Anti-Militarism within the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1917-1929

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of First World War conscientious objection on the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) between 1917 and 1929. Beginning with an assessment of the No-Conscription Fellowship, the largest anti-conscription movement in Britain, it argues that many conscientious objectors became increasingly radicalised during the First World War. Harsh treatment by the British state, combined with the influence of revolution in Russia after 1917, served to highlight Bolshevism's attraction as a viable form of revolutionary anti-militarism for many British anti-war activists. Tracing the subsequent paths these individuals trod in the post-war period, this thesis emphasises the role former conscientious objectors played in campaigning for the wider British political left to embrace the politics of Bolshevism. Many such individuals, finding a home within the CPGB after its formation in 1920, played a key role in the Party's subsequent anti-militarist campaigns, which often remained influenced by personal experiences of the First World War. This thesis, examining in detail for the first time the domestic impact of the 1927 Soviet war scare, not only argues that fears of war were, to an extent, feasible across the political spectrum, but ultimately marked the culminating influence of this conscientious objector cohort within the CPGB. Obliged to reject passive resistance, many British communists were in fact reluctant to abandon their ingrained methods of fighting war. It will be argued that this perceived lethargy, going hand-in-hand with the political changes that 'class against class' marked for the Party after 1928, played a key role in the Comintern's decision to remove the CPGB's original leadership in 1929.

In terms of contribution to knowledge, this thesis, in emphasising the radicalisation of First World War conscientious objectors, develops on previous interpretations which merely stress their passive status as victims of conscience. A focus on this cohort's role within the CPGB between 1920-9 also highlights British communism's staunch domestic influences. Though expected to reject any form of passive resistance, in line with a Bolshevik model that expected all communists to commit to revolutionary subversion in the event of war, a conscientious objector past instead saw a clear reluctance to follow Moscow directives. The Comintern's decision to remove much of the CPGB's leadership in 1929, therefore, symbolises the complete removal of these lingering influences, ensuring British communism's complete subjugation to the Soviet Union.

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List of Abbreviations

ARCOS: All-Russian Co-operative Society

BL: British Library

BOA: British Online Archives

BSP: British Socialist Party

CAC: Carlisle Archive Centre

ChAC: Churchill Archives Centre

CC: Central Committee (of the Communist Party of Great Britain)

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain

CPSU: Communist Party of the Soviet Union

Comintern: Communist International

CUL: Cambridge University Library

ECCI: Executive Committee of the Communist International

ILP: Independent Labour Party

IWMSA: Imperial War Museum Sound Archive

KMT: Kuomintang

LSE: London School of Economics

LSECM: London School of Economics Comintern Microfiche

LUA: Leeds University Archive

MEPO: Metropolitan Police Office

MJRL: Manchester John Rylands Library

MLHASC: Manchester Labour History Archive and Study Centre

MML: Marx Memorial Library

NAC: National Administrative Committee (of the Independent Labour Party)

NCF: No-Conscription Fellowship

NMWM: No More War Movement

RGASPI: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History

SDF: Shanghai Defence Force

SLP: Socialist Labour Party

TNA: The National Archives

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Chapter One: Introduction

During a hustings meeting in the run-up to the December 1918 general election, the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, asserted to his audience that the Labour Party was an 'extreme pacifist, Bolshevik group'.[1] Such rhetoric, tempered as it is in jingoistic hubris following the Armistice just weeks before, is not so much remarkable in how he perceived the Labour Party, but in its assertion that pacifists within its ranks were a revolutionary threat on a par with those who blatantly professed themselves as followers of Lenin. Lloyd George's embrace of this seeming contradiction, it could be argued, was merely a by-product of current anti-German feeling. Throughout the war, crude logic dictated that those who refused to support Britain's war effort naturally desired a German victory. One particular anti-war activist, Albert Inkpin, incidentally the future General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain and a key figure within this thesis, was no stranger to accusations of being 'violently pro-German'.[2] Even when Bolshevism, with its powerful anti-war beliefs, made itself known on the world stage after 1917, many continued to argue that as Germany had engineered Lenin's return to Russia, it remained little more than an extension of the 'German Despotism' Britain was currently waging a life-and-death struggle against.[3] Nevertheless, upon entering the collective British lexicon, it became clear that 'Bolshevik', when used as a derogatory term to smear the British pacifist movement, went far beyond any mere association with Imperial Germany, and in fact reflected genuine fears that anti-war activists, most typically conscientious objectors who had refused to serve in the armed forces, had indeed become infatuated with revolutionary ideals. In the war's aftermath, it was soon observed by one anti-conscription

[1] Quoted in A. Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 303.
[2] The National Archives [Hereafter TNA], KV 2/1532, Albert Inkpin.
[3] M. Ruotsila, *British and American Anticommunism before the Cold War* (London, 2001), p. 56.

group that 'Pro-Bolshevik, by the bye, has replaced Pro-German as a term of abuse'.[4] Even the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police, not without approval, stressed that '"Bolshevik"' as a term, 'is made to include every kind of revolutionary agitator; whether he is a pacifist and conscientious objector, or anarchist and Industrial Worker of the World'.[5] As late as February 1920, mere months before the formation of an organised communist movement in Britain, it would still be asserted by the head of Special Branch that the British revolutionary remained fundamentally linked to the pacifist movement: 'you will find him as a passive resister, conscientious objector or pacifist. The same persons are found in all these movements, and it is natural now to find them conspiring secretly with the Soviet Government in Russia'.[6]

Such assertions highlight the key argument of this thesis, that the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) until 1929 remained intrinsically linked, in both reality and in the perception of the political establishment, to the cohort of conscientious objectors in Britain that had opposed both war and conscription during the First World War. Not only did the largest anti-war movement in Britain, the No-Conscription Fellowship, become increasingly radicalised as the war progressed, the impetus to such radicalisation, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, ensured that many anti-war activists became increasingly drawn to the possibilities that Bolshevism seemed to offer. These experiences not only influenced the CPGB's anti-militarist policies throughout the 1920s in ways which sometimes clashed with directives from Moscow, but helped to dominate wider public perceptions of the British communist movement, with notable events that brought the CPGB to national attention, the 1924

[4] Cambridge University Library [Hereafter CUL], WRA.557, National Council for Civil Liberties Monthly Letter, May 1919.
[5] TNA, CAB 24/67, Fortnightly Report on Pacifism and Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, and Morale in France and Italy, 21 October 1918, p. 4.
[6] TNA, CAB 24/97, Revolutionaries and the need for Legislation, 2 February 1920.

Campbell Case and the 1925 arrest and trial of the CPGB's leadership, all ultimately stemming from opposition to their anti-militarist propaganda. The coming of the 1927 Soviet war scare marked the culmination of the influence of these former conscientious objectors. Obliged by the Communist International to combat the supposed threat of war between Britain and the Soviet Union, the CPGB was instead accused of conducting a faltering campaign that all too often fell back on 'pacifist' methods deriving from the personal experiences of many British communists as conscientious objectors during the Great War. This lacklustre response to the war scare ultimately contributed to the removal of much of the CPGB's original leadership by the end of 1929. This thesis is therefore centred between 1917, when revolutionary ideas from Russia began to permeate the anti-conscription movement, and 1929, when CPGB leaders were replaced by figures more amenable to the Communist International.

An association between communism and pacifism cannot be made lightly. While a detailed analysis is featured below, one need only skim through the countless proclamations made by communists after 1917 to register the seeming incompatibility between these two movements. In communist doctrine, war was intrinsically linked to capitalism, and so pacifists who sought to end war without overcoming 'the contradictions, the evils and the crimes of capitalism',[7] were either seen as delusional at best, or at worst, traitors to the working class. Even conscientious objection, the most typical means by which many in Britain expressed their opposition to the First World War, was considered suspect by communists. To take such a stance, to believe 'that the pledge of resistance to serve can actually prevent a war from taking place and that individual refusal to serve can stop a war', was sharply criticised within

[7] J. Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents: Volume 1, 1919-1922* (London, 1971), p. 332.

the CPGB itself, particularly at the height of the war scare in 1927.[8] It is important to emphasise, however, that these ideological polemics became internationally clear-cut only after Bolshevism had made itself a potent force after 1917, the year this thesis begins. By that time, conscription had been in place in Britain for over a year,[9] and nearly all the major anti-war tendencies in Britain, from religious to socialist, were united in defending the rights of individuals to resist compulsion. Fundamentally, those future communists liable for military service had seen no issue in proclaiming themselves conscientious objectors as a means to highlight their opposition to the war. Albert Inkpin himself had argued that his conscientious objector stance arose precisely 'because, as a Socialist and internationalist, I am strongly opposed to war'.[10] While, in light of their subsequent transition to communism, a clear 'pacifist' error had been made, such individuals, when inclined to discuss the subject, would contend they had little choice. 'Since one must live', it was argued, they had 'submitted to the law and order of the Capitalist State' by taking the only legal route to opposing the war, namely by applying for conscientious objector status.[11] It was also pointed out that this unique situation had allowed for easy association between proto-communists and all others who opposed the war, ensuring some flexibility in welcoming new members to the Party in the immediate years after its foundation in 1920. As the *Communist Review* would note in 1922, 'we were thrown together by the impact of the war and by the brutal powers wielded by the Government'.[12]

[8] Churchill Archives Centre [Hereafter ChAC], CHAR 22/188, Report on Revolutionary Activities in the United Kingdom, 9 June 1927, pp. 4-6.
[9] In January 1916, Parliament passed the Military Service Act. Conscription was imposed on all single men aged between eighteen to forty-one. Later, in May, it was extended to include married men. Key industrial workers, teachers and religious ministers were exempted.
[10] TNA, MH 47/40/37, Inkpin, Albert Samuel (M4026), c. 1917.
[11] 'Pigs in Clover', *The Call*, 14 June 1917, p. 3.
[12] 'Review of the Month', *Communist Review*, 5 (1922), p. 332.

Such arguments, that the 'brutal' force of the British state was key in unifying proto-communist tendencies calls for fresh consideration as to why conscientious objectors felt sympathy with the Bolshevik regime, and even sought to emulate its tactics. Sociological explanations as to why individuals felt attracted to communism have been in existence for decades, and long remained a thorny issue in communist historiography. Gabriel Almond, in attempting to explore the psychology of communists, originally asserted that in joining communist parties, 'alienative feelings' typically acted as a catalyst, suggesting that party membership could often be influenced by an event initiated beyond the control of the individual.[13] Such views have long been dismissed however, with Hobsbawm prominent in deploring those 'witch-hunting scholars' who 'saw communist parties as sinister, compulsive, potentially omnipresent bodies, half religion and half plot', only able to be 'analysed in terms of the social psychology of deviant individual and a conspiracy theory of history'.[14] More nuanced views have certainly been propagated. Linehan, for instance, in his work on the CPGB acknowledges the importance of 'interpersonal and social networks', with family and friendship ties often acting as a key influence. At the same time, he nonetheless registers the prevalence of 'disaffected "atomised" types' gravitating to authoritarian movements, and the fact that 'early methods of recruitment' into communist parties were linked to those 'feelings of alienation'.[15] Certainly one British communist, who would gain much national attention as a result of the 1929 Meerut Trial, Phillip Spratt, would comment that communism 'systematically gathers in and feeds on the alienated from orthodox society […] I allowed myself to be gathered into the communist fold'.[16]

[13] G. Almond, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, 1956) p. 235-6.
[14] E. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*. (London, 1977) p. 11.
[15] T. Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 69-70.
[16] British Online Archives [Hereafter BOA], P. Spratt, *Blowing Up India* (1955), p. 12.

Such feelings of alienation would not have been unknown to many British conscientious objectors during the First World War. The 1916 Military Service Act which brought in conscription also, as a sop to liberal tendencies in Britain, allowed for exemption applications to be made which were reviewed by government-established tribunals. While religious conscientious objectors were generally treated with more leniency by the tribunals, and could be granted some form of exemption from active service,[17] political objectors nearly always had their exemption pleas refused. Continued resistance to enlistment resulted in two years' imprisonment with hard labour, a sentence which was often renewed, ensuring indefinite prison sentences until the end of the First World War. Public opinion remained harshly antagonistic to this cohort, allowing one Cabinet Minister, Walter Long, to proclaim there would be no 'substantial outcry even if one of these conscientious objectors died in prison'.[18] Both the British Government and wider British society remained suspicious of the anti-war movement as a whole. Even prior to the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution, suspicions that the conscientious objector movement harboured revolutionaries were clear-cut. Anyone hostile to the war effort, or supportive of the right to resist conscription, such as the Independent Labour MP and future Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, could expect to be labelled a 'declared pacifist of revolutionary tendencies',[19] whilst attempts to disseminate peace, such as at the 1917 Leeds Convention, were not only viewed by the Government as being 'of such a revolutionary character',[20] but even by those on the pro-war political left as

[17] Although this was not always the case. Stephen Hobhouse was one prominent Quaker subjected to imprisonment with hard labour, a ruling that created an uproar and was debated in Parliament. His mother, Margaret Hobhouse, wrote a highly critical treatise that was heavily promoted by the No-Conscription Fellowship. See M. Hobhouse, *I Appeal unto Caesar: The Case of the Conscientious Objector* (London, 1917).
[18] TNA, CAB 23/4, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 25 October 1917, p. 4.
[19] TNA, CAB 24/69, Fortnightly Report on Pacifism and Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, and Morale in France and Italy, 4 November 1918, p. 7.
[20] TNA, CAB 23/2, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 25 May 1917, p. 4.

a wave of 'anarchism which is doing so much havoc to the movement'.[21] The bitter reaction conscientious objection provoked within British society would force one such resister, by the war's end, to comment:

> British justice says that a man should not be punished more than once for the same offence. Well, most of us are doing a 3rd, 4th, 5th, sentence for what is virtually the same offence, viz., refusal to join the army. […] Are we to be punished 7 times or 70 times 7? It is, at any rate, a compliment to the vitality of the C.O.'s spirit that he should be judged capable of undergoing all this and coming out of it an enemy of society still![22]

Such was the harsh treatment of these individuals that even those unsympathetic to the anti-war movement would begin to warn that 'harsh treatment of pacifists facilitates the organization of revolution'.[23] This would be an issue that would long perplex the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), whose Executive Committee, deploring violence, feared many of its members, in supporting the Bolshevik Revolution, might very well resort to physical force within Britain itself. This dynamic would also have a clear impact on the development of the CPGB, from its foundation in 1920 to the change of leadership in 1929, albeit in a vastly different way.

