability. The League was central to Labour's foreign policy as it was ultimate example of internationalism put to work. The institution provided the means for preserving peace and encouraging multilateral responses to economic and military challenges.<sup>186</sup> It was for these reasons that the Peace Act would be a recurring aspect of Labour policy well into 1935.

Henderson's appeal was followed up by a statement from former Party leader and current representative of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, J.R. Clynes. He called for the Government to disarm to a level equal with Germany under the limitations stipulated under Versailles.<sup>187</sup> It was a clear example of how respected figures in Labour still held strong Germanophile attitudes even as the Party was appalled by the domestic policy of Hitler's regime. Labour hostile to the destruction of German democracy but acknowledged Hitler's claims that Germany had been wronged in 1919. Under this context, Labour could not yet, appreciate that the Nazis harboured imperial aspirations which threatened European security.

These radical policies had the backing of several DLPs. For instance, Major J. Bellerby of the Cambridge DLP urged the Conference to take an even more radical position of having total British disarmament to act as an example for the world. Those on the left, such as Dorothy

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid

<sup>186</sup> Economics were relevant as Henderson and the bulk of the Labour Party believed that protectionism was core reason for the Great Depressions global reach.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 192.

Woodman of the Wood Green and Southgate DLP echoed similar stances from the left and ILP at earlier Conferences. Woodman believed that Labour had to back unilateral action as a final acknowledgement of the failure of the Geneva talks. These cases suggest that Labour's grassroots were largely in line with this radical turn compared to the lukewarm reception given by some in leadership.

As has been seen through the debates at the 1933 Conference, Labour's anti-capitalism had different influence on members of its left wing from that of the trade unions and the NEC. For the left, anti-capitalism meant a strict adherence to nationalisation of arms manufacturing to keep Britain out of war, something that could work in tandem with unilateral disarmament. For Party centrists, anti-capitalism provided means to support institutional structures in protecting peace. For Henderson, Dalton and others in the NEC, removal of the profit motive from arms production made war less likely, but only when combined with active British participation in the League and other multilateral efforts. Most importantly, the Conferences' wide acceptance of war-resistance via a general strike illustrated a peak in radical thinking which emerged as an initial response to the rise of Hitler and the brutality of Japanese warfare in China. Alignment behind a policy of a general strike was shared across all branches of the Party and its trade union affiliates. The only deviation could be found from members of the NEC which sought to keep the role of the League in mind. A general strike was a suitable policy for these leaders as a response to war so long as Labour paired it with its earlier internationalist values. The Party could adopt radical thinking at this juncture as the prospect for a general election was still far away and appeared to be in line with the lessons learned from East Fulham. If the public backed a pacifist foreign policy, then Labour's response with a commitment to war resistance was a logical reflection of public sentiment. The question for Labour going into 1934 was whether the division



between supporters of unilateral or multilateral responses to disarmament could shift their view to produce a unified vision.

### The Fall of Austria

Fascism extended its reach in Europe in 1934 with the violent suppression of Social Democrats and Communists in Austria in a brief civil war from February 12 to 16 with skirmishes occurring all major urban centres. The regime of Engelbert Dollfuss violently purged Vienna of social democrats in a series of acts between 12 to 14 February as he sought to consolidate power by dissolving all political parties. Austrian social democrats responded with calls for a general strike and were met with state repression. In the words of Labour Party chairman Walter Smith: “Their opponents [Austrian fascists] could not defeat them [social democrats] at the ballot-box. So, in order to break the workers’ power of resistance to dictatorship, the Social-Democrats were made the victims of the machine-gun bullet, the hand-grenade, and artillery shell-fire.”<sup>188</sup> This was not mere hyperbole as Austrian troops were brought into Vienna to shell Social Democratic and Communist headquarters and their surrounding neighbourhoods resulting in a considerable loss of life.<sup>189</sup> By May 1934 Austrian fascists and Conservatives would move to replace the democratic constitution of Austria and prohibit the Social Democratic Party and trade unions forcing its remaining leaders to flee or face arrest. The Austrian fall to dictatorship was a further step in the alarming trend for Labour of seeing social democratic movements attacked across Europe.

The fall of Germany and now Austria to fascism prompted a stern re-evaluation of Labour’s relationship with the wider political left both at home and abroad. Labour remained

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<sup>188</sup> *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, 128.

<sup>189</sup> Naylor, 73.

stalwart in its anti-fascist and anti-communist policy at home while also being pragmatic about the need to bring the Soviet Union into the League of Nations as a means of countering rising extremism on the world stage. Domestically, Labour was vehement in its opposition to the formation of any United Front effort between the various elements of the British left, which had been proposed in February of 1934. Labour rejected any reaffiliation with the ILP over significant differences in domestic policy and were blatant in their refusal to countenance any cooperation with the CPGB. As Henderson noted in his reply to the secretary of the CPGB: “The Communist Party does not believe in Parliamentary Democracy, [its members] are allowed...to enter Parliament not for the purpose of organic work, but in order to destroy Parliament “from within.” Labour had no trust for the CPGB as Henderson summed up their relationship as one of “misrepresentation, denunciation and disruption.”<sup>190</sup>

In foreign affairs the Labour Party supported efforts to strengthen the League of Nations at a time when Germany and Japan were withdrawing from the organisation. In April of 1934 the NCL adopted a resolution titled “Disarmament and The Entry of Soviet Russia into the League of Nations” which would be presented to Downing Street as a call for Government action to revitalise the League. The NCL was gravely concerned with the apparent failure of the World Disarmament Conference, although they were not yet willing to acknowledge the project was dead merely summarising the situation in Geneva as “the negotiations between the principal European Powers for a reduction and limitation of armaments drag on without reassuring conclusions.” This was a significant understatement as even the NCL had to acknowledge that most powers were embarking on re-armament projects and German efforts (so long praised as

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<sup>190</sup> Arthur Henderson to the Secretariat of the Communist Party of Great Britain, as found in, *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 11.

the model for other states to copy in disarmament efforts) were now “in [the] process of becoming an accomplished fact.”<sup>191</sup> To counteract these challenges the United States and the Soviet Union needed to be brought into the League. The fact that the Soviets had expressed interest in joining showed a positive step in an otherwise deteriorating international outlook. Therefore, Labour called upon the British Government to “do all in its power to facilitate the entry of Soviet Russia to the League.”<sup>192</sup>

In Labour’s eyes’ the only substitute to empowering the League would be to allow more states to look for alternative means of ensuring their security. It was already obvious by early 1934 that:

pernicious influences are at work in many countries fomenting hostility and indifference to the fundamental idea of international co-operation to maintain and enforce peace. We are drifting towards international anarchy, policies of isolation, and inflated armaments, or alliances based upon a perilous balance of the armed forces of one group against the armed forces of another group, each working out their destiny and conducting their mutual relations in secret.<sup>193</sup>

The fear that states resorting to secret diplomacy was a fundamental danger to world security was viewed by Labour as a repeat of the errors which had led to Britain and much of the world being dragged into conflict in the summer of 1914. Internationalism needed to be shorn up rather than thrown aside. The entry of Soviet Union to the League would be achieved by September 18 of 1934 but by then events would overtake any benefit the entry of such a significant state would entail.

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<sup>191</sup> National Joint Council, “Disarmament and The Entry of Soviet Russia into the League of Nations,” *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1934), 15.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*

## Aid to China Revisited

Although open hostilities between China and Japan largely subsided in 1934 it was apparent any international observer that the status quo was untenable. Japan had shown no interest in abandoning its territorial acquisitions made since 1931 in Northern China or from its enclave in the city of Shanghai. The Chinese by contrast were unwilling to accept Japanese troops remaining in its territory but were distracted by continued internal conflict between communists under the leadership of Mao Zedong, local warlords, and the internationally recognised Government of Chiang Kai-Shek based in the city of Nanking.

To aid the Labour Party in determining where it should direct its activism to best assist the Chinese, a confidential report was drafted by Labour Peer and Chief Whip in the House of Lords, Lord Marley. His memorandum presented to the Labour Party international subcommittee in the spring of 1934 attempted to update policy laid out by Arthur Henderson in late 1933. Henderson had called upon Labour to promote the political and economic stability of China and end earlier policies of exploitation which had weakened China's ability to repel the Japanese.<sup>194</sup> Marley argued that Henderson's policy was out of date and ignored conditions on the ground in China.

Marley believed that Labour's support for the Nanking Government was a serious error. He viewed the Chinese regime as steadily moving to the right since 1927 even going so far as to say it had become "fascist and terrorist" and even "pro-Japanese."<sup>195</sup> This assessment was based on a belief that the Chinese peasantry were exploited by the army and were sympathetic to the

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<sup>194</sup> Lord Marley, "Memorandum on the Far East," Report to the Advisory Committee of International Questions, item, ID/CI/53/4i, 1934. William Gillies Papers, Labour Party Archives, Manchester.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 4ii

rival communist movement. As to the ridiculous claims of the Chinese Government being “pro-Japanese,” no evidence was provided. Marley also believed that the regime was fascist as it avoided trials for suspected enemies and forbid independent trade unions. Instead, Marley sang the praises of the Mao’s alternative communist regime which was more representative of the peasantry and was a more “just and democratic Government” than Chiang’s.<sup>196</sup> It appeared that Marley wanted to see the communist’s recognised as the legitimate authority in China and sought to protect them by minimising calls for British support for the China in its stand off with Japan. He suggested that Labour reject any proposal to “supply arms, ammunition and loans to one political party on the understanding that force shall be thereby applied against another political movement.”<sup>197</sup> Although Marley was likely correct that aid to the Chinese state would be prioritised to defeat internal enemies, a policy which abandoned China to its fate would only embolden the Japanese to further its imperialist desires in Asia.

The NEC response to Marley’s report was produced a few weeks later, in June 1934. In a report from the Advisory Committee on International Questions, Marley’s claims regarding the effectiveness of the Chinese communists were rejected. The report went so far as to blame the communists for the poor performance of Government troops against Japan in 1933 as “when the Nanking Government was fighting the Japanese at the Great Wall it was attacked in the rear by the Chinese Soviet Government.”<sup>198</sup> The Committee saw no reason to change course and would continue to regard the Government in Nanking as the legitimate Chinese Government. Instead, it recommended that Labour advocate for all “possible aid to the Nanking Government for

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 4iv

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 4v. Although not mentioned in subsequent Labour reports, it seems plausible that concerns about fueling internal Chinese conflict explain why Labour was unwilling in later years to support sending arms to aide the Chinese against Japanese incursions.

<sup>198</sup> Advisory Committee for International Questions, “Report on Lord Marley’s Memorandum on the Far East,” Report to the Labour Party, item, ID/CI/53/5i, 1934. William Gillies Papers, Labour Party Archives, Manchester.

improving the economic conditions in the area under its control and developing railways, suppressing banditry, preventing extortion...such aid should, however, only be given on the condition that money is not spent on military expeditions and civil war.”<sup>199</sup>

Although Labour would not change course in its China policy to embrace the Marley proposals, the dispute illustrated that China’s plight was not ignored by Labour in 1934. The Party was still concerned with the threat of further Japanese imperialist acts and wished to strengthen China’s ability to modernise. More tellingly, the Party remained committed to its anti-communism, but seeds of dissent could be seen among prominent members. Labour would continue in the coming years to watch affairs in China with concern.

#### Labour’s Southport Conference

In October of 1934 the Labour Party gathered in Southport for its annual Conference. It was here that a first attempt would be made to shift the Party away from its radical policy of war resistance. Fear of fascism had clearly grown in Labour’s ranks as Britain bore witness to domestic fascist threats and a solidification of fascist power abroad.<sup>200</sup> Attempts by the NEC to redirect Labour foreign policy were stunted by passionate protest from an alignment of pacifists and the left who were unwilling to place their faith in capitalist multilateral institutions like the League. It would take a far more dire international environment for Labour to significantly distance itself from the radicalism which had taken hold in 1933.

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 5ii.

<sup>200</sup> Although Oswald Mosely’s movement failed to generate widespread support for fascism in Britain, Labour took the threat of domestic fascism seriously, understanding that it had corroded democracy in Italy and Germany when left unchecked by their social democratic rivals. For more information see, Martin Pugh. *Hurrah For the Blackshirts!* (London: Pimlico, 2006); and, Matthew Worley. *Oswald Mosley and the New Party*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

In opening the Conference, Walter Smith, speaking in his role of Conference Chairman, expressed Labour fears that by the end of 1934 fascism was on the march across central Europe and attempts at disarmament “have not yet reached a successful conclusion.”<sup>201</sup> This was a rather tame description of the state of the disarmament conference which was already doomed and would ultimately disband for the final time a month later in November of 1934. The Party also grappled with the genuine threat European fascism brought to the postwar settlement as such regimes sought war as a legitimate means of securing foreign and domestic policy objectives. Smith captured the view of many in the Labour Party when he summed up the increasingly militant language of Mussolini and Hitler and the danger they presented:

Fascism and Nazism represent a most aggressive form of militarist nationalism. Mussolini has bluntly declared that “War is to man what childbirth is to woman,” and in a speech at the end of the recent Italian maneuvers he asserted, “We must not prepare for a war tomorrow, but for a war today... we must bring up Italians to be military minded – if you like, a militarist people. Nations rise and fall as a result of force.” Hitler, now the supreme civil and military Leader of Germany, was equally blunt in his “*Mein Kampf*”: “So also in the future,” he declared, “life will not allot to our people new soil as a national favour, but only through the power of a victorious sword.” Let there be no mistake about it. The rule of force and violence, either in national or international affairs, will inevitably lead to the explosion of revolution or war. Fascism stands for everything to which the workers are opposed.<sup>202</sup>

As the Party had demonstrated since 1933, it correctly understood the existential danger which fascism presented both for wider social democratic and trade unionist movements and for the fate of European democracy. What was different by 1934 was that Party was looking at what the dictators were saying not simply hoping for amicable settlement as members of Britain’s National Government desired.

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<sup>201</sup> Walter Smith, “Chairman’s Address,” *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, 127.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

Labour echoed similar anti-fascist sentiments when discussing its approach to Oswald Mosely's British Union of Fascists (BUF). Smith outlined for the Conference Labour's hostility to the BUF and its desire to obstruct similar movements which could degrade British democracy in a similar fashion to the nightmarish events in central Europe:

The aims and methods of the British Union of Fascists are not matters for academic discussion... There is no place in the British national life for any semi-militarised political movement. Experience has shown that there is no half-way house between the complete prohibition of semi-militarised politics and the general militarisation of politics... We [The Labour Party] say emphatically that it is far better for democratic government to put an end to the evil in the beginning than to wait until the evil is able to put an end to democratic government.<sup>203</sup>

The BUF was at the high point of its support in Britain by 1934 and the attention given by the Labour Party demonstrated a clear understanding of what could occur if it simply ignored its militancy. Mosely had been working aggressively to spread his message through public rallies where he could exert his rhetorical prowess. Rallies in 1933 and 1934 had resulted in an escalation in violence as communists and Labour Party supporters (the PLP never condoned violence and was against direct action with BUF elements as it believed that it paved the way for communist entry into the Labour Party) would gather to protest and heckle BUF speakers with the aim of derailing their events.<sup>204</sup>

BUF rallies often gathered far more opponents than supporters. To note one example, in May of 1934 at Tyneside, former Labour MP and BUF member, John Beckett had his rally protested by over 10,000 people.<sup>205</sup> Fighting was a common outcome of BUF rallies and as a result Mosely organised a 'Defense Force' to rough up hostile observers which managed to get past police. The Government proved unwilling to ban such militarisation of British politics

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>204</sup> John Swift, *Labour in Crisis*, (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 136.

<sup>205</sup> Martin Pugh, *Hurrah For the Blackshirts!*, (London: Pimlico, 2006), 158.



leading to protest from elements of the Labour Party and TUC such as Clement Attlee and Walter Citrine who met with the Home Secretary, Sir John Gilmore, in June of 1934. The meeting came to no avail which concerned Citrine who believed that younger members of the Labour Party were growing disaffected with state inaction and would take matters into their own hands.<sup>206</sup> The Party was hamstrung because they did not want to give police powers to enter political meetings, the problem was that police intervention was needed to halt BUF violence inside of rally venues, but this was conducted in a sporadic fashion. Labour was far ahead of the Government in seeking to counter an increase in political violence which had brought disaster in Italy, Austria, and Germany.

Internationally, Labour was focused on challenging the imperialist ambitions of fascist powers in Europe and Asia. Walter Smith brought attention to the fact that such political movements were seeing support grow because they “seek to win tolerance and a free hand by posing as the bulwark against the tide of revolutionary Bolshevism.”<sup>207</sup> The fear of communism was a wider trend in global politics which empowered fascism and alarmed the Labour Party. Smith argued that anti-communism must not be allowed to blind the British Government to the fact that the Soviet Union had no territorial ambitions due to a “series of non-aggression pacts which the Russian Government signed with neighbouring States” which demonstrated a “growing recognition that the best guarantee for peace and security lies in the Collective System.”<sup>208</sup> The final ray of hope was provided with the Soviets finally joining the League of Nations, which Labour had long advocated for. Although Party never strayed from its staunch anti-communism at home, Labour was pragmatic about the incorporation of one of the last two

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid

<sup>207</sup> Smith, *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*. 129.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

remaining world powers into the League (the other being the United States) which gave renewed hope that peace could be preserved with a reinvigorated League.

### The War and Peace Debate

The Conference re-evaluated its attitude towards war resistance with Arthur Henderson presenting an updated peace policy which responded to the increased international instability which had destroyed the World Disarmament Conference. Henderson's explanation of the modifications for Labour peace policy was centred on TUC revisions which called for that organisation "in the event of there being a danger of an outbreak of war, call a special Congress to decide on industrial action."<sup>209</sup> This pledge to decide on industrial action was an important if subtle shift away from strict adherence to war resistance, as the TUC (and Labour Party) would consider an action rather than immediately institute a general strike as Labour had embraced in 1933. The shift was carefully downplayed by Henderson when he followed it with a pledge to the Conference that "we have not abandoned the idea of the general strike ...we have a war resistance policy that is consistent with the whole of our foreign policy."<sup>210</sup> Therefore, deradicalization of Labour policy began at the 1934 Conference but it was no turning point as the chief architect of Labour's foreign policy was not willing to alienate elements of the Party to fully support its longstanding position that if the League called for a collective military action Britain would participate.

Henderson believed that Labour needed to show unflinching support for the League of Nations in the face of a collapse of the World Disarmament Conference. He argued that the experience in Geneva showed that disarmament was impossible without effective measures for

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<sup>209</sup> *Report of the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 153.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*

collective defence.”<sup>211</sup> Disarmament was a noble cause for Labour but if it truly wanted to see it achieved, then the Party, and the world needed to have confidence that the League could act as an effective mechanism for collective defence. Therefore, Henderson outlined a four-point plan: To keep Britain out of war, work with League members to punish any state undertaking a war of aggression, refer all international disputes to the League for arbitration, and eliminate private profit from armaments production.<sup>212</sup> There are two aspects to this manifesto which show that war resistance was no longer viewed by Henderson as the focus of Party policy: the willingness to continue to produce armaments and a lack of any objection to Britain participating in a military response to aggression if approved by the League.

The shift away from a policy of war resistance did not go unnoticed amongst Conference members. E.S. More representing the Croydon South DLP attacked Henderson’s shift as “inconsistent” with the Party policy adopted in 1933. More attacked the NEC as abandoning its pledge to war resistance and showed weakness when the need of “organised Labour... is to have leaders who will take the ultimate risks in leading the country from the miasma of war into the daylight of peace.”<sup>213</sup> The fear for More was that the NEC was both condoning any future war Britain might engage in (which in the context of supporting a League motion it was) and confusing the public, who would be left asking “Is there any essential difference between Labour’s attitude to war and that of the Conservative Party or the Nationalist Government?”<sup>214</sup>

More urged the Labour Conference to understand that the NEC was asking “to reserve to themselves the right of being the arbiters as to the circumstances under which they shall go to

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 167. The use of the term ‘Nationalist Government’ is a telling point of how More viewed the principles of the National Government.

war...They put it to you that under certain circumstances this Party will have to go to war in defence of its ideals.”<sup>215</sup> More followed these comments with a request for the Conference to embrace a clear provision that Labour would only support the use of armed force if it was a part of a League of Nations action, after all other peaceful options to settle a conflict had failed. He believed that this statement would focus policy to support its principles as:

The Labour Party, in the matter of peace, stands unique in this country. It is the one school of political thought that renounces war for the securing of its objects. We must adhere to that. We want the right to go to war in defence of our democratic principles and against any attempt on the part of Italy, Germany or Austria, to foist Fascism on any part of Europe or the British Isles.<sup>216</sup>

The fact that More provided this proviso to his objections to the NEC statement demonstrated that Henderson’s subtle shift was difficult to challenge as the spread of fascism and the existential threat it represented for the Labour Movement was obvious to the bulk of the Party.

The NEC policy was also challenged from the left by who believed that a League-centric foreign policy was no longer tenable. Wilfred Wellock of the Stourbridge DLP declared that “the League of Nations today is largely a broken institution. Its attitude on the Japanese-Manchurian affair is abundant proof of that...imperialism commands the situation and justice goes to the wind.”<sup>217</sup> Wellock saw similar problems with the Party’s determination to cling to international efforts at arms control at Geneva as he articulated the Labour left belief that the League was fixated with maintaining a balance of power on the European continent to protect capitalist interests (even after the Soviet Union joined the organisation).<sup>218</sup> For these class-centric reasons,

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid

<sup>216</sup> Ibid

<sup>217</sup> Ibid

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 168.

Wellock believed that Labour should acknowledge that the League was no longer capable of being the panacea to global crises.

Pacifist criticism of the NEC's shift in policy was centered on a wider desire to see an end to the British retention of any armaments. Lord Ponsonby, opening on behalf of the pacifists declared his desire for unilateral disarmament or as he called it "disarmament by example" but acknowledged that the bulk of Labour were not willing to go so far:

There are many of you who are still under the impression that an aggressor is coming along and that we have got to have defences against him. That kind of talk has been used by Governments in the past, and I should have thought that most people today realised that it is nothing but a false issue to drive the workers of this country against their fellow workers in other countries.<sup>219</sup>

Ponsonby's pacifist convictions were too strong to see that the menace of fascism was an existential threat to the Labour Movement and international peace. Ponsonby did continue to show alignment with elements of the Labour left with a reiteration of his belief that capitalism was the driving force behind the threat of war and was a destabilising force for the League of Nations which made it unable to respond to international crises between capitalist powers. For pacifists, it was the combination of firm moral convictions and staunch anti-capitalism which would produce Labour's ideal future. The alignment displayed between pacifists and the left at the 1934 Conference made it difficult for Party centrists to effect genuine change with the NEC proposals.

Philip Noel-Baker, speaking on behalf of the NEC attempted to break the pacifist/left alignment with an attack on Ponsonby's criticisms. Noel-Baker zeroed in on Ponsonby's attack on multilateral disarmament arguing that he:

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid

offered you the choice between total disarmament and the conditions which we have today...our real choice is between the security the Executive proposes...and going on as we are now with the absolute certainty that within ten years there will be a war.<sup>220</sup>

Noel-Baker believed that the League could be effective in stopping further aggression if it was given appropriate support from Britain and other global powers. He also attacked the lunacy of Ponsonby's anti-capitalist justification for not supporting the League as Labour could not afford to wait until a world revolution had occurred and Socialism was enacted everywhere to achieve peace as "if we wait for that we are sitting with folded hands waiting for the next war to come." Such inaction also ignored the historical reality that inequalities in capitalism could be changed as "there were forces in capitalism which made for the legal slavery of negroes and sent children down mines at the age of five and opposed the right of the workers to unite in trade unionism. Those forces were beaten."<sup>221</sup> The policy of international engagement advocated by the NEC was the only rational path for the Party to follow.

Clement Attlee followed a similar logic in his support for the NEC position and defended multilateralism from those who sought the dangerous and selfish policy of unilateralism. Attlee acknowledged that he had once supported unilateral disarmament on moral grounds but "in the light of fresh experience I don not think it is a practical policy...I think it is essentially an individualist policy. It is much easier to believe in unilateral disarmament when you live in England than it is for people living on the Continent. We cannot wash our hands of our responsibility for our Socialist comrades and the workers in other countries."<sup>222</sup> Attlee was firm in his rejection of isolationism which could only result in the spread of fascism. However, fear of fascist expansion his was a matter of little concern for pacifists like Ponsonby. He wanted to see

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 174.

a world which could have an abolition of war, but it was impossible to achieve with the international conditions facing Britain in 1934. Attlee's injection of such practicality proved fruitful as the Conference rejected amendments to the NEC's policy and pacifist motions which sought a declaration that Britain's armed forces would never settle any dispute, or in the event of failure at the World Disarmament Conference, Britain would refuse to "land a gun or man on foreign soil" if a war were to breakout. Labour's adherence to multilateralism had won out but its future appeared bleak.

### Conclusion

The period between 1933 and 1934 contained the most radical phase of Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s. The Party had structurally recovered from the nightmare of 1931 to 1932 and proven successful in averting further defections from its varied constituencies in the trade unions, Socialist League, and Pacifists. The continuation of Japanese aggression in China and the fall of Weimar Germany into the hands of Adolf Hitler were immediately understood by Labour actors as a serious threat to international stability. The Party sounded the alarm for the plight of their fellow social democrats on the continent and staked out a clear policy of non-cooperation with communism to stem the rising tide of fascism. Labour showed a far better understanding of the danger of Hitler than the Conservatives. Its hostility to the mere notion of giving Germany equality of status to salvage disarmament efforts was farsighted at a moment when Labour's estranged former leader attempted to push such a remedy through Parliament. The interpretation of the results of the East-Fulham by-election furthered the Party's radical turn as it appeared that the public sought a pacifist response to deter future war. By the time of the 1933 Party Conference, the World Disarmament Conference appeared to be struggling to make any headway and gave credibility to those in the Labour Party who advocated unilateral policies. The

acceptance of a policy of war resistance showed a broad cross-faction appreciation in the Party that the postwar settlement was in mortal danger and the League of Nations might not be capable of salvaging it.

1934 seemed little better as fascism appeared to be on the march with Austria falling to authoritarianism, and Transport House had to rebuff attempts to form a 'United Front' with the ILP and CPGB to fight fascism at home. Instead of accepting partnership with the Left, the NEC and the bulk of the trade union leadership looked for ways to strengthen the Party's faith in the League and pull away from its war resistance policy. The decision by the Soviet Union to engage with the international community and join the League of Nations provided a glimmer of hope that even with its setbacks from the exit of Japan and Germany, that institution could be revitalised.

The 1934 Labour Party Conference marked an important moment of consternation during its most radical phase in its evolution of foreign policy. The NEC had provided a subtle but important shift away from strict adherence to the Hastings resolution for war resistance to a more flexible stance, which in theory allowed the Party to support British participation in an armed conflict (realistically this would only have been possible if war were the product of a League decision which had resulted from the failure of earlier League initiatives). Stern pushback from Conference attendees demonstrated clearly the need for a gradualist approach to any shift in Party policy as ideological considerations reigned supreme. The acceptance of the NEC's shift in its war and peace policy was an important development as it marked this first step in a gradual shift but was limited by splits in the Party, and the fact that flagrant violation of League decisions was limited to far flung matters in China. More damaging for those who sought a League-centric foreign policy was the final inglorious collapse of the World Disarmament Conference a month



later. The failure of the talks in Geneva to achieve a viable settlement was a serious blow to campaigners for multilateral solutions to an increasingly militarised and authoritarian world. These challenges, combined with Labour now being led by the devout pacifist Lansbury, a man who long advocated for unilateral disarmament, meant the Party lacked a unified foreign policy vision as it headed into 1935.

## 1935 and the Year of Pragmatic Revolution

### Introduction

1935 opened with an atmosphere of tension within the Labour Party. It had survived the tribulations of 1931 and was readily preparing for a significant political comeback at the next general election. The Party's foreign policy had been tested with open conflict in China and blatant acknowledgement of German rearmament in direct defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. Both events had proven to be far beyond the capabilities of the League of Nations to solve and bode ill for the future. Most significantly for Labour, 1934 had seen the final inglorious collapse of the World Disarmament Conference. Its failure dealt a serious blow to the legitimacy of the Party's longstanding faith in multilateralism to protect the peace. The fears uttered by the Labour left had proven true as Arthur Henderson's vision of a collaborative effort to avert war struggled to make any progress over its brief existence. The Party had made a radical turn in 1933 to meet the growing threat of war with a policy of war resistance through a general strike. Efforts in 1934 to deradicalize Labour thought had seen some minor success but, pacifism still held significant influence over foreign policy. The 1934 Party conference had witnessed passionate calls for a turn towards unilateralism which proved difficult to stifle. Tensions between the pacifist moral convictions of George Lansbury and Lord Ponsonby, and practical desires of the NEC and trade unions to strengthen support for the League would only worsen as the threat of fascism and international peace reached a tipping point in the summer of 1935. The question of implementing sanctions to protect the independence of Abyssinia from Italian imperialism would force Labour into a moment of reckoning. Either it would demonstrate its faith in the League of Nations or provide the death blow to Henderson's carefully crafted League-centric foreign policy. Labour's subsequent decision to oust Lansbury from the leadership showed a pragmatic turn in favour of sanctions and provided one final chance for Henderson's League-centric policy to secure peace.

Labour's post 1931 status quo was no longer tenable, and its resolution would have lasting consequences for the Party's political aspirations.

### 1935 White Paper on Defence

In March of 1935 the National Government presented its annual White Paper on Defence policy and spending. Although the publication and debate on the White Paper was a normal yearly process, the 1935 document outlined a clear British response to an increasingly militarised world. The Government planned to ensure peace through strength (even if it sought to avoid such a phrase) as a reaction to open German rearmament, Japanese aggression in China, and a possible Italian venture to conquer the Abyssinia. The first portion of the White Paper covering planned Army Estimates showed a realistic understanding of the untrustworthiness of Hitler's expressions of a desire for peace in Europe when contrasted with the "spirit in which the population, especially the youth of the country [Germany], are being organised."<sup>223</sup> The Government was also compelled to respond to public concerns over the threat of aerial bombing as aircraft technology was rapidly improving, increasing the range at which strikes could be launched upon the British Isles. It also had to address the pressing need for all three branches of the armed services to modernise its equipment much of which was still holdovers from the First World War.

Labour was alarmed at the prospect of millions of pounds of additional spending for the production and acquisition of new arms. Fears were rampant in Labour circles that the country was about to repeat the terrible mistakes of 1912 and 1913 which saw a significant increase in naval production to match the strength of Imperial Germany. Lord Snowden, the estranged

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<sup>223</sup> "British Foreign Policy," *The Londonderry Sentinel* (5 March 1935), 5. This was a reference to the Hitler Youth program which was structured in a militarised fashion and viewed as a training program for future soldiers.

former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, went so far as to call the proposal an abandonment of “all hope of disarmament.”<sup>224</sup> Unlike those in the ranks of the Labour Party, Snowden centered his criticisms on a Francophobic line, asserting that France was dragging Britain into war, as he believed had been done in 1914.<sup>225</sup> The reality was that the proposed increase in spending for the army was miniscule, only adding four million pounds to its budget and planning an increase of little under 3000 personnel.<sup>226</sup> Such a move was hardly indicative of a drift towards war but rather a necessary adoption of modern practices such as the increase in motorisation, acquiring trucks to ensure that troops could be moved rapidly and the purchase of modern anti-aircraft equipment, both actions in line with other Great Powers.

Labour’s leadership was quick to express alarm at the proposed expenditures for the armed forces and planned a stern response in Parliament. It fell to deputy leader Clement Attlee to defend Labour’s belief in collective security over the Government’s unilateral embrace. He called the White Paper a “deplorable document” as it made no mention of the Covenant on the League of Nations, which made the proposal a repudiation of the League and its values.<sup>227</sup> Attlee argued that Labour was entirely opposed to “Hitlerism” and the abandonment of the League by Germany and Japan. Yet, to meet the challenge with an expansion of the armed forces the Government had brought Britain back to a “pre-war atmosphere.”<sup>228</sup> Baldwin refuted this argument by noting that the League was already a wounded entity with Japan and Germany gone and the United States never joining the institution. Therefore, the only rational response was to

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid, Snowden was now part of the small National Labour element of the National Government which was made up of only a few loyalists to Ramsay MacDonald after the 1931 Labour Party schism.

<sup>225</sup> The Labour Party by contrast was far more Francophile in their thinking with regular coordination and communication with French Socialists.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid

<sup>227</sup> “Labour Claims Cabinet Has Snubbed League,” *New Chronicle* (12 March 1935), 2.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid

modernise British equipment for any collective League action to even be an option in the near the future.

Attlee countered Baldwin by reiterating the twin pillars of Labour's foreign policy of disarmament and collective security through the League. Under this framework Labour could only be horrified at the proposal outlined in the Government's White Paper to expand the size of the Royal Air Force to achieve parity with Germany. Even under the auspice of protecting British cities, rearmament could only lead to an arms race between the two countries and increase the potential for a general European war. If British rearmament was justified because of the weakness of the League or the inability of the institution to stop fascist aggression, it was the product of Baldwin's inaction to show strong support to League action.<sup>229</sup> Attlee believed an enlargement of Britain's arms industry was better replaced with a renewed drive for collective security between League member states which together could stop the aggression of any expansionist power.

Attlee was soon challenged by the Government benches. To its critics, Labour's policy was idealistic but impractical and had little chance of success in the face of blatant German and Italian re-armament. Austen Chamberlain was particularly poignant in his criticism noting:

If war breaks out, if we become the victims of aggression or become involved in a struggle, and if the hon. Member for Limehouse [Attlee] and his friends be sitting on the Government bench while London is bombed, do you think that that is the defence he will make? If he does, he will be one of the first victims of the war, for he will be strung up by an angry, and a justifiably angry, populace to the nearest lamppost.<sup>230</sup>

For Austen Chamberlain, the only responsible course of action for the defence of the United Kingdom and to maintain the country's commitments to the League would be to embrace a

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<sup>229</sup> Clement Attlee, House of Commons debate, 11 March 1935, Vol. 299. col. 38.

<sup>230</sup> Austen Chamberlain, HC debate, 11 March 1935, Vol 299. col. 78.

rational rearmament policy that responded to emerging threats to British security. Increases to the operational capabilities to the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy were “necessary for our own defence, and that [of] our membership of the League of Nations, our promises to contribute to collective security, and our guarantees under Locarno, [which] are worthless unless we put our forces in a proper condition and maintain a strength comparable to the dangers which we may have to meet.”<sup>231</sup> Chamberlain presented a reasonable balance between desires for Britain to ensure its security in the face of fascist rearmament and the need for the British armed forces to be adequately equipped to act upon any desired League response to militant expansion which may appear in the near future. More importantly, Chamberlain’s statement suggested a rational Conservative response to Labour policy which would soon be put to the test in a set of by-elections centred on the question of rearmament and the role of the League in British policy.

The Prime Minister followed this debate with the publication of an article outlining the rationale for its increased spending outlined in its “peace document.” Baldwin framed his desired military expansion as a moral necessity: “I consider that it would be a grave dereliction of duty to leave women and children and the nation as a community defenceless should an aggressor arise.”<sup>232</sup> Baldwin believed that the White Paper’s proposals were defensive in nature and were necessary to make any future effort of collective security “more than words.” In Labour’s eyes, the proposals could be nothing more than a first step in an arms race with the potential to place Britain on a path to a second European war in the span of twenty years. Therefore, the public had to be galvanised to stand against such dangerous policy. Opportunity to test the public’s response would soon present itself with the publication of the country’s first referendum on the issue of

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid

<sup>232</sup> Stanley Baldwin, “The White Paper,” *The Scotsman* (13 March 1935), 12.

peace and a set of by-elections which were due only a few months following the passage of the Government's White Paper.

### The Peace Ballot: "A Demonstration of British Loyalty"

The National Declaration on the League of Nations and Armaments, or popularly known as the Peace Ballot, was a key moment in the history British foreign policy. The Ballot represented the first nationwide attempt to use a popular referendum to gauge public opinion on a single matter of policy. The process was organised by the League of Nations Union, a nonpartisan body which was represented by members of all major political parties as well as various civil society groups, and all included members from all classes in British society. It was believed that this process could be 'above party politics' as no party had control over the questions or distribution of the ballots. The LNU itself was representative of a large portion of British society and was by the early 1930s one of the country's largest voluntary associations.<sup>233</sup> With its membership having a wide range of political and social affiliations the LNU was well suited to spread its activism into mainstream social discourse.

The Ballot was undertaken by the LNU as the organisation wanted to show the Government and the world that the British people were not apathetic in their support for the League and its potential to be a fresh mechanism for settling international challenges outside of traditional remedies. It was a genuine attempt to show that Britain would not retreat once again into traditional policy of 'splendid isolation' or see the formation of a balance of power policy with alliances made between the Great Powers; something which was widely attributed to the outbreak of the First World War. The LNU believed that a drastic action in the form of a popular

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<sup>233</sup> Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 2.

vote was needed in early 1934 as “it looked as if the cause of international co-operation were dying. The Disarmament Conference had reached a deadlock, and the possibility of war in Europe was being vigorously pressed in certain quarters. A demonstration of British loyalty to the League and the collective peace system was urgently needed.”<sup>234</sup> LNU also believed that the initiative would be educational for the public which normally focused on domestic issues and spark interest in foreign policy which could have a significant impact if peace were allowed to falter.

The Ballot was first attempted at a local level with a newspaper questionnaire distributed by the Ilford (a district in London) branch of the LNU. The results were astonishing for the LNU with over twenty thousand responses.<sup>235</sup> Lord Robert Cecil, the President of the LNU, was greatly impressed with Ilford’s response and in March of 1934 brought a proposal to the Executive Committee of the LNU to attempt to a nationwide poll which was quickly approved. After some discussion, the LNU settled on five questions (with the fifth having an ‘a’ and ‘b’ section) for the public:

1. Should Great Britain remain a Member of the League of Nations?
2. Are you in favour of an all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement?
3. Are you in favour of the all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement?
4. Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement?
5. Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by
  - (a) economic and non-military measures?

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<sup>234</sup> Dame Adelaide Livingstone, *The Peace Ballot: The Official History* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935),6.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid*, 7.



(b) if necessary, military measures?<sup>236</sup>

The decision to split the final question in two was of critical importance as above all the final question would provide an assessment for what the public expected of the Government in any response to an act of aggression by another state. The LNU made a conscious decision to avoid any hint of unilateral disarmament being an option, even if this was something many pacifists would want to see.<sup>237</sup> Collective action was the only option that appeared realistic for the bulk of the LNU to achieve a lasting peace.

The LNU actively sought throughout the process of distributing and then publishing the results of the Ballot, to ensure it was none partisan in nature. Nonetheless, it was quickly attacked by some Conservatives as it appeared to them to be aimed at attacking the National Government in favour of promoting Labour policy. The Conservative Party took no official position on the matter as it proved divisive within the Party ranks, as some did support the measure, even speaking at events or were members of the LNU.<sup>238</sup> Labour was almost immediate in stating its approval for the Ballot. Such a move was not surprising as the core pillars of Labour's foreign policy was centred on collective action through the League and international disarmament.

The returns on the Ballot suffered from some confusion as the LNU had outlined five measurable answers to each of the questions. One could answer, yes, no, doubtful, "Christian Pacifist" and abstentions.<sup>239</sup> Of the total returns 97% of all answers were either yes or no, the

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>238</sup> McCarthy, 61. Some Conservatives within the LNU attempt to change the phrasing or inclusion of certain questions. The wider Conservative membership had mixed reaction to the Ballot, some supporting it others seeing it as a tool of the left.

<sup>239</sup> Livingston, 36.

most notable levels of doubtful or Christian Pacifist responses were to question 5b over whether acts by an aggressor state might necessitate military measures at 40,000 and 17,000 respectively. Abstentions had the highest count for the question at a little over 2,000,000.<sup>240</sup> Nonetheless, these were miniscule portions of the total vote in the Peace Ballot for all categories of just under 11,120,000.<sup>241</sup> The full breakdown for response to all questions were as follows:

1. Should Great Britain remain a Member of the League of Nations?

Yes: 11,166,818 (95.9%) Doubtful: 10,528 (0.1%)

No: 357,930 (3.1%) Abstention: 104,790 (0.9%)

2. Are you in favour of the all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement?

Yes: 10,542,738 (90.6%) Doubtful: 12,138 (0.1%)

No: 868,431 (7.5%) Abstention: 216,759 (1.8%)

3. Are you in favour of the all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement?

Yes: 9,600,274 (82.5%) Doubtful: 17,063 (0.1%)

No: 1,699,989 (14.6%) Abstention: 322,740 (2.8%)

4. Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement?

Yes: 10,489,145 (90.1%) Doubtful: 15,157 (0.1%)

No: 780,350 (6.7%) Abstention: 355,414 (3.1%)

5. Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by

(a) economic and non-military measures?

Yes: 10,096,626 (86.8%) Doubtful: 27,369 (0.2%)

No: 636,195 (5.5%) Abstention: 862,707 (7.4%)

(b) if necessary, military measures?

Yes: 6,833,803 (58.7%) Doubtful: 41,058 (0.4%)

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid 46.

<sup>241</sup> Martin Ceadel, "The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot 1934-5," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 95. No. 377, 1980: 828.

No: 2,366,184 (20.3%) Abstention: 2,381,485 (20.4%)<sup>242</sup>

The results provided a strong public backing for arms control, nationalisation of the arms industry, and the use of sanctions or other non-violent forms of collective action to stem the tide of aggression. The most polarising topics were related to the abolition of air forces and the use of military action to force an end to any attack on independent states. For a first attempt at a national referendum which was independently organised public participation was relatively strong. In all it is estimated that 38% of the adult population participated in the Ballot, well over the hopes of Lord Cecil to get five million returns.<sup>243</sup> Whilst the methodology employed by the LNU and the turnout method would encourage many to view the outcome with scepticism. The Peace Ballot was conducted at a time when scientific methods of polling were in their infancy. The press and political organisations still tended to use petitions or widespread canvassing as proof of public opinion.<sup>244</sup>

What mattered most from the Ballot was what the politicians interpreted the results to mean. For the Tories it would require a shift in language to provide more frequent commitments to the League and its importance in foreign policy. For Labour the Ballot appeared to be a powerful symbol of vindication for its foreign policy which had already been centred on the League. An editorial in the *Daily Herald* responding to the outcome declared: “From the result of the Peace Ballot one fact stands out with inescapable clearness. The solid mass of British public opinion demands a policy based not on isolation, not on alliances or particular antagonisms, but on the collective system which is embodied in the League.”<sup>245</sup> The Ballot was interpreted as clear proof (in contrast to the outcome of recent by-elections) that Labour’s ‘middle way’ foreign

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid

<sup>243</sup> McCarthy, 29.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>245</sup> “Germany” *Daily Herald*, (28 June 1935), 10.

policy had the backing of the British people. This understanding shaped how the bulk of the NEC and Trade union leadership approached moments of crisis later in the year, both within the Labour Party and the wider British polity. The first test for the Party would be to see if its support for the Peace Ballot would connect with the public in a series of by-elections.

### By-Election Jitters

Labour was optimistic about its electoral prospects in the spring of 1935. It had seen clear, if limited, success in by-elections since the defeat of 1931 and noted an increase in Party membership year on year. NEC reports indicated a growing confidence within the Party rank and file for any coming national contest, and the General Election Fund was found to be growing at a satisfactory rate.<sup>246</sup> The Party believed that its improving fortunes could be tied to the warm reception of its foreign policy centred on the twin pillars of collective security and disarmament, and the popularity of its domestic aim of abolishing the Means Test.<sup>247</sup>

Events in May and June challenged such enthusiasm for Labour as five by-elections were held, all of which saw Government candidates retain their seats. In the contest for South Aberdeen, foreign policy was a central part of the contest between Conservative candidate Sir Douglas Thompson and Labour's Joseph Duncan. Early in the campaign questions were raised about the candidates' support for the principles expressed in the Peace Ballot. Douglas was questioned by some electors over lack of support for the Ballot, which he dodged by claiming he had not participated in the vote and clearly stated his support for rearmament. He defended this spending on arms as necessary to modernise military equipment and ensure Britain remained an

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<sup>246</sup> Tom Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition*, (Croom Helm, London: 1980), 76.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid*

efficient global power.<sup>248</sup> Douglas was soon engaged in heckling matches whilst stumping in some areas over questions that he was “a self-confessed militarist.”<sup>249</sup> Douglas argued instead that in essence the Tory position on arms control was a policy of peace through strength.

Duncan by contrast framed his campaign as a referendum on peace, as it was that looming challenge which shaped government’s ability to tackle all other considerations. In Duncan’s words: “the question of securing some settlement of the international problems [are] nearer home than any other question we are faced with today. Until we can get some settlement of it, it will be very difficult for any Government to make very much impression on the unemployment problem or the wider one of poverty.”<sup>250</sup> Therefore, Duncan argued that Tory ideas of peace through rearmament were a dangerous rerun of the disaster of 1914. Labour would instead focus on international cooperation through the League of Nations and nationalise the arms industry to eliminate the profit incentive from war making. In the end the Tories carried the vote with little over twenty thousand to Labour’s ten thousand.<sup>251</sup>

The contest in South Aberdeen was representative of the wider challenge Labour faced in the early months of 1935, as the Party struggled to sell its foreign policy to voters alongside lingering negative memory of Labour’s handling of the 1931 crisis. In a report to Labour’s NEC prepared by the Party’s Scottish secretary Arthur Woodburn examining the twin losses in South Aberdeen and in West Edinburgh, it was concluded that the national issues of peace and arms control were important reasons for Tory victory. Woodburn found that a “growing war atmosphere was shaking people’s faith in the ability of the League of Nations to guarantee

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<sup>248</sup> “South Aberdeen By-Election,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal* (10 May 1935), 8.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>251</sup> “By-Election Result in South Aberdeen,” *Leicester Evening Mail* (22 May 1935), 11.

security.”<sup>252</sup> The Tories’ focus on peace through preparedness had proven popular, and as a result Woodburn could only conclude: “the positive passion for Peace which gave us such a powerful plea in earlier elections was not so effective under the shadow of Hitler’s threats.”<sup>253</sup> If disarmament was not popular for voters then it was evident that Lansbury’s leadership of the Labour Party was quickly becoming more of a liability than an asset.

### Labour’s Way to Peace

An official outline of Labour’s foreign policy was presented to the public amid the Peace Ballot’s collection and the run up to Labour’s 1935 Party Conference in a book by Arthur Henderson titled, *Labour’s Way to Peace*. One could go so far as to view the book as Henderson’s magnum opus as it centralised the foreign policy vision, he had so diligently crafted for the Labour Party since the end of the First World War. Henderson’s thesis was that Labour learned the real lessons from the horrors of the 1914 to 1918. The Party offered the British people a new vision of foreign policy not centered on the principle of maintaining a balance of power, but rather by embracing internationalism. Labour looked to new institutions, specifically the League of Nations, as new vehicles for implementing multilateral solutions to crises.

Close observers of Labour’s international dealings in the early 1930s would be able to see such internationalist values being put into action with Arthur Henderson taking a direct lead in chairing the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva, from 1932 to 1934. Such multilateral

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<sup>252</sup> “By -Election Report by Arthur Woodburn, Scottish Secretary’, attached to minutes, NEC meeting, 26 June 1935. As quoted in Stannage.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, Stannage goes so far as to claim that the Woodburn report may have been taken up by Hugh Dalton as a tool to use against the strong pacifist influence within Labour’s leadership prior to the Party conference in October of 1935.

challenges to traditional foreign policy were deemed necessary by the mid 1930s as Henderson observed:

Since 1931 the world has passed from a postwar to a prewar: there is a new race in armaments, the fear of war is once more poisoning public life, militant nationalism has revived with a vengeance, there is a return to the belief that the way to secure peace is to prepare for war, and a groping back to the old polices – armed isolation or rival alliances – of the Balance of Power.<sup>254</sup>

The solution to such concerns was for Labour to advocate global responses to the problems of peace. Above all else, economic considerations needed to be centre stage in any analysis of rivalries between states.

Labour had long believed that economic rivalries encouraged violence. Therefore, in the long-term, peace would only be preserved with an embrace of free trade which allows easy access to necessary raw materials. Henderson acknowledged that this would be a long-term remedy to global instability due to the 1929 Wall Street Crash which had shown itself to be “the Waterloo of the economics of individualism.”<sup>255</sup> Such individualist trends could still be countered if Labour’s policy were implemented as British Governmental policy. Multilateral arms control projects (especially in naval limitations) had worked in the 1920s and Henderson was determined that observers remember it. Of course, Henderson ignored the glaring example of such multilateral ineffectiveness with collapse of the World Disarmament Conference one year earlier. One can surmise that he viewed the failure at Geneva as a result of casting the ‘net too wide’ as his example of the Washington Naval Treaty and a later focus on curtailing the production of military aircraft suggest an attempt to replicate successful - if more limited - multilateral disarmament efforts.

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<sup>254</sup> Arthur Henderson, *Labour’s Way to Peace*, (London, Methuen, 1935), 4.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*

That Henderson sought more focused disarmament efforts in the aftermath of the Geneva Conference is made more plausible when one looks at his suggestions for the abolition of national air forces. While such a move was unlikely to be successful due to the cost effectiveness and combined arms benefits of retaining such forces, Henderson was attempting to address an issue which received significant public attention in the interwar years. The potential of aerial bombing to bring the violence of modern warfare directly to civilian populations was an alarming prospect. Henderson argued that it increasingly threatening as bombing had “developed to the point where experts declare there is no defence, but only reprisals.”<sup>256</sup> If no means of countering bomber aircraft were possible then Labour had two options available to prevent a bleak future where British cities were quickly turned to rubble in the hours after a war was declared. Labour could listen to the pacifists and abandon all use of force when facing an aggressor state, or they could enact a policy of economic sanctions against any aggressor state which threatened League of Nations member states with war.

Most intriguing in the context of later events in 1935, Henderson provided remarkable foresight when writing on the problems that pacifists were creating for the Party with their dogmatic adherence to their utopian ideals of abolition of the British military. Henderson understood that such ideas were not palatable to the bulk of the electorate: “such views [for abandoning national self defence] are not likely to be held by a sufficient number of people to bring them within the horizon of practical politics.”<sup>257</sup> Henderson also took aim at those pacifists that sought to reject the implementation of economic sanctions upon aggressor nations which threatened the independence of member states to the League of Nations: “pacifists who reject

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 47. Although Henderson would not attend the 1935 Labour Party Conference due to his declining health, the ideas presented here would be taken up by Hugh Dalton and much of the Trade union representation.



economic sanctions thereby become, willy-nilly, accessories after the fact to the crime of war, for they are in favour of selling war materials to an aggressor.”<sup>258</sup> A stand on principle without consideration of the real world implications could easily defeat the purpose that Labour pacifists had in opposing sanctions in the first place.

Addressing Labour’s attitude towards the use of sanctions was essential to addressing pressing international issues in early 1935. The most pressing global challenge when Henderson was writing was Japanese expansionism. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 was viewed as a serious violation of the postwar peace settlement by the Labour Party, and they believed it was the chief reason that the World Disarmament Conference failed.<sup>259</sup> At the same time Henderson was careful to not blame German rearmament (one of the reasons the project collapsed) on Anglo-French responses to Japanese policy, as German actions had “partly reflected the inability of the Geneva conference to give effect to the principle of equality of rights in a system of security.”<sup>260</sup> Japan did not have the same impetus to address unfair grievances imposed upon Germany through the Treaty of Versailles.

Labour was committed to maintaining China’s pre-1931 borders. The Party embraced a non-recognition policy over Japanese occupation of Manchuria and were critical of Conservative suggestions that it might be better for Britain to simply come to an understanding with Japan, allowing the latter to maintain authority over the territory in exchange for an end to further exploitation in China.<sup>261</sup> Yet, such direct statements of support for the Chinese cause lacked a firm resolve to see Britain make good on them. Labour rejected any use of direct action against

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 64. Labour had a clear preference to address German grievances over that of the Japanese who had been a British ally during the First World War.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 67.

Japan and instead sought a change in response from the League of Nations, without any explanation of how that could be achieved. This was further hindered by the Party's restatement of its commitment to the passage of a 'Peace Act' should they return to government.

The Peace Act was believed to still have value for Labour internationalism as it would demonstrate strong British support for the League when other states (specifically Japan) were content to abandon it. Continued faith in the Peace Act was clear case of morality taking precedence over any realistic assessment of the state of international affairs by 1935. Japan showed little interest in changing course with its imperialist ambitions and by January of 1935 Italy blatantly preparing for an invasion of Abyssinia from its East African colonies.<sup>262</sup> Unilateral British action could prevent any Italian preparations with a closure of the Suez Canal to Italian shipping. Yet, the Peace Act, as envisaged by Labour, would make such a move impossible without League consent thereby limiting any hindrance of Italian operational planning.

Nonetheless, the Peace Act was considered an essential first step in mitigating the potential for future wars. Labour would pair the Act with public outreach campaigns to challenge "traditional views as to the rights of the State... and the nature of patriotism" and encourage the public to not blindly support the use of military action.<sup>263</sup> This conceptual rebuttal of Conservative notions of patriotism was a key element of Labour's anti-militarism and appeared to be inline with public attitudes. Anti-war sentiment was already rife in elite youth circles. The most infamous example being the 'King and Country Debate' at the Oxford Union in 1933, where students carried a motion by 275 to 153 "that this House will in, no circumstances fight

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<sup>262</sup> "Pacts of Rome," *Daily Herald*, 8 January 1935, 8.

<sup>263</sup> Henderson, 95.

for its King and Country.”<sup>264</sup> The topic was promptly taken up by student debate clubs across Britain and garnered international attention. Labour sought to spread these anti-war sentiments from the educated elite to the working-class. Henderson framed Labour notions of patriotism as meaning “it is the duty of citizens, in virtue of their direct world peace loyalty, to judge for themselves in the light of the nation’s peace undertakings and obligations, whether or not the Government has been faithful on this supreme issue to the overriding world authority of the League.”<sup>265</sup> Labour had three ways in which good citizens force the Government to protect peace: insist on arbitration through the League to settle all international disputes, support the state in all aspects of League approved sanctions against any peace-breaker, and resist war unless undertaken through League action. War resistance would be undertaken through refusal to serve in the armed forces or pay any tax in support of war production.<sup>266</sup>

The fact that war resistance was still being discussed to this degree in Labour literature showed that the Party was not comfortable distancing itself from its 1933 policy. One can posit that Henderson’s was aiming to preserve party unity when reiterating the policy if one considers the subtle shifts away from war resistance presented at the 1934 Labour Party Conference. At the very least, a thorough explanation of war resistance policy suggests that at the time of Henderson’s writing, a show of consistency was believed to be necessary.

In its totality, *Labour’s Way to Peace* provided the electorate with a fresh set of ideas for British foreign policy, after the damaging Party schism of 1931. Labour committed itself firmly to the League of Nations and looked to it as the best mechanism to preserve international peace.

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<sup>264</sup> Martin Ceadel, “The King and Country Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1979, 397.

<sup>265</sup> Henderson, 95-96.

<sup>266</sup> Henderson, 96.

Labour would strengthen the League by committing Britain to disarmament and collective security between member states. The Party would also focus on breaking down economic barriers to peace with an attack on rampant protectionism which was believed to be slowing recovery efforts from the Great Depression. Two developments in international affairs held the attention of the Party: the increase in tensions between China and Japan over the latter's continued occupation of Manchuria and the entry into the League of Nations by the Soviet Union. The entry of the Soviets into the League, in theory, presented the best chance possible for collective security to be encouraged by other powerful member states while the threat of Japanese aggression appeared to be the most likely test the League would endure in coming years. Labour's ideas built on the positive public response to the League of Nations Union's peace ballot campaign of 1934 to 1935 and provided an idealistic foreign policy with real contrasts to the traditional ideas of the Tories. The rapid collapse of Henderson's health by the end of the summer and subsequent death in October brought an end to his contributions to Labour foreign policy. Yet, Henderson's ideas would have a lasting legacy both in his writings and the influence he instilled on Labour foreign policy discourse. In the short term, Henderson's ideas presented in *Labour's Way to Peace* would soon be tested within the Labour Party at its upcoming Conference and with the British public a few months later at the launch of the 1935 General Election Campaign.

### The Pragmatic Revolt: The 1935 Labour Party Conference

The pacifist grip on Labour's foreign policy was given its greatest test to date at the Party's annual conference in Brighton. It was there that the Labour Party would fight one of its greatest battles over foreign policy as it considered its response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Pacifists and left alignment, so critical to the Labour's radical turn collapsed as they

disagreed over their reasons for opposing sanctions against Italy. The bulk of the Party followed outspoken realists, such as Hugh Dalton and Ernest Bevin in rebelling against its pacifist leadership who placed greater value in ideological purity than in challenging the danger of fascism. The NEC wanted to back the implementation of economic sanctions by the League of Nations to halt fascist aggression and show the world that violence could be effectively countered through multilateralism. While not a turning point on its own, pragmatist victory over the pacifist leadership of George Lansbury created the conditions for Labour to adopt rational responses to fascist states who showed no qualms disregarding international norms.

In the fall of 1935, the threat of war in East Africa took centre stage in Labour's foreign policy discourse. After the tepid response by the League of Nations to Japanese aggression in China, the Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini looked to act on longstanding Italian aspirations for imperial expansion. Italy already possessed colonies in Eritrea and the bulk of modern-day Somalia but had proved incapable of conquering the Abyssinian Empire (modern day Ethiopia). Italy had suffered an embarrassing defeat in the First Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895-96 where the Abyssinians had proven to be effective fighters and protected its independence from imperialist aspirations. Mussolini now sought in 1935 to demonstrate to the world that Italy had been reinvigorated under fascist rule and would actively assert its imperialist ambitions against its old foe.

Privately, Mussolini viewed a conquest of Abyssinia as a first step in a larger plan for Italian expansion in Africa with desires against British-controlled Sudan and the much-coveted Egypt and its valuable Suez Canal. As early as March of 1935 Mussolini had begun to lay the groundwork for these wider ambitions with Italian radio stations Radio Bari and Radio Roma instructed to broadcast anti-British propaganda across North Africa and the Middle East. This

was soon followed up with the signing of a treaty of Commerce and Friendship with Yemen designed to damage British authority in neighbouring Aden and support being given to Italian Fascists in Malta to encourage that territory to break from Britain in favour of Italian rule.<sup>267</sup> Therefore, Britain was tied to the planned Italian invasion of Abyssinia in two ways. Firstly, long-term Italian ambitions threatened British imperial interests (something that was of far less concern to Labour than that of the governing Conservatives) and secondly, Britain had authority over the Suez Canal, the critical artery for the flow of Italian supplies and troops to any staging area for an invasion.

The fact that Italian forces had to be shipped through the British-controlled Suez Canal made any troop buildup impossible for the Baldwin ministry and press to ignore. Unknown to Labour, the Government had been considering a response in the event of war. Officials from the Foreign Office and the Treasury had begun examining the feasibility of sanctions against Italy in the summer of 1935 with Neville Chamberlain believing that a blockade of seaborne trade could be very effective at damaging the Italian economy.<sup>268</sup> By the end of August Cabinet had ruled out the use of unilateral sanctions but was open to the imposition of League sanctions in the event of an Italian invasion. In early September Britain and France agreed to rule out any measures which might lead to war including military sanctions or the closing of the Suez Canal to Italian shipping.<sup>269</sup> This was a fateful decision as the choice to keep the canal open allowed Italy to supply its troops and move reinforcements to East Africa with ease.

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<sup>267</sup> Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2021), 48.

<sup>268</sup> G. Bruce Strang, "The Worst of All Worlds:" Oil Sanctions and Italy's Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935-1936," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, (2008): Vol. 19. No. 1, 213.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*

The Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff also had significant concerns over any potential reaction to an Italian war of aggression in East Africa. Some of this has been attributed to the fact that the bulk of the military high command were Conservatives who had sympathies with Mussolini and were hostile to the League.<sup>270</sup> There were also more practical concerns from the First Sea Lord, Sir Ernle Chatfield that the Royal Navy was not ready for war. For this reason, the Committee for Imperial Defence warned the Cabinet that any sanctions policy which included blocking supply of coal or oil to Italy might provoke a military response.<sup>271</sup> Halting shipment of oil and coal would be the most impactful hit to Italy's ability to make war as the country lacked significant domestic sources (something which would prove disastrous for the Italian economy during the Second World War). Mussolini was keenly aware of this fact and made clear public statements that if Britain cut off access to these necessary materials it would lead to war.<sup>272</sup> Although Labour would not have been privy to such Cabinet and military considerations (but would have been fully aware of Mussolini's posturing), these attitudes towards any sanctions policy show that that Labour's internal debate on the proposal for economic action against Italy were in line with wider political discourse, rather than a unique outlier.

The imminent threat to Abyssinia was a critical test of Labour's League of Nations collective security policy as the African empire was a member state of the League and had every justification to defend its sovereignty in the face of fascist aggression. The NEC opened the Brighton Conference by making clear its position on Labour's response to the increasing threat

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<sup>270</sup> Andrew Holt, "No More Hoares to Paris: British foreign policymaking and the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935," *Review of International Studies*, (2011): Vol. 37. No. 3, 1391.

<sup>271</sup> Strang, 214.

<sup>272</sup> Strang, 216.

of Italian invasion of Abyssinia: “the way to peace lies not through coercion of Abyssinia into making concessions to Fascist Italy, but in making Fascist Italy realise that it is in danger of being confronted by the obloquy and resistance of the world.”<sup>273</sup> The NEC hoped that such resistance could be garnered both between democracies but also from the Soviet Union which had now joined the League and advocated for a policy of collective security.<sup>274</sup> Yet, the executive acknowledged that reform of the League was needed to achieve the aims of the institution in an increasingly militarised world.

The NEC justified its continued commitment to the League and internationalism more broadly, with acknowledgment of the recently published results of the LNU Peace Ballot. The strong support of the League as the mechanism for maintaining peace demonstrated by nearly twelve million people. The ballot provided clear majorities in favour of economic and material sanctions against an aggressor, and an acceptance that Britain should be willing to undertake direct military action should the League determine it to be necessary to protect the integrity of member states. Therefore, the NEC believed that the Peace Ballot results was clear proof of overwhelming public support for Labour’s foreign policy.<sup>275</sup>

This position was further solidified amongst the trade union base of the Labour Party at the 1935 annual conference of the TUC a few weeks prior to the Labour Party Conference. There, a motion was presented by delegates of the leading trade unions across Britain to demonstrate their support for the ideas enshrined in the Peace Ballot and in the Labour Party, to

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<sup>273</sup> The Labour Party, *The Labour Party Report of the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London, Transport House, 1935), 7.

<sup>274</sup> Labour rather naively believed at this point that the Soviet Union was on the road towards democracy and international engagement after recovering from the damage of the Russian Civil War.

<sup>275</sup> Labour Party, *35<sup>th</sup> Conference Report*, 8. Modern analysis of the Peace Ballot would likely result in serious questioning of the methodology employed and its conflated picture presented from the results. However, in the 1930s such scientific methods were not the accepted norm, and all political parties interpreted the Ballot as a clear expression of public sentiment.



undertake all ‘necessary measures’ to halt Italian aggression and settle grievances with the convening of a world economic conference. The motion was carried by an overwhelming margin of 2,962,000 in favour and 177,000 against.<sup>276</sup> Although this had been a vote from the TUC membership and not the Labour Party, prominent Labourites, Attlee, Lansbury, and Citrine had all been in attendance to represent the political arms of the Trade Union Movement and had demonstrated their tacit support for the motion. Lansbury’s lack of objection to the position of the TUC was soon to prove problematic as he was faced once more with the question of Labour’s response to Italian aggression a few weeks later at the Brighton Conference. The central question was would Lansbury adopt a show of loyalty to the Party’s support of a collective security centric foreign policy or urge the Party to embrace his moral pacifist principles in defiance of the TUC’s show of solidarity?

The test of Lansbury’s leadership of the Labour Party and his moral convictions emerged at the conference when Hugh Dalton raised a motion of similar wording to that presented at the TUC Conference, urging the Party to embrace all necessary measures to ensure the territorial integrity and independence of Abyssinia in the face of possible Italian invasion (Italy would launch its invasion on 3 October during Labour’s Conference). Dalton’s motion committed Labour to unwavering support for collective security in defence of League member states and the use of sanctions as a final means to avert war. The Party’s support for sanctions had become problematic for Lansbury and other pacifists as there was a genuine belief (shared in the *Daily Mail* and other parts of the Conservative press) that the implementation of sanctions would only increase the chance of a wider war breaking out. Under this narrative, sanctions would force the

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid, 9.

hand of an aggressor state encouraging them to lash out against those who implemented the sanctions in an act of desperation.

Dalton followed his motion with a statement of its necessity to the conference where he challenged the naïve notion that sanctions would increase the potential for war. He argued that “scrapping the use of sanctions as a reserve force behind international law certainly means war.”<sup>277</sup> For Dalton, it was clear that a lack of meaningful cost being placed upon an expansionist state would only result in a larger conflict as smaller ventures like the one in Abyssinia would only embolden Mussolini and other dictators. The implementation of sanctions even if only economic and financial in nature, could be sufficient in the case of Italy to avert war.<sup>278</sup> It already appeared to economic observers that Italy was on shaky ground and militarily the entire Abyssinian venture could be strangled with a closure of the Suez Canal to Italian shipping. The United States, a key player outside of the League, had already expressed a commitment to embargo loans, financial assistance, and munitions to Italy should it go to war. Such realities gave Dalton’s support for sanctions real credibility, even having impact outside the confines of the League.

Dalton went on to express that Labour’s accepted foreign policy centred on the twin pillars of League based collective security and disarmament were both appropriate to the Abyssinian crisis and to improving Labour’s political aspirations. The outcome of the Peace Ballot was proof that Labour’s policy was popular with the electorate and had forced the Tories to make rhetorical changes to its earlier objections to disarmament. The Ballot was “worth more than a hundred speeches in the House of Commons.”<sup>279</sup> With clear public backing for Labour’s

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<sup>277</sup> Labour Party, *35<sup>th</sup> Conference Report*, 155.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

foreign policy it would be damaging for both the cause of international peace and to the Party's political fortunes to meekly embrace pacifist isolationism.

The first to respond to the motion was Stafford Cripps one of the leading figures on the Labour left. He had been mired in his own recent controversy with a decision on the eve of the conference to resign from Labour's National Executive Committee in protest to their support for the League. Cripps opposed Dalton's motion arguing it would increase the potential for war and had little chance of forcing political change in Italy. Cripps centred his criticisms on the core of Dalton's motion, the role of the League. He fixated on the inadequacies of the League which was now nothing more than a "tool of the satiated imperialist powers."<sup>280</sup> Like other Labourites who viewed the brewing international crisis as a contest between the 'have' and 'have not' states, Cripps saw the present struggle as one between the established imperial powers of Britain and France against those fascist powers with imperialist ambitions. He believed that sanctions would not prevent war as they would be implemented by imperialists and capitalists who did not have the interests of Italian or Abyssinian workers at heart. If conflict emerged from the implementation of sanctions, it would encourage the electorate to rally around the flag and limit the chance for Labour to defeat the National Government in the next election.<sup>281</sup> In essence, Cripps believed the only valid means of protecting the peace would be the election of a Labour Government. Nothing less would produce the change necessary to uncouple the League from its capitalist masters. The logic followed that if a Labour government was at the helm and a war did breakout between Britain and Italy then it would not be one waged for imperial or capitalist interests. Even if one were to assume that a Labour government would focus any war aims as

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>281</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 307.

restoring democracy and socialism to Italy; Cripps' solution provided multiple problems as it meant Labour would be abdicating any role as the official opposition in protecting international peace and relied on a complete reversal in the minds of an electorate who had witnessed economic growth and relative peace in the past few years. Most important of all, Cripps proposal required an acceptance that the League was defunct, and nothing could be done in its present form to change the crisis in East Africa.

Cripps hostility to the NEC sanctions proposal also held great significance as it represented a fracturing of the left/pacifist alignment which had proven effective in ensuring radical policy was embraced by the 1933 Conference and survived 1934. Although both groups shared hostility to sanctions, they did so for very different reasons. For Cripps and the Labour left, anti-capitalism was their justification for standing against the NEC, not a doubt of the viability of economic sanctions to preserve peace.

Representing the trade union interests, John Marchbank spoke on behalf of the National Union of Railwaymen and promptly attacked the absurdity of Cripps speech and its desire for inaction. He noted that for all of Cripps' claims of the League being a tool of the capitalists, the Soviet Union's membership made that appear doubtful and that a policy of inaction would only embolden the likes of Mussolini. Marchbank was determined to inject realism into the debate noting, "I suggest to you that when these people [fascist states] arm, as they will arm, it will be of very little use the British Labour Movement getting down on its knees and praying for salvation in the hope that the other people will not use the gun."<sup>282</sup> Marchbank then turned to attacking Cripps directly by quoting his previous support for economic and financial sanctions

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<sup>282</sup> Labour Party, *35<sup>th</sup> Conference Report*, 159.

against Japan in 1933 arguing at that time that such a response would be appropriate punishment for that country's aggressive expansion. The suggestion that the League could not be utilised to implement such policy due to its capitalist associations in 1935 but could do so in 1933 was ludicrous.

Marchbank also took aim at Labour pacifists for rejecting a position which aligned with long standing Party support for the League. He attacked those who were willing to reject sanctions as policy whilst in opposition but would have to be willing to take some concrete action to preserve peace if Labour were in government. The importance of a decisive response by Labour would be key as it would not be long before a future election would be called and the Party needed to demonstrate to the electorate that it was capable of adequately dealing with an international emergency.<sup>283</sup>

Lord Ponsonby, the most prominent Labour member in the House of Lords, was the first to speak on behalf of the pacifists. Ponsonby opposed the motion arguing that the risk of war was too great from the implementation of sanctions. He believed that Dalton and others had learned nothing from the experience of the First World War as victory in 1918 had only strengthened militarism not diminished it. The Wilsonian notion of making the "world safe for democracy" which had captivated the attention of many in the Labour Party during the 1920s was an unmitigated failure.<sup>284</sup> Ponsonby attempted to inject a pragmatic assessment of the current state of the League which was being ignored by supporters of sanctions noting that "we are confronted with a League of Nations with many vacant chairs... and with an absence of unanimity."<sup>285</sup> Even

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid. While Stanley Baldwin had not yet called a general election at the time of Marchbank's speech, but it was inevitable that he would have to call one within the next year.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

those nations still within the League seemed lackluster supporters of sanctions against Italy and absolutely unwilling to follow up such a policy with military action. In Ponsonby's eyes, the goal of isolating Italy was noble but unlikely to produce results when neighbouring Austria and Yugoslavia were consumed with internal struggles and unlikely to risk conflict. When looking more widely across Europe it already appeared that the seeds of two hostile camps developing in Europe with the democracies on one side and authoritarian states such as Poland and Hungary sharing similar territorial aspirations as Hitler.<sup>286</sup>

Beyond these challenges from League members, Ponsonby could see serious difficulties for Britain if it were to apply sanctions with enough teeth to force Italian withdrawal from Abyssinia. Britain would need to provide the bulk of the naval and other resources necessary to enforce a blockade and the effort would likely be doomed any way as sanctions could never be “watertight, through having a bad leakage in several countries, [which] will aggravate the situation and make it worse than it is at present.”<sup>287</sup> Ponsonby took the idea further by attacking Dalton and the NEC's language with the use of the word ‘sanctions’ being a used merely as a “more refined” term than that of ‘war’. He compared the idea of acting on any League desire to save Abyssinia as the same disastrous notion in 1914 that one should be asked to “fight for King and Country” to save “poor little Belgium” as “only a difference in language.”<sup>288</sup> Both ideas were merely examples of capitalists disguising their words to “take in the people.” Yet, for all the bravado, Ponsonby could not hide his isolationist tendencies arguing that the fight for Africa was of no concern compared to the ‘real war’ of class struggle within Britain: “This sham fight is

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

distracting us, is preventing us from building up the society that we want.”<sup>289</sup> Ponsonby’s pacifist outlook had him look at the desire to halt the conflict in Abyssinia and the aim to tackle class struggle at home as mutually exclusive.

Ponsonby provided scant solutions to the international crisis other than two goals of his pacifism. The first to avoid dragging Britain into a conflict, for although he claimed to detest the Italian regime: “we are not going to crush Fascism by the sacrifice of British lives.”<sup>290</sup> This desire was in line with his pacifist ideals but went well beyond the desires of Dalton and the trade unionists for sanctions, none were calling for outright war with Italy and can therefore only be understood in the pacifist framework that sanctions and war were one and the same. The second area of attack for Ponsonby was the longstanding Labour support for disarmament. He viewed the work of Arthur Henderson and others as noble but doomed to failure as efforts for disarmament had followed a flawed framework: “It is not a question of getting a gun out of a man’s hand, it is a question of getting the idea out of his head which makes him want to use his gun.”<sup>291</sup> Such idealism demonstrated just how out of touch the pacifists in Labour were from the longstanding policy of the Party.

Supporters of Dalton’s motion reacted angrily to Cripps and Ponsonby’s assertion that desires of pro-League capitalist states and fascist imperialist ones were merely one and the same. Hastings Lees-Smith, former President of the Board of Education in the Second Labour Government, proclaimed to the Conference that it was “quite ridiculous” and ignorant of reality to view such ideologically divergent states as being inherently similar. Lee-Smith noted that if Italy had remained a democracy with freedom of the press Mussolini would be far less capable of

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid

enacting a policy of blatant aggression.<sup>292</sup> Instead Lees-Smith framed the conflict in Abyssinia as much more than a conflict over the role of the League in international affairs but part of a broader struggle “between ourselves and Fascism.”<sup>293</sup> If Mussolini were to be allowed to conquer a fellow League member with no response it would be a triumph for Italy and more importantly:

[Italian victory would be] proof of the practical effectiveness of Fascism in the field of foreign affairs, because it will be clear that in Italy Fascism has succeeded where Parliamentary democracy would have failed. Therefore, it seems to me that if you want to fight Fascism, imperialism and capitalism, you have got to stop Mussolini now.

Lees-Smith went on to challenge the cantankerous ideas from Cripps and Ponsonby that if Labour held firm to its support for sanctions it would only be standing side by side with the ‘capitalist’ National Government.

The notion that an alignment on one aspect of foreign policy meant alignment on all issues was absurd in a multiparty democracy like that of the United Kingdom. Lees-Smith brought the point home by noting that if Cripps logic were to be followed it would place him in the same ranks of Oswald Mosely and his sycophants.<sup>294</sup> As for Ponsonby’s suggestion that Labour should simply embrace isolationism, Lees-Smith could see the obvious danger that mentality represented as the need to stop Italy at the present juncture created a ‘now or never’ moment. If Ponsonby’s ideas were to be followed, even as a matter of individual conscience, it would “not be advancing the morality of the future” rather it would return foreign affairs to the “morality of the jungle.”<sup>295</sup> Lees-Smith concluded his remarks with a pragmatic appeal to show

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid

<sup>293</sup> Ibid

<sup>294</sup> Ibid

<sup>295</sup> Ibid



the public that Labour was still a party of government and stand behind League based sanctions to protect the peace.

Fractures in the Labour left appeared when former Socialist League member and representative of the Newcastle-on-Tyne Labour Party, Charles Trevelyan, expressed more moderate sentiments. He saw claims from Cripps and Ponsonby that League action was dominated by imperialist considerations as “ludicrous.”<sup>296</sup> A perception of League inaction or timidity to Japanese aggression in China had already done damage to its power and influence. Now if at this next juncture “no active and drastic attempt to stop Mussolini” was made then it would represent the “final and culminating betrayal of the purposes of the League.”<sup>297</sup> He attacked the foolishness of Ponsonby’s isolationism but also expressed a clear desire for the Party to not present the Government a ‘blank cheque’ any support for sanctions must be given with clear conditions. Labour support had to be tied to an unmistakably “international act by all the League Governments acting together,” if member states refused this it would not be for Britain to act unilaterally. Trevelyan’s second condition was that Labour should only support economic pressure on Italy and clearly refuse to assist in a military response to Italian actions. This last condition represented an attempt to find a reconcilable position between the supporters and sceptics of sanctions. Yet, the implementation of sanctions without the potential for military backing would result in the same problem Lee-Smith had warned against as it would create conditions where ignoring the sanctions would be a viable option for Mussolini diminishing their aim to stop conflict.

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<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*

John Wilmot, the winner of the 1934 East Fulham by-election, a victory widely attributed to Labour foreign policy, was deeply alarmed by the potential damage which blatant divisions on sanctions policy would inflict upon the Party. Wilmot stressed that his victory had been a product of Labour's strong and unified support for the League and correct understanding of the implications wrought by Germany's decision to leave the organisation. He had been able to show Party unity to voters with Lansbury, Cripps, and Arthur Henderson all stumping for his campaign and sharing a unified foreign policy vision. Wilmot's victory was a model for the Party to achieve wider success during a future general election.

Wilmot sought to promote his earlier success by challenging assumptions that the LNU Peace Ballot had been the great mechanism for mobilising the bulk of public opinion behind Labour's peace policy. Wilmot argued instead that "the public education, the public instruction and the mobilisation of public opinion was done by the rank-and-file members of the Labour Party."<sup>298</sup> He believed this achievement could be successfully transferred beyond the confines of East Fulham to make "foreign affairs the most burning issue in every election that is fought." This was attributed to the fact that Labour foreign policy was "straight, direct, consistent, simple and effective, and the common man can understand it." Wilmot believed that if Cripps and Ponsonby were to be followed then Labour would embrace a path which had "nothing else to offer them [voters] except to say "the spoils go to the victor"<sup>299</sup> By showing infighting to the electorate Wilmot feared that not only would the Tories capitalise on perceptions of Labour divisions but the Party would seem to be uncomfortable with the actually implementing the ideas it championed if it were to ever form Government. If the Party could not rally behind its existing

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<sup>298</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid*

foreign policy, then in Wilmot's mind, Labour was doomed to remain in the political wilderness for years to come at great cost to the working class both at home and abroad.

Contributions from other leading elements of the trade unions brought to the forefront the most realistic interpretation of the need for Labour to support sanctions and encourage Britain to challenge Mussolini's ambitions. J. Williams, representing the Mineworkers Federation, supported Dalton's motion with a direct challenge to Cripps and the Socialist League hostility to existing Labour foreign policy asking the conference: "shall we serve peace by being passive spectators of war?"<sup>300</sup> He argued that sanctions were the only path open to Labour and that the critics of such a policy provided no tangible alternative to prevent conflict. If war was the result of such policy, then so be it as "force is the only thing the bully and the black guard understands. He will surrender only when faced with a stronger force than himself."<sup>301</sup> Charles Dukes, representing the National Union of General and Municipal Workers articulated a similar response as he believed League based sanctions were the only option left to avoid war and do right by Abyssinia. He took great issue with pacifists who urged the Abyssinians to merely surrender to Italy noting, "I do not believe singing psalms to lions will work in this year of our Lord."<sup>302</sup> The trade unions could see the risks of inaction and desired pacifists and the left to join them in developing a rational policy response to Italian aggression.

Other pacifists such as Dr. Alfred Salter attempted to push past the objections of Ponsonby and challenge the 'realist' attack from trade unionists and the NEC. Salter believed that pacifists were "the true realists" as they offered a radical alternative to the use of violence as

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, 172.

means of enforcing international norms throughout history.<sup>303</sup> He echoed former statements from Lansbury that the use of force to stop aggression only served to create a new alignment of world powers increasing the brutality and scale of any conflict. Salter went on to provide what he felt the Christian pacifist response should be to Abyssinia's plight if they oversaw British policy:

[The Abyssinians should] Throw down your arms, refuse to fight. If the Italians are behaving wrongly to you, do not contemplate retaliation in similar action yourselves. Give hospitality to the invader and trust to the moral judgment and moral pressure of the whole world and to a return to sanity and decency of the Italian people ultimately to restore your independence.<sup>304</sup>

Salter believed that resistance was futile as Italian air superiority would mean a war would result in the mass bombing of Abyssinian cities: "no people can endure repeated bombing by high explosives and poison gas."<sup>305</sup> As to what Salter believed the British response to Italy ought to be, he suggested the nation encourage Mussolini to follow a wider international effort at decolonisation. For many at the conference and in Government, Salter's solution would appear highly improbable when imperial commerce was still centred on the retention of empire, even if it was one with increasing political liberalisation. Salter viewed decolonisation as the new method needed to avert calamity, "you say it is ridiculous, it is impracticable. I submit that it is the only true realism, it is the only way other than the inevitable suicide of civilisation."<sup>306</sup> If the conference were to support Dalton's motion, Salter believed that sanctions would inevitably lead to war with Italy which in short order would spiral into a general European war.

Even if sanctions did not result in war, Salter believed that Labour's support of such policy meant an abandonment of its longstanding support for British disarmament. Salter quoted

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid

<sup>305</sup> Ibid

<sup>306</sup> Ibid

recent press comments from Labour's estranged former leader Ramsay MacDonald who had written: "it is hoped that the crisis will have taught the Labour Party that in the world of today those who are prepared to support sanctions must not decline to support armaments to support sanctions. That is a logical and inescapable position."<sup>307</sup> MacDonald had been an important moderate in the Labour Party in the 1920s, but his views were received with deep hostility following his abandonment of the Party in 1931. Therefore, while MacDonald's position echoed that of trade unionists it was used by Salter to demonstrate that Labour was embracing the policy of its traitorous former leader rather than forging its own path.

The scare tactic forced a response from Lord Strabolgi who argued that while Salter's vision might one day bring international peace it was impossible in the present time. He challenged Ponsonby and Salter's refusal to try economic sanctions as it had never been done in peace time and now was a chance to prove if the method could work. He pointed to the successful implementation of economic blockade against Germany in the First World War as proof that similar actions had been able to stop conflict demonstrating a level of practicality to NEC policy.<sup>308</sup> Strabolgi also attacked Ponsonby for suggesting that the NEC wanted Labour to support a war for "poor little Abyssinia" when instead the conference was fighting over the very idea that a "society of nations" could utilise a system of collective security to halt the violent actions of an aggressor state.<sup>309</sup> Trying to use the tools developed since 1919 was critical in Strabolgi's view, if a bloodless end to war was possible it had to be given the chance to succeed.

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid

<sup>309</sup> Ibid

Clement Attlee forcefully defended Labour's longstanding support for the League and its attempt to construct an "effective international society."<sup>310</sup> Attlee presented an important pragmatic contribution to the debate. He made clear his respect for the aspirational society pacifists wanted to see but acknowledged the important reality that:

the peace propaganda of Lord Ponsonby goes on in safety because there is force behind it which enforces the rule of law...They [pacifists] could not say the same things if they were in countries adjoining Germany or Italy. Where there is Government there is force behind it in some way or other. The point is the proper use of force. We are against the use of force for imperialist and capitalist ends, but we are in favour of the proper use of force for ensuring the rule of law. Non-resistance is not a political attitude; it is a personal attitude. I do not believe it is a possible policy for people with responsibility.<sup>311</sup>

This was a significant criticism of the pacifist case but it also, whether intentional or not, represented a clear attack by Attlee on the policy positions of his Party leader George Lansbury. Lansbury's pacifist values were only tenable so long as they were a personal attitude and not injected into the design of Party policy.

Next Attlee turned his focus to Cripps and the Socialist League. Attlee could not understand the Socialist League prescription that action would only be taken if a Labour government was in power, as they believed non-socialist parties could not be trusted. Such an idea represented a danger to the fundamentals of democracy as it "really means the acceptance of a totalitarian state. You can do nothing unless you have all the people of the state thinking and acting the same way, because you cannot trust each other." Attlee believed the same logic had to be applied to the League. It was not a defunct institution because it had member states that were capitalists or imperialists. The membership of the Soviet Union demonstrated a realist understanding of this dynamic, as even amongst the other member states there was still a

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid, 173. This statement shows that Vickers interpretation of Attlee being a 'national pacifist' is deeply flawed.

diversity of interests and values: “there are capitalist democracies and capitalist autocracies. There are states whose interests are towards war, and there are states whose interests are towards peace.”<sup>312</sup> Attlee could also see rampant hypocrisy in Cripps’ turn against the League after supporting it in the past: “I can never understand why the League was good enough for us to support with Japan and Germany in it, and now is so imperialist because Japan has gone out and Soviet Russia has come in.”<sup>313</sup> In Attlee’s eyes, Labour had clear ideas for the development of a constructive path towards peace with a dual focus on disarmament and a lowering of economic barriers. Labour simply needed to stay the course and let these solutions work. The suggestion from pacifists and the left that the Party was simply being led down a path to backing imperialism was utter nonsense. Labour was not so foolish as to follow such action without protest and if it did not Attlee observed: “we shall deserve our fate. Let us have some pride in the strength of our Movement.”<sup>314</sup>

Lansbury soon followed up with his most important speech as Party leader as he sought to defend his pacifist values and their importance to broader Labour policy. He took a blatant stand against the policy of the trade unions and the NEC stating: “I have never been more convinced that I am right, and that the Movement is making a terrible mistake, than I am today.”<sup>315</sup> Lansbury passionately defended his “overwhelming conviction...that force is no remedy” and that the contrast between his pacifist values and his role as Labour leader placed him in a “kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde position.”<sup>316</sup> He spoke of his long career in politics and social activism, all of which followed a consistent pacifist outlook. His values were

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, 176.

increasingly challenged with the gloomy prospects for Britain and a rearming world. He was deeply concerned that ideas of Britain maintaining peace through strength would make war more likely and was already producing grave social consequences. He noted the plans to move schools away from the coasts, the “training [of] our children for air drill and gas attack drill,” or newspapers calling for the implementation of conscription to expand the size of the armed forces.<sup>317</sup> All of these changes were preparing the country for a far larger conflict than that brewing between Italy and Abyssinia.

Lansbury believed that Europe was on the brink of a second major conflict on the same scale as the First World War. He could see little distinction between the alliances which brought about that prior conflict with the current rise of fascism and the League. The use of the League as an international body rather than an alliance acting on the interests of a small set of nations was not relevant to Lansbury. He noted: “I personally cannot see the difference between mass murder organised by the League of Nations, or mass murder organised between individual nations.”<sup>318</sup> With war being immoral regardless of who was organising it, Lansbury believed that Labour had only one way forward and that was to find ways to remove the causes of war both at home and abroad. Lansbury wanted Labour to do all it could to ensure equitable access to raw materials for all countries as this would establish the conditions for a lasting peace, “instead of backing this policy of sanctions.”<sup>319</sup> This broad policy goal was not far off from the central aims of longstanding Labour foreign policy which sought an economic settlement to prevent conflict.

Lansbury could carry the Labour Party behind this common policy of economic equity but that alone did not match his desire to see Britain lead by example to ensure peace was

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid

<sup>318</sup> Ibid

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 177.



permanent. He called for the far more radical desire to see a Britain that would be “willing to become disarmed unilaterally.”<sup>320</sup> Such a noble aspiration also represented a fundamental danger to Britain in the face of threats that Lansbury himself acknowledged, especially the increasingly expansionist desires of the fascist powers. Like Ponsonby and Salter, Lansbury referred to such desires as a “Christianity [which] is the realist principle of life.”<sup>321</sup> The confusing nature of this adherence to pacifism as the true ‘realist’ response to international crisis was further demonstrated when Lansbury brushed aside criticism of such ideas being easily ignored by Hitler and Mussolini without some international force to ensure its success, as he was himself willing to speak with the dictators about these goals.<sup>322</sup> Lansbury’s unwavering faith in the righteousness of his pacifism was well and good for him to promote as an individual political actor but as leader of the Labour Party and should Labour win election a potential Prime Minister represented a real danger for Britain in an increasingly militarised world. To these concerns Lansbury could only reply “in the name of the faith I hold, the belief I have that God intended us to live peaceably and quietly with one another, if some people do not allow us to do so, I am ready to stand as the early Christians did, and say, “This is our faith, this is where we stand, and, if necessary, this is where we will die.”<sup>323</sup>

Lansbury’s convictions were representative of only a small fringe of the Party and as leader he clearly embraced a foreign policy which was untenable for a potential leader of Britain. It was with such concerns in mind that Ernest Bevin representing the powerful Transport and General Workers’ Union, addressed the conference. Bevin’s determination to excise the pacifist

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid

<sup>321</sup> Ibid

<sup>322</sup> Ibid

<sup>323</sup> Ibid

influence from the Party's leadership was a force to behold. He opened with a powerful attack on Lansbury his injection of personal convictions into Party policy:

It is placing the Executive and the Movement in an absolutely wrong position to be taking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what your ought to do with it. There is one quotation from the Scriptures which George Lansbury has quoted today which I think he ought to apply to himself – “Do unto others.” I have had to sit in Conference with the Leader and come to decisions, and I am a democrat and I feel we have been betrayed.<sup>324</sup>

Bevin recounted the formation of Labour's foreign policy in the past four years and noted that the Party had come to a clear agreement on a consistent policy which had the backing of the Trade unions and the PLP. Such policy had never included suggestions of extremist measures like unilateral British disarmament, showing how far out of touch Lansbury and the pacifists had become. Bevin also took aim at the anti-imperialists in the Socialist League and pacifists such as Dr. Salter who sought a rapid embrace of decolonisation. With Britain at the helm of a vast global empire Bevin feared such ideas would lead to “a scramble in the world. It will lead to wars all over the world.”<sup>325</sup> Bevin was not ignorant to the need to accept the empires of the nineteenth century were on the way out but believed that the League provided the best means of transitioning Empire towards a future with numerous independent nations.

Bevin saw pacifist dominance of Labour foreign policy as dangerous because while it was aspirational it failed to guard against the dangers of the growing fascist menace. He believed that the Trade Union Movement was in danger of being wiped out. One only had to look at the recent examples of state repression placed upon fellow trade unionists in Austria, Germany, or Italy to see the threat. The only way in Bevin's and the other trade unionists' minds to protect the movement at home and abroad was to challenge fascist expansion wherever it appeared. Bevin

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid

explained this through his own Christian references: “they saw he who takes the sword shall perish by the sword. The man who has taken the sword is Mussolini, and because Mussolini has taken the sword we stand by the Scriptural doctrine and say that he shall perish by economic sanctions.”<sup>326</sup> For Bevin sanctions could not be linked to a desire for war but rather was an essential tool to ensure the survival of the entire Labour Movement, standing idly by as Lansbury counselled would only lead to disaster.

Although the Party would carry its debate into a second day the outcome was clear. The pacifist/left alignment which had been critical to Labour adopting radical foreign policy between 1933 and 1934 had broken. Both groups showed hostility to sanctions but for different reasons. Those on the left feared that sanctions would only further the interests of capitalists while for pacifists, such policy would risk the outbreak of war. Labour pragmatists were able to paint their rivals as out of touch with reality, so wrapped up in their ideals that they were unwilling to accept logical policy to preserve peace. The unions agreed that fascism had to be challenged and the use of sanctions to protect Abyssinia was viewed as noble undertaking. As a result of these divisions within Labour’s fringe elements the outcome of the debate was clear. When the Party finally voted on the motion the result was overwhelming in its embrace of sanctions as a critical element of Labour foreign policy. With the backing of the NEC and the unanimous support from the TUC the outcome was a crushing blow to Lansbury’s pacifist crusade with 2,168,000 voting in favour of sanctions to only 102,000 against.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

### Hoare-Laval: “A Stain Upon the Reputation of this Country”

The Italian invasion occurred only days after Labour debated the question of sanctions. Abyssinia, as a member state of the League promptly appealed to Geneva for assistance. On 7 October the League took a bold stand (in contrast to its slow response to the invasion of China) and declared Italy to be the aggressor. After it was clear Mussolini had no intention of withdrawing his forces from Abyssinia the League imposed economic sanctions on 18 November. Fifty-two states, including Britain and France, immediately ceased purchase of Italian commodities.<sup>328</sup> However, these did not include oil or coal which would have had a decisive impact upon Italy’s ability to make war.<sup>329</sup>

Labour fears of an imperialist resolution to the crisis organised outside the confines of the League would come to pass in December 1935 when the secret Hoare-Laval proposal (named after the British and French foreign secretaries) was presented to Mussolini which offered significant territorial concessions to Italy but left only a small portion of Abyssinia as a rump state.<sup>330</sup> The plan was leaked to the press shortly thereafter. The British public and the Labour Party were outraged. Upon hearing the news Attlee angrily told a rally in Bassetlaw that the deal was a “stain upon the reputation of this country...there can no longer be any trust in Britain’s good faith by smaller nations after this...what state is going to trust the League for protection if it understands that the League protection means losing half its territory to the exponents of violence?”<sup>331</sup> Attlee’s message would carry the day as such a sneaky bi-lateral maneuver

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<sup>328</sup> William Welk, “League Sanctions and Foreign Trade Restrictions in Italy,” *The American Economic Review*, (1937), Vol. 27. No. 1, 100.

<sup>329</sup> Canada pushed League members to expand sanctions to include oil and steel but the initiative failed to gain traction. See Welk for more details.

<sup>330</sup> A rump state is a remanent of a previously larger state which has been broken up by its neighbours.

<sup>331</sup> “Stain on Britain’s Reputation,” *Belfast Telegraph* (13 December 1935), 15.

vindicated Labour assertions that the National Government had no qualms settling imperial disputes in the traditional manner outside the confines of the League. The embarrassing episode forced Prime Minister Baldwin to abandon the plan and accept the resignation of the Foreign Secretary, Samuel Hoare. Of course, moral backing did nothing to aid the Abyssinian struggle on the battlefield. They would put up staunch resistance but were only able to hold out for a few months with the capital, Addis Ababa and the remainder of the country falling to the invaders on 5 May 1936.

The debate over how to best aid Abyssinia at Labour's conference allowed the Party to unshackle itself from the grip of Lansbury and other pacifists but also demonstrated for all to see a clear disunity within its upper ranks. The Conference proved to be a moment of evolution for Labour policy as support for sanctions was assured. Yet, the Conference did not demonstrate a watershed moment in Party's response to rearmament as it would continue to vote against the Government's service estimates until 1937. In the face of such a blatant rebuke of his principles, Lansbury soon resigned from the leadership and Attlee acting in his role as deputy leader stepped in to guide the Party in the interim. Smelling blood, in mid October, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, at a rally in Glasgow, noted his concerns for European stability and the need for the Prime Minister to call an early election as "we are not at the end but at the beginning of what might be a long period of difficulty, doubt, and anxiety, during which there might be recurring crises of a most serious character."<sup>332</sup> Chamberlain made clear that the Government would soon need a fresh mandate to secure more arms and alleviate unemployment with fresh contract for small arms, aircraft, and ships. For the Tories, rearmament could be beneficial for both improved

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<sup>332</sup> Neville Chamberlain, "Mr. Chamberlain's Speech," *The Scotsman*, 15 October 1935, 8. Chamberlain hoped that proposed ship building would strengthen the Tories hold on Scotland in any coming contest.

security and employment opportunities. Labour would soon get the chance to challenge such antithetical ideas to its own policy. The threat of conflict with Italy combined with opposition infighting proved too good an opportunity to ignore for Stanley Baldwin who on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October went to the King for a dissolution of parliament and called a General Election for the 14<sup>th</sup> of November.<sup>333</sup>

### The 1935 General Election: “A Vote for the Tories is a Vote for War”

Foreign affairs and rearmament would be interlinked issues as Labour’s claims that the Tories sought war was quickly adopted as a common slogan for its candidates across the country. Foreign policy was centre stage for all parties at the outset of the 1935 General Election campaign in October of 1935. With the Abyssinian Crisis still a central focus of the national discourse, Labour sought to open its electioneering with a clear explanation of its foreign policy principles. The Tory threat to place Britain in the middle of an international arms race and by extension threaten the ability of the League of Nations to preserve international peace were central to Labour’s campaign rhetoric.

In the Labour Party’s election manifesto, it took direct aim at the Government’s “suicidal foreign policy.”<sup>334</sup> It sought to frame Labour’s campaign as the rational response to an increasingly militarised world which was on the trajectory towards a fresh calamity like that of 1914. These ideas were outlined clearly by Transport House in its model election address for local Labour candidates to share with their constituents. Labour sought to tie international crises to the failures of the National Government. Attention was given to the inaction shown by

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<sup>333</sup> Maurice Cowling specifically attributes Baldwin’s decision to call an election on the shambles that was Labour’s Party conference. *The Impact of Hitler*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62.

<sup>334</sup> Stannage, 157.

Downing Street to Japanese aggression in China and Italian actions in Abyssinia, which had done serious damage to the perceived strength of the League of Nations collective peace system. Above all, Transport House wanted Labour candidates to directly attack the Government for its role in wrecking the “Disarmament Conference by resisting all the constructive proposals made by other states. While paying lip service to the League, it is planning a vast and expensive re-armament program which will lead inevitably to a suicidal race in armaments.”<sup>335</sup> Labour candidates would express the Party’s firm support for arms reductions and the organisation of collective security through the League of Nations.

Most intriguingly Transport House wanted candidates to express the Party’s position on the future of the Royal Air Force and the militarisation of the air at large. Whilst the Labour Party supported the maintenance of necessary army and naval forces to defend Britain and the Empire, they echoed earlier statements outlined in *Labour’s Way to Peace* which called for the abolition of national air forces. Instead, the Party sought the creation of an international air police force under the auspices of the League of Nations, this would be completed in tandem with reductions in naval and land forces and the end of private manufacture and trade of arms across the globe.<sup>336</sup>

The specific threat of German air parity was also a focus for Labour with national campaign literature focusing on the incompetence of the National Government’s own air production schemes. Transport House provided a narrative to voters that the Government had been handed a situation in 1932 where Germany had no military air power to speak of and

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<sup>335</sup> “Model Election Address,” (Transport House, 1935) Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 292/715.11/5 Item 715.14.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid

allowed in three years for air parity to be reached with the RAF.<sup>337</sup> The pamphlet attacked Stanley Baldwin's failure to grasp the scale of German air rearmament until it was already too late. Labour pointed to his naïve assumptions in 1934 that air parity would never be reached which were quickly proven wrong when the Luftwaffe acquired an equal number of aircraft to that of the RAF in early 1935. As a result, Baldwin and company had shown themselves to be "neither idealists nor realists."<sup>338</sup> Labour's attacks demonstrated logical inconsistency in two ways which may have hurt its ability to appeal to urban voters. On the one hand Labour accused the Government of being too slow in aircraft production compared to Germany, while on the other attacked the Government for having a national air force at all.

Labour's messaging failed to demonstrate how its own policy of abolition of air forces could have prevented a determined Hitler from pursuing such rearmament with the inadequacies of the League already demonstrated by 1933. Expansion of the RAF, even if it lagged behind that of Germany, was a far more rational policy than hoping Hitler could be persuaded to disband the Luftwaffe. Yet, Labour's dogma of air abolition was the Party's only course of action which could be in line with its wider calls for halting military expansion and its desire to protect urban centres from the threat of bombing. Therefore, while the policy was not rational when facing the threat of Hitler, for Labour it was the only reasonable course of action to avert mass slaughter that would quickly follow an outbreak of war. Such an inconsistency on the matter of air power was indicative of wider problems Labour had with adapting to the rapid pace of change in international affairs.

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<sup>337</sup> Labour Party, "Murder front the Air," (Transport House: London, 1935).

<sup>338</sup> Ibid



On 4 November 1935, Arthur Greenwood held a nation-wide radio broadcast on the BBC to spread Labour's message. The confused and weak foreign policy of the National Government was central to Labour's campaign, which they claimed had only "prate of peace" but killed any hope for World Disarmament Conference to succeed.<sup>339</sup> Even more astoundingly Government spokesmen had openly derided, and at times obstructed, the "Great Peace Ballot."<sup>340</sup> It was only when the results of the Peace Ballot were released that the Conservatives changed course and embraced its objectives. Greenwood carried his attacks against the Tories further by noting key personalities which threatened any chance for British disarmament:

I [Greenwood] fear that a fire-eater like Mr. Churchill, backed by the diehard Tories, will rush the Prime Minister and his colleagues down the slippery slope towards a disastrous new armaments race. The Government's policy of unilateral re-armament is inconsistent with the sincere support of League principles. It is a source of grave uneasiness, which is not lessened by the singular reluctance of ministers.<sup>341</sup>

Greenwood's attack on Churchill specifically is even more remarkable as Churchill had opened his own campaign with a statement of adamant support for a policy of collective security under the League of Nations. No mention was made of Conservative plans to modernise the armed forces. Instead, Churchill stressed the importance of a strong collective system under auspice of the League as "the alternative to the growing strength of the League of Nations is the return to the ferocious appetites of the jungle."<sup>342</sup> Churchill's own assessment of the strengthening of the League matches similar misunderstandings by Labour which failed to grasp that the League was already proven to be deeply compromised in the eyes of the dictators by late 1935.

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<sup>339</sup> "Mr. Greenwood's Broadcast, 9.40 P.M." (Transport House, 1935) Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 292/715.11/5 Item 715.14.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid

<sup>341</sup> Ibid

<sup>342</sup> Winston Churchill, "Mr. Churchill's Election Address," *The Scotsman*, 29 October 1935, 10.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, was also a target of attack as he had echoed pledges to not expand the armed forces but during his own radio broadcast of the campaign, he stressed the need to modernise Britain's defences. Greenwood argued that such statements were unnecessary, pointing to the fact that the Royal Navy was the strongest naval power in the world and possessed the strongest capital ships currently afloat.<sup>343</sup> The problem with this assessment was that Italy, Germany and Japan were all building modern military equipment which could threaten British security, making it essential that Britain's armed forces be given up to date equipment to protect the Empire. Labour's appeals demonstrated a firm attachment to an idealistic world where all nations would abide by arms control treaties and that British military materials were impervious to degradation or of becoming inferior to the innovations of competing states.

Greenwood did ensure that any notion of Labour's pacifist appeals for unilateral disarmament were removed from the current platform. Greenwood suggested what seemed to be a realist policy of maintaining the capabilities of the armed forces at the highest point of efficiency, so long as they met both the country's needs and Britain's obligations to the League and its ability to maintain collective security as a viable policy tool.<sup>344</sup> The fear for Labour was that the alternative policy embraced by a re-elected National Government would provide a blank cheque to the arms industry, a genuine threat to world peace.<sup>345</sup> Such statements were rational within the confines of Labour's ideological development away from its earlier pacifist embrace. The Party now was clearly moving forwards with greater unity in its support of a policy of

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<sup>343</sup> Greenwood, "Broadcast."

<sup>344</sup> Ibid

<sup>345</sup> TUC General Secretary Walter Citrine would go so far as to call the National Government's plans to modernise military equipment as 'a blank cheque' in the final days of Labour's campaign, making his views a little more radical than those of Greenwood and official Labour policy.

collective security through the League, but the Party lacked any comparative understanding of the state of global affairs British military planners had to consider in the near future.

Local level responses to policy from Transport House were clear in constituency races across the country. One example can be seen in the campaign literature for East Edinburgh candidate Pethick Lawrence. Lawrence made the threat of war a central component of his campaign tying Labour's longstanding advocacy for free trade to wider peace policy. In Labour's eyes free trade not only helped reduce prices for commercial goods, but it also discouraged other countries from embracing war as a solution to economic inequalities as free exchange of goods alleviated the problem. On arms production Lawrence was directly in line with Transport House's call for nationalisation of weapons manufacturing to separate it from any capitalist incentive for a conflict to occur. Most intriguingly, Lawrence demonstrated the Party's desire to avoid unilateral disarmament:

I am not in favour of this country disarming alone, because I do not regard it as practicable while other nations have strong offensive weapons. Our forces must be adequate, but not on a scale calculated to promote a new race in armaments throughout the world. In this connection I cannot accept the panicky view put forward by the Conservative leaders as to the alleged obsolete character of our Navy and the need for large new expenditure on our forces generally. I believe such an attitude to be unfounded and dangerous.<sup>346</sup>

Lawrence's support for the balanced approach of Transport House demonstrates a belief that such policy could be effective in regaining important Scottish seats which had demonstrated clear Labour support in the past. Of course, Lawrence's position ignores the reality that Italy, Japan and Germany were all undertaking naval expansion by 1935 and producing modern ships which would be far superior to the bulk of the Royal Navy's First World War vintage ships. Far more importantly, for Scottish seats, the chance to attain work with Tory promises of ship

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<sup>346</sup> East Edinburgh Labour Party, "Pethick Lawrence for Labour," (William Davie: Edinburgh, 1935), 1.

building contracts proved hard for Labour to challenge as ship building was a critical part of the Scottish economy. It may well have been that the practicality of rearmament providing work which proved the decisive factor in the election even if many had sympathy towards Labour's solutions for averting a future conflict.

The results of the election were not altogether shocking for the national press. The National Government was returned with 387 seats to Labour's 154. Labour had improved its position from the disaster of 1931 where it had a meager return of 52 seats but had along way to go towards returning to Government. Labour received just under 38% of the vote, its highest ever share.<sup>347</sup> This did not translate into a serious threat to the National Government's hold on Westminster. However, several Labour realists were able to return to parliament after suffering defeat in 1931 with Herbert Morrison, J. R. Clynes, A.V. Alexander, and Hugh Dalton all sitting on the front bench once more. The return of these voices to the centre stage of British politics would be critical in the years to come as Labour's foreign policy embraced a far more rational response to the fascist menace than the Tories could provide. However, in the immediate term, Labour's defeat on the issue of rearmament was a bitter blow. While PLP leadership was no longer under the control of Lansbury and Ponsonby, their influence was still felt, and the election would not prompt a radical rethink of the Party's adherence to the League of Nations. A change would only become possible once the League's inability to maintain peace was blatantly demonstrated over the course of 1936.

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<sup>347</sup> Ben Pimlott, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton*, (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986), 193.

## Conclusion

1935 had proven to be a testing year for Labour as its faith in the League of Nations and its staunch adherence to disarmament were tested both within the ranks of the Party and from its political enemies. The Party had demonstrated renewed hostility to any threat to international peace by Britain unilaterally rearming. A collective response from the League was still seen as the most viable option to protect peace and halt the spread of Fascist aggression. Opposition to the Government's white paper in early 1935 demonstrated this as Baldwin and others favoured an expansion of the RAF to ensure British security. Labour's alternative foreign policy embraced the use of international institutions, global disarmament, and a desire to eliminate economic barriers as the best means of preserving peace. Arthur Henderson outlined in a clear fashion these policies in his work which provided a clear theoretical framing to Labour's existing policy. The 1935 Party Conference was a testing moment for Henderson's work as pacifists, Socialist League members, and realists battled for the backing of Labour's membership to their own visions of Labour foreign policy. The ousting of Cripps, Lansbury, and Ponsonby, from the NEC and Labour's front bench demonstrated a significant turn with the Party clearly embracing a policy of League administered sanctions as the best means of preserving peace. The NEC and the trade unions had been successful in their ability to remain united around Henderson's vision for Labour policy and held Party radicals at bay. Labour was able to fight the 1935 election with an ideologically consistent policy but failed to sell their message to the bulk of the electorate which supported the Government's calls for reasonable steps towards rearmament and military modernisation. Labour desires to halt the spread of fascism were still limited by its adherence to the League and its potential to create a better world than the one which had gone to war in 1914. The Party had a long way to go towards accepting a realist policy in the face of dictators who

blatantly disregarded the authority of the League and its objections to their expansionist desires. Baldwin's support for rearmament by contrast showed an acceptance of the changing security situation Britain faced in late 1935 but also suffered from an assumption that the dictators could be encouraged to stop their desires for empire. Mussolini and Hitler had found success in their militarist adventures and were emboldened. The events of 1936-37 would prove decisive in shattering Labour's faith in the League in its current form.

## “Malevolent Neutrality”: 1936-1937

### Introduction

The threat of war in 1935 appeared unlikely to diminish at the start of 1936. Fighting in Abyssinia showed no signs of waning as Italian troops continued to make slow but steady progress towards the capital Addis Ababa, amidst determined resistance. The recent Hoare-Laval imbroglio taught Labour that it could not allow itself to become complacent as the National Government could once again embrace imperialist solutions to the menace of fascism. Internally, the ousting of George Lansbury and Lord Ponsonby shattered the pacifist grip on the Party leadership, but they were likely to remain a thorn in the side of the NEC as they would undoubtedly continue their advocacy of an idealistic foreign policy. Labour would be tested by new international disasters as Germany and Italy began a campaign to spread their influence across the continent. Germany would openly defy the Versailles settlement with a fresh set of violations early in the year, but it was a sudden eruption of violence in Spain which would captivate the attention of the Labour Party for the next two years. Labour’s haphazard response to the Spanish Civil War and its reluctant embrace of a policy of non-intervention weakened their claims that the threat of fascism was an existential danger to democracy.

### Navigating the “War Menace”

Both pacifists and trade unionists opened 1936 with fresh debates on how to mitigate the potential for further colonial conflicts (as with Italy in Abyssinia and Japan in China) to quickly evolving into wider wars. In February 1936 the pragmatic pacifist, Norman Angell, addressed a meeting of the Trowbridge Branch of the League of Nations Union. He acknowledged the longstanding Labour position that the Treaty of Versailles would need revision to ensure harmony in Europe, but also believed it was “already dead” due to the inability of the Great

Powers to address legitimate grievances.<sup>348</sup> Peace could be saved, but only if swift action were taken to show Germany that its concerns were deemed credible by those who had imposed Versailles upon it. However, Angell made an important distinction from other pacifists in Labour's ranks. He argued that claims both in the LNU and in the wider British political discourse that peace was best preserved through equitable access to raw materials were fundamentally flawed. Raw materials could be accessed in present economic conditions as there was no nation which "showed a disinclination to sell them."<sup>349</sup> It was a significant divergence from earlier claims from other members of the left and pacifist elements of the Labour Party.

Only days later the London Trades Council held a meeting that was attended by TUC leadership, including Walter Citrine. The meeting was almost entirely centred on addressing how the trade unions would respond to the growing "war menace." The Council resolved to press the Government to demonstrate clear support for the League in the aftermath of the Hoare-Laval controversy, as only that institution could stave off the threat of imperialist expansion. John Stokes who presided over the meeting noted the clear public support for the League demonstrated in the Peace Ballot and from the Conservatives campaigning in the General Election of 1935, in both cases the British people were clear in their desire to back a League-centric foreign policy.<sup>350</sup> Walter Citrine furthered this thinking with a call for the Labour Movement to abandon patriotic sentiments with calls for the National Government to pass the Peace Act which had been floated for years in Labour discourse.<sup>351</sup> The Council concluded its

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<sup>348</sup> Norman Angell, "The Way to Peace," *The Wiltshire Times*, (22 February 1936), 5.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>350</sup> For more details on the Peace Ballot and the response of the Conservative Party refer to page 105 in the previous chapter.

<sup>351</sup> "Sir Walter Citrine Outlines Labour's Policy," *Daily Herald*, (24 February 1936), 8. Citrine's support of the Peace Act suggests a last-ditch attempt to shore up British faith in the League as the law would hinder any British response to a fresh international crisis.



discussion with an approval of a motion to pressure the Government and the League of Nations to strengthen its sanctions policy against Italy (which was clearly ineffectual in the face of continuing fighting in Abyssinia) with the implementation of an oil embargo.<sup>352</sup> Through these separate actions, both pacifists and trade unionists demonstrated a shared belief that the League was no longer central to British foreign policy and corrective action was needed to avert a second Abyssinian debacle in the near future.

#### “Co-operate or Perish” The Remilitarisation of the Rhineland

The battle for Abyssinia had occupied the bulk of Labour attention in 1935, but Germany had also been making bold moves towards war in Europe. On 9 March 1935, Hitler acknowledged to the world the existence of the Luftwaffe (German Airforce) in clear violation of the Treaty of Versailles. It was an official statement of something that had been obvious for months. This was promptly followed on 16 March with the enactment of compulsory military service and a pledge to increase the size of the army to 550,000, when Versailles had capped the army at 100,000.<sup>353</sup> The Anglo-French response to these blatant violations was limited to a feeble series of talks where Hitler falsely claimed air parity had been achieved with Britain and demanded the return of former German colonies, both of which could not be provided by Britain and France unilaterally.<sup>354</sup>

Finding no opposition to German rearmament, Hitler was emboldened to further violate the Treaty of Versailles on 7 March 1936 when he ordered German troops to reoccupy the Rhineland. This western region of Germany which bordered France and Belgium had been

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid

<sup>353</sup> Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85.

<sup>354</sup> Steiner, 87.

declared a demilitarised zone in the aftermath of the First World War. It was believed to be a necessary condition to ensure French security was maintained with a buffer zone between any future German threat and the French frontier. This German escalation alarmed the French but was of little concern to the Labour Party which had a long history of viewing the Versailles settlement as unjustly harsh. In the Parliamentary debate afterwards, Labour decided to simply support the National Government in requesting a League of Nations condemnation. Hugh Dalton, speaking on behalf of the Opposition, merely summed up the matter as “it is only right to say bluntly and frankly that public opinion in this country would not support, and certainly the Labour party would not support, the taking of military sanctions or even economic sanctions against Germany at this time, in order to put German troops out of the German Rhineland.”<sup>355</sup> Although Dalton was to admit later that a weak Labour response was a mistake, at the time it was seen as pragmatic politics.<sup>356</sup>

The NCL had a slightly stronger response than that of the Parliamentary Party. The trade union influence led the NCL to denounce the German action and describe it as proof of a “clear determination of Nazi Germany to repudiate its obligations and take what it wants by force.” Even this firmer stance was limited by a reminder that the Labour and the British Government needed to make a genuine attempt to negotiate with Hitler to address German grievances.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Hugh Dalton, “European Situation,” *House of Commons Debate* (26 March 1936), Vol. 310. cc. 1454. This comment was contrary to Dalton’s personal views outlined in his diary on 11 March 1936 where he stated a belief that the Labour Party and the public would not stand for Hitler’s actions. Evidently the lack of public enthusiasm shaped Labour’s official response in Parliament.

<sup>356</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World: Vol 1*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 117.

<sup>357</sup> National Council of Labour, *Labour and the Defence of Peace*, (London: Transport House, 1936), 6. quoted in, Vickers, 117.

Attlee also demonstrated a stronger response at a by-election rally in Dunbartonshire on 16 March where he declared:

No sympathy for the injustices inflicted on the German people by the Versailles Treaty should blind us to the true nature of the act of the German Government. It has shattered all confidence in the word of the Fascist rulers... [therefore] we believe that the choice before the world is co-operate or perish.<sup>358</sup>

Attlee's public statement was far more balanced than the show of indifference presented by Labour in the House of Commons. Clearly Attlee was aware of the threat to French security that of Hitler's blatant violation of international law represented.

Others such as former Labour Party Leader J. R. Clynes articulated the Germanophile sympathies many Labourites held towards attempts to redress Versailles, even if the means were militaristic in nature. Writing a year later, Clynes outlined his belief that British rearmament created "dismay and anger" within Germany, and that subsequent Anglo-French staff talks early in 1936 and the renewal of the Franco-Soviet defence pact provided a rationale for Hitler's actions in the Rhineland.<sup>359</sup> Under such thinking, Hitler's justification for military expansion and assertion of full territorial control was in line with defending Germany from its neighbours. Across the different strata of the Labour Party, balancing sympathy with the plight of Germany with fears of Hitler was difficult to achieve.

#### "Malevolent Neutrality" and The Spanish Civil War

On 17 July 1936, a coup was launched by a group of army officers against the democratically elected Government of Spain. These officers, primarily based in Spanish Morocco, struggled to entice the urban population in mainland Spain to join their cause. Instead,

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<sup>358</sup> Attlee, "Mr. Attlee Warns Germany," *Daily Herald*, (16 March 1936), 2.

<sup>359</sup> J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs*, (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1937), 231.

an alliance of trade unionists, social democrats, communists, and anarchists took up arms to defend the Republic from right-wing reactionaries.<sup>360</sup> Within a matter of days, the country was engulfed in civil war.

The immediate British response to the news of civil war in Spain was to summon the Royal Navy to secure several Spanish ports for the evacuation of British subjects and begin coordinating a wider response with French Prime Minister and social democrat, Léon Blum. In short order the French Government faced calls from the Spanish Republican authorities for export licenses to ship arms to Spain. Blum was clear in his desire to accept the Spanish request but Prime Minister Baldwin and Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, rejected the plan and pressured the French to abandon its desire to directly aid the Republic. The best the Spanish authorities could get was a French plan to send arms to Mexico where they would then be dispatched to Spain, making the French an indirect contributor to the conflict.<sup>361</sup> The British Government feared that assisting the Spanish Government in a domestic affair would prompt other states to begin supporting either side, which could lead to the outbreak of a general European war.

The only solution that appeared viable to policy makers in London and Paris was to enact a system of non-intervention where all states would be prohibited from supplying arms, technical experts or volunteer combatants to either side in the Spanish Civil War. There were immediate problems with this response as the Spanish Government had the right under international law to buy foreign arms to suppress rebel forces in its territory.<sup>362</sup> The bulk of Conservatives backed the policy due to their belief that the conflict was an internal Spanish matter and had little interest in

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<sup>360</sup> Stainer, 186.

<sup>361</sup> Naylor, 140.

<sup>362</sup> Cole, 326.

the region.<sup>363</sup> The British left by contrast had been interested in Spanish affairs since the Second Republic was declared in 1931.

Initial Labour responses to the news of civil war in Spain were like those of the Conservatives: it could only be viewed as an internal Spanish matter. Party attention in those early days was almost entirely fixated on developing a strategy to challenge that National Government's new unemployment assistance regulations.<sup>364</sup> This shift in domestic social policy was of critical importance for core Labour constituencies as changes in unemployment supports would have an immediate impact upon working class families. The Party simply made a pledge to "support or Spanish comrades in their struggle to defend freedom and democracy in Spain."<sup>365</sup> Labour's initial response in Parliament before the summer recess was to urge the Government to support its policy of non-intervention. Therefore, at the start of the conflict Labour and the National Government were in alignment on Britain's response.

Not all Labour members shared the feeling that the war in Spain could be viewed as strictly an issue isolated to the Iberian Peninsula. On 10 August Labour Peer, Lord Strabolgi, penned an opinion piece for the *Daily Herald* titled "What Spain's War Means to Britain," which condemned the Government's (and indirectly also Labour's) policy of non-intervention.<sup>366</sup> He feared that if Britain stayed the course and refused to support the Spanish Government then the rebels would inevitably win and promptly turn Spain into "an Italo-German protectorate" which would threaten Britain's position in the Mediterranean and Africa.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Tom Buchanan, "A Far Away Country of Which We Know Nothing? Perceptions of Spain and its Civil War in Britain, 1931-1939," *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 4. No. 1. 1993, 2.

<sup>364</sup> Naylor, 142.

<sup>365</sup> "Labour Party and Spain," *The Times*, (21 July 1936). quoted in Naylor, 142.

<sup>366</sup> Lord Strabolgi would become Labour's Chief Whip in the House of Lords in 1938.

<sup>367</sup> Lord Strabolgi, "What Spain's War Means to Britain," *Daily Herald*, (10 August 1936), 8.

Britain had already had to consider the prospect of war in the region a year earlier when it embarked upon a sanctions policy against Italy. If Spain were added to the list of Britain's rivals, then the key Royal Navy bases in Gibraltar (the point which guards the western entrance to the Mediterranean), and the island of Malta would be almost impossible to defend.<sup>368</sup> Strabolgi could only conclude:

Neither the policy of "splendid isolation" nor hundred percent non-resistance will avail us in Britain if we abandon our friends on the Continent of Europe. And yet Tories blindly cheer reports of rebel victories and our "National" Government adopts an attitude of malevolent neutrality towards the constitutionally elected Government of Spain.<sup>369</sup>

Strabolgi's claim that Britain had adopted a policy of "malevolent neutrality" caused a strong reaction amongst some of the nations leading Conservatives. Lord Halifax, then serving as Lord Privy Seal, angrily wrote Strabolgi to protest the phrase as he believed British policy was seeking to localise the Spanish conflict to keep it from growing into a "first-class international crisis [which] would only result in a prolongation of the disastrous struggle."<sup>370</sup> Halifax could not understand how British policy could possibly be construed as 'malevolent' because he was unwilling to see how dangerous it would be for Britain (and France as it shares a large southern border with Spain along the Pyrenees Mountains) to have a Spain which was controlled by a fascist regime or at the very least one with Fascist sympathies. At this early-stage Labour members could already see the wider implications of Spain's plight where the Conservatives were content to look on in ignorance.

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<sup>368</sup> Strabolgi had worked for the Admiralty in the First World War and was posted to Gibraltar so had intimate knowledge of Britain's strengths and weaknesses in the region.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid

<sup>370</sup> Halifax to Strabolgi, 11 August 1936, FO [Foreign Office Records, The National Archives, Kew] 371/20530/W8416/62/41. As quoted in, Scott Ramsay, "Ideological Foundations of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War: Foreign Office Perceptions of Political Polarisation in Spain, 1931-1936," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* (2020), Vol. 31, No. 1, 44.

It appeared the Labour leadership shared Strabolgi's views as a joint meeting of the NEC and the TUC was called a few weeks later on 28 August. An agreement was reached on Labour's official response to the fighting in Spain which showed had no clear end in sight. The NCL statement declared sympathy with the Spanish people and affirmed Labour's belief that it was within the rights of the Spanish Government to purchase arms for its own defence.<sup>371</sup> It was a key example of the pragmatic outlook that had taken place since the fall of 1935 as the Party which had fought bitterly against the production and distribution armaments. It also showed a recognition that older responses of economic sanctions, called for against Japan and implemented haphazardly against Italy, were not enough to blunt the aspirations of fascist imperialism.

Yet, this moment of pragmatic progress did not survive the very meeting which created it. It was already evident at this early juncture that the Nationalist Rebels were receiving outside help from Portugal, Italy, and Germany. With a belief that any Anglo-French decision to supply arms to the Republican side would only escalate tensions between the two ideological blocks (and by extension risk a wider war with the intervening states), Labour therefore, decided to begrudgingly accept the non-intervention policy agreed by the British and French Governments.<sup>372</sup> This awkward stance would be difficult to justify to the wider Party, as it was already clear that non-intervention was flawed from its inception as the rebels were receiving outside help but the Spanish Government was denied arms. The NEC attempted to circumnavigate the problem of fascist assistance to the rebels while the Republic was left to fend for itself by guaranteeing non-intervention would be observed by both sides of the conflict. It

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<sup>371</sup> Naylor, 144.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid

would do this by ensuring that supervision mechanisms were enacted to ensure non-intervention was working equitably.<sup>373</sup> What the meeting ignored was the question of what would be done should proof of violations be obtained. If Labour was unwilling to press the British Government to enforce non-intervention with military resources, then fascist states could simply pay lip service to the policy.

It appears that even the Labour leadership itself was not convinced that non-intervention would last, as in early September they promptly dispatched NEC members Hugh Dalton, William Gillies and George Hicks to Paris to meet with Prime Minister Blum to discuss reports of fresh Portuguese aid to the rebels. Dalton's account of the meeting showed the position of the French socialists with remarkable clarity:

He [Blum] was sure that his policy, if it was fully observed by all the European Governments, would help the Spanish Government forces much more than the free supply of arms to both sides. Even if it was not fully observed, if there were only comparatively small infractions by Hitler and Mussolini, it would still be better for our friends in Spain than opening the floodgates.<sup>374</sup>

According to Dalton, Blum followed these comments about the value of non-intervention by informing his Labour guests that, as the agreement had not yet gone into effect, modern French fighter aircraft were about to arrive in Spain.<sup>375</sup> Even the architect of non-intervention was intent on finding the means of evading it.

Nonetheless, Blum was insistent that his Labour comrades urge their Party to support his policy of non-intervention. There were pragmatic reasons for Labour to support the French in

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid

<sup>374</sup> Hugh Dalton, *Fateful Years*, 95.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid, the French would continue to provide some aircraft to the Republicans secretly, once the non-intervention agreement went into force. It is also important to note that for Blum, there were also domestic considerations behind his support of non-intervention as the domestic tensions which could erupt from openly arming the Republic could conceivably bring down the Popular Front Government. Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 206.



such a tense moment even if it came at the cost of strong desires to aid the Spanish Republic. Spanish socialists had made little effort to coordinate with their fellow European social democrats in the 1930s, either through the Labour and Socialist International or through direct contact with the British Labour Movement.<sup>376</sup> Dalton made clear his strong Francophile sentiments which went a little further than others in the Labour Party, writing in his memoirs:

I valued France above Spain, both as a civilised modern state, and as a friend and pledged ally of Britain. I was not an admirer of the Spanish approximation to democracy. When the Spanish Left lost the elections of 1934, they started an armed revolt to reverse the result of the voting...I did not think well of this political method. Again, we [British Labour] had many friends among French politicians on the Left, and especially among French Socialists.<sup>377</sup>

Although Dalton's lack of faith in the Spanish was not shared amongst other elements of the Labour Party, his strong Francophile attitude was shared by many in the Party's leadership. This attitude would prove fruitful as the conflict dragged on with the Republican forces radicalising over the course of conflict ushering in far greater communist and anarchist influences and sidelining social democrats. The French socialists would remain steadfast allies who shared Labour's dual concern over the growth of communism and fascism in Europe.

### The 1936 Labour Party Conference and "Europe's New Dark Age"

Labour's annual conference opened in Edinburgh under a cloud of despair. The year had born witness to the collapse of Abyssinia to Italy's war of conquest and the eruption of civil war in Spain. Both conflicts had demonstrated the weakness of the League of Nations and showed that appeals for collective action were not working to halt the expansion of the existential threat

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<sup>376</sup> Laurence Brown, "The Great Betrayal? European Socialists and Humanitarian Relief During the Spanish Civil War," *Labour History Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1, (2002), 85. The Labour Socialist International was predominantly focused on advancing support for Social Democrats in Northern Europe and had received little engagement from its Spanish counterparts before the outbreak of the Civil War.

<sup>377</sup> Dalton, *Fateful Years*, 96.

of fascism. The Party was consumed by disagreement over the implementation of non-intervention in Spain. The NEC and PLP leadership sought a strong display of support for the policy from the membership to shore up the influence of their fellow social democrats in France. Yet, even those who urged the Conference to endorse non-intervention, trade unionists such as Ernest Bevin, were incredibly lackluster in their endorsement of the policy. It was obvious to all elements of the Labour Party that non-intervention would have a short lifespan if fascist regimes showed no qualms with aiding the Spanish rebels in their fight. Pacifists challenged non-intervention from a Francophobic line, believing that Labour needed to finally accept isolationism as the means of averting war. The left stood against the policy due to their desire to aid the Spanish Republic in its fight even if it required an abandonment of past policy. Altogether it was an uninspiring position for the Party as it struggled to effectively challenge fascist influence in Europe while supporting its fellow social democrats on the continent.

Fear of fascism was illustrated in the Chairman's Address by Jennie Adamson where she referred to Europe as entering a "new dark age" where authoritarianism had "put back the clock of civilisation and turned its face towards the Dark Ages of tyranny, persecution, poverty and ignorance."<sup>378</sup> Adamson expressed the view of many Labourites by framing the great struggle against this threat to European society as being played out in the struggle for Spain and the threat of Germany expansionism. Labour's mission in the coming year would be to "spread the knowledge of the state of degradation into which a large part of Europe has fallen, and to create within our country such a sense of outraged feeling against this fall of mankind."<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1936), 161.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

Adamson promptly led the way by focusing Party outrage on the weakness Liberal and Conservative politicians had shown towards Hitler's violations of the international status quo. Specific attention was brought to the decision of former Prime Minister David Lloyd George to meet with Hitler and who proclaimed Hitler to be a "great man", as it embodied German attempts to coerce the British political establishment. Labour sought to challenge such maneuvers to normalise Hitler through stern example and accept that "the international spirit is confronted with the duty to defend itself."<sup>380</sup> Even with such an understanding that Labour policy needed to be more active in its response to the continued rise of fascism, what this policy should be was unclear. Instead, Adamson spoke in broad platitudes addressing the need to defeat the National Government in the next election and institute socialist domestic reforms that would "diminish the risk of war."<sup>381</sup> A real alternative to the policy of the National Government was not forthcoming.

The threat of fascist influence both at home and abroad was top of mind for many Conference attendees. The first debate that Labour representatives engaged in was an emergency response to the events in the working-class dominated East End of London a day earlier (4 October) which had seen violent clashes erupt between members of Oswald Mosely's BUF and a coalition of left-wing locals (communists, Labourites, and members of the local Jewish community) in what was later dubbed, The Battle of Cable Street.<sup>382</sup> BUF marches had been known to attract violence at earlier events but the events at Cable Street reached a new intensity and was widely covered in the press. Although Mosely had been forced by police to redirect the

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid

<sup>381</sup> Ibid

<sup>382</sup> Jacco Visser, "Anti-Racist Activism in London; Exploring Multidirectionality at Commemorations of the Battle of Cable Street and the Murder of Altab Ali," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, (2020), Vol. 41, No. 5, 624.

route for the march, clashes did spread between anti-fascists and police for a few more hours. The Labour Party viewed the event as dangerous cross-roads for Britain to stem the tide of domestic fascist forces or allow a diminution of democratic norms like that which occurred on continental Europe.<sup>383</sup>

It was in this context of fears of fascism at home that Labour's foreign policy discussions at Conference commenced. Events in Spain took centre stage as the fight to save the Republic captivated global attention from fascist and anti-fascist forces seeking to further their causes. The question for the Labour Party was whether it would repeat its policy of sanctions which had failed to save Abyssinia a year earlier or embark on a campaign to send British arms to the Spanish Government. PLP deputy leader, Arthur Greenwood, moved a resolution which would tie the Party to the cause of non-intervention keeping Labour in line with the USSR, France, and other social democrats. Yet, Greenwood did not hide his criticisms of non-intervention. He acknowledged that it was genuinely accepted by its proponents, that a lack of involvement in the conflict would aide the Government in its efforts to defeat the rebels. However, he could not see it as a genuine policy of neutrality as Labour's "interests lie in the direction of supporting the Government of Spain... [as] this policy of non-intervention is a very, very bad second best."<sup>384</sup>

Greenwood also saw wider implications of the non-intervention policy in a state of international affairs which saw continuous growth in fascist influence. The fear was that a strong show of support for non-intervention would establish a "precedent that rebels should be treated on equal terms with Governments." In other words, this fresh act of appeasement was simply

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<sup>383</sup> For more detail on the BUF and its street violence see: Thomas Lineham, *East London for Mosely*. London: Frank Cass, 1996. Dan Stone, "The English Mistery, the BUF, and the Dilemmas of British Fascism," *The Journal of Modern History*. Vol. 75. No. 2. 2003. 336-358. Daniel Tilles. "Bullies or Victims? A Study of British Union of Fascists Violence." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*. Vol. 7. No. 3. 2006. 327-346.

<sup>384</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 169.

another step which emboldened fascist powers to expand their reach. As Greenwood observed had Japan, Italy, and Germany been prevented in their bids to violate international law then the Spanish crisis would not have developed.<sup>385</sup>

Such a reluctant embrace towards non-intervention was shared by other Labour speakers such as the MP David Grenfell. He made his disappointment clear that Labour appeared to be forced into a decision which contradicted its earlier policy position towards the Spanish conflict only a few months earlier. Grenfell reminded the Conference that the NJC had pledged to “do everything it could to support the Spanish Government in the attempt to maintain its authority in its own country.”<sup>386</sup> Once the Popular Front Government in France (headed by fellow social democrats) had decided to follow a policy of non-intervention, Labour leadership believed that it was the only viable option left to them. Anything more would risk fracturing social democratic politics in Britain and beyond. Grenfell opted to second Greenwood’s motion on this francophile basis as it was imperative that social democrats remain united in their approach to fascism.