Defining Pacifism within Britain

As Cockburn has highlighted, any anti-war movement, communist or otherwise, 'faces a problem of definition'.[24] On the face of it, a multitude of terms can be used to describe such a movement. 'Pacifism' is one, 'anti-militarism' another, ensuring a clear need to clarify the key distinctions between various anti-war movements and the CPGB's own anti-militarist

[21] 'British Leninism and Reaction', *Justice*, 16 August 1917, p. 8.
[22] 'An Open Letter from Prison', *Labour Leader*, 16 January 1919, p. 4.
[23] 'Anarchic Dartmoor', *The Times*, 8 October 1917, p. 10.
[24] C. Cockburn, *Anti-Militarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements* (Basingstoke, 2012), p. 2.

propaganda. As the leading historian of peace studies, Martin Ceadel, has argued, anti-war, or peace, movements in Britain have been dominated by two different tendencies, categorised as 'pacifism' and 'pacificism'. 'Pacifism' can be described as 'the belief that all war is *always wrong* and should never be resorted to, whatever the consequences of abstaining from fighting'. In Ceadel's view, however, 'pacificism' is an altogether more common viewpoint, that 'war, though *sometimes necessary*, is always an irrational and inhumane way to solve disputes, and that its prevention should always be an over-riding political priority'.[25] Cortright, sympathising insofar attempts at 'narrow definition[s]' have often 'left most of the peace community out in the cold', nevertheless describes 'pacificism' as 'awkward, confusing, and difficult to write or pronounce'. Emphasising a 'general concept of pragmatic or conditional pacifism' is, however, 'valuable'.[26] Reid herself has recently commented that 'pacificism' is now rarely used, and that 'pacifism' has once more become the 'common, very broad umbrella term for a range of beliefs'.[27] She nevertheless argues that Ceadel's pioneering work remains unsurpassed, and has done much to prompt further generations of scholars to consider 'pacifism as a social movement and as a belief system'.[28] Ceadel has since sought to clarify his arguments, citing 'absolutist' and 'reformist' positions as key distinctions. Absolutists would make war extinct by 'unconditionally rejecting military force', whilst reformists accept 'military force might be needed' in extreme cases. They are therefore 'pacific in [their] aspiration to abolish war, but not pacifist in immediately renouncing it'.[29]

[25] M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford, 1980), p. 3.
[26] D. Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 11.
[27] F. Reid, 'Pacifism and Peace Activism in Modern Britain: A History of the 'Peace Studies Problem', *History Compass*, 22 (2024), p. 2.
[28] Ibid., p. 8.
[29] M. Ceadel, 'The London Peace Society and Absolutist-Reformist Relations within the Peace Movement, 1816-1939'. *Peace and Change*, 42 (2017), pp. 497-8.

Such discourse invites a timely consideration into the brief history of pacifism within Britain. The first organised peace society in Britain was established as a direct result of the chaos and upheaval unleashed by the Napoleonic Wars. The London - later British - Peace Society was formed in 1816. Liberal in ideology, and dominated by middle- and upper-class figures, the society remained largely hostile to working-class support, a tendency seemingly justified by its belief that 'ending war was the work of the ruling classes who control politics'.[30] Heavily swayed by Cobdenite ideas asserting that international free trade guaranteed global peace,[31] such activists remained largely unaffected by socialism's development for much of the nineteenth century. Instead, Quaker and nonconformist views on peace predominated. As Brock highlights, so intrinsic in the public mind were the ties between Quakerism and pacifism throughout the nineteenth century, that it sufficed to merely comment '"I hold Quaker views on war"' to aptly reflect a pacifist worldview.[32] By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, closer interactions between pacifists and socialists became evident. The Second International's 1907 Congress, in emphasising internationalism as the key means in which to prevent an outbreak of war, allowed for crossovers with pacifist opinions. Similarly, the creation in 1905 of the British National Peace Council, in seeking to coordinate the activities of the British Peace Society with various other peace groups, ensured links were established with diverse political groupings, including the radical element of the Liberal Party, the Independent Labour Party and various trade unions.[33] Such ties indicate an organic turn towards the political left in the years leading up to 1914. Whilst admittedly causing concern

[30] S.E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe, 1815-1914* (Oxford, 1991), p. 17.
[31] Views which remained prevalent at the dawn of the next century. As Cortright notes, Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1911), argued that economic productivity, not military conquest, ensured the well-being of all nations, making war a venture too costly to seriously consider. Such a view mirrored Richard Cobden's 'rationalist calculations', but quickly became impotent at the outbreak of the First World War some three years later. See Cortright, *Peace*, pp. 238-9.
[32] P. Brock, *Twentieth Century Pacifism* (New York, 1970), p. 7.
[33] Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*, p. 70.

for some,[34] this would only be further compounded when the First World War failed to see a unified anti-war response within Britain's religious communities (see chapter two).

Regardless of such developments, it is notable, in sharp contrast to those movements on the continent, that the issue of passive resistance to military service, or conscientious objection, occupied little attention within the British pacifist movement, doubtless due to longstanding traditions of voluntary military service. Conscientious objection can be directly traced back to Tolstoyan ideas, following the great Russian author's assertion that all governments relied on powers of violent coercion, a 'sinful' act. Refusing to obey one's government, least of all in matters of military service, was a fundamental Christian obligation, as only through undermining state authority could a truly non-violent world be brought about.[35] Though Tolstoy's advocacy of conscientious objection stemmed from his personal religious considerations, established pacifist movements largely dissented from his views, arguing that such a method of action would 'invite attacks on the patriotism of pacifists'.[36] Moreover, even prior to the First World War, conscientious objection was commonly perceived to have morphed in its purposes, becoming 'the property of anarchists and radical socialist anti-militarists'.[37] The First World War would ultimately compound such attitudes. Though Lenin had contemptuously dismissed Tolstoy as concerned solely with moral self-perfection, others traced a direct correlation with Bolshevism's own anti-war beliefs.[38] Mussolini, then the pro-war Italian socialist, would express his dismay to hear of Lenin's seizure of power in late-1917, lamenting that Russia was now under the 'indirect influence of Tolstoy'.[39] Such discourse

[34] The secretary of the British Peace Society felt obliged at this point in time to comment that so many new advocates for peace were neglecting the significance of the gospel. See Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifists*, p. 70.
[35] Cortright, *Peace*, pp. 197-8.
[36] Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*, p. 128.
[37] Ibid., pp. 128-30.
[38] D. Losurdo, *Non-Violence: A History Beyond the Myth* (Maryland, 2015), p. 55.
[39] Ibid., 56.

ultimately serves to highlight that multi-faceted interpretations of conscientious objection could - and did - exist, particularly within a Britain which had not previously had to consider resisting military service, until the fait accompli of conscription was thrust upon it in 1916.

Such arguments, along with Ceadel's own suggestion that reformists would 'seek the absolution of war through a restructuring of the political order' ultimately allows one to consider the linkages between pacifism and communism. Ceadel proposes a desire to end capitalism, a mainstay for communists everywhere, a particular caveat in indicating a reformist attitude to pacifism.[40] Indeed, he directly argues that in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution many on the left sought 'an explicitly socialist version of pacificism, according to which only the overthrow of capitalism could ensure peace'.[41] Certainly, Eglin, in her study of female pacifists in inter-war Britain, has, as well as 'pacifist and 'pacificist' tendencies, also registered 'socialist anti-militarists' as a distinct grouping.[42] However, her examples of socialist anti-militarists within Britain, individuals such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Ellen Wilkinson, both CPGB renegades of independent thought and mind, would doubtless make a card-carrying communist shudder at being associated with such figures. It makes sense then that Young has distinguished typical socialist anti-militarism as distinct from communist influence, and all too often 'non-Marxist'.[43] Certainly, the most prominent example of a socialist anti-militarist group in the inter-war period, the No More War Movement, was something of a *bête noire* to the CPGB (see chapter four). Ostergaard, while

[40] M. Ceadel, 'Ten Distinctions for Peace Historians' in H.L. Dyck, ed., *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective*. (Toronto, 1996), p. 21.
[41] M. Ceadel, 'The Peace Movement: Overview of a British Brand Leader', *International Affairs*, 90 (2014), p. 360.
[42] J. Eglin, 'Women Pacifists in Interwar Britain', in P. Brock and T.P. Socknat, eds. *Challenge to Mars: Essays of Pacifism from 1918 to 1945*. (Toronto, 1999), pp. 149-68.
[43] N. Young, 'Tradition and Innovation in the British Peace Movement: Towards an Analytical Framework', in N. Young, and R. Taylor, eds. *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century*. (Manchester, 1987), p. 13.

acknowledging that 'pacificist' is, in theory, an 'appropriate' term to describe communist attitudes towards war and peace, also demonstrates that while 'pacificists' are generally 'anti-militarists', 'not all anti-militarists are pacifists'. Though the terms overlap, they 'stand for fairly distinct orientations'.[44]

Ostergard's own definition of anti-militarism 'is the belief that most modern wars are fought in the interests of ruling classes',[45] whilst Cockburn cites an absolute rejection of military institutions.[46] Laqua, most recently, has asserted that anti-militarism went 'beyond the rejection of military values or institutions: it treated military conflicts as products of class-based oppression'.[47] Callaghan, the biographer of prominent British communist Rajani Palme Dutt, has commented on the 'apocalyptic world inhabited by the communists' that viewed 'a combination of domestic repression and an international drive towards war' as endemic features of capitalism.[48] A key feature of this worldview was the belief that a creeping militarisation of society was an inherent feature of capitalism. As the Hungarian communist Eugen Varga argued in *Communist Review* in 1922, 'militarism' was directed by those same 'financial dictators' that controlled capitalist society. To Varga, the 'class interests of *a small group of power financiers, army contractors, militarists etc.*' ultimately dominated the fundamental questions of war and peace.[49] Opposing this militarism was the very encapsulation of what communists worldwide stood for. Ceadel's suggestion that

[44] G. Ostergaard, *Resisting the Nation State: The Pacifist and Anarchist Tradition* (London, 1982), https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/geoffrey-ostergaard-resisting-the-nation-state-the-pacifist-and-anarchist-tradition [Last accessed 5 June 2025].
[45] Ibid.
[46] Cockburn, *Anti-Militarism*, p. 2.
[47] D. Laqua, *Activism across Borders since 1870: Causes, Campaigns and Conflicts in and beyond Europe* (London, 2023), p. 105.
[48] J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism* (London, 1993), p. 112.
[49] 'Pacifism or Class War', *Communist Review*, 3 (1922), p. 179.

communism could therefore slot into a strand of reformist pacifism ultimately neglects the ideology's fundamental tenets.

It is notable that Marxist views on war remained largely moribund prior to Lenin. For Marx, war was only important insofar it affected the balance of class power, 'and hence the prospects of democratic and socialist advance'.[50] Any attempt to explain the actual source of conflict between various states throughout history remained neglected, appearing instead to be an unquantifiable 'intrusion'. Though the Napoleonic Wars had produced 'the most tumultuous phase of working class revolt' so far seen within modern society – parallel to the Leninist interpretation of the First World War a century later - Marx failed to emphasise this, nor did he linger on the idea that military defeat, as opposed to his trusted economic conditions, had chiefly engineered the creation of the 1871 Paris Commune, the first workers' government. As such, war as a whole failed to be 'seriously theorised' by the father of Marxism throughout the nineteenth century, and detailed assessments of war and peace would come only with the emergence of Lenin, whose views themselves would be granted further impetus by the coming of the First World War.[51] Lenin himself, whilst sharing the pacifist condemnation of war, ultimately argued that 'war cannot be abolished unless classes are abolished and Socialism is created'.[52] This could only be achieved by a wholesale revolution which would, in all likelihood, lead to civil war. Such internal strife was to be welcomed, and deemed 'legitimate, progressive and necessary' in ending war permanently.[53] Fundamentally shaped by the experiences of Russia during the First World War, it was taken for granted that the coming of any future 'imperialist' war would be the means by which a

[50] M. Shaw, 'War, Peace and British Marxism, 1895-1945', in Young and Taylor, *Campaigns for* Peace, p. 53.
[51] Ibid.
[52] V.I. Lenin, *The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War* (1915), https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/jul/26.htm [Last accessed 5th June 2025].
[53] Ibid.

successful communist revolution could take place. In the event of an imperialist war, communists were expected to adopt a policy of 'revolutionary defeatism'. As Lenin put it, within a 'reactionary war a revolutionary class cannot but desire the defeat of its government'. The best way to achieve this was for communists to join their armed forces in the event of war, 'thereby facilitating defeat' through the persistent subversion of their fellow soldiers. The subsequent civil war which would naturally follow marked the best chance for communists to secure power and thus ensure 'the permanent peace of socialism'.[54] As one historian has recently commented, in any theoretical war, pacifists would merely desire 'to bring the war to an end […] defeatists, on the other hand, tried to bring it home […] to turn the imperialist war into a civil war'.[55] With a touch of understatement, there thus developed 'tension between the pacifist and revolutionary defeatist strands within anti-militarism, which made friction almost inevitable across Europe'.[56] Ultimately then, as there could be no sympathy for any strand of pacifist thought within communist ranks, it serves the purposes of this thesis to ascribe the attitudes of the CPGB towards the issues of war and peace as 'anti-militarist'.