The shift demonstrated by Greenwood and Grenfell to emphasise national over institutional solutions to the Spanish conflict alarmed some conference attendees. The first of these voices was Charles Trevelyan, who made an appeal to the Party to revive internationalist remedies to Spanish plight. He urged the conference to look to the League of Nations once again by having Labour demand that body settle the question of whether arms should be provided to the Spanish Government. Only a clear statement of support from the League could justify the sending of weapons to a member state, something which risked an internal conflict escalating to a continental war. Trevelyan also rejected attempts to fall in line behind the decisions of fellow

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid. Such a clear case against Non-Intervention from Greenwood would represent its wider problems for the NEC in keeping broad Labour support behind it over the next year.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid, 171.

social democrats on the European continent, quipping: “I do not think that the British Labour Movement ought to take its cue necessarily from Socialists of other countries.”<sup>387</sup> It was an attempt to stem any movement towards a more interventionist policy which learned its lesson from the Abyssinian debacle.

The attempt to reverse course in Labour foreign policy quickly hit a brick wall. One of the Party’s most steadfast advocates for a tough stand against fascism, Ernest Bevin, promptly responded to Trevelyan’s antics with a desire to bring the conference “back to some realities, because it is not rhetoric that is going to solve this problem.” He stood by Labour desires to send arms to the Spanish Government but accepted that non-intervention and the arms embargo such policy brought with it was the only option to keep anti-fascist forces united. Yet, Bevin demonstrated an understanding that such policy could not be expected to last and could not be a cornerstone of Labour policy as “we are faced with the arrival of Fascist Governments who will not respect either Treaties or international law. International law, as ordinarily understood... is dead.”<sup>388</sup> Therefore, it was due to practical considerations over the internal divisions in Spain that Labour should endorse non-intervention, as Bevin feared that by not doing so it would allow Germany and Italy to formally recognise the rebels as the legitimate voice of the Spanish state. It was also the case that Bevin saw real potential for France’s Popular Front to act as a bulwark against the growth of domestic fascist movements. If Labour were to take a firm stand against non-intervention (one of the first major foreign policy efforts of the Blum ministry) it could damage the left-wing cohesion needed to preserve it as that Government was reliant on support

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<sup>387</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid*

of communists and other left-wing parties. In a Europe awash with dictators, the realist choice for Labour would be to support policy which could protect democratic governance in France.

Other voices such as Labour MP William Dobbie echoed Bevin's view that international law was dead but took things a step further with a rejection of the NEC support for non-intervention. Dobbie rejected the idea that a policy of arms embargo would do more damage to the Spanish rebels than that of the Government. He understood, more clearly than many others, that the rebels benefited from having the support of large portions of the Spanish army and its equipment. Dobbie had only recently returned from a tour across Spain where he had bourn witness to the poor conditions which ran rampant in regions controlled by the Government. He told the Conference how he had seen:

All sorts of primitive kinds of barricades erected which would be useful only for pulling up cars for the examination of passports. We [Dobbie and his delegation] saw how the people were armed, with clubs and sticks. At one of the barricades we passed, one of the soldiers begged and obtained two rounds of ammunition from the militiaman who was with us. I want you to understand the inadequacy of the defence of the people who are fighting the battle of democracy, not only for the Spanish but for the free peoples of the world, this country included.<sup>389</sup>

Dobbie proceeded to inform the Conference of his conversations with Spanish Government ministers who claimed that non-intervention was only aiding the rebels as Germany and Italy were supplying them with arms and aircraft. The contrast between rebel forces given ample modern arms and aircraft fighting Government forces which had to carefully ration ammunition and lacked guns was obvious and needed to be accepted by the Labour Party.<sup>390</sup>

Greater caution was demonstrated by Charles Dukes of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. He believed that Labour needed to determine clearly if non-intervention

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<sup>389</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid*

was working. Evidence provided by Dobbie and from earlier press statements suggested that violation of the arms embargo was possible but difficult to prove as no evidence had been presented which showed arms had been dispatched to Spain after the non-intervention agreement had been made. As Dukes put it: “we stand here today without a single fact that will enable us to go to the Government...a Government in which you believe their bias is with the rebels of Spain, and you expect them to conform to our appeal to lift the arms embargo.”<sup>391</sup> Dukes’ position was sensible in the absence of clear information but evidence was widespread that the rebels were receiving Italian and German assistance. The second element to his defence of Labour’s support for non-intervention was far stronger as a shift in British state policy could only be achieved if the Government could be lobbied due to overwhelming proof.

On the Labour left, Aneurin Bevan spoke out against the Party’s support for an arms embargo and presented a rational appeal with the evidence widely available that the rebels were continuing to receive weapons. Bevan referred to numerous accounts of the poor state of equipment for Government forces and how “every newspaper in London is full of information about arms pouring in through Lisbon...everybody in the world knows that about the rebels getting arms – except the National Council of Labour.”<sup>392</sup> Bevan also directly referred to the statements by Bevin regarding the fact that fascist states had no interest in following international law, which showed a serious inconsistency between the reality of international affairs and Labour’s support for non-intervention.<sup>393</sup> Bevan was clear cut in his assessment that “the rebels are receiving arms because the Fascist nations ignore the obligations of international

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid, 176-177.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>393</sup> For an example of German and Italian violations of post 1919 arms limitation agreements see: Andrew Webster, “From Versailles to Geneva: The Many Forms Interwar Disarmament,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 29, No. 2. (2006), 244.



covenants.”<sup>394</sup> This point was difficult for Ernest Bevin to counter as the root of his own position was that international law was dead. All he could do was point out that Labour was following the lead of Prime Minister Léon Blum who had effectively cast the die on the issue. It was a weak counter to the left position that arming the Republic was far more pressing than ensuring the stability of the French Government.

Other critics to Labour’s policy emerged from its centrist elements who normally supported the NEC stance’s when opposed by pacifists and the left. Philip Noel-Baker challenged the principle of non-intervention as “practicing an intervention which is decisive” as Italy was working fervently to provide aircraft to the rebels.<sup>395</sup> Clearly Labour’s policy was ineffectual, and Noel-Baker believed the solution was for the Party to lobby Downing Street to change course. In an amazing turn compared to where the Labour had been only a few years earlier, Noel-Baker called for Britain to suspend the “operation of the embargo in order to allow private armament firms to fulfil the orders which the constitutionally elected Government of Spain may place.”<sup>396</sup> Earlier Party conferences and by-election campaigns had been consumed with debate over how to end the private manufacture of armaments in Britain as capitalist desires would drive industrialists to expand war rather than limit it. Noel-Baker demonstrated a clear injection of practicality over morality which could give Britain a “last chance...to show that their lip-service to democracy is not lip-service alone.”<sup>397</sup>

Clement Attlee concluded the debate with an attempt to bridge Party divides over the issue of non-intervention. He began by stressing that Party policy had always supported the right

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<sup>394</sup> Labour Party, *36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 177.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, 179.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid*

of the Spanish Government to import arms but reminded delegates that non-intervention was to be a mutual undertaking between all Great Powers which could be dropped if violations could be proven.<sup>398</sup> Attlee noted that the NEC had taken evidence mentioned in the international press and from Government leaders (all brought up by Labour delegates opposed to the NEC policy) of German and Italian support for the rebels to the Foreign Office. The fact was that without irrefutable proof the British Government was not going to act, and the Labour Party would be willing to change its stance on the Spanish question should new evidence come to light. It was a remarkably even-handed response which took the concerns of all elements of the Labour Party seriously and refuted the notion that the leadership simply wanted to put their heads in the sand as Spain collapsed. Subsequently, a vote was taken on the resolution and the Party voted overwhelmingly in favour of supporting Non-Intervention as the lesser of two evils with 1,836,000 in favour and 519,000 against.<sup>399</sup> The desire for Party unity had won the day but nonetheless, the question of how long such a policy of non-intervention could remain tenable lingered as fascism continued to spread across Europe.

#### Epilogue to the Edinburgh Conference

In another about face, only weeks after the Edinburgh Conference, the NJC held a meeting in London on 28 October 1936 to discuss the Labour movement's response to a fresh rebel offensive aimed at capturing Madrid. A joint statement was provided afterwards to the press which outlined Labour's unwavering support of the democratically elected Government of Spain. It called upon the British and French Governments to "completely restore full commercial rights to democratic Spain, including the purchase of munitions, and thus enable the Spanish

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<sup>398</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

people to bring their heroic struggle for liberty and democracy to a victorious conclusion.’<sup>400</sup>

Support for munitions purchasing (the absence of calls for arms purchasing is a key distinction as it meant that Labour was attempting to find a compromise position) was a minor but important refinement of the policy outlined by Clement Attlee a few weeks earlier at the Party’s annual Conference in Edinburgh. Labour had already understood that non-intervention was not being followed by supporters of the Nationalist cause but like their French partners appeared unable to settle on the issue when it was clear that fascism had no intention of ‘playing by the rules.’<sup>401</sup>

The confusion around Labour’s support for non-intervention demonstrated before, during and after the Edinburgh Conference showed the tension between competing pragmatic desires to shore up the Government of French comrades while also seeking to defend the Spanish state locked in a battle for survival against the forces of fascism. The remedy to these dual concerns had real world implications as any collapse of anti-fascist forces in both France and Spain would present a danger to the British Labour Movement which had seen its ideological fellows crushed under the heels of fascism in years prior.

Desire for a change in policy by the fall of 1936 was also apparent in the internal structures of the Labour Party. At the end of 1936 William Gillies, Secretary for the Labour Party’s International Department, drafted an internal report summarizing the foreign policy developments for the year and provided some important reflective questions for the PLP regarding its adherence to non-intervention, and mixed messaging on rearmament. It concluded that the League of Nations (as had been apparent to international observers since the end of 1935) was incapable of reforming in any meaningful manner to stem the advance of fascism and

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<sup>400</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1937), 7.

<sup>401</sup> Vickers, 122. The Spanish Government had already complained to the League in September that Germany and Italy were violating Non-Intervention which only added to Labour’s discomfort with the policy.

was merely a “disinterested spectator of events.”<sup>402</sup> The report noted that response of European powers to this collapse of faith in the League was a burgeoning arms race with the Soviet Union boosting its conscription levy from that of 1935, Germany now openly rearming, all while Poland and France were publicly sharing technical and military expertise with one another.<sup>403</sup> In this bleak international context it was apparent to the drafters of the report that Labour policy needed to rapidly evolve:

We may also have to consider whether we can go on assailing Fascism, urging our Governments to take a strong line in foreign policy, advocating an anti-fascist bloc of peace loving nations, and expecting that bloc to call the Nazi and Fascist bluff (if it be a bluff), and at the same time appear to oppose the adequate rearmament of our own country. It has to be examined whether the rearmament of Great Britain is not essential merely on the grounds of ordinary prudence. M. Leon Blum has said: “We shall not commit the imprudence of immediately making our hopes the measure of our defensive forces, which must always be maintained at the level necessary for the immediate needs of National defence. So long as the armaments race is not stopped, so long as the international mechanism has not given proof of its efficiency, the duty of France to herself and to her friends is to remain in such a position as to discourage any attacks.”...Can we say any less?<sup>404</sup>

The report’s conclusion on the need to support rearmament in Britain was emblematic of the PLPs wider embrace of realism in the face of fascist aggression. Reference to the similar position of the Government of Léon Blum once more illustrated wider Labour desires for Party policy to be in line with the orthodoxy of fellow European social democrats. If rearmament could be justified in France on the bases of national defence and protection of European allies in the face of fascist aggression then it was necessary that British Labour fall in line. The PLP would act on these recommendations in the new year as the state of international affairs to continued to fragment.

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<sup>402</sup> William Gillies, “The European Situation And Labour Policy,” Report to the Labour Party International Department, item, Hen/15/5, 1, 1936. Arthur Henderson Papers, Labour Party Archives, Manchester.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid, 6.

## The Battle for Spain and the World: 1937

The start of 1937 ushered in an escalation in the brutality seen in Spain. Specifically, the increased use of bombing of Republican controlled cities by German and Italian forces alarmed Labour. Walter Citrine, with the permission of the NCL, wrote Prime Minister Baldwin on 31 January to implore the Government to secure an agreement which could halt the bombing campaigns. He brought similar messages in March to put an end the continuous flow of German troops to Spain.<sup>405</sup> These two issues showed the true brutality of modern warfare when the contingent of German Luftwaffe volunteers known as the Condor Legion launched a bombing raid on the Spanish city of Guernica on the afternoon of 26 April 1937. As the date of the raid corresponded with market day the centre of the city was filled with civilians which likely increased the death count.<sup>406</sup> The centre of the city was destroyed leaving shocking images for the international press in the days following the raid.

Death figures vary widely but Guernica quickly became a household name as the attack demonstrated the true destructive power that modern bombing aircraft could inflict upon urban centres. British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, observed that if Guernica were “repeated and intensifies on a larger scale, it is going to mean a terrible future for Europe to face.”<sup>407</sup> The British Labour Movement shared similar sentiments two days after the bombing when the editor of the *Daily Herald* described the attack as a “bestial murder by cowards of unarmed and defenceless people” and believed “the lesson of Guernica is the same as the lesson of Abyssinia. Fascism is a lust for power and supremacy whatever the cost.”<sup>408</sup> An official response from the

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<sup>405</sup> Vickers, 125.

<sup>406</sup> Scott Ramsay, “Ensuring Benevolent Neutrality: The British Government’s Appeasement of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” *The International History Review*, (2019), Vol. 41. No. 3, 608.

<sup>407</sup> Anthony Eden, As quoted in, Ramsay, 608.

<sup>408</sup> “Murder in Guernica,” *Daily Herald*, (28 April 1937), 10.

NEC was published on 28 April. They referred to the destruction of Guernica as “an outrage upon humanity, as a violation of the principles of civilisation, and as a manifestation of the merciless and inhuman spirit which animates the rebel forces and their Nazi and Fascist accomplices.” Labour went on to refer to witness testimonies that the attack was carried out by German airmen using German aircraft, and “called upon the British Government to take the initiative, through the League of Nations, for an examination of the whole problem of the bombing in warfare of open towns and the indiscriminate slaughter of the non-combatant population.”<sup>409</sup>

In response to the reports of increasing brutality coming out of Spain, grassroots elements of the Labour Party began to organise to influence the NEC to abandon its policy of non-intervention. Local level activists formed the Home Counties Labour Association which was made up of prominent figures from various Constituency Labour Parties who sought to amplify their voice in contrast to the broader Labour Party Conference’s which had heavy trade union influence.<sup>410</sup> At a meeting of the Home Counties Labour Association at Conway Hall in London on 13 March 1937 it was decided to create a pressure group called the Labour Spain Committee which would work to shift PLP policy to support the Spanish Republic. It would aid the Republic by advocating for a restoration of the rights of the Spanish Government to purchase armaments and coordinate all anti-fascist groups within Britain to assist in this mission.<sup>411</sup> The problem with this approach was that it encouraged local coordination with Labour rivals. Labour had a history of working with Liberals, both locally and nationally, but had longstanding hostility to the anti-

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<sup>409</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference* (Transport House: London, 1937), 11.

<sup>410</sup> C. Fleay and M. L. Sanders, “The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War,” *The Historical Journal*, (1985), Vol. 21, No. 1, 188.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid*

democratic principles of the CPGB, even if their attitudes towards aiding the Spanish Republic were shared.

This problem of who to coordinate with grew when members of the Labour left who supported collaboration with the CPGB in the formation of a British Popular Front joined the Labour Spain Committee. Stafford Cripps had close association with the organisation and H. N. Brailsford who was strong proponent of a Popular Front became Chairman of the Committee, solidifying its leftist values. Such values were problematic as only two months earlier (in January of 1937) the CPGB, the ILP, and the Socialist League issued a joint “Unity Manifesto” calling for collaboration against the National Government, fascism and war.<sup>412</sup> The NEC’s rejection of such a proposal had fractured the Socialist League and quickly resulted in it being expelled from the Labour Party. Some members would opt to remain in the Party while hardliners looked to their newfound comrades as the best means of fighting fascism. For the Labour Spain Committee, having key followers made up of former Socialist League members, who advocated a return to radical methods such as widespread industrial action to pressure the Government, brought unwelcome suspicion on its activities.<sup>413</sup> Although the PLP would shift towards an embrace of some of the Committee’s key goals, it did so as a response to changing international conditions rather than from the pressure of the activism of its grassroots elements.

In these first months of 1937 Labour was also conscious of its need to coordinate with its international partners if there were to be any hope of saving the Spanish Republic from the combined threat of fascism. On 10 to 11 March 1937 a Conference was held in London between the Socialist International, the General Council of the International Federation of Trade unions

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<sup>412</sup> Cole, 347.

<sup>413</sup> Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 207.

and the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. There were also representatives from nineteen country's social democratic Parliamentary groups. The Spanish delegates set the tone of the gathering by outlining the most pressing matters for the Republic. A list of requests was made to the Conference which included demands for signatories of the non-intervention Agreement to withdraw and the sending of arms and munitions to Spain, positions that were already in line with Labour's response a few months earlier. It was the most important request of the Spanish, which proved problematic for the Labour Party, the formation of a 'Popular Front' to unify all anti-fascist forces. Hostility to a form of 'United Front' or 'Popular Front' had been a consistent part of Labour policy and they were unwilling to countenance Spanish and French suggestions that fascism would be best challenged with a unification of the left. The Party believed that such attempts to reconcile the divided elements on the left would divert attention from the real issue of helping Spain.<sup>414</sup> What was most important from the Conference is what they decided not to do. Although most delegates believed that the Spanish Republic should be given aid to defend itself, there was little enthusiasm to encourage democratic powers to outright intervene (something which already appeared unlikely as the United States, Britain and France all were focused on larger internal matters). Most of all no support was given for the use of "concerted strike action" to generate a government response in the democratic states for aiding the Spanish Republic.<sup>415</sup> The fact that war resistance through strike action was entirely dropped showed that Labour's earlier adherence to such policy was no longer viewed as viable, both by Labour delegates at the Conference or from the wider socialist movement.

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<sup>414</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 9. Earlier attempts by Labour to reconcile with the ILP showed the comprehensive and futile nature of such efforts.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid*



After these debates the London Conference settled its response in a central resolution which outlined the Labour and Socialist International's support for the Spanish Republic and made an appeal for the League of Nations to help a member state under assault. The call for League assistance was based on the argument that the Spanish conflict was no civil war but rather "a war of national liberation", as fascist powers were not only supplying weapons to the Nationalists but also sending large contingents of so-called volunteers which were regular military forces from Germany and Italy.<sup>416</sup> Fascist intervention necessitated a wider international response which went beyond the now defunct mission of non-intervention.

On 27 July, a meeting of the NCL was held in London which produced a manifesto for the Labour Party and the TUC to update its official response to Spain's plight and the deliberations of the Labour and Socialist International. The NCL viewed the Spanish conflict as the new frontier for fascist expansion which created an "immediate danger of war in Europe" and imperiled the "vital interests of France and Great Britain."<sup>417</sup> Attention was focused on how Germany and Italy had violated their pledge to support the principle of non-intervention through their recognition of General Franco's Government as the legitimate Government of Spain and the active participation of their armed forces in the conflict. These acts were both immoral, most obviously demonstrated by the bombing of the city of Guernica, "the cradle and symbol of Basque civilisation," and imperialistic as agreements had been secured for "Fascist monopoly in Spain's mineral resources...and by establishing naval depots and aerodromes on the coasts...which are a direct threat to French and British sea communications."<sup>418</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid

<sup>417</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid, 13.

NCL believed Labour must pressure Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to work with the League of Nations to enforce a withdrawal of foreign troops from Spain.

### “A Perilous Adventure” the Second Sino-Japanese War

On the night of 7 July 1937 on the outskirts of Wanping city (now a part of Beijing) a firefight erupted between Chinese and Japanese troops. In the aftermath, a Japanese soldier lost contact with his unit who demanded Chinese authorities allow Japanese troops into Wanping to search for him. In essence, the Japanese were accusing the Chinese of kidnapping and their commander, General Song, opted to refuse Japanese demands.<sup>419</sup> Subsequently, Japanese troops entered the city killing over 200 Chinese soldiers.<sup>420</sup> This affair, commonly known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, quickly spiraled from being simply one of many border skirmishes between Chinese and Japanese troops into full blown war. The Japanese promptly began a general offensive to secure the remainder of northern China and captured the city of Beijing on 26 July.<sup>421</sup> The leader of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek, proclaimed that the Japanese action was a threat to obliterate China and rallied the country to fight a war of survival.<sup>422</sup> The conflict, which would become known as the Second Sino-Japanese War, represented the fundamental failure of the League of Nations based international order.

The ramifications of war in China were obvious to the Labour Party, which had monitored the plight of the Chinese since the Mukden Incident in 1931. The editor of the *Daily Herald* provided one of the earliest Labour interpretations of the renewed conflict in China. The fresh

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<sup>419</sup> Mitter, 80.

<sup>420</sup> Overy, 42.

<sup>421</sup> Beijing had historical and logistical importance as the ancient capital of Imperial China but by the 1930s the Chinese had moved their capital to the city of Nanking.

<sup>422</sup> Overy, 43. Increasingly, modern historical literature of the Second World War has come to view the Marco Polo Bridge Incident as the true start to that global conflict. The war in China would eventually merge into the wider global war when Japan launched its 1941 offensive against the United States and Britain.

Japanese assault represented a culmination of longstanding failures “here [the invasion] is a new instalment of the sequel to that tragic weakness in Geneva five years ago.”<sup>423</sup> The inability of the League of Nations to reverse Japanese incursions into Manchuria in 1931 or provide any substantive economic or diplomatic costs upon Japan only encouraged more imperialist ventures in China. Following such a pattern of failure, Labour would need to question its faith in the League to provide effective settlement to international disputes:

to talk in 1937 of the League of Nations taking the matter in hand would be bitter sarcasm. What then? Is there anything doable to prevent war? There are two countries which, acting together, might mediate successfully, which should if they show firmness, be able to deter the Japanese from a perilous adventure...quick united action by the British Empire and the United States would seem the best visible chance of preserving peace.<sup>424</sup>

It was an important admission that peace could no longer be maintained through multilateral action coordinated through the League. Instead, the Great Powers would once more need to take the leading role in settling international disputes. It represented an embrace of the very system which Labour had believed caused global instability since 1919.

Labour expanded its support for China with the organisation of a campaign to boycott Japanese goods. Such a move was something that Labour and its supporting trade unions could affect outside the confines of Parliament, as there was little chance of securing enough Government MPs to support a state enacted prohibition. In mid-October a manifesto outlining the parameters of the boycott was issued by the TUC General Council. Walter Citrine explained in the manifesto that there were two purposes for the boycott. First, to demonstrate Labour sympathy with the Chinese people and second, to bring “home to the Japanese people themselves

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<sup>423</sup> “China.” *Daily Herald* (14 July 1937), 10.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid*

the detestation in which the policy of their Government is held in other countries.”<sup>425</sup> Hurting Japanese exports was seen as the only viable way of getting the Japanese people to start asking questions from their Government as they “only allow the people to have such information as is favourable to the authorities, and the working people of Japan are completely ignorant of the protest of the civilised world against Japan’s methods of warfare.”<sup>426</sup> The criticism of Japan’s methods of warfare was a reference to reports coming out of China that Japanese aircraft and artillery were deliberately bombarding civilian centres rather than military targets.<sup>427</sup> Such attacks had concerned Labour since Japan’s first incursion into Manchuria in 1931.<sup>428</sup>

To launch the boycott campaign and pressure the Prime Minister to take similar Government action, Labour and the TUC held a day of action across the United Kingdom. The large rallies were held in Manchester and Sheffield which saw attendance of over 2000 people with other sizable gatherings in Leeds and Glasgow.<sup>429</sup> The largest congregation was at a joint rally organised by the London Labour Party and the London Trades Council and included leading elements of PLP and TUC leadership alongside Chinese officials, in London’s Trafalgar Square. Sixteen speakers addressed a crowd of over 10,000 attendees.<sup>430</sup> The gathering settled on a joint resolution of demands for the Prime Minister calling for a state sanctioned ban on selling war materials to Japan and to cooperate with the League of Nations and the United States to impose economic and financial penalties to put an end to Japanese aggression.<sup>431</sup> It also

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<sup>425</sup> “Nations Answer Labour Call for Boycott,” *Daily Herald*, (18 October 1937), 7. In a well publicised incident, both British and German consulates protested Japanese bombing of the city of Nanking which destroyed homes from British and German residents.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>427</sup> Tom Buchanan, “Shanghai-Madrid Axis? Comparing British Responses to the Conflicts in China and Spain, 1936-39,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 21, No. 4, (2012), 533.

<sup>428</sup> David French, *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 250.

<sup>429</sup> “Stop This Mass Murder,” *News Chronicle*, (18 October 1937), 8.

<sup>430</sup> “10,000 Say “Ban Japanese Goods,” *News Chronicle*, (18 October 1937), 8.

<sup>431</sup> “Stop Trade and Stop Japan,” *Daily Herald*, (18 October 1937), 7.

requested that the British Government send medical supplies to China as both a humanitarian and practical gesture to aid the fight against fascism. Clement Attlee, speaking on behalf of the PLP, addressed the crowd by defending the value of a boycott as “Japan is in a weak economic position, and we should remember that she depends on external trade.”<sup>432</sup> Attlee saw the current crisis in China as a product of ineffectual British response to earlier Japanese abuses noting: “the failure of the Government to act in 1932 has brought the danger of war nearer. The real trouble is that this Government’s heart is not in the preservation of the world from imperialism.”<sup>433</sup> Inaction had been damaging but Attlee ignored the fact that Labour had also shown little resolve in taking meaningful economic measures against Japan when it first embarked on an imperialist venture in Manchuria.

Other prominent speakers included Ben Tillett. Tillett had been a significant figure in the Labour Party due to his support of British participation in the First World War, in contrast to other leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald. He also played a leading role in developing the powerful Dockworkers Union but had fallen out of the spotlight as his influence in the TUC declined after 1931.<sup>434</sup> Tillett sought to show the crowd that a crisis on the other side of the globe had significant implications on the future of Britain. He spoke of Labour’s mission as “not just fighting for the rights of the Chinese people. If they are let down humanity is let down.”<sup>435</sup> It was not mere hyperbole as Tillett understood the pattern that had already been shown with inadequate responses to earlier Japanese attacks or towards the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Although Spain had captured the imagination of the British left, China’s struggle was not forgotten by the

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid. Attlee’s understanding of Japan’s economic vulnerabilities were astute as the collapse of Japanese trade would be the thing that brought down their war effort during the Second World War.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid

<sup>434</sup> Cole, 177.

<sup>435</sup> “Crowd Roused by Ben Tillett,” *News Chronicle*, (18 October 1937), 8.

Labour Party as Japanese imperialism was understood to be part of wider pattern of Fascist expansion which had to be reversed.

A partial Labour response can be discerned from the shift in the PLP's attitude to the Government's annual Service Estimates. The Service Estimates represented the Government's yearly budget for the armed forces. Any desire to increase or limit the capabilities of the military would be directly impacted by their funding allotment. As such, Labour traditionally voted against the Government's proposals as a formal protest to what they saw as unwillingness to support global disarmament initiatives.<sup>436</sup> In 1936, the Government had sought to increase the Service Estimates and Labour as usual, voted against them but not without dissension.<sup>437</sup> Hugh Dalton attempted to generate wider Labour support to show the public that the Party was conscious of the new security realities facing Britain. He attempted to modestly move the PLP to abstain rather than vote them down. The result was dismal if unsurprising as Dalton noted in his diary:

We [the PLP] made a very silly decision, by 57 to 39 (60 either absent or not voting) to vote against all Service Estimates...only Alexander, Lees-Smith (not very empathetically) and I were against this... We [Labour] shall be out [of Government] for the rest of our lifetimes which the coming war may shorten or render even more unimportant and unhappy than today.<sup>438</sup>

Dalton would find success in a second attempt to move the Party when the Service Estimates were debated before Parliament in 1937. The ever-increasing evidence of fascist intervention in Spain along with Dalton's prompting a narrow change in course with the PLP voting 45 to 39 to

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<sup>436</sup> French, 418.

<sup>437</sup> Richard Toye, "The Labour Party and the Economics of Rearmament, 1935-39," *20<sup>th</sup> Century British History*, Vol. 12, No. 3, (2001) 319.

<sup>438</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton*, edited by Ben Pimlott, (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986), 200.

merely abstain.<sup>439</sup> It represented a small but important nudge towards a more rational policy which could align with Labour's growing alarm from the rise of fascism.

### Pacifism as Political Policy Would be Deadly: Labour's 1937 Conference

The question of Labour's response to the threat of war was once again central to the agenda when it gathered in Bournemouth for its annual conference from 4 to 7 October. The Party needed to ensure that its policy was framed around the potential for the Spanish conflict to evolve into a general European war. Spain also had to be revisited as the uncomfortable relationship between Labour and its stated policy of non-intervention could not continue. The 1937 Conference would provide a 'course correction' as the Party finally ended the despised policy of non-intervention in Spain and showed tacit approval of rearmament. While aiding Spain was almost universally endorsed, the shift on rearmament prompted a fierce reaction. The pacifists launched a combined offensive with George Lansbury entering the fray after his dramatic rebuttal by the Party in 1935. Again, Lansbury faced staunch criticism for his idealism. Other pacifists attempted to win the day with appeals for morality, but these failed to work as the trade unions stood firm in their support of the NEC. The unions viewed pacifist appeals as merely emboldening an existential threat from fascism. In the face of such stark divisions at Conference, the NEC diminished the significance of their support for rearmament to preserve party unity. Nonetheless Labour made a critical break from past policy, finally accepting a rational response to fascism. All that was needed was a popular cause to rally the Party and the country to justify its staunch anti-fascism and rational turn on the issue military preparedness.

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<sup>439</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party: Fourth Edition*, (London: Palgrave, 2015), 95.

J. R. Clynes opened the Conference's foreign policy debate on behalf of the NEC. Discussion was centred on an NEC report titled *International Policy and Defence* which provided an update on Party positions on how it would prepare and if need be, respond to a general European war. The report had a few important elements which showed a desire to avoid war but an acceptance that it was now a possibility. It rejected the notion that "war is inevitable, our opinion being that a sane policy can prevent war." The Party would adopt a position of hoping for the best while preparing for the worst as Clynes noted: "to stray in the other direction [towards pacifist isolationism] would be foolish. We cannot imagine that Fascist States are accumulating arms upon a vast scale in order to never use them. Those States are becoming more and more offensive, aggressive, and assertive in glorifying war."<sup>440</sup> Acknowledging the reality that Britain and France were now facing an increasingly militarised Europe was an important step for members of the NEC as it showed that strict adherence to earlier foreign policy was inadequate to the crisis of the present.

Clynes was careful to note that Labour was not embracing wholesale change but attempting to work within the international system as it was in late 1937. He spoke for many in the Party when he remarked since the end of the First World War:

Our hope was that we would maintain peace by being ready for peace with a trusted and accepted peace institution like the League of Nations. We relied upon the truthfulness of powerful representatives, upon their sanity, and, above all, upon the bitter experience of...that long and dreadful encounter. We viewed the League as a substitute for war policy, and we believed that gradually the nations would recognise the wisdom of disarmament.<sup>441</sup>

Clynes' statement was a remarkable admission that all the hopes which Labour had placed upon a modern mechanism for settling international disputes were proven wrong. The issue for the

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<sup>440</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 195.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid*, 195.



Party was where it should direct its efforts going forward if the League was no longer capable of achieving its aims.

For the time being Labour had no significant answer to what alternative it should base its foreign and defence policy. It did not want to embrace the ‘traditional’ balance of power system which in the eyes of many Labourites, had brought about the calamity of 1914. All it could offer was a continuation of its support for the admittedly diminished and ineffectual institution as Clynes informed the Conference that “the Report does not abandon the League of Nations as a medium for Collective Security.” Instead, Labour was encouraged to adopt a ‘wait and see’ approach hoping that some event outside of its current influence would allow for the League to be revived and strengthened. Only when a “British Government soon comes to power which will base its policy on the declarations of the British Labour Movement” could corrective action be taken.<sup>442</sup> It was sheer folly for Labour to advocate such a tepid response to an issue it acknowledged was of grave consequence. In essence the NEC accepted the problem the international system faced but its solution was to wait, in the best-case scenario, until it could achieve victory in a 1940 General Election (as one would be due by then) which it had no guarantees of a positive outcome.

Clynes provided a far more realistic approach to Labour’s new policy on defence which was a clear divergence from the desires of its pacifist members. The experience of creeping Japanese imperialism in China and Italian victory over Abyssinia showed that Britain needed to be able to defend itself (as China and Abyssinia had not sought war but nonetheless had it thrust upon them). Clynes acknowledged the reality that “We [Labour] cannot safely conclude that

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid

there is no risk of the fascist states attacking democratic Britain. We cannot therefore leave every preparation for resistance until attacks actually begin.”<sup>443</sup> This was a reasonable approach which showed that Labour could acknowledge the need to no longer oppose rearmament but was not actively seeking a military solution to international crisis. Labour still rejected militarism which it opposed as strongly “as any pacifist in this country. Pacifism maybe glorious, but as a political policy it would be deadly.”<sup>444</sup> To do nothing would not prevent the potential for a conflict. Clynes admission was representative of a monumental shift from where Labour had been only a few years earlier as it would never have been possible to take such a stance when the Party was under the leadership of George Lansbury.

The push back to Clynes’ deviation from the Party’s ideals was immediate. Pacifist Labour MP Sydney Silverman moved a radical resolution which called upon the Conference to declare the National Government “mainly responsible for the enfeeblement of the League of nations; are directly aiding the Fascist powers; are prosecuting an Armament Programme which is a threat to future expansion of Social Services, and to the peace of the World.”<sup>445</sup> It was an extreme claim to argue that the National Government was providing direct aid to fascist states. There is a significant difference between indirect ‘support’ through inaction as the Government had shown, with its support for non-intervention in Spain or with Abyssinia by refusing to block Italian shipping through the Suez Canal. Silverman’s resolution also called upon the Labour Party to commit to vote against the Government’s Arms Estimates, something which had previously been a consistent Labour response to the yearly votes on expenditure.

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid, 196.

To defend his sweeping attack upon the NEC Report Silverman attacked Clynes directly. He argued that Clynes had made a “moving speech” similar to his rhetoric during the First World War which was so bellicose as to be presented by a “Member of the next War Cabinet.”<sup>446</sup> For Silverman, the Report suggested a path for Labour to support British participation in a future World War and a commitment to support the Government’s rearmament programme. The later point was true but even Clynes language did not wholeheartedly commit the Party to a new war but rather to a rational acceptance that a war was possible, and the country needed to be prepared. Nonetheless Silverman tied a pledge for rearmament in Britain to making a general European war inevitable.

Others such as H. Harvey of the Torquay DLP urged the Conference to not ignore the legacy of the late Arthur Henderson and attempt to stop the drift to war it seemed Labour was intent on. Harvey believed, like many others in the Labour Party, that the state of international affairs was the product of a lack of faith in the League. He could only express misery that “Arthur Henderson would be heartbroken to see the edifice of ideals and reason he helped so magnificently to erect lying in such a shambles of ruin and despair.”<sup>447</sup> The solution for the Party would be to stop the drift to war through the organisation of an international conference to settle economic inequalities and the abolition of private arms manufacturing. The problem with such a solution (something which would be advocated for continually in the next few years) was that prior experience demonstrated fascist states had no desire to achieve a lasting peace through multilateral action. The collapse of the World Disarmament Conference was telling enough with

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid

<sup>447</sup> Ibid, 199.

Germany and others abandoning the entire process.<sup>448</sup> Interestingly, Harvey provided one of the only internationalist options for Conference. The fact that it was a lone voice amongst a clamour of radicalism showed how the spread of violence in Europe and Asia increasingly made traditional Labour policy responses untenable.

One of the strongest proponents of disarmament, George Lansbury, also spoke against Clynes and the NEC Report. It was a moment of great significance that Lansbury had decided to once again speak against the centrist elements of the Labour Party after the bitter response to his remarks at the 1935 Conference. He believed that to stand for his pacifist values would provide a moral framing for the Party to consider. While he acknowledged that there was no one in Labour who wanted a war, he noted that they “disagree as to the means and the method by which peace can be obtained, and unless the British Labour Movement takes the lead along the line that my friends and myself think we ought to take, we feel that the future of the world is hopeless.”<sup>449</sup> It was clear in his remarks that Lansbury believed he and his fellow pacifists were alone in their moral crusade to avert mass slaughter for a new generation of British youth.

Lansbury spoke to the Conference of the risk of a war, even if Britain were to be victorious, as ending with a long period of further reactionary violence. He shared a part of a 1905 speech from the famous French pacifist and Socialist, Jean Jaures who like Lansbury now, fought until the bitter end to avert a General European War through attempts to foster cooperation between the working class in all countries. In 1905 Jaures had warned that if a war broke out it was likely that revolution would follow or there “might also come, for a long period,

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<sup>448</sup> Thomas, Davies, “France and the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-34,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 15, No. 4, (2004), 768. Germany and France are often viewed as the two states most responsible for the failure of the talks in Geneva. Most British observers were content to blame the French as German grievances were seen as far more legitimate due to the perceived injustice imposed upon them by Versailles.

<sup>449</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 199.

crises of counter-revolution, violent reaction, exasperated nationalism, stifling dictatorship, exaggerated militarism...we have no wish to play at this game of barbarous chance.”<sup>450</sup> To Lansbury the parallels to the experience of the interwar years were clear as now the world was facing the potential of a new war.

For these reasons Lansbury believed that Labour had to continue to stand up to the National Government’s rearmament policy. His alternative was a return to the radical policy which had seen him removed from the leadership at the 1935 Conference. He returned to the example of the Abyssinian conflict and explained how if he had overseen Abyssinia he would have “let the Italians walk in” rather than let his people suffer in a violent conflict. The rationale for Lansbury was that the world was in a period of significant transition, “I believe Imperialism is finished; it may last another generation, but it is on the slope downwards. Imperialism cannot exist in face of the world development of communication, inter-communication and trade.”<sup>451</sup> Although Lansbury’s assessment did nothing to avert the Second World War, his comments are remarkably forward thinking as the world has not had a conflict between the Great Powers since 1945 and imperialism would collapse shortly thereafter. It was on this note that Lansbury concluded his remarks to the Conference with a final warning: “I have it burned in on my soul that if the Labour Party supports this expenditure, you may at any moment find yourselves plunged into a war of absolute destruction about which you will have no option but to see it through.”<sup>452</sup> It was impossible for anyone to argue that Lansbury was inconsistent in his beliefs.

Lord Ponsonby followed Lansbury with a similar attack upon the NEC policy but took a different approach. Ponsonby honed in on the failure of Labour’s collective security policy to

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid

<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 201.

save Abyssinia and asked why they should continue to adhere to it. He believed that “the only effect of attempting collective security in that war was to make Mussolini take the whole of Abyssinia. He only wanted the fertile part of it. If Abyssinia had been worth conquering, we [the British] would have taken it long ago.”<sup>453</sup> What Ponsonby ignored was that Mussolini was far more interested in a short war which could demonstrate prestige for Italian fascism.

Nonetheless, Ponsonby believed that Labour was on a dangerous path towards war. He saw a bleak future which would soon include conscription and arms races “with all other means of the old balderdash of pretending it is for defence, a pretext by which people have been deluded in every war in the past.”<sup>454</sup> Ponsonby presented a modest shift in defence spending as a first step in a sinister militarisation effort which would inevitably see Britain’s parliamentary democracy collapse into fascism. He refused to see the NEC’s aim was to ensure Britain could appropriately defend itself. Ponsonby believed the only solution to this peril was for Labour to look inwards and focus on being home builders rather than house breakers. The priority needed to be the development of a robust socialist society which could address the challenges of the working class and to “keep our heads while these Dictatorships last. They are short-lived.”<sup>455</sup> Although Ponsonby would be proved correct when it came to lifespan of Italian and German dictatorships, their collapse would only come after the conclusion of a brutal second global war.

Such naïve assumptions about the nature of fascist dictatorships were challenged by the representatives of the trade unions. Gordon MacDonald, speaking on behalf of the Mine

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid

<sup>454</sup> Ibid

<sup>455</sup> Ibid

Workers' Federation, refuted pacifist narratives by attacking Lansbury's continued calls for unilateral disarmament with an injection of realism:

He [Lansbury] believes, with a burning sincerity, that for Britain to disarm now would strike the imagination of the peoples of the world in such a way that they would very soon follow and disarm too. He believes that Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany would not take advantage of a disarmed Britain. He has more confidence in Hitler and Mussolini than we have.<sup>456</sup>

Peace at any price was no true peace as Lansbury's vision would only lead to aggressor states brutalising the peoples within the victim states. MacDonald also attack Lansbury and Ponsonby's consistent framing of their pacifist case as being the true 'Christian' response to the growing threat of a global conflict. Those that supported rearmament were not 'un-Christian' in MacDonald's words, for wanting to "safeguard the homes of Britain" was a Christian act to protect one's society.<sup>457</sup>

TUC support for Labour policy was centred on the protective nature of rearmament, not an embrace of warmongering, as having a strong, modernised military could provide an effective deterrent to fascist aggression. The alternative would be to encourage peace solely on the aggressor's terms as MacDonald noted:

The Labour Party want peace, but they want that kind of peace which will enable the individual to develop to his fullest capacity... the peace that would have been granted Abyssinia without a war would not be that peace. If China would accept the ruthless domination of Japan, she would have peace. Are we to understand that the Labour Party stand for that kind of peace?<sup>458</sup>

In the face of the stark reality of past experience, the Mine Workers could support the NEC policy as the only way to establish a permanent peace.

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid

<sup>458</sup> Ibid

When Philip Noel-Baker entered the debate on behalf of the NEC, he unintentionally demonstrated the confused nature of Labour policy in the past few years. He opened his remarks by calling the Report a “bold, courageous and opportune restatement of principles for which the Labour Party has always stood.”<sup>459</sup> This had some truth as the Report did show a strong support for longstanding Party principles to end aggression, stop the international arms race, a desire to abolish aerial warfare, and a desire to finally solve unequal access to raw materials between states. It also made clear that unilateral disarmament was not the aim of the Labour Party, even if consistent votes against the defence estimates could be construed as such. Noel-Baker argued that Labour’s hostility to the defence estimates were a form of moral protest to National Government foreign policy, not a sign that national defence was unimportant to the Party.<sup>460</sup> Yet, the fact that Labour was officially declaring its decision to no longer object to defence estimates and tacitly supporting rearmament represented an important shift from prior policy. Reluctance shown at Conference to admit to such a break from past views could certainly make it understandable why the public’s perception of Labour policy would be confused for years to come.

Noel-Baker focused most of his time on attacking the pacifists in the Party. He believed that the most significant divergence between the likes of George Lansbury and the NEC was their view of the use of force in international affairs. Where pacifists refused to countenance any support for League based sanctions or the use of military resources to enforce such acts, the NEC believed that such tools were the only means of averting international calamity. In this narrative Lansbury’s vision of inaction (as he had argued in 1935 that economic sanctions could easily

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid

<sup>460</sup> Ibid, 203.



result in the outbreak of war and therefore should be avoided) had already been used to horrible consequences:

We have had a League of Nations without sanctions...aggressors had nothing to fear but resolutions. What are the results? The long cumulative martyrdom of Manchuria...the squalid degradation of Mussolini's triumph over black men whom he burned and bombed...fearful holocausts in Spain...a Britain where every mother will be training her child to use a gas-mask; an Assembly of the League of Nations so demoralised...a British Government so demoralised...that it resisted the use of the words "by the Japanese aircraft" when the bombing was being condemned. That is the result of Mr. Lansbury's policy...because there was no collective security to make them safe.<sup>461</sup>

Labour's adherence to collective security had proven ineffective because of Lansbury's policy of disarmament and passivity had meant Britain had no force capable of making a wider response possible. It was a remarkable attack upon a man who had only two years earlier been leader of the Party and one of its voices of conscience. However, Noel-Baker's attack showed once again that the Party had shifted its policy from that of the past to create conditions for the League of Nations to effectively do the task it was established to do.

Others such as R. H. Crossman, representing the West-Birmingham DLP, showed remarkable foresight when assessing alternatives for the Party to consider. He could see three options for Labour to follow in the year ahead. The first was to support a private agreement between Britain, France, and Germany which would secure peace "if we allowed Germany to extend in the East of Europe. I do not believe there is a delegate here who would defend that policy of surrender."<sup>462</sup> Labour's hostility to such appeasement would be exemplified in the year to come. Crossman's other two options were to settle some general agreement in Europe, a

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid. The comment about Spain was centred on the shocking destruction of the city of Guernica by German bombers.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid, 205. It was a remarkable observation which would ring true when Chamberlain brought that very question of a settlement with Hitler to the country only a year later.

revision of the Treaty of Versailles which was a longstanding desire in the Party or lastly, simply wait for the outbreak of war. Although for Crossman a new settlement for Europe was something the Party could unite behind, there was genuine disagreement on whether Britain could lead that process through disarmament or by having “armament power.” Crossman’s realism shown through when he criticized Lansbury’s attempts to meet with Hitler as he ignored how social democrats were treated by Nazis and the personal privilege a foreign national enjoyed when in Germany. The central problem was that “the policy advocated by the pacifist is the policy of the Social Democrat in Germany, when he tried to deal with Hitler. He trusted solely in law and in his conscientious scruples, and what happened? Fascism advanced in Europe as far as it possibly could. Every inch you give it takes.”<sup>463</sup> The obvious response to this was for Britain to frame its arms procurement policy around such ideological change and to show the public that Labour had a consistent and realistic understanding of that. Crossman attacked the Party for being harsh critics of Stanley Baldwin expanding rearmament but not being clear on what they would do instead: “if we allow the country to believe we are semi-pacifist, semi-internationalists...we shall stand condemned.”<sup>464</sup> Anything short of a unified message which showed clear support for rearming to make the League effective would be damaging to perceptions of Labour as a party of government.

The question of appeasement was already contested within Labour circles as another pacifist member, Dr. Alfred Salter, demonstrated in stern criticism of Crossman’s remarks. Salter argued that the only way forward was to ignore German and Italian rearmament and offer concessions to alleviate the genuine concerns that these economic “have not” states

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid

<sup>464</sup> Ibid

experienced.<sup>465</sup> Salter demonstrated the same problem as other pacifists at the conference, a belief that war was the not the true desire of fascism. Instead, the pacifists contended that such authoritarian regimes could be reasoned with if their economic challenges were taken seriously by the other Great Powers. Once such economic concessions were made it would be merely a matter of time before Italian and German people overthrew their dictators. As Salter put it, “if we offer them [Italy and Germany] the hand of friendship, if we offer them disarmament, if we offer them a sympathetic attitude...we shall effect more than by all the rearmament and all the additional aeroplanes and battleships it is possible for this nation to make.”<sup>466</sup> The fact that Mussolini had demonstrated no qualms over invading Abyssinia or in aiding the Nationalists in Spain, both conflicts having armed resistance to such forces, should have made the nature of Salter’s claims untenable. If fascists were willing to invade states which had the potential to resist, it was difficult to imagine that Britain could achieve different results by merely leading by example.

Aneurin Bevan representing the Ebbw Vale DLP, opened the second day of debate on the matter with a strong left-wing attack upon Labour’s policy shift. He made a forceful attack upon Clynes and Walter Citrine of the TUC who argued that Labour could not longer oppose rearmament in the current international climate. Bevan believed that the NEC was insidiously asking the Party to fall in line with the policy of the National Government. The problem then for those on the Labour left was how to distinguish a policy of anti-fascism from one which could empower capitalist forces at home. Bevan suggested that Labour be prepared to send arms to those fighting fascism (one can assume Spain would be viewed as the desired priority) but not

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid

build up British military strength as “we are not going to put a sword in the hands of our enemies that may be used to cut off our own heads.”<sup>467</sup> The problem was that the position of the left was as untenable as that of the pacifists, neither could provide a realistic solution to long term challenges emerging from the fascist powers which had expressed clear hostility to notions of international law.

To conclude the debate Labour MP J. Walker reiterated the NEC’s stance on foreign policy in the face of such determined pacifist and left-wing attack. For Walker noted that:

Our modern St. George goes out to slay the dragon, [threat of war] not with a sword, but with fine words and prayers, and he thinks he can induce the tiger...to law down all his arms and discuss the thing peaceably merely because we ask him to do it, and merely because we are going to lay ourselves defenceless before him. I have never yet heard that the tiger was ever moved to pity because of the helplessness of the lamb.<sup>468</sup>

Walker then turned his attention to George Lansbury and his desire to meet with Hitler and Mussolini to protect the peace. It appeared to Walker that willingness to meet with the dictators showed a tacit approval of their oppressive actions towards social democrats within their territories. Of course, such an attack was unfair, as one only makes peace by dealing with perceived or real enemies. Walker was far more successful in his second line of attack which focused on the moral basis of the pacifist’s policy vision as “the peace that they believe in is the peace of death... [pacifist members said] “Thou shalt not kill.” I agree with that moral maxim, but there is another that I also believe in, and that is “Thou shalt not allow thyself to be killed,” and when Mr. Lansbury tells us, quoting the Bible, that he who takes the sword will perish by the sword, he evidently has not realised the full implication of the statement he makes.”<sup>469</sup> Next

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid

Walker turned his attention to the attacks made by the Labour Left to the NEC policy. He pointed to the fact that fear mongering about capitalist influence in the National Government did not in itself demonstrate a threat to British democracy or to the Labour Party's existence. A well armed Britain would be good for democracy everywhere as Walker asked: "where does there exist more democracy than in the British Empire?"<sup>470</sup> He then looked to other capitalist states which had seen social democrats form government such as France all of which had not turned their military against democratic practices. The alarmism of the left did nothing to help advance their cause of wanting to stem the spread of fascism. It was with this rational response that Walker concluded, reminding the Conference that it was essential that pacifist and left proposals be shot down to ensure that Labour could have a clear and realistic message for the public. The Conference subsequently voted to quash the pacifist and left attempts to pull Labour foreign policy away from support of rearmament by over two million votes against both resolutions.<sup>471</sup>

### Ending the Farce of Non-Intervention

The Conference also debated the ongoing issue of Labour's supported for the broken policy of non-intervention. Charles Trevelyan moved a resolution which instructed the NEC to launch a nation-wide campaign to compel the British Government to abandon the non-intervention agreement as it "allows the Fascist rebels to receive help while imposing "sanctions" on the Spanish Government."<sup>472</sup> It was probably the most unsurprising policy shift to be brought to Conference as Labour had been so torn over non-intervention from its inception. Trevelyan summed up the feelings of many in the Labour Movement in defending the policy shift: "The Spanish War has clearly become an Italian war...backed by the Germans.

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, 212.

Franco's...atrocities and his successes are only possible with his German and Italian instruments...but even now the Spanish people are denied the right of defending themselves by obtaining arms from the democratic countries, and they are denied principally by our Government."<sup>473</sup> Trevelyan also reminded the Conference that Labour had been campaigning in Parliament for an end to non-intervention and a restoration of the right of the Spanish Government to purchase arms as the proof that the fascist dictators were violating non-intervention were overwhelming. Therefore, the abandonment of non-intervention was a mere formality as it was already believed to be ineffectual whilst it was stated policy.

The Party was unanimous in its support for an end to non-intervention with the only significant debate on the resolution centring on who was to blame for its implementation and legacy. Some placed blame on the French while others blamed the NEC with G. T. Garratt of the Plymouth Labour Party arguing that Labour "ought to realise that we have definitely helped to injure the Government of Spain. If it had not been for the International Brigade, there would have been a set back from which I doubt if Europe would ever have recovered. I believe that ten years hence, history will record that, all unwittingly, the Communists saved the British Empire and modern democracy."<sup>474</sup> It was an awkward position for Labour as the communist's hostility to non-intervention was vindicated. The only effective criticism which could be given was to note that at the local level, several DLP's had long been campaigning to end non-intervention and provided support to the Republic through grassroots funding drives. Such support had ranged from sending food for displaced children to the shipping of ambulances in the name of humanitarian assistance.<sup>475</sup> Now that supporting the supplying of arms to Spain was official

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid

<sup>474</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid

policy, the Party could stand united around a consistent programme which was in line with its values. Above all, Labour's approval of sending weapons to actively support one side in a war was a significant change from earlier years where the best that could be mustered was a dispatch of medical supplies to China. Yet, while the Spanish Civil War could be viewed as the frontline in the battle against fascism, at its core, it was an internal conflict. To complete its shift to an interventionist foreign policy, Labour would need to be willing to fight to defend the independence of states which were exposed to external fascist threats.

### Conclusion

The events of 1936 and 1937 represented a serious escalation in violence with the final shameful collapse of Abyssinia and outbreak of war in Spain and China. Labour's faith in League-centric solutions to fascist aggression were shattered. The sanctions policy from 1935 failed to save Abyssinia and uncomfortable backing of non-intervention in Spain simply repeated the mistaken view that fascist states would be forced to 'play by the rules.' The adoption of non-intervention was logical if viewed as means of protecting the unity of social democratic politics in France and Britain. However, the flaws of the plan were obvious even to those responsible for its creation. Fascism could not be trusted and yet Labour adopted a policy which was entirely reliant on German and Italian good faith (something they had never demonstrated). Labour had correctly understood the threat of Hitler and of Japanese aggression in the early 1930s. Yet, the Rhineland Crisis demonstrated a new, albeit brief, complacency with Hitler as Labour fell back on its longstanding belief that Versailles had been unjust. The invasion of China in 1937 was the ultimate expression of the League of Nations institutional failures. China had responded to Japanese aggression since 1931 by following the systems laid out by the League to settle an

attack upon one of its members. The inability or unwillingness of the League to punish Japan as the rogue state it was showed it was truly defunct.

Labour's show of support for the Chinese cause was morally consistent but did not go far enough as the Party was unwilling to support a policy of sending arms and thus by extension, encourage British intervention. A more hardline policy could be followed with Labour desires to aid Spain as it was closer to home and was more obvious to common people as the frontline against fascism. As a civil war, Labour could justify advocacy for supplying arms to a state fighting an internal enemy and the involvement of Italy and Germany allowed it to easily fit into an anti-fascist narrative. Overall, Labour foreign policy between 1936 and 1937 appeared confusing and inconsistent even to its own members. The Party was only able to make slow marginal moves away from its longstanding faith in the League and international disarmament. The acceptance by the end of 1937 to support sending arms to Spain and a shift to abstain rather than reject Britain's service estimates reflected this gradualism. The damaging nature of such reticence was clear with the wars in China and Spain showing no signs of abating as the year ended. The true test of Labour's foreign policy would come in the new year as Britain was forced to reckon with the power of emboldened authoritarianism.



## “Pacifists Must Take Sides” January to June 1938

### Introduction

January 1938 began with great fears in Britain that the postwar settlement was in mortal danger. War in China and Spain had escalated over the previous year and showed no signs of concluding. The Labour Party watched these events and the weakening of international support for the League of Nations with grave concern. The Party had already made changes to its stance on rearmament, abstaining rather than opposing Chamberlain's increased defence budget. This move attempted to balance competing interests across the Labour Party. For hardline interventionists the need for Labour to embrace a more assertive foreign policy clashed with desires of idealists. Faced with growing global challenges both sides of the Labour Party believed that 1938 would prove to be decisive. For pacifists 1938 appeared to be the last opportunity to avert disaster. For the trade unions and Labour interventionists, it was essential that British rearmament be accelerated, and fascist states be directly challenged in their ambitions to destabilize Europe. The dramatic events of the first half of 1938 with the sudden fall of Austria and the increase in violence in Spain pushed Labour interventionists to the forefront of the Party's policy debate setting the stage for a strong stand against Appeasement at the start of the summer of 1938. The question of Czechoslovakian territorial integrity, not the plight of the Spanish Republic, would provide Labour with its greatest opportunity yet to challenge Chamberlain and prove to the country once and for all that the Tories had failed to protect Britain and international peace.

### Pacifist Maneuvers:

For Labour's pacifist wing, George Lansbury summed up the fears of his fellow defenders of peace at a rally in Bristol on 22 January. Lansbury noted that while Britain had global military

power, the British people did not feel safe. Rather, “the beginning of 1938 finds us with an apprehension as to what the end of the year will bring – and this in spite of the fact we have made so much progress in other directions.”<sup>476</sup> Lansbury had already opened the year with a renewal of his personal peace campaign, one which found both supporters and detractors in Labour Party circles. He penned a letter published by the *Daily Herald* on 7 January 1938 titled, ‘I Would Not Kill.’ In the article Lansbury outlined the central components of his pacifism and its moral consistency with both domestic and foreign policy stating: “There is no cause on behalf of which I would kill my fellow men and women; neither would I ask anyone to kill on my behalf. I am opposed to Capital Punishment and to mass murder – which we describe as war – whether at the command of a government, a group of governments, or leaders of a revolution.”<sup>477</sup> Lansbury acknowledged that while for him the sands of time were running out, he wanted to continue for as long as possible his mission to leave the world a more peaceful and accepting place than that which he was born into. He believed that in 1938 Europe was facing the genuine possibility of a general European war which would likely bring universal slaughter:

No one will say the acceptance of Pacifism could possibly create a more catastrophic ending to two thousand years of Christian and other moral and religious teachings. I know that some of those who formerly warned us against the horrors of aerial warfare and its inevitable end are now inclined to try to water down their former declarations. This does not help us. Some of the bombers will always get through, and all governments know it. That is why in Germany, France and Britain towns are blacked out at night, and why millions of gas masks are being manufactured. I am not a pessimist: on the contrary I am firmly convinced that public opinion when not merely manufactured by partisan propaganda, is moving steadily against war.<sup>478</sup>

Lansbury not only tied the threat of war to the lived experience of those who had endured the Great War but also stressed the wider cross-party fear of modern war and the rapid destruction

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<sup>476</sup> George Lansbury, “Appeal to Great Britain to Take First Steps,” *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, (22 January 1938), 11.

<sup>477</sup> George Lansbury, “I Would Not Kill,” *Daily Herald*, (7 January 1938), 8.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid

bombing could bring within hours of a conflict breaking out. Lansbury tied these conceptions of the personal devastation war brings with that of the long-term economic challenges war leaves in its aftermath.

Lansbury also discussed how his personal views on war and peace connected to the Labour Party under his leadership. He noted that the Party had continually opposed arms spending both at home and abroad (but conveniently ignored the shift to support rearmament at the 1937 Labour Party Conference) as peace could only be guaranteed when states were able to focus on diplomatic solutions to territorial and economic differences. Labour's solution was and should remain the calling a world economic conference to eliminate the economic disadvantages that inevitably result in the outbreak of war.<sup>479</sup> Lansbury brushed aside Conservative attacks that such an idealistic solution was impossible to achieve, arguing: "if the Black Plague suddenly reappeared, all nations would at once co-operate to stamp it out by removing the causes, just as in Croydon today the authorities are striving to find out why typhoid has reappeared."<sup>480</sup> With the threat of war on the horizon Lansbury concluded with a firm belief that the British people would be willing to pay the price of peace, after paying so dearly for the costs of war.

Lansbury would echo these comments a few days later in a meeting of the Parliamentary Pacifist group and the Christian Pacifist Party in Bristol. The gathering was attended by several well-known British pacifists. Speakers included, Lansbury, Labour MP Dr. Alfred Salter, Reverend Henry Carter founder of the Methodist Peace Fellowship, former Labour candidate for Cambridge Dr. Alex Wood, and was chaired by feminist and pacifist playwright Laurence

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid

<sup>480</sup> Ibid. Lansbury is referencing an outbreak of typhoid in the London borough of Croydon in the fall of 1937 which infected hundreds and led to the deaths of over 40 people. For more see; Oscar Holden, "The Croydon Typhoid Outbreak," *Public Health*, Vol. 52, No. 1, (1938), 135.

Houseman. Houseman opened the event with condemnation of the British government expanding its arms sales to Japan in late 1937, thereby providing support to a fascist regime currently engaged in a brutal war of aggression in China. The hypocrisy of Conservatives supporting war in Asia while officially decrying war was to Houseman a disgraceful abomination which needed to be challenged by all peace-loving Britons.<sup>481</sup> In response Lansbury moved for a resolution to enact his earlier desire for a new world economic conference to settle the core disputes driving countries to embrace war. He defended the idealism of this proposal noting: “we may be dreamers but we are not ashamed to say we see visions.”<sup>482</sup> Therefore, if the leaders of the world got together it would surely be possible to ensure fair access to necessary raw materials for their growing economies.

Lansbury was seconded in his motion by Dr. Salter who went further by identifying what he believed to be the ‘root of the trouble,’ placing blame for the present deterioration of world peace on Britain. Salter argued that the British people were not aware of the British Empire’s domination of essential raw materials and proceeded to read a statement “inspired from Japan and Germany which accused Great Britain of being the sole cause of much of the strife and threats of war in various parts of the world... the ‘have’ Governments were refusing the ‘have-not’ Governments any concessions, and in that way lay the world-war danger.”<sup>483</sup> The use of such language caused a stir at the meeting with one speaker arguing that: “I think Dr. Salter’s speech and the Fascist propaganda he read out are some of the best bits of Fascist advertisements I have heard in public meeting in a long time.”<sup>484</sup> Another brought attention to the danger of

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<sup>481</sup> “Well-Known Pacifists at Bristol Meeting,” *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, (10 January 1938), 7.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid*

Britain acquiescing to fascist desires for a return of colonies now under British protection as only furthering the spread of their ideology not encouraging long term peace. Nonetheless, the motion was carried with only four dissents.<sup>485</sup>

Reverend Henry Carter followed with his own resolution calling for a reinvigoration of the League of Nations. Carter was an important voice in the wider pacifist movement as he was a founder of the Methodist Peace Fellowship in 1933.<sup>486</sup> Collaboration with Methodists was a common practice going back to the founding of the LRC in 1900. Methodists worked closely with Labour Party members (some Methodists were active members in the Labour Party) to solve a number of social ills ranging from temperance and domestic violence to international pacifism.<sup>487</sup> At this dangerous moment in 1938 Carter's aim was to garner support for a reorganization of the League with a focus on "the moral influence of world public opinion rather than upon armed coercion. An extension of the League's powers of conciliation... and enlarging the humanitarian activities of the League."<sup>488</sup> Carter argued that these changes were needed if the apparent weaknesses of the League to act as the world's guarantor of peace were to be rectified. Carter's resolution was followed up with another proposal for a motion in favour of total disarmament by Dr. Wood. Wood argued that disarmament would only be possible at this late hour if Britain were to take the lead, as it was the biggest spender on arms behind Germany.<sup>489</sup> Wood was seconded by another speaker who presented an amendment which included an agreement to ensure that Britain refuse to be bound to any system of treaties that involve them in war of any kind. In other words, a rejection of alliance systems to ensure peace, such deals only

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid

<sup>486</sup> Pamela Atkins, "Rev Henry Carter, pioneer of the Methodist Refugee Fund, forerunner of All We Can," *My Methodist History*. <https://www.mymethodisthistory.org.uk>

<sup>487</sup> Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), 18-19.

<sup>488</sup> "Well-Known Pacifists at Bristol Meeting," *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, (10 January 1938), 7.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid

increase the potential for a general conflict. This motion was rejected but the meeting concluded with an agreement to carry a motion in favour of opposing conscription and opposition to air raid defence precautions. The latter would likely rely on the popular public sentiment that aerial bombing would be almost impossible to stop anyway, and potential rivals would see any British ARP initiatives as preparation for war.<sup>490</sup>

The pacifist community's ardent rejection of any form of rearmament, whether it be from Labour or the National Government, was soon challenged by Norman Angell in an open letter titled, 'but Pacifists Must take Sides.' Angell was concerned with the blatant disregard parliamentary pacifists and their supporters demonstrated for the important distinctions Labour and Conservatives gave towards re-armament and peace. Angell made clear that pacifists should not waver from their genuine belief that war was a moral evil which needed to be prevented. Yet, to avert war he argued that "you [British pacifists] must also decide which of two (or more) non-Pacifist policies will bring the Pacifist goal nearer, and which make it more remote: otherwise, you may, by bad judgment, betray the cause you have at heart."<sup>491</sup> Regardless of the current course of events in Europe and the world, Angell stressed that an election would come at some point in the next two years and there would be few staunch pacifist candidates on the ballot.

The choice for pacifist voters would therefore be between the foreign policy of two groups: the Attlee-Dalton-Noel Baker-Cecil-Gilbert Murray order or the Beaverbrook-Rothermere-Amery-Page Croft-Londonderry order. Angell's groupings were not explicitly centred on party lines, but on personalities and common ideological views. Yet, these largely could be segmented on the side of League of Nations Union members and Labour Party officials

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<sup>490</sup> For more information on the air panic which captivated British society in the 1930s see; Susan Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>491</sup> Norman Angell, "but Pacifists Must take Sides," *Daily Herald* (14 January 1938), 10.

versus that of the Government. Both groups stood for armed defence, yet the former group of Attlee and Dalton had policy compatible with pacifist desires for peace whilst the ideas of the Beaverbrook group would make war inevitable.<sup>492</sup> While the Government group consistently paid lip service to peace, they prioritised arms spending to ensure that Britain could exert its will both within the Empire and in any dispute with international rivals. The opposition Attlee group boiled down to saying to foreigners:

we do not ask you to take our verdict in any dispute between us, since we are one of the parties to it. We offer you the umpire principle, arbitration, which is equal for both. We shall not use our arms in order to be your judge; only to prevent you being ours; not to ensure that the status quo is not changed; only to ensure that it is not changed by war at the irresponsible dictation of the victor. We will fight only for that right of impartial judgment, pacific settlement, and peaceful change which we offer freely to you.<sup>493</sup>

To Angell the central premise for pacifists supporting the Attlee group was that they had the best policies towards arms, one which encouraged states to pursue peaceful solutions to disputes. If pacifists were to abstain from voting because the Attlee group still supported the maintenance of British armaments then the result would be a victory for the Beaverbrook group, which could only make the threat of war more likely. Angell concluded with a call to action for British pacifists to support the Attlee group at all times, not just during election campaigns as the best means of preventing the National Government from dragging Britain into a general European war.