Historiography of the CPGB

In August 1925, Harry Pollitt, head of the CPGB's trade union apparatus, the National Minority Movement, and future General Secretary of the Party, professed that his 'heart is filled to overflowing'. A much needed donation 'has relieved me from the terrors of creditors who are now refusing to go away from this office'. So grateful was Pollitt that he magnanimously granted his saviour 'full permission to do what ever [*sic*] you like for the rest of your life

[54] Ibid.
[55] B. Sayim, 'Communist Anti-Militarism in France and Anti-Colonial Wars in Morocco and Syria', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 24 (2023), p. 19.
[56] Ibid.

without any fear of consequences, dire or otherwise, after the Revolution'.[57] This anecdote sharply summarises the attitudes of the CPGB. Confident that the revolution which would ensure its seizure of power was just around the corner, the Party, though professing a fervent desire to tear up the status quo, would be ever forced to operate within the political, and indeed financial, bounds of the British democratic system. As such, when compared to the major political parties within Britain throughout the twentieth century, it cannot be denied that the CPGB, in light of its overall goals and ambitions, was found wanting when it came to assistance from domestic sources, and remained largely dependent on Soviet political and financial support in order to stay above water. It is this reliance on Soviet backing, primarily through membership of the institution dedicated to spreading world revolution in the inter-war period, the Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern), that has proved to be the most enduring theme of discussion within CPGB historiography.

Within the context of internal CPGB affairs, it was a matter of pride for British communists to find themselves members of the worldwide communist party that was the Comintern. Hobsbawm has described it nobly as 'the consciousness of being soldiers in a single international army, operating, with whatever tactical multiformity and flexibility, a single grand strategy of world revolution'.[58] For the first generation of British communists, staunch admiration for the seeming successes of the Soviet experiment after 1917, and the fact that, as Harry Pollitt recalled, 'workers like me and all those around me had won power, had defeated the boss class',[59] ensured absolute loyalty to the Comintern's aims and tactics. J.T. Murphy's observation in 1925, once the internal leadership struggle between Stalin and

[57] TNA, KV 3/18, Letter from Harry Pollitt to Eva Reckett, 31 August 1925.
[58] Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, p. 5.
[59] H. Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, 4th ed. (London, 1961), p. 92.

Trotsky began to affect Comintern proceedings, that 'Our "October" is before us and not behind us' at the same time emphasised the CPGB's fundamental reluctance to question or criticise the decisions made by a body that had helped carry out a revolution in the world's largest state.[60] Pelling, the first academic to embark on a history of the CPGB in 1958, ultimately reinforced Cold War perceptions that the CPGB, or 'Moscow Men', remained nothing more than a tool of Soviet foreign policy, a perception that was most clear-cut when the CPGB was obliged to change the political line after 1927 and adopt the seemingly disastrous policy of 'class against class'.[61] The response of the CPGB, to publish their own subjective accounts of the Party's history similarly lacked critical detail.[62] As Worley therefore notes, with the prominent exception of some nuanced works such as by Macfarlane and Morgan,[63] until the archives in Moscow were opened up following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, memoirs written by former and current party activists often dominated CPGB historiography.[64] These could either be completely hostile, as in the case of Bob Darke,[65] or dubiously positive, as in the case of Ernie Trory when recalling the ideological somersaults the CPGB was obliged to undertake at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939.[66]

It is thus only in relatively recent years that the fundamental academic debates regarding the CPGB have been able to take shape. After visiting the Russian archives to consult key Comintern documents, Andrew Thorpe argued in 2000 that the relationship between the

[60] J.T. Murphy, 'Introduction' in *The Errors of Trotskyism: A Symposium* (1925), https://www.marxists.org/archive/murphy-jt/1925/05/errors.htm [accessed 5th June 2025].
[61] H. Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London, 1958).
[62] See J. Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Volume I, Formation and Early Years, 1919-1924* (London, 1969); *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Volume II, The General Strike, 1925-1926*. (London, 1969).
[63] L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origins and Development until 1929.* (London, 1966); K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester, 1989).
[64] M. Worley, 'Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', *Historical Materialism*, 4 (1999), p. 242.
[65] B. Darke, *The Communist Technique in Britain* (London, 1952).
[66] E. Trory, *Imperialist War: Further Recollections of a Communist Organiser* (Brighton, 1977).

CPGB and the Comintern, far from being top-down only, was in fact 'more of a partnership', ensuring the CPGB could take advantage of Comintern 'slack' to implement policies they themselves believed the best course of action for the domestic situation.[67] Worley, with his research focusing in particular on the era of 'class against class' after 1928,[68] concurs, arguing that far from a simple binary relationship with Moscow, wider domestic factors need to be taken into account in evaluating the events of 1928-9.[69] While acknowledging the Comintern's supremacy insofar as there could be 'no room for variation', differences could exist in regard to 'the practical implementation of Communist policy'.[70] Most notably, he argues that the left turn of 'class against class' would have taken place 'with or without Comintern prodding'.[71] So persuasive was this new understanding of the CPGB's relationship with the Comintern that by 2003, the chief detractors, McIlroy and Campbell, would argue that there was now a 'need to critically rehabilitate the centrality of […] Russian domination',[72] or, in other words, to reassert that the 'Russians were the masters, the British the pupils'.[73] It is perhaps not much of an understatement to argue that something of a backlash greeted Thorpe and Worley's assessments, who would even be accused of searching 'for novelty in their arguments'.[74] Attempts to classify the differences in opinion, between 'essentialists', those historians like McIlroy and Campbell who sought to emphasise that CPGB affairs were dictated by 'the

[67] A. Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, 2000), p. 5.
[68] M. Worley, *Class against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2002).
[69] M. Worley, 'Left Turn: A Reassessment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1928-33', *Twentieth Century British History*, 11 (2000), p. 379.
[70] M. Worley, 'Echoes from the Dustbin of History: A Reply to Alan Campbell and John McIlroy', *Labour History Review,* 69 (2004), p. 368.
[71] Ibid., p. 369.
[72] J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, 'Histories of the British Communist Party: A User's Guide', *Labour History Review*, 68 (2003), p. 54.
[73] J. Mcilroy and A. Campbell, ''Nina Ponomareva's Hats': The New Revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1930', *Labour*, 49 (2002), p. 186.
[74] J. Mcilroy and A. Campbell, ''For a Revolutionary Workers' Government': Moscow, British Communism and Revisionist Interpretations of the Third Period, 1927-34', *European History Quarterly*, 32 (2002), p. 563.

essential Stalinist nature of all things Communist' and the 'realists', like Thorpe and Worley, who asserted that there was a 'great deal of latitude for individual British Party members on the ground and that the CPGB was able to develop its own identity and integrity', themselves came to be contested.[75]

While, in more recent years, efforts have been made to move on from these bitter debates, with recent research on the CPGB's cultural influence a particular development,[76] a focus on the CPGB's anti-militarist policies in the 1920s invites a re-immersion into the original discussions about the CPGB's freedom of action under the Comintern. Writing in 1987, prior to the opening of key Russian archives after 1991, Shaw would argue that the 1920s were a period 'for which there is least documentation and discussion of Marxist attitudes to war and peace'.[77] No such excuse now exists, and while it is important to assert that both the 'essentialists' and 'realists', if one can use these terms, agreed that a looming threat of war was pivotal in helping to formulate 'class against class', there remains little engagement with the consequences the war scare actually had on CPGB activity. Worley cites the coming of 'imperialist war' as one of the fundamental features of the Third Period,[78] and McIlroy and Campbell similarly note 'the Russian's fear of war in 1927' as pivotal in helping to shape the new political doctrine,[79] yet both the former and the latter nevertheless exert little focus on the impact of the war scare, or indeed on CPGB anti-militarism in this period, within their own

[75] H. Jones, 'Is CPGB history Important?', *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), p. 348.
[76] See, for instance, E. Smith, *British Communism and the Politics of Race* (Leiden, 2017); B. Harker, *The Chronology of Revolution: Communism, Culture and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Toronto, 2021).
[77] M. Shaw, 'War, Peace and British Marxism, 1895-1945' in *Campaigns for Peace*, p. 60.
[78] M. Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the 'Third Period', 1928-1932', *European History Quarterly*, 30 (2000), p. 186.
[79] McIlroy and Campbell, ''For a Revolutionary Workers' Government', p. 536.

work. By contrast, this thesis begins with the argument that greater examination of these factors is required.

Historiography of CPGB Anti-Militarism

Morgan's research on CPGB anti-militarism, though neglecting the impact of the 1927 war scare, has highlighted key continuities with the pre-1917 British left. Communists in Britain retained the traditional British 'labourist distrust of state compulsion',[80] a perception no doubt hardened by conscription's implementation during the First World War. Indeed, the war itself was crucial in the development of the CPGB. As Shaw has noted, while 'there was no effective revolutionary opposition [in Britain]' to the war, it did ensure 'the unification of almost all the serious revolutionary forces in the Communist Party'.[81] At the same time, in terms of anti-war activity, it is important to note, as Young highlights, that the British Socialist Party (BSP), the main forerunner to the CPGB, 'did not differ greatly in its real orientation from the majority of the I[ndependent] L[abour] P[arty], whose opposition to the war was more on pacifist than revolutionary grounds'. The BSP instead appears to 'have fallen between two stools, committed neither to the 'peace movement', nor to revolutionary anti-war activity, but carrying on its own rather indecisive anti-war propaganda'.[82] As such, while there certainly existed 'a strong anti-militarist undercurrent', this rather tepid tradition became 'overwhelmed by the influence of the Stalinist Comintern'.[83] Shaw concurs, noting that the CPGB line on war and peace 'varied in accordance with Soviet domestic and foreign policy',[84] underlining the overall 'essentialist' argument that points to Comintern domination

[80] K. Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism: Socialists, Communists and Conscription in France and Britain 1900-1940', *Past & Present*, 202 (2009), p. 240.
[81] Shaw, 'War, Peace and British Marxism', p. 60.
[82] Ibid., 58.
[83] Young, 'Tradition and Innovation', p. 14.
[84] Shaw, 'War, Peace and British Marxism', p. 61.

of CPGB policy. Certainly, the Comintern demanded a one-size-fits-all approach to anti-militarist affairs. Britain's unique situation when compared to other European nations, in lacking a peacetime conscript army, was ignored, with the exact form of military service in the capitalist states judged immaterial. In a typically Leninist style of who, whom?, the chief concern for Moscow was who ultimately controlled the state and armed forces: 'debates over "purely organisational" issues – militia, conscription or professional army – merely obscured their role as instruments of class rule'.[85] As we shall see in chapter six however, the CPGB itself considered Britain's tradition of voluntary military service an important factor in the conduct of their anti-militarist propaganda, and were prepared, to an extent, to contest the Comintern's views in 1927, contributing to 'realist' arguments that emphasise the CPGB's scope for action.

Amongst those historians who have researched communist anti-militarism, there continues to be little engagement with the 1927 war scare. Shaw, whilst acknowledging the Soviet Union 'had much to fear from a major war with any major Western state' in the 1920s, frustratingly fails to acknowledge the war scare's impact on either the CPGB's anti-militarism or the change in political line after 1927.[86] Ceadel, as one of the few scholars to have discussed the linkages between communism and pacifism, makes an opaque reference, dubiously asserting that it was only after 1932 that British communists were 'persuaded' that an anti-war campaign was necessary.[87] His subsequent focus on the British Anti-War Movement, a communist entryist group created to contend the rise of fascism, naturally ensures little focus on CPGB anti-militarism in the 1920s. Nevertheless, Ceadel remains one of the few scholars to recognise

[85] Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism', p. 230.
[86] Shaw, 'War, Peace and British Marxism', p. 61.
[87] M. Ceadel, 'The First Communist 'Peace Society': The British Anti-War Movement, 1932-1935', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), p. 61.

the potential pitfalls of communist engagement with anti-war rhetoric. A fine line had to be drawn, as perpetual anti-militarist activity threatened to 'undermine proletarian commitment to the Soviet defence effort'. Balance was therefore required in prioritising the Soviet Union's security needs over an emphasis on the horrors of militarism. Confusion, however, could easily be the result, with an 'explicitly socialist anti-war' message perhaps blurring into 'bourgeois pacifism'.[88] Indeed, the Hungarian Varga, a seasoned Comintern official, acknowledged in 1922 that 'pacifism is a somewhat complicated movement'. Despite a fervent desire to 'separate bourgeois pacifism from proletarian anti-militarism', he could only lamely admit that 'it is sometimes very difficult to separate the one from the other'.[89] That even a Comintern functionary, at the centre of power in Moscow, could admit to such worries helps to explain just how the CPGB could fall foul of the Comintern, in monumental fashion, after 1927 and in the run up to the change in leadership in 1929.

Sources and Methodology

A multitude of primary sources have been utilised for this thesis. These include periodicals and newspapers from across the political spectrum, oral testimonies, and the examination of documentary collections from the key political parties and movements that dominate this thesis; the No-Conscription Fellowship, the Independent Labour Party, and, of course, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Communist International. A focus on British communism suggests it is imperative to be able to access the documents housed in Russia in order to fully engage with this topic. Alas, at the time of writing, sharp geopolitical tensions between Russia and the west have put heed to any possibility of this. Nevertheless, it has

[88] Ibid., 62.
[89] 'Pacifism or Class War', pp. 177-8.

been possible to circumvent these difficulties. The Labour History Archive and Study Centre, housed in the People's History Museum in Manchester, contains a significant bulk of papers relating to the CPGB. As Worley noted in 2004, these resources are 'extensive and relevant', and include minutes of the CPGB's Central Committee and Political Bureau, correspondence between Party members, and indeed, the personal papers of many individual communists themselves.[90] Furthermore, it has been possible to explore the attitudes of the Comintern through the London School of Economics' microfilm collection, which contains the minutes and discussions of all the Comintern congresses and plenums.

Though the popular press has been utilised in order to gain insight into public opinion, particularly in regards to key events discussed within subsequent chapters, such as the 1925 trial of the CPGB's leadership and the 1927 Shanghai Defence Force, particular emphasis has been placed on periodicals centred within the British labour movement during and after the First World War. The traditional perception of the British press, of conservative voices dominating mainstream opinion for much of the early twentieth century, ensured 'radical socialist papers aimed at overturning the status quo' enjoyed lower readership and a corresponding influence, in line with the prospects of the political parties they sought to represent.[91] However, Morgan has argued that it is precisely because of a failure to gain mass membership that socialist 'newspapers played an accentuated role both as mobilisers and disseminators of opinion and as a focus of political allegiance'.[92] In particular, it is clear to see that such publications, above all, acted as a source of encouragement and moral sustenance for their supporters. The NCF periodical *The Tribunal*, though continually hounded by a

[90] Worley, 'Echoes from the Dustbin', p. 371.
[91] A. Bingham and M. Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present* (Oxford, 2015) p. 70.
[92] K. Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (London, 2006), p. 89.

Government determined to prevent publication, was able to print weekly issues without fail, doubtless a source of satisfaction and encouragement to the conscientious objector lingering away his days in prison. Similarly, *The International*, the mouthpiece of the ILP left, though of course never proscribed, was deliberately ignored by the wider ILP, helping to create ever tighter bonds between like-minded readers, convinced of the righteousness of their beliefs.

The irreverent assessment of Koss, that such papers were all too often 'tied to faction' and 'articulated the ideals and resentments of mercurial personalities',[93] in fact makes such periodicals an invaluable source in understanding the key viewpoints and opinions that predominated over the political left throughout this thesis' time period. The key publications used for this research, the NCF's *Tribunal*, the ILP's *Forward* and the ILP Left Wing Group's *International*, are incredibly useful in discerning the grassroots views and opinions of individuals towards the towering issues of the day, be it the looming spectre of Bolshevism on the anti-conscription movement within *The Tribunal* after 1917, or the questioned sincerity of communist anti-militarism within *Forward* in 1921. *The International* in particular, which to the author's knowledge can only be found at London's Marx Memorial Library, is, considering its relevance to British labour politics in the immediate post-war period, an underused source, doubtless helped little by low circulation and a rather haughty tone. Nevertheless, the discovery and utilisation of such an invaluable source during the course of this thesis has allowed for an in-depth understanding of the role former conscientious objectors played in attempting to steer the ILP to Comintern affiliation.

[93] S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume II: The Twentieth Century* (London, 1984), p. 63.

Researching the British Government's attitudes towards the Soviet war scare required a consultation of the relevant cabinet papers, as well as the correspondence of Sir Austen Chamberlain during his tenure as Foreign Secretary between 1924-9 (TNA *FO 800/256-263*). The decision has been made to employ these resources, alongside MI5 security files (TNA *KV 2-3*), and reports compiled by Special Branch on revolutionary activity within Britain (ChAC *22/78-246*) - in other words, the records of state surveillance - to complement those sources produced by the CPGB and NCF. This is perhaps a controversial decision. Morgan, after all, has commented on the 'seemingly inconsequential character' of much of this material, as well as the importance of 'critical reflection' in our understanding of such sources.[94] Certainly, there are potential pitfalls. Hiley has emphasised that reports compiled by the security services would naturally develop 'according to the prejudices of its chief officers'.[95] Thurlow's argument, that as the security services, deeming the CPGB as an existential threat, 'exaggerated' the Party's significance, such files ostensibly do little more than reinforce those orthodox attitudes towards British communism, as a 'conspiratorial' movement that merely functioned 'as the British agent of the Comintern, which in turn is seen as controlled by Stalin as the international mouthpiece of the Soviet Union'.[96]

However, there are certain benefits to utilising such sources in light of this thesis' aims. For one, it makes it possible to access unique documents unavailable to previous historians. Both the NCF, in 1917, and the CPGB, in 1925, were subjected to police raids, ensuring extensive amounts of documents were seized and eventually deposited in the National Archives (TNA

[94] K. Morgan, 'Communist History, Police History and the archives of British State Surveillance' *Twentieth Century Communism*, 17 (2019), pp. 68-80.
[95] N. Hiley, 'Counter Espionage and Security in Great Britain during the First World War', *The English Historical Review*, 101 (1986), p. 661.
[96] R. Thurlow, 'The Historiography and Source Materials in the Study of Internal Security in Modern Britain (1885-1956)', *History Compass*, 6 (2008), pp. 156-7.

PRO 10/802 & TNA *KV 3/18-33*). These documents have proved to be incredibly useful for this thesis, and complement those CPGB and NCF collections. Freedom of Information Requests made to the Metropolitan Police have now made further documents publicly available. In particular, material referring to the 1925 arrest and trial of the CPGB' leadership (*MEPO 38*) appear to confirm once and for all the trial's politicisation. Furthermore, the regular Special Branch reports on revolutionary activity in Britain are invaluable in discerning official reactions to communist anti-militarist activity throughout the 1920s. Though naturally hostile, such weekly reports have made it possible to assess both broader governmental and public attitudes to the CPGB's anti-war propaganda, as well as monitor the evolution of the campaigns themselves. Though such reports, on occasion, have quoted material without detailing the provenance, where it has been possible to compare reports with an original source, such as with the Comintern's closed letter to the CPGB after its Eleventh Congress in January 1929, there are close similarities in content and phrasing.[97] This suggests these sources, when used in combination with other material, can be a useful addition to those resources already utilised for this thesis.

In terms of methodology, this thesis, whilst primarily an empirical study based on the evaluation and analysis of newspapers and primary documents from archives all over Britain, remains influenced by the recent prosopographical research conducted by Mcilroy and Campbell on the leadership of the CPGB in the inter-war period.[98] Prosopography is defined

[97] Similarly, almost word for word, Special Branch picked up on the CPSU's dissatisfaction towards the CPGB's anti-militarist propaganda at its 1928 Congress in Moscow. More broadly, it was able to register rank and file dissatisfaction with the ILP Memorandum 'Socialism and Government' in 1919 (See chapter three) and also detected the lack of belief within the CPGB over the Soviet war scare in 1927 (See chapter seven).

[98] J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism, 1923-1928: Pages from a Prosopographical Project', *Labor History*, 62 (2021), pp. 207-53; 'The 'Core' Leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1923-1928: Their Past, Present and Future', *Labor History*, 62 (2021), pp. 371-412; ''For Peace and Defence of the Soviet Union': The Leadership of British Communism in the Popular Front Era, 1935-1939', *Labor History*, 64 (2023), pp. 1-47.

as ‘a form of collective biography in which the common and diverse characteristics of a specific population of social actors are enumerated, analysed and compared by reference to selected categories’, with the aim to ‘establish variables, correlations and patterns within the group’.[99] When used to investigate ‘members of social movements and political parties’, it can often ‘restore or reaffirm the significance of agency and the background and characteristics of historical actors’.[100] As McIlroy and Campbell themselves note, its ability to ‘help penetrate institutional facades, and shed light on how things worked in practice’ lends itself to a study of communist movements.[101] Prosopographical influences have therefore been used within this thesis to uncover the shared characteristics of those conscientious objectors who subsequently embraced communist politics. While the First World War itself played a pivotal role in instigating the CPGB’s formation, Morgan’s comment on ‘the profoundly civilian formation of most of the CPGB’s founding cohort’, reflects those typical perceptions of the First World War for many communists as a ‘war in the workshops’.[102] Certainly, while boilermaker Harry Pollitt, or engineer Willie Gallacher were, as skilled industrial workers, exempt from conscription, many other founding communists had a vastly different experience, of a war in prison. The shared characteristics of imprisonment, and broader exclusion from political and civil rights, are therefore key characteristics of those individuals who dominate this thesis, such as C.H. Norman and Bob Stewart. This in turn allows for a greater understanding of their political development over this thesis’ timeframe.

[99] J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, ‘Towards a Prosopography of the American Communist Elite: The Foundation Years’, *American Communist History*, 18 (2019), 175.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] K. Morgan, ‘‘Kings among their Subjects’? Ernest Thälmann, Harry Pollitt and the Leadership Cult at Stalinization’ in N. Laporte, K. Morgan and M. Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-53*. (Basingstoke, 2008), p. 133.

Research Questions and Thesis Structure

In undertaking an investigation into the anti-militarist views of both the CPGB in the 1920s and the NCF during the First World War, five research questions were fundamental to formulating this thesis. First of all, as highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, the thesis seeks to discover why the British State viewed conscientious objectors as synonymous with communists. This in turn led to an investigation as to how conscientious objectors themselves perceived the state, especially in light of the imprisonment and general poor treatment they were subjected to. The second question asks how the NCF greeted the 1917 Russian Revolutions, particularly the Bolshevik Revolution, and whether Bolshevism was not only able to appeal to those in Britain resisting both war and conscription, but maintain a clear influence on the political outlook of former conscientious objectors in the post-war period. The third question, in acknowledging the importance of both the 1924 Campbell Case and 1925 trial and arrest of the CPGB leadership to the Party' history, asks how communist anti-militarist propaganda, the catalyst to state action in both cases, played an integral role in the wider perception of these events. The fourth question regards the 1927 Soviet war scare. Though the extensive literature highlights that British actions played a key role in sustaining Soviet fears of conflict, this thesis asks if this event had a discernible impact on communist affairs in Britain. Once research was duly undertaken on this event, a fifth and final question arose, namely, how the Soviet war scare was considered by the British Government itself.

This thesis, in seeking to answer these research questions, begins with an analysis of the No-Conscription Fellowship (chapter two). Traditional scholarship of conscientious objectors, in emphasising their status as victims of conscience, has neglected this movement's increasing politicisation as the War progressed. The poor treatment many conscientious objectors

suffered, alongside the influences of the Russian Revolutions in 1917, did much to radicalise many within the NCF. Not only did this create sustained Government fears that the anti-war movement as a whole was becoming increasingly susceptible to revolutionary ideas, it ensured that the NCF's Executive Committee, keen to retain a moderate image, was unable to bridge the differences that increasingly divided the Fellowship, culminating in self-dissolution by 1919.

Chapter three, in acknowledging the intrinsic ties established between the NCF and the Independent Labour Party (ILP), traces the subsequent path many former conscientious objectors, as ILP members, trod in the immediate post-war period. Between 1919 and 1921, staunch demands for ILP affiliation to the newly founded Communist International emerged. Though this is a subject discussed at length by many scholars, there has been little acknowledgement that many former conscientious objectors were key in promoting this sympathetic attitude towards Moscow. As such, the ILP's attitudes towards the Comintern will be explored for the first time in light of the activities of this staunch body of former conscientious objectors. Failing to secure their bid for affiliation in 1921, many of these same individuals went on to join the CPGB. Far from rejecting such 'pacifists', the CPGB welcomed this influx, ensuring concrete links were established almost from the very beginning of the Party's history with the First World War anti-conscription movement.

The development of CPGB anti-militarism until 1927 will be the focus of chapter four. Anti-war campaigns during and immediately after the Party's formation did much to unite the CPGB, and helped to propagate a distinct anti-militarist mind-set. Whilst unable to influence members of the British armed forces in any meaningful way, Government concerns over the prevalence of communist propaganda ensured that the CPGB's anti-militarist views received

national attention. Both the 1924 Campbell Case and the 1925 trial of the CPGB's leadership, it will be argued, were a direct result of the CPGB's attempts to diffuse its anti-militarist views to the public. This interpretation, in contrast to previous scholarship which focuses mainly on public impact,[103] seeks to re-assert the role anti-militarist propaganda had in driving these events.

Chapter five introduces the reader to the 1927 Soviet war scare. Detailing current scholarly interpretations of the war scare, it then seeks to offer a new perspective by focusing on the actions of the British Government during this period. Far from dismissing Soviet attitudes as simple paranoia, Sir Austen Chamberlain echoed fears that a severance of diplomatic relations would dramatically upset the international order, and might very well lead to war. Such an interpretation not only builds on a scholarship which emphasises the need for a British interpretation of the war danger, but challenges existing views which emphasise the British Government's mere dismissal of Soviet fears of conflict.[104]

Chapter six, in turn, analyses the response of the CPGB to the Soviet war scare. It will be argued that the Party exhibited a distinct sluggishness in engaging with Soviet fears of war, preferring instead to concentrate on actual British intervention in China. Though internal discussions eventually took place regarding communist tactics in the event of war and conscription's introduction, it is notable that key Party members were reluctant to adopt the revolutionary policy of infiltrating the armed forces, preferring to adopt a stance akin to

[103] Ewing and Gearty, as law scholars, unsurprisingly emphasise the complications for which the trial had on the traditional understanding of civil liberties within Britain at this time. See K.D. Ewing and C.A. Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2000). Thorpe, in his assessment of the trial, devotes a mere sentence to anti-militarism, despite it being at the crux of the situation. See Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow*, p. 71. Worley emphasises the trial's impact on relations between the CPGB and the Labour left. See Worley, *Class against Class*, pp. 9-10.