Nonetheless, support for Attlee's leadership of Labour and the broader weakness of the Party's tacit acceptance for rearmament faced internal challengers. In the January 1938 issue of *The Political Quarterly* included an article titled, "The Present and Immediate Future of the

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid

<sup>493</sup> Ibid

Labour Party,” by Elizabethan historian and former Cornwall Labour candidate, Alfred L. Rowse, who gave a stinging criticism of embracing collective security. Rowse had stood for Labour in 1931 and 1935 and believed that without significant change in foreign policy Labour would lose in a 1940 election, “snatching defeat from the Jaws of victory...[as] parties do not win power by following the impulses of their ridiculous hearts.”<sup>494</sup> Rowse pointed to the fact that while Labour had many figures who were well informed on issues of industrial regulation, health and local government, there were few who could debate matters of international policy. This was due to DLP’s often preferring ideologs for their candidates rather than those with proven ability.<sup>495</sup> Yet, Rowse stressed that Labour had an opportunity in 1938 to capitalize on the failures of Baldwin and Chamberlain’s foreign policy, appeasing Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Labour would be able to capitalise on Conservative weakness if it could address its internal challenges. Due to its varied trade union, leftist, and pacifist elements, Labour needed to persuade its different and often ideologically divergent elements accept a common rearmament policy. Specifically, Rowse refers to setbacks in the 1935 election and the limited number of Labour gains in by-elections:

Lansbury’s pacifism must have cost the Party a dozen seats at the last election; the Conservatives estimate Sir Stafford Cripps’s idiosyncrasies as worth thirty seats to them. Over and above this the Labour Party itself has taken the wrong line about Rearmament. They hesitated...until it was too late. People only understand a straight and simple line. I [Rowse] am told that in the by-elections people have been saying of the Labour Party that it was “against the country being defended,” that it “didn’t want us to protect ourselves,” etc. I can well believe it; and that is what the idiots would think, however unjustified we know it to be. And however foolish they are, there is some justification for their fear: for supposing we do not provide for the country’s security, on the ground that we cannot trust a National Government, responsible for the disaster of our policy, with armaments... in fact, if a Labour Government came in to take the right line about collective security, it could not suddenly call up air-fleets and battleships out of the ground overnight to deal with

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<sup>494</sup> Alfred Rowse, *The Political Quarterly*, “The Present and Immediate Future of the Labour Party,” 9, No. 1, 16.

<sup>495</sup> Rowse, 18.



Hitler and Mussolini. It is that consideration which makes the Left-Wing standpoint on Armaments such dangerous lunacy.<sup>496</sup>

Rowse did support earlier efforts by Labour to secure general global disarmament but argued that the opportunity was lost once Hitler had secured power in 1933. Therefore, Labour should have attacked the Conservatives “for the criminal responsibility of delaying rearmament until it was two years too late. The Party has failed to identify the interests of the country with itself.”<sup>497</sup> Until Labour demonstrated to the country that it was the defender of Britain’s interests it would remain in opposition.

Labour would be able to act on such policy in 1938 if the party embraced its core constituency: trade unions. The unions were an important moderating influence in the Party since its founding as “they [trade unionists] are practical men, who know what the world is really like. When one thinks of the intellectuals of the Labour Party, who are almost always wrong, one thanks God for the Trade unionists.”<sup>498</sup> It was from this framework that Rowse argued Labour should drop Attlee as leader and instead turn to Herbert Morrison, as he could galvanise the unions and demonstrating a patriotic outlook, making Labour less vulnerable to Conservative attack. Under this narrative, Attlee had demonstrated himself to be out of touch with the country as he attacked Chamberlain for defending British interests over collective security.<sup>499</sup> Others, such as Philip Noel-Baker were attacked by Rowse for being ‘League Fanatics’ who demonstrated an unrealistic understanding of the influence of the League of Nations by 1938 to settle issues such as the Spanish conflict.<sup>500</sup> By contrast Morrison would be a desirable leader because he had correctly understood the danger Britain faced, such as focusing on the

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<sup>496</sup> Rowse, 22.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid

<sup>498</sup> Rowse, 25.

<sup>499</sup> Rowse, 25.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid

unpreparedness of air-raid precautions, matter of great importance to metropolitan London. Lastly, Rowse made the prophetic call for Labour to make common cause with Liberals. While Stafford Cripps and others sought a United Front between Labour, ILP, and the CPGB these were fringe movements which had little electoral support. Liberals by contrast still polled well in elections and had similar disagreement with the Tories on foreign policy. Attleean ideas that Liberals were not good partners as they were not Socialists, hindered Labour's ability to challenge the rise of fascism.

### The Ipswich By-Election

Labour appears to have acted on some of the ideas of Rowse and others the following month. Labour used its upcoming by-election for Ipswich in February of 1938 to attract moderate Conservative and Liberal voters with the aim of flipping the traditionally safe Conservative seat. Labour candidate R. Stokes focused his campaign on three central issues, rising unemployment, increased food costs and the 'muddle along' foreign policy of the Government.<sup>501</sup> Stokes found a very positive response by a crowd of 4000 football spectators on the issue of foreign policy when after the days match, he stumped for the campaign.<sup>502</sup> When asked to clarify his advocacy for a policy of 'shells without profit,' Stokes argued that as veteran of the Great War "I believe that if you take the humbug of profiteering out of war you turn people's minds to peace, and you might be contributing something to stop the incentive for war."<sup>503</sup> Stokes then turned his attention to Chamberlain's foreign policy noting: "There is more money to be made out of peace if you organise it properly, but this Government has no real plan

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<sup>501</sup> "Football Crowd Cheers Plan for Peace," *Daily Herald*, (7 February 1938), 13.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid*

for organising peace.”<sup>504</sup> Again this focus on the capitalist incentivization of war drew a positive response from the crowd.

Economic arguments continued to dominate Labour’s campaign in Ipswich. When Labour Peer, Lord Strabolgi visited the riding in support of Stokes, he focused his attacks on the weakness of the Government’s economic policy. This was relevant as the limited recovery that had been achieved since 1931 was threatened by the sudden economic collapse of neighboring powers like Italy. The *Daily Herald*, by contrast, supported Stokes’ campaign on the basis that he and the Labour Party were best able to preserve peace.<sup>505</sup>

Stokes proved successful and flipped the seat for Labour 27,604 to the Conservatives 24,443 a majority of 3,161.<sup>506</sup> Upon hearing of his victory, Stokes told reporters:

We have won this election because the people of Ipswich are profoundly disturbed at the vacillating and feeble foreign policy which has been pursued by the Tory Government ever since they broke their specific election pledges, and betrayed Abyssinia in 1935 – and because the people are thoroughly dissatisfied with the rising cost of living, the ever-increasing number of able bodied unemployed, and the unwillingness of the Government to control the arms rackets.<sup>507</sup>

Certainly, in Stokes’ view, the Conservatives’ perceived weakness in response to Fascist aggression was a key component behind Labour’s gain in Ipswich, most especially when compared to more localised economic concerns which impacted voters’ daily lives. Such concerns about the threat of fascism on continental Europe would soon become the dominant issue on the minds of British Labourites.

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid

<sup>505</sup> “Now Then Ipswich!” *Daily Herald*, (14 February 1938), 10.

<sup>506</sup> “Ipswich Result,” *The Scotsman*, (17 February 1938), 11.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid

## “The Rome-Berlin Axis Temporarily Controls the Fate of Europe” Labour’s and the Anschluss

In March 1938 German aggression took on a new more dangerous form. On 12 March German troops crossed the border and annexed Austria into the Third Reich. This blatant disregard of Austrian sovereignty and the Treaty of Versailles represented a serious threat to European stability. Austria was a young republic only emerging in the aftermath of the First World War and it struggled to adopt democracy following the collapse of its central European empire. The country’s multiparty system had collapsed in February 1934 with the defeat of the social democrats and communists in the brief Austrian Civil War. In July 1934 Austrian Nazis attempted a coup d’état and assassinated the fascist Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. The coup failed with the army and police remaining loyal to the remainder of the Austro-fascist government.<sup>508</sup> By 1938 Austria was dominated by a fascist movement which was hostile to unification with Germany but was not viewed favourably by the wider European left.

When Hitler moved to annex Austria, it was the flagrant disregard for the postwar settlement that alarmed Labour. The fate of Austria was of limited concern to Labour as the country had already abandoned liberal democracy and embraced extremist politics before German troops marched over the border. Yet, the German annexation occurred during Labour’s nation-wide Peace Crusade. Labour had been planning since January, a series of rallies and events to generate public support to mobilise the country to stop Europe drifting into war and plan for British security to maintain peace.<sup>509</sup> These preparations meant that Labour was well

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<sup>508</sup> The failure of the coup was also the result of Mussolini supporting the Austrian government and threatening Germany with war should Hitler move to assist the Austrian Nazis behind the putsch.

<sup>509</sup> *Daily Herald*, “Mobilise for Peace, Plan for Security,” 15 January 1938.

positioned to rapidly generate a countrywide response to the tepid reaction by the Conservatives to the Anschluss and its violation of the postwar peace settlement.

Upon hearing the news that Austria had been forcibly incorporated into the Third Reich, Labour MPs quickly condemned the blatant weakness of the Prime Minister. Clement Attlee declared German action to be an “outstanding example of the world anarchy of today.”<sup>510</sup> Stafford Cripps, speaking at a rally in Inverness, took a far stronger tone, declaring that Great Britain had, by its inaction, ceased to be a first-class power. Cripps noted: “The Rome-Berlin axis temporarily controls the fate of Europe. It is clear that...this is part of a concerted plan by Hitler and Mussolini.”<sup>511</sup> Cripps believed that Mussolini had coordinated his response to the Austrian crisis to match the timing of German annexation, thereby limiting the ability of the international community to condemn the Anschluss as a unilateral act of aggression. Chamberlain’s lack of action suggested to Cripps that Britain was throwing aside its solidarity with France and Russia in favour of courting the influence of Italy and Germany. The result of this would lead to German expansion being directed against Czechoslovakia “and when that happened, the people of Great Britain would again find themselves back to the days of August 1914.”<sup>512</sup>

Labour’s deputy leader, Arthur Greenwood, echoed similar sentiments at a rally in Liverpool where he stressed a need for the Prime Minister to return to a foreign policy which utilized a reinvigorated League of Nations. The use of such global institutions was important in galvanizing a strong international response and demonstrated “the complete absence of moral

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<sup>510</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, “Comments on Austrian Crisis,” 14 March 1938.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid*

principle in the acts of dictatorship states.”<sup>513</sup> A re-evaluation of moral responses were instead taken up by some members of Labour’s parliamentary pacifists. Most telling of these were the statements made by pacifist Labour MP Emanuel Shinwell at a rally in Grimsby. Shinwell showed a willingness to adapt his pacifist principles in the face of growing European instability stating:

If the dictators are to be prevented from overrunning Europe, from weakening French and British interests, and of ultimately striking a deadly blow at democracy, we must modify our pacifist doctrines, and be ready to support the full power of democratic nations against aggression. This is not the policy we wanted. We have opposed it all along, but it is now forced upon us by the ineptitude of the National Government in foreign affairs.<sup>514</sup>

The fact that Shinwell was not only willing to adopt a more pragmatic vision of his pacifist values but to encourage others to do so as well provides an important example of the pressure being placed on others in the Labour Party to re-examine their place within the Party over the rest of 1938.

On 14 March, two days after the Anschluss was concluded Parliament reconvened to debate the matter and pressure Chamberlain to explain where Britain now stood on matters of European stability. The Prime Minister defended his decision not to respond to the annexation of Austria as he believed that “nothing could have arrested this action by Germany unless we and others with us had been prepared to use force to prevent it.”<sup>515</sup> The lack of solutions and the blatant disregard for the Anschluss’s consequences upon the lives of Austrians viewed as undesirable by the Nazis were central to the Conservative reaction.

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid

<sup>514</sup> Ibid

<sup>515</sup> Neville Chamberlain, “Foreign Affairs (Austria),” *House of Commons Debate* 14 March 1938. Vol 333 cc 52.

By contrast, Attlee's response on behalf of the opposition made potential punishment for anti-fascist Austrian's centre stage in Labour's attack upon the Government:

I know that the Social Democrats stood for Austria, and I believe that the hearts of all of us will go out to those who may be imperilled there to-day, or captives, the Catholics, the Socialists and the Jews, or any others who may suffer. I trust that our Government will make representations to whatever Government there may be in Austria, that the world will look very closely on what goes on in Austria and will resent any oppression of the people of Austria. I hope that all possible public opinion will be brought to bear.<sup>516</sup>

Attlee went on to explain that Labour supported Austrians deciding their own future, and if that included joining in union with Germany then so be it.<sup>517</sup> The Party's contention was with the way the Austrian state was coerced through force of arms to be incorporated into the German Reich. A pattern was evident of the Prime Minister ignoring acts of aggression across the globe which were only serving to embolden dictators to violate the postwar settlement, "Manchuria, Rhineland, Abyssinia, Spain, China, Austria—what next? In this progressive deterioration of the world situation there must come a time when it is necessary to stand firm unless all Europe is to be thrown into the melting pot."<sup>518</sup> Labour's solution was still to have Britain appeal to the League of Nations and empower it to provide a basis for law and justice in settling international disputes.

Above all else, the League of Nations could provide the means of settling what Labour believed were the underlying conditions that made it possible for dictators to rise to power and exert their will upon the rest of the globe, competition for raw materials. Attlee concluded this assessment with an appeal to solving this period of crisis with an embrace of common values

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<sup>516</sup> Clement Attlee, *Ibid*, cc. 53.

<sup>517</sup> This is of course in line with Labour's longstanding Germanophile belief that Versailles had been unjust and so German acts to address these were deemed acceptable by many Labourites.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid*, cc. 55.

shared across the British polity: “To allow a further degeneration of the situation by the admission of the rule of force all the time is to make war inevitable. I believe that the people of this country would stand firm together for the rule of law for the preservation of the peace of the world.”<sup>519</sup> Labour MP Arthur Henderson shared this assessment, that only through an embrace of collective security through the League of Nations could the ambitions of the militarist powers be halted.<sup>520</sup> Even at this late hour, when some in the Party were considering an evolution of their principles towards war and peace, the official Party line was still to rely upon the same ideas which had guided it for over a decade.

Other solutions to militarist aggression were embraced through Labour’s public outreach, particularly in the *Daily Herald* where on 15 March, Francis Williams wrote an editorial titled “Arms are Not Enough.”<sup>521</sup> Williams argued that Labour needed to show solidarity with those in the Government benches who demanded a renewed increase in arms spending to protect Britain and its interests in a rearming world. It was the regrettable truth that Hitler was far more likely to take the British seriously if it had a stronger military, rather than peaceful words of protest to each international violation.<sup>522</sup> However, as Labour believed that the outbreak of the First World War was the product of an arms race, it was imperative that Britain not go down the same path once again. Therefore, Britain should embrace the creation of a treaty of mutual assistance with the Anglo-French alliance as its nucleus to compliment any rearmament measures.<sup>523</sup> This plan was not meant to replicate the system of alliances which had contributed to the outbreak of war in 1914 but rather be limited to a means of providing collective defence as a deterrent to further

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid

<sup>520</sup> Arthur Henderson, “Foreign Affairs (Austria),” HC Deb, 14 March 1938, cc. 55.

<sup>521</sup> *Daily Herald*, 15 March 1938, 10.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid

<sup>523</sup> Ibid



aggression. Although this was not the policy being promoted in Parliament, the proposals inclusion in the *Daily Herald* during the week that Europe was reeling from the shock of the Anschluss demonstrates that such alternative ideas were being considered in Labour circles in the spring of 1938.

In the months that followed the Anschluss, Labour's NEC assessed the implications of Britain's tepid response and how the Party should approach the inevitable next violation of the Treaty of Versailles. The NEC concluded in a meeting in May of 1938 that the Anschluss would have six significant consequences which the Labour movement would need to address:

(1) It [The Anschluss] has greatly increased the prestige and striking power of Fascism not only in those areas, but over all Western Civilization. (2) It threatens Czecho-Slovakia and other free states in this area with internal disruption and a consequent loss of their freedom and independence. (3) It acquires for Hitler new and important resources for his larger and later aggression both in the East and the West. (4) It intimidates the smaller countries neighbouring on Germany and thus forces them into the orbit of Fascist influence. (5) It threatens the break-up of the Franco-Soviet-Czech pact, and thus endangers one of the main possible safeguards for world peace. (6) It encourages the British Government to accept the results of Fascist aggression as a basis for negotiation with Hitler and Mussolini. It has aided the National Government in its effort to disrupt the popular front in France and the replace it by a government less determined upon the defence of democracy and more ready to be persuaded into deals with the Fascist Powers on the basis of their aggressive conquests.<sup>524</sup>

In Labour's eyes the annexation of Austria brought further danger to Europe and left the continent at risk.

#### West Fulham By-Election April 1938

The NEC's assessment of its political strategy following the Anschluss was based on Labour's gain of a Conservative seat in the West-Fulham by-election on 6 April. Labour's

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<sup>524</sup> Labour Party National Executive Committee, NEC Minutes 25 May 1938, Item 377. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre, Manchester.

candidate, Dr. Edith Summerskill, proved successful with a focus on attacking the National Government's response to the Anschluss and wider concerns in the constituency that the Conservatives were becoming increasingly pro fascist in their stance on the Spanish Civil War. The Conservative candidate, John Busby was forced to respond to accusations that British rearmament schemes were increasing the potential for war and that the Prime Minister was sympathetic to the Nationalist rebels in Spain.<sup>525</sup> In response, Busby directed his attacks at the Labour Party and Clement Attlee's stance on the Spanish conflict in particular stating at a rally, "Mr. Attlee demanded intervention in Spain and said he was well aware of the risk of war it would involve."<sup>526</sup> Framing Attlee's support for the Spanish Republic as being hawkish was an important underpinning of Conservative dogma in the late 1930s which stressed that any deviation from appeasement made a general European war more likely.

Busby's early electioneering faced many questions from constituents about foreign policy and the resignation of Anthony Eden. One interaction with an audience member illustrated the important shift in Labour rearmament policy over the past year. When Busby alleged that Labour had no interest in defending Britain, a member of the audience interrupted stating: "the Labour Party say they will re-arm sufficiently to defend England and all commitments," to which Busby replied: "For the last six years the Socialist Party voted against any measure of defence. But just recently something must have frightened them," to which the audience member replied: "I will tell you what it is – Fascism versus democracy!"<sup>527</sup> While Busby's attack on Labour was true, he made a serious error in alleging that they had no reason to be afraid, in the face of increasing

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<sup>525</sup> "West Fulham By-Election," *Fulham Chronicle*, 1 April 1938, 5.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid*

violence in Spain and the Hitler's recent annexation of Austria. Those events were top of mind to the voters of West Fulham.

Such concerns were clearly understood by the upper echelons of the Conservative Party to be key to holding West Fulham. A published statement given by the Prime Minister to Mr. Busby showed a remarkable shift in Tory policy towards embracing Labour's prescription to avert a general European war. Chamberlain emphasized the importance of a conciliatory policy with Germany and Italy while further expanding Britain's rearmament. Yet, Chamberlain acknowledged the importance of international institutions as the best mechanisms to ensure stability:

I still hold, as I have always held, that the League of Nations, if it can be enlarged and strengthened, may someday be the salvation of the world. But we should not be promoting the cause of peace by pretending that the League, in its present weakened condition, can in the fact, guarantee collective security. We can best serve the League's interest by seeking to enlarge and strengthen it so that it may be made a fitting instrument for the attainment of our ideals. Let us all strive to preserve national unity so that we may present a united front to the world in the face of the difficulties which lie ahead of us.<sup>528</sup>

This desire to see a reinvigorated League of Nations backed by a re-armed Britain was entirely in line with the official Labour policy set out by its NEC and the bulk of its parliamentary leadership. The fact that Chamberlain echoed such sentiments for the coming by-election illustrated the damage the Anschluss had done to earlier Conservative schemes for modest rearmament combined with a lack of punitive action directed against Germany, Italy, and Japan.

The outcome was a clear blow to the Conservatives and their strategy to focus their campaign on the Government's foreign policy and defence schemes. Labour secured victory with a majority of 16,583 to the Conservatives' 15,162, a narrow victory but an upset for the Prime

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid

Minister nonetheless.<sup>529</sup> Both parties had heavily invested both manpower and resources to the campaign, viewing the contest as a referendum on the British response to the Anschluss and increasing violence in Spain. Labour had sent party staffers from its central office and members of its parliamentary front bench such as Stafford Cripps and Arthur Greenwood, to assist in the local campaign.<sup>530</sup> Dr. Summerskill attributed the victory to Labour's advocacy for collective security and the desire to send British arms to Spain to aid the government in its fight against fascism.<sup>531</sup>

### Stemming Franco's Advance

The British left and particularly the membership of the Labour Party had been deeply concerned about the Spanish conflict as the great battle between fascism and a free Europe. Early in the year Labour had focused its activism on supporting the Spanish Republic by emphasizing evidence of Italian and German intervention in the conflict in favour of the Nationalist Rebels. The problem with such support being given by these authoritarian regimes was that it was a direct violation of Anglo-French policy of non-intervention.

In March 1938 Parliament considered the matter of Axis intervention, in light of the other shocking abuse of international law in the form of the Anschluss. During the Parliamentary debate of 24 March, the Prime Minister defended the Government's strict adherence to non-intervention even in the face of overwhelming evidence of Italian intervention in the conflict. Chamberlain insisted that "Italy has no territorial, political, or economic aims in Spain or in the

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<sup>529</sup> "West Fulham By-Election," *Fulham Chronicle*, 8 April 1938, 8.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid*

Balearic Islands.”<sup>532</sup> He went on to assert that Italian contributions to the Nationalist campaign were not impacting the nature of the conflict. The sheer ignorance displayed by Chamberlain when discussing the abuses of non-intervention forced Labour undertake a strong response two days later in the press with the distribution of a statement from the National Council of Labour titled *League Assembly Must End Spain's Ordeal*.

The NCL stressed the Labour Party's and the trade unions grave concerns that the Prime Minister had decided to abandon the Spanish Republic to its fate and proved unwilling to stop the abuses made by the fascist powers. The statement attacked the reckless abandonment of the League of Nations and the democratic peoples of the continent by the Government and highlighted the dangerous similarity that Europe was facing to the road to war in 1914:

When the democratic peoples are becoming more and more appalled by the frightful massacre taking place in Spain through the prolonged and massive intervention of the armed forces of Germany and Italy, the Prime Minister should merely repeat his faith in the farcical policy of Non-Intervention, and at the same time record his confidence in the good faith of the Italian Government. This declaration is a mockery of brave men and women who have been stubbornly denied the freedom to purchase arms and supplies for their defence by a Prime Minister who calls upon the British people to arm in their own defence.<sup>533</sup>

This position on arms exports represented a significant shift from where Labour had been only a few years earlier. By moving from being hostile to ‘capitalist’ arms manufacturing to supporting the production of British armaments and exporting them to aid in the fight against fascism, Labour demonstrated publicly, support for a realist policy which accepted the international situation for what it was.

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<sup>532</sup> Neville Chamberlain, “Foreign Affairs and Rearmament,” *House of Commons Debate*, 24 March 1938, Vol. 333. cc. 1409.

<sup>533</sup> “League Assembly Must End Spain's Ordeal,” *Daily Herald*, 26 March 1938, 9.

The solution for the Spanish conflict that was proposed by the NCL built on this realistic understanding of the international situation Britain faced. Labour's solution required the use of the League of Nations to bring together the Anglo-French alliance and the Soviet Union to deter further acts of aggression.<sup>534</sup> Other objectives would be the end of the arms embargo to the Spanish Republic and the use of guarantees by Britain to support the independence of smaller European states which were threatened by the fascist powers, thereby averting isolation with the rest of the continent. The statement concluded with an appeal to traditional Conservative values of rallying the British people around the cause of national security, international law and order, and of peace and democracy.<sup>535</sup>

April 1938 opened with an extensive campaign by the British left to generate public support for aiding the Spanish Republic before it was crushed by the Nationalist Rebels. Norman Angell sought to galvanize public support for the Republic and draw attention to the threat of Germany at a meeting of the International Peace Campaign in Sheffield on 4 April. Acting in his role as a member of the executive of the League of Nations Union, Angell connected the threat of the Spanish conflict and German aggression in Europe to the people of Sheffield directly by emphasizing the threat of aerial bombing. Angell stressed that it would be Germany that was the most likely threat to the city and European stability more broadly. The threat of Germany was in Angell's view, directly tied to the fate of the Spanish Republic. Victory for Franco in Spain would provide Germany with significant strategic advantage over Britain, providing a threat to Gibraltar and Britain's link to Australia, and surround France with hostile fascist regimes on three sides.<sup>536</sup> The best means of avoiding an increasingly likely general European war would be

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid

<sup>535</sup> Ibid

<sup>536</sup> Norman Angell, "Any Bombs Dropped on City Will Come from Germany," *The Daily Independent*, 5 April 1938, 7.

to build a larger international coalition which included the Soviet Union and was willing to clearly state that further aggression by Italy or Germany would not be accepted. Angell's desire to foster positive relations with the Soviet Union was carefully qualified with reference to his disdain of their internal system of oppression.<sup>537</sup> The inclusion of the Soviet Union in any Anglo-French coalition would be necessary as "Russia is not pledged to territorial expansion. The Fascist States say they want conquest and expansion. We can co-operate with Russia, but we cannot co-operate with fascist states until they drop their policy of expansion."<sup>538</sup> These statements by Angell represented a continued development of his desire to maintain peace from that of his statements in January. He accepted that as Europe was moving closer towards war, it was necessary that more traditional forms of diplomacy be utilised to limit the spread of fascist power and dissuade such powers from further acts of aggression which endangered British security.

On 10 April the Labour Party, in tandem with trade unions and co-operative societies, organised a massive "Arms for Spain" rally in London's Hyde Park which sought to pressure Chamberlain to save Spain and European peace. Labour's own estimates placed the crowd size at a massive 120,000 all seeking to end non-intervention and provide the Republic with the arms it needed to defeat fascism.<sup>539</sup> The rally included many prominent speakers from across the Labour Party including many backbench MPs and leading figures such as, Attlee, Party Chairman George Dallas, and Stafford Cripps. Attlee opened the speeches with an appeal to the moral sentiments of the nation, telling the horrifying tale of the deaths of over 10,000 children and a

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<sup>537</sup> It seems likely that Angell viewed any partnership with the Soviet Union as a marriage of convenience as it shared the same hostility that Labour held towards fascism. Although not as strong in his criticism of the Soviet Union as Ernest Bevin, he was still willing to challenge totalitarian aspects of Stalin's regime.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid

<sup>539</sup> "120,000 Demanded "Save Spain"", *Daily Herald*, 11 April 1938, 13. The numbers are disputed with *The Guardian* placing the figure at closer to 50,000.

further 15,000 wounded by the fascist forces in the past few days.<sup>540</sup> The decision by the Prime Minister to cling to non-intervention meant that the British people were being “denied the right to send arms to protect those little children.”<sup>541</sup> Chamberlain’s statements of being shocked and horrified by such acts in the House of Commons were doing nothing to stop such acts of brutality, as Attlee put it, “What did the dictators care for paper protests?”<sup>542</sup>

Labour sought to stop this status quo from continuing as it was leading Britain down an inevitable path towards war. Attlee noted that Britain was certainly stockpiling arms but that this was dangerous as it was not being combined with any credible peace plan: “you need arms in an armed world but to be used for keeping law and order, but arms merely piled up in Imperialist rivalries lead to war.”<sup>543</sup>

Alongside Attlee was Labour Party Chairman, George Dallas and Labour’s newest MP Dr. Edith Summerskill, the recent winner of the West Fulham by-election. Summerskill received a jubilant welcome from the crowd and proudly proclaimed: “I believe that the West Fulham result reflects the political conscience of the people of Britain.”<sup>544</sup> In Labour’s eyes, the victory in Fulham demonstrated clear support from the public in supporting Spain in its struggle, and the crowd in Hyde Park certainly agreed. However, others such as Arthur Greenwood had to temper expectations during their speeches. Greenwood had suggested that Britain, France, and the United States would be the only viable powers to stop war as, “the nearer fascism comes to democratically minded people the more certain they are to defend themselves against it.”<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid

<sup>541</sup> Ibid

<sup>542</sup> “Arms for Spain Demanded,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1938, 12.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid

<sup>544</sup> “120,000 Demanded “Save Spain”, *Daily Herald*, 11 April 1938, 13.

<sup>545</sup> “Arms for Spain Demanded,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1938, 12.



Upon hearing such statements, members of the crowd began calling for the implementation of a General strike to force Chamberlain's hand, Greenwood was quick to deflect the issue, noting: "that is a matter for the trade unions."<sup>546</sup>

Stafford Cripps sought to focus his efforts on galvanizing the more radical elements of the crowd from a different platform at the rally. Cripps read aloud to the crowd a letter from a member of the British International Brigade serving in Spain which claimed that the author was "resting behind the lines, perforce, for lack of arms. As a result of the Chamberlain Government thousands of Spanish workers have shed their blood trying to stem Franco's advance."<sup>547</sup> Cripps claimed that this proved that morale was not gone from those fighting for the Republic but that they were in dire need of support. Labour was slow to support the British International Brigade compared to that of the CPGB who was the chief recruiting force for the unit at the outbreak of the Civil War were. By 1938 Labour became more supportive with a delegation including Clement Attlee, Ellen Wilkinson, and Philip Noel-Baker dining with a British battalion while touring the Spanish Republic.<sup>548</sup> The troops were so inspired by the occasion that they renamed themselves the Major Attlee Battalion (clearly, Attlee felt a connection to the unit as he attended a reception for them in London when they returned from Spain).<sup>549</sup>

Following his reading of the letter to the crowd, Cripps proceeded to fearmonger with claims that conscription was coming soon by Chamberlain to force workers to provide their

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid

<sup>547</sup> "120,000 Demanded "Save Spain", Daily Herald, 11 April 1938, 13.

<sup>548</sup> William Rust, *Britons in Spain*, (Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, 2007), 97. Attlee, Angell, and Brailsford would amongst other Labourites played an active part in the "The Dependents Aid Committee of the International Brigade," and worked to raise funds to support the families of Brigade members between June of 1937 and October of 1938. For me detail see: Rust, 208.

<sup>549</sup> *Reynolds News*, "Big Welcome Planned for The Heroic 300," 30 October 1938), 3.

services in support of a pro-Franco policy.<sup>550</sup> Therefore, the most logical action for the trade unions would be to encourage industrial action as the best means of challenging the Government's policy towards Spain. This was shared by others in the co-operative movement such as journalist and writer Henry Noel Brailsford and the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the AEU had already refused to negotiate with the Government to speed up rearmament without an end to non-intervention. Brailsford and Cripps hailed such action by the AEU as a strong act which could be supported to turn the tide in Spain, as Brailsford put it "the value of the worker to the Government is not in his vote but in his hands."<sup>551</sup> Such radical action was essential in the eyes of the Labour left as Spain offered the democracies the best chance to settle every issue in Europe by ensuring the survival of the Republic.

Yet, such statements not only demonstrated a serious split from Labour leadership but also resulted in galvanised elements of the crowd engaging in violence at the edge of Hyde Park. Several fascists arrived to protest Labour's rally in support of Spain. Many of these counter-protesters came wearing swastika badges. Sections of the crowd gathered near Stafford Cripps charged the fascists and were quickly locked in a street brawl which police had to breakup.<sup>552</sup> A second larger fight broke out when some fascists began brandishing swastika flags. Some in the crowd shouted instructions to "kill the fascists" which resulted in milk bottles and other objects thrown at the fascists and the police which had attempted to move the groups apart.<sup>553</sup> Some injuries were reported but the bulk of rally attendees remained peaceful, and the event did not end

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<sup>550</sup> "Arms for Spain Demanded," *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1938, 12.

<sup>551</sup> "Speeding Up of Rearming: Labour Co-operation Only on Terms," *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1938, 12.

<sup>552</sup> "Crowd Chases Fascists: Hyde Park Rally Swastika Causes Trouble," *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1938, 11.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid*

the demonstration, but it certainly showed the increased tensions the Spanish issue was creating within London.

With no serious action taken by the Government, Labour's NEC considered in May of 1938 options for aid to be shipped to the Republicans in their increasingly dire struggle with the Nationalists. Numerous DLPs were already gathering support for the Parliamentary Party to call for a national emergency meeting to settle the matter of sending aid to Spain and pressuring the Prime Minister to abandon Britain's policy of non-intervention. The DLPs of East Fulham and Swindon being the most outspoken.<sup>554</sup> As part of their deliberation, the NEC accepted the need to hold a meeting which included representatives from all branches of the Labour Party and affiliated trade unions to "consider the international situation."<sup>555</sup> However, the NEC refused to consider questions of the development of a British "Popular Front" between Labour and the CPGB. The NEC decision provided clarity amidst the divergent responses from Divisional Labour Party's and local trade unions across the country to the question of unifying the British Left. The Hull City DLP and the Sheffield DLP both had previously expressed interest in developing common cause with the Communists, with the Hull DLP going so far as to invite speakers from the local CPGB branch to address the cities May Day events.<sup>556</sup> Other's such as the Birmingham DLP faced bitter divisions over the question of developing a Popular Front, even if it furthered the goal of aiding Spain.

The question of Labour's response to non-intervention was settled with the NEC producing a confidential memorandum for its membership which outlined its desire for the PLP

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<sup>554</sup> Labour Party National Executive Committee, NEC Minutes 25 May 1938, Item 360. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre. Manchester.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid

<sup>556</sup> Ibid

to pressure the Prime Minister to abandon the broken system. The most obvious example of the non-intervention's failure was the continued supply of German and Italian weapons to the Nationalist side, tools which were changing the tide of the conflict. The NEC identified five outcomes from the maintenance of this status quo by Chamberlain,

(a) Greatly to diminish the power of the Spanish democracy... (b) To injure the morale of the democratic countries, both large and small, by its enhancement of Fascist prestige; it also gradually eliminates the democratic government of Spain from the forces opposed to Fascism; (c) this, in turn, weakens France as a force against Fascism... (d) beyond this, the working-class movement in Great Britain is discouraged, and the country's strategic position is involved by the threat to the Empire routes and her naval position; (e) Possible allies of democracy, above all the U.S.A., are isolated and estranged by the sense that Great Britain has abandoned the struggle to maintain the democratic principle and is acquiescing in its conquest by aggression.<sup>557</sup>

Based on these conclusions and the earlier weak responses to Abyssinian and Austrian annexation, the NEC determined that the Chamberlain Ministry had exemplified an effectively pro-fascist foreign policy.<sup>558</sup>

For all of Labour's bluster about the Prime Minister leaving Europe vulnerable to the hungry dictators, the party remained inconsistent in its own remedy. With the collapse of any viable means of ensuring collective security through the League of Nations the NEC feared, like that of its pacifist PLP members earlier in the year, that the continent was drifting towards a general European war. In the PLP's view, Britain giving Germany and Italy a freehand in central Europe was obviously emboldening fascists. Yet, efforts to accelerate British rearmament and air raid protection were "deliberately creating a war crisis atmosphere."<sup>559</sup> The NEC believed that

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<sup>557</sup> Labour Party National Executive Committee, NEC Minutes 25 May 1938, Item 376-377. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid

<sup>559</sup> Labour Party National Executive Committee, NEC Minutes 25 May 1938, Item 378. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre. Manchester.

this war crisis atmosphere was not being engineered to halt fascist expansion, but rather, to aid the Conservatives when they may choose to call an election, framing their campaign around a call for ‘national unity.’<sup>560</sup> The disastrous result of this would be a Conservative victory and Britain being either dragged into an Imperialist war or some form of alliance with the fascist powers.<sup>561</sup>

### The Easter Accords

Amid the British left’s campaign to save the Spanish Republic, Chamberlain was working to reach a settlement with Mussolini which could ensure that Italy protected the status quo in the Mediterranean and avoid the formation of an alliance with Germany. The fruits of such discussions were born out in late April 1938 when Mussolini agreed to several British desires in what would be known as the Easter Accords. Italy sought an end to sanctions resulting from its conquest of Abyssinia and the British wanted to prevent further expansion and end the Italian support for the Nationalist rebels in Spain. Although Chamberlain and his ministers were largely silent about the issue in public, in cabinet there was great concern over the 50,000 Italian soldiers, pilots and technical experts serving alongside Franco’s forces.<sup>562</sup> The decision to negotiate with Italy was controversial even within the Conservative Party with Chamberlain supporting the action, believing Mussolini could be trusted, while Anthony Eden was adamant that Italy merely sought to expand its territory and had no desire to adhere to the international status quo.<sup>563</sup> The Prime Minister believed that the accords would be valuable in both providing security for the Suez Canal, as Italian troop numbers in Libya would be drawn down, and would

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid

<sup>561</sup> Ibid

<sup>562</sup> Bruce Strang, “*Mésentente Cordial: Italian Policy and the Failure of the Easter Accords, 1937-1938,*” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 31.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid

limit the bloodshed in Spain, as it required Italy to begin withdrawing its forces intervening in that conflict. Yet, to secure such a promise of withdrawal and guarantees that Italy would not further destabilize the Mediterranean region, Britain granted *de jure* recognition of Italian conquest of Abyssinia.

When news of the accords being finalised between Britain and Italy reached the public, Labour was furious. The Party viewed the deal as an “extremely bad bargain” and a serious blow to democracy and the remaining influence of the League of Nations.<sup>564</sup> Attlee addressed the matter in Perth at the annual conference of the Scottish Universities Labour Party. He argued that the signing of such a deal demonstrated without a doubt that the Government had “thrown over the ideals which underlay the formation of the League of Nations, and have made an agreement on old-fashioned Imperialist lines...they have adopted the outlook of the aggressive States.”<sup>565</sup> Not only was the Government cruelly abandoning the Abyssinian people in their struggle for freedom but it was signing a death blow to the Spanish Republic “acting as an accomplice to aggression.”<sup>566</sup> Such a display of British weakness on the world stage could only drive the world closer to war, as it demonstrated once more the naïve faith being placed in the dictators to do right by the peoples of the world in face of repeated displays of disregard for the international status quo.

An altogether different response to the accords came days later from George Lansbury as his book *My Quest for Peace* was published at the end of April. It was ironic timing as Lansbury’s resignation from Labour leadership in 1935 was entirely prompted by disputes within the Party over its response to Italian aggression in Abyssinia, the very issue being once more in

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<sup>564</sup> “Rome Pact,” *The Scotsman*, 18 April 1938, 15.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid*

the national spotlight. In the book Lansbury outlined his perspective on this saga and his view of Mussolini. He defended his dissension over the very question of placing sanctions upon Italy and gave a rather positive interpretation of Mussolini based on his meetings with him in 1936.

Lansbury did not echo the view of his fellow Labourites when describing Mussolini and his attitude to war. Rather than be a serious threat to international order, Lansbury noted: “nobody whom I have met has a keener appreciation of the true causes of war than Mussolini.”<sup>567</sup> This was because of Mussolini’s political start as an Italian socialist, which underscored the importance of addressing economic grievances through trade as one of the best means of improving the life of citizens. Due to his background and his stated desire to expand Italian economic opportunities in his conversation with Lansbury, it seemed obvious that Mussolini understood clearly that Italy had nothing to gain from war and everything from maintaining European peace.<sup>568</sup> Such an interpretation placed Lansbury far out of step with the views of Labour leadership which correctly understood the implications of Britain’s deal with Mussolini, a man who could not possibly be trusted.

Lansbury’s book was also timely as others on the British left were concerned over the threat of war and the response from pacifists. In the April issue of *The Political Quarterly* Kingsley Martin authored an article titled *The Pacifist’s Dilemma To-Day*. Martin was specifically addressing ideas presented in the left-wing writer Aldous Huxley’s 1937 published collection of essays titled *Ends and Means* which presented a pacifist approach to avert war which embodied similar ideas which were prevalent in recent pacifist literature. Huxley had repudiated conventional remedies against war such as sanctions and in the event of war, citizens

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<sup>567</sup> George Lansbury, *My Quest for Peace*, (London, Michael Joseph, 1938), 162.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid*

should refuse all co-operation in waging such a conflict.<sup>569</sup> Huxley also specifically argued that the whole process of rearmament must be resisted, instead the road to war must be challenged by Gandhian methods of non-violent resistance.

Martin challenged pacifist sentiments by critically examining the international response to the Spanish Civil War. Britain had gone further than being a neutral bystander, who would allow harm to be done to Spain, its embargo policy has benefited the fascists as pacifism only emboldens Italian and German regimes to exert their interests. As a result, Martin believed that violence could be an appropriate response if followed up with measures of justice, the League of Nations being the central tool of ensuring such a result. Martin argues that the League provided a genuine opportunity to ensure global peace but its time had passed: “It may well be today that the great challenge and opportunity of our age has passed and that it is too late to end the international anarchy without means that seems as bad as the disease.”<sup>570</sup> Pacifism by 1938 was devoid of genuine solutions to the state of world affairs, with the ineptitude of international institutions on full display, pacifists could only suggest doing nothing or defer to Gandhian style non-violent action. The problem for Huxley and his fellows, in Martin’s eyes, was that such non-violent action had no application in the present international crisis, protest only served to embolden fascists to continue their policies of expansion. Martin concludes with the important note, that would later be displayed by Labour members, that pacifists were still allies in the struggle against fascism, both them and other Labourites wanted peace, but only one group had a genuine means of achieving it.

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<sup>569</sup> Kingsley Martin, “The Pacifist Dilemma Today,” *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2, April 1938, 159.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid*, 168.



Attlee expressed his personal concerns over the agreement only days before Parliament was to debate the matter in a letter to his brother Tom. Attlee recognised that the accord was an attempt to prevent German-Italian alignment but demonstrated a danger to continental Europe:

We are really back in 1914. The Government will, I think, continue to allow all the smaller democratic states to be swallowed up by Germany not from a pacifist aversion to war, but because they want time to develop armaments. There is really no peace policy at all, Chamberlain is just an imperialist of the old school but without much knowledge of foreign affairs or appreciation of the forces at work. It is a pretty gloomy outlook.<sup>571</sup>

It was under this ‘gloomy outlook’ that Labour approached the matter when the Party had the opportunity to demonstrate the accords fundamental weakness in Westminster.

When the House of Commons met to approve the agreement on 2 May, Labour used the opportunity to demonstrate that Chamberlain had firmly adopted a pro-Fascist foreign policy at the expense of the rights of small nations. Herbert Morrison provided the strongest criticism from the Labour benches with his focus squarely on the inconceivable position that the Prime Minister expected the British people to accept. By reaching a deal with Italy, Morrison argued that the Prime Minister was telling the public that “the treatment of Spain is a wrong, and the treatment of Abyssinia is a wrong, and we are asked to believe that these two wrongs make a right. It really constitutes a double shame to the honour of our country, a double disgrace to the British name in the eyes of the world. It constitutes the ethics of the double cross. That is one of the disadvantages of the Prime Minister getting mixed up with swastika politicians.”<sup>572</sup> By attempting to make friends with such ‘swastika politicians’ as Mussolini and Hitler, Chamberlain was putting Europe on a path towards war. Such an accord with Italy, in quick succession of Britain’s tepid reaction to the annexation of Austria demonstrated that small nations could not

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<sup>571</sup> Clement Attlee to Tom Attlee, 29 April 1938, MS. Eng. c. 4792. Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>572</sup> Herbert Morrison, *HC Deb 02 May 1938, Vol 335. cc. 555.*

place their faith in British and French support should they fall under the hungry eyes of fascist dictators. As Morrison put it: “The Prime Minister is driving the smaller Powers of Europe to the conclusion that their best way to security is to patch up some kind of a peace—and a surrender—with Germany and Italy, even if it be at the expense of the interests of this country.”<sup>573</sup> The driving force for such policy by the Prime Minister could only be due, in Morrison’s eyes, to Conservative class interests in expanding the power of capitalists. Capitalist power could only grow with an inevitable increase in arms production and increased collaboration with fascist states. The fact that such a deal could have clear strategic benefit of driving a wedge between Hitler and Mussolini was not given fair consideration by Morrison or other Labour speakers on the matter. To Labour, by not ensuring that a mechanism existed to punish Italy for delaying its withdrawal from Spain, the Easter Accords could only be further proof that Britain was on the brink of repeating the disaster of 1914.

### The Popular Front Campaign Revisited

Faced with mounting crisis in Spain and appeasement of Italy by the Prime Minister, members of the Labour left were losing patience with Party leadership and its seeming inability to successfully pressure the Government to change course. Seeing renewed campaigning for a British popular front by some local Labour Parties greatly concerned Labour and TUC leadership who feared that the unity of the Party could be damaged by fresh infighting at a time when unity was essential to countering appeasement.

On 13 April Labour’s NEC issued a statement for all Divisional Parties and the press clearly stating the Party’s opposition to entering any form of a British Popular Front with the

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid, cc. 560.

Liberals or any left-wing movement. The NEC reiterated its address to the Party in 1937 which appealed for Party loyalty over any attempt to unify the left under one banner as it posed a serious threat to future electoral opportunity and Labour's ability to enact its democratic socialist objectives.<sup>574</sup> Yet, within days of the NEC making its rejection of any Popular Front clear, the Party was facing a public fight over the issue from some of the more radical branches of the Labour movement. On 17 April, the Co-operative Party held its conference in Brighton where the issue of entering into a Popular Front was a central issue.<sup>575</sup> Labour- Co-operative MP Alfred Barnes, speaking in his role as Chairman of the Co-Operative Party, opened discussion in Brighton in favour of establishing a Popular Front among all progressive parties in the United Kingdom "Is British democracy to be hamstrung while the Opposition parties and groups that defend the League of Nations and collective security abroad continue to practice political isolation at home?"<sup>576</sup> Others voices such as A.V. Alexander were quick to push back against such ideas, urging the Co-operative Party to avoid disunity with Labour, instead encouraging the movement to focus on ways of achieving victory at the next general election.<sup>577</sup> In the end the Co-Operative Conference voted in favour of Barnes motion to support the development of a Popular Front in the face fascist expansion in Europe. The final tally was 2,306,000 in favour of a Popular Front and 1,924,000 a majority of 382,000.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, "No Popular Front," *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 April 1938, 5.

<sup>575</sup> The Co-Operative Party is legally registered as a separate Party from Labour but has always had an electoral pact where its candidates do not contest Labour and in the House of Commons all Co-Operative MPs are part of Labour's caucus.

<sup>576</sup> National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, "No Popular Front," *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 April 1938, 5.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid*

This decision by the Co-Operative Conference would be dramatically overturned in June. The core problem for Co-Operative Popular Front advocates being that without the Labour Party officially joining the Popular Front, the movement lacked political legitimacy. Other groups such as the powerful National Union of Railwaymen and the National Conference of Labour Women both clamped down on the small number of members that sought their respective organisations support for the Front.<sup>579</sup> With a lack of support from large trade unions the Popular Front Campaign slowly died out in May and June 1938.

### Exposing the Air Muddle

Fear of aerial bombing only continued to grow in intensity amongst the British public in 1938. Labour had already been alarmed by the collapse of British efforts to maintain numerical parity in military aircraft production with Germany earlier in the 1930s. Japanese bombing of Chinese cities had intensified in early 1938 and received significant press coverage in Britain, only exacerbating fears that any outbreak of war in Europe would leave British cities to a similar fate to that of Guernica in 1937. In responding to the growing fear that bombing could bring the horrific experiences on far off battlefields directly to one's home, academics, the Government, and Labour all produced a flurry of studies of the potential damage, both psychological and material of bombing and determine effective counter measures.

Fear of bombing was captured in the 1938 study *Air Defence of Britain*, a government report on the threat of bombing to British cities which was so widely read it was published in paperback by Penguin Books for broad consumption. The report centred much of its attention on the moral panic which bombing presented by threatening the safety of women and children. It

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<sup>579</sup> John Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London, 1969, p. 236.

was believed that the destruction inflicted on the home front would be utterly horrific as “the first raid of the next war will be a completely bestial affair, mass murder to an extent which has been approached but not reached in China during the last few months.”<sup>580</sup> Others such as Virginia Woolf focused specific attention on the horrific outcome of bombing upon children and homes with the shocking impact that appears in photographs of communities which endured air raids. The difference for Woolf of seeing images of dead children and houses ripped apart compared to reading about such events made a far more powerful impact which should necessitate state action.<sup>581</sup>

The PLP’s leadership had already reached expressed similar concerns in private meetings in April. Hugh Dalton had noted in his diary on 8 April after attending a lunch with *New Statesman* writer Kingsley Martin that Britain was facing a perilous deficiency in arms which forced Chamberlain to accept a docile foreign policy. Martin noted that “the country was so weak in arms, and London so indefensible, and France so weak, that we could not afford to antagonise in any degree a German-Italian combination.”<sup>582</sup> In a following entry in Dalton’s diary he noted a meeting between himself, Attlee and Alexander, on 11 April that Labour’s information on British aircraft production showed serious problems both in quantity and quality in contrast to the best information they could receive on German production. Dalton asserted that such information demonstrated a dramatic failure of the Air Ministry and of its partnership with private industry through the Shadow Factory Scheme was “the biggest single issue at the present

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<sup>580</sup> L.E.O. Charlton, G.T. Garratt, and Lt-Com. R. Fletcher, *Air Defence of Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1938), 10. As quoted in, Susan Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, (New York, Cambridge University Press), 193.

<sup>581</sup> Grayzel, 195-196.

<sup>582</sup> Dalton, “Political Diary,” ed. Pimlott, 227.

moment...”<sup>583</sup> It was decided that Dalton would take the lead in presenting the matter to Parliament and relaying it to the public.

The failure to maintain air parity combined with increasing evidence of serious unpreparedness in air raid protection measures provided Labour with a clear wedge issue which could be utilised to pressure Chamberlain to act. Labour framed the issue as the Government’s “Air Muddle,” and produced a pamphlet for national distribution of the same name. The pamphlet and Dalton’s address in Parliament on the matter took a strong non-partisan approach to the matter with the central desire of Labour being the formation of a national inquiry into Britain’s air defences which had received expressions of support from Winston Churchill and the Liberal Party.<sup>584</sup>

The issue of air rearmament also had important ideological underpinnings for Labour as the decline of Britain’s hard power compared to Germany presented a serious threat to the League of Nations. There could be no future hope of using the League to prevent a dispute without a strong Britain to enforce its decisions in the face of fascist aggression. For Dalton, it was critical to stress this point to the electorate as “the Labour Party’s policy on arms has sometimes been honestly misunderstood and sometimes disingenuously misrepresented.”<sup>585</sup> Dalton noted that Labour desired to maintain such armed forces as were necessary to defend Britain and meet the country’s international obligations. Labour foreign policy sought to remain loyal to anti-capitalist values by seeking new treaties to end economic grievances which encourage states to fight one another whilst also halting aggression through League action

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<sup>583</sup> Dalton, “Political Diary,” ed. Pimlott, 229. For more information on the Shadow Factory Scheme see: Little, Stephen E., and Margaret Grieco. “Shadow Factories, Shallow Skills? An Analysis of Work Organisation in the Aircraft Industry in the Second World War.” *Labor history* 52, no. 2 (2011): 193–216.

<sup>584</sup> Dalton, “The Government’s Air Muddle Exposed,” (London: Transport House, 1938), 1-2.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

supported by a superiority of armed force.<sup>586</sup> This represented an important shift in position as the Party was clearly stating its support for a strong armed force in Britain and attacking Chamberlain for allowing the country to face fascist aggression from a position of blatant weakness. Labour brought specific attention to the failure of the Shadow Factory Scheme which had little to show after running for three years. The Scheme sought to partner new military aviation production with that of auto-manufacturers, often using different parts of the same production plants to better provide access to industrial expertise. Dalton argued that the Scheme had proved effective at making good quality engines but had serious deficiencies in the creation of airframes, without which RAF strength could never be improved.<sup>587</sup> The biggest problems leading to such challenges were the over complexity of aircraft designs approved by the Air Ministry and inconsistent orders leading to frequent layoffs of trained staff, therefore Labour believed the only genuine solution would be a complete overhaul of the aircraft production system.

Labour also brought attention to the sorry state of air raid protection plans. The defence of major urban centres from bombing was top of mind for much of the British population as it was believed that in the event of war, it would be only a matter of hours before the horrors of Guernica were inflicted on British cities. Dalton was particularly outraged that the Government could not commit to a date for ensuring adequate barrage balloon coverage of cities, apart from London.<sup>588</sup> This last point was far more powerful in demonstrating the serious neglect that Chamberlain had allowed to take place in a way which could be easily understood and connected with by the average voter. The ‘Air Muddle’ presented an enormous challenge as tensions in

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<sup>586</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

Europe were only continuing to rise over Spain, and increasingly by the start of the summer of 1938, Czechoslovakia.

### Conclusion

The first half of 1938 brought a series of international crises which strained the postwar settlement the breaking point. While some prominent figures in Labour's pacifist wing remained committed to the principle of unilateral British disarmament, others such as Norman Angell took a pragmatic turn, accepting that Labour would need to accept that some level of rearmament to maintain peace amongst the great powers. This attention on foreign policy also proved to be an effective wedge issue in by-elections which produced Labour gains, or at least the Party interpreted such victories as being the product of dysfunctional Tory policy. The problem for Labour was that these minor victories could not be translated into a wider shift in public consciousness with which to threaten Chamberlain's prospects in a future general election. The Anschluss caused more alarm for policy makers in Westminster than in local constituencies and the Spanish Civil War continued to galvanise the attention of the British Left and encourage Labour to resist the policy of Non-Intervention but proved to be of little interest of Liberal or Conservative voters. Where Labour was able to define itself was on the issue of aircraft production and urban air raid defence planning. The threat of German bombers was an issue which was far more connected to anyone living in London, Glasgow, or Manchester as it represented a far more direct threat than the fate of Spain or small central European states. It was the threat of war appearing above British homes that could provide the Party with a strong area of attack upon the Government. This fear of bombing combined with a destabilisation of the postwar order in central Europe created the seeds for the second half of 1938 to usher in a sea change in Labour foreign policy.



## Stand Fast for Peace & Freedom! The Sudetenland Crisis of 1938

### Introduction

The spectre of war hung over Europe in 1938. The start of the year had already seen an escalation in the brutality of the Spanish Civil War, and the German Anschluss of Austria. The inability of the League of Nations to counter German and Italian interventionism had been on full display through these crises. For the British Labour Party, the League's ineptitude presented a significant challenge to its ardent support for collective security as the optimal focus of British foreign policy. By July the Labour Party was forced to grapple with the Conservative Party's alternative response, appeasement, to settle a brewing territorial dispute between Adolf Hitler and Czechoslovakia over the border region known as the Sudetenland. Compared to crises over Abyssinia, Manchuria, China, Austria, or Spain, the case for aiding the Czechs was exemplary, with no concerns over association with Communists, slavery, or right-wing authoritarianism, to taint a call to uphold territorial integrity in the face of aggression.

Chamberlain's infamous decision to give Germany a free hand to annex the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1938 has been ceaselessly criticized in the aftermath of the Second World War, viewed as the last chance for Britain and France to avert the calamity of 1939 to 1945. Resistance to appeasement is understood to have been undertaken by prominent post-war Conservatives, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, and most of all, Winston Churchill. In popular memory it is Churchill who made the most dramatic stand in support of Czechoslovakia and in opposition of Hitler. It is certainly important to recognise the principled stand Churchill made to challenge what he referred to as "a disaster of the first magnitude."<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> Winston Churchill, 5 October 1938, House of Commons Debate, as quoted in "Disaster of the First Magnitude, 1938," NationalChurchillMuseum.org

Popular history has condemned Chamberlain, vindicated Churchill and left appeasement as a dirty word, a perpetual sign of political weakness to those attached to it.<sup>590</sup>

Churchill provided a leading voice of opposition from within the Conservative Party, but it was the opposition Labour Party that provided a countrywide and comprehensive protest to appeasement. Concern regarding the fate of Czechoslovakia had been on the minds of some leaders in the Labour Party as early as 1935. Hugh Dalton, Labour's spokesman for foreign affairs in the House of Commons, had already raised discussion of the unique place Czechoslovakia held in central Europe after a trip to the country in May of 1935. Dalton remarked that the country appeared to him to be "the freest and most civilized land in central Europe... the simple decencies of democracy maintained, amid surrounding decadence."<sup>591</sup> Dalton went on to acknowledge that the country had a large range of minority groups but that they were treated fairly, and he did note the tensions between Czech authorities and Sudetenland German speakers. He believed that the question over minority rights could be solved by peaceful means, rejecting large scale territorial changes but believing, "it would not be impossible here and there to cut away the German rind from the Czech cheese, and if this were to be regarded as the final settlement, leading to good and neighbourly relations... accompanied by a diminution of trade barriers, there would be much to be said for it."<sup>592</sup> From a reading of such a statement on

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<sup>590</sup> Academic history of appeasement and of Neville Chamberlain specifically has drifted towards a more sympathetic interpretation than the popular memory. For more sympathetic interpretations see; John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989); Andrew Stedman, *Alternatives to Appeasement*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Robert Self, *Neville Chamberlain* (New York: Routledge, 2016); More critical interpretations continue to appear at regular intervals, including; Tim Bouverie, *Appeasement*, (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020); Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, (London: Allen Lane, 2018); Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>591</sup> Hugh Dalton, "Some Impressions of Czechoslovakia," *New Statesman*, Vol. 9, No. 709 (18 May 1935).

<sup>592</sup> Hugh Dalton, "England and Europe," *Contemporary Review*, No. 148, (August 1935), as quoted in, Naylor, John. *Labour's International Policy*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London, 1969. p. 238.

its own, it appears that Dalton would be favourable to Chamberlain's eventual settlement with Hitler, but such a move went beyond the scale of Dalton's considerations of 'cutting the rind'. Dalton and several other Labour leaders were also conscious that by 1938 it was clear that Hitler could not be taken at his word, his wilful disregard for honouring existing European settlements whether they be non-intervention in Spain, or the annexation of Austria were evidence enough.

During the Party Conference for 1936, Ernest Bevin made a strong statement during a debate on an amendment regarding the international situation of that year. The motion sought a nation wide campaign by the TUC and the Labour Party to ensure all possible pressure be placed on the Government to, "prevent it entering into any arrangement with "Hitler" Germany outside the League of Nations [and] shall press for a revision in the application of sanctions to more effectively penalise the "aggressor" nation."<sup>593</sup> Such a discussion took place in the aftermath of Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 which demonstrated for Labour the plain fact that Hitler was not afraid of the League of Nations at the present time and may be open to violating further restrictions from the Treaty of Versailles. While debating this motion, Bevin made note of the perceived weakness of the British polity to German expansion and what he believed should be Labour's resolve:

The International Movement are wondering what we are going to do in Britain. Czechoslovakia, one of the most glorious little democratic countries, hedged in all round, is in danger of being sacrificed tomorrow. They are our brothers... You cannot save Czechoslovakia with speeches. We are not in office but I want to drive this Government to defend democracy against its will, if I can...It want to say to Mussolini and Hitler...'If you are banking on being able to attacking the East or the West, and you are going to treat the British Socialist Movement as being weak and are going to rely on that at the critical moment, you are taking us too cheaply.'<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1936), 195.

<sup>594</sup> Labour Party, *36<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 203-204. Bevin's reference to, 'The International Movement,' represents the Labour movement but also the wider danger that European Trade unionists faced in a world with growing Fascist influence.

Bevin's words would be only too revealing once the dispute between Germany and Czechoslovakia reached its climax in the summer of 1938.

Even before that moment of crisis in 1938, Labour had provided a public comment on the Party's concern for the integrity of Czech independence. Multiple articles were published by the Trades Union Congress magazine, *Labour* between January of 1937 and June of 1938 covering various elements of the situation. Labour MP John Parker drew up plans in May of 1938 for Labour's Advisory Committee on International Questions (ACIQ), which aimed to settle Hitler's grievances by proposing a plebiscite in the Sudetenland thereby minimising the importance for frontiers. Parker proposed that any areas recording a less than 75% sentiment for autonomy remain Czech.<sup>595</sup> In the end such an idea had little impact as it never got beyond Labour circles and failed to consider the broader implications for the Czechs of giving up such strategically valuable territory. Nonetheless, these discussions both public and private, demonstrated in the words of John Naylor: "Czechoslovakia was hardly a far-away country of which little was known – not for the Labour Party."<sup>596</sup> Such an understanding contrasted with the perception Chamberlain presented in a speech to the public a few months later when reflecting on the potential for war between the Allies and Germany: "How, horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing."<sup>597</sup> Responding to such a crisis, Labour took a radically different tone.

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<sup>595</sup> Naylor, 238.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>597</sup> "Chamberlain Addresses the Nation on Peace Negotiations," (27 September 1938), BBC Archive, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/chamberlain-addresses-the-nation-on-his-negotiations-for-peace/zjrjgwx>

Faced with the threat of calamity in late 1938, Labour demonstrated an understanding of the danger German expansionism posed both for Britain and European stability. The Party worked diligently to garner opposition not simply amongst the left and the trade union movement but also the broader electorate. Whilst not in any form embracing war, the Labour Party made clear that Chamberlain had to take a firm stand against Hitler, ideally forcing the Germans to back down, if necessary, to fight in defence of Czechoslovakian independence. Labour's campaign was multifaceted, utilising, the press, public gatherings, pamphleteering, by-elections, and debate in the House of Commons, internal negotiation with Labour and the Government, and coordination with Léon Blum of the French socialists, to reach the widest possible audience. Labour was cautious but not opposed to collaboration with other political forces who also understood the danger of German expansion.

Labour sought out support from like minded trade unionists, liberals, conservatives, communists, and independent labourites. Such support was garnered at both the highest levels of political leadership, and at the local constituency level, sometimes resulting in conflict between such Party branches. The campaign in support of peace and the independence of Czechoslovakia was given significant resources and had the potential to be a watershed moment for the Labour Party's embrace of a pragmatic foreign policy that cultivated a strong public opposition to Chamberlain's premiership. The subsequent success of Chamberlain's "Peace for our time" with Hitler, encapsulated in the Munich agreement of 1938 outflanked Labour. The Party remained a victim to its earlier calls for unilateral disarmament and had trouble differentiating their pro-Czech stance with a perception that such support made them pro-war. The mixed results of the parliamentary by-elections held in the two months after Munich gave credence to such an assessment. Labour softened its rhetoric but did not rebound to its earlier foreign policy. Instead,

it stood firm in its acceptance of a more pragmatic position which favoured limited re-armament, the development of a European balance of power, based around a deep-rooted hostility to the Prime Minister.<sup>598</sup> It would take nearly a year for Labour to recover from such a shrewd maneuver by Chamberlain.

### Opening Moves

As summer began in 1938 it was apparent to any international observer that Europe was on the brink. The civil war in Spain had escalated with the bombing of British merchant ships in the Atlantic. In Germany, Hitler had made clear his desire to ‘settle’ the question of the fate of the Sudetenland and as he framed it, end the oppression of the German speaking population by the government in Prague. The Sudetenland provided a unique problem for Hitler compared to earlier efforts to expand German power and defy the Treaty of Versailles. Unlike Austria, the Czechs not only retained a vibrant liberal democracy in a region awash with dictators, but also held a strong defensive relationship with its neighbours. It had entered the ‘Little Entente’ in 1921, a collective defense agreement, with Romania and Yugoslavia.<sup>599</sup> Although on the surface the British Labour Party should have embraced such a move as a means of preventing future war, the accord was viewed with concern in Labour circles as it was not enacted alongside an embrace of disarmament by its members. A *Daily Herald* correspondent questioned whether such a pact was not merely the creation of a, “new balance of power,” one which could be a threat to

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<sup>598</sup> Labour framed much of its foreign policy criticisms as attacks on Chamberlain’s personal leadership, rather than the National Government or the Conservative Party. It should also be stressed that in some cases Labour leadership dropped use of the term’s collective security and League of Nations in the weeks following Munich, not completely abandoned from Labour vocabulary but certainly on the backburner in contrast to the language of earlier years.

<sup>599</sup> Piotr Wandycz, “The Little Entente: Sixty Years Later,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 59. No. 4, (1981), 548.

European stability when interviewing the Czech foreign minister, Edvard Benes.<sup>600</sup> Balance of power and the establishment of alliance systems were of significant concern to politicians on both the right and left in Britain during the 1920s as this was perceived as being a critical element in the outbreak of the Great War.

More important to the events of 1938, the Czechs had also secured a military alliance with France in 1924. Therefore, the threat of invasion would obligate the French to act and place the British in an inflexible position. It would be almost impossible to keep the United Kingdom out of a general European war should France be involved due to the close defence relationship the two states had and that Britain and France were the de facto defenders of the post Versailles world order. The Sudetenland also had strategic value for the Czechs as it had arms factories and a fortified defense line along the German border, the chief means of safeguarding the country in the event of a German attack.<sup>601</sup> These elements were combined with the fact that the Czechs had a modern and well armed military with high quality tanks and aircraft.<sup>602</sup> Therefore, not only did the Czechs have incentive to protect their territorial integrity but that also had the means to fight for it and allies obligated to assist.