[104] Neilson has argued that the British Government 'greeted calmly' Soviet fears of war in 1927. See K. Neilson, '"Pursued by a Bear": British Estimates of Soviet Military Strength and Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1922-1939', *Canadian Journal of History*, 28 (1993), p. 199.

pacifism. This introduces a new understanding of the history of the CPGB during this period, asserting as it does the level of flexibility and scope for action many British communists exhibited in response to Comintern directives over the war scare. It also highlights that the typical anti-militarist views of many British communists did not emanate solely from Moscow, but remained grounded in personal experiences of the First World War.

Finally, chapter seven seeks to offer a new interpretation of the leadership struggle that broke out within the Party in 1928-9. The ongoing war scare, an intrinsic feature of 'class against class', ensured ever increasing pressure was placed on the CPGB by the Comintern to conduct successful anti-militarist campaigns. Failure to achieve this, combined with perceptions that pacifist viewpoints continued to dominate the Party, would ensure the leadership's replacement by the end of 1929. As many of the individuals removed from their position of power were former conscientious objectors, the events of 1929 mark a logical ending point to this thesis. The period covered within this research, 1917 to 1929, highlights the clear lingering influence of First World War conscientious objection on the CPGB and, indeed, the British left as a whole. These conscientious objectors, radicalised over the course of the war, not only instigated tension with the wider British left, but, in spite of finding a home within the CPGB, similarly came into conflict with the Comintern after 1927. The threat of war, veracity notwithstanding, obliged such individuals either to leave the Party or abandon their ingrained methods of resisting war. If they chose the latter, they were obliged to adopt a programme that was completely alien to their own personal experiences. Reconciliation could only come through complete subjugation to the new line.

Chapter Two: The No-Conscription Fellowship and the First World War

Amidst all the crude and lurid anti-Bolshevik propaganda that engulfed the western world following the October Revolution in 1917 exists one unique pamphlet. Written in an almost Wellsian manner, it details the fortunes of a man who rises from his bed one morning in 1919 to discover that London has been captured by Bolsheviks. As he walks through the streets, the protagonist is bewildered by the poverty, the desolation, and most of all by the sheer brutality exhibited by the militia on the streets, entitled disingenuously as 'comrades'. When questioning a passer-by, his interlocutor is contemptuous, though resigned to these new circumstances, for after all what can one 'expect when you have an ex-criminal for Chief of Police and a Conscientious Objector as General of the Red Army? That's a strange thing about some of these pacifists: they objected to killing Germans, but they don't mind killing Englishmen'.[1] Though hardly the pivotal point of this pamphlet, the seeming inconsistency that those who had refused to be conscripted into the armed forces during the First World War could be capable of wholeheartedly embracing revolution is an interesting yet neglected perception within the scholarship of the British anti-conscription movement. Nevertheless, sustained poor treatment by the British state, combined with the advent of revolutionary regimes in Russia and central Europe after 1917, exerted a clear influence in changing the attitudes of many anti-war campaigners. This chapter, in focusing on the development of the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) throughout the First World War, will argue that this anti-war movement became increasingly politicised by the events of 1917, so much so that by the war's end, many conscientious objectors not only supported the Bolshevik regime in Russia,

[1] CUL, *London under the Bolsheviks: A Londoner's Dream on Returning from Petrograd*, Russian Liberation Committee, 1919, p. 6.

but in defending the use of physical force to achieve concrete political and social change in the former Tsarist empire, saw a desire for such tactics to be implemented within Britain itself.

This chapter will begin with an assessment of the scholarship of the NCF, seeking to highlight that the Fellowship, though professing to be apolitical, was strongly influenced by left-wing ideas from the very beginning, suggesting a likely receptiveness towards Bolshevism after 1917. The impact of the Home Office Scheme will then be assessed. Implemented by the government to accommodate the vast majority of conscientious objectors who refused to serve in the armed forces, but were prepared to undertake work of national importance, it has been traditionally viewed as the main source of tension within the Fellowship. While it certainly pitted those conscientious objectors, the 'absolutists', who refused to engage in any such work against the wider cohort of anti-war resisters, it will be argued that many Home Office men used their position within these camps to directly attack the war effort. It was this example of direct action within the scheme, rather than acceptance of the scheme itself, that caused such fracturing within the Fellowship, particularly as it went against the express wishes of the NCF's leaders. The response of the NCF towards the 1917 February Revolution in Russia will then be examined. The enthusiasm with which the NCF welcomed this event reflected hopes that it marked a step towards overall peace. Nevertheless, grassroots infatuation with domestic movements that emanated from the Revolution's influence, such as the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, further disconcerted the leadership and prompted a new wave of internal dissent. Finally, the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on the NCF will be discussed. This event provoked vigorous debate within the ranks of the Fellowship, and saw a fundamental questioning of the movement's core values, namely a belief in the sacredness of human life. Such staunch attitudes not only ensured the movement's eventual dissolution, but caused huge concern for the British Government. The continued

imprisonment of conscientious objectors well into 1919 derived not from a desire to prioritise the demobilisation of armed servicemen, but from establishment fears of the chaos that might be unleashed on the streets of Britain were such individuals to be released.

Historiography of the NCF

Whilst, as highlighted in chapter one, a 'moderately secure geopolitical situation with a moderately liberal political culture' ensured anti-war tendencies made themselves known within British society as early as the nineteenth century,[2] Britain's steadfast tradition of voluntary military service ensured conscientious objection remained a theoretical concept until the introduction of conscription in 1916. As Young notes, conscientious objection only became a 'public political act' following the beginning of an organised rejection of compulsory military service.[3] The pro-war socialist periodical *Justice* would describe it as a 'peculiar emotional and semi-religious trend' and express surprise that so many on the left appeared to be taking up a 'Quaker attitude'.[4] However, such a stance was hardly the sole preserve of religious opponents of war, with Ceadel demonstrating that less than half of all Quakers eligible for military service (some forty-five per cent) became conscientious objectors, with the rest either serving directly in the armed forces, or through auxiliary services such as the Friends Ambulance Unit.[5] The First World War therefore marked the 'decisive passing of the leadership of the Pacifist movement to non-Quakers', with the NCF the key beneficiary.[6]

The NCF was formed shortly after war was declared in October 1914 by Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway, with the intention to 'oppose every effort to introduce compulsory military

[2] Ceadel, 'The Peace Movement', p. 352.
[3] Young, 'War Resistance and the British Peace Movement', p. 23.
[4] 'A Danger to Social-Democracy in Great Britain', *Justice*, 20 January 1916, p. 4.
[5] Ceadel, 'The London Peace Society', p. 512.
[6] M. Ceadel, 'British Quakerism, 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community', *The English Historical Review*, 117 (2002), p. 1009.

service into Great Britain'. When this duly took place in 1916, the movement sought 'whatever the consequences may be, [to] obey their conscientious convictions rather than the commands of Governments'.[7] It effectively took on, in Pearce's words, 'the character of an underground resistance movement',[8] with Brockway recounting that while the NCF was officially a public body, having held two conferences,[9] the organisation was 'necessarily "underground" because of police attention'. Preparations were made for reserve committees to take over the day-to-day running of the movement once the key leaders, all of whom were of military age, were arrested and sent to prison for refusing to serve in the armed forces,[10] as indeed happened after May 1916.[11] Historiography of the NCF has therefore focused on the extent to which government treatment of conscientious objectors 'divided British society on every level'.[12] Boulton helped to launch discussions on the motives of the state in their treatment of pacifists, and sympathetically portrayed them as passive victims bound by their idealism, a view largely shared by Kennedy.[13] Other historians however, have defended the government over their treatment of conscientious objectors, arguing that the infamous tribunals largely acted fairly in carrying out a difficult task.[14] More recent scholarship,

[7] TNA, PRO 10/802, The No-Conscription Fellowship Statement of Faith, c.1917.
[8] C. Pearce, *Communities of Resistance: Conscience and Dissent in Britain during the First World War*, (London, 2020), Francis Boutle, p. 51.
[9] In November 1915 and April 1916.
[10] Churchill Archive Centre [Hereafter ChAC], FEBR/195, F. Brockway, *The Opposition to the War*, c. 1970s, p. 17.
[11] Pearce, *Communities of Resistance*, p. 51.
[12] C. Pearce, 'Writing about Britain's 1914-18 War Resisters', *Reviews in History*, 1779 (2015).
[13] D. Boulton, *Objection Overruled* (London, 1967); T. Kennedy, *The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919* (Arkansas, 1981).
[14] J. Rae, *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service, 1916-1919* (Oxford, 1970); J. McDermott, *British Military Service Tribunals, 1916-1918: 'A very much abused body of men'* (Manchester, 2011).

pioneered by Pearce, has shifted the narrative away from a broader national perspective, instead focusing on the organic emergence of anti-war views within local communities.[15]

In refusing to support Britain's war effort, conscientious objectors were castigated and subjected to public scorn. Such vitriol was all too often presented in gendered terms, with Gullace arguing that those who refused to serve were perceived as 'hysterical and crankish weaklings'.[16] Bibbings has also alluded to gendered perceptions, highlighting a perceived lack of 'manliness' in the conduct of anti-war activists.[17] Most recently, Hodgson has shown that concepts of personal weakness were deliberately used by the government to strengthen public distaste for conscientious objectors.[18] However, the fact that many conscientious objectors were re-galvanised by the actions of Lenin after 1917 has been largely overlooked. Boulton failed to truly gauge societal fears of radical extremism within the movement, believing that the delayed release of imprisoned pacifists after the war was attributed to public pressure in prioritising demobilisation rather than any fear of potential subversion.[19] Rae, while noting state suspicions of pacifist extremism, cites these as stemming from a series of disturbances by conscientious objectors at one particular prison in early 1919, rather than

[15] For Cyril Pearce's work in particular see *Comrades in Conscience: The Story of an English Community's Opposition to the Great War*, (London, 2001); 'A Landscape of Dissent: Topography and Identity in Three Pennine Valleys', *Landscapes* 3 (2000), pp. 84-102; *Communities of Resistance: Conscience and Dissent in Britain during the First World War*; 'Mapping Dissent: Conscientious Objectors in Northern England during the First World War', *Northern History*, 61 (2024), pp. 114-133.
Other research incorporating this localised approach includes D.M. Amos, 'Conscientious Objectors: men of Nottinghamshire who failed the call to arms, 1914-18', *Midland History*, 45 (2020), pp. 95-110; J. Hinshelwood, 'Hotbeds of resistance in the First World War: Conscientious Objection in Birmingham and London', *Local Historian*, 49 (2019), pp. 121-132; A. Wallace, 'A Community of Consent: Conscientious Objectors on the North Yorkshire Moors and the North East Coast During the First World War', *Northern History*, 61 (2024), pp. 94-113.
[16] N.F. Gullace, *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 182.
[17] L. Bibbings, 'Images of Manliness: The Portrayal of Soldiers and Conscientious Objectors in the Great War', *Social and Legal Studies*, 12 (2003), p. 335.
[18] M. Hodgson, 'Pathologising 'Refusal': Prison, Health and Conscientious Objectors during the First World War', *Social History of Medicine*, 35 (2022), p. 976.
[19] Boulton, op. cit., pp. 281-3.

through fears of an encroaching radicalism within the NCF after 1917.[20] While the imprisonment and poor treatment anti-war protestors were subjected to have been a mainstay in the historical narrative, no attempt has been made to investigate whether such treatment, combined with the domestic impact of international events such as the Russian Revolutions, helped to radicalise these individuals.