The question over the fate of the Sudetenland and the unwillingness of Hitler to backdown meant that the Labour Party could not ignore the potential that Britain could be pulled into a war in support of the Czechs and their French allies. In private, discussion had already been taking place amongst some members of the Parliamentary Labour Party regarding

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<sup>600</sup> *Daily Herald*, (8 August 1923), 3. Benes would go on to be the President of Czechoslovakia during the Sudetenland Crisis and lead the Czech government in exile during the Second World War.

<sup>601</sup> P. E. Caquet, "The Balance of Forces on the Eve of Munich," *International History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 33.

<sup>602</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, (London: Houghton & Mifflin, 1976): 279-280; and for a full overview of the strategic situation facing France, Britain, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, see Williamson Murray, "Munich, 1938: The Military Confrontation," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 282-303.

Czechoslovakia. On 7 July 1938, Hugh Dalton had a meeting with Labour Peer, Lord Noel-Buxton who urged him to assist in persuading the Labour Party to “issue a declaration urging the Czech government to make large and speedy concessions and to hint that if they delayed much longer or offered too little, they would lose the support of British public opinion.”<sup>603</sup> Dalton was quick to reply that he held no hope that the Party would act as Noel-Buxton wished. Dalton concluded his discussion with an exchange that illustrated his stark division with the likes of Buxton,

On parting Buxton said, ‘I hope you do not regard me as utterly pro-German or being a Nazi agent.’ I [Dalton] said, ‘I know you have always been more pro-German than most of the Party and I think that you are less shocked than more of us are by the internal regime in Germany.’ He replied, ‘I am very shocked by much that is going on and I am doing my best to help the refugees.’<sup>604</sup>

Dalton noted that later Buxton went on to see Attlee to gain support on the same issue and was snubbed by him vigorously. From this it seems probable that at this early stage of the crisis Labour’s front bench was not supportive of a complete abandonment of the Czechs. Dalton specifically, knew from his own venture to Czechoslovakia that it was a state that stood by liberal democracy when surrounded by increasingly hostile dictatorial regimes.

Yet, after being rebuffed in private by the PLP leadership, Noel-Buxton took his pro-German peace crusade into the public eye to sway the electorate. On 25 July, *The Manchester Guardian* published his letter to the editor titled, “Autonomy for the Sudeten Germans.” Noel-Buxton argued that peace could only be ensured by Prague immediately granting full autonomy to the Sudetenland otherwise, it would be the Czechs, not Germany, that made war inevitable.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton: 1918-40, 1945-60*. Edited by Ben Pimlott, (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986), 235.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid

<sup>605</sup> “Autonomy for the Sudeten Germans: Lord Noel-Buxton’s Argument,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (25 July 1938), 18.



Under this argument, the British had no interests in the Sudetenland and should leave it to its fate. Noel-Buxton went further than merely stating his case by providing a counter to each of the arguments against abandoning the Sudetenland, in Labour and Liberal circles. These ranged from the outlandish, such as hoping that Hitler's regime was temporary and ordinary Germans would soon tire of it, to the pragmatic, that concessions to Germany would only embolden Hitler to take further action.<sup>606</sup> Noel-Buxton believed that Germany could not be emboldened as it was merely seeking redress for the treatment it had received following the First World war he also attacked Labour's view that surrendering Czech territory would be an injustice, rather, it would be Labour ignoring a people's aspiration for self-determination. Labour had argued in favour of self-determination for the peoples of other territories under fascist threat, making Noel-Buxton's focus on this issue particularly potent. It was in the latter portions of Noel-Buxton's letter that his pro-German outlook became all too revealing. He declared that he was willing to sacrifice the freedoms of Sudeten Jews and Socialists to German rule if peace could be maintained, and he countered those who argued for Czech control of the Sudetenland for issues of national security stating: "strategic considerations cannot be allowed to play havoc with ethnography... There does not exist a natural right in every state... to extend its dominion to the nearest mountain barrier."<sup>607</sup> Such hypocrisy was embraced by Noel-Buxton with little regard for Britain having a natural defence inherently due to it being an island and unlike Hugh Dalton, all supported without any direct knowledge of the realities the Czechs faced on the ground.

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid, many in the Labour Party believed well into 1940, once Britain was at war with Germany, that the German people could not possibly be in love with fascism and would inevitably revolt against it. The goal post for what would produce such resistance always seemed to shift.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid

Labour's NEC was very concerned about Noel-Buxton's decision to present such an aggressive rebuff of Labour's stance towards Czechoslovakia. At a meeting of the NEC International Sub Committee on 25 July, the same day of Noel-Buxton's article appearing, Herbert Morrison brought up the matter. The Committee included the Party Chairman George Dallas, Labour's International Secretary William Gillies, Hugh Dalton, Morrison, and Noel-Buxton, among others. Morrison moved that a letter on behalf of the Labour Party, be sent to *The Manchester Guardian*, The German SPD and the Czech socialist party, "in order to avoid misunderstandings and to counteract misleading propaganda in Czechoslovakia...disassociating the Labour Party from Noel-Buxton's arguments and proposals."<sup>608</sup> The Committee overruled Noel-Buxton's objections and George Dallas, penned a letter published on 29 July. Apart from publicly disassociating Labour from Noel-Buxton's comments, Dallas outlined that Labour endorsed the position of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) given on 30 May. The LSI position was in approval of:

The Government of Czechoslovakia is pursuing a conciliatory policy towards the German-speaking people within the State and is prepared to discuss with them and with other nationalities the removal of any reasonable grievances on the basis of equality, freedom, and justice for all sections of the population within the framework of the Constitution.<sup>609</sup>

Only days later, the 1 August issue of *The Manchester Guardian* included a letter to the editor from Noel-Buxton apologising for suggesting that his opinions might have been construed as official Party policy, whilst standing firm on his personal belief that the leadership was wrong. A letter was also included from Labour MP Rhys Davies which rebuffed George Dallas' statement.

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<sup>608</sup> "International Sub-Committee of the National Executive," *NEC Minutes*, 27 July 1938, item 642. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre. Manchester.

<sup>609</sup> "Lord Noel-Buxton and Czechs: Labour Party's Reply," *The Manchester Guardian*, (29 July 1938), 20.

Davies was a staunch pacifist with long ties to the trade union movement and the Labour Party serving as an under-secretary for the Home Department in the Labour's first government in 1924. Davies claimed in support of Noel-Buxton that:

There is a strong and growing body of opinion within the Labour Party itself which is much disturbed at the bellicose interpretation of Labour's foreign policy by our national executive. Whether it is intended or not, the fact remains that the executive and those acting for them have given the impression that nothing short of open hostility by Great Britain and France against Germany and Italy can possibly bring peace to Europe.<sup>610</sup>

To Davies, not only was Labour's foreign policy increasingly hawkish, but it was also centred on Germanophobia. Dallas and the rest of the NEC showed such dislike of Germans that they were willing to abandon the fight for minority rights, something that should be central Labour's socialist politics.<sup>611</sup> Davies' letter further demonstrated to the public a significant divide between some elements of Labour and in the following days garnered both criticism and support. One supporter, wrote a pro-German column arguing, that Labour leaders had shown a curious inconsistency on foreign affairs, paying lip service to peace while advocating policies that could only lead to war.<sup>612</sup> Under this narrative, Labour's disdain of Nazism had blinded the leadership to the realities in central Europe and made them hypocrites for ignoring legitimate German grievances under Hitler, while condemning injustices of Versailles towards Germany during the Weimar era.<sup>613</sup> This was to become a common theme by pacifists that attacked Labour's hostility to Nazism.

In short order, Robert Bruce, Labour's prospective candidate for South Aberdeen wrote a condemnation of Davies' letter. It was pertinent that Davies be challenged by a Scottish Labour

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<sup>610</sup> "Labour Party and the Czechs: Mr. Dallas's Letter," *The Manchester Guardian*, (1 August 1938), 16.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>612</sup> "German Grievances," *The Manchester Guardian*, (3 August 1938), 18.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid*, the Weimar era is a reference to the period of German democratic rule between 1919 and 1933.

representative as he had relied, in his letter, on an analogy of the NEC response to the Czech crisis with Scotland suffering from English oppression. Bruce noted that minorities in Czech territory had full political and social rights and that the loss of the Sudetenland would quickly result in the loss of an independent Czechoslovak republic.<sup>614</sup> Yet, worst of all, “He [Davies] aligns himself with the Tory policy of concession under threat – if the threat is from the Right – and falls into the easy pitfall of believing that a policy of collective resistance is bellicose.”<sup>615</sup> Bruce argued that such views were folly, based on his own recent tour of the Sudetenland, seeing Storm Troops and Sudeten Nazis marching in the streets. To him, the events of the May crisis earlier that year, had already demonstrated the potential for the Czechs to defend their freedoms:

As for the Czechs, they are convinced, as I am, that their action on May 21, which impelled a strong stand by France and Russia, not only saved their own independence but preserved the peace of Europe. It was the first time that Hitler had been stopped; he was stopped by a policy which has been adopted by the Labour party as the only way to preserve peace.<sup>616</sup>

Bruce, even more than some of Labour’s leadership, articulated that a clear stand by the Great European powers could prevent war, even if the League of Nations was no longer a viable mechanism for mobilising collective action. Although Bruce was only writing as one member of the Labour Party, his statement suggests support for a return to a foreign policy based on alliance systems and balance of power, even if it must be clothed in the language of collective security to maintain party unity and limit Tory attack.

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<sup>614</sup> “Mr. Rhys Davies’s Letter,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (3 August 1938),18.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid

<sup>616</sup> Ibid, The May Crisis was a brief episode that saw sudden Czech fears of a German invasion due to a border dispute, in late May 1938. Strong Anglo-French support for Czech territorial integrity quickly de-escalated the situation. It remained an important indicator for political observers of how the second flare up of tensions later in 1938 might be resolved. For Labour it demonstrated that German expansion would not stop with Austrian annexation but could be halted with a stern united response from Europe’s great powers.

For the broader Party membership and the electorate, it was essential that Labour provide a coherent statement of its position on foreign policy after years of dramatic developments by fascist aggression. Such a need was met when Clement Attlee, amid the Noel-Buxton controversy, penned an article for the *Daily Herald* on 26 July titled “The Peace That People Seek.” Attlee outlined Labour’s position on the emerging crisis and combating attacks from the Conservatives and pacifists on the left. He acknowledged pacifist criticism with reference to a letter recently received asking why Labour was standing for the Versailles Treaty and Imperialism instead of advocating measures of appeasement, and another which claimed that the Party was militaristic for its calls for improved production and air defence capability.<sup>617</sup> Such statements strongly suggest that by the start of the summer Labour’s stance was unclear and could be interpreted as being centred on two opposite positions. Attlee attacked such a perception by laying out the work Labour had pursued in the years since the end of the Great War. Never believing in the infallibility of the Treaty of Versailles, Labour had supported German entry into the League of Nations, the abolition of war indemnities, all-round disarmament, and utilization of the League as a means of maintaining international rule of law.<sup>618</sup> The fact that such initiatives had failed was due not to Labour but the Conservatives’ willing acceptance of a degradation of the League over the course of the 1930s. Such an interpretation was incredibly astute, demonstrating a clear understanding of Labour’s internationalism and the central fact that the peace of 1919 was not inherently doomed to fail.

Attlee embraced a pragmatic interpretation of the results of Britain’s weakness at the League, perhaps one too revealing of the collapse in effectiveness of collective security as the

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<sup>617</sup> Clement Attlee, “The Peace that People Seek,” *Daily Herald*, (26 July 1938), 8.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid*

Party's central tenet of foreign policy. He observed: "A race in armaments has ensued. Collective Security through the League has been scrapped. There is again an anarchy of armed States. War and the threat of war are more than ever instruments of policy and these instruments are in the hands of dangerous dictators, restrained by no public opinion."<sup>619</sup> Attlee went on to directly attack Chamberlain asserting that he poses as "an apostle of appeasement," who argues that anyone who opposes him are recklessly risking war, if not actually seeking it. Comment was also made on Labour's policy to armaments, one which drifts far from where the Party stood only a few years previous but shied away from a wholehearted disaffiliation with an element of collective security through the League of Nations. British arms are justified in relation to the maintenance of order, not capable of aggression, like how police officers have the equipment to keep the peace but not brutalise. Key to the longer evolution of Labour's stance on arms and peace is an acceptance that some increase in armaments to fulfil national and global obligations was necessary, and that it was prepared to stand in defence against aggression.<sup>620</sup> These positions that Attlee outlined meant that at the very least that the Labour Party was making a more concrete framing of its positions on foreign policy for its engaged political base as the threat of a general European war increased. Understanding the narrative Labour sought to present at this stage makes it possible to gauge how the Party was impacted by the onslaught of events in the following months.

Naturally, Attlee's statement was indicative of official Labour policy towards Germany, but it was not universally accepted amongst the Party rank and file. On 1 August, Sir Norman Angell, a former Labour MP and 1933 Nobel Peace Prize winner who was still closely affiliated

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<sup>619</sup> Ibid

<sup>620</sup> Ibid

with the Labour Party, gave a well publicized lecture at London's Bedford College regarding the solution to preserve peace.<sup>621</sup> He was not vehemently opposed to the use of armed force to settle the brewing dispute over Czech territory but also made clear it must be a last resort. In his words, "the only purpose for which war should be used was to restrain the making of war. Force could have no deterrent effect upon crime unless the criminal knew beforehand that he would have to meet that force, and unless he knew what was the crime that would invoke punishment."<sup>622</sup> Therefore, Angell urged a recognition that war, and at its most basic element, territorial dispute, would be caused from economic disparities, that whilst Germany and Italy were obviously the aggressor states by 1938, showing flagrant disregard for international solutions, this was driven by a desire for raw materials. Angell argued that such issues would best be addressed through the creation of a fact-finding commission which allowed Italy, Germany, plus other neighbouring states to find a solution that could be amicable, and to ensure success, have all facts openly shared with the peoples of each state.<sup>623</sup> Such a position represented an important minority in the Labour Party who were not absolute pacifists but still wedded themselves to an increasingly dated methodology to ensure peace, one which failed to demonstrate a firm grasp of the reality of the situation at hand.<sup>624</sup> The reception to these ideas by Labour's trade union base would be settled in short order.

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<sup>621</sup> Angell had decided not to stand for re-election in 1931 following the fracturing of the Labour Party but had decided to re-enter politics in 1935 as the threat of militarism intensified. He stood unsuccessfully for the London University Seat in 1935 but remained active in Labour political discourse for decades afterwards.

<sup>622</sup> "Sir Norman Angell Peace Plan," *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 August 1938.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid

<sup>624</sup> Economic considerations were important to the non-Angell majority of the Party but in foreign policy discourse they were by 1938 secondary to fascist authoritarianism which could exert its will through force of arms. Changing economic conditions in Germany, Italy, and Japan, would be a long-term solution to global tensions, but not viable in the short term.

## The Question of the Sudetenland and the TUC Conference

By the end of August, preparation was underway for the Trades Union Congress annual meeting set for the start of September in Blackpool. The TUC's close affiliation with the Labour Party meant that the meeting would provide an opportunity for Trade union leaders and for Labour Party leadership to debate a coordinated response to the brewing threat of war. This was of critical importance as the Labour Party had cancelled its annual conference for that year, due to the need to rapidly respond to several serious international crises, ranging from China, Spain, and Austria. The gathering also held importance as Parliament was still on summer recess and Chamberlain had no interest in recalling the House to consider the escalating situation before the predetermined return in mid September, establishing a clear stance for Labour and its affiliates would greatly strengthen the Parliamentary Party's hand when the time came. The TUC had already shot down an effort by more radical members to get support for a series of industrial actions, or a widespread general strike in protest to activities taken by fascist powers.<sup>625</sup> Many unions had already taken stances on their attitudes to rearmament and the Government's defence policy. As an article in the *Gloucester Echo* noted, "It is well known that many unions have been in favour of refusing co-operation with the Government except at the price of the Government's consent to abandon its non-intervention policy in Spain and to afford effective military aid to the Spanish Government."<sup>626</sup> With many affiliate unions of the TUC already wanting a stronger militant stand against Chamberlain over the Government's policy for Spain, it appeared probable, yet by no means certain, that a similar stance would be adopted in the face of the growing crisis with Germany. For the time being both TUC and Labour Party leadership had

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<sup>625</sup> "T.U.C. Policy," *Gloucester Echo*, (22 August 1938), 4.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid*



proven effective at limiting the influence of radical movements to ensure that mainstream discourse remained wedded to the political centre, understanding that the British working class were not willing to accept appeasement ‘at any price.’

On 27 August, Kingsley Martin published an editorial in the *New Statesman* providing his stance on the question of the Sudetenland.<sup>627</sup> Martin argued that Hitler could only want a small war with the Czechs and not one which brought France and Great Britain in. Yet, in his view, the crisis had already developed conditions that would make Czech retention of the Sudetenland impossible. Martin had already embraced the narrative that the German minority would not be deterred from anything short of unification with Germany. The only solution to Martin required the acceptance that “the strategic value of the Bohemia frontier should not be made on the occasion of a world war. We should not guarantee the *status quo* [italics from original source].”<sup>628</sup> This position in favour of a territorial settlement presented by the Fabian wing of the Labour Party provided a strong contrast to the views of Dalton, Attlee, and the leadership of the TUC. All these other voices left some political wiggle room. Such a divergence demonstrates that while official Labour Party discourse adopted a clear, if weak middle of the road response there was dissension below the surface. Kingsley Martin’s editorial and the private efforts of Noel-Buxton demonstrate that there was a will to sacrifice the Czechs if peace could be attained. Such naïve hope being centered on the idea that Hitler could be trusted.<sup>629</sup>

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<sup>627</sup> *New Statesman* was founded by Beatrice and Sydney Webb with the support of George Bernard Shaw and other leading Fabians. Therefore, it became a publication that led the way in political discourse for the Fabian movement alongside use of meetings and pamphleteering by the Fabian Society. As an organised movement Fabians were closely connected with the Labour Party and its conversations on policy formulation.

<sup>628</sup> Kingsley Martin, “The Situation in Central Europe,” *New Statesman*, Vol. 16, No. 392. (27 August 1938), 301.

<sup>629</sup> Kingsley Martin would continue to be editor until 1960 and for decades following 1938 would argue that this editorial went on to haunt him.

On the cusp of the House of Commons resuming sitting following summer recess, Attlee provided an updated statement on Labour's response to the impasse which had emerged between Hitler and the Czechs on 1 September in an article titled 'Policy to Rally the World.' In it Attlee called for the question of political and social rights for the Sudeten Germans to be settled between their own leaders and that of the government in Prague, whilst the British and French acknowledge the obvious, that the treatment of the German minority was not and never would be the crux of the situation.<sup>630</sup> The real danger towards European peace was according to Attlee, "the action of Herr Hitler in using the minority question in Czechoslovakia to pursue his ambitious dreams for power. The fomenting of trouble in another State with the threat of intervention is the modern technique of aggression."<sup>631</sup> Attlee outlining this political maneuvering by Hitler was important to demonstrating to the wider public that it was the actions of Germany that threatened aggression, in contrast to attacks made against Labour as being a pro-war Party, based on its critical attacks on Chamberlain's so far, weak response to German threats of military action. Yet, Attlee also provided a prescriptive solution that Labour could advocate and would welcome Downing Street to embrace the public use of a "positive peace policy which would rally the world, the whole position might well be transformed and the present anxiety dispersed."<sup>632</sup> Such a position was certainly vague in terms of substance but Attlee believed that a positive peace policy might well assuage concerns amongst the public that they may soon face the danger of German bombers over their cities.<sup>633</sup> Attlee also stressed that

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<sup>630</sup> Attlee, "Policy to Rally the World," *Daily Herald*, (1 September 1938), 8.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>633</sup> Concern on the threat of air bombing had continued to grow during the interwar years based on the limited bombing of British cities in the First World War and subsequent demonstrations of its increased lethality in China and Spain. Images of the destruction of the Spanish city of Guernica in April of 1937 was particularly haunting for the public.

the populations of Germany, Italy, and Japan were also concerned about need to embrace significant sacrifices and destruction to follow their country's into war.<sup>634</sup> For Czechoslovakia's neighbours it was surely obvious, in Attlee's view, that if Britain and France let Germany have a freehand there, then the independence and safety of the rest of Europe would be jeopardised.

A positive peace policy would in Labour's eyes be able to avert calamity. It would be centred on securing economic prosperity for the 'have-not' nations of the world, primarily the three Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy. Such a response was based on Labour's acceptance that war was primarily motivated by economic considerations, that if a country could not access necessary raw materials than it was essential that they be secured with armed force. To guarantee such a global order, Attlee wanted to see a reinvigoration of the strength and capabilities of the League of Nations, accepting publicly the previous month, that it was no longer in possession of the teeth needed to assert its will.<sup>635</sup> Chamberlain's willingness to allow the League's influence to erode meant that appeasement as it was desired would not be capable of averting calamity, instead only serving to enhance the prospect of a general European war. In Labour's eyes, the prospect of war now appeared likely but not inevitable. If political pressure could be brought to bear on the Prime Minister, then peace could be saved by garnering the support of the peace-loving people both at home and abroad. The problem which Labour could not tackle effectively, was how to get such peace-loving citizens of the Axis powers to make their voices heard when living in totalitarian regimes that harshly punished deviation from the Party line.

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<sup>634</sup> For Germany specifically, a good exploration of this sentiment even into 1940, is thoroughly examined by Ernst May in his book *Strange Victory*. Such a position, that it was the Nazi Party and not the German people who wanted war, was something that Labour would continue to stress in its political discourse until the country faced the Battle for Britain in the summer of 1940.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid

On 5 September, Labour and its TUC affiliates met in Blackpool to open the first day of the TUC annual conference. Such an event would traditionally be focused on domestic economic challenges instead it was dominated by discussion of the Labour movement's best means to tackle the Sudetenland crisis. By September of 1938 the TUC was believed to represent close to five million workers across the United Kingdom in all industries.<sup>636</sup> The bulk of these union members were also considered members of the Labour Party and allowed to vote on initiatives from its annual Party conferences, even though most of these members were not active in Labour's daily functions. Given that the Labour Party did not have its own annual conference for 1938, the PLP leadership and the NEC, alongside the TUC General Council, were to hold a few meetings on the Czech crisis and produce a joint statement representing for the country a unified response from Labour Movement.<sup>637</sup>

Following the established norms for the TUC conference, on 4 September, the eve-of-Congress demonstration was held which saw some speeches given by leaders of some of the country's most important unions. The most high-profile speaker to get press coverage that night was John Marchbank, leader of the Railwaymen's Union, a powerful body that represented workers in every corner of the country. Marchbank opened his statement with a stern rejection of any regime or movement that sought to ensure its rule by force, pledging that the trade union movement must rearm Britain to protect against aggression whilst striving for peace.<sup>638</sup> Marchbank went on to address the specific plight gripping the news, "Britain, France, Russia,

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<sup>636</sup> "T.U.C. faces big issues," *Daily Herald*, (5 September 1938), 8.

<sup>637</sup> The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) were voices for a small minority of the British left. The CPGB with strong influence in Scotland and Northwest England, were supportive of a firm stand by Britain on the question of German aggression and defence of Czech territorial integrity, following their directives from Moscow for such action. The ILP remained staunchly gripped by pacifism, rejecting any policy which on the part of Britain, risked tensions boiling over into war with Germany. The Labour Party and the TUC were determined to keep such voices limited to the fringes of British political discourse.

<sup>638</sup> "Hitler Must Get Clear Warning," *Daily Herald*, (5 September 1938), 11.

and America should make it clear to Hitler, that any attempt to coerce the Czech Government or to weaken in any way Czechoslovakia's democratic position would be resisted, and that the four countries would stand by her in her right to democratic government."<sup>639</sup> Marchbank concluded by noting that the trade union movement was definitely willing to bear its full responsibility in maintaining the right of all nations to freedom and independence. The decision by Marchbank to open the years TUC conference with a firm commitment to rearmament represented an important position from the more moderate TUC in contrast to some Labour Party and PLP members who, whilst not rejecting rearmament wholeheartedly, felt that it should be approached cautiously. Those involved in more academic and policy discourse, were of the mind that arms build up could increase the potential for conflict, often perceived as verified by the outbreak of the Great War in the summer of 1914.

The two days later on 6 September, Herbert Elvin gave the presidential address to the TUC conference, outlining the political priorities for the movement to evaluate. Elvin made robust support of the League of Nations a central element of the address, noting that the 'enemy' had repeated so often that the League was dead, and many were prone to believe it. In his view, the League suffered a crippling weakness from those controlling it, who "by throwing sand into the machine, had prevented it from working satisfactorily."<sup>640</sup> This could be reversed if the will could be generated to support the League adequately. Britain and the other Great Powers had failed to do their duty to the League. Instead:

Those Powers, including Britain, cynically denied the German Republic (With a Socialist as its President) its rights under the Treaty of Versailles; and they paved the way to the reign of terror. Peace and democracy were on the lips of the Governments, but War and Fascism were in their hearts, if deeds were to be their judges. The betrayal of Abyssinia by this country and France formed one of the blackest pages in

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid

<sup>640</sup> "T.U.C. Chairman's Message to Workers," *Daily Herald*, (6 September 1938), 11.

African experience. The League's failure, by treachery to ideals, to deal effectively with bombast covering up economic weakness, was largely responsible for what had followed... Was Czechoslovakia to be the next sacrifice? If not, ... why had not Britain, France, and the Soviet Republic plainly told Germany that she must, keep off the grass? This brave people of a democratic republic must not be thrown to the wolves. No pressure must be brought to bear upon Czechoslovakia to succumb in the slightest degree to Germany's ruthlessness. This maybe the last chance for Europe to prevent another world war.<sup>641</sup>

To Elvin it was essential that Britain save the Czechs from the fate of fascism and despair. He advocated for a hard line in favour of defending Czech territorial integrity from the 'new barbarism' of Germany. In response to Hitler's claims that Germany merely sought the protection for the rights of a minority population in the Czech border regions, Elvin attacked Germany's "outrageous treatment of Jews," demanding that they be made to put their house in order before threatening to interfere in anyone else's.

In tackling the lack of action by Chamberlain and his ministers, Elvin harkened to the ideas of the Popular Front movement from the spring of that year, that he was prepared to associate with anyone, should principle not be involved, but not at the expense of principle.<sup>642</sup> A will to embrace a shared objective but a rejection of an alignment on means of systemic change. To bring the point home, Elvin brought attention to the lesson that the German experience could teach the British left how a popular front could become a precipitous folly. As was the case in 1931-32 when Chancellor Bruning of the Catholic Centre Party fought to protect democracy, "The German Communists played a fatal role. They choose to be destiny's agent by voting with the Nazis in the Reich to paralyze the forces of Government, because they believed themselves to be the ordained beneficiaries of chaos."<sup>643</sup> To Elvin the TUC and the Labour Party needed to be

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<sup>641</sup> Ibid

<sup>642</sup> Ibid

<sup>643</sup> Ibid, these ideas are not lost on the Party membership as will be seen when discussing constituency Party responses to parliamentary by-elections in the midst of the threat of war.

open to working in a broad coalition to protect peace in Europe and defend democracy but remain ever wary of an anarchic communist trojan horse.<sup>644</sup>

The following day, 7 September, the General Secretary of the TUC, Sir Walter Citrine, addressed the conference with an introduction of the manifesto agreed to by the NCL. The manifesto declared:

The Time has come for a positive and unmistakeable lead for collective defence against aggression and to safeguard peace. The British Government must leave no doubt in the mind of the German Government that they will unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack upon Czechoslovakia... Whatever the risks involved Great Britain must make its stand against aggression. There is now no room for doubt or hesitation.<sup>645</sup>

The statement demonstrated a hardening of opinions within the Labour Party and its Trade union base towards the Government's stance on German expansionism. The manifesto went further to denounce an abandonment of Czech territory to give in to Hitler's demands. Specifically, "British Labour emphatically repudiates the right of the British or any other Government to use diplomatic or other pressure to compel an acceptance of such a humiliation."<sup>646</sup> Yet, as in previous personal and organisational statements, the manifesto took pains to reiterate that for British Labour, there was no quarrel with the German people and held out hope that there might still be some groundswell of anti-war sentiment amongst German workers. Something, that appears to have been genuinely accepted across the Labour Movement, not all that different from the belief in the years before the outbreak of the First World War, where workers would be more likely to embrace a general strike than fight their class fellows. Although such ideas failed

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<sup>644</sup> This would prove all too relevant during the mess of the Oxford by-election of October 1938.

<sup>645</sup> "Labour's Call to Nation," *Daily Herald*, (8 September 1938), 4. The NCL was the coordinating body with the TUC, NEC, and PLP Shadow Cabinet.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid*, this statement is one of the most intriguing from Labour in this crisis when one considers how it was eventually resolved by Chamberlain.

completely once war was declared, by 1938 such sentiment was centred on human nature as the mechanism to embrace peace rather than notions of commonality of class or appeals to nationalism.

Although the manifesto was embraced by Labour and their trade union base, others on the left were angered that the TUC conference refused to embrace a common cause with them, particularly the CPGB. The communists attacked the manifesto as not going far enough, both in its rejection once again of a popular front and for merely ‘regretting’ that Chamberlain’s ministry was responsible for the current international situation.<sup>647</sup> The communists also sought to maximise areas of contention within the various trade unions, particularly over moderates and hardliners who debated the scale of rearmament that should be embraced. Walter Citrine in this narrative was suppressing Labour supporters in service of the pro-fascist Chamberlain Government. Surely, the result of such a stifling of debate would only place the Labour movement in danger of further fracturing, on the scale of 1931. The fact that Transport House and the TUC never felt compelled to dramatically shift their messaging in response to such communist attacks and falsehoods suggests that the target demographic for Labour were Liberals and more centrist Conservatives who wanted peace maintained but were uncomfortable with the expansion of fascism. It was these voters that Labour appealed to in its public rallies.

### Spreading the Message

By the latter half of September, Labour expanded its approach beyond statements in the press and indoor conferences with associated leadership to that of public rallies which could provide a tangible show of support for challenging German aggression. Lord Listowel, a Labour

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<sup>647</sup> “Communist Statement,” *The Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, 9 September 1938.



Peer, was the key speaker at a rally in the London borough of Southall. The central theme of the rally was, in Listowel's words: "We must not sit on the fence." The electorate had to make a choice either to embrace the position of Labour and others who opposed appeasement and that of Chamberlain. Listowel's statements included an intriguing passage which suggests a shift for Labour closer to an embrace of a balance of power, the traditional focus of British foreign policy, rather than collective security which almost always in Labour discourse was employed through the League of Nations. Listowel stated:

Don't let the statesmen of this country repeat the fatal blunder that brought us into the Great War. Don't let us allow the leaders of Germany to be in doubt as to whether Great Britain would remain neutral in view of German aggression. If Great Britain, were to tell Germany that we would stand by France and Russia in the event of an attack on Czechoslovakia, then, indeed we might hope with confidence for the maintenance of European peace for a much longer period of time. The Government has given no such lead. That is why I feel prouder of the Labour movement at this time than ever before. It has given lead to the British people for the sake of peace and international honour. You have got to say clearly and unmistakably what side of the fence you are on. If in spite of that, should war break out, the British people would not be afraid to do their duty on behalf of democracy in our own country: on behalf of democracy and everything we hold sacred.<sup>648</sup>

Whilst such a statement can only be representative of a voice within the larger apparatus of the Labour Party, it provides a clear case of a hardening of opinions in the Party. Listowel embraced a return to a balance of power policy to keep Germany in check and ideally maintain peace on the continent. Listowel's remarks also demonstrate a begrudging acceptance that war while an unenviable task may well need to be accepted as the only means to preserve democracy at home and abroad. More generally, the rally, and its themes of ending fence-sitting by the public at this late hour of the crisis, shows that Labour and the TUC leadership were losing any political space

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<sup>648</sup> "We Must Not Sit on Fence," *The West Middlesex Gazette*, (17 September 1938).

which might exist to embrace a more centrist middle ground which lacked commitment when the moment of decision emerged.

Other similar rallies were held in London and other urban centres across the United Kingdom from late September. In Manchester, the City's DLP, organised a large rally near the city centre which covered, all elements of the crisis, both the plight of the Czechs, the foreign policy of Chamberlain, and plans for ARP.<sup>649</sup> The local Party passed the following resolution upon the conclusion of the rally: "This mass meeting of Manchester citizens declares it will not tolerate the betrayal of this country by Chamberlain's surrender to Hitler, and demands an immediate and emphatic declaration that this country stands shoulder to shoulder with France, Russia, and other democracies for the maintenance of world peace and democracy."<sup>650</sup> The process for those speaking at the rally to reach this statement is worth examining as it demonstrates some of the partisan views that some Labour voices had at the constituency level of the Party to Chamberlain's handling of the crisis. R. McKeon the Chairman of the Borough Labour Party argued forcefully that Chamberlain could have put a stop to Hitler earlier but opted not to, and only flew to Germany to meet Hitler to, "receive the instructions of the German Dictator. Our suspicion is that Chamberlain is either preparing, or had already arranged, the betrayal of Czechoslovakia."<sup>651</sup> Arguing that the Prime Minister was merely a pawn for Hitler might have been received well by Labourites but would likely not be amenable to wary Conservatives.

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<sup>649</sup> ARP was of increasing concern across the country as the danger of bombing had already been demonstrated by the German Condor Legion in Spain and left serious fears that London and other urban centres would be targets of massive raids within hours of a declaration of war.

<sup>650</sup> "Manchester Labour and the Crisis," *The Manchester Guardian*, (19 September 1938).

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid*

Such arguments were shared by prospective Labour candidate for the Stretford Division, E. Gower. He stated that Chamberlain and Hitler had no political quarrel between them, that the British would not stand beside France and Russia unless compelled by the electorate to do so.<sup>652</sup> Yet, this was not the universal approach to all speakers at the Manchester rally, Labour MP George Benson harkened back to older interpretations for an escalation of tensions within Europe. The present crisis was, in his view, the direct outcome of the Treaty of Versailles. The Allies had driven the German people into the hands of the Nazis, and Britain had wasted resources on armaments. Although Benson echoed these older attitudes of the Labour Party, he was not entirely ignorant of the crisis the Czechs faced and the impact that its resolution would have for Europe. To him, even if giving Germany a free hand in Czechoslovakia would buy temporary peace, it would not be worth the price as conflict would be inevitable in a short time.<sup>653</sup> Benson fell short of calling for Chamberlain to declare war in support of the Czechs but noted that if peaceable nations were unwilling to stand together, “unless we [The British people] realised that the fate of an unaggressive democracy in any part of the world was closely bound up with our own the time would come when we should stand naked before the face of our enemies.”<sup>654</sup> Benson’s solution did mimic that of his fellow speakers, but again appears far more as a return to a balance of power politics even if it is cloaked in the language of collective security. Calling for Britain to stand strong with Czechoslovakia, France, and Russia, peace could be assured he argued: “if we used this crisis to re-establish unity of interest and purpose between the democratic and non-aggressive nations we should show to the aggressor nations that

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid

<sup>653</sup> Ibid, subsequent examination of constituency level Labour responses to the crisis show that Benson was a reflection of a significant number of grass-roots Labourites.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid

collective security was more powerful than any individual nations, however heavily armed.”<sup>655</sup>

The specific absence of the League of Nations from this discussion and an unwillingness to fully embrace an alliance, merely a ‘unity of interest’ suggests a opaque yet important distinction from earlier Labour responses to solving the deteriorating geo-political situation Europe faced in the late 1930s.

Herbert Morrison presented his own solution around the same time as these rallies with a speaking event at the London Labour Party Youth Crusade. This solution went further than official Labour Party statements which almost entirely favoured a guaranteed protection of Czech territorial integrity. Morrison stressed that the Sudetenland was never a part of Germany therefore Hitler could have no genuine claim to the region. Therefore, Morrison proposed an exchange of populations. As he put it:

If we were living in a sensible world the dispute in so far as it is reasonable and natural could quite easily be solved. If it be the case that some of the Sudeten Deutsch wish to live within the German Reich it is no less the case that certainly an equal number of people now living in Germany would prefer to live outside it, including a very large number of what may be described as thoroughbred German Aryans. Would not the sensible thing therefore, be to arrange an appropriate exchange of populations without territorial changes? If the Nazi Government is not out for aggrandisement and territorial expansion, if its policy towards Czechoslovakia is not animated by future military considerations that is a proposal which it would accept.<sup>656</sup>

Morrison’s solution most certainly presented himself outside of the mainstream position of the Labour Party, likely as he wanted it, as he still harboured leadership aspirations which he could capitalise on should an election be called in the coming months.<sup>657</sup> Yet, even on the surface,

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid

<sup>656</sup> “An Exchange of Populations,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (19 September 1938).

<sup>657</sup> It was assumed by many in the Labour Party that Chamberlain might call a snap election, yet, even if he waited until 1940 it was widely assumed that the next general election would result in Labour gaining seats but still losing to the National Government. As for Morrison’s dreams of leadership, he had already unsuccessfully challenged Attlee for the leadership in 1935 and would do so again in 1939 and in the 1950s.

Morrison's solution failed to meet the moment. It was increasingly clear that Hitler favoured war if he could not get the territory, the population being a far less relevant component of negotiation and public statements. A more optimistic interpretation would be to see Morrison's proposal as forcing Hitler to acknowledge to the world that his concerns for the treatment of the German minority were hogwash, but this too appeared too late, as trenches were being dug in parks and gas masks being distributed to the urban population.

There were still some voices within the Labour Party even if they represented an ever-shrinking component of the Party's Parliamentary core, that sought a return to utilising the League of Nations. Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Ellis Smith suggested at a local rally that Chamberlain fly not to Germany but rather Geneva to make an appeal to the global community for peace at the League of Nations. Smith acknowledged what many already believed to be true, that the League was at present, impotent. The result of German-Italian aggression, and the negotiation of new alliances with British connivance.<sup>658</sup> Smith reiterated common Labour talking points of the need for economic cooperation as the best means of securing lasting peace. The example of Smith's actions show that elements of Labour were still wedded to its longer aspirations for developing and maintaining a vibrant League of Nations as the guarantor of peace as the organising body for any collective security initiatives.

In London on 18 September a 'Stand by Czechs' demonstration by the International Peace Campaign, a combined group of Independent, Liberal, TUC, and Labour pro Czech voices, was held outside Whitehall. It was well attended with many thousands appearing within shouting distance of Downing Street where Chamberlain and his ministers were discussing their

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<sup>658</sup> "Saving the World," *Manchester Guardian*, (19 September 1938).

response to the burgeoning crisis.<sup>659</sup> The rallying cry made throughout was, ‘stand by the Czechs!’ as demonstrators marched between Parliament and Trafalgar Square. A resolution from the march was given to the staff at Downing Street for the Cabinet to review. The resolution echoed that of earlier Labour and TUC statements. It assured the Government that the peace campaigners would support “any action the Government might take to resist any attempt by the German Government to settle the Sudeten question by military action, and resist any proposals which would affect the integrity and independence of Czecho-Slovakia in defiance of the principles of the League of Nations.”<sup>660</sup> A podium was setup in Trafalgar Square for speakers after the march, which was flanked by the flags of Czechoslovakia, the United States, Great Britain, France, and the USSR. Labour MP and outspoken member of the Party left, Ellen Wilkinson, was one of the first to speak. She addressed the crowd saying: “We say to Neville Chamberlain, we don’t trust you. We believe that you went to Germany to fix up a sale of the liberties of Czechoslovakia.”<sup>661</sup> Wilkinson continued by attacking Chamberlain’s unwillingness to recall parliament early, to discussing the developing situation in central Europe. She was followed up by Miss Eleanor Rathbone an independent MP who had long advocated for a strong response to German expansion and hostility to Nazism. She argued: “Let us not buy peace for ourselves by frittering away the freedom of small democracies.”<sup>662</sup> Other non-Labour speakers included Ramsay Muir the Chairman of the Liberal Party Organisation and Liberal Peer, Lord Meston. Meston asserted: “We all wish Mr. Chamberlain and his French colleagues every possible success in the great and courageous adventure on which they are embarking, but we have got to make it clear to them that if Germany breaks the peace, we are with all our power,

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<sup>659</sup> “Stand by Czechs Demonstration in London,” *Manchester Guardian*, (19 September 1938)

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid*

moral and military, against her.”<sup>663</sup> Such a statement went a step further than official TUC and Labour arguments in claiming support for Chamberlain’s peace efforts. Labour advocated for the maintenance of peace but frequently projected a distrust of Chamberlain.

Attlee was one of the last to speak at the Trafalgar Square rally. He reiterated his earlier statements that he hoped for the maintenance of peace, but that Czech independence must be protected. Attlee placed the concerns over territory in a country far away from the anxieties of ordinary Londoners into context. If a strong statement was not made now, potential for a general European war to breakout would only increase, regardless of the fate of the Sudetenland.<sup>664</sup> Attlee ended with an attack on the growing influence of appeasers and pro-German propaganda appearing in Britain: “There has been a campaign of calumny against Czechoslovakia made up of foul lying propaganda, and some people of this country would lend themselves to this propaganda.”<sup>665</sup> His statements spurred an aggressive response from a group of near five hundred fascists who had been attending a counter demonstration nearby and shouted among other things, “We want peace, Attlee wants war!”<sup>666</sup> Some scuffles quickly broke out between fascists and original rally attendees which had to be separated by mounted police. Such a response by local fascists could only demonstrate for Attlee and fellow defenders of the Czechs that their stand was just.<sup>667</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid

<sup>664</sup> Ibid

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid

<sup>667</sup> The limited influence that British fascists had meant that Chamberlain’s stance towards Germany was not hindered by having the same associated message. Consequently, that meant Labour was not given a discernable boost in support on the issue of Czechoslovakia as most ardent anti-Fascists were already tied to movements in Labour, Liberal, and Communist organisations.

The rallies around the country had appeared by 20 September to have failed to dramatically change Chamberlain's plans for placating Hitler. The Czech cabinet had made public statements on the previous day that it would bow to British and French pressure to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. Labour provided an official statement to the development titled, "British Labour Stands by the Czechs." The statement read:

It [the NCL] declares that this is a shameful betrayal of a peaceful and democratic people and constitutes a dangerous precedent for the future. The National Council of Labour expresses its profound sympathy with the Czechoslovakian people in the grievous anxieties through which they are now passing. It reaffirms its conviction that enduring peace can be secured only by the re-establishment of the rule of law and the ending of the use of lawless force in international relations.<sup>668</sup>

Naturally, this statement could not be reflective of all responses within the Labour Party and the TUC. George Lansbury, speaking at a Labour meeting in Bow East, praised the Prime Minister and urged the Czech Government to dare not accept war as an alternative to the proposals now being considered.<sup>669</sup> Lansbury defended the sacrifice of the Sudetenland with reference to the 'success' found in the resolution of the Abyssinia crisis, the same position that had resulted in Lansbury being removed from Party leadership. He also demonstrated how out of touch he truly was with the current situation in central Europe arguing that "our sympathies must be with the smaller peoples struggling for freedom."<sup>670</sup> He praised Chamberlain's actions as 'courageous,' and reflected that, "we pacifists hate persecution, tyranny, and the mailed fist, whomever may use it. We are convinced that if the present crisis ended with universal war our last state will be worse than the first."<sup>671</sup> Lansbury continued as always, to adhere to his staunch pacifism but such statements demonstrate a lack of appreciation for the danger that Nazism brought for the people

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<sup>668</sup> "British Labour Stands by the Czechs," *Daily Herald*, (20 September 1938).

<sup>669</sup> "Lansbury Praises Premier," *Daily Herald*, (21 September 1938).

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid*



of the Sudetenland and that there was little evidence that this would be the end of German expansion.

Lansbury would find support from some Labour pacifists that had already left the Party. On 24 September, former Labour Peer Lord Ponsonby, wrote an opinion piece attacking the official Labour position being outlined in recent rallies and articles. He was suspicious of recent examples being put to the public of righteous indignation, based on fervent rejection of finding an accord with Hitler. However, Ponsonby's efforts to challenge the justification for war proved revealing, "For practically the first time an attempt is being made before fighting to reach, on a major issue, a settlement which on balance may have some justice in it...indignant and disappointed people seem to forget that war settles nothing."<sup>672</sup> Ponsonby's suggestion that Hitler's demands had merit were not likely to find warm reception in Labour or trade union circles at such a late hour.

Lansbury and Ponsonby's arguments were quickly rejected by the NEC and Labour's Parliamentary leadership after a meeting at Transport House on 21 September which discussed the Anglo-French plan for the Sudetenland. A statement following the meeting condemned the plan as a "surrender to Hitler's threat of aggression."<sup>673</sup> They described the deal as a profound humiliation, and a sacrifice of a gallant democratic people. Correctly, as events would bear out, Transport House noted:

Hitler's ambitions do not stop short at Czechoslovakia. There is no longer a frontier in Europe which is safe. His present triumph will be a new starting point for further war-like adventures, which in the end must lead to a general conflict. With every surrender to violence peace recedes. If war is to be averted and civilization saved the

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<sup>672</sup> "Righteous Indignation," *The Times*, (24 September 1938), 11.

<sup>673</sup> "Labour and Crisis," *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, (22 September 1938).

peace-loving nations must make an immediate and concerted effort to restore the rule of law.<sup>674</sup>

This position was echoed in a subsequent article Attlee penned for the *Daily Herald* on 23 September, titled ‘Stand Fast for Peace & Freedom.’

Attlee argued that Chamberlain had returned from his meeting with Hitler a defeated man, who sacrificed Sudeten Jews and others to a horrific fate under German rule. He derided Chamberlain and the Conservatives for their foolish acceptance of ‘guarantees’ that Hitler would go no further when history had already shown that the Nazis could not be trusted.<sup>675</sup> The decision by Britain and France to abandon the Czechs clearly had wider implications for other small European states such as Yugoslavia, Poland, and Romania who would logically look not to the Allies but to making their own terms with Germany to save what they could. To Attlee, if such a settlement was to be accepted it could only be a matter of time before Britain and France had to accept losses to Germany:

When all the outworks of the fortress have been surrendered the citadel will be summoned. It is the citadel of freedom which will be endangered. How long in a Europe under the sway of Fascism will liberty be allowed to survive? It is one of the tragedies of the situation that the Prime Minister’s surrender came at a time when the forces of peace and freedom were gathering strength. The more moderate nationalists among the Sudeten Germans were uniting with the Social Democrats and other groups for a reasonable settlement. The smaller Powers of Europe, increasingly were moving towards the democratic side.<sup>676</sup>

Such a failure over Czechoslovakia could only be viewed as a pattern of Britain in retreat in the face of aggressor states, a ‘surrender to force,’ by the National Government. By the fall of 1938, it was an annual experience to witness the Conservatives “surrender to the wolves of some victim. Manchuria, Abyssinia, China, Spain, Austria, and now Czechoslovakia. On every

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<sup>674</sup> Ibid

<sup>675</sup> “Stand Fast for Peace & Freedom,” *Daily Herald*, (23 September 1938).

<sup>676</sup> Ibid

occasion we have been told that the Government is preserving peace. Every time the menace of war has increased...when the country has been led to the verge of the abyss, the men who are responsible try to pretend they are the friends of peace.”<sup>677</sup> Although such facts had been outlined consistently by Labour in the previous few years, Attlee was able to demonstrate in late September that Chamberlain’s ignorance towards Fascist aggression could not be ignored any longer, the mechanisms to prevent a war were gone, and Hitler would only continue to gain strength for an inevitable confrontation with Britain and France.

The day that Attlee’s article was published saw him, Dalton, William Gillies, and Walter Citrine travel to Paris to meet with Léon Blum and the French socialists. The aim was to internationalise Labour’s campaign with their French political allies, thereby exerting pressure for both a stronger stand by the French and by extension force Chamberlain’s hand to stand by Britain’s allies over its rivals. Meeting with Blum it became clear that whilst Labour had shown unanimity in supporting all its public declarations, the French Socialists had been deeply divided struggling even to come to agreement on requesting a recalling for the National Assembly.<sup>678</sup> Blum’s positions on the crisis varied little from that of the Labour Party, and at the conclusion of their meeting Blum pledged to do all he could to rally his party to standfast in support of the Czechs and encourage the creation of a more united approach between France and Britain compared to earlier efforts by both governments to blame each other for setbacks. Walter Citrine also did what he could to garner support from anti-appeaser French cabinet ministers, Paul Reynaud (then Minister of Justice) and Champetier de Ribes (Pensions Minister) with a closed

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid

<sup>678</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), 189. Although Labour had unanimity in its declarations, these were based on the votes from Party and Parliamentary leadership. As some of the local rallies have demonstrated, George Lansbury was not alone in drifting from the Party line.

door meeting later that evening.<sup>679</sup> What impact the talks had upon French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier is hard to discern but he did decide to announce on 24 September that the French armed forces were ordered to partial mobilisation.<sup>680</sup> In this way Labour achieved what it sought which was a stronger stand against Hitler.

On the home front, Labour continued to expand its public campaigning against the Prime Minister and any deal which forced the Czechs to surrender their territory. On 22 September, Transport House announced that 2,000 meetings had been arranged across the country to take place in the coming days to demonstrate opposition to the “betrayal.”<sup>681</sup> Orders were dispatched for all Labour MPs to be recalled from holiday to lead rallies in their local communities. Large meetings were to be held by Attlee in London, Walter Citrine in Bristol, Arthur Greenwood in Sheffield, George Dallas in Northampton, Herbert Morrison in Cornwall, and Ellen Wilkinson in Hastings. Attlee’s rally was to be the highlight of these widespread speaking events, with Hugh Dalton, Barbara Ayrtton-Gould and H.H. Elvin of the TUC also participating. These events were to be supported by a set of pamphlets produced by Transport House for distribution at the gatherings to guide the public on Labour’s alternative to Chamberlain. Such moves came as local trade union organisations and Divisional Labour Party’s were making their own statements of support for Labour and its defence of the Czechs.

The General Council of the National Federation of Building Trades, passed a resolution condemning humiliating British self abasement in the face of fascism. The Sheffield, Chesterfield, and District Council of the NUR (National Union of Railwaymen) stated: “We demand that this Government should make a firm stand on the side of democratic Powers. If

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<sup>679</sup> “Labour Leaders in Paris,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (23 September 1938), 12.

<sup>680</sup> Dalton, *Political Diary*, 247.

<sup>681</sup> “2000 Week-End Meetings on Czech Betrayal,” *Daily Herald*, (23 September 1938).

necessary, we should withdraw our labour to support this.”<sup>682</sup> Such a statement went further than some unions by suggesting a work stoppage or strike action if Chamberlain stayed the course. The Leeds DLP was also compelled to issue a statement on behalf of its representing near 40,000 workers. They argued that the deal before the Czechs was not merely a betrayal of the principle of collective security but also a surrender to brute force.<sup>683</sup> The Divisional Party argued that an immediate recall of Parliament was now essential to hold the government to account for this affront. Similar statements were given from organisations across the country, from Glasgow’s Scottish delegate conference of the Transport and General Workers Union, the Durham County Mining Federation, and the University Labour Federation. All echoed the same message of rejecting Chamberlain’s betrayal as an abandonment of all that had been done to guarantee peace and the freedoms of small nations since 1919. For the Labour Party, the task of country-wide rallies was to amplify the voices behind these press statements and show that a wide swath of the British working class took the threat towards peace seriously but were not prepared to accept it at the price of betraying a fellow democracy.

The central theme of these meetings echoed all previous arguments from the Labour Party and its affiliated unions, with themes of betrayal, a hope for peace but not through the abandonment of free peoples, and the personal weakness of the Prime Minister for suggesting that the only course of action was to give in to Hitler. This last point was given the greatest attention at the end of September. To note one example, Ellen Wilkinson, known to be a firebrand for the Labour Left, claimed at a rally in Hastings that Chamberlain was now a

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<sup>682</sup> Ibid, The NUM had strong connections with the Labour Party, sponsoring Labour candidates in elections across the country. Its connection to a critical form of transport made it a recognisable organisation compared to many more removed industries from the public eye.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid

“terrified man” who came to represent a group that sought friendship with Fascist powers, at the expense of the League and of small independent nations.<sup>684</sup>

As Wilkinson and these numerous other examples show, Labour both at the top levels of its organisation and at the local level, broadly adhered to a consistent narrative for the public. However, some would continue even at the lower echelons of the Party to criticize such approaches. Whilst George Lansbury remained a prominent figure as a former leader of the Party and Lord Ponsonby had a significant reputation as leader in the House of Lords, there were local examples of party dissent. One case of this was seen in the case of the East Dorset Labour Party. It sent a message to Transport House demanding: “The immediate summoning of a special session of the Labour Conference to formulate a Socialist policy to meet the present crisis.”<sup>685</sup> Such a statement ignored the fact that Labour had already brought together Party and trade union leadership together over the question of the Sudetenland crisis at the TUC conference. The strong showing given to Labour rallies across the country suggests a lack of significant dissention within Party ranks. Nonetheless, some such as the prospective Labour candidate for East Dorset told reporters that the rank and file of the Party felt ignored and that Labour leadership had been treating its followers as in as dictatorial a fashion as the Prime Minister treated the country.<sup>686</sup> The reality was that these minor voices failed to break through into wider Labour discourse on the crisis. The vacuum was already picked up for those concerned, by the ILP which under the leadership of James Maxton firmly committed itself to absolute pacifism.<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>684</sup> “A Terrified Man,” *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, (24 September 1938).

<sup>685</sup> “Labour Candidate on His Leaders,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (26 September 1938), 5.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>687</sup> “I.L.P. Against War,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, (26 September 1938).

On 26 September, Hitler announced that unless the Czechs surrendered the Sudetenland by 1 October, German troops would ‘go and liberate our Germans.’ With an outbreak of hostilities top of mind, Attlee’s rally in London on 27 September, echoed much of Wilkinson’s and others’ statements but illustrated an increased focus on pragmatism over idealism. He stressed that “the whole fate of Western Civilization may be decided in the coming days.”<sup>688</sup> Labour did not want war but would not abandon the Czechs to the brutalities of Nazism. Attlee sought to challenge the criticisms that had been put forward in the previous few weeks, noting that the Czechs had been exemplary in defending the rights of minorities within its borders. Specific attention was given to showing Hitler’s hypocrisy when it came to asserting support for German speaking minorities, “Herr Hitler says nothing about his fellow-Germans who are repressed by the Italians in South Tyrol. It is not national sentiment. It is sheer aggression, dictated by the policy that Hitler has outlined in ‘Mein Kampf.’ That policy is the domination of Europe not merely by Germany, but by Fascism.”<sup>689</sup>

Attlee then transferred his focus to criticism of Chamberlain’s terms for the Czechs he secured in consultation with Hitler, surrender of the Sudetenland, and betrayal of British and French honour. This contrasted with Attlee’s positive view of the USSR in this urgent moment, standing by its pledges to aide the Czechs which drew loud applause from the crowd.<sup>690</sup> More broadly, Attlee attacked appeasement as the Tories had used it, as a constant acquiescence to violence which only begot violence from fascism.<sup>691</sup> Attlee concluded that war was likely to come and that if it did, it must be met with courage from the British in defence of democracy and

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<sup>688</sup> “Fate of Our Civilization Is in the Balance,” *Daily Herald*, (27 September 1938), 5.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>690</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid*

freedom, “It is to us who love liberty to see to it that Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from Europe.”<sup>692</sup>

Attlee was followed by Charles Dukes of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. Dukes was direct in his comments, noting that the public had reached the limit of concessions to fascists, not merely regarding the Sudetenland.<sup>693</sup> In his view, war should be accepted now, however reluctantly, before further concessions illustrated British weakness and destroyed public morale and determination: “We believe it our duty to say to the nation that no Government should go on making concessions merely out of fear. There comes a time when it is better to face the major responsibility of your fate than to crawl to the dictator on your knees.”<sup>694</sup> Hugh Dalton concluded the rally by going even further than Dukes or Attlee. He claimed that a member of the NCL told the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax that the handling of the whole farce made him ashamed to be British. A failure to stand firm against Hitler now by Chamberlain would mean the loss of national honour and the blotting out of democracy, “with a quick return for humanity to the Dark Ages.”<sup>695</sup> The tone of this rally demonstrated that Labour was at least in language if not in thought, moving towards a more patriotic and nationalistic interpretation of the crisis. This was a significant departure from earlier periods which stressed internationalism, the importance of the League of Nations and support for protecting the brotherhood of man rather than making references to national honour, psychology, and martial strength. Such a move suggests along with earlier more incremental developments, that pragmatism was winning the day for Labour policy, even if some elements of the party objected.

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid

<sup>693</sup> Ibid

<sup>694</sup> Ibid

<sup>695</sup> Ibid



Following the rally Labour MPs met and all but a handful of the 166 members agreed to endorse a motion that any German aggression must be met with British force, cementing what had been discussed earlier in the day.<sup>696</sup> There were two small groups of objectors, one naturally, led by George Lansbury, the other being the estranged four ILP MPs led by Maxton.<sup>697</sup> It was agreed by Labour MPs that should Chamberlain pledge to stand firm once Parliament returned on 29 September, then Labour would vote to support the Government in the crisis.

The following day on 28 September, Labour's pragmatism was challenged by the publication of a joint peace manifesto which sought to align the left in a finale stand for peace. This manifesto was produced by an amalgamation of the Peace Pledge Union, the Society of Friends, the No More War Movement, the ILP, and Labour and Parliamentary Pacifist Groups.<sup>698</sup> The manifesto reiterated earlier pacifist statements, that the present crisis was merely the reflection of a longstanding failure to remedy the mistakes of the Versailles Treaty and British economic imperialism.<sup>699</sup> The signatories ranged, among many others, from the former Labour Peer, Lord Ponsonby, ILP leader James Maxton, Vera Britain, and George Orwell recently returned from service in the Spanish Civil War. The lack of any direct response by Labour or TUC leadership to the manifesto suggests that the Party was disinterested in veering off from its anti-Chamberlain focus. The success of this Chamberlain centric strategy would soon be tested as Parliament resumed sitting after a tumultuous summer recess.

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<sup>696</sup> "Labour's Role in Parliament," *The Manchester Guardian*, (28 September 1938), 8.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>698</sup> Both the Labour and the Parliamentary Pacifist groups had some crossover with pacifist Labour MPs being part of the Parliamentary group.

<sup>699</sup> "Against War: A Joint Peace Manifesto," *The Manchester Guardian*, (28 September 1938), 5.

## “A Submission to Blackmail” Parliament’s Debate of the Munich Accord

Chamberlain addressed the House of Commons on 28 September outlining all actions he had taken up to that moment and his plans for a final summit with Hitler, and if possible Prime Minister Daladier of France, and Mussolini. After securing a tentative agreement with Hitler to settle the crisis in exchange for the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany the matter was to be brought up for debate in the House on 3 October. A great showdown was anticipated for the full convening of the Commons with all the observer galleries filled with Peers, Ambassadors, and interested members of the public. Following an opening statement by the Prime Minister, Attlee rose to give his most important speech yet as Labour leader. He opened with an acknowledgment that he and the Labour Party were thankful conflict had for the moment been averted but stressed that this deal was not peace for Europe, rather, “we have nothing but an armistice in a state of war.”<sup>700</sup> The deal reached in Germany was a defeat for liberty and democracy. It would clearly result in the surrender of thousands into the hands of Nazi despotism. Similar to earlier public addresses, Attlee made direct attacks against Chamberlain stating: “All the faults of seamanship and errors of judgment must be brought to light, and no amount of devotion at the eleventh hour will save that captain from the verdict that he has hazarded his ship through bad seamanship.”<sup>701</sup> He went on to attack Chamberlain’s wilful and shameful decision to cut the Czechs out of negotiations in favour of backdoor politicking by the great powers.

A strong and thorough defence of the Czechs was given based on actions by Prague and from first-hand experience by Attlee and other Labour members’ personal tours of the Sudetenland and the treatment of its minority population and concluded:

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<sup>700</sup> Clement Attlee, *House of Commons Debate 03 October 1938* vol. 339. cc 51

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid*, cc 52.

Undoubtedly many injustices were done, but I contend that no State on the Continent of Europe has behaved better to its minorities than has Czechoslovakia. There are grievances... but if you compare these minorities with the Germans in the Trentino or with the Jews and Catholics or the Socialists in Germany, their position is as heaven to hell. If there are faults between the Czechs and Germans, the faults were not all on one side. There has been deliberate provocation from outside. Whatever these men and women had in the way of disabilities, they were free men and women in a free State: they were citizens.<sup>702</sup>

While it was important that Attlee acknowledged this reality to the House, it was already more than apparent to anyone who followed international news in the previous few years that such minorities were brutalised daily by Hitler's regime. To Attlee and many others, for Chamberlain to subject thousands more to this nightmare was utterly reprehensible. This statement stood out from other speeches given in the debate as concerns over the treatment of minorities subject to Nazi rule was largely overlooked. In Attlee's words this horrible fate for vulnerable minorities was only made possible because of Chamberlain's abandonment of the League of Nations. Attlee used Chamberlain's own quotes from March of 1938 against him, noting that if the League was defunct than it only showed Hitler, he had a freehand to act without fear of international response. Attlee argued that such weakness was further demonstrated when pleas from Churchill and other likeminded Tories for a stand in solidarity with the Czechs were rejected when Hitler first made his demands at the start of the summer.

The basis for Chamberlain's faith in agreements with Hitler, and Mussolini for that matter, were based in Attlee's view on individual assurances from those who had demonstrated themselves to be untrustworthy:

We have to walk by faith—the faith of the Prime Minister in Signor Mussolini and his faith in Herr Hitler. The Prime Minister has said how difficult it was for Herr Hitler to recede from a statement which he had once made. I have five pages of statements made by Herr Hitler, from every one of which he has receded. I need not go through them; you know them—pages of them; but the Prime Minister says

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<sup>702</sup> Attlee, *HC Deb 03 October 1938*. cc 55

against all experience that he has faith in Herr Hitler's promise, grounded on two or three interviews—a pretty flimsy support for this country.<sup>703</sup>

Attlee's concern that not only was the present deal built on quicksand but that it demonstrated national British weakness to a global community that lacked viable mechanisms to avert war. Only a strong stand by liberty loving countries could be a check on Hitler now.

Attlee also noted the contribution to the crisis made by genuine pacifists both within the Labour Party and without. He wanted to stress that Lansbury and others were sincere in their aspiration to maintain peace but attacked many unprincipled pacifists who added to the narrative made by Hitler and Mosleyites that British calmness in the face of crisis demonstrated a disconnected decadence from the plight of peoples on the continent:

I have a great admiration for complete pacifists of the type of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bow and Bromley (Mr. Lansbury). When he went to see Herr Hitler, I think he raised the dignity of this country to a position of strength, but I am not favourable to people whom I would call merely the pleasure-loving people, who are pacifists because they will not take up any responsible position. I am afraid that the view that Herr Hitler may have got may be derived from them.<sup>704</sup>

This statement was also illustrative as it showed that Attlee was not in fact concerned with Chamberlain's decision to meet with Hitler, as Lansbury had also done so. Attlee's central issue was that the present deal before Parliament did not avert the potential for war to breakout in Europe. Attlee's position was that while Britain should be prepared to fight if military action was taken against the Czechs yet, the ideal solution would be that echoed countless times by Labour Party members and affiliates. Labour argued that a general conference by all European powers should be convened, as Germany now could sit as an equal rather than a vanquished foe in 1919.

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<sup>703</sup> Attlee, *HC Deb 03 October 1938*. cc 64.

<sup>704</sup> Attlee, *HC Deb 03 October 1938*. cc 65.

The chief instigator of war for Attlee and others was economic inequality. A country's population will suffer material inequalities so long as the state lacks access to raw materials to develop their industries.<sup>705</sup> A conference which can settle these issues would be a stronger guarantor of peace than the sacrifice of the Czechs. However, such a solution would only be possible if Hitler and Mussolini halted their acts of aggression, both in Spain and in their threats to Poland and Yugoslavia. Attlee's idealism provided an aspirational framework for peace, not far different from what would eventually emerge in the form of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952. Yet, these hopes were guided by a firm reliance on pragmatism. Hitler could not be trusted, and the betrayal of the peoples of the Sudetenland to Nazi rule was a national disgrace of the first order.

The ensuing debate included contributions from supporters and detractors of the Prime Minister's settlement with Hitler. Hugh Dalton, Lansbury, and Arthur Henderson providing some of the most substantive Labour contributions on day one.<sup>706</sup> Other strong contributions came from across the political spectrum, Anthony Eden and Archibald Sinclair (Liberal Party leader) standing out most. Most of these contributions contained similar argument to that of Attlee, with the greatest variation being focused on the particulars of minority representation in the Sudetenland.

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<sup>705</sup> Attlee, *HC Deb 03 October 1938*. cc 66. Such a view on economic equality was consistent with Labour's longstanding commitment to equitable economic relationships, if the have not states of Germany, Italy, and Japan could get better means of trading for necessary materials then war would not be needed.

<sup>706</sup> Arthur Henderson mentioned here is not the same individual who led the Labour Party, rather he was an MP re-elected in 1935 after losing his seat in 1931 who went on to become a Labour Peer, Lord Rowley.

Day two of the Commons debate opened with Herbert Morrison speaking on behalf of the Labour Party. Morrison argued that Labour had for years been working to strengthen the League of Nations and strengthen international resolve to challenge the expansion of fascism:

This party [Labour] has said insistently, ever since 1931, that if the policy of drift continued, if the cowardly, unimaginative and ineffective policy, merely negative, of dodging trouble whenever it came was persisted in, that there would come a time when it was not a question of the Chinese being the victims of a Japanese aggression...it would not be a matter of Abyssinians...It would not be a question of Spaniards... We on this side said, "If this drift goes on, if this cowardly policy of weak Ministers continues, under which you are merely evading trouble because it has not actually reached your doorstep, then be sure the time will come when it is on your doorstep." It was on our doorstep last week—not in at the front door, but on the doorstep. We were on the verge of a great calamity for our own country and for the world. We here have said, "Either we must join with other countries in the collective organisation of the peace of the world and the conscious building up of a tidy world, a just world and a fair world, or we must go on with this policy of—not a policy, but this bending, this submission to blackmail—and one of these days we shall not be able to evade war itself."<sup>707</sup>

Morrison went on to crucify the Government for wilfully weakening the League of Nations and its ability to effectively utilise collective security as a means of halting fascist expansion. By showing a blatant acceptance of the need to sacrifice small or fractured states rather than contemplate the potential for war by unifying the great powers to protect peace. The result instead was that, "We [Britain] were taking in any case the risk of war, but the tragedy is that we were taking the risk of war with weak forces behind us, whereas we could have taken the risk of war with vast and powerful forces behind us."<sup>708</sup> To Morrison, the decision by Chamberlain to accept peace at the expense of the Czechs merely provided a play for time and it would not be long before another small European state was on the chopping block.

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<sup>707</sup> Morrison, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 vol 339*. cc. 171-172.

<sup>708</sup> Morrison, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 vol 339*. cc. 177.

Another speaker of prominence following Morrison was Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, a Labour MP who was a staunch pragmatist in the Party. He had seen military service with the Royal Navy's land forces during the First World War. Wedgwood was blunter than some of his Labour colleagues declaring the League of Nations dead.<sup>709</sup> After being attacked by Conservative MP Vice-Admiral Taylor for a lack of clarity on the nature of Labour's proposed alternative to Chamberlain, should the League be dead, Wedgwood articulated the core of his Party's aims:

If the Labour party were in power their foreign policy would be directed entirely towards reconstructing the League of Collective Security, and if I had the privilege of being dictator under those circumstances it would be reconstructed in about six weeks. The Four Power Pact is at present merely another name for the German Reich. England is no longer the dominating Power in any such organisation. Obviously, Italy takes her orders from Germany under any circumstances. France is, unfortunately, cowed, and England under the present Prime Minister will support freedom up to a point, but will always be guided by expediency if not sympathy. So that we can say that the Four Power Pact as it is envisaged, as it is promised, by Herr Hitler, is indeed another name for the German Reich. It will lead us into peace, but only so long as the Four Power Pact does what Germany wants, and so long as all the other nations agree to obey the orders of Germany.<sup>710</sup>

Wedgwood added to earlier statements by Labour speakers to stress that Hitler could not be trusted, by reference to his own reading of *Mein Kampf*. He made specific reference to Hitler's expressed hatred of British and French democracy and desire to see Europe turned into a series of satellite states which directed their trade to Germany. Wedgwood warned that even if war did not break out, Hitler would work to further develop economic domination of the continent to impose a twentieth century version of Napoleon's Continental System which had sought to economically defeat Britain in the nineteenth century. With such a system already being developed by German exploitation of Lithuania, Wedgwood warned:

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<sup>709</sup> Colonel Wedgwood, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 vol 339*. cc. 214.

<sup>710</sup> Colonel Wedgwood, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 vol 339*. cc. 214-215.

I ask all Members of this House who do not trust the German Chancellor, on whichever side we may sit, to consider whether we must not view the future through the most gloomy spectacles, if we are dependent on a Four-Power Pact which is only another name for the German Reich—if we are to be forced by threat of war to consent to every concession demanded of us, which will alienate from us our trade and our friends. If that is the prospect before us, I say that we will not be governed by those who have confidence in Herr Hitler, and not by one who sympathises with an alien form of rule by force.<sup>711</sup>

To Wedgwood, the threat to Britain was clear and an appeal to concerned Tories was critical to have any hope to either bring down Chamberlain's proposal, or more realistically, brace the country for the inevitable next showdown with Hitler.

When Conservative MPs attacked Labour for the perceived hypocrisy of demanding a stronger stand in support of the Czechs but consistently opposing rearmament, Labour MP A. V. Alexander was quick to respond:

We have offered again and again from this Box support for whatever expenditure was required on armaments for collective security. Since then, when the present Government, by their retreat, had forsaken collective security, you have seen the Labour movement, in spite sometimes of great criticism of people who did not agree with them, still supporting armaments in the interests of the defence of their own nationals and their own country.<sup>712</sup>

It was true that Labour had since 1937 shifted its Party stance on rearmament, abstaining rather than voting no on defence estimates. Yet, these Tory criticisms suggest that Labour's popular perception was hindered by its Lansbury era positions as the Party of unilateral disarmament and war resistance. On matters of defence Labour had moved to support limited rearmament, particularly related to air defence and aiding Spanish Republicans against Fascist forces backed by Germany and Italy. However, as this dispute in the Commons demonstrates, Chamberlain

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<sup>711</sup> Colonel Wedgwood, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 vol 339*. cc. 217.

<sup>712</sup> A. V. Alexander, *HC Deb 04 October 1938 Vol 339*. cc. 295.



loyalists were able to portray Labour and Tory dissenters as the bloc that now stood in the way of peace.

Therefore, despite the efforts of Labour, Liberal, and some Conservative MPs, a major political upset was not achieved. Chamberlain was, as expected, able to maintain the confidence of a majority of Government members to gain parliamentary backing for the Four Powers Pact he had secured with Hitler surrendering the Sudetenland but averting war. Basking in their victory, the Conservatives claimed that Labour's "hatred of Fascism outweighed its love of peace."<sup>713</sup> Labour had failed in its objective to break Conservative support for the motion but strongly denounced the move, demonstrating the trade union Movement's solidarity behind such an initiative. Labour would be vindicated in its assessment of the damage the deal brought for Britain's position in Europe by future events but in October of 1938 it could only be viewed as a resounding defeat for the Party. Significant resources had been devoted to a mass campaign that spanned the whole country. Yet, the electorate would have their say on the matter in the seven by-elections scheduled for October and November. Three of these contests were given significant attention by Transport House and local Labour constituency associations and served as referenda on the Munich settlement.

### Munich's By-Election Aftermath

The first of these by-elections was held in Oxford on 27 October. Transport House had been concerned about the Oxford DLP for over a year as it had consistently demonstrated itself to be militantly left wing and had concerns over communist infiltration in the leadership due to

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<sup>713</sup> Conservative Party, *How the Peace was Saved: The story of the Great Crisis* (Tiptree: Anchor Press, 1938), 11.

its often-independent activities.<sup>714</sup> It had been a staunch supporter for British intervention in the Spanish Civil War and was vocal in its support for the creation of a Popular Front. Labour Headquarters grew so worried that in June of 1938, it had threatened to disaffiliate the Oxford DLP unless it withdrew from the Coordinating Committee for Peace and Democracy.<sup>715</sup> The local executive followed the orders but registered its protest to Transport House. Before the Sudetenland Crisis, the prospective Labour Candidate Gordon Walker, called upon the Liberal candidate to resign to avoid a vote split that would favour the Tories. The Liberals were quick to argue the opposite. As the European crisis developed in early September, the Liberals offered to withdraw from the election if Walker also withdrew, in favour of a progressive candidate without party allegiance. This was initially rejected, but in the aftermath of the Munich settlement pressure from the local Party leadership grew for Walker to take the Liberals up on their offer. On 10 October, Transport House was informed that the local Party had agreed to the deal with the Liberals, before getting approval for that decision by the NEC. Walker was quick to contact Labour's NEC Elections Sub-Committee and state his objection to the move. He was determined to still run for the seat, believing that Oxford's Labour voters still supported him even if he had lost the confidence of the Local Party leadership.<sup>716</sup>

This saga continued in the days leading to the election. NEC agents made statements of support for Walker's candidacy at local Party meetings, but the Local Executive voted 109 to 34 to remove Walker.<sup>717</sup> Such defiance by the local Party demonstrated a stern response to Munich, a belief that a united ticket would be the best means of showing Chamberlain that the

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<sup>714</sup> Duncan Bowie, "Popular Front – the 1938 By-Election and After," in *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires*, (London, University of Westminster Press, 2018), 198.

<sup>715</sup> Bowie, 201.

<sup>716</sup> Labour Party National Executive Committee, *NEC Minutes 6 Sep – 26 Oct*, "By Election Report," 1938, Item, 851. People's History Museum, Labour History and Archive Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid*

dishonourable sacrifice of the Czechs was not supported by the public. For Oxford Labour leadership this split between Transport House and the local constituency suggests a desire to uphold Labour's national campaign which had stressed the patriotic notion of country above Party. The NEC by contrast appeared to genuinely believe that their Labour candidate could win and provide a direct repudiation to Chamberlain. However, once Party agents began reporting that there was widespread support for Lindsay's candidacy, Transport House decided to withdraw Walker but not to officially endorse the independent, Sandy Lindsay.<sup>718</sup> Walker himself refused to go quietly, writing a letter to the editor of the *Daily Herald* titled, "It was a Betrayal to Withdraw Me." In it he argued that the by-election was Labour's chance to show the fruits of its fight, but it was not to be with the independent candidate starting his campaigning within hours of Walker's withdrawal.

The Oxford Party reaction may not have been unjustified as press coverage from the immediate aftermath of the Munich settlement passing Parliament showed Labour to be on the defensive in asserting it had not been, 'the war Party.' The Labour MP for North Aberdeen made clear at a rally on 6 October that Labour had not been out for war but that it was firmly opposed to the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini. Not only did such dictators laud immorality but they represented a serious threat to British and French democracy.<sup>719</sup> At another gathering in Motherwell, Arthur Woodburn, the Scottish Secretary of the Labour Party, argued that Labour desired peace but that the present surrender to force was no lasting solution, returning instead to the earlier Labour mantra that the solution lay in collective security.<sup>720</sup> How this could be achieved with a defunct League of Nations was not made apparent. Stafford Cripps at least made

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<sup>718</sup> Bowie, 204.

<sup>719</sup> "Labour Party Not out for War," *Aberdeen Press and Journalism*, (6 October 1938).

<sup>720</sup> "Czech Betrayal Condemned: Labour and the Crisis," *The Wishaw Press and Advertiser*, (7 October 1938).

clear at a meeting in Bristol that he believed if the Government had been willing to go to war for the Czechs it would have averted the present calamity, and even if it had not, he was prepared for the consequences.<sup>721</sup> Norman Angell went further, emphasising the need to not alienate the USSR as only through cooperation between the western Allies and Moscow could further German aggression be kept in check: “Our policy had been to throw an innocent third party to the wolves. The supply of third parties was limited, but the appetite of the wolves was unlimited.”<sup>722</sup> To him rearmament was needed but could only go so far if Britain’s strategic position was placed at the mercy of Germany. Angell never mentioned collective security or the League in his address, accepting it seems, that only now could a European balance of power ensure peace. These conflicting responses demonstrate that some in the Party had come out of the Sudetenland Crisis with a pragmatic understanding of the new international situation, others were still wedded to the idealism of years past.

The reception in public responses to the contrasting press coverage was mixed, with some calling out Cripps’ hypocrisy for previously advocating disarmament, others suggesting that “the Labour Party’s attitude during the crisis must be nauseating to all decent-minded men and women. Twenty years ago, Labour was attracting the idealists and progressive thinkers of the country by its international outlook and determination for world peace. Many are leaving the party today, tired of its office-seeking and narrow outlook.”<sup>723</sup> This statement held merit. Brief but widespread press coverage was given in late October to the resignation of two-time Labour candidate for North-west Camberwell, Hector Hughes. His letter announcing his resignation to the Labour Party General Secretary James Middleton was published in the press giving full

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<sup>721</sup> “Bristol East MP and War,” *Western Daily Press*, (11 October 1938).

<sup>722</sup> “No Peace If Soviet is Alienated,” *Daily Herald*, (14 October 1938).

<sup>723</sup> “Letter to the Editor,” *Birmingham Gazette*, (8 October 1938).

account of his reasons for leaving. Hughes argued that he exited the Party was due to unclear foreign policy positions. He declared that “its [Labour’s] policy have become eclipsed by a sporadic and often undefined concern for the right of various foreign nationals for whom it is not clear whether the Party desires us to wage war or not.”<sup>724</sup> Hughes further elaborated that Labour’s relief at the avoidance of war but anger at the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia under threat of war was inconsistent.<sup>725</sup> To Hughes this was the product of Labour abandoning idealism, now entirely represented by Chamberlain and his settlement with Hitler, in favour of a so called, “effective realism.”<sup>726</sup> Such anecdotal pieces cannot be representative of the broad Party base but do at the very least suggest that there was some Party and public confusion over Labour’s haphazard return to form in the face of Chamberlain’s victory. The consequences of these conflicting perceptions of Labour’s handling of the Czech affair meant that once a joint candidacy had been agreed on for Oxford, all eyes turned to that city to see how the public would respond in the aftermath of the gravest crisis Britain had faced since the summer of 1914.

The independent progressive campaign benefited from a significant solidification of the anti-Conservative, and anti-appeasement vote. Not only were the Labour and Liberal voters brought together on the issue of appeasement, but many of the leadership of the Oxford Labour Party had close connections to the communists and used this to bring their voters alongside a local popular front movement in all but name. There was no contribution from significant Labour figures, the NEC successfully blocking Stafford Cripps from speaking in Oxford in support of Lindsay. Conservative support for Lindsay could be found in disaffected students, including a young, future Prime Minister, Edward Heath and some prominent supporters such as Randolph

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<sup>724</sup> “K.C. Resigns from Labour Party,” *Gloucester Citizen*, (25 October 1938).

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid*

Churchill and Harold Macmillan. Strong liberal support came from Megan Lloyd George and Richard Acland.<sup>727</sup> After much protestation, on the eve of the vote, Walker accepted that it was better to collaborate to make a strong stand against appeasement. He spoke in support of Lindsay at the final Townhall gathering of the campaign. In a pamphlet produced by the Oxford Labour Party titled *Labour Supports Dr. Lindsay*, Walker said: "I urge all those who would have supported my candidature to vote in this election for Mr. Lindsay. Democrats – especially in such a crisis as this – must on no account neglect to use their vote...I therefore call on you to vote for Mr. Lindsay on October 27<sup>th</sup>."<sup>728</sup> Walker's statement only finalised what had already been occurring on the ground, that Lindsay's campaign was a localised popular front in all but name.

The results were a blow to the anti-appeasers. The by-election totals were 15,797 votes to 12,363 a majority of 3,434 in favour of the Conservative candidate Quintin Hogg. This was down from the vote in 1935 where Walker lost by 6,645.<sup>729</sup> Hogg immediately claimed the victory as vindication of Chamberlain's Munich settlement, Lindsay believed that the outcome still showed that a cross party movement had been developed which showed no signs of stopping its activism. For Transport House, the NEC doubled down on its concerns about the leadership of the Oxford Labour Party in the aftermath of vote, acting on the concerns of Walker and others that the local leadership was filled with communist sympathisers which could only damage the wider Party.

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<sup>727</sup> Bowie, 206. Acland was the junior whip for the Liberals and a proponent of the Popular Front, he would later join the Labour Party in 1945 and campaign on nuclear disarmament.

<sup>728</sup> *Labour Supports Dr. Lindsay*, quoted in Bowie, 206.

<sup>729</sup> Bowie, 206.

As with the case of Hector Hughes, Labour was also challenged internally in the days following the Commons showdown and the Oxford by-election. Pacifists came out of these events with a firm belief that they were a clear minority in the Party and struggled to find a place in the current foreign policy discourse. On 28 October the *Daily Herald* published a letter by Labour Party activist and writer John Beresford titled, “More Than I Could Endure” which argued that Labour had drifted too far from its traditional unwavering support for peace and abandoned its principles during the Commons debate on the Munich settlement. According to Beresford, “That was more than I could endure, and that is why I am addressing that Labour Party through its most authoritative organ, to warn them that I, and those who feel as I do, could not stand by them at the next General Election, if they adopted the attitude held by Mr. Attlee in the debate that began on October 3.”<sup>730</sup> Beresford went on to explain that the Czechs were doomed anyway. Instead Labour had embraced militarism and capitalist forces that feared Germany just as the Liberals did in 1914, “We were asked to believe in the old days before the war that our single chance of defeating Germany’s intolerable ambitions was by juggling with the balance of power in Europe which had been our policy for a century.”<sup>731</sup> Beresford instead praised the leader of the ILP, James Maxton, for standing by Labour’s true principles and acknowledging that Chamberlain’s way was right, standing up to capitalist forces that Attlee and others embraced.<sup>732</sup> Such a statement by a leading pacifist in the Labour Party, echoed by similar statements from George Lansbury, suggests that Attlee and others, had demonstrated to anti-war hardliners that the Party had genuinely moved in a more pragmatic direction.

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<sup>730</sup> “More Than I Could Endure,” *Daily Herald*, (28 October 1938), 12.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>732</sup> Capitalism in this context usually referred to the arms industry specifically, as it was believed that they utilised the system to drive politicians to support war as the best solution to international problems.

In response to accusations of a lack of clarity and attacks from pacifists within the Party, the NEC put out a declaration titled, *A Supreme National Effort for Peace* which reiterated Labour's foreign and domestic policy stance. It harkened to statements made by Attlee and other elements of PLP leadership, praising Czech President Edvard Benes for sacrificing his country to preserve European peace, not Chamberlain, and stressed that the Party had to accept that the League had become impotent and incapable of organising collective security efforts. Most important to the press was that the NEC doubled down on previous statements noting: "The crisis is not over. In October 1938, we are back in 1914."<sup>733</sup> The NEC focused its attacks on the Conservatives rather than its ever-shrinking pool of pacifist members stressing that British interests worldwide were currently being sacrificed and the Government had willfully accepted one diplomatic defeat after another. The recent crisis had only served to demonstrate for the public that Chamberlain had allowed British defences to be criminally neglected, particularly a mass shortage of anti-aircraft guns and laughable ARP systems, chiefly for urban centres outside of London.<sup>734</sup> Alongside this point, emphasis was brought to the consistent failure to maintain air parity with Germany as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin had pledged to do in 1934. In Labour's assessment great financial and political capital had been spent for years on efforts to supposedly improve the defences of Britain but when crisis emerged these were shown to be entirely inadequate. Labour made clear that in the coming months, defences had to be improved, rapid rearmament was needed and supported by the Party in defiance of pacifist members who refused to accept the Party's pragmatic embrace.<sup>735</sup>

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<sup>733</sup> "A Supreme National Effort for Peace," *Daily Herald*, (29 October 1938), 12.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>735</sup> *Ibid*



This tonal shift was quickly picked up by Conservatives in the Dartford by-election set for early November. This second by-election since the Munich deal was passed, was also framed by Conservatives and Labour as a referendum on the accord, for Chamberlain, victory would provide even stronger proof that the country was on side, for Labour it would show that Oxford was merely the product of radical influence scaring off voters from demonstrating their rejection of appeasement.

Chamberlain's actions and the Government's re-armament schemes were centre stage for discussion in the election. The Health Minister, Walter Elliot attacked Labour from the left on this issue of arms spending, arguing that meeting re-armament needs might come at the cost of social services, specifically regarding the raising of old age pensions.<sup>736</sup> Other leading Government MPs were keen to focus attention on their success in achieving peace in their time. Chamberlain's own message to Dartford stressed that, "world appeasement [is] our aim."<sup>737</sup> Dominions and Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald called for Dartford to support Chamberlain as the man who had courage not merely to shout peace but to make peace.<sup>738</sup>

For Labour, Attlee and Stafford Cripps were some of the leading Labour figures to appear in support of Labour Candidate, Janet Laurel Adamson, who made Chamberlain's dishonourable abandonment of the Czechs a central theme of her campaign. Attlee and Cripps used their election stumping to echo a similar message. Attlee stressed Hitler's lack of credibility: "The peril of war was only postponed. Peace rested on nothing more substantial than

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<sup>736</sup> "Arms Cost May Affect Social Services," *Gloucester Citizen*, (28 October 1938).

<sup>737</sup> "World Appeasement Our Aim," *Nottingham Evening Post*, (25 October 1938).

<sup>738</sup> "Crisis Memories," *Birmingham Gazette*, (5 November 1938). Malcolm MacDonald was the son of Ramsay MacDonald and had been a member of the Labour Party but broke off to join National Labour with his father in 1931.

the word of a dictator whose whole course had been strewn with broken pledges.”<sup>739</sup> Attlee also brought the point home to voters, focusing attention on the poor state of ARP to illustrate the Government incompetence overlooked by jubilation of peace: “The War Secretary explained that the shortage of anti-aircraft guns was due to his placing an order with a firm that went bankrupt. What a commentary on private enterprise in armaments! It was a lamentable story of failure and procrastination.”<sup>740</sup> Cripps attacks on the Conservatives emphasized Chamberlain’s wilful ignorance of Germany’s strategic position in late September, arguing that Hitler was not ready for war should Britain have stood firm. Cripps quoted reports passed to him from German SPD contacts including details of the logistical nightmare the Wehrmacht faced: “The German railways were completely blocked, and road transport was thrown into confusion.”<sup>741</sup> If Chamberlain had been prepared to acknowledge its readiness to stand by France and the USSR, rather than keep the Soviets out of the picture, a different agreement might well have come from the Four Power meetings in Munich.<sup>742</sup> It is telling that both Attlee and Cripps statements emphasized the failure of Chamberlain and abandon mention of collective security or the League, entirely disregarding attacks made in the weeks following Chamberlain’s victory that Labour was drifting too far into the arms of militarism and capitalism from the Party’s pacifist members.

The results appeared to vindicate PLP leadership both in their campaign and the ability to avert any local popular front developing that might scare off moderate middle-class voters. Mrs. Adamson gained the seat for Labour, 46,514 to 42,276 a sizable swing of 4,238 compared to the

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<sup>739</sup> “Mr. Attlee’s Attack: Government Worst in Modern Times,” *The Manchester Guardian*, (5 November 1938), 7.

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>741</sup> “Germany Not Ready for War,” *Daily Herald*, (1 November 1938).

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid*

2,646 majority in favour of the Conservatives in 1935. Turnout was higher too, unusual for a by-election in any period, with Conservatives getting 38,242 votes and Labour 35,596 in the 1935 General Election.<sup>743</sup> This Labour gain, combined with the growth in anti-Conservative votes in Oxford now buoyed PLP leadership's belief that their response to the Sudetenland crisis was morally, and now, politically astute. In Adamson's words: "The people of this constituency...have shown by their votes that they reject the foreign policy of the Government, and that they object to the betrayal of Czechoslovakia and democracy..."<sup>744</sup> The local Labour association attributed the victory to the women's vote arguing that the Conservative belief that women would base their vote on gratitude towards Chamberlain and his peace was shattered.<sup>745</sup> As a result Labour sought to tie Munich to its impact on working and middle class families in subsequent contests.

The Dartford gain was quickly followed up with a Labour victory in the Doncaster by-election on 17 November. The outcome matched that of Dartford with an increase in Labour's share of the vote and a higher voter turnout.<sup>746</sup> The Munich deal was given prominence in Doncaster by both Labour and the Conservatives. Chamberlain's personal appeal to the riding focused on his achieving peace with Germany and the lack of a viable alternative to appeasement. He attacked Labour as warmongers having no substitute which would have given the Czechs better terms, "If our political opponents who criticize us to-day had been in our place they would have found only two alternatives confronting them – peace by negotiation or war on a scale that might well have become worldwide."<sup>747</sup> The Labour candidate John Morgan stressed

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<sup>743</sup> "Labour Capture Dartford from Unionists," *Western Daily Press*, (9 November 1938).

<sup>744</sup> "Dartford By-Election Declaration," *The Manchester Guardian*, (8 November 1938), 11.

<sup>745</sup> "Women's Vote: A Theory Exploded," *The Manchester Guardian*, (9 November 1938), 12.

<sup>746</sup> Roger Eatwell, "Munich, Public Opinion, And Popular Front," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 6. No. 4 (1971), 131.

<sup>747</sup> "The Doncaster By-Election: Premier's Letter," *The Manchester Guardian*, (3 November 1938), 10.

the shame Chamberlain had brought to the country by securing peace at the expense of national honour.<sup>748</sup> A. V. Alexander also visited the riding to support Morgan's campaign. He attacked the Tories on two fronts. First, he emphasized how the growth of the national debt due to re-armament resulted in an increase in income tax and a policy of austerity halting improvements to social services. Second, Alexander tied these fiscal challenges for voters to Chamberlain's failure to ensure Britain had a reliable host of allies, leaving only France as a friend in Europe.<sup>749</sup> In other words, the British people were now suffering the financial toll of Chamberlain's foreign policy failures. Such arguments proved successful with a Labour victory, holding the seat and breaking through the wider popularity of Chamberlain's accord with Hitler.

How Labour's by-election momentum would translate in the expected 1940 General Election was still hard to predict in late 1938. Nationally, public perception was still strongly supportive of the Prime Minister, demonstrated in the press and, in three of the four remaining by-elections that year which saw Government candidates retain their seats. The Conservative narrative that Chamberlain had shown himself to be the man of the hour saving peace and averting war proved hard for Labour to dispel.<sup>750</sup> Nonetheless, the by-elections demonstrated for Labour that their hostility to appeasement was justified and could, at least momentarily, increase Party support. The rhetoric used to stump for Labour candidates solidified the Party's shift in supporting re-armament, and a foreign policy centred on balance of power as the most viable means of halting fascist expansion.

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<sup>748</sup> "Doncaster Socialist Candidate's View," *The Leeds Mercury*, (26 October 1938).

<sup>749</sup> "Government's Record Criticized," *The Manchester Guardian*, (7 November 1938), 6.

<sup>750</sup> Eatwell, 124. The other government defeat was at the Bridgwater by-election where an independent anti-appeasement candidate narrowly won the seat with the support of local Labour and Liberal voters.

## Conclusion

Overall, Labour's campaign in support of the Czechs resulted in a halfway revolution. The events of 1939-40 would vindicate almost all of Labour's arguments, Hitler cared nothing for the "scrap of paper" signed with Chamberlain, the Czechs were not left to enjoy liberty in the remainder of their territory, Britain was forced to accept war as a final resort, entering in a state of unpreparedness for the level of commitment to continental Europe needed to save France and avert calamity. Whilst Churchill has remained in popular memory as the great hero of this saga, it was Labour that organised the widest response to Czechoslovakia's plight. The Party had been concerned with the fate of the Czechs for years beforehand and organised their stand in solidarity with them on the basis of defending individual liberty and the patriotic sentiment of preserving British national honour. Labour also demonstrated a clear, and largely underappreciated, acknowledgment of the evil horrors that Nazi rule brought to those subjected to it, the fate of the Jews and of European socialists was of grave concern. Yet, the Party was not unanimous in this stand. There were pacifist detractors who made their voices heard both privately and at times in incredibly public displays of discord. TUC and Party leadership largely proved successful in forcing these dissenting voices to the sidelines, even if some such as George Lansbury made an impassioned case for his views in Parliament and the press. Divergence between Transport House and the Oxford DLP over the best means of showing public disagreement with Chamberlain came to a tipping point which could not be hidden from the electorate. Dartford may well have been a moment of vindication for Labour, but the reality was that the opportunity for change in Labour was driven by two factors. First, the resignations of staunch pacifists both in the months before and the weeks after the crisis provided political space for Labour to shift to a more pragmatic foreign policy as events forced urgency upon all involved. There were of

course, some moments which still showed Party leadership was out of touch with the pace of events and felt compelled to keep a modicum of reference to older idealism. The most obvious of these were the calls by Attlee and others for a world conference which, like Versailles in 1919, could bring a fresh settlement of economic grievances between Fascist states and the Democracies to avoid war. Such an aim would have been nearly impossible to achieve at the start of the 1930s, let alone by 1938 when it was clear that nothing, but the threat of armed force could satiate the fascist hunger for expansion.

The truth was that Labour was simply outmaneuvered by Chamberlain. The fact that he was able to bring “peace in our time” for the British people, when Europe appeared to be on the brink made him the man of the hour. Labour’s nation-wide rallies failed to convince enough of the public to back their case. Such an outcome was largely the product of the inconsistent language at these rallies, they often relied on messaging that lacked cross-party appeal, and radicalism was likely a significant deterrent to Labour’s efforts at anti-appeasement consensus building. The situation was not helped by the fact that Labour’s criticisms were effectively portrayed by Conservatives and Mosleyites as warmongering, their hatred of fascism blinding themselves to the great victory which had been achieved. Even the fact that Labour had, broadly, embraced the pragmatic reality that Britain needed to re-arm quickly was not as transformational as it could have been. Labour would continue to oppose conscription well into the spring of 1939 when its consideration was no longer realistic to the situation Europe faced. Nonetheless, Labour succeeded in galvanising much of the working class to the foreign policy plight Britain faced in a way that had not been possible with earlier events no longer was the threat of fascism a Spanish, Chinese, or Austrian problem, it was now at Britain’s doorstep. The delayed outbreak of war also

brought with it a delay in Labour's full embrace of a pragmatic acceptance of war as the only means of arresting the slow death of liberty at the hands of Nazism.

## “A Bellicose Party”: Labour and the Countdown to War

### Introduction

1939 would provide Britain with all the international crises and complexities that Labour had been sounding alarm over for years. Where 1938 provided the Party with a clear wedge issue that was capable of garnering public support outside of traditional left-wing voices, 1939 provided validation. Labour made great strides and found genuine success in pushing the Chamberlain ministry to embrace much of its foreign policy but still faced serious stumbling blocks from its ideological constraints. The Party suffered from serious infighting early in the year over the question of Labour entering a Popular Front with Liberals and communists as a last ditched attempt to secure victory in the next General Election. Although the NEC proved successful in quelling this brief emergence of left-wing dissent, the Party appeared unsure of itself just when international events saw an escalation of war fears. Most damaging of all, the Party became stuck in a drawn out and pointless battle over the decision by the Government to implement peace time conscription at the end of the Spring in 1939 at a moment when war with Germany was appearing to be incredibly likely. The Party renewed efforts at establishing an anti-fascist bloc in Europe to preserve peace and a rapid expansion of Britain's rearmament program, all of which would be hindered if the armed forces could not be adequately expanded to meet its international and imperial commitments. Labour emerged relatively undamaged by such a campaign, as the pace of events took over press coverage and the apparent dithering of the Prime Minister on declaring war on Germany for its invasion of Poland in September 1939 provided vindication for the Party's claims that their foreign policy vision had been the right path for Britain to avert another major conflict.



## Munich in retrospect

1938 had been a dramatic year for the Labour Party with its foreign policy principles shaken to the core by events in Europe. Labour had taken a decisive turn in its opposition to British abandonment of Czechoslovakia and accepted the League of Nations was no longer a viable mechanism for maintaining peace between the Great Powers of the world. The Party had already seen some success in by-elections where the Munich settlement was central to its campaigning in October and November. Based on the countrywide response Labour had developed in opposition to a settlement with Hitler, Labour authored a confidential report for its international policy sub-committee titled, *The Position of the Labour Party After Munich*.

The report was aimed at establishing a consistent foreign policy in the aftermath of the surrender of the Sudetenland and a common protocol for DLP's relationship with other opposition groups to the National Government. The report made clear that unification of opposition groups should not be viewed as strictly the product of pro-communist maneuvers, something which gravely concerned Transport House as any increase in support for the CPGB could represent a serious divide in Labour's trade union political base. The threat was identified in no uncertain terms: "As far as the Communist Party is concerned, there can of course, be no relaxation of the vigilance which has been exercised against that body, one of whose aims remains the destruction of Labour leadership and the substitution of Communist leadership."<sup>751</sup> The policy sub-committee believed that such agitation for unity of the British left was a product of increasing threat to democracy abroad and in Britain over the course of 1938. The report cited two main reasons for this:

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<sup>751</sup> "The Position of the Labour Party After Munich," Labour Party Policy Committee memo no. 8, 8 October 1938, 5. Hugh Dalton Papers 2/4/3. British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, LSE, London.

(1) The maturing of German rearmament preparations, and the fact that Germany has outstripped Britain and France combined in the Arms Race. It has been quite clear for some time that the British Government's "time table" of rearmament was two years late: it would not produce its full results until 1940-41: whereas the Nazi timetable was designed to bring Germany to a high state of military preparedness for an aggressive foreign policy in 1938-39: and it has been clear since Germany invaded Austria that the Nazis would stick to their timetable and not ours.

(2) The replacement of Mr. Baldwin's Government by the Chamberlain Government which is to say the least, much less pro-democrat and pro-French; and much more pro-German and anti-Russian, than its predecessor, and which seems to have a trust in the dictatorships as pathetic as its mistrust of democracy is dangerous.<sup>752</sup>

For the international policy sub committee, the fact that Chamberlain had acquiesced to Hitler and Mussolini's interests provided a serious threat to western democracies. The fact that British re-armament lagged far behind Germany represented a serious threat to European stability into 1939 and the Labour Party, through its focus on the issue in the report, demonstrated a strong stand in favour of the about-face the Party had taken on rearmament since the earliest days in the Sudetenland Crisis. Concerns over Chamberlain's foreign policy also illustrated Labour's concern that a strong anti-German coalition was far more challenging to achieve after a clear surrender to the demands of the dictators.

The report's assessment of the National Government and the Conservative Party in the aftermath of Munich was also telling. It determined that there was a clear divide among Tories which had been demonstrated in the Parliamentary battle over the Munich settlement. A group that included Churchill and others clearly supported Britain taking a 'firm stand' against the interests of the dictators, requiring a strengthening of Britain's defences. Such a stance towards accelerated rearmament by dissident Tories represented an important vulnerability in the Government benches for Labour to exploit.<sup>753</sup> As the report stated: "it is quite clear that the

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<sup>752</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>753</sup> Ibid, 3.

fundamental cleavage in policy is between those who are prepared to deal sympathetically with the aggressive fascist states, and those who are prepared to deal with them, but only on condition that their future behaviour is a great improvement on that of their past, and that they give guarantees to this effect.”<sup>754</sup> For Labour the opportunity existed to build common cause with other political forces on the singular matter of standing up to fascism.

The report also sought to address wide reaching concerns regarding the official party position on the formation of a Popular Front or a ‘Progressive Alliance,’ in response to the present international situation. The drafters of the report concluded that Labour would only support the formation of an anti-Government alliance if it had effective Conservative support. Without the backing of Conservatives, “it would take the heart out of large numbers of our most loyal supporters.”<sup>755</sup> Rejection of a Popular Front or a unification of opposition forces under other auspices remained a key plank of Labour’s policy into the coming year. Nonetheless, the Party embraced a clear, if reluctant support for rearmament akin to that of the Liberals or Tories:

It is deeply repugnant to the spirit of the Labour Movement to have to consider once again the question of rearmament and the pouring out of wealth on weapons. But it must be remembered that it is most probably already a question of whether this country and France will defend the democratic faith which they have in common and endeavour to rebuild the collective peace system, or whether they will refuse to make that effort of defence, see themselves further and further outstripped in the building up of power, and finally be faced with a Nazi dominated Europe; the least of the repercussions of which will be silencing of free speech in this country as far as expressions of opinion about Fascism and Fascist leaders are concerned; the greatest of which constitutes such a threat to all the ideals we profess that it is even more painful to contemplate than is the prospect of rearming to defend those ideals.<sup>756</sup>

Although some elements of the Party still stood firmly against supporting rearmament, George Lansbury chief amongst them, the concluding statement of the report made clear the support of

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<sup>754</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid, 13.

the top elements of the Party to see Britain rearm in defence of Labour's values in the face of the fascist menace.

### The Expulsion of Stafford Cripps

Stafford Cripps, the leading voice of the Labour left, had been gravely concerned at the dawn of 1939 over the direction of the Government's foreign policy and Labour's increasing support for a more direct stand against the actions of the fascist powers. His own reaction to Munich had been a forceful demand for Labour to rally around Churchill to develop an alternative to the, in his view, increasingly pro-fascist Chamberlain ministry. The surprise by-election victory of Vernon Bartlett in November 1938, an independent progressive candidate who gained the seat of Bridgwater from the Conservatives over the issue of Munich, was viewed as proof of the effectiveness of local popular front activity by Cripps and Aneurin Bevan.<sup>757</sup> Other events in Europe also established panic in Labour's left-wing. It was clear to any international observer that the Spanish Republic was facing its final days and that only immediate action could have any hope in stopping yet another country falling under the grip of fascism. The idea of a cross-party alliance that included the Tories, or specifically Churchill, was soon dropped as Cripps' attitude towards the Tories hardened over concerns that even its anti-fascist elements embraced only one solution to the demands of the dictators, 'reactionary imperialism.'<sup>758</sup>

On 9 January Cripps wrote to the General Secretary of the Labour Party, James Middleton, requesting a meeting of the NEC to consider his renewed calls for the formation of a British Popular Front. Cripps argued that the urgency of global events required an abandonment

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<sup>757</sup> John Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, (London: Weidenfeld And Nicholson, 1969), 261.

<sup>758</sup> Ben Pimlott, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton*, 251.

of “rigid adherence to Party discipline and to traditional Party tactics [which] may amount to losing the substance to working-class freedom and democracy for the shadow of maintaining a particular type of organization which is, as a mere machine, in itself of no value.”<sup>759</sup> Cripps followed this argument with a twelve-point program which was presented to the NEC. Some of the demands were within conventional bounds of traditional Labour Party policy and activism: increases to wages, improvement of working conditions, expansion of educational opportunities, improved nutritional standards for working-class women and children, and the elimination of the means test on one’s ability to access welfare programs.<sup>760</sup> Yet, it was first two points of Cripps’ memoranda which held the most importance to his present campaign for a Popular Front: “The effective protection of the democratic rights, liberties and freedom of the British people from internal and external attack,” and the implementation of “a positive policy of peace by collective action with France, Russia, the United States of America and other democratic countries for the strengthening of democracy against aggression and a world economic reconstruction based upon justice to the people of all classes and nations.”<sup>761</sup> The language itself represents a subtle but significant shift in the Labour left from the earlier adherence to collective security being dropped in favour of collective action. Cripps’s language suggests an admission which seemed to match the views expressed by the Labour right in late 1938 that the League of Nations was in its present form dead and incapable of acting as the chief mechanism to protect the international status quo.

Cripps followed his twelve points for action with a request that the NEC implement a policy of combining opposition parties to win future by-elections and weaken the power of the

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<sup>759</sup> Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: A Biography Volume One*, (London: Macgibbon & Key, 1962), 287.

<sup>760</sup> The array of domestic policy issues Cripps was focused on are indicative of wider Party priority given to matters of domestic policy.

<sup>761</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, (London: Transport House, 1939), 44.

Tories in Parliament. Approval by the NEC would result in the establishment of a nationwide campaign to harmonise opposition funds and manpower at the constituency level upon the understanding that such action was to meet the emergency that Britain faced. Lastly, Cripps demanded that the NEC include in their statement of approval a categorical three-point commitment that:

- a) Neither the Labour Party, group or person joining on the above basis, would be expected to relinquish any part of their belief or programme except for the specific and limited purpose of the present emergency and for the creation of a temporary combination to fight the National Government.
- b) That the Labour Party only took this action because it was convinced that the emergency was such as to warrant and demand the temporary dropping of particular party interests in the cause of national and international salvation.
- c) That the Labour Party remained convinced that the only ultimate solution of the National and International difficulties was along the lines of the fullest Socialist programme.<sup>762</sup>

The NEC reviewed Cripps's demands at a meeting on 13 January and rejected the motion to adopt the memorandum by seventeen votes to three.<sup>763</sup> It was a resounding response as two of the supporting votes came from Cripps himself and Ellen Wilkinson.<sup>764</sup>

The following morning Transport House learned that Cripps had immediately acted in defiance of the NEC's ruling and had distributed copies of his memorandum to the press, trade unions, and DLP's requesting support for his desire to finally establish a British Popular Front. Before the NEC could organise a further meeting to decide on disciplinary measures to be taken against Cripps, news broke in the *Daily Herald* that a meeting had occurred in Oxford between 40 members of the local suspended DLP, the recent independent progressive candidate in the 1938 by-election Sandy Lindsay, and other liberals and communists from multiple

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<sup>762</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid

<sup>764</sup> Dalton, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton*, 252.

constituencies.<sup>765</sup> The aim was to setup nine Popular Front candidates to run in expected by-elections in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. Most importantly, no recognised members of any of these respective DLPs were in attendance. The chairman of the Oxford City Labour Party, a couple of prospective Labour candidates, a Liberal Peer, some Liberal candidates and local association chairs all attended.<sup>766</sup>

Although the gathering did not produce a constitution to organise the new group, a committee was setup to draft such a document in the coming weeks, needless to say, such moves alarmed Transport House, desperate to avoid a fresh schism in the ranks of the Labour Party. The concerns of Transport House were clearly illustrated in the 18 January issue of the *Daily Herald* where Francis Williams' personal column took direct aim at Cripps and the conspirators in Oxford:

These individuals know that they are acting in dictatorial defiance of repeated decisions taken by the Party in its representative conferences. Even if they dismiss loyalty as an old-fashioned vice worthy only of the "bureaucracy," they must be capable of understanding that without unity and cohesion any political party must perish... It is pure humbug to talk about the "rule of bureaucracy," the "narrow Party machine," and "officialdom." These phrases are the jargon on disloyalty, the self-excusing language of people who well know they are bluntly defying the right to the great majority to decide what Party policy shall be.<sup>767</sup>

Internally, much of the NEC were in favour of dealing an immediate death blow to Cripps's schism attempt with an order of expulsion from the Labour Party. Hugh Dalton noted in his diary entry on 19 January, that the trade union leadership were increasingly irritated with Cripps's antics and other members of the NEC made clear to Dalton that "if we [Labour's NEC] expel Cripps next week there will be a few squeaks and protests, but nothing comparable to the trouble

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<sup>765</sup> "New Popular Front Disclosure," *Daily Herald*, 18 January 1939, 4.

<sup>766</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>767</sup> "Forces of Anarchy," *Daily Herald*, 18 January 1939, 8.

we are in for if we let him go on.”<sup>768</sup> Yet, Dalton was keenly aware of the danger of acting too quickly in a climate where the Prime Minister could call an early General Election to fixate public attention on Labour’s internal squabbles: “The case against is that you give Cripps something you never gave MacDonald: a wonderful new run of publicity and limelight. I feel that the attractiveness of expelling him is so great that one must be on one’s guard against accepting it too eagerly.”<sup>769</sup> The Party opted to approach the matter with caution, not rushing to formally remove Cripps until he could have a fair opportunity to defend himself before the annual Party conference.

The impact of Cripps’s message quickly revealed itself in the following weeks with other discredited members of the Labour Party using the moment to attack the parliamentary leadership for its embrace of a more hawkish foreign policy than that of earlier years. On 20 January, the *Daily Herald* published an article by the former leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, Lord Ponsonby, titled ‘Why I don’t leave the Labour Party.’ Although Ponsonby had resigned from leadership in protest of the Labour Party firmly supporting Czechoslovakia, then under threat of German invasion, he had remained a registered member of Labour and sought to continue his efforts to promote his pacifist values within the Party. While Ponsonby praised Labour as the only party which could bring socialism to Britain, he did not shy away from attacking the leadership’s support for British rearmament:

As a knight in shining armour, Britain cannot go forth to destroy all the dragons in the world. Moreover, we have discovered at last that attempts at destroying dragons have a curious way of strengthening them and increasing their brood. But by accepting the doctrine of force and lining up in its acceptance of large armaments, the Party has laid itself open to the jibes of Government spokesmen that its policy of

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<sup>768</sup> Hugh Dalton, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton*, 253.

<sup>769</sup> *Ibid*



“bold initiative” and intervention makes it [Labour] present itself as a bellicose party.<sup>770</sup>

In Ponsonby’s eyes, Labour’s central focus on matters of foreign policy was damaging its central goal of improving social and economic conditions of Britain’s working class. Whilst not requesting that the bulk of the Party embrace Ponsonby’s own vision of pacifism, he believed that the current focus on the menace of fascism was recreating the conditions that led to disaster in 1914, “to see so many of my friends duped by the old cries, only twenty years after the most complete failure of force and violence the world has ever seen, is terribly disappointing.”<sup>771</sup> Such a statement clearly illustrated Ponsonby’s inability to recognise the unique danger that fascism represented, not only for preserving peace but for those people’s subject to the horrors of authoritarianism. He believed that the matter would solve itself as “dictatorships in Europe are...short lived. But as always, they will be strengthened by foreign intervention by force and will fall only by inevitable internal chaos and corruption when left to themselves.”<sup>772</sup> Such an interpretation would be applicable to the international situation Britain faced in the early 1930s but from 1938 onwards it was lunacy to ignore fascist expansion, something that Labour’s leadership clearly understood.

Francis Williams provided a clear response to Ponsonby in his own column on the same page of Ponsonby’s article. Ponsonby’s loyalty to the Party was praised throughout, even if he held serious disagreements with policy positions embraced by leadership. Ponsonby’s disagreement from the Party line was justified as he held staunch pacifist views which were always consistent with his principles. The reasonable stance of the Party in favour of rearmament was justified as Labour “believes that pacifism of this character would encourage the dictators to

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<sup>770</sup> “Why I Don’t Leave the Labour Party,” *Daily Herald*, 20 January 1939, 8.

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>772</sup> *Ibid*

make war in the sure knowledge that democracy and justice would have no defence against aggression.”<sup>773</sup> Only by ensuring that Britain and France had the means to resist the will of the dictators could peace be maintained.

On 25 January Cripps struck out again with the *Daily Herald* publishing in full a letter outlining his defence of the United Front (different media sources used United and Popular interchangeably to describe the same unity movement). Cripps opened with praise for the brave stand made by Lord Ponsonby the previous week, arguing that his criticisms of the Labour’s foreign policy should be tolerated, even if Cripps himself disagreed with an embrace of absolute pacifism.<sup>774</sup> Cripps attacked Party leadership for attempting to block his efforts to spread his message in Labour and wider anti-Government circles, he also took direct aim at the *Daily Herald* itself for placing party solidarity above any attempt to prevent the Tories securing victory in a future general election. The fundamentals of Cripps’s argument were best encapsulated in his final assessment of the folly of Labour’s leadership, “I reject absolutely the view, impliedly held by some members of the Party, that is on the whole safer in the present circumstances to have a strong Conservative Government rather than risk the possibilities of an alternative which will not be purely Socialist.”<sup>775</sup> Cripps sought to make it clear to the readership of the *Daily Herald* that British democracy could only be defended from fascism and imperialism by an alignment of all opposition parties to avert a future calamity.

On the same page which presented Cripps’s article, Francis Williams provided a response representing the interests of the NEC titled, ‘These are the Answers.’ Williams attacked Cripps as a self-serving opportunist who constantly sought different political weddings, first with

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<sup>773</sup> Ibid

<sup>774</sup> Stafford Cripps, “I Want to Know...,” *Daily Herald*, 25 January 1939, 8.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid

communists and later the Liberals.<sup>776</sup> To explain the position of the *Daily Herald* and by extension that of Labour's NEC Williams stated: "The Daily Herald opposes an alliance with Communism because we believe in democracy and an alliance with Liberalism because we believe in Socialism."<sup>777</sup> Not only were Cripps's desires for the creation of a Popular Front ideologically inconsistent, they also threatened to fracture the Labour movement at a time when unity was critical to pressuring Chamberlain to take appropriate action to protect Britain and France from an external fascist threat. Cripps also went against the democratic decisions approved by a ballot of Labour Party and trade union members. The desire to overthrow the will of the previous Party conferences demonstrated an abandonment of Labour's support for democracy. For these reasons Williams suggested that Cripps's movement would fail to garner significant support at the grassroots level of the Labour movement or from the wider British polity.

The same day that Cripps's defence was published in the *Daily Herald* the NEC voted to expel him from the Labour Party. In a vote of 18 to 1 the NEC revoked Cripps membership based on three conclusions:

- (a) The past campaigns waged over a long period at Sir Stafford Cripps' instigation have been calculated to weaken the unity of the Party and to give aid and comfort to its opponents;
- (b) The wide departure from the Party's Programme, Principles, and Policy which were the ostensible object of those campaigns, and
- (c) The present organised effort, fundamentally to change the Party's direction and leadership.<sup>778</sup>

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<sup>776</sup> Francis Williams, "These are the Answers," *Daily Herald*, 25 January 1939, 8.

<sup>777</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>778</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 48.

Cripps was given one final chance to avert removal by re-affirming his allegiance to the Labour Party and a public withdrawal of his memorandum.

On 2 February 1939 the Labour Party published a pamphlet explaining its decision to expel Cripps titled 'Unity, Truth, or Sham.' The central problem in the eyes of the NEC was that Cripps and his supporters were seeking an embrace of Liberalism and a diminution of Labour's moral leadership in favour of a desperate bid to remove Neville Chamberlain from office.<sup>779</sup>

There were also genuine electoral considerations as the NEC pointed out that even if a form of Popular Front was implemented with the Liberals it would not necessarily help Labour win seats as often the inclusion of a Liberal candidate did more to hurt the Conservatives than Labour.<sup>780</sup>

The entry of the communists by contrast would likely drive away any potential Liberal support, therefore, in Labour's eyes the Party would be best served standing on their own in any future general election. The NEC also pointed to the recent example of the collapse of the French Popular Front government as evidence that such a coalition would be inherently unstable.

Beyond that, the Liberals had not always proven to be clear allies for Labour, as the Liberals had acted in tandem with Ramsay MacDonald to bring down the Second Labour Government in 1931. Ideologically there were also important distinctions which could not be easily separated as the NEC noted: "We must insist that the Capitalism in which the Conservative and Liberal Parties believe is one of the root causes of war and Fascism. The Socialist who disputes this, or sets it aside as unimportant, has failed to understand the Socialist cause."<sup>781</sup> The NEC believed that Cripps' proposal would result in the Labour Party becoming a Liberal Party in all but name and sacrifice all socialist proposals for economic and social reform. The NEC believed that in the

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<sup>779</sup> "Sham Unity of Popular Front Rejected," *Daily Herald*, 3 February 1939, 13.

<sup>780</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>781</sup> *Ibid*

run up to a general election (one would be due by 1940), Labour offered the only effective counter to the policies of Neville Chamberlain: “there is no other effective choice.”<sup>782</sup> With these arguments the NEC made it clear that they were unwilling to reverse its expulsion of Cripps and its crackdown on his supporters who threatened the Labour Party’s integrity.

Cripps was given a fresh opportunity to challenge his removal at the 1939 Labour Party Conference from 29 May to 2 June. Cripps was allowed to address the conference and defend his Popular Front campaign and his validity in remaining a member of the Labour Party. Cripps opened by attacking the NEC for fixating its criticism of his actions as being justified by previous Party Conference rulings, rather than consider statements by Divisional Labour Parties. More importantly Cripps pointed to perceived hypocrisy with the way he and his supporters were treated versus that of Labour pacifists who had also frequently challenged the Party line “the pacifists...have been in complete opposition to the Labour Party’s foreign policy over a year now and yet no one has suggested that they should be stopped carrying out the most active campaign against the Party, and, in some instances, actually in favour of Chamberlain’s policy throughout the country.”<sup>783</sup> Cripps’s decision to attack the NEC on its contradictory treatment of Labour pacifists was astute, as while they had been pushed to the sidelines and unable to shape foreign policy for over a year, the pacifists were still allowed to criticize the NEC from within the Party and faced no threat of expulsion.

Following Cripps’ remarks to the Conference, Hugh Dalton was selected to present the NEC’s case for expulsion to the Party. Dalton fired back against Cripps’ assertions that the NEC had attempted to stifle or outright block policy debate within the Labour Party, although he was

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<sup>782</sup> Ibid

<sup>783</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 229.

quickly interrupted by an angry delegate who claimed that Cripps's assertion "was the truth."<sup>784</sup> Dalton made frequent use of quotes from the NEC's earlier statement found in the Party pamphlet *Unity, Truth, or Sham?* to outline for the Conference the longstanding justification for expulsion. Going beyond the confines of that document, Dalton asserted: "I have always believed that this Labour Movement of ours was a great comradeship, but I have also believed that if that comradeship was to be effective and true, minorities must submit, with good grace, to majority decisions."<sup>785</sup> The Party provided ample opportunities for democratic discussion and debate of policy, but it was essential to the survival of Labour as a political force, that it unify behind decisions once approved.

Cripps did have his supporters in the conference with W. H. Hennessy representing the Bristol East DLP (Cripps's own Constituency Party) addressing the Party to defend the right for members to lobby for change in policy. Although simply arguing that Cripps had a right to differ from official Party line, Hennessy used incredibly charged language, alleging that the NEC's actions put the entire Party on a direct course towards fascism.<sup>786</sup> Foreign policy was central to Cripps defence with examples made towards the lack of NEC punishment for DLP's and PLP members of the Party campaigning to change Labour's stance towards non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War, even though support for that policy had been central to the Party for over 14 months into the conflict.<sup>787</sup> None of these dissenters faced expulsion for what could only be viewed a similar direct challenge to the position embraced by the Party leadership. By such protestations the NEC became hostile to non-intervention and went so far as to advocate for the

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<sup>784</sup> Ibid

<sup>785</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 231.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid

supply of British arms to the Spanish Republic. Of course, such an argument ignored the important fact that the NEC's shift came at a moment when many groups in Britain and beyond were faced with ample evidence that non-intervention had been completely disregarded by Germany and Italy. Therefore, any continuation of the policy only hurt the very side Non-Intervention was meant to aide.

Other support for Cripps was found from Dudley Collard acting as a representative of the Haldane Society, the organisation of Labour Party lawyers. The Haldane Society was not in-favour of arguing over the merits or not of changing Party policy but rather saw Cripps's expulsion as a threat to "issues of democracy and of fair play."<sup>788</sup> Others strongly supported the NEC and its decision to expel such as Ralph Morley of the Southampton Labour Party, asserting that Cripps acted in his own self interest to circulate memoranda which had been rejected by the NEC before brining the matter to the Party Conference. Similar sentiment was found in other local representatives such as George Brown of the St. Albans DLP. Faced with strong support for expulsion from some of the representatives of the largest local Labour Parties, the conference voted on the matter 2,100,000 in favour of upholding the NEC's decision to expel Cripps with only 402,000 in support of his motion for reinstatement.<sup>789</sup> Such an overwhelming outcome demonstrated clear Party cohesion against Cripps and his divisive campaign.

#### "The Voluntary System has not Failed!" Labour's Resistance to Conscription

Although the bulk of the Labour Party had become far more militant in its opposition to fascism and demanded an aggressive stand by Britain to halt the expansionist march of the dictators, the Party was unable to commit to wholesale change from where it had been at the start

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<sup>788</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 233.

<sup>789</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 236.

of the 1930s. With Britain facing an inevitable crisis in Europe and across the Empire, Chamberlain sought in April to institute a peacetime policy of conscription to bolster the strength of the armed forces and limit the chance that Britain's enemies would seek to threaten its international and imperial interests. Chamberlain made clear at the outset that such a policy would only be temporary in nature, with it being withdrawn in the face of an improved international outlook.<sup>790</sup> The support the Government showed for this policy was directly in line with the harder stand Labour had been lobbying for Chamberlain to embrace for almost two years. Yet, Labour opposed such a policy with immense vigor, both in Parliament and in the press.

During the opening of Parliamentary debate on the matter on 26 April, Attlee was quick to attack the Prime Minister for his proposal, viewing it as a betrayal to country. Chamberlain defended his call for conscription as the situation in Europe could no longer be viewed as truly 'peacetime'; rather it appeared obvious that war was imminent and that Britain needed to be ready.<sup>791</sup> The following day on 27 April, Parliament had a general debate on the question of conscription which allowed members from all parties to state their support or objections to the matter. Chamberlain introduced the bill for the introduction of conscription and concluded his defence for the implementation of such a policy with an appeal which should have been conducive to Labour's longstanding appeals: "For my part, I do not believe that this country has ever been more united in its approval of the stand which the Government are making against the forces of aggression. I do not believe there is any step, whatever the sacrifice might be, that the country is not prepared to take if it felt it necessary to secure the success of that policy."<sup>792</sup> Attlee

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<sup>790</sup> Neville Chamberlain, *House of Common's Debates*, 26 April 1939, cc. 1152.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid*, cc. 1155.

<sup>792</sup> Neville Chamberlain, *House of Common's Debates*, 27 April 1939, cc. 1352.



followed this statement by the Prime Minister with an attack on the shocking abandonment of the ‘voluntary system’ which was currently in place for British subjects to join the armed forces on their own volition.

In Attlee’s view, the voluntary system had not demonstrated itself to be inadequate to the task of meeting Britain’s defence requirements. The implementation of conscription would only sow discord in the country and disrupt the national effort in a moment when unity was essential to the survival of British democracy. The most important aspect of this argument was Attlee’s concern that military conscription would soon lead to industrial conscription, something that could damage the Trade unions and their influence over working conditions for their members.<sup>793</sup> Attlee believed that Chamberlain’s justification of conscription based on the recent guarantee’s made to Poland, Greece and Romania that Britain would defend their independence in the face of aggression from the fascist powers, was ludicrous:

Do I understand the right hon. Gentleman [Chamberlain] to mean that with every new obligation we require new forces? Surely, you have also to consider the forces on your own side. From any realistic point of view, if war should break out—we all hope it will not—we should be obliged to send certain forces, and should have to estimate those forces, where they could be applied. But we had obligations before this, and it is really ridiculous to suggest that there is a difference now.<sup>794</sup>

Attlee also attacked the Prime Minister’s leadership directly, arguing that his weakness in foreign policy had made it necessary for Britain to embrace a blatant shift in its defence policy to show allied states that ‘this time’ Britain was serious about its guarantees.

Labour believed that the very fact that the Conservatives deemed conscription necessary illustrated the folly of appeasement. For the British public, “They do not believe that the Prime

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<sup>793</sup> Clement Attlee, *House of Common’s Debates*, 27 April 1939, cc. 1353.

<sup>794</sup> *Ibid*, cc. 1354-1355.

Minister is really converted to collective security and is standing here for the rule of law against aggression. They have bitter memories of his past actions and speeches. He has not shown himself a friend of democracy. He has assisted in the handing over of free peoples to despotism. All that has had a damping effect on the working of the voluntary system.”<sup>795</sup> Chamberlain’s personal weakness demonstrated by the Munich settlement and Hitler’s subsequent occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939 had in Labour’s eyes done irreparable damage to a system which could have worked. Attlee also pointed to direct numbers for the manpower currently available to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force as meeting the military’s demands for 1939, with the Army already close to its requests from the past year. The fatal flaw with such a line of argumentation was that without the influx of fresh manpower, expansion to the armed forces would have to be undertaken after Britain had entered a conflict, therefore the armed forces would be required to fight potential enemies whilst at the same time working to expand its capabilities to counter the strength of Germany and potentially Italy.

Churchill was first to speak on behalf of the government benches and he was quick to attack the ridiculousness of Labour’s position. As Churchill astutely put it, “if the Opposition won and they established the principle of no compulsory National Service, I say—make no mistake about it—the whole resistance of Europe to Nazi domination would collapse. All countries, great and small alike, would make the best terms they could with the Nazi Power, and we should be left alone with our great possessions to settle up with the dictators ourselves.”<sup>796</sup>

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<sup>795</sup> Ibid, cc. 1356.

<sup>796</sup> Winston Churchill, *House of Common’s Debates*, 27 April 1939, cc. 1372.

Opposition to conscription was contrary to Labour's own interests and earlier arguments made over Chamberlain's abandonment of the small nations of central Europe to fascist hegemony.<sup>797</sup>

Colonel Wedgwood, one of Labour's most hawkish members, towed a tight line between the policy of his Party and the reality of the international situation which Britain faced. Wedgwood claimed that "I am confident that we are united in this House to-day, ... on our determination, at whatever cost to any principle and to any interest, to stand up to and if necessary to beat Hitler."<sup>798</sup> To achieve this stand against Hitler, Wedgwood could see the merit of conscription to demonstrate to Poland and France that Britain would stand behind its pledges in Europe but attacked the foolishness in believing that conscription could make a serious contribution to British defences in the next six months as it would take nearly a year for the military to really be impacted by its benefits. Wedgwood proved the most amenable to conscription of the Labour speakers but even he argued that it could only be supported by Chamberlain going a step further than making unilateral defensive pacts with countries under threat of the fascist powers. A general pact between Britain, France, and the USSR was the only viable means of making conscription worthwhile, even if such a stance by Wedgwood ignored Chamberlain's justification for anti-Bolshevism to protect the Versailles settlement. In the end, Labour's objections meant little as the Government was firmly united in its support for conscription and easily passed the measure.

On May Day of 1939 Labour organised a series of publications and rallies to challenge the implementation of conscription in peacetime. Officially, the Party stressed in its media remarks that conscription's implementation was emblematic of Chamberlain's foreign policy

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<sup>797</sup> For Chamberlain's focus on UK over the League see page 207, for the abandonment of Austria see 212, Labour efforts to pressure Chamberlain to save the Spanish Republic see 221.

<sup>798</sup> Josiah Wedgwood, *House of Common's Debates*, 27 April 1939, cc. 1380.

follies and that the only viable option for securing peace was to promote the voluntary system and attempt to establish a wider alliance of nations around a collective defence agreement.<sup>799</sup> Ernest Bevin speaking in his role as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union accused the Prime Minister of directly lying to the trade unions after making pledges in late 1938 that the Government was committed to the voluntary system. Most important to the trade unions was the fear that conscription would do damage to critical national industries which required fresh workers to maintain production levels.<sup>800</sup>

Attlee spoke at a rally in Glamorgan on the problems of conscription, telling the crowd that the implementation of required military service in peacetime was simply a “poor gesture.”<sup>801</sup> Attlee’s proposed solution was rather farcical and overly optimistic, as he believed international stability could only be achieved if Labour returned to government. While attacking the Prime Minister on what should have appeared to be a logical policy step, Attlee also rightly brought attention to the growing threat of Hitler by attacking Chamberlain’s recent remarks that Germany only sought peace with its neighbours following its final annexation of the rump of Czechoslovakia. Attlee correctly understood that Hitler had already demonstrated the worthlessness of Chamberlain’s assessment through his denunciations of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty and his disregard for the Versailles settlement.<sup>802</sup> These conflicting understandings of the international situation Britain faced, encapsulated the foolishness of Labour’s decision to

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<sup>799</sup> “Boys Paying for Premier’s Folly,” *Daily Herald*, 1 May 1939, 13.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>801</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid*. The fact that Attlee was now criticizing Germany for violating the Treaty of Versailles represented a significant break from longstanding Labour belief that Germany (but not necessarily Hitler) could justify violations of the treaty as it had been unjustly imposed upon them.

take a firm stand on conscription when even their own leader could willingly acknowledge that Hitler could not be trusted, and bold action was necessary to preserve any modicum of peace.

Other Labour MPs holding similar rallies around the country presented rather different concerns around the issue of conscription. Emanuel Shinwell speaking in Kendal claimed that Chamberlain's motives were purely to protect British capitalism from strengthening socialist influence. John Parker speaking in Dagenham went so far as to allege that conscription may soon be followed with the implementation of some form of fascism in Britain by the Government. Stafford Cripps speaking in Torquay echoed similar radical sentiment to that of Parker that the Government's call up of 200,000 men would do little to counter the power of Germany after its continuously unchallenged expansion in central Europe.<sup>803</sup> Such ideologically charged and radical language could only do harm to Labour's broader demands for a more aggressive foreign policy which saw Britain firmly stand against fascist expansion.

The matter appeared before the Labour Party's annual conference at the end of May. Herbert Morrison proposed a resolution to that "the conference declares that the voluntary system has not failed and calls for every effort to ensure its increasing success."<sup>804</sup> Morrison focused his defence of the resolution on the issue of Air Raid Protection (ARP) as the inevitable increase in numbers of anti-aircraft batteries and public alert systems naturally required a surge in available manpower. Morrison believed that the voluntary system was more effectual for providing adequate ARP resources as locals would want to see their communities defended and understand the importance of protecting what they were familiar with.

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<sup>803</sup> Ibid

<sup>804</sup> Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 281.

John Morris, representative for the Lambeth Borough Labour Party, echoed Morrison's focus on ARP but went further calling for the conference to endorse a motion which demanded a complete cessation of all subsequent support for all National Service schemes initiated by the Chamberlain ministry, with the sole exception of ARP.<sup>805</sup> Morris believed that the Labour Movement could no longer trust the Government as Chamberlain had willingly handed over Spain, Austria, and Czechoslovakia to the dictators. Under this reasoning, Morris viewed Chamberlain as a greater threat to the British people than fascism as the Prime Minister was only using conscription to stir public reaction at home rather than provide any deterrence to Hitler. Yet, Morris's radicalism did not go unchallenged. Ivor Thomas, Labour candidate for the constituency of Spen Valley, angrily fired back against Morris's desire to withdraw Labour support for National Service Schemes. Thomas believed that such hostility to conscription would damage Labour's credibility in a future general election. Morris's position only served to confuse the electorate as Labour would declare its hostility to Hitler while being unwilling to take reasonable actions to defend the country.<sup>806</sup> Herbert Morrison also attacked Morris's confusing position as he "is willing to co-operate with the pro-Fascist National Government on ARP for what is political virtue, but it will not...on National Service because it is political sin. I cannot follow the reasoning."<sup>807</sup> Such confusion over the merits of some co-operation with the Government over others created even greater inconsistency that Labour's public position.

Dalton took a more pragmatic view that conscription resulted in a less efficient army than that of a smaller volunteer organisation. Such a position would not be all that uncommon with military planning in the present day but was inadequate to the moment in 1939 as Britain needed

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<sup>805</sup> *Ibid*, 283.