Certainly, the make-up of the movement could suggest an ingrained sympathy towards Bolshevism. Though Cortright has argued the NCF served 'as the libertarian voice of absolutist pacifists',[21] Kennedy has suggested that some seventy-five to eighty per cent of the Fellowship held staunch socialist beliefs.[22] In a report complied during the war by the Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organisation, it was found that of 329 conscientious objectors surveyed, 315 belonged to a range of left-wing political parties including the British Socialist Party[23] and the Independent Labour Party.[24] Ceadel himself describes the NCF as a 'socialist-pacifist' movement,[25] which made great attempts 'to reconcile the pacifist and pacificist[26] versions of socialism' throughout its lifetime.[27] Many contemporaries rejected the assessment that the NCF was a pacifist body. Dorothy Louise Bing, who along with her brother Harold were members of the Croydon branch of the NCF, recalled that many within the Fellowship 'weren't all pacifists. Some of them objected on political grounds'.[28] Lewis MacLachlan, a religious

[20] Rae, op. cit., pp. 229-33.
[21] Cortright, op. cit., p. 167.
[22] Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 49-50.
[23] One of the leading elements in the creation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) between 1920-21.
[24] CUL, WRC,34.314, Friends Service Committee, *The Absolutists' Objection to Conscription: A Statement and Appeal to the Conscience of the Nation*, c. 1918, pp. 28-9.
[25] M. Ceadel, 'The case of Interwar Britain, 1918-1945' in *Challenge to Mars*, p. 138.
[26] As discussed in chapter one, this was a term used extensively by Ceadel to denote that some pacifist movements believed armed force could be justified in some cases, a belief many socialist members of the NCF, particularly Marxists who would only fight in a class war, could identify with.
[27] Ceadel, 'Ten Distinctions for Peace Historians', p. 21.
[28] Imperial War Museum Sound Archive [Hereafter IWMSA], Dorothy Louise Bing Interview, 1974, (Reel 3/9).

conscientious objector, was more damning. He maintained that the NCF and religious pacifist groups 'were quite apart'. The NCF, in his view, was 'inclined to be rather [..] contemptuous of us. I think they thought that we were just putting up just a show of religion, whereas they were out for something really political and they were going to make it impossible for conscription to get through Parliament again'.[29]

Nevertheless, the shared goal of resisting conscription allowed for 'a relaxation of sectarianism amongst the Left and a politics based on intersecting networks', with a sustained belief in internationalism a unifying principle.[30] Though the collapse of the Second International at the war's outbreak had seemingly marked the end of internationalism as a persuasive concept, Hannam and Hunt have argued that this merely 'exposed the weaknesses of the International rather than the futility of internationalism itself'. In fact, the 'politics of internationalism were if anything more pressing than ever'.[31] This ensured great attention was paid to foreign events throughout the course of the war, with Russia in particular occupying a prominent place in NCF discourse. Both Rempel and Anta have researched the British anti-war movement's response to the Russian Revolutions through the lens of key NCF member Bertrand Russell.[32] Without a doubt, the February Revolution was perceived as a decisive rejection of war. Russell argued that it 'would involve 'a complete change in the political, social, and economic field at the international level by removing the causes of war''.[33] Even the supplanting of the Provisional Government by the Bolsheviks later that year failed to dampen his optimism, and he continued to take stock in the Bolshevik promise of

[29] IWMSA, Lewis MacLachlan Interview, 1974, (Reel 6/6).
[30] J. Hannam and K. Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002), p. 176.
[31] Ibid., 176-7.
[32] R.A. Rempel, 'Pacifism and Revolution: Bertrand Russell and Russia, 1914-1920' in Dyck, *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective*, pp. 341-61; C.G. Anta, 'The Pacifism of Bertrand Russell during the Great War', *History of European Ideas*, 48 (2022), pp. 438-53.
[33] Quoted in Anta, op. cit., p. 448.

''no annexation, no indemnities''.[34] It is therefore likely that, just as Russell claimed it 'was enough for him that Lenin wanted Russia out of the war, while Allied capitalism continued the conflict',[35] so too was it for many others within the NCF. Indeed, Lenin's attempts to end hostilities with Germany upon taking power naturally appealed to many conscientious objectors, and provoked further interest in his political aims. Ultimately, as Rempel notes, it was possible for many to integrate the Bolshevik revolution, for all its focus on class conflict, into a pre-existing pacificist ideology.[36]

The leadership of the NCF, often referred to interchangeably as the National Committee or National Executive, was well aware of the variety of views prevalent within the Fellowship, particularly after 1917. At the very beginning of its formation it acknowledged 'members have been drawn together from many different bodies', yet confidence remained that 'all have found a common basis in their conviction that participation in war is wrong, and from it has sprung a wonderful sense of comradeship and unity', a unity ensured by the agreement that 'human life is sacred'. This belief was paramount to the principles for which the Fellowship stood, and occupied a prominent place in the movement's statement of faith when it was printed in 1915.[37] Nevertheless, Fenner Brockway hinted at the complications of such an absolute stance, recalling that 'I wouldn't say we had any common philosophy then. We hadn't worked out all the implications of pacifism',[38] while those 'who were opposing the war on socialist grounds, I don't think had thought out our philosophy so far as pacifism was concerned'.[39] A susceptibility to radical ideas as the war dragged on therefore created direct

[34] Ibid., 450.
[35] Rempel, op. cit., p. 356.
[36] Ibid., pp. 341, 355.
[37] TNA, PRO 10/802, The No-Conscription Fellowship Statement of Faith, circa. 1917.
[38] Leeds University Archive [Hereafter LUA], CO/012, Transcript of Oral Interview with Fenner Brockway, c. 1974, p. 5.
[39] Ibid. p. 2.

conflict between the National Executive and local branches. Brockway acknowledged that 'the rank and file was more challenging and aggressive than the leadership. I think if there was conflict it was because they thought the leadership was sometimes compromising'.[40] The National Executive could be defensive of such criticism. One circular from February 1918 noted that many branches 'feel disappointed that Head Office is not doing more than it is'. Their response that in actual fact the branches themselves 'are not in closer touch with our activities' and need 'to do much more public work than they have done hitherto' may have done little to allay any resentment.[41] Kennedy has also noted the incongruity that for a group 'advocating individual liberty of thought and expression, the NCF seemed to be a somewhat autocratic organization' with the National Committee establishing 'tight administrative and financial controls over local branch activities'.[42] However, the semi-illegality that dogged the movement throughout the war often meant that the leadership could appear remote to ordinary members, resulting in Pearce's assessment that it was local branches that served as the key 'centres of […] solidarity'.[43] Such assessments would suggest that an ever growing radicalisation of the movement, in contrast to a comparatively moderate leadership, was in some ways responsible for creating the divisions and discontent that were to become greatly exacerbated as the war progressed. In any case, in assessing the changing dynamics of the conscientious objector movement as the war developed, it is abundantly telling that *Justice*, having originally denounced resistance to conscription as a 'Quaker' attitude, felt obliged to claim by 1918 that 'the religious pacifist finds himself in the same boat with the Socialist

[40] Ibid., p. 24.
[41] Carlisle Archives Centre [Hereafter CAC], DMAR/4/29, Special Propaganda Memorandum, 14 February 1918.
[42] Kennedy, op. cit., p. 63.
[43] Pearce, *Patterns of Dissent*, p. 50.

impossibilist or anarchist, for whom the class war is the beginning and end of political principle'.[44]

The Home Office Scheme

By the close of 1916, government concern about the large numbers of conscientious objectors in prison led to the creation of the Home Office Scheme, a means by which individuals currently in prison had the opportunity to perform work of national importance in camps dotted around the country. That this created tensions within the NCF has been long acknowledged, with many viewing the scheme as a deliberate attempt to split the movement,[45] assisted in no small part by those who acquiesced to the scheme, leaving many 'inclined to think they [the Home Office men] had let us down a bit'.[46] Fenner Brockway admitted that the divisions that arose over the scheme were one of the largest problems the movement faced during the war, especially when the vast majority of the NCF joined it.[47] However, that these divisions became increasingly politicised is an aspect of the movement's history that has been overlooked. From the very beginning, the National Executive identified the scheme as a nascent form of industrial conscription. Such an attitude could not but help bring the movement into closer contact with a labour movement itself struggling to cope with ever burgeoning forms of industrial compulsion.[48] As Brockway recalled, the 'effective way to fight war was to identify ourselves with the working class in the struggle against the grievances which war caused'.[49] An article within *The Tribunal*, the NCF's periodical, argued

[44] 'The Class War and its Implications', *Justice*, 28 March 1918, p. 2.
[45] Boulton, op. cit., p. 187.
[46] IWMSA, Harold Frederick Bing Interview, 1974, (Reel 7/11).
[47] Pearce, *Patterns of Dissent*, p. 48.
[48] The 1915 Munitions of War Act, in outlawing strikes and forbidding workers in key industries to leave their positions without permission, was perceived to be a nascent form of conscription and treated by many workers as a direct threat to their interests. See A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 187-213.
[49] IWMSA, Fenner Brockway Interview, 1974, (Reel 3/4).

that 'Labour should realise that the penalty meted out to us by the Government may only be a foretaste of what Labour may have to bear in the near future' and that nothing would 'be more gladly welcomed by the capitalist class than the conscription of Labour'.[50] The National Executive also argued that 'Military conscription leads inevitably to industrial conscription' before bluntly stating that 'Unless you kill conscription here you will have lost your right to dispose of your labour freely. Militarism is the implacable enemy of Trade Unionism and Labour'.[51] The NCF was so concerned with this measure that their statement of faith was updated in 1917 to oppose both military and industrial forms of conscription, while individuals liable to be subjected to industrial compulsion could be granted membership.[52]

A memo compiled by the National Executive at the beginning of 1917 made it clear that though the movement was hostile to the Home Office Scheme, it 'was felt that, in view of the fact that the Fellowship has always left members free to accept alternative service from the Tribunals or work in the Home Office Camps, it was impossible to make a definite recommendation to members or associates to refuse work under the new scheme'.[53] Furthermore, the National Executive was at pains to make it known that their opposition to the scheme remained in the bounds of legality, even seeking to be useful to the British state at this time of crisis. It was argued 'that we ought not to oppose the State, even in time of war, except in so far as its energies are devoted to carrying on the war, and that we ought even at this time to assist it in those of its activities which are concerned with objects that would be equally important in time of peace'.[54] That the leadership was prepared to co-

[50] British Online Archives [Hereafter BOA] NCF Collection, 'From Inside the Prison Cells', *The Tribunal*, 2 January 1919, p. 3.
[51] BOA, NCF Collection, Appeal to the Public on the Dangers of Continued Conscription, 30 November 1918.
[52] TNA, PRO 10/802, The No-Conscription Fellowship Statement of Faith, c. 1917.
[53] CAC, DMAR/4/16, Memo on Industrial Conscription, c. February 1917.
[54] Ibid.

operate with the government can be seen in the regular meetings that took place between Catherine Marshall, acting secretary for the Fellowship after Brockway's imprisonment in 1916, and General Wyndham Childs, Assistant Adjutant-General to the War Office with responsibility for conscientious objectors. In his memoirs, Childs wrote that during the war 'so bad did the treatment of the Conscientious Objectors become that I formed a liaison with the No-Conscription Fellowship', with Childs 'inclined to think' Marshall trusted him.[55] At one stormy meeting however, Childs informed Marshall that 'the authorities had some incriminating documents in their hands which might prove very dangerous to the N.C.F.', this being 'documentary evidence that there was an organised policy among the men in Home Office Camps to make the scheme a farce, and to cost the country as much as possible by means of systematic slacking'. Marshall, in response, felt it best to not 'leave him in any doubt as to what the Nat. Cte's view was on the point' and was keen to 'to clear the N.C.F. from an imputation it did not deserve'. It did not support any such policy, and believed those who did 'were not members of the N.C.F.'[56] It soon became clear, however, that the policy was led by C.H. Norman, a former member of the National Executive and a Home Office worker at Princetown Camp in Dartmoor, described by Brockway as 'rather more extreme than the rest of us and less pacifist'.[57] That his actions brought dismay to the leadership was clear, with Bertrand Russell stating that 'I think the point of view of Norman and those who try to wreck the scheme by not working is lamentable, very bad for them, and very damaging to the cause of the C.O. generally'.[58] That Norman's actions had political overtones became quickly evident. An internal memorandum on the situation felt that it was 'important to remember,

[55] W. Childs, *Episodes and Reflections: Being Some Records from the Life of Major-General Sir Wyndham Childs* (London, 1930), p. 152.
[56] CAC, DMAR/4/18, Report of Miss Marshall's Interview with General Childs, 26 April 1917.
[57] LUA, CO/012, Fenner Brockway Interview, p. 5.
[58] CAC, DMAR/4/18, Letter to Aylmer Rose from Bertrand Russell, 27 April 1917.

I think, that in the main the N.C.F. consists of young politicians rather than of young religionists, i.e. they have objected to military service on political + moral grounds rather than on religious grounds'. The memorandum found that many of those opposing work in the camps were 'energetic young Trade Unionists and Socialists who had been loud in their advocacy of Trade Union conditions in their several localities', who had also been inspired by 'a few well read syndicalist teachers […] their great inspiration being that since the Government tricked them out of the benefits of the Military Service Act (absolute exemption) they would pay back the government in its own coin'.[59] It was also discovered that the policy was 'advocated partly on the ground that Conscientious Objectors ought to have been given absolute exemption, and partly on the ground of opposition to Capitalism'. Unimpressed, it was commented that though 'most members of the N.-C.F. would be glad to see the Capitalist system swept away, […] opposition to Capitalism is not any part of our basis'. Fellowship members were instructed that those:

> Who believe their action is capable of having any effect, either favourable or adverse, upon the Capitalist system, are forgetting that their work is not intended to bring to profit to any Capitalist, since the State is the employer. Their work, even if it were done with the utmost diligence, would barely repay the State for the expense of maintaining them.[60]

That the policy of slacking may have only been the beginning of ever further radicalism within the camps vexed the National Executive, with warnings sounded that the:

> Policy of attempting to break the scheme from within is analogous to the policy advocated by some Continental Pacifists of going into the Army with a view to undermining discipline. From some

[59] CAC, DMAR/4/18, Memorandum respecting Home Office Camps + General Position of COs, 30 April 1917.
[60] CAC, DMAR/4/19, The N.C.F. and Home Office Camps (Suggested memorandum to Camps and N-C.F. Branches), May 1917.

> points of view there is much to be said about this policy, but the N.-C.F. has been built up on the opposite principle, the principle of testimony by open opposition.[61]

An even earlier report on the Home Office Camps had expressed concern that though the NCF had 'from the first openly proclaimed our opinions' it was feared members of the Fellowship would follow the policy of European counterparts, where 'anti-militarists have […] outwardly submitted to orders while secretly evading the tasks imposed as much as possible and endeavouring to spread their opinion among their fellow soldiers'.[62] From the point of view of Norman however, the policy of slacking was crucial in giving the anti-war movement impetus, as the 'capitalists recognise now that we are a challenge not only to the military machine but to the capitalist order of society'.[63] The accusation from Marshall that 'militant tactics' were being used by the Home Office men was butted away by Norman, who replied that 'I know no principle of the N.C.F. which asserts that one should submit to tyranny'.[64]

To the National Executive, the slacking policy was damaging any legitimacy the Fellowship could count on. It was acknowledged that under 'the influence of persecution, men tend, not unnaturally, to become hostile to their persecutors, but when this happens, they lose the spirit for which we stand, the spirit of human brotherhood'. Nevertheless, members were reminded that 'when we adopt the spirit of the Militarist' in response, 'we are bound to fail, since force is not on our side'.[65] Ultimately, a lack of government sympathy for conscientious objectors 'does not seem to us to justify the adoption of a policy of "reprisals"'. Indeed, those men currently slacking, 'if they wish to be true to the principle of the N.-C.F., ought to state

[61] Ibid.
[62] CAC, DMAR/4/17, The Position in the Home Office Camps, January 1917.
[63] CAC, DMAR/4/18, Letter to Catherine Marshall from C.H. Norman, 29 April 1917.
[64] CAC, DMAR/4/19, Letter to Catherine Marshall from C.H. Norman, 6 May 1917.
[65] CAC, DMAR/4/19, The N.-C.F. and Home Office Camps (Suggested Memorandum to Camps and N-C.F. Branches), May 1917.

their position openly and accept the consequences, which would probably be their return to prison'.[66] Further emphasizing the National Executive's wish to distance the Fellowship from the slacking, it was decided that Marshall would once again approach General Childs to make the opinion of the leadership known, an action 'unanimously endorsed' by the Executive.[67] This incensed the men at Dartmoor. Norman bitterly informed Bertrand Russell that the men in the camps had 'staked their all on an unremitting opposition to the war', yet the National Executive was displaying 'some unstated moral duty to a Government carrying on that war'.[68] The Dartmoor prison branch of the NCF unanimously passed a resolution showing 'their apprehension' in 'the attitude the National Committee has adopted in its communications to the Government regarding the situation in the Home Office Centres and Camps', while their branch secretary A.W. Smith pointedly hoped the National Executive would refrain from 'taking an action which might prejudice the position of such a considerable proportion of the membership of the N.C.F.'[69] Dismayed at the leadership's behaviour, one Home Office Scheme man wrote that 'seeing that the majority of the men have accepted the Scheme, the Committee ought at least to give us fair play. We have enough to put up with without the N.-C.F. turning against us'.[70] Norman himself starkly warned that the current position of the leadership 'cannot be allowed to continue without irreparable injury to the whole movement'.[71]

A truce appeared to be established following a visit from Russell to Dartmoor in May 1917. Though some 'of those present were vehemently with Norman [and] many were critical of

[66] *Ibid*.
[67] CAC, DMAR/4/19, 'The Attacks on H.O. Camp Men', May 1917.
[68] CAC, DMAR/4/19, Letter to Bertrand Russell from C.H. Norman, 3 May 1917.
[69] CAC, DMAR/4/19, Letter to Catherine Marshall from A.W. Smith, 4 May 1917.
[70] CAC, DMAR/4/28, Letter from H. Wood in Princetown Camp, [n.d.].
[71] CAC, DMAR/4/19, Letter to Bertrand Russell from C.H. Norman, 5 May 1917.

the National Committee', it was agreed that the NCF leadership would attempt to campaign for a fairer Home Office Scheme, one 'with real work not under penal conditions', while Dartmoor would pass a resolution condemning the slacking policy.[72] It is clear that the leadership were keen to minimise the disunity the scheme had brought to the Fellowship, with a pamphlet strongly repudiating the idea that 'the men in the Home Office Camps persistently slack and neglect their work'. The resolution agreed with Russell, namely that 'this meeting repudiates the charge that a policy of slacking is, or has been pursued at this Settlement', was given as apparent proof that no such policy had ever existed, despite it having exercised the strained attentions of the National Executive since the beginning of the year.[73]

The Impact of the February Revolution

Amidst such bitterness within the NCF over the Home Office Scheme came international news that overwhelmed the entire anti-war movement in Britain: revolution in Russia. Currently in prison, Harold Bing reflected that 'there was great excitement when the news of the Russian [February] Revolution came through. People thought this would make a great difference to the War. I remember one CO at a Quaker meeting in prison making a reference to it and talking about the star in the east'.[74] Helen Bowen Pease, a member of the Cambridge branch of the NCF, remembered that a meeting held to celebrate the news was 'more like a revivalist meeting […] we were all the same thing: delighted, [it] meant possibly the end of the war'.[75] Such celebrations culminated in the Leeds Convention held in June 1917. That the NCF itself

[72] CAC, DMAR/4/19, Report of Visit of Hon. Bertrand Russell to Princetown, 9 May 1917.
[73] TNA, PRO 10/802, The Home Office Compounds: A Statement as to how Conscientious Objectors are Penalized, c. 1917, p. 12.
[74] IWMSA, Harold Frederick Bing Interview, (Reel 7/11).
[75] IWMSA, Helen Bowen Pease Interview, 1974 (Reel 16/20).

strongly supported the recent developments in Russia is evident. A telegram offering its congratulations was sent to the Russian workers,[76] while the Fellowship's Information Bureau (a weekly newsletter intended to inform members of the movement's activities) published a letter from one imprisoned conscientious objector who believed 'the Revolution will greatly stimulate the movement towards Internationalism'.[77] This buoyant view was echoed within *The Tribunal*. Bertrand Russell compared the Provisional Government's immediate amnesty for political and religious offences in Russia with the NCF's own domestic situation, arguing that until Britain granted a similar amnesty for conscientious objectors, 'every Russian has the right to point the figure of scorn at us for our repressive and reactionary methods!'.[78] Though White has argued that the euphoria that greeted the February Revolution in Britain should be understood through a pacifist lens rather than a celebration of revolutionary means,[79] it is clear *The Tribunal* heartily embraced its revolutionary fervour. To the publication, the concept of revolution, albeit in a peaceful form, could be used as a political tool not only to end conscription, or even the war, but oversee a complete transition of society. In its article commemorating the Leeds Convention, *The Tribunal* believed the 'ideal to be worked for is Revolution' while 'mere opposition to militarism and Imperialism', seemingly the original goals of the NCF upon its formation in 1916, would never be enough. Though quick to distance itself from typical perceptions of revolution, 'of bloodshed, hatred and bitterness', the article adamantly felt there was a necessary 'task of overthrowing tyrannical institutions' with a

[76] BOA, NCF Collection, National Committee Meeting Report, April 1917, p. 2.
[77] BOA, NCF Collection, 'Conscientious Objector Bureau, Report LXX, 4 April 1917, p. 238.
[78] BOA, NCF Collection, Russia Leads the Way, *The Tribunal*, 22 March 1917, p. 2.
[79] S. White, 'Soviets in Britain: The Leeds Convention of 1917, *International Review of Social History*, 19 (1974), p. 166.

complete overhaul of the political status quo: 'much of the machinery of State to which we are accustomed to will have to be done away with'.[80]

Certainly Leeds was perceived as a radical event. As Brockway noted in his memoirs, it represented the height of revolutionary fervour in Britain, with some delegates even calling on 'British workers to follow the Russian example of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat''.[81] It certainly concerned Lloyd George's coalition government, who decided at a War Cabinet meeting two days after Leeds that 'the time had come to undertake an active campaign to counteract the pacifist movement' lamenting that until this point the movement had had 'the field to itself'.[82] In particular, the Government became more proactive in seeking to alter the portrayal of conscientious objectors. The official charged with dealing with conscientious objectors, General Childs, helped play a key role in such aggression, with the renewed offensive following Leeds giving him an opportunity to clamp down on the NCF. Stephen Hobhouse, a fervent but sickly Quaker who had refused military service, suffered greatly in prison following his arrest. His mother, Margaret Hobhouse, subsequently wrote *I Appeal unto Caesar* to publicise his case.[83] This polemic, which implied the vast majority of conscientious objectors were being persecuted for religious beliefs, was heavily promoted and circulated by the NCF. This enraged the government, and at one meeting with the NCF Childs argued that:

[80] BOA, NCF Collection, 'Leeds and Revolution', *The Tribunal*, 7 June 1917, p. 1.
[81] ChAC, FEBR/195, *The Opposition to the War*, p. 12.
[82] TNA, CAB 23/3, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 5 June 1917, p. 6.
[83] Hobhouse, op. cit.

> Too much stress had been laid upon the religious character of these men and that it might be necessary for him to issue a counterblast in which he would point out that only 40% of the men in prison were religious and that the majority of the balance were enemies of society.[84]

Such vehement language highlights the change in official government attitudes accorded to the conscientious objector movement following the Leeds Convention.

Fears of increased radicalism within the conscientious objector movement were to an extent justified. The most controversial aspect of the Leeds Convention, the establishment of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, seemed to be wholeheartedly embraced within the pages of *The Tribunal*, which remained confident about their potential. These councils were formed as a deliberate copy of the worker councils that had helped topple the Tsar in Russia, and aimed to 'band together lovers of freedom, so as to prevent the further loss of liberty, to recover the ground already lost, to attack Governmental and all other forms of tyranny, and to quicken the responsibility and power of democracy'. Its wish to be 'at one with Russia in striving for a people's peace' were matched by a desire to reinstall civil liberties that had been chipped away since the beginning of the war. In particular, its demand for a general amnesty for 'political and religious prisoners' would certainly appeal to many NCF members.[85] *The Tribunal* expressed its confidence that everyone 'will realise the significance of the setting up in this country of a Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates' insofar it could help deliver 'a People's Peace'.[86]

Despite such bullishness, itself an indication of the encroaching sense of radicalism seeping into the movement, it appears the NCF leadership showed unease at the prospect of any ties

[84] CAC, DMAR/4/24, Notes on Meeting with General Childs, 11 September 1917.
[85] CAC, DMAR/4/21, Workers' and Soldiers' Council: Manifesto to District Conferences, c. 1917.
[86] BOA NCF Collection, 'Leeds and Revolution', *The Tribunal*, 7 June 1917, p. 1.

with the Councils, expressing the view that the Fellowship had 'a particular function in opposing the establishment of conscription in this country and the preservation of the right of conscience in relation to Military Service'. To identify itself 'with the establishment of a Worker's & Soldier's Council, the programme of which must involve proposals of an economic, political and social character' would be detrimental to the movement, obliging the Fellowship to adopt policies the 'organisation as such does not necessarily subscribe [to]'.[87] A proposed resolution to steer clear of the Councils was defeated by 6-5; a close margin that ensured the National Committee would be expected to duly recommended branch attendance at these Council meetings. However, it appeared that the leadership did nothing to help propel the movement. Despite its formation in June, the National Executive had not even informed local branches of the resolution advocating NCF membership. It was only pointed out in late August by James Crawshaw 'that the actual text of the resolution and amendments voted on by the National Committee on this subject had not been sent to members of Committees and Branches'.[88] A letter to Catherine Marshall from Ernest Hunter in response to this issue found him asking 'is not this [the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils] rather dead now', questioning whether they could 'risk Crawshaw raising it' as it 'would serve no earthly purpose to send out the resolution and amendment at this late stage'.[89] Local branches were however laconically informed in October that the amendment advocating participation had been 'inadvertently omitted',[90] an action which clearly infuriated members, with a letter from the Leeds branch strongly 'protesting against the delay'.[91]

[87] BOA, NCF Collection, Letter to Branch Secretaries, 19 October 1917.
[88] CAC, DMAR/4/25, Minutes of the National Committee of the NCF, 31 August – 1 September 1917.
[89] CAC, DMAR/4/24, Letter from Ernest Hunter to Catherine Marshall, 26 September 1917.
[90] BOA, NCF Collection, Letter to Branch Secretaries 'Re. Workers and Soldier's Councils', 19 October 1917.
[91] CAC, DMAR/4/27, Minutes of the National Committee of the NCF, 11 November 1917.