<sup>806</sup> *Ibid*, 286.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

a larger army to meet its global defence commitments and aid the French. Dalton's more moderate take was attacked by J. Wood representative for the Moseley Divisional Labour Party. Wood argued that his experience as a soldier in the First World War provided him with a different argument against conscription from that embraced by the Party Executive. Wood believed that the NEC and the bulk of the Party were misguided in their belief that the next war Britain would face would be between democracy and fascism. Instead, it would be under Cripps's concept of a clash of rival imperialisms. Under the auspice of class warfare, Woods argued: "I appeal to you to support the efforts made...to fight this conscription, to line up even with our pacifist colleagues with whom we disagree, in a fight against conscription on entirely different lines, remembering the slogan of a great Socialist, "The enemy is at home."<sup>808</sup> Such differences on the position of conscription caused significant divides within the Labour Party on an issue which lacked strong public opposition in the spring of 1939.

When the conference began voting on the resolution, and the additional measure presented by Morris, the bulk of Labour's membership refrained from going further in its embrace of lunacy. The resolution brought by Morris (the Lambeth Resolution) calling for the Labour Party to reject co-operation with all National Service schemes outside of ARP was soundly rejected by 1,767,000 votes to 729,000.<sup>809</sup> However, the Party resoundingly reiterated its support for the leadership's opposition to peacetime conscription with 1,997,000 voting in favour of continued challenges to the scheme and only 574,000 voting to drop such an absurdity.<sup>810</sup> Although the matter was settled in conference at the start of June, Labour's foolish position would not be an effective pressure point for Tory attack for long. What the debacle did

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<sup>808</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid

<sup>810</sup> Ibid

demonstrate was that while Labour had otherwise embraced a rational foreign policy by late 1938 that appropriately responded to the state of international affairs, when Chamberlain moved towards a position which should have been logically consistent, Labour was hamstrung with ideological considerations and its vendetta against the personality of Neville Chamberlain.

“Is Mr. Chamberlain the Man to Carry Through the Task?” The Countdown to War

Hitler’s annexation of the rump remnant of Czechoslovakia at six in the morning on 15 March 1939 caused shock across Europe as Germany blatantly violated the Munich agreement which had given all that Germany had demanded. Labour’s long warnings about the folly of placing any trust in Hitler were now vindicated, Germany had now expanded into territories which had no legitimate claim to historical ties towards German ethnicity. Chamberlain’s initial response to this most recent example of international treachery was incredibly tepid. When Parliament discussed the matter on the afternoon of 15 March the Prime Minister claimed that Britain had no authority to act against the annexation as the recent declaration of Slovak independence made any requirements to guarantee the existing frontiers of ‘Czechoslovakia’ null and void.<sup>811</sup> The furthest that the Prime Minister was willing to go in his criticisms of the act was to acknowledge that Germany had no racial claims to the rest of Czech territory and that the mornings actions by German troops understandably caused international shock.

Labour was firm in their reply to such a weak initial response to a direct violation of British policy and international agreement. Welsh Labour MP David Grenfell opened the first of the oppositions remarks directly attacking the timid response of the Prime Minister:

I am quite sure that the Prime Minister is about the only person in diplomatic circles in Europe who can afford that splendid sense of isolation and detachment that he

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<sup>811</sup> Neville Chamberlain, *House of Common’s Debates*, 15 March 1939, cc. 437.



presented to-day. It is quite certain that no one in Czecho-Slovakia, either those who have held responsibility in the very difficult six months through which the country has passed or the great mass of the Czech people who have witnessed the invasion of their country, the violation of their liberties, the liquidation of the sovereignty of their country, the destruction of their independence—not one of those people could afford to preserve the calm mien which the Prime Minister has been able to preserve to-day.<sup>812</sup>

Grenfell illustrated the true bleak significance of the moment in contrast to the normality with which the Prime Minister considered the matter. A general European war could only be more likely now with a demonstration that the democracies were unwilling to act in defence of one of their own.

Grenfell followed this statement with a firm appeal to Britain's abandonment of its longstanding moral obligations to the free peoples of Europe:

I am simply amazed at the state of mind revealed by the Prime Minister in his speech this afternoon. He referred to the changed situation in Europe, a kind of theoretical and academic observation which did not take into account the fact that to-day, in the city of Prague, there is a situation that is surcharged with emotion, when pride is being trammelled and a nation's mutual trust and independence has been violated, when men and women witnesses in the streets of their historic city see armed men and equipment which came in, not in observance of any moral principles—for the mere pretence of that has been swept away.<sup>813</sup>

Morality had long been an important staple of Labour foreign policy and its usage here represented a powerful tool, as conceptions of national morality and honour had been central to the Party's response to the Czech crisis in the fall of 1938 and generated popular public support. Unlike Austria or even the last free portions of the Spanish Republic, the Czech state was a liberal democracy with laws and norms similar to that of Britain, its sudden fall being unanswered represented a serious abandonment of British principles, "it was a day of humiliation and shame for all of us."<sup>814</sup> The Prime Minister had lost in Labour's eyes any vestige of

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<sup>812</sup> David Grenfell, *House of Common's Debates*, 15 March 1939, cc. 441.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid*, cc. 442-443.

<sup>814</sup> *Ibid*, cc. 443.

legitimacy: “Guarantees—nothing remains; options— forgotten; plebiscites—completely repudiated.”<sup>815</sup> Without action British guarantees held no value and clearly were of no concern to Hitler. The fall of the Czech state was simply the death blow as Britain had not overseen any other component of the Munich agreement such as the use of plebiscites to settle remaining territorial disputes. The only option left would be for Britain to make firm commitments to common cause with France the United States and the Soviet Union. Anything less would leave the smaller nations of Europe to the fascist dictators. For Labour, Chamberlain’s personal guarantees could only be viewed as meaningless.

Josiah Wedgwood went further in his personal attacks against the Prime Minister. He claimed that Chamberlain had “been blinded by his affection for the dictators.” Only this could explain why Britain had been so relaxed for years in its responses to examples of fascist aggression.<sup>816</sup> Wedgwood demanded a rapid expansion of British rearmament efforts, not simply to defend its imperial interests but to protect the ideals it claims are central to its system of governance, this was critical as “the leadership of this country has been such as to turn a brave people into a nation of cowards.”<sup>817</sup> Wedgwood also challenged the frequent attack made against Labour that it was a party of warmongers for demanding more aggressive responses to the flagrant violations of the international status quo. The fact was that the Conservatives made war more likely, and more unfavourable to Britain, by allowing the rest of the Czech military’s equipment and its arms industry to be absorbed into the Reich. Germany’s gains in military and industrial strength were a tangible truth that could not be brushed aside by appeals to ideology.

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<sup>815</sup> Ibid, cc. 446.

<sup>816</sup> Josiah Wedgwood, *House of Common’s Debates*, 15 March 1939, cc. 463.

<sup>817</sup> Ibid

Hugh Dalton closed the debate on the matter for Labour with similar appeals to the Government benches of the utter failure of Chamberlain's personal foreign policy of appeasement. For Dalton, the danger to Britain was clear if members on the Government side did not push for a serious shift in policy:

Either we are to join with other nations to seek by common action to arrest it [the German advance into central Europe], or it will flow on and on, first in this direction and then in that, until it has reached almost to the shores of this little island itself, and until we are left to resist it, having allowed overwhelming odds to be piled up against us, having allowed the dice to be heavily loaded against us. Having been unwilling to defend others in their hour of necessity we shall have lost all claim to the friendship and help of others, until at the last we, friendless and forsaken, shall face our fate alone.<sup>818</sup>

The feeling in the House of Commons was effectively captured in Dalton's statement as many in the Government benches remained silent, unwilling to associate themselves with defending a policy that had so blatantly failed to ensure European stability. Only Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and a couple of backbenchers defended the Prime Minister without reservation.<sup>819</sup> A few others followed Anthony Eden in providing moderate criticism of Chamberlain's past policy with a recommendation that the time had come to form an all-Party government to ensure political stability in an increasingly bleak moment.

Faced with unified and strong criticism from the opposition and an overly timid defence from the Government benches Chamberlain was forced to make a stern policy reversal. Two days after Parliament's blistering rebuke of appeasement, Chamberlain announced to a rally in Birmingham that he was like so many in Britain, furious that Hitler had so flagrantly violated the settlement at Munich asking the crowd: "Is this the last attack upon a small state, or is it to be followed by others? Is this, in fact, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by

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<sup>818</sup> Hugh Dalton, *House of Common's Debates*, 15 March 1939, cc. 545.

<sup>819</sup> Naylor, 277.

force? ... Any attempt to dominate the world by force was one which the Democracies must resist.”<sup>820</sup> Chamberlain’s sudden turn has been largely attributed to Downing Street’s perception of British public opinion on the matter, unsurprising of course as the Munich Agreement had seen strong support in the press and in many Parliamentary by-elections (even if Labour flipped a few seats based on their opposition to the deal) the sudden collapse of the accord mere months after its signing was a sudden shock to the British political system which required a rapid reaction by the Prime Minister.<sup>821</sup>

Following the collapse of Czechoslovakia, on 31 March, Chamberlain extended British guarantees to protect the independence of Poland, Romania, and Greece, all states which were viewed as being under the hungry gaze of the fascist dictators. Publicly Chamberlain expressed hope that the Soviet Union would join Britain and France in opposing the threat of Germany and Italy. Privately cabinet was far less optimistic. On 3 April Parliament addressed the implementation of these guarantees. Arthur Greenwood, Deputy leader of the Labour Party, opened the debate for the opposition as Attlee was away from Parliament to undergo a prostate surgery. Greenwood hoped that these guarantees could be a nucleus for a reinvigorated form of collective security:

this Three-Power agreement, however satisfactory it may become, is clearly not enough to meet the needs of the present situation. It is a nucleus. It may be made a very valuable nucleus of a much wider understanding. I ask the Prime Minister whether he will make it the basis for the broadest possible brotherhood of nations to stand against aggression.<sup>822</sup>

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<sup>820</sup> Neville Chamberlain as quoted in, John Lukacs, *The Last European War*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976), 35.

<sup>821</sup> Lukacs, 36.

<sup>822</sup> Arthur Greenwood, *House of Common’s Debates*, 3 April 1939, cc. 2478.

Greenwood's so called 'much wider understanding' was an appeal to collective security without calling it as such, correctly understanding that such a word would be viewed as too ideologically tainted by mid 1939.

Greenwood also hoped to build on Chamberlain's public appeal for Soviet support to protect the status quo in central Europe. Greenwood understood the important role that the Soviet's could play as the great power in the east but was rather overconfident in its commitment to institutions like the League of Nations:

Since her entry into the League she has, I fear I must confess, been more loyal to its principles and its decisions than the British Government. She has declared her willingness to stand by any kind of understanding which would keep the peace through the establishment of collective security. I realise that there are all kinds of ideological objections to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I suppose that this new word is applicable to Members on both sides of the House, but in these times, it is important to mobilise in the cause of peace all States which are prepared to stand for peace.<sup>823</sup>

This level of faith in the Soviet Union was deeply flawed and ignored the strong (and very valid) concerns Poland had for any Soviet involvement in aiding it when faced with any form of German aggression. As the events of the Second World War would play out, the Soviets would be an essential component to a successful anti-German coalition but the dangers of the spread of Soviet influence were far more European states at the end of the 1930s.

To Greenwood, the potential for Chamberlain to understand the importance of partnering with any powerful state that opposes Germany could only benefit Britain and should be deserving of Labour's public support. If the Prime Minister could prove successful in building a strong anti-fascist bloc, "he will wear the laurels of victory on his brow. On these benches we shall not complain. We shall have been proud that the policy for which we have consistently

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<sup>823</sup> Ibid, cc. 2480.

stood has borne fruit in establishing enduring peace in the world and a new era of prosperity for this people.”<sup>824</sup> It should be noted of course, that in the background of such proceedings where Labour was working to establish a strong international stand against fascism, they were campaigning against the important tool for acting on rapid British rearmament, conscription. By opposing conscription Labour hindered its own message that the international situation facing Europe was a serious moment of crisis which required bold action even if such acts were contrary to ideological concerns.

Although Chamberlain’s guarantees were bilateral in nature, they represented an important shift in Labour’s eyes towards an embrace of a rational foreign policy after serious blunders in the past year. Where Labour and Chamberlain differed was in the belief that a deal with Poland was simply a first step in the establishment of a wider collective defense pact, something that was never in the cards for Chamberlain.

Labour’s hostility to the Prime Minister and his weak leadership in a period of emerging crisis was front of mind at the start of the summer. Chamberlain had proven weak in his handling of the dictators in peace, and it was not believed that he would be capable of following through in a potential armed conflict. Speaking at the 1939 Annual Labour Party Conference, Philip Noel-Baker presented an emergency resolution with the intention of addressing Chamberlain’s slow response to German aggression through the creation of a defence pact with France and the Soviet Union. While explaining the need for Labour’s membership to support such a resolution Noel-Baker noted in his closing remarks:

I ask again, is Mr. Chamberlain the man to carry through the task? Is he the man who can take these pacts to-day, work with President Roosevelt for economic cooperation and arms reduction, and end aggression by the collective security of a real League of

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<sup>824</sup> Ibid, cc. 2481.

Nations? It was only in February, three months ago that he said the only chance for the League was to abandon the idea that peace could be imposed by force. If he thinks that then we might ask him what he is trying to do today with the pacts he is making. Some people say he has changed the whole of his policy and turned to ours. I wish he had. I say he can never rebuild the League of Nations, for he has shown a thousand times that he is unconstitutionally incapable of understanding its purpose, its principles, or the ways in which it works. All his manifold humiliations at the hands of Hitler have not taught him, for he has still one foot in the eighteenth century and the other in Berlin.<sup>825</sup>

Although such a partisan attack on Chamberlain was not surprising, Noel-Baker's remarks make clear that there were serious concerns within the Labour Party, that the Prime Minister was not prepared to take the necessary measures to avert further German expansion. In Labour's view, Chamberlain's personal attempts to avert war were destroying the mechanisms by which a conflict could be reasonably prevented and isolating Britain from potential allies (as had been the case in 1938) if fresh European crisis erupted into a general war. Chamberlain's longstanding discrediting of the League of Nations and public perceptions that he was avoiding Soviet overtures meant he was hindering any chance of creating an anti-German coalition to preserve the peace he claimed to care so much about.

It is worth noting that anti-capitalism had not fully disappeared in Labour's rhetoric as even members of the Labour Right believed that Chamberlain's weakness in the face of fascist aggression was motivated by class interests. Ernest Bevin argued that Chamberlain and other appeasers were guided by the bankers and were content to see the masses suffer under fascism in favour of increased profits for the corporate elite.<sup>826</sup> Bevin's statements also demonstrated the core elements of Labour's attitude towards Hitler's regime and the important distinction of how Labour should view the German people. As Bevin stated:

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<sup>825</sup> The Labour Party, *The Labour Party 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 243.

<sup>826</sup> *Ibid*

Behind Chamberlain are the bankers; they are the principal supporters of appeasement for Germany. They do not want justice for the German masses – that is quite a different thing. I am anxious to prevent this movement fighting for the preservation of the Paris Bourse, the London Stock Exchange, the Amsterdam Exchange, and Wall Street. This movement, whilst building up its peace policy and resisting aggression, must do so on a basis which will ensure that in the end it achieves the salvation of the common people throughout the world.<sup>827</sup>

This belief that there must be a distinction between the German people and those in the Nazi hierarchy was maintained even in the formation of Labour's war aims in early 1940. The fact that this remained in the Labour Party literature shows that solidarity between working class peoples and deep resentment of Chamberlain were still core Party values heading into the period of maximum crisis in the summer of 1939. The Party had shifted towards a more reasonably foreign policy since 1937 but even at this late hour in 1939 the importance of internationalist influence could not be jettisoned and hostility to capitalist institutions remained.

Class interests were not in reality the driver behind the horrific outcome of Britain and France's inability to bring the Soviet Union into a common alliance against Germany. The great act of left-wing treachery was made all too clear in late August 1939 when it was announced that Hitler and Stalin had reached an agreement to avoid conflict and open trade between the two powers. For Poland, the consequences were immediately obvious as it provided a threat on both its eastern and western borders. For Labour the announcement of the pact between the great ideological rivals was a serious blow to the Party's hopes that the Soviet Union could provide a genuine chance to ensure European peace. As Francis Williams explained, following the first leaks of information confirming the pact was secured, in his column in the 22 August edition of the *Daily Herald*: “[For the Soviet Union] that there should have been serious distrust on her part of both the British and French Governments, that is understandable. But it can provide no excuse

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<sup>827</sup> Ibid



for what, if it is true, is a bigger betrayal of peace and of European freedom than Munich.”<sup>828</sup>

Such anger was clearly demonstrated in the following days issue of the *Herald* with a whole page devoted to covering foreign policy statements given by the Soviet press earlier in 1939, demonstrating their adherence to the importance of collective security and hostility to fascism even into mid August with a statement in *Pravda* for 15 August which said: “The war of the Soviet Union against Fascism will be the most just and lawful of all the wars of humanity.”<sup>829</sup>

The dramatic about face from Moscow had a significant impact upon Labour and other international left-wing political movements now faced with abandonment of core tenants of socialist foreign policy, most of all hostility to fascism.

Faced with the likely prospect that war in Europe could break out at any moment in the final days in August, Labour began to centralise its message of opposition to a war of aggression and a firm desire to stand behind Britain’s international commitments to halt fascist expansion. On 25 August Francis Williams wrote a whole page editorial titled ‘This is the Hour’ in the *Daily Herald* which outlined Labour’s principles in the face of a likely conflict. Apart from pledging Labour’s commitment to stand by the Poles should they face invasion, Williams also made appeals to Conservative conceptions of foreign policy last seen in the crisis over the Sudetenland, most importantly deference to ‘national honour’ as Labour could only support Chamberlain declaring war if it was in response to maintaining British national honour, rather than any fight for material interests which would bring glory to the Empire.<sup>830</sup> Yet, even at the proverbial ‘eleventh hour’ Labour remained open to an alternative to war, and the Party was committed to supporting free and equal negotiations between the belligerent states to settle

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<sup>828</sup> Francis Williams, “Russia and Germany,” *Daily Herald*, 22 August 1939, 8.

<sup>829</sup> “What USSR has said,” *Daily Herald*, 23 August, 8.

<sup>830</sup> Francis Williams, “This is the Hour,” *Daily Herald*, 25 August 1939, 10.

economic differences that would make conflict the only other recourse.<sup>831</sup> In the end it would be up to Hitler to choose the path Labour would follow.

### Towards a New World War

In the early hours of 1 September German troops crossed the Polish frontier and were soon engaged in firefights with Polish defenders. When news reached Britain a few hours later the country was in uproar over whether Chamberlain would once more abandon his pledge to defend a small nation from fascist aggression or would finally meet the gravity of the moment and act with the honour that Labour and many in the Government benches expected.

Chamberlain's dissenters now called for swift and determined action to demonstrate clearly that Hitler had gone 'too far.' With Attlee in hospital recovering from his operation, it fell to Arthur Greenwood to press the government to act. Greenwood faced a surprising predicament as many in the country had expected Chamberlain to quickly declare war with Germany for violating the Polish Guarantee, not all that different from the rapid declarations of war fired out between the belligerent powers in August 1914. For Labour's front bench it seemed that fears of Chamberlain once again avoiding war or at the very least delay, were able to fester. As Herbert Morrison would later reflect: "The Government was not blatantly refusing to declare war, but it did not seem in a hurry about it."<sup>832</sup> This perception was shared by many MPs on both sides of the aisle and sparked heated debate in the House of Commons over the decision to give German forces time to withdraw from Poland. The defining moment came when the Conservative MP Leo Amery, certainly no friend of Chamberlain, shouted out to Greenwood to 'Speak for

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<sup>831</sup> Ibid

<sup>832</sup> Herbert Morrison, *Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography*, (London: Odhams Press, 1960), 167.

England!', as he was about to reply on behalf of the opposition. His attack was forceful and demonstrated a clear repudiation of the Prime Minister's weakness towards Hitler's actions:

We are building our hopes upon sand, if we think that the German Government are going to give any kind of favourable response to the appeal which has been made. The act of aggression has already taken place. Herr Hitler has put himself grievously in the wrong. He has become the arch-enemy of mankind. He has been guilty not merely of the gravest, basest treachery to this Government and this people; he has been guilty of the basest treachery to all peoples to whom in the past he has given promises.<sup>833</sup>

It was essential to Greenwood that it be made clear to the Prime Minister that any notion that Hitler could be persuaded to act with reason was ludicrous. Further into his reply, Greenwood directed his message towards the British working class, making a call to action to stand up to aggression as the Labour Movement had advocated for so long. By both distinguishing Labour's quarrel as being with the Nazi leadership rather than the German people and calling for solidarity with the oppressed workers of Europe, Greenwood ushered Labour into war.

### Conclusion

The first half of 1939 provided Labour with significant political opportunity and potentially damaging internal challenges. The voices of the Party's pacifists were largely sidelined, and instead internal debate occurred on matters of foreign and defence policy which were out of line with where the country had moved. Chamberlain had embraced some of the core aspects of Labour's foreign policy demands from 1938, strengthening ties with France, expanding Britain's rearmament program, and forging strong bi-lateral ties with central European states at risk of fascist expansion. Labour had strong success in attacking the Government over weaknesses that could be easily demonstrated to the public, both in ARP

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<sup>833</sup> Arthur Greenwood, *House of Commons Debates*, 1 September 1939, cc. 134.

inadequacies and in the timid reaction given to the German annexation of the remnant of Czechoslovakia on both occasions the Prime Minister had to make clear shows of support to demonstrate competency in the eyes of the British public. Where Labour stumbled and was forced to waste considerable time and resources debating, was the renewed and rather farcical idea from Stafford Cripps of once more attempting to build a Popular Front, and the wider foolish Party hostility to the introduction of conscription. Cripps' campaign posed a threat to the stability of the Labour Party at a moment when a General Election could have been called something that brought back painful memories of the defeat in 1931 and the treachery of Ramsay MacDonald. The Party had already proven to be moderately successful in by-elections after Munich without the need for a Popular Front with liberals and communists. The NEC proved effective at pushing out Cripps and halting his campaign before it could generate a crisis of confidence. The greatest blunder the Party made in the months before the outbreak of war was its hostility to conscription. It had ideological reasons for this, as it was believed that such policy was merely a means of damaging the power of Trade unions. Yet, Chamberlain's decision to bring in peace-time conscription demonstrated finally that the Government was taking the growing international crisis seriously. Army expansion would allow Britain to meet its demands for imperial defence and provide a final deterrent to fascist aspirations. Labour had long demanded that rearmament be accelerated, and the military be expanded to ensure that the rights of small nations would be protected. Therefore, opposition to conscription damaged their own policy aims. There were also renewed hopes in the final days before the outbreak of war that a fresh effort at collective security under a different name was possible. The Party understood that Chamberlain's Polish guarantee was bi-lateral in nature but genuinely believed it was the first step in a larger process. The shocking news that Germany and the Soviet Union had come to a

new 'understanding' about the distribution of influence in Europe through the Nazi-Soviet Pact dealt the final blow to a renewed attempt to develop a collective defence agreement with central European states. When the moment of maximum danger appeared with Poland under German assault, Labour was quick to pressure the Prime Minister to not once again fall back on a position of weakness as he had when news first reached Britain of the fall of Czechoslovakia. Labour had done all it could to reasonably avert a new general European war over course of the 1930s, now that the time had come the Party was determined to do all it could to defeat the fascist menace and save democracy.

## “To Secure a Swift Victory and a Just Peace” Labour’s War in Opposition

### Introduction

The Labour Party entered the Second World War with a grim determination to see the country defeat the menace of fascism and drive Neville Chamberlain from office as soon as possible. Labour had been gravely concerned with Chamberlain’s leadership since his weak response to Hitler’s desires in 1938 to annex the Sudetenland and his reluctance to act on the incorporation of the rest of Czechoslovakia into the Third Reich in early 1939. Labour had campaigned for years to pressure the Government to expand and accelerate rearmament as their favoured mechanism for settling international conflict, the League of Nations, became a shadow of its former self, not viewed as a viable check on the desires of the dictators.

Once Britain had entered a state of war with Germany, the Labour Party worked diligently to act as part of a ‘Constructive Opposition’ which would cooperate where possible and challenge the Government where necessary to protect the interests of the working class. As the conflict dragged on Labour was forced to fight not only Conservatives but also threats from the left, primarily the communists and the ILP, which sought to make inroads into portions of Labour’s traditional political base which were more radical and desired an end to ‘imperialist conflict.’ To meet the challenge the Party established a clear set of war aims and decided to enter a coalition government for the good of the nation, if it was not headed by Chamberlain. This could not be achieved quickly enough for the Labour Party, which believed that Chamberlain remaining in 10 Downing Street represented a fundamental danger to the country and the war effort. It would not be until the country faced a moment of maximum danger in May of 1940 that Labour’s desires would finally be realised, with a significant portion of the House of Commons finally embracing a robust foreign policy centred around an aggressive prosecution of the war.

## Labour's Phoney War

Neville Chamberlain finally made the fateful decision alongside France, on 3 September to declare war on Germany for its refusal to withdraw from Poland. As part of an emergency session the House of Commons met late that afternoon both to discuss the decision to declare war and pass a series of emergency measures to prepare the armed forces and the British population for a multiyear conflict which was expected to be as brutal as anything witnessed from 1914 to 1918. The Labour Party fully supported such measures, as deputy leader Arthur Greenwood had indicated it would in the days before the British declaration of war. However, in the opening of the Opposition's statement for Parliament's debate on the declaration of war Greenwood provided a stern warning to the Prime Minister and his fellow appeasers: "Should there be confused councils, inefficiency and wavering, then other men must be called to take their places. We share no responsibilities in the tremendous tasks which confront the Government."<sup>834</sup> The moment when Labour would act on this warning would be continuously debated over the course of the Phoney War, a period from October 1939 to April 1940 when both sides conducted no offensive actions against each other. Apart from a few minor skirmishes on the seas, it was difficult to see that a war was really going on.

During this period of military inaction, Labour worked to develop its own war aims and its parliamentary role in the face of a national emergency. Although invited by Chamberlain, Labour refused to join the National Government as part of a coalition, something that had been determined as too dangerous with Chamberlain remaining Prime Minister. The Labour Party had decided that entry into any future governing coalition would come about through the collective decision of leadership, not through individual inclination, in an effort to avoid a repeat of the

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<sup>834</sup> Arthur Greenwood, *House of Commons Debates*, 3 September 1939, cc. 293.

schism of 1931 when Ramsay MacDonald and a few other members of the Labour cabinet abandoned the Party to join in an emergency coalition government.<sup>835</sup> By deciding to avoid entry into the Government, Labour retained its role as the official opposition and yet there was a clear need to avoid the instability which had caused serious challenges for the act of governance in the First World War.

On 5 September it was decided at a joint meeting of Labour's National Executive Council and the Executive Committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party that along with supporting resistance to Germany and opposition to entering a coalition led by Chamberlain, Labour would support an electoral truce with the Conservatives and Liberals for the duration of the war. These principles were the core elements of what Labour called a 'Constructive Opposition' leaving the Party free to criticize the actions of the Government while also supporting the war effort. The specifics of the truce focused on by-elections. As stated in Labour's 1940 Conference Report, two core tenants of the truce were, "Not to nominate candidates for Parliamentary vacancies that now exist, or may occur, against the candidate nominated by the Party holding the seat at the time of the vacancy occurring." And "The agreement shall hold during the War, or until determined on notice by anyone of the three Parties signatories hereto."<sup>836</sup> This truce also had the benefit of averting an election in 1940 which Labour did not believe they would perform favourably in. Yet the electoral truce was not without its detractors both in Labour and on the rest of the political left. Labour faced challenges from without by both the CPGB and the ILP,

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<sup>835</sup> Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party and the Second World War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>836</sup> The Labour Party, *The Labour Party of Great Britain's 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, (London: Transport House, 1940), 19.



and from within, by a small number of pacifist Labour MPs led by George Lansbury. The key to the truce's success, however, was due to the strong backing it received from the Trade unions.

The electoral truce caused significant tension with the Party's grassroots. In the months before the outbreak of war, Labour headquarters was seriously concerned with the lack of obedience many constituency organisations had in towing the Party line. There was a strong degree of pessimism within these local groups towards any potential for success in the coming 1940 election (which was officially cancelled not long after the outbreak of war). Other groups believed that the Party needed to maintain a hardline against the Conservatives after the clear breach of the Munich Agreement in March of 1939. By standing firm against the appeasers, it was believed that Labour could improve its electoral fortunes. The proponents of such a stand advocated for an electoral pact against the National Government, not all that different from the campaign Cripps had forced upon the Party earlier in the year. For some constituency associations this included going so far as to collaborate with the communists.<sup>837</sup> However, these were minor voices when compared to the massive influence of the trade unions which were far more moderate in their outlook. According to Labour's own figures total trade unionist membership numbered 2,214,070 out of a total Labour Party membership of 2,663,067 in 1939.<sup>838</sup> With such overwhelming influence over the Party, the disinterest of major trade unions in working with the communists even at the expense of the Conservatives made all efforts to establish an anti-National Government pact impossible. The one area where the unions did embrace some degree of radicalism was in their hope to regain recognition of their rights in response to the labour controls implemented by the 1939 Control of Employment Act through

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<sup>837</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organization in the Second World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189.

<sup>838</sup> The Labour Party, *39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report*, 45.

victories in by-elections for Conservative seats. Such dissent continued to fester within Labour's grassroots over the course of the Phoney War and was only kept at bay through careful restraint by Attlee and Dalton. However, by late 1939 it was becoming increasingly apparent that from both without and within Labour was walking a dangerous line.<sup>839</sup>

From outside Labour's ranks the greatest concern for Transport House in the early days of the War were from the communists who upon learning their new directive from Moscow to oppose Britain's war with Germany became viewed as a more serious threat to Labour constituencies. Labour had over the course of the 1930s proved successful at keeping the CPGB politically isolated even if at times this caused serious discord within Labour's ranks.<sup>840</sup> The problem for Labour was that once the Nazi-Soviet Pact was put into action, Moscow ordered all foreign communist parties to conduct an about-face on their long and determined anti-fascist campaigning and instead clamour against Anglo-French participation in an imperialist conflict. This transition by the communists caused serious concerns for Labour's leadership as renewed radical agitation could cause splits in the working classes support for the war effort. Labour constituency associations were encouraged to support the distribution of party pamphlets which outlined acceptable conduct for their members when dealing with CPGB members and their affiliates.<sup>841</sup>

However, the CPGB's membership was limited, and Labour's NEC found that a much greater danger was posed by the breakaway ILP which was not committed to the electoral truce and promoted an anti-war agenda. ILP members believed that the months of inaction following

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<sup>839</sup> Strikes and lockouts would be banned by the Government in 1941 under Order 1305 to keep the war industry on track. It fell to Ernest Bevin then acting in his role as Minister of Labour to enforce.

<sup>840</sup> Thorpe, 34.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid

Chamberlain's declaration of war allowed for a growth in opposition to war among the rank and file of the Labour Movement and challenged the Labour Party in by-elections in their strongholds of London, Northern England, and Scotland. Yet, by-elections against both the CPGB and the ILP clearly demonstrated that working class support for the war was strong. In the by-election for the London riding of Central Southwark in February 1940, the ILP candidate polled only 1,550 votes, while in West Ham the CPGB leader Harry Pollitt received only 966 votes compared to his Labour rival's 14,343.<sup>842</sup> Even in Scotland, where pacifist sentiment was believed to be strong, Labour won overwhelming victories in by-elections. These results provided clear proof that Labour's traditional political base supported the Party's policy of 'Constructive Opposition,' allowing for continued support of the war while opposing Chamberlain's leadership.

The perception by Labour's leadership that the communists presented a serious threat was not limited to concerns about local level politics, but also of the dangerous new relationship Germany and the Soviet Union had formed with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. This 'devils alliance' created a significant rupture between Labour's leadership and its affiliated organizations particularly with the TUC and its General Secretary, Walter Citrine. While the Labour Party and its affiliates agreed that the aims of the current war must be directed to protect the independent democratic societies of Europe, how would the Party respond to acts of aggression by the Soviet Union.

The specifics of such war policy had yet to be finalised before another small, and this time democratic, European state was threatened by a totalitarian neighbour. On 30 November in the

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<sup>842</sup> Brooke, 35.

Finnish capital of Helsinki, planes of the Soviet Red Airforce began dropping bombs on the airport, docks and central plaza. Structural damage was minimal but over 40 civilians were killed in an event that opened hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union.<sup>843</sup> The air raid signalled the start of a wider Soviet offensive against the Finns in the region of the Karelian Isthmus, an area sandwiched between the Baltic Sea and Lake Ladoga which was deemed by Joseph Stalin to be critical to Soviet security. The Finns controlled the bulk of the territory, and this provided a threat to the city of Leningrad (present day St. Petersburg) which was only a few dozen kilometers from the Finnish border. Stalin had attempted to negotiate with Finland in the aftermath of the destruction of Poland in October 1939 to lease the Karelian Isthmus for a period of thirty years.<sup>844</sup> The Finns were reluctant to accept any transfer of the territory as it had been previously fortified with a series of connected forts and pillboxes known as the Mannerheim line. Sacrificing the defences would leave the rest of the country vulnerable to any future Soviet incursion. As such, the negotiations between a reluctant Finland and frustrated Soviets dragged into November when at the end of the month Stalin opted to invade.

The fact that Britain and France were already dealing with a war with Germany (and carefully observing Italy for any signs it would enter the conflict) which inevitably required the attention of the bulk of their political and military resources. There were also geographic considerations as Germany had naval dominance over the Baltic Sea. There was widespread sympathy for Finland's plight in the Anglo-French press and amongst many political leaders but for those in charge, such as Prime Minister Chamberlain, there was little meaningful actions that could be done aid the struggle against Soviet aggression. Behind the scenes, the British Cabinet

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<sup>843</sup> William Trotter, *Frozen Hell*, (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991), 48.

<sup>844</sup> David Glantz and Johnathan House, *When Titans Clashed* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2015), 17.

and the Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff viewed Finland's fate as a forgone conclusion as the small state would never be able to match numerical and material advantages of the Soviet Red Army.<sup>845</sup> Yet, to the global community's surprise, Finland staved off the first Soviet offensive at the Mannerheim Line.

Labour responses to the invasion were initially limited. A statement was published in the press by the NCL on 8 December after it became clear that the war would drag on. Labour and its TUC affiliates called for all practicable aid to be given to the Finns. Such a clear display of aggression alarmed Labour as "Soviet Imperialism...revealed itself as using the same methods as the Nazi Power."<sup>846</sup> Yet, for making such a forceful connection between Soviet warmongering and Nazism, Labour was unwilling to comment on whether Britain should go to war with the Soviets. More important for the Finns, the NCL did not provide clarity for what so called practicable aid, would entail. The Party was unwilling at such an early juncture to consider calls for sending humanitarian assistance or small arms which would provide far more utility than mere words of moral support. While Labour's leadership was predominantly sympathetic to the plight of the Finns, there were serious concerns about making an enemy of the Soviets. Citrine and Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker became powerful advocates for arming the Finns and for showing public support for the Finnish working class.

As the potential for the conflict (now referred to as the Winter War) to be a quick contest diminished, Finland's struggle captivated the attention of the British press who framed it as a tale of David and Goliath. Support was also given to the Finns from the League of Nations who kicked the Soviet Union out of the organisation on 14 December. It was a strong display of

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<sup>845</sup> Bernard Kelly, "Drifting Towards War: The British Chiefs of Staff, the USSR and the Winter War, November 1939-March 1940," *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2009, 273.

<sup>846</sup> "Labour Hits Out at Russia," *Daily Herald* (8 December 1939), 2.

solidarity with its Finnish member state but optimised the ‘too little, too late’ mentality central to League responses to international crises over the course of the 1930s. Only now that a World War was underway, the very thing the League was established to prevent, did the institution show proportionate resolve to support one of its members in the fight for its life.

After being so firmly wedded in its policy to the importance of the League, Labour had surprisingly little to say about its response towards the Soviet Union. The bulk of Party attention was fixated on the war with Germany and news of the naval battles with the German pocket battleship Graf Spee in the South Atlantic. A brief response was provided in an editorial in the *Daily Herald* by Francis Williams. His remarks on the League action demonstrated how fallen from relevance for many Labourites noting: “The strength of the League has been so weakened that it no longer has sufficient power to take effective action against a mighty lawbreaker. It can do little more than condemn the crime.”<sup>847</sup> Williams was quick to remind readers that even outside the confines of the League, there was little that Britain and France could do for Finland other than attempt to defeat Germany and hope Stalin changed course in response. Certainly not the most optimistic stance even if it was incredibly pragmatic.

Labour would begin to shift its view of the Finnish struggle when members of the Finnish Labour Party sought to foster connections with Labour Party leaders in hopes of garnering support in Westminster. As Walter Citrine noted in his memoirs: “Clem Attlee received a communication from the Social Democratic Party and the Trades Union Congress of Finland, urgently requesting British labour send a delegation to investigate conditions on the spot. I was nominated but was reluctant to go. I had an immense amount of work on hand at the TUC.”<sup>848</sup> In

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<sup>847</sup> Francis Williams, “To Help Finland We Must Beat Hitler First,” *Daily Herald*, (15 December 1939), 6.

<sup>848</sup> Walter Citrine, *Two Careers: A Second Volume of Autobiography*, (London: Hutchison & Co, 1967), 17.

the end Citrine and Noel-Baker ended up going to Finland in late January 1940 as part of a British delegation aimed at determining the logistical challenges Finnish forces faced in their battle against the Red Army. More broadly Labour's National Executive Council used the Soviet invasion as means to publicly attack the CPGB's assertion that they were the voice and defender of the British working class. In parallel the Council publicly championed the spirit of internationalism through continued use of the League of Nations as a means of organising support for the Finns.<sup>849</sup> Yet, it was only after the surrender of the Finns in March that Labour released the report Citrine's delegation had created, which recommended sending large quantities of arms and volunteers to challenge the Red Army. Due to Labour's role as official opposition the Party could avoid blame for lack of significant government action but the fact that the issue of Finland appeared in both party literature such as *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* and at the 1940 annual party conference, shows it was of great concern to membership and leadership alike.

For those in the affiliated unions, the failure of their efforts to garner significant support from the Prime Minister to support the Finns before it was too late provided yet another example of the Government's ineptitude. When Chamberlain provided a statement to the House of Commons on the defeat of Finland Attlee fired back with righteous indignation, "We cannot have a policy of wait and see... Finland was not the first country to lose against aggression. I want other countries that may be threatened to realise we are willing and able to give effective aid if they are threatened."<sup>850</sup> Not only had the Prime Minister failed to defend yet another European state from authoritarianism, Britain was faced with the probability of a German

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<sup>849</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 13. As noted earlier, Labour made little mention of support or rejection of the decision to expel the Soviet Union from the League. Both in Parliament and in the press the Party was firm in its condemnation of the invasion of Finland but avoided any statement on the exit of a member state which Labour had advocated for joining in the first half of the 1930s.

<sup>850</sup> H.R.S. Phillpott, "'Don't Wait and See' – Attlee to Premier," *Daily Herald*, 20 March 1940, 1 and 8.

springtime offensive in Western Europe. It was apparent that while the country had been martialing its economic and manpower resources to prepare for coming fight there was a consistent weakness in the way that the present war cabinet conducted its affairs. Attlee, with the cheers from some Conservative back benchers quipped, “there is a feeling that much more might be done. Whether the fault is due to methods of men I cannot tell, but if either are wrong let them be changed.”<sup>851</sup> It was further proof that Chamberlain was not the man to lead Britain through the war and justification for Labour’s longstanding hostility to the Prime Minister.

Labour was also forced to reckon with some internal Party descension over its strong show of support for Finland and fervent rejection of Soviet imperialism. While some of the most problematic elements of the Labour left (Cripps most of all) had been expelled or sidelined with the collapse of the United Front campaign in early 1939, there were still some Russophiles with strong communist tendencies in Labour ranks. A minor controversy emerged when the Labour MP Denis Pritt, a longstanding Russophile who championed the Soviet system wrote a new edition of his book, *Light On Moscow* which was nothing but Soviet apologia justifying the invasion of Finland.<sup>852</sup> Pritt had already proven problematic for the Labour Party as his Russophile views allowed him to justify the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 as an act to save a portion of that country from the hands of Nazism. The Labour Party had condemned the Soviet invasion even if it fell short in calling for a military response the way it had towards Germany.

*Light on Moscow* had proven troubling for Pritt’s publisher, Penguin, who found it to so flagrantly vindicate Soviet policy that they attempted to refuse publication of the manuscript. It

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<sup>851</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>852</sup> Bill Jones, *The Russia Complex*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1977), 41-42. Pritt had been deeply impressed with the Soviet system when he toured the country in 1932. This was not a problem for his election to the London riding of North Hammersmith in 1935 but became a serious issue once Soviet militarism was on full display in 1939.



was only after Pritt, a significant lawyer in his own right, sued Penguin and forced a settlement where they agreed to distribute the book for public consumption.<sup>853</sup> The 1940 edition included a new chapter outlining Pritt's justification for Soviet invasion of Finland. He framed Soviet militarism as justified as the USSR was acting in self-defence, the logic being that Stalin was attempting to follow international law and assert the right of self-preservation for the Soviet Union which superseded Finnish independence.<sup>854</sup> Pritt believed that the Soviet state was in a unique geo-political position as it was the world's sole socialist state and was surrounded by hostile capitalist states. Therefore, the Soviets had a right to pre-emptively defend their national interests, but Pritt went further arguing that unlike Nazi Germany or Britain, the Soviets had additional justifications including "the grounds of humanity," as "contrary to the story put forward in the [British] Press, the Finnish people are entitled to receive assistance in recovering their freedom from a virtually Fascist government."<sup>855</sup> It was a stunning interpretation of a war of aggression launched against a liberal democratic state. Pritt even attacked Labour and wider international hostility to Soviet aggression as proof of a wider conspiracy to garner public support for a future invasion of the USSR. He also took direct aim at the Labour Party's framing of Soviet aggression as being imperialist in nature. Pritt believed that Stalin and the Soviets could not be imperialists as they had no capitalist motivations to exploit conquered peoples and had continued to show benevolence rather than imperialist desires in their conduct towards the Baltic States which were left freely to their own devices.<sup>856</sup>

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<sup>853</sup> Jones, 42.

<sup>854</sup> D. N. Pritt, *Light On Moscow*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), 165.

<sup>855</sup> Pritt, 171.

<sup>856</sup> Pritt, 187. The Soviet Union would annex the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania later in 1940.

Reaction from Labourites was swift with letters of condemnation flooding Transport House with demands to take punitive actions. Bjarne Braatoy, a *Daily Herald* journalist who regularly reported on Scandinavian events asked the Labour Party Executive to defend their fellow social democrats in Finland. This was of the utmost importance as Pritt had labeled the Finnish government fascist when really it was the product of the Social-Democratic Labour Party of Finland who had fairly won the 1936 election and held deep ideological ties to the British Labour Party.<sup>857</sup> Braatoy found numerous other falsehoods perpetuated by Pritt's apologia which demonstrated that he was wilfully spreading Soviet propaganda. Other Labourites wrote Transport House with similar complaints that Pritt's message could not be allowed to go unchallenged lest Labour approve of communist influence in the Party. As one contributor noted that Pritt:

repudiates the attitude of the [Labour Party] Executive in their expression of disgust of Russia in the Finnish aggression and writes glorifying Stalin. He should be made to resign and let him fight the seat [North Hammersmith] as a Communist. It is people like Pritt who make the workers afraid to vote Labour because of the extreme views some of the candidates have expressed. Surely if Stafford Cripps and several others were expelled for less than what Pritt has done it seems as if something was wrong with the authority of the Labour National Executive.<sup>858</sup>

These responses from prospective Labour candidates and DLP representatives across the country demonstrate that Labour's grassroots were also concerned with communist influences and sought a strong response from Transport House to avert communist entryism in the Party.

Labour's National Executive would proceed to expel Pritt in March of 1940 for his attack on Party policy. When the matter came before the Labour Party annual conference a few months later, Philip Noel-Baker defended the executive's decision to remove Pritt as his pro-Soviet

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<sup>857</sup> Mr. Bjarne Braatoy to the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson Papers, item, HEN/15/14. 1.

<sup>858</sup> R. Smithford to the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson Papers, item, HEN/15/14. 6.

campaign mirrored wider communist efforts to influence policy in Britain. Fears of communist entryism could be seen in Noel-Baker's assertion that the CPGB had "secret members, and fellow travellers, who permeate other organisations including...the Labour Party [and]... their duty as good and loyal members of the Communist Party... [is] to preach the gospel in everyway they can."<sup>859</sup> The fact that Pritt attempted to justify the Soviet invasion under the auspices of international law were deeply alarming to the Labour Party as it represented a bastardisation of existing Labour orthodoxy to use and promote international law to avert conflict not rely upon them to justify imperialist wars. Nor could the Party merely "forget the immorality of the Finnish war."<sup>860</sup> Soviet imperialism and communist entryism would have no avenue for promotion in the Labour Party, continuing its longstanding commitment to democracy and gradualism.

As Labour sought to tackle the crisis in Finland the Party also faced significant pressure from the membership and affiliated unions to clearly articulate their war aims. Understanding Labour's official war aims as defined in the early months of the Second World War is critical to determine what concepts Labour brought with them into Churchill's coalition in May 1940. These aims were outlined in two Labour Party publications released in early 1940: *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* written by Labour's party executive, and *Why We Fight: Labour's Case* by Party Deputy leader Arthur Greenwood. *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* is the more substantive of the two documents. It outlines the core policy positions Labour took towards the war. Labour's War Manifesto is outlined in full in the first section of the book and it lays out the core tenants of the Party's goals in supporting the war. Collective Security enforced through the League of Nations is reiterated again as a position retained as an element of party discourse since

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<sup>859</sup> The Labour Party, *Report of the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, (London: Transport House, 1940), 164.

<sup>860</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

the middle of the 1930s.<sup>861</sup> In specific relation to the current war, Labour articulated their full support for their efforts against Hitler while making a critical distinction. While determined to defeat the Nazis, “British Labour has no-quarrel with the German people. It does not seek to deprive them of any just rights to be obtained by rational and equal negotiation... It will resist any attempt to use the present conflict for ends that sow the seeds of further war.”<sup>862</sup> This focus on defining the war as a conflict with the Nazi government rather than with Germany was important, as there was still naive hope by some Labour leaders that the German working class would soon call for an end to the war and force Hitler out.<sup>863</sup>

The remainder of *Labour’s Aims in War and Peace* focuses on clearly assuaging concerns from both the left and the right to Labour’s support for the war and sympathy to the Finnish people. Harold Laski specifically assuages the concerns of those on the far left of the Party who may have sympathies to the CPGB by demonstrating the fallacies of the communist narrative that the current conflict was an imperialist war. While noting that capitalists in both Britain and France certainly had interests in supporting the war, *Labour’s Aims* claimed that there was no evidence to support communist claims that an immediate cessation of hostilities and implementation of a peace conference would provide an opportunity for a return of a socialist government.<sup>864</sup> Laski also pointed to Hitler’s track record for breaching international agreements over the course of the 1930s as proof that left wing calls for a peace conference were delusional. In response to communist narratives that supporting the war with Germany would merely be

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<sup>861</sup> Indeed, such language in Labour’s publications show a continued adherence to internationalism.

<sup>862</sup> Clement Attlee, Arthur Greenwood, Hugh Dalton, Herbert Morrison, Philip J. Noel-Baker, Barbara Ayrton Gould, Leonard Woolf, Harold Laski, Lord Snell, *Labour’s Aims in War and Peace*, (London: Lincolns – Prager, 1940), 9.

<sup>863</sup> This can be discerned in the statements provided by the Trades Union Congress, Philip Noel-Baker and others in *Labour’s Aims in War and Peace* which show a conscious effort to galvanise German workers to act against the Nazi regime.

<sup>864</sup> Attlee, Greenwood, Dalton, and all, *Labour’s Aims in War and Peace*, 23.

repeating the imperial expansion which resulted from the First World War, Laski stated that British imperialism had passed its stage of expansion. Rather participation in the current conflict would aid those on the left who wish to see the back of British colonialism. Laski noted that, “the effect of the war on British imperialism will be to develop still further those centrifugal and disintegrating tendencies which have already won for the Dominions the position of virtually independent states and are rapidly pushing India to the same situation.”<sup>865</sup> The case of an independent India had been a particularly serious concern of Labour’s since the earliest years of the Party’s life.

Using the case of India, Laski argued that British imperialism was essentially a capital-exporting enterprise where investors have intentionally developed colonies allowing for the growth of an increasingly politically conscious working class. This system allowed for a path to independence to exist whereas German imperialism aimed to exploit colonial resources while avoiding the consequences of industrialization with the colonists’ becoming peons to a conquering race.<sup>866</sup> For this reason victory over Germany was viewed as being in the best interests of the working class, speeding up the decline of empire, freeing the oppressed workers of Europe, and securing the Soviet Union from German threat. Clearly such ideas were accepted by the majority of Labour’s left-wing as demonstrated by Labour by-election victories over the communists and ILP.<sup>867</sup>

Yet, Laski needed to ensure that the left wing of the Party membership not only supported the war but supported Labour’s acceptance of the electoral truce with Chamberlain. Although acknowledging such an attitude towards the Prime Minister was unpopular, it was

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<sup>865</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>867</sup> Refer to the discussion of Labour’s by-election success on page 19.

necessary, Laski argued, that the lesser of two evils be embraced. This position was particularly directed at the CPGB and their Labour sympathisers by invoking Lenin's own dual policy to ensure the Revolution's victory by aiding Alexander Kerensky (leader of the Russian Provisional Government in 1917) in his crack down on General Kornilov's coup. Both were Lenin's enemies, but it was essential that an alliance of convenience be embraced to ensure the greater threat was eliminated. This was the key strategy Labour sought to embrace in their current conflict:

It [Labour] must support Mr. Chamberlain in so far as it is his clear purpose to defeat Hitler; that is the condition of the survival of an organized British Labour Movement. But it must not fail to make the case against him, the case, therefore, for replacing him in power as rapidly as possible; and it must do so with all the strength at its disposal. It must insist to the masses that only those can prosecute the war against Nazism to a victory which means enduring Peace whose minds and hearts are in its overthrow. Pursued with courage and determination, that insistence may, more rapidly than its enemies imagine, place the Labour Party in power. But to be able to make that insistence effectively, Socialists must grasp, in all its complexity, the dual nature of the issue that confronts them. Above all, they must understand that they cannot defeat Mr. Chamberlain and the things he represents save as they give all their energy to the defeat of Hitler.<sup>868</sup>

With this persuasive argument Laski and the Labour executive hoped that the British left could unite behind the formation of a constructive opposition which supported Chamberlain until the opportune moment finally appeared.

Just as Labour reassured the left-wing of the Party that supporting the war was the best path for advancing the socialist agenda, the Party Executive articulated their reasoning for the centrist and right-wing Labourites to support the war and interventionist policy more broadly. With the bulk Labour's membership composed of trade unionists who generally held a deep-seated hostility towards communism, almost a third of *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* was

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<sup>868</sup> Ibid, 33.

devoted to explaining the Party's attitude towards the Soviet Union. This anti-communist focus demonstrated Labour sentiment that both Nazism and communism (even if Britain was not at war with the Soviet Union) represented a serious threat to moderate trade unionism across Europe. This is first introduced with a declaration by the NCL regarding the Soviet victory over Finland in the Winter War: "Soviet Imperialism has thus revealed itself as using the same methods as the Nazi power against which the British working class is united in the war now raging."<sup>869</sup> The connection of Soviet action in Finland as being a form of imperialism represents a clear attack upon the CPGB's hypocrisy in toeing Moscow's line that the war against Germany was purely an imperialist conflict. Idolisation of the Soviet system was further shattered by Labour's assertion that Stalin was merely a modern Red Czar who clearly displayed similar ambitions to those of the Romanov dynasty that was overthrown in 1917. The CPGB are specifically viewed as merely being Stalin's men and are willing to support the invasion of an independent democratic state [Finland]. The specific assertion is that such a position is counter-intuitive to the aims of the British workers and shows a willful ignorance of Soviet crimes: "Even now, these emissaries of a foreign despotism refuse to see through the disguise of the Red Czar, who has used a new social and political system to invent a new kind of slavery for the Russian people."<sup>870</sup> This level of vitriol towards communists and their sympathizers was not likely to encourage conversion towards them, over supporting Labour's constructive opposition. Rather it aimed to reassure Labour centrists that the Party will continue to be suspicious of the far left. These members were to be further assured of this as the Party's anti-communist rhetoric caused apprehension in Moscow. This was made clear when the Soviet ambassador told Beatrice Webb, wife of former Labour minister Sidney Webb, that Labour's harsh response to the

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<sup>869</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid, 74.

situation in Finland meant that the Party was viewed as a much greater obstacle than the Conservatives to any Anglo-Soviet rapprochement.<sup>871</sup>

The final contributions to *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* are devoted to the outlining the conditions upon which a general peace could be possible. Attlee's ideas on this subject are most significant as they define the course, he intended to guide the Party through. Specifically addressing the fact that Hitler had consistently lied about his peaceful intentions over the course of the 1930s, a core condition of a peace settlement was that Germany had a government devoid of Nazism.<sup>872</sup> Attlee also distinguishes between the need for conditions to produce a cessation of hostilities and the principles by which Labour would establish a lasting peace. The first of these is the need to avoid a dictated peace, something that was viewed as a clear problem with the Treaty of Versailles which ended the First World War. The second is an early recognition of human rights: whatever one's colour or creed, they have a right to live in peace and develop their societies. In particular this includes a repudiation of Nazi ideology, as Attlee put it, "The German, relinquishing his conception of the primacy of the German race, must recognise that the Pole and the Czech and the Jew have as much right as he, no more no less, to a place in the world and to a share in the bounty of nature."<sup>873</sup> This is further expanded upon by the third principle which called for a recognition of rights of racial and religious minorities across the world. This would be achievable with the establishment of an international institution which has superior authority to nation states allowing for a means to guarantee protections for minorities. Along with these changes, Attlee considered that the final principle of a lasting peace was to finally

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<sup>871</sup> John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, (London: Riverrun, 2016), 238. The Webbs were well respected in Moscow as they had journeyed there in the early 1930s and written at length about the great successes of the Soviet system.

<sup>872</sup> Attlee, Greenwood, Dalton, and all, *Labour's Aims in War and Peace*, 103.

<sup>873</sup> Attlee, Greenwood, Dalton, and all, *Labour's Aims in War and Peace*, 105.



bring an end to imperialism as it was a system which had allowed for the oppression of minorities. Together, Attlee's principles for peace echoed longstanding Labour policies which had been developing since the formation of the Party at the start of the twentieth century.

Overall, *Labour's Aims in War and Peace* differs from earlier Labour Party discourse in that it not only outlined the party's anti-Chamberlain stance but attempted to pull the various factions of the Party together. It demonstrates that the Soviet narrative of the war with Germany being an imperialist conflict is fundamentally flawed and notes that victory over Nazism provides the best chance of achieving left-wing social reforms. It also appealed to Labour centrists by focusing on the imperialistic ambitions of the Soviet Union and the need to achieve a lasting peace based on principles of social equality and the creation of a powerful supra-national international institution, one which addressed the flaws that hampered the League of Nations. While the chief focus of the publication was directed to outline a clear set of war aims, it was also a form of election manifesto. The potential for an election in 1940 was believed to be very high by the Labour leadership (certainly in the early spring of 1940) as an election was required that year unless an agreement could be arranged to postpone due to the war. Efforts to unite the Party completely behind the war effort would be critical to avert electoral disaster. It was certainly possible that Chamberlain could use the current conflict as an opportune moment to increase his majority and secure his leadership position from his Conservative detractors.

This theory is given greater credence with Labour producing a second publication in the spring of 1940, *Why We Fight: Labour's Case* by deputy leader Arthur Greenwood. The book sought to educate the broader electorate by explaining the rise of Hitler and the failure of the Baldwin and Chamberlain administrations to douse the flames over the course of the 1930s. Regarding the Labour Party, Greenwood reiterated key principles outlined in *Labour's Aims in*

*War and Peace* such as support for the war but also an end to imperialism and reforms of the capitalist system. Where the book differed from earlier Labour publications was in its discussion of Chamberlain's handling of the war effort. Although there was a clear attempt to avoid naming names there was no subtlety to the assertion that the basic principles of socialism needed to be applied to make war production more efficient. As Greenwood noted: "What the Labour Party desires least of all is officialdom and bumbledom. It is earnestly desirous of mobilising our material resources, and harnessing all our knowledge, skill, experience and brains for the utilisation of those resources with the view to the optimum production of goods and services in support of the national effort."<sup>874</sup> Although not directly attacking any of the Tory ministers responsible for war production and mobilisation it is clearly articulated that there are too many aspects of the war effort left uncontrolled.

Greenwood suggested that socialist direction would be far more successful in getting the nation on an effective war footing. This could be best achieved by the swift implementation of far-reaching public control in industry and finance.<sup>875</sup> However, this is not limited to institutional changes. Greenwood argues that it is essential that union workers avoid the kind of exploitation in the current war that they faced in the First World War. By focusing on the need to protect workers from both suffering the greatest in the field of battle and at home from cuts to their standards of living and social services, Greenwood presents a particularly partisan narrative. This was a reference to both the Liberals in the First World War and the Conservatives in the present conflict ignoring the plight of working people, a critical point for voters to keep in mind should an election be called.

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<sup>874</sup> Arthur Greenwood, *Why We Fight: Labour's Case*, (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1940), 193-194.

<sup>875</sup> Greenwood, 197.

When examined together the Labour Party literature published in 1940 shows a Party walking a dangerous line. In choosing to embrace a policy of constructive opposition the Party's support for the war effort was made clear. This left Labour vulnerable to attack from the left as the CPGB painted the conflict as an imperialist venture. To counter this Labour had to attack the policies of the Soviet Union without appearing to be overly interventionist. What kept that Party united was its deep disdain for Chamberlain and his government's poor handling of the war effort. Yet, even this presented problems for Labour's leadership as the electoral truce was unpopular with the membership. The battle for Finland ended too quickly for a crisis to develop which could destroy Chamberlain but the disastrous fate of another Scandinavian country would provide the chance.

#### The Norway Debate and the fall of a Prime Minister

The enemies of the Prime Minister had sought to remove him from office since the war began. The appeasers had remained at the helm, and it was plainly apparent that they sought to wage war as a bloodless contest, showing little initiative or determination to defeat Germany. Poland had been allowed to fall without any significant military action by British or French forces, and any hope of forming an alliance with the Soviets had been dashed. The invasion of Finland in the winter of 1939-40 had finally prompted a serious call to action with Labour advocating for British support to the Finns. Yet, such support was slow to accumulate and for the Allies the first contest would not come against the Red Army in Finland but against the true enemy in the fiords of Norway. The German invasion of Denmark and Norway, which began on 9 April 1940, forced Chamberlain and the appeasers to finally take bold action. Although there was no realistic means of aiding the Danes, with the country being overrun in a matter of hours, British and French forces could conceivably secure Norway from German threat. The Royal

Navy went into action and the army prepared ground forces to be sent to secure harbours in the central and northern reaches of the country.

At the same time calls for Labour's entry into a coalition government were uttered once again. Although there was certainly support within the party for returning to government, great hesitation remained at the prospect of Chamberlain and the appeasers remaining in charge. As Hugh Dalton wrote in his memoirs: "None of us favoured entering a Government under Chamberlain. Most of us thought that we should reconsider the question if Chamberlain disappeared, as a result either of repaid physical decay or of a bad turn in the war. Several of us felt strongly that in the last phase of the war, our Party should have a substantial holding in the Government, to influence the settlement and prevent a khaki-coupon election."<sup>876</sup> In this way Labour maintained the same 'wait and see' approach that it had adopted in September 1939 to any question of entering the Government. This is not to say that there was no dissension within Labour over this tactic. It was no secret to the leadership that anger had been bubbling up among the party membership and affiliated unions towards Chamberlain's handling of the war. Such basic issues as tackling unemployment and settling on clear production goals were still not sorted after being at war for seven months.<sup>877</sup> The fact that Labour's membership was putting increasing pressure on the Party meant that Attlee, Greenwood, Morrison, and Dalton would have to act decisively when the opportunity to oust Chamberlain presented itself. This was given urgency when several DLPs began to question Labour's support for the war effort in early 1940. In Lancashire, members called for a pan-European conference to discuss democratic terms for peace; in Greenwich the local DLP passed a motion calling on the Party leadership to work for

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<sup>876</sup> Hugh Dalton, *Hugh Dalton Memoirs 1931-1945: The Fateful Years* (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), 297.

<sup>877</sup> Herbert Morrison, *Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography*, (London: Odhams Press, 1960), 171.

peace, end co-operation with the National Government, and organise a public campaign to oust Chamberlain.<sup>878</sup> These public displays of Party dissonance had to be reined in by decisive action against the Prime Minister.

The battle for Norway presented that chance, as what should have been a rather easy and straightforward campaign proved disastrous. Although the Royal Navy had no ability to stop initial German paratroop forces from securing airfields in southern Norway, these units would not be able to hold out with any effectiveness without supplies and reinforcements brought in by the *Kriegsmarine*. The fact that the Navy failed to intercept the main German landing force was a national embarrassment. Even where the government had the chance to act, there was a profoundly sluggish attitude towards taking decisive action. To name one example, when the Royal Air Force wanted to bomb concentrations of German troop transport planes in Denmark, cabinet took three days to approve the strike by which time the German aircraft were deploying their troops in Norway.<sup>879</sup> Yet, it was the stunning loss of central Norway and particularly the failure of the army to secure Trondheim which proved to be the final straw for those who believed that the country needed new leadership. After such strong assurances earlier in April by Chamberlain that British success in Norway was all but inevitable, such as his infamous statement to the Conservative Party Conference that, “Hitler has missed the bus!”, the resulting military disaster caused public outcry.<sup>880</sup> Both Labour and the Liberals used this outcry to force a parliamentary debate to attack the Government and determine who was to blame for the resulting calamity.

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<sup>878</sup> Thorpe, *Parties at War*, 191.

<sup>879</sup> Lynn Olson, *Troublesome Young Men*, (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2008), 279. This particular incident was picked up by the *New York Times* and demonstrated British ineptitude in America at a time when the Allies were working to secure rights to buy American armaments.

<sup>880</sup> “The Premier Feels “Ten Times as Confident of Victory,” *Aberdeen Evening Express*, (4 April 1940), 1.

The decision Labour faced at the start of May 1940 was between continuing its policy of providing constructive opposition or taking the opportunity to topple Chamberlain. Labour clearly had no love for Chamberlain as had been made clear from the outset of war with Arthur Greenwood and Philip Noel-Baker raising serious doubts about the Prime Minister's ability to lead the nation through the current crisis. However, the Party was strangled by the electoral truce as it averted any opportunity for the public to clearly demonstrate their dissatisfaction with Chamberlain's leadership through contestation of Conservative seats in by-elections. Therefore, the only effective means of changing Labour's fortunes was to use a challenging moment for the nation as a means of ousting Chamberlain from office. This was a high-risk strategy which could easily backfire if the Conservatives rallied around the Prime Minister for the sake of the war effort. Everything depended on the ability of Chamberlain's enemies to make a strong united stand.

For Labour to play a decisive role in changing Britain's leadership it was critical that coordination be made with Conservative and Liberal dissenters. Focus on the role played by the Conservatives has dominated the literature surrounding the Norway Debate and for this reason it is critical that a basic understanding of their part played in this saga be made clear. A mere examination of the distribution of seats in the House of Commons makes plain that Labour could not hope to oust Chamberlain alone, with the Conservatives holding 425 seats to Labour's 160.<sup>881</sup> Chamberlain faced dissent within the ranks after he embraced a policy of appeasement towards Germany in 1938. The first of these was a small group referred to as 'The Glamour Boys' led by Anthony Eden (Foreign Secretary until his resignation in protest of appeasement in

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<sup>881</sup> Larry Witherell, "Lord Sailsbury's 'Watching Committee' and the Fall of Neville Chamberlain, May 1940," *English Historical Review*, 116 no. 469, (2001), 1134.

1938), which included several backbench members who continued to challenge Chamberlain's policy direction over the first months of the war. Regarding the Norway debate many of the members of the 'Glamour Boys' joined ranks with a larger anti-Chamberlain caucus formed by Lord Salisbury, known as The Watching Committee. This body was formed in March 1940 with initially twenty-eight MPs and Peers who intended to pressure the Government to reform the cabinet.<sup>882</sup> This reform movement soon transitioned into a mechanism for Party rebellion as Lord Halifax ignored their proposals for a new cabinet as being unnecessary and Chamberlain saw their efforts as a personal attack against his leadership. As the debacle in Norway began to unfold it became apparent to members of the Watching Committee that advocating for cabinet reform was inadequate. Only a change in leadership could ensure that the war be conducted in an effective manner.

To orchestrate an effective rebellion, it was clear to members of the Watching Committee that overtures had to be made to the Labour Party, whose support would be essential to achieve a successful vote of non-confidence against the Prime Minister. Efforts to cobble together an anti-Chamberlain coalition had begun the week before Germany launched its Scandinavian offensive. Clement Davies, an up-and-coming Liberal National MP, played the key role of bringing members of the Watching Committee together with the PLP leadership. Davies was well-suited to the task as he had a strong friendship with both Attlee and Greenwood; he also was close to David Lloyd George who remained a popular and prominent member of the House.<sup>883</sup> Davies used these connections to arrange a meeting with Attlee at the start of April to outline what chance there would be of the Tory rebels being ready to vote against the Government should the

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<sup>882</sup> Witherell, 1135.

<sup>883</sup> David Roberts, "Clement Davies and the Fall of Neville Chamberlain, 1939-1940," *Welsh History Review* 8, (1976): 204.

issue arise. The information Davies provided regarding the existence of the Watching Committee and increasing dissention within the Tory ranks left Attlee hopeful but cautious. They, along with Greenwood, continued to meet regularly at the Reform Club over the following weeks as Davies continued to pressure Labour to act.<sup>884</sup>

Attlee had good reason to remain cautious as Labour had only just begun to see serious support for their hostile attitude to the CPGB in recent by-elections. Attlee had been able to gather the support of the trade unions in accepting the electoral truce with the Conservatives, but it had been a difficult pill to swallow. There were serious problems with arms production, particularly with tanks, and this was hampered by numerous strikes due to government disregard of the unions.<sup>885</sup> However, Attlee had been successful at rebranding the image of the Labour Party over the duration of the Phoney War away from a perceived pacifist organization to a group which took an active interest in aiding the British war effort through economic planning and state control (critical elements to the waging of a successful total war). This was primarily achieved through a focus on having very publicised meetings between Attlee and the Prime Minister aimed at keeping the opposition informed of events and Attlee's increasing media presence with regular broadcasts done on the BBC.<sup>886</sup> In this way Labour's public position was stronger than it had been in years. Yet, it was not lost on some Labour MPs that poor timing in making a move against the Government could still backfire and result in a strengthening of Chamberlain's public support. Most members of Labour's frontbench could well remember when the Party had made a similar attack upon Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin during the

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<sup>884</sup> Roberts, 204.

<sup>885</sup> Graham Stewart, *Burying Caesar: The Churchill Chamberlain Rivalry*, (New York: The Overlook Press, 2001), 407.

<sup>886</sup> John Swift, *Labour in Crisis: Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 154.



debate on the Hoare-Laval agreement, the 1935 accord which demonstrated clear Anglo-French acceptance to the Italian occupation of Abyssinia and in the process undermined the very essence of the League of Nations. The resulting Conservative reaction to rally around Baldwin was a disaster not worth repeating. Yet, Labour could not avoid action; it was clear from the membership that there was deep resentment of the electoral truce and there was increasing pressure from the Conservative backbench and the press for the Party to finally enter the National Government. Even Labour's unofficial paper, *The Manchester Guardian*, placed pressure on the leadership as rumours that some high-profile members such as A.V. Alexander were seriously considering an offer of coalition from Chamberlain in late March 1940.<sup>887</sup>

Due to such pressures for Labour to join the Government, in the days preceding the Norway Debate, the Party sought to test the waters and see if the supposed Conservative rebels would reveal themselves. Through continuation of the constructive opposition policy, Labour's leaders leveled clear criticism in the press of the Government's and particularly Chamberlain's failure in central Norway. Hugh Dalton, speaking at Cambridge on 6 May 1940, made a strong attack, noting that there was clear complacency and indecision stemming from Downing Street. The Prime Minister and Sir John Simon (Chancellor of the Exchequer) were referred to as "our two greatest liabilities, both at home and abroad."<sup>888</sup> Dalton called for their resignation as the best thing the two men could do to aid the war effort at this moment. Although when viewed on its own this attack stands out, it is important to remember that Dalton's attack showed little change from earlier partisan statements made against Chamberlain. However, this was not restricted to statements from Labour's leadership, as another statement found further in the same

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<sup>887</sup> Brooke, 46.

<sup>888</sup> "Our Two Greatest Liabilities", *The Times* (7 May 1940), 3.

issue of *The Times* revealed. A Miss Susan Lawrence, speaking at the East Middlesex Labour Women's May Day demonstration, called on the Prime Minister to resign before being pushed out, due to his clear incompetence.<sup>889</sup> These were examples of Labour continuing to criticize the Government from a position of strength. Only when the matter of Chamberlain's position as Prime Minister was brought to Parliament could Labour face serious vulnerabilities.

However, in the same issue of *The Times* where Dalton's words were presented, there were clear signs of a two-pronged rebuttal by the Conservatives which foreshadowed the bitterness the coming debate would take. Lord Bicester, presiding at the annual meeting of the City of London Conservative and Unionist Association, attacked Dalton's words as, "No contribution to victory", while noting that people were certainly free to criticize Chamberlain, but that doing so only damaged the war effort.<sup>890</sup> This seems a rather weak form of attack considering that Labour had spent a great deal of time developing and supporting its policy of constructive opposition which included inherent support for the war but not Chamberlain. The second Conservative assault was based on an appeal to Labour to finally enter the government, this coming from a backbencher at the Bungay Conservative Association. This move is intriguing as it shows an effort to place public pressure on Labour to accept a government led by Chamberlain for the good of the nation. But again, this could be challenged effectively by Labour's constructive opposition, as the Party made no secret that they were willing to work with the Government on essential war needs. To the Labour leadership attacks such as these by Chamberlain loyalists were certainly expected and important to watch, to ensure that Labour could protect its standing in the press.

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<sup>889</sup> "Unruffled Complacency", *The Times* (7 May 1940), 3.

<sup>890</sup> "No Contribution to Victory", *The Times* (7 May 1940), 3.

Labour entered the Parliamentary debate of 7 May 1940 with cautious optimism, aware that Chamberlain and the appeasers were vulnerable but unsure of the willingness of the Tory dissidents to take decisive action. With an understanding of the efforts taken by Clement Davies and other anti-Chamberlain MPs to garner support from Labour to open a non-confidence motion against the Government during the Norway debate, it is possible to assess the contributions Labour made to shaping Chamberlain's downfall.

Chamberlain opened the debate with feeble attempts to absolve the Government of fault in the Norway debacle. He refused to take ownership for the sorry state of logistical preparations made for the British force dispatched to Trondheim and instead explained that the defeat was a product of Norwegian weakness. Any opposition criticism to the Government's handling of the war effort was both unjustified and damaging to the Allied cause. For Chamberlain, Parliamentary scrutiny would only aide enemy propagandists. This claim by Chamberlain alarmed Labour as it encapsulated anti-democratic attitudes which Britain was supposed to be fighting against.

Following such a shocking attempt by the Prime Minister to defend his record, Herbert Morrison opened for the opposition. While it was expected that Labour would demonstrate anger at the handling of the Norway campaign there was no expectation in the press that the Commons debate would usher in political change.<sup>891</sup> Morrison, like most of his Labour colleges, had deep-rooted disdain for Chamberlain. Writing in his memoirs Morison described Chamberlain as "a sad and to me pathetic man...the coldness of his character encompassed him like an aura...when he became Prime Minister, his personal tragedy was that he was genuinely aghast at the

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<sup>891</sup> Brooke, 47. Even insiders such as Parliamentary correspondent Maurice Webb for the *Daily Herald* believed that the Prime Minister would survive the crisis.

possibility of war, and he adopted the role of a man of peace because he was convinced, he had the political acumen to achieve it. But he hadn't."<sup>892</sup> To Morrison and the rest of the Labour front bench, it was obvious that Chamberlain would continue to hamper Britain's war effort if he remained in office. Morrison's comments were brief, and he quickly gave way to Attlee to launch an attack on the Government's Scandinavian debacle. Attlee argued that Chamberlain lacked the confidence to achieve victory or the character to negotiate with the trade unions to provide stability in critical war industries. Attlee believed that only effective Government intervention would get the nations war effort on track.<sup>893</sup>

The masterstroke of Attlee's speech came at the close with an excellent use of theatricality. He picked up a recent issue of *The Times* and waved it for dramatic effect; focusing on an editorial ran that day which said that the Prime Minister's greatest weakness was his devotion to colleagues who were either failures or well overdue for retirement.<sup>894</sup> Attlee followed this up with a stinging blow: "In a life-and-death struggle we cannot afford to have our destinies in the hands of failures or men who need a rest."<sup>895</sup> This was a strong attack as it used the arguments of the Prime Minister and Conservative contributors to the press who suggested that Labour's criticism of the Government's actions in Norway were endangering the country at a moment of national crisis. With a call for change in the top levels of the Government articulated in the strongest possible terms, Attlee pressed Tory MPs with a call to action, noting that they had been content to allow Ministers to serve whom they knew were failures. They had in his

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<sup>892</sup> Morrison, 175-176.

<sup>893</sup> Attlee, *As it Happened*, (London: Sharpe Books, 2019), 112.

<sup>894</sup> Bew, 239.

<sup>895</sup> Attlee, *House of Commons Debate*, 07 May 1940, cc. 1094.

view, allowed this because they were willing to put the interests of their party over country, and the only way to win the war was to place different people at the helm.<sup>896</sup>

Attlee's conclusion was a strong attempt to shame the Government backbenchers and specifically the supposed anti-Chamberlain members to act. It was also an essential move on two accounts, as the Labour leadership could not risk the standing of the Party without a serious chance of success, and it was critical to foment public pressure upon Conservative MPs who were unhappy with Chamberlain's leadership but were unsure about defecting. Attlee's speech has received mixed reviews from scholars, with some such as historian Lynn Olson going so far as to call it a tepid attack as he was willing to wound but afraid to strike.<sup>897</sup> However, this shows a failure to appreciate what Attlee's aims were. His speech was never intended to be, on its own, the decisive blow to force out Chamberlain; rather it aimed to test the willingness of supposed Tory rebels to act.

In the long-term Attlee's speech demonstrated a clear grasp on the foreign policy realities Britain faced, far in excess to what Chamberlain comprehended. By acknowledging that Germany was prepared to wage war in an aggressive and bold manner, Attlee showed that Labour's attitude towards the Prime Minister was necessary to effect real change in the war's conduct. This challenges the long-standing view that the Conservatives were the 'natural' party of foreign policy. Labour presented a rational approach to foreign and domestic policy in May 1940, something that has not been properly appreciated in the historical scholarship. Through the words of Attlee and other Labour actors, both parliament and the public were galvanised to support essential governmental change. It shows that Labour's leaders were foreign policy

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<sup>896</sup> Ibid

<sup>897</sup> Olson, 292.

realists who could rise to the challenge of leading the country through a crisis years before the 1945 election.

Such an interpretation of Attlee's strategy is effectively supported by examining the reaction to his speech as powerful attacks were levied against the Government front bench from Conservative MPs. The speeches by Admiral Sir Roger Keys and Leo Amery were particularly damaging and have received the greatest attention from scholars. Primarily this has been because the Norway debate has been examined in the scope of Conservative Party actions. This has been justified because the Labour's attacks were an expected part of their job as the opposition party and, due to the Conservative majority in the House, changes in the cabinet could only occur if there was clear discord within Tory ranks. However, these two speeches were important for Labour as they provided validity to the claims from Davies and Amery that dissention was rife within the Conservative backbenches. This had a twofold impact as amid the debate on 7 May it meant that Arthur Greenwood, arguably Labour's strongest Parliamentary speaker, could capitalise on the strong words of Keys and Amery to drive wavering Conservatives to act. Second, it allowed Greenwood to advance Labour's narrative of government ineptitude displayed earlier by Attlee, to ensure pressure in the press remained firm against the Prime Minister. Greenwood began by focusing on the impact of the reception Conservatives gave to Keys compared to Chamberlain, then proceeded to highlight the serious problems in how the war was being pursued and presented in the press. As Greenwood put it:

Is it not the case that, through lack of direction by the Government...the Press led the public to believe that day by day we were winning magnificent victories, when those people who looked at the map and thought about the situation knew that those things could not be? The right hon. Gentleman today told us that south of Trondheim and

north of Trondheim we had succeeded, by a masterly policy, in evacuation with no losses. Wars are not won on masterly evacuations.<sup>898</sup>

That last point about the shame of British withdrawal from southern Norway represented an important step in ending the attempts by Government speakers to direct public attention to the successes of the evacuation rather than the failure of the operation.

Where Greenwood distinguished himself from repeating the core elements of Attlee's speech was in his response to Chamberlain's attack on any criticism of the cabinet's handling of the situation in Norway. He was able to skillfully turn the question of criticism against the Government by arguing that to dismiss critical comments was endangering the war effort.

Specifically, Greenwood noted:

Criticism in this House in wartime... is the one weapon that sincere people must keep in order to prevent the Government going wrong...if hon. Members feel that the prosecution of the war is not effective and do not say so, they are playing into the hands of the enemy far more effectively than by creating disturbances in the House... Therefore, I make no apology for my criticisms.<sup>899</sup>

The suggestion that to criticize the government at a time of war was a patriotic duty was hard to challenge as Greenwood could easily support this position by noting the continuous examples of German successes over European states. This led to a powerful conclusion that the House needed to decide if the country was willing to take risks in war. There had to be decisive action as the present course was damaging Britain's international standing as an effective guarantor of the existing world order and was doing no favours in swaying American public opinion in their favour. As Greenwood stated: "We all know Hitler's technique of unexpected strokes here and there and we are faced with this fact...that we have never taken the initiative in this war. We have allowed ourselves to be on the defensive. We have been passive. We have struck back when

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<sup>898</sup> Arthur Greenwood, *House of Commons Debates*, 7 May 1940, cc. 1173.

<sup>899</sup> *Ibid*

we have been struck. It is perfectly clear that there must be an active, vigorous, imaginative direction of the war.”<sup>900</sup> This argument perfectly captured the way in which Britain had conducted itself during the Phoney War and provided a clear call to action for Conservative members to vote with their conscience in the next day’s session.

The tough statements made by Keys and Amery reassured Labour. They showed that their gambit of pressuring Conservative backbenchers to speak out while avoiding any firm commitment to a vote against the Government was the correct course of action. As Attlee recorded in his memoirs:

The debate on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May showed that the revolt against the Chamberlain Government was more widespread than I had thought. Many members serving in the Forces had come up for the debate. Accordingly, next day I recommended to the Party that we should vote against the Motion for the Adjournment. I told them that it must be clearly understood that this was a vote of Censure and that if it brought the Government down, we must be prepared to assume responsibility. There was general and enthusiastic support for this action, except, curiously enough, from one or two people normally regarded as extremely left wing and anti-Fascist.<sup>901</sup>

The appetite for change in the House was a welcome surprise to many Labour MPs but there remained a tough question of how best to proceed. On the morning of 8 May 1940, as Attlee noted, there was strong support for bringing a motion to the floor but also apprehension from some unlikely individuals. Ironically it was Hugh Dalton who had the greatest reservations towards calling for a motion, though he had been so critical only a few days before, calling Chamberlain and Simon the two greatest liabilities the country had and urged them to resign as soon as possible.<sup>902</sup> His concerns were the same as those that Attlee and Greenwood had held before the 7 May debate; that a move by Labour now would damage the Party as many Tories

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<sup>900</sup> Greenwood, *House of Commons Debates*, 07 May 1940, cc. 1178.

<sup>901</sup> Clement Attlee, *As it Happened*, (London: William Heinemann, 1954), 111-112.

<sup>902</sup> Hugh Dalton. *The Fateful Years*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), 303.



might abstain but that only a dozen or so would be willing to actually vote against the Government. Although Dalton could acknowledge like the other Labour members, that the situation appeared fruitful, he believed that the Conservative Chief Whip David Margesson was too strong and would keep the bulk of the members in line.<sup>903</sup>

Although the majority of the Party Executive decided to follow Attlee's lead in bringing a motion to the House, there was still the serious possibility that Dalton's concerns would pan out. Therefore, it was decided that Herbert Morrison would bring the motion to the floor as a powerful voice in the Party who was popular with the trade unions. He devoted a large portion of his opening speech to addressing the impact that the failure in Norway had done to British international standing. By reviewing the portrayal of this debate in the press, Morrison noted that Chamberlain received praise only in the Spanish press under the arm of General Franco while American papers showed serious concern over the fighting ability of the British. More importantly though, Morrison demonstrated the impact Chamberlain's actions were reaping upon the unity of the Empire. Quoting the previous day's issue of the *Sydney Sun*, Morrison explained how the lack of preparations for the first major military venture of war showed an alarming degree of complacency which was causing serious doubt in the Dominions about Chamberlain's ability to guide the Empire through the present struggle.<sup>904</sup> The fact that concerns were growing in the Empire over the Prime Minister's wartime leadership was a serious problem as British military plans relied on the use of Dominion forces and resources to bolster the war effort as had been the case in the First World War.

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<sup>903</sup> Olson, 295.

<sup>904</sup> Herbert Morrison, *House of Commons Debates*, 8 May 1940, cc. 1254.

Aside from comments on the lack of resources being placed behind the intelligence services and poor strategy, Morrison focused on two core points to end his speech. First, he returned to the impactful speech given the day before by Sir Roger Keys emphasising that it left serious questions for Churchill to answer (in his capacity as First Lord) regarding the decision to not launch a direct naval attack upon Trondheim. The specifics of Morrison's line of questions on this matter are rather unimportant but the aim from them was to criticize the Government rather than allow Churchill to become a scapegoat. This was achieved by asking Churchill questions that were centered on the interventions the Prime Minister and the cabinet made in determining strategic decisions. Particularly, this was centered on decisions which had left ground troops without means of countering German air superiority. Later Morrison made a much more concerted effort to protect Churchill from scapegoating:

Is it the case that the right hon. Gentleman the First Lord of the Admiralty is being used as a sort of shield by the Prime Minister when he finds it convenient to do so? I am quite aware that the Prime Minister has great confidence in the First Lord. I have been pleased to notice that during recent months. But it appears to me that when the Government are in trouble, when they are open to criticism on the grounds of incompetence, they tend to bring the First Lord into the shop window in the belief that that will satisfy public criticism. That is not altogether fair. It tends to place on the First Lord responsibilities which he cannot possibly carry, and which it is doubtful whether, in fact, the Government will allow him to carry.<sup>905</sup>

This effort to protect and separate Churchill from the rest of the appeasers in Government shows two important aspects of Labour's strategy at this crucial moment. The first was to illustrate that the current Government had few capable leaders who understood the importance of waging the war in a bold and aggressive fashion. The second and more important element is that there was clear effort made to shield Churchill from any attempt by the Government to place the blame for the failure in Norway upon him. This is something that would have been easy to do as Churchill

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<sup>905</sup> Morrison, *House of Commons Debates*, 08 May 1940, cc. 1263.

had been a strong advocate for intervention in Norway to deny Germany essential raw materials and it was the Royal Navy which was responsible for determining the landing zones and averting any German landing attempt. It was essential that Churchill not 'go down with the ship' should Chamberlain's administration collapse as he was one of the few prominent Conservatives who could challenge the appeasers (particularly Edward Halifax, John Simon, and Samuel Hoare) for leadership of the Party.<sup>906</sup>

The conclusion of Herbert Morrison's speech allowed Chamberlain to deliver his infamous response where he called upon his friends in the House to show their loyalty at the end of the debate. This decision by Chamberlain to turn a question of the highest national interest into a personal issue only increased tensions in the House and settled the minds of many Conservative MPs.<sup>907</sup> It was also quickly turned against Chamberlain by David Lloyd George who made a final and immense contribution to British politics by delivering a stinging attack upon the Prime Minister's defence of having friends in the House. This was well covered in the press and has remained an important contribution in the discourse surrounding the Norway debate. However, Lloyd George's statement almost never happened. He was hesitant about contributing to the debate and it fell to Clement Davies and Herbert Morrison to persuade him to speak. As Morrison recounted in his memoirs:

I was very anxious to rally our forces and friends to the support of the Labour Party, and in particular Mr. Lloyd George who, I knew, would make a vigorous attacking speech against the government, if he spoke at all. I sent messages to him through Megan Lloyd George, but for quite a time I could get no definite reply. Sometimes the answer was he would think about it. Sometimes it was that he did not feel like coming to the debate. I asked Megan to go back again and impress upon him that this really was a vital occasion, and asked her to beg him on my behalf to come into the debate and make a really vigorous attack on the government which was needed in the

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<sup>906</sup> It is worth noting here that many (including Attlee and Greenwood) in Labour's front bench also viewed Halifax as a suitable Prime Minister but believed that it was critical that Churchill have a position in the war cabinet.

<sup>907</sup> Olson, 297.

interest of the country and prosecution of the war. In the end we got L.G. going. He made a first-class attack which was of great value in supporting the campaign I had opened on behalf of the official Labour opposition.<sup>908</sup>

It was essential that every possible MP of significance or of linguistic prowess lined up against the Government in the lead-up to the final vote. After being successful in this venture the only remaining question was would enough Government members be swayed to openly rebel against the will of their leader and whips.

When the motion was brought to the floor that evening the final vote tally was 281 for the Government and 200 against. By the numbers Chamberlain had survived with a majority of 81 but the vote demonstrated overwhelming disunity in the Conservative Party and a united opposition behind the Prime Minister's resignation. Almost all the Conservative MPs in the armed services voted against Chamberlain, bringing the total to 42 Government MPs voting with the opposition while a further 40 had abstained.<sup>909</sup> In the histories of wartime politics this is often considered the end of the story for Chamberlain. He stepped down a few days later and it fell to Churchill to lead the country through the crisis developing in France. Viewing Churchill's rise to power as all but inevitable after the vote on 8 May 1940 is misguided and ignores the decisive role Labour played in ensuring that Chamberlain stepped aside. It is certainly true that it was the public demonstration of divide within the ranks of the Conservative Party which forced Chamberlain and the rest of the cabinet to consider resignation, but it did not guarantee such an outcome.

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<sup>908</sup> Morrison, *Autobiography*, 174.

<sup>909</sup> Olson, 304.

## Neville's Last Stand and the Bournemouth Conference

The 1940 Labour Party Conference would demonstrate just how far radical influence had fallen since 1933. The most significant matter of debate for Labour would be the question of whether to enter a coalition for the duration of the war, assuming that the Government was led by a different Conservative than Chamberlain. The NEC, TUC, many DLPs and some elements of the Party left all fell into line behind the need to put the interests of the country above ideological concerns that a coalition dominated by Conservatives would mean stagnation of socialist advance in Britain. Some radical DLPs continued to object to any plan which involved cooperation with the Conservatives and even raised concerns that entire question of the Party responding to a national emergency as echoing the catastrophe of 1931. Nonetheless, these were lonely voices of dissention. The 1940 Conference would show the country that the Labour Party was prepared to place the interests of the country over the Party and do all it could to secure victory over the menace of fascism.

Although it was clear to many that Chamberlain's position was untenable, he still intended to stay on. For the following thirty-six hours he sought to reconstruct his government in a way which would be acceptable to the many of the Conservative defectors. Although Chamberlain had the support of both Churchill and Halifax (the two chief contenders to replace Chamberlain) in carrying on as Prime Minister, it was clear that substantial changes would be needed in the cabinet if the public was to be united behind the government. Therefore, it was suggested that Labour be asked to join in a coalition with the National Government, headed by Chamberlain, assuming some ministers such as Samuel Hoare and Kingsley Wood were dropped.<sup>910</sup> This

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<sup>910</sup> John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 93.

suggestion was likely based on a private conversation earlier in the day between the prominent Conservative MP, R.A. Butler, and Hugh Dalton, as the vague suggestion recorded by the Prime Minister's secretary John Colville is very similar to Dalton's recollection of the conversation he had with Butler. As Dalton recorded in his memoirs:

I was not authorised to speak for my colleagues, in my view, provided Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare disappeared from Government altogether, we should be prepared to discuss the possibility of coming in... Butler asked whether we would not consider the possibility of Chamberlain continuing as Prime Minister if certain other changes were made. I said that there could, for us, be no question of this. In our view Chamberlain and Simon had failed so often that they must go. I did not myself put Hoare in the same class, but most of my colleagues, I thought would insist on his going too.<sup>911</sup>

This was an accurate assessment of the attitude most Labour members had towards the possibility of joining a government headed by Chamberlain. Although Attlee and Greenwood had to consider the importance of avoiding political division as the situation in Norway continued to deteriorate, supporting a government headed by Chamberlain would have been politically self-destructive. After so many months of Labour promoting an anti-Chamberlain agenda and successfully rallying most of the British left around supporting the war effort but opposing the Prime Minister, there could be no possibility of allowing even the perception of political submission.

Regardless of Dalton's comments Chamberlain was determined to make a bid to remain in office and so approached the Labour leadership on the evening of Thursday 9 May 1940. The Prime Minister requested a meeting with Attlee and Greenwood to discuss the possibility of producing a coalition headed by himself. Attlee could not accept this and made clear that the Party would never support it. As Attlee describes in his memoirs: "It was not a pleasant task to

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<sup>911</sup> Dalton, *Memoirs*, 306-307.

tell a Prime Minister that he ought to go, but I had no option but to tell him the truth. I was asked whether Labour would take part in a Coalition of which someone else was the head. I said that I thought they would but that as the Party was holding its Annual Conference...I would go down and ask the delegates.”<sup>912</sup> The decision to defer to the will of the party all but sealed Chamberlain’s fate as the membership had deep anger towards him that had only continued to grow over the course of the Phoney War. It was no secret at this stage that if the Party voted to join in a coalition headed by someone other than Chamberlain, it would be either Churchill or Halifax. Churchill was seen as more acceptable at this point as he had been such a strong critic of the Government on appeasement, though he had been staunchly loyal to Chamberlain during the debate.<sup>913</sup> Yet, this was not a unanimous view with some members preferring Halifax, as they viewed him as more level-headed than Churchill, whose failure at Gallipoli was still remembered.

For Labour the final decision was to come on the morning of 10 May 1940 at the Annual Party Conference in Bournemouth. The Party could not have picked a more fateful day, as that morning German forces launched their long-awaited offensive in Western Europe. This new danger made it essential that Labour act quickly to avoid any effort by Chamberlain to use the crisis as a means of retaining the Premiership. Once in Bournemouth, Attlee and Greenwood presented two questions to the Labour Party National Executive Committee. First, would they enter a government under the Prime Minister? Second, would they come in under someone else? The Committee voted seventeen to one in favour of entering any government except one led by Chamberlain.<sup>914</sup> With the crisis offensive underway in Western Europe it was decided that Attlee

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<sup>912</sup> Attlee, *As it Happened*, 112-113.

<sup>913</sup> Bew, 240.

<sup>914</sup> Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), 259.

would return to London to quickly organise Labour's entry into a new government should Chamberlain step aside. After receiving a call from the Prime Minister just before heading to the train back to London, Attlee informed him of the Committee's decision. On their return to London, Attlee and Greenwood were called to meet the Prime Minister not at Downing Street but the Admiralty. Upon their arrival the two Labour leaders learned that their efforts had been successful. With Chamberlain resigning and Churchill taking his place, it appeared that the appeasers had finally been usurped.

As Attlee and Greenwood began discussions with Churchill over the formation of the new coalition Labour's other leaders and members waited to hear the details so they could approve or reject their proposed role in the new administration. Attlee approached these discussions with a determination to avoid the challenges the Government endured in the First World War when forming a wartime coalition. In his view there had been too much haggling between parties over positions which resulted in greater challenges for the military. He wished to avoid a repeat of such an outcome at this crucial hour.<sup>915</sup> Churchill offered Labour two out of five places in a refined War Cabinet which would be filled by Attlee and Greenwood, and Labour would be placed in charge of one of the three defence ministries. He also wanted to have several key Labour leaders to fill the broader cabinet including Morrison, Dalton, Bevin, and Alexander. The offer was better than Attlee could ever have expected, as he later recalled: "I at once accepted."<sup>916</sup> There was only one topic of disagreement which was over the fate of Chamberlain. Churchill wanted to make him the leader of the Government in the House of

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<sup>915</sup> Francis Williams and Clement Attlee, *Twilight of Empire: Memoirs of Clement Attlee*, (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1962), 35.

<sup>916</sup> Williams and Attlee, 35.



Commons, something that Labour adamantly opposed. It was quickly dropped. Overall, Churchill offered Labour an excellent deal, nearly half of the cabinet seats (including positions in the War Cabinet) went to a party which controlled less than a third of the legislature.<sup>917</sup> This was an unbelievable change in fortunes from the prospects the Party had faced only a few weeks earlier with the potential for Chamberlain to increase his majority by calling an early election.

After securing this deal with Churchill it was necessary for Attlee and Greenwood to get the approval of the Party membership and affiliates. While the leader and deputy leader were in London it fell to Hugh Dalton to represent the leadership at Party Conference. Dalton's first task was to secure the support of the trade unions whose members made up the bulk of the Labour Party's base. Dalton was largely successful in this venture as he describes in his memoirs, "At Bournemouth on Saturday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, it soon became clear that the big unions would stand up well to the crisis. The Miners, with a hundred delegates, voted by ninety-eight to two support our decision. Other important Unions followed suit."<sup>918</sup> The support of the trade unions for this deal was crucial to establishing party solidarity behind Churchill as the situation in Belgium continued to rapidly deteriorate.

On Monday 13 May 1940 the Party Conference debated the proposed coalition deal. This opened with brief speech from the Party Chairman Barbara Ayrton-Gould who urged members to see the value of joining in the Government. Specifically, she noted that the leaders who were set to take cabinet positions were on the side of workers and their agenda: "They are, before all things, Socialist Ministers who will sit at Westminster and in Whitehall."<sup>919</sup> Gould subsequently went on to discuss the importance of aiding the war effort to assist socialist allies in Western

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<sup>917</sup> Brooke, 50.

<sup>918</sup> Dalton, *Memoirs*, 313.

<sup>919</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 122.

Europe, noting that Labour stood in solidarity with socialists in France, Holland, and Belgium.

Following this statement Attlee introduced the emergency resolution which would allow the

Party to enter the government. The resolution read as follows:

That this Conference endorses the unanimous decision of the National Executive Committee that the Labour Party should take its share of responsibility as a full partner in a new Government, which, under a new Prime Minister, commands the confidence of the nation. This Conference further pledges its full support to the new Government in its effort to secure a swift victory and a just peace.<sup>920</sup>

This resolution aimed to not merely allow Labour to enter the Government but to encourage party solidarity in its support of the united government, an important goal as there remained a minority who resisted any form co-operation with the Conservatives.<sup>921</sup>

It was with this concern in mind that Attlee gave what the *Daily Herald* considered likely to be the greatest speech in his life.<sup>922</sup> After so many months of working to establish party solidarity and force the appeasers off the helm, it was essential that Labour come together and meet their responsibilities to the nation. He began by calling upon the Party to take swift action noting that at that very moment:

Right along the line in Holland, Belgium, and in France, there is the onrush of the Nazi hordes, and our men in the line, men who represent western civilization and the old traditions of democracy and civilization, are struggling to withstand the onrush. Others of our comrades have already been overrun, and are awaiting deliverance. This is the most tremendous moment. Everything is at stake.<sup>923</sup>

Attlee stressed that it was because the free and open society the British people enjoy was faced with annihilation that Labour supported the war from the beginning. While accepting that the

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<sup>920</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 123.

<sup>921</sup> Labour influence in the War Cabinet gave greater credibility to its moderate leaders who took the valuable experience gained during the war into their time in the postwar Attlee Ministry. More detail on this is provided in the conclusion of the thesis.

<sup>922</sup> Brooke, 51.

<sup>923</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 123.

Party included a significant number of pacifists whose position on violence needed to be respected, Attlee directed serious criticism against those who hide behind the veil of pacifism because they viewed the present conflict as an ‘imperialist war’. This was another example of Labour’s attempts to challenge the communist narrative of the war which sought to discredit left-wing support for the war by equating that support to class treason. When Attlee reached the core purpose of this speech, he provided an important warning to the Party:

You all know that you have to do the best you can, and we are trying at the present time to form a Government that shall rally to the support of the nation at this time the energies of all the people. That means there must be included in the Government perhaps some people we do not like. Yes, but there are some of us they do not like. After all, that is the essence of the whole thing.<sup>924</sup>

This warning was critical as it was likely that Chamberlain would remain in the Government in some capacity, information which had not yet been shared with the public, as Churchill, Attlee and Greenwood were still considering final cabinet positions. After so many months of bubbling anger within the Labour movement towards Chamberlain it would be a difficult request to have the Party support a government which still included some of the appeasers. Attlee understood that Churchill had little choice but to keep these men in Government as the bulk of the Conservative Party had shown continued loyalty to Chamberlain with their recent vote in the House. Attlee concluded his speech by emphasising the fact that only by defeating Hitler could a just peace be assured, that only with victory could British Labour be secure and fellow European Labourites be freed from the perils of occupation and oppression.<sup>925</sup>

After concluding his speech Attlee immediately headed back to London to aid Churchill in managing the unfolding crisis across the English Channel. The conference now began to

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<sup>924</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid

debate the resolution Attlee had set forth, the results of which changed the course of Labour's political destiny. It was quickly apparent that the Party was not entirely unified over the decision to join the government. P. Shufeldt of the Chelsea DLP argued that, "As a matter of Socialist principle the Labour Party cannot support the War as long as the 'National' Government are in power, and they must demand power for a Socialist Government or a Socialist mandate as the only way of extracting the country from its present disastrous position."<sup>926</sup> This notion that agreeing to compromise over the inclusion of Chamberlain in government was a betrayal of socialism was shared by a number of pacifist or far left MPs. Some such as A. McDonald from the Edinburgh DLP suggested that the Party executive was following the same dangerous road that had nearly eviscerated the Labour Party in 1931, "When they [the Labour leadership] have the opportunity of clearing out Chamberlain, when they have the backing of the Working-class Movement of this country, what happens? They walk into the National Government knowing perfectly well where the road is leading."<sup>927</sup> This suggestion could be effectively challenged by the strong support the unions had already shown towards the entry of Labour into a coalition, a situation very different from when Ramsay MacDonald abandoned the unions in his entry to the National Government.

After the few determined pacifists and far-left members of the Party had their say several members defended Attlee's call to join the Government as the only sound policy there could be with the country facing the danger of an expansionist Nazi regime. Support came from a few different sources but one of the first to speak in favour of the emergency resolution was Will Lawther of the Mine Workers Federation. The miners were a particularly powerful block within

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<sup>926</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>927</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

the party who held enormous sway; Dalton went so far as to refer to them as “our storm troops.”<sup>928</sup> With this strong standing in the Party, Lawther’s words were given great importance. He spoke of the unanimous support the Mineworkers delegation had given a few days earlier to support Labour’s negotiation with Churchill. This was justified as the threat of Nazism was very real to fellow miners’ associations which had been destroyed in Germany and their occupied territories, going so far as to execute the President of the Miners International.<sup>929</sup> In direct response to the pacifists and far left members who wished to challenge Attlee’s proposal, Lawther stated:

It is because we as miners realise that all our organisations have been destroyed abroad, and would be destroyed here, that we say to those talking about negotiating in a struggle who have never been in one, that this Movement of ours on the industrial side is sick to death of those would-be teachers of the Working-class Movement...The miners give their support because they do not want any mere empty platitudes and talk about fighting Hitlerism. We want this Conference to stand up to this Resolution and face the facts, and not at this stage blackleg when the issue is before us.<sup>930</sup>

This was a strong statement against those who would seek to use the fight for socialism to avoid compromise in a time of national crisis. It also showed a strong faith in Churchill’s new administration as it was under Chamberlain that empty platitudes were given rather than any sign of vigorous prosecution of the war.

Others such as J. J. Toole of the Bury Divisional Labour Party supported the motion by defending Churchill’s record. This was important as some members argued that Churchill could not be trusted due to his record as being an enemy of the Labour movement. Particularly for older members the discussion of Churchill’s role in quelling the 1910 miners’ strike in South

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<sup>928</sup> Brooke, 53.

<sup>929</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 128.

<sup>930</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 128.

Wales generated great apprehension. They remembered that Churchill had, acting in his role as Home Secretary, ordered troops into the area to curb dissent but there was an outbreak of violence which led to the death of several union members. Although Churchill's direct culpability in the deaths was disproven, many far left members of the Labour Party used the disaster as proof that he was an enemy of the trade unions. Toole defended the new Prime Minister by examining his record in supporting the League of Nations and drawing attention to the dangers of Hitler long before anyone else in the House took it seriously.<sup>931</sup>

However, one of the strongest statements in defence of supporting Attlee's motion came from W. G. Murkin of the London Society of Compositors. He attacked members of the ILP and other left-wing bodies for condemning Labour for not taking significant enough action to fight Fascism, but now attacked the leadership for doing a diabolical deal. In support of Attlee's motion, he noted: "We...only deal in fact. The absolute fact today is that the house is burning...The Labour leaders have gone in with the Conservative Government in order to stop the house which is burning from being wiped out. I am going to ask you... to get on with the job, and if the job is well done, it will put a stop to Fascism and Nazism."<sup>932</sup> It was with this poignant statement that cries went up in the conference calling for a vote on the motion. The result was an overwhelming show of support for entry into Churchill's coalition. The unions had shown almost unanimous support for the motion resulting in a decisive vote. The final tally was 2, 413,000 in favour and 170,000 against.<sup>933</sup> This was a powerful show of support for Labour's leadership and for the new Churchill administration. Although the new Prime Minister would still have to win over many Chamberlain supporters, he could be assured of sturdy support from the opposition.

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<sup>931</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 129.

<sup>932</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 131.

<sup>933</sup> The Labour Party, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Report, 134.

## Conclusion

Although Chamberlain and his fellow appeaser Halifax remained in the War Cabinet for the next few months, Labour's place in the Government assured that the working class supported Churchill as the disastrous collapse of France ensued. The strong support of the country's opposition to the Prime Minister in this critical moment was essential to averting the collapse of the British war effort in the summer of 1940. This was a product of party unity centered on a policy of reasonable hostility to Chamberlain's personal brand of politics. Labour's hatred of the Prime Minister had been bubbling since Chamberlain settled the Czech crisis in September 1938. Yet, it was the apparent lack of vigour towards challenging Germany as the threat of war loomed in the summer of 1939 that was the final straw. It was clear that Chamberlain had refused to embrace any effort of fomenting collective action against Germany until it was too late. Particularly the last minute and lacklustre attempt to establish an anti-German coalition between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union provided, in Labour's eyes, proof that the Prime Minister was unfit for the job. He was either ignorant of the fact that Hitler could not be reasoned with or, in the view of the far left, in bed with the capitalists and bankers who stood to benefit from economic ties to anti-labour totalitarian states.

Labour entered the war with the same determination to challenge Chamberlain and encourage the Conservatives to abandon him. This was evident from speeches by prominent Labour MPs during the Parliamentary debate of 2 September 1939 where questions were raised over the ability of Chamberlain to lead the nation through a war which he seemed so unwilling to start. Regardless of his noble aspirations to avoid a repeat of the slaughters of the First World War, Chamberlain's determination avoid war and then proceed to conduct it with inaction, represented a serious threat to the democratic world. The challenge Labour faced in the final

months of 1939 was to rally the Party behind a continued policy of hostility towards Chamberlain's leadership while also supporting a vigorous prosecution of the war. This proved challenging as forces on the left, specifically the ILP and CPGB challenged Labour's commitment to the war by producing a narrative which dictated that the conflict was imperialist in nature and was waged to aid capitalist. Therefore, in the eyes of the far left anyone supporting the war was tacitly accepting the destruction of the socialist movement. The Labour Party Executive were also faced with serious challenges from the Party's pacifist wing which either opposed the war outright or were only willing to support very specific war aims which distinguished between the need to defeat Nazism and defend the German working class.

Labour sought to avert these concerns through Party literature which outlined their aims in pursuing the current war and the terms by which a peace deal could be supported. The Party devoted a great deal of their literature to distinguishing the war, in Labour's eyes, as being a conflict against the Nazis who were determined to destroy trade unionism across the globe. Yet, Labour also took a particularly hostile attitude towards those in the CPGB and their masters in Moscow. The chief war aims publication by the Party, *Labours Aims in War and Peace*, devoted nearly a third of the work to refuting the idea that the war was imperialist in nature as it was Labour groups and those on the left that stood to suffer the greatest from a Nazi-dominated Europe. Furthermore, Labour showed serious efforts to advocate support for Finland in the winter of 1939-1940 using their case as an important example of how Soviet imperialism was as serious a danger to the democratic world as Nazi imperialism. This line of attack showed the hypocrisy of the CPGB's attitude to Britain's war and allowed for Labour to solidify its base by acting on the demands of the trade unions to challenge the actions of totalitarian states, fascist or otherwise.



The aggressive attitude Labour took towards challengers on the left was a necessary move as it averted a schism in the Party's base over the need to support the war but oppose Chamberlain. There was apprehension by some Labour members that accepting an electoral truce with the Conservatives was damaging to the Party as the ILP and CPGB could steal Conservative swing seats and more importantly could take some Labour seats from a divided electorate. Yet, by-election results showed that Labour's aggressive attitude to the threat from the left and its support for the war on the grounds of defending the workers movement from an existential threat garnered the support of the electorate. By embracing the demands of the unions and their leaders to challenge both Nazism and communism, Labour secured a relatively united Party base behind which Chamberlain's orchestration, or lack thereof, of the war could be challenged.

When the moment presented itself, Labour worked to oust the Prime Minister from office for the good of the nation. When it became apparent from the debacle at Trondheim that new leadership was needed, Labour took appropriate steps to work with anti-Chamberlain MPs both from the Conservative and Liberal parties. Some scholars have considered Labour's path in the Norway debate to be an expected part of their job as the opposition in the House. This view ignores the careful and essential part they played in prompting rebellious Conservatives to act. Labour approached the debate with caution but no lack of drive. It was necessary to ascertain that Lord Salisbury's counterparts were bold enough to openly attack the Government in defiance of the whips. Failure would have only further secured Chamberlain's position at a moment when the war needed to be conducted with decisiveness. It was Labour that opened the motion to oust Chamberlain in the House and it was the work of its members that willed critical voices such as Lloyd George to speak out. Labour provided the opportunity and support needed

to persuade over eighty Conservative MPs to abandon the Government. It was a combined effort which laid the basis for Chamberlain's downfall, not the unilateral action of a few rebellious Tories.

However, the vote in the House on 8 May 1940 was not the final straw for Chamberlain. The Prime Minister had narrowly secured a majority in his favour and believed that Labour could be persuaded to save his position. By using the current crisis unfolding in Norway Chamberlain hoped that Attlee and Greenwood would be forced to accept his remaining in office due to pressure within the Party. It was the Party Executive which stood firm in its belief that Chamberlain was unsuited to lead the nation which resulted in his giving way to Churchill. Yet, as is evident from the debates held at Labour's Bournemouth Conference the hostility towards Neville Chamberlain risked going too far. The intense hatred of the former Prime Minister meant that some in the Labour Party could not accept being part of a coalition in which he remained a cabinet member. Some on Labour's far left were willing to abandon the country's best chance at establishing national unity because there was resistance to accepting political realities. It was evident to Attlee and the rest of Labour's leadership that, much as they despised Chamberlain, his inclusion in a Churchill administration was essential to ensuring stability within the Conservative Party. The wartime coalition was only able to survive its first few days because British unions voted overwhelmingly in favour of it. Although union members' attitudes towards Churchill and Chamberlain were at best mixed, it was their acceptance of political realities and their move beyond personal hatreds that ensured Attlee could bring Labour into Government. Therefore, the downfall of Neville Chamberlain cannot continue to be viewed as exclusively being a story of the Conservative Party. Without Labour's staunch hostility to Chamberlain's leadership and fierce determination to unify the British left behind the war effort, Churchill's rise

to power in the moment he did is doubtful. With the unmitigated disaster unfolding in France, the nation needed a decisive leader who was prepared to conduct the war with the vigour and determination the moment required. It was with the unity and decisiveness of the Labour Party at that critical juncture that a moment of disaster became Britain's finest hour.

## Conclusion

Labour's entry into the Churchill Ministry represented a clear vindication of the Party's longstanding hatred for fascism. After sounding the alarm over the dangers of Hitler's Germany since its beginnings in 1933, Labour was now able to play a direct role in guiding Britain's war effort. Its leadership was aware of the crisis facing the country in those first weeks in office. Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood were party to some of the most consequential decisions in a critical phase of the Second World War. On 10 May, the day Winston Churchill became Prime Minister, German forces launched their invasion of Western Europe. Within a matter of days panic set in amongst Allied High Command. German forces had successfully broken through French lines near the town of Sedan and were heading west towards the English Channel.

On the morning of 15 May Churchill was awoken with news that the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud was on the telephone. He shared an alarming assessment of France's military capabilities after the recent German breakthrough near the town of Sedan: "We are beaten; we have lost the battle."<sup>934</sup> Churchill could not believe that such a bleak attitude was warranted but the events of the next few days proved Reynaud correct. The bulk of the French army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were cut off the from south and trapped near the port of Dunkirk. Attlee and Greenwood would play a direct role in the war cabinet debates to settle British plans to evacuate the troops from France and prepare Britain for a potential German invasion.<sup>935</sup> By the end of June, France was defeated, and Britain stood alone in its fight against Hitler and Mussolini (Italy declared war on the Allies on 10 June). The sustained air campaign

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<sup>934</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 38.

<sup>935</sup> For details see; John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

which followed French defeat by the German Luftwaffe against the Royal Air Force between July and September 1940 saw Britain in the fight for its life. It was the nightmare scenario which Labour had feared over the course of the 1930s.

Yet, Britain proved triumphant in the fight over Britain's skies. The Second World War would drag on until 1945 and while Britain would be victorious, it came at a devastating cost of lives and resources, far in excess of any cost from the First World War. The Labour Party was firm in its support of Churchill in running the war and worked diligently to achieve victory.<sup>936</sup> As Churchill noted in his memoirs: "In the early weeks [of the wartime coalition] it was from the Labour benches that I was mainly greeted...[yet] there was considerable pressure by elements of the Labour Party...for a purge of the "guilty men" and of Ministers who had been responsible for Munich or could be criticised for the many short comings in our war preparation."<sup>937</sup> Churchill's remarks show that the disgrace of Munich had a lasting legacy for the Labour Party and their assessment of prewar foreign policy. It was this passionate repudiation of appeasement and the political forces behind it which benefited Labour most when Britain defeated fascism in 1945. Labour was able to utilise a popular social agenda and public anger at the advocates of appeasement as it went on to win the 1945 general election and form the first Labour majority Government.

The Attlee Government would usher in a period of state expansion as Labour sought to solve social ills which had plagued Britain for decades. The achievements which are most well known from those years of Labour governance are entirely focused on domestic policy, the few

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<sup>936</sup> See; Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Roger Hermiston, *All Behind You, Winston: Churchill's Great Coalition 1940-45*, (London: Aurum Press, 2016); Leo McKinstry, *Attlee and Churchill*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2019); John Bew, *Citizen Clem* (London: Riverrun, 2016); Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking With Destiny*, (London: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>937</sup> Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 10.

exceptions being the retreat from India in 1947 and the decision to send British troops as part of the United Nations contingent serving in the Korean War. Nonetheless, the implementation of social reforms still holds greatest interest in Labour history. Between 1945 and 1951 these changes included the creation of the National Health Service, nationalisation of industry, expansion of housing and state provided education. These policies had lasting impact upon the daily lives of all Britons, yet Labour also carried into office lessons learned from the foreign policy challenges of the 1930s. Labour had the chance to play a direct role in shaping the immediate postwar settlement. With the Potsdam Conference of July 1945 happening during the 1945 election, Attlee got to represent British interests in the final stages after his victory was announced.<sup>938</sup>

Following the election victory, Ernest Bevin became foreign secretary and took his realist policy from the prewar years with him when shaping the postwar world order. Bevin's anti-authoritarianism led him to deeply distrust Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union. He understood, earlier than his counterparts in the United States or France, that communist rule in Eastern Europe was a threat to democracy and could not be appeased. Instead, Bevin advocated a policy of containment far earlier than American deputy ambassador George Kennan who is often associated with the policy.<sup>939</sup> Labour would also play a key role in the formation of West Germany in 1949, which has remained (today as a reunified Germany) a robust democratic state in central Europe. Bevin also worked diligently to ensure that the United States would maintain a permanent military presence in Europe (unlike in 1919 when America largely retreated from

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<sup>938</sup> Although Churchill was Prime Minister when the Conference began, he brought Attlee along to all negotiations to ease any transition should the election results be unfavourable to him. For this reason, Attlee was able to easily conclude the negotiations on Britain's behalf.

<sup>939</sup> Andrew Adonis. *Ernest Bevin: Labour's Churchill*, (London: Biteback, 2020), 233.

European affairs).<sup>940</sup> This was combined with Britain retaining a strong military presence with a retention of national service (conscription) to keep the military well above prewar levels. Labour understood that Britain needed to have a strong global presence to prevent the spread of communism. A clear example could be seen in the decision to keep significant British forces in Greece in the late 1940s to prevent a communist takeover.<sup>941</sup> Most telling of all for Labour's shift towards a policy of maintaining peace through strength was in its creation of Britain's nuclear weapons program in 1946. Bevin was its foremost proponent, with Hugh Dalton and Cripps concerned with the financial costs of such a program (something that has remained a challenge for subsequent British governments to address).<sup>942</sup> The decision to make Britain a nuclear power served two functions. First, it established that Britain would be capable of defending itself with an independent nuclear deterrent (states are unlikely to attack a nuclear armed nation if they do not want to suffer widespread destruction). Second, the preservation of nuclear weapons would ensure that Britain remained a key player on the world stage, even as it began the process of imperial decline. The fact that the Attlee Government approved the creation of such a powerful weapons system showed that Labour was unwilling to allow Britain to fall behind its rivals as it had with its interwar disarmament policy.<sup>943</sup>

Labour paired its military policy with a renewed effort to protect global peace with effective institutions. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 encapsulated the lessons learned from Labour's earlier ideas of collective security through the League of Nations. Collective security had been a good idea in principle but was ineffectual

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<sup>940</sup> Adonis, 255.

<sup>941</sup> Derek Leebaert, *Grand Improvisation*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 90.

<sup>942</sup> Adonis, 262. Cripps rejoined the Labour Party in 1945 and would become the Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1947 to 1950 as part of the Attlee Government.

<sup>943</sup> There were also some economic benefits to keeping nuclear weapons as it could limit the necessary number of conventional military forces needed to deploy a similar level of destructive power against would be enemies.

when it was centred on a need for League of Nations member states to use their military forces to protect the territorial integrity of their fellows. The League's tepid response to the invasions of China and Abyssinia showed that a reliance on the benevolence of Great Powers to do the right thing when it could damage its interests was deeply flawed. NATO ensured that European security would be assured as it included in its provisions, Article 5 which considers an attack against one member state as an attack against all.<sup>944</sup> The system based on the principle of collective security has ensured peace across the bulk of continental Europe since 1945 (wars between European states have only occurred with those outside of NATO such as the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022).

Labour also played a key role in crafting the United Nations (UN), the successor institution to the League of Nations. The new institution included new mechanisms to protect international peace. Alongside a General Assembly which would have representatives of all member states, the UN would have a Security Council. The Council would include a set of rotating members to represent the interests of the different parts of the world alongside a permanent group of five states, known as the P5, representing the Great Powers (United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China). Although the new institutional structures produced fresh challenges (such as the inclusion of a veto power for any of the P5 members to any proposed response to a crisis), the UN created a deliberative body which brought the Great Powers together and required each state to respond in some way to international emergencies. For Labour it was the deliberative nature of these structures that would provide the greatest value. Nonetheless, it was not a fool-proof system and could still suffer from vulnerabilities

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<sup>944</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, "Collective Defence – Article 5," [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm)



similar to those that hampered the League of Nations ability to settle crises. For instance, the Soviet Union chose to boycott security council meetings in 1950, which allowed for the passage of a resolution to militarily assist South Korea when it faced communist invasion.

Subsequent Labour Governments have continued to follow the foreign policy laid out by the Attlee Government. Harold Wilson, James Callaghan, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown have all led Labour Governments which have maintained Britain's nuclear deterrent, kept the armed forces to a reasonable state of readiness to defend its possessions, shown a willingness to use military force to protect its interests, and maintained support for key institutions such as the UN and NATO. In part, whenever Labour has drifted away from these values the Party has struggled in opposition. Pacifism or anti-militarist values have remained in elements of the Labour Party, but these have largely been kept to the fringes. The few exceptions when Labour has selected leaders like George Lansbury who placed their anti-militarist values above pragmatic politics has resulted in the Party suffering defeat at the hands of the Conservatives. The clearest examples have been when Michael Foot in the 1980s and Jeremy Corbyn in the 2010s both ran campaigns on denuclearisation and demilitarisation which were strongly rejected by voters and gave sweeping majorities to the Conservatives. The history of the Labour Party since 1945 shows that this struggle between pragmatism and idealism has continued to manifest in different forms (and when idealism is in the ascendency it has been to the Party's detriment).

In these ways, the story of Labour foreign policy development during its years in opposition from 1931 to 1940 casts a long shadow. This thesis has shown that Labour's foreign policy took a dramatic radical turn in the early 1930s embracing a near pacifist policy of war resistance and struggled to make a pragmatic turn until it found popular support for its stand to defend Czechoslovakia from fascist aggression in 1938. This pragmatic about-face led Labour to

be the necessary hawkish voice in calling for Britain fight fascism with the determination required to achieve victory. It was difficult political journey with many pitfalls over the 1930s. The Party's earlier aspirations for a successful outcome to the World Disarmament Conference were shattered when Franco-German infighting made the Conference untenable. The idea was noble, but the project suffered from a flawed understanding of how more limited arms control efforts had succeeded in the 1920s when states were focused on restricting specific types of weaponry. One can see similar successful efforts in the Cold War for nuclear non-proliferation.

Labour's response to the failure of the World Disarmament Conference was to radicalise its anti-militarism to a dangerous degree with an adoption of a pacifist war resistance policy. This came at a horrible moment when fascism was on the ascendent with Germany coming under the authority of Hitler. In 1933 the Labour Party was able recognise the danger of fascism but lacked an effective means of countering its influence. Instead, Labour became consumed by internal battles over whether to have an idealistic or pragmatic foreign policy which accepted some level of rearmament and a more aggressive British response to violations of the post First World War settlement. The events of 1935 provided for a gradualist turn away from its radical embrace with the removal of George Lansbury from the Party leadership, but it was not enough to threaten the power of the National Government during the 1935 election.

The decision to support a policy of sanctions against Italy, enacted through the League of Nations in 1935 showed that the Party was attempting to put their foreign policy from the 1920s into practice. The fact that it failed to save Abyssinia should have been a clear wakeup call for Labour, but many remained unwilling to change tact until civil war in Spain ignited the passions of the Party membership. The battle against fascism in Spain galvanised many in the Party to shift towards support for rearmament and saw a strong advocacy campaign to send armaments to

the Spanish Republic. The decision by the NEC to support the policy of non-intervention in Spain was difficult for the membership to accept but was a pragmatic choice to show support for fellow social democrats in France. The problem was that if Germany and Italy were determined to continue providing military support to the Spanish rebels then non-intervention was untenable. By 1937 the escalation of violence in Spain and the use of aerial bombing made it necessary to change tactics and support a policy of arming the Spanish Government. Blatant Japanese aggression in China also added to Labour's concern that its faith in the League of Nations and disarmament was inadequate to stem the tide of fascist imperialism. Labour further showed its desire to move towards a more pragmatic foreign policy by choosing to abstain from the Government's defence estimates instead of voting against. It was a small step that would look to any unfamiliar observer like the Party was out of touch with the darkening international situation Britain faced in late 1937.

The war scare with Germany in 1938 proved to be the turning point in Labour's foreign policy development. The Party's determination to defend Czechoslovakia from German expansionism was something which generated strong national appeal. Labour was able to combine its longstanding anti-fascism with a foreign policy challenge which could be easily framed as a matter of national honour. It was able to garner the support of all constituent elements of the Party in the campaign and proved willing to cooperate with likeminded Liberals, Conservatives, French socialists and other civil society groups. It rallied significant portions of the population behind its anti-appeasement campaign and showed that millions of Britons rejected an accord with Hitler which involved sacrificing a fellow liberal democratic state to the wolves. When it appeared likely that standing by the Czechs in defence of their territorial integrity would risk the outbreak of a general European war, Labour made the choice to stand its

ground, thereby accepting war if Hitler forced the issue. Subsequent by-election campaigns showed vindication for Labour's stand as it gained Parliamentary seats in contests that it and the Conservatives interpreted as referenda on Neville Chamberlain's settlement with Hitler at the expense of the Czechs.

Labour was faced with internal challenges in early 1939 over the failure of the anti-appeasers to save British honour and stand up to fascism. The Labour left response to appeasement by Stafford Cripps and the united front campaign threatened the integrity of the Labour Party and was rightly excised. Labour felt some vindication in its hostility to the Munich settlement when Hitler annexed the rump of Czechoslovakia. It also learned important lessons from its setback, determining that it needed to find ways to gather strong Conservative support for its foreign policy if it had any hope of challenging fascism. The decision by Labour to oppose the implementation of conscription was a serious error as it suggested that the Party was not committed to enacting policy which allowed Britain to take the bold stand against fascism that it desired. It was a case of ideological growing pains as Labour sought to protect the interests of the trade unions in its campaign to highlight the merits of the voluntary system. Apart from this brief stumble, Labour advocated for a rational response to the threat of war in the spring of 1939 by calling for the formation of a fresh alliance system between Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Although the words were not used, the Party was continuing to show its move towards a 'balance of power' foreign policy, as it had posited during the Czech crisis in 1938. The Party was moving towards traditional British foreign policy as the only viable option in a world where the League was completely disregarded by the fascist powers. Labour clearly demonstrated this turn when it aggressively pushed the House of Commons to declare war on Germany upon

hearing the news of its invasion of Poland. Labour had shown it was ready to do the job of defeating fascism when Chamberlain appeared unsure.

When the Second World War began Labour made the critical choice to remain outside of Government. It was a move which could well have backfired, as it suggested to the country and the world, lack of unity at a time of great crisis. Yet, Labour could not pretend that the declaration of war would magically change its hostility to Neville Chamberlain's leadership. The Party was enraged that appeasement had been followed with such determination when it was apparent a year earlier that it was no longer tenable. It grudgingly accepted that some accommodations would need to be made due to the war and enacted an electoral truce with the Conservatives and Liberals to preserve stability. At the same time Labour was forced to devote significant resources to counter communist challenges as Labour's support for the war was presented as endorsing Anglo-French imperialism. Labour effectively shut out the communists and defended its support for the war with Germany as an existential crisis. This was given greater credibility when Finland was invaded by the Soviet Union as it showed that communists were just as dangerous for democracy as fascism. When the war with Germany escalated, following disaster in Norway, Labour acted swiftly to galvanise cross party opposition to Chamberlain's leadership. Labour proved successful in creating the conditions for dissident Tories to rebel and force Chamberlain to resign in favour of Winston Churchill. This change in the country's leadership was not desirable in wartime, but Churchill's accession to the Premiership provided the opportunity to radically alter Britain's lackluster war effort. Now, finally, the war against fascism could be fought with the aggressiveness required to achieve victory. Labour's endorsement of Churchill and support for entry into a coalition government

headed by him showed the evolution in Party orthodoxy which had occurred over its time in opposition.

Labour's journey had begun in 1931 with the Party unceremoniously thrown out of office by the defection of its own leadership. It was seen as putting Party interests above the challenges facing the country and it paid dearly at the polls, nearly being wiped out as a political force.

Labour's return to Government in 1940 was a dramatic reversal. Its rejection of appeasement and longstanding hostility to fascism were rewarded with a triumphant return to office. In a moment of national crisis, when Britain faced a battle for its survival, Labour showed the country that it was willing to put the interests of the people ahead of that of the Party. It would be rewarded for this pragmatic turn with its sweeping victory over Churchill in 1945 when, finally, Labour had a chance to build a modern and progressive Britain.

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**Alexander**, Albert Victor – First Lord of the Admiralty, 1929-1931, 1940-1945, 1945-1946.  
Labour MP, 1922-1950.

**Angell**, Norman – Pacifist, International Relations Scholar, Labour MP, 1929-1931.

**Baldwin**, Stanley – Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1923-1924, 1924-1929, and 1935-1937. Leader of the Conservative Party, 1923-1927.

**Bevan**, Aneurin – Labour MP, 1929-1960.

**Bevin**, Ernest – General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, 1922-1945.

**Blum**, Léon – Prime Minister of France, 1936-1937, 1938, 1946-1947.

**Brailsford**, Henry – Labour Party member, journalist and author.

**Breitscheid**, Rudolf – Prominent SPD member in the German Reichstag, 1920-1933.

**Brüning**, Heinrich – Chancellor of Germany, 1930-1932. Member of the German Centre Party.

**Cecil**, Robert – President of the LNU, 1923-1945.

**Chamberlain**, Austen – Conservative MP. First Lord of the Admiralty, 1931. Foreign Secretary, 1924-1929.

**Chamberlain**, Neville – Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1937-1940. Leader of the Conservative Party, 1937-1940. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1923 and 1931-1937.

**Churchill**, Winston – Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1940-1945 and 1951-1955. First Lord of the Admiralty, 1939-1940.

**Citrine**, Walter – General Secretary of the TUC, 1926-1946.

**Clynes**, John Robert – PLP Leader, 1921-1922. Deputy PLP Leader, 1922-1932. Home Secretary of the United Kingdom, 1929-1931.

**Compton**, Joseph – Labour Party Conference Chairman, 1933. MP, 1923-1931 and 1935-1937.

**Cripps**, Stafford – Labour MP, 1931-1950. Chairman of the Socialist League, 1933 to 1935.

**Daladier**, Edouard – Prime Minister of France, 1933, 1934, 1938-1940.

**Dallas**, George – Labour MP 1929-1931. Chairman of the National Executive Committee (Labour Party) 1937.

**Dalton**, Hugh – Labour MP, 1924-1929 and 1935-1959. Labour foreign affairs critic 1935-1940.

**Davies**, Rhys – Labour MP, 1921-1951.

**Dollfuss**, Engelbert – Chancellor of Austria, 1932-1934.

**10 Downing Street**, Residence of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

**Dukes**, Charles – General Secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers.

**Eden**, Anthony – Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 1931-1935. Foreign Secretary, 1935-1938. Prominent member of the Conservative Party.

**Elvin**, Herbert – President of the TUC, 1938. General Secretary of the National Union of Clerks and Administrative Workers, 1906-1941.

**Franco**, Francisco – Head of State of Spain, 1936-1975.

**George**, David Lloyd – Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1916-1922. Liberal MP, 1890-1945. Leader of the Liberal Party, 1926-1931.

**Gillies**, William – International Secretary of the Labour Party.

**Greenwood**, Arthur – PLP Deputy Leader, 1935-1945.

**Halifax**, Edward (Lord Halifax) – Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, 1938-1940.

**Hankey**, Maurice – Cabinet Secretary of the United Kingdom, 1916-1938.

**Hare**, William Francis (The Earl of Listowel) – Labour Member of the House of Lords, 1931-1997.

**Henderson**, Arthur – PLP Leader, 1914-1917 and 1931-1932. Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, 1929-1931. Chairman of the World Disarmament Conference, 1932-1934.

**Hitler**, Adolf – Chancellor of Germany, 1933-1945.

**Hoover**, Herbert – President of the United States, 1929-1933.

**Huxley**, Aldous – Author, 1894-1963.

**Kai-Shek**, Chiang – Leader of the Republic of China, 1928-1975.

**Lansbury**, George – PLP leader, 1932-1935. Prominent Pacifist and one of the first editors for the Daily Herald.

**Lees-Smith**, Hastings – Leader of the Opposition, 1940-1941. President of the Board of Education, 1931. Labour MP, 1922, 1924-1931, 1935-1941.

**MacDonald**, Ramsay – PLP leader, 1911-1914 and 1922-1931, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1924 and 1929-1935.

**Marchbank**, John – General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, 1933-1943.

**Martin**, Kingsley – Editor of the New Statesman, 1931-1960.

**Maxton**, James – Leader of the ILP, 1932-1946. ILP MP, 1922-1946.

**Mellor**, William – Member of the Socialist League. Editor of the Daily Herald, 1926-1930. Editor of Tribune, 1937-1938.

**Morrison**, Herbert – Minister of Transport, 1929-1931. Leader of the London County Council, 1934-1940. Minister of Supply, 1940.

**Mosley**, Oswald – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1929-1930. Labour MP, 1926-1931. Leader of the New Party, 1931-1932. Leader of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940.

**Mussolini**, Benito – Prime Minister of Italy, 1922-1943.

**Noel-Baker**, Philip – Labour MP, 1929-1931 and 1936-1970. Assistant to Arthur Henderson at the World Disarmament Conference, 1932-1934.

**Noel-Buxton**, Lord (Noel Edward Buxton) – Labour Peer.

**Roosevelt**, Franklin Delano – President of the United States, 1933-1945.

**Rowse**, Alfred – Historian and Labour Party candidate, 1931 and 1935.

**Salter**, Alfred – Devout pacifist and Labour MP, 1929-1945.

**Simon**, John – Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, 1931-1935. Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1937-1940.

**Sinclair**, Archibald – Leader of the Liberal Party, 1935-1945.

**Smith**, Walter. Chairman of the Labour Party, 1934. Labour MP, 1918-1924 and 1929-1931.

**Snowden**, Philip – Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1924 and 1929-1931. Labour MP, 1922-1931.

**Strabolgi**, Lord. (Kenworthy, Joseph) – Labour Chief Whip in the House of Lords, 1938-1942.

**Summerskill**, Edith – Labour MP, 1938-1961.

**Pollitt**, Harry. General Secretary of the CPGB, 1929-1939 and 1941-1956.

**Ponsonby**, Arthur – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1931. Leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, 1931-1935.

**Transport House**, Headquarters of the British Labour Party

**Trevelyan**, Charles – Labour MP, 1922-1931.

**Wedgwood**, Joshia – Labour MP, 1919-1941. Labour Peer, 1941-1943.

**Wels**, Otto – Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, 1919-1939.

**Wilkinson**, Ellen – Labour MP, 1924-1931, 1935-1947. Member of the Socialist League.

**Williams**, Francis – Editor of the *Daily Herald*, 1936 to 1940.

**Wilmot**, John – Labour MP, 1933-1935.

**Woodburn**, Arthur – Secretary of the Scottish Council of the Labour Party, 1932-1939.