Ultimately, these Soviet-style Councils achieved very little. Bush has noted that the hostility the Independent Labour Party showed towards the councils stemmed from their threat to the hegemony of the Labour Party,[92] while White has pointed out that the key standout objective of the Councils, to establish a 'People's Peace', became diffused when the Labour Party also began to campaign for a negotiated peace, and effectively ensured the Councils 'lost their raison d'étre'.[93] It seemed the Councils had all but collapsed by the end of 1917. A police raid conducted on the NCF headquarters that November found a letter written by Albert Inkpin, leader of the British Socialist Party, lamenting to the NCF that the work required by the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils was interfering with his other duties. Furthermore, he added with not a hint of exasperation, that the repeated lack of interest from other council members, stalwarts of the labour movement such as George Lansbury and Phillip Snowden, was preventing any tangible success in its aims, and the BSP had instructed Inkpin to cease any further activity with the body, effectively leading to its collapse.[94] Despite such setbacks, yet more events were to come that ensured Britain's 'ruling classes were […] frightened', as Helen Pease, an NCF sympathiser noted, 'which rather pleased us'.[95]

The Impact of the Bolshevik Revolution

The actions of the Bolsheviks in Russia upon seizing power in November 1917 seemingly found favour within the NCF, due to their attempts to seek immediate peace with Germany. Bertrand Russell was effusive in his praise and invited comparisons between the Russian revolutionaries and British pacifists, noting that Lenin 'has suffered many years of persecution

[92] J. Bush, *Behind the Lines: East London Labour, 1914-1919* (London, 1984), p. 77.
[93] White, op. cit., p. 166.
[94] TNA, CAB 24/35, Pacifism: Report by Basil Thomson, 13 December 1917, p. 5.
[95] IWMSA, Helen Bowen Pease Interview, 1974 (Reel 16/20).

for his opinions'.[96] His enthusiasm notwithstanding, he could perceive a growing radicalism within the pacifist and labour movement he himself did not agree with. Echoing Lenin's view of Revolutionary Defeatism, Russell was aware that some 'democrats and Socialists [in Britain] are not unwilling that the war should continue, since it is clear that if it does it must lead to universal revolution', an outcome he believed would result only in ruin.[97] There appeared to be elements within the NCF that wholeheartedly embraced such a revolutionary outlook. The day after the Bolsheviks seized power an article in *The Tribunal* stated 'there is no way out but this – the destruction of State sovereignty and the overthrow of capitalism'.[98]

Linkages had already been inadvertently made between the NCF and key Bolsheviks then living in Britain. Brockway recalled that under the 1917 Anglo-Russian Military Convention, Russians living in Britain, many of whom were political exiles, were obliged to be conscripted in Britain or face deportation back to Russia to be forcibly enlisted there. In response, a Russian Anti-Conscription League was created and included 'Maisky, subsequently Soviet Ambassador in Britain and Chicherine [*sic*], afterwards Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs'.[99] Though this movement was undeniably radical, arguing that the 'struggle against Militarism and Imperialism is, therefore, a struggle against Capitalism',[100] this body nevertheless developed key links with the NCF,[101] which placed 'at their disposal its political and organisational resources'.[102] A letter to branch secretaries confirmed that such emigres could join the NCF 'provided they accept the Statement of Faith' while local branches were asked

[96] BOA NCF Collection, 'The German Peace Offer', *The Tribunal*, 3 January 1918, p. 1.
[97] Ibid.
[98] BOA NCF Collection, 'War or Revolution', *The Tribunal*, 8 November 1917, p. 1.
[99] ChAC, FEBR/195, *The Opposition to the War*, p. 22.
[100] CAC, DMAR/4/22, 'Russian Anti-Conscription League Pamphlet', c. 1917.
[101] R. Grant, 'G.V. Chicherin and the Russian Revolutionary Cause in Great Britain', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 2 (1983), p. 122.
[102] ChAC, FEBR/195, op. cit., p. 22.

to ‘give all the assistance in their power to other organisations whose members resist Conscription’.[103] Further correspondence confirmed that a majority of branches were in favour of co-operation with the Anti-Conscription League.[104]

In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, *The Tribunal* became, as one contributor delicately put it, ‘a forum in which we may air our various points of view’ and acted as the key debating ground in establishing the Fellowship’s attitude towards Bolshevism.[105] Vigorous debate emerged over the fundamental beliefs that had seemingly helped cement the NCF together from the very beginning. Though radical views had materialised ever since the February Revolution in Russia, it seems the advent of the Bolshevik regime created a major turning point in the mind-set of many NCF members. While the sanctity of human life had always been taken as given, and was for many fundamental to their conscientious objection, some members now considered that violence could be justified in some respects, in particular against perceived state oppression. Some contributors to *The Tribunal* suggested that this was a direct result of the imprisonment many had experienced since 1916. In May 1919, one writer, who himself professed to abhor Bolsheviks ‘and all others engaged in driving out the old devils of militarism and capitalism by the strangely similar new devils of civil war’, pondered that ‘the stress of the last years has caused something to snap [...] owing to our most painful and narrowing experiences in prison’.[106] Two weeks later, another correspondent agreed there was a ‘dangerous spirit’ within the pacifist movement as a result of ‘men who have just completed two years imprisonment as anti-militarists’ starting to talk ‘about the “dictatorship of the armed proletariat”’. He also noted in some NCF branches a

[103] BOA, NCF Collection, Letter to Branch Secretaries, 12 September 1917.
[104] BOA, NCF Collection, Letter to Branch Secretaries, 19 October 1917.
[105] BOA, NCF Collection, ‘What is Anti-Militarism’, *The Tribunal*, 22 May 1919, p. 1.
[106] BOA, NCF Collection, ‘The Future of the NCF’, *The Tribunal*, 8 May 1919, p. 4.

resolution had emerged attempting to remove from the movement's constitution a belief in the sanctity of human life, thus allowing membership to those who felt 'it is not wrong to kill their fellows in a war waged by workers against their oppressors', alongside those who felt war was abhorrent in any form. Though this writer disagreed that violence could ever be justified, it is interesting to note that he believed in 'the enormous amount of real good there is in Bolshevism' and strongly disagreed with those in the NCF who felt a need to begin to engage in anti-Bolshevik propaganda.[107] Others however, lamented the ongoing debates, with one member arguing that 'I have been staggered at the number of discharged prisoners who have told me they are prepared to take up arms on behalf of the social revolution' before dejectedly stating 'I doubt if one-third of our people are pacifist'. Indeed, the end of the war now saw the pacifist movement 'in a far more painful position than we occupied during the European war'. Class war militants would begin to see absolute pacifists as 'enemies to the Cause' who would 'feel towards us exactly as the patriots did towards the pacifists during the war'. Perhaps most galling of all 'will be the commendations of the capitalist press, in which we shall be eulogised as wise and moderate men'. Ultimately, this contributor concluded, he did not think the NCF 'can hold together in view of the fundamental divergence of opinion' nor did he think it 'desirable that we should attempt to hold together'.[108] Certainly, there appeared a bleak mood amongst those on the left who had not fallen for the allure of Bolshevism. J. Bruce Glasier, a prominent ILP member, lamented to Brockway that 'there still exists so much misunderstanding, so much old world fear and hatred, of those who refuse to bow to the fetishism of the sword not only alas among the people generally, but even among our own brethren in the Socialist movement'.[109] With the Armistice in November 1918 came

[107] BOA NCF Collection, 'What is Anti-Militarism', *The Tribunal*, 22 May 1919, p. 1-4.
[108] BOA NCF Collection, 'Where is the NCF?', *The Tribunal*, 24 July 1919, p. 1.
[109] ChAC, FEBR/112, Letter to Brockway from J. Bruce Glasier, 7 February 1919.

a major impediment to the unity of the movement. In the words of one conscientious objector, the NCF 'were bound together by one thing, and that was the question of war. At first, it was a direct question of opposing a war, but afterwards so many discussions arose and the subject began to […] be broken into all kinds of aspects until some of the societies […] almost ceased to exist, because there were so many points of view'.[110]

Government Concerns

A Cabinet report on extremist movements within Britain written just a week before the Armistice noted that since the previous summer the press had started to use the term ''Bolshevik' as synonymous with advanced revolutionaries and pacifists'.[111] Such labelling, in the opinion of the report, was clearly apt. The same individuals forming committees with a pro-Russian stance were also supporters of 'pacifist and revolutionary organisations', while clear links between the NCF and Bolshevik supporting groups such as the British Socialist Party could be established as one would 'find the same names' in all the subscription lists. The government was also warned that as 'soon as the pressure of war is removed […] the impulse towards a revolutionary change in our Social System will become more menacing than ever'.[112] When it came to the treatment of imprisoned conscientious objectors at the war's end many officials advocated caution. A Ministry of Labour report on the situation 'of what are termed, by the Labour press, "political prisoners"' advocated a gentle approach. In normal times, any clamouring for the release of a small minority could be safely ignored, but with 'the bacillus of Bolshevism' present in Europe, extremists would desire nothing more than 'any restriction of liberty which would be likely to create an atmosphere favourable' to its

[110] IWMSA, Mark Henry Chambers Hayler Interview, 1974, (Reel 24/28).
[111] TNA, CAB 24/69, Fortnightly Report on Pacifism and Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, and Morale in France and Italy, 4 November 1918, p. 9.
[112] Ibid., p. 12.

spread to British shores.[113] General Childs, described as a 'hard-liner' in his attitudes towards the conscientious objectors,[114] had nonetheless stated that his policy 'would be to discharge all these persons from His Majesty's Service as worthless and incorrigible as soon as demobilization commences'.[115] This was not to be however, with imprisoned conscientious objectors kept in prison for months after the cessation of hostilities. That this hit hard was evident. Many absolutists 'who'd built on the fact that they'd be home for Christmas did lose morale, quite a bit. I think one can understand it, because they felt the circumstances which had started the war had now ceased'.[116] Imprisoned conscientious objectors at Wandsworth Prison responded to their continued detention by proclaiming a work strike in early 1919. These strikers were heard to proclaim that the 'Russian working-class were the people responsible for the war's stoppage', a statement which provoked successive cheers for Bolshevism.[117] One participant, later writing to the Bolshevik-sympathising *Workers' Dreadnought*, described how many had 'proclaimed boldly from prison windows our Bolshevik principles and our allegiance to the Red flag'. In a telling indictment of the state of affairs existent within the NCF at this point, he also bitterly recounted that soon enough 'stupid resolutions were passed by N.C.F. leaders against striking'.[118]

Cabinet debate on the fate of those in prison did not take place until February 1919, but was clearly influenced by events at Wandsworth. Secretary of State for War Winston Churchill described the situation to the cabinet as 'invidious', with it looking 'almost as if we were resorting to persecution'. The Home Secretary Edward Shortt retorted that conscientious

[113] TNA, CAB 24/70, The Labour Situation: Report from the Ministry of Labour for the week ending 13 November 1918, p. 2.
[114] Kennedy, op. cit., p. 156.
[115] LUA, PRO (6), Letter from Sir Wyndham Childs, June 1917.
[116] IWMSA, Wilfred Ernest Littleboy, 1974, (Reel 4/6).
[117] BOA, NCF Collection, Thomas Ellison Scrapbook, 'Wandsworth Prison Revolt', January 1919.
[118] 'A Call for Absolutism', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 25 January 1919, p. 1.

objectors were 'most difficult to deal with, and a great many of them were blackguards. Force had generally to be used in order to get them to do anything'. Any advocacy for immediate release provoked hostility, with Lord Curzon arguing that this should at the very least come with employment restrictions. The opinion of General Childs that in any case 'they would find it very difficult to obtain employment' was seemingly not enough. To the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, the cabinet should be less concerned for the fate of the conscientious objectors than for the fate of the country once these pacifists were released. Echoing the fears of the moderates in *The Tribunal* he questioned as to whether 'the majority of those men would not be only too ready to shed the blood of their fellow-countrymen'. Put bluntly, these individuals were 'not of the Quaker class [...] but were revolutionaries'.[119]

In the face of cabinet hostility, Churchill took up the gauntlet again some three weeks later. He 'wished vigorously' to protest 'against the continued stringent treatment of these imprisoned conscientious objectors' and even highlighted that his military advisors now felt there were no grounds to prevent their release. To Churchill, 'too much importance' had been placed on an issue that could be immediately rectified. His arguments continued to be refuted however. It was thought that any release would create an acute labour situation, denying employment to soldiers awaiting demobilisation. Such assertions not only ignored General Child's previous comments that any chance of employment for these pacifists was very poor indeed, but appear farcical when it was ascertained that there were only some seven hundred left in prison at that point in time.[120] Two weeks later, after summing up the arguments against release, that many conscientious objectors were 'thoroughly bad characters' along with the retained belief that 'they would prejudice the chances of employment of men who

[119] TNA, CAB 23/9, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 26 February 1919, pp. 5-6.
[120] TNA, CAB 23/9, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 17 March 1919, pp. 1-2.

were gradually being demobilised' the Home Secretary candidly acknowledged that neither argument was strong enough to warrant continued imprisonment. Resigned to the notion that those who were 'blackguards would remain so whether they were detained or not' the Home Secretary allowed these men their freedom.[121] General Child's recollection, that 'Absolutists were discharged "on demobilisation". None of them received any bounty on discharge, and that was about the only difference we made between the fighting man and the "conchy"' was disingenuous to say the least.[122]

The Disbandment of the NCF

With the last of the imprisoned conscientious objectors released by the end of April 1919, attention started to be drawn to the future of the NCF. That same month, Fenner Brockway, himself only recently released from prison, argued in *The Tribunal* that the movement should limit its public activity only to 'Anti-militarism and Internationalism', a clear step down from the fervour seen at the time of the Leeds Convention nearly two years before. He felt it necessary to prevent the NCF from overshadowing socialist parties, and was content to leave 'public propaganda on social reconstruction to the I.L.P. and similar organisations', perhaps a nod to the heated discourse engulfing the NCF at this point. Brockway also suggested a new "League of Internationalists" be created, to supersede the NCF and establish relations with pacifists and anti-militarists in other countries.[123] Such a viewpoint suggested he could not see the movement continuing in its current form, a concept that others agreed with, citing the radicalisation of its members. His ideas were treated with suspicion from some quarters. One NCF member, a H.A.J. Martin, wrote that though such a league would be one he would

[121] TNA, CAB 23/10, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 3 April 1919, pp. 1-2.
[122] Childs, op. cit., p. 154.
[123] BOA NCF Collection, 'What of the Future', *The Tribunal*, 24 April 1919, p. 1.

'certainly wish to join', he assumed that this movement would abhor physical force, even if it was 'in defence of self or others or, as a last resource, against unjust oppression'. He expressed concern that this future movement may therefore 'exclude many who, like myself, would be prepared to have recourse to physical force' in such circumstances.[124] It is clear to see that the leadership was struggling to unify the differing strands within the NCF.

Later that year in November, a National Convention was established in order to oversee the No-Conscription Fellowship's disbandment. Meeting as it did just two weeks after an article in *The Tribunal* had despaired that the movement would soon be 'catholic enough to admit the militarist Sinn Féiner, the physical force Anarchist, [the] revolutionary Socialist',[125] it was likely tensions would come to the fore. Over the course of two days, the National Committee decided the NCF would henceforth disperse into three separate committees. The Anti-Conscription Committee would take 'the necessary steps to get into touch with the anti-militarists of other countries'; the Pacifist Committee would convene a conference of all like-minded organisations with the aim to establish a unified pacifist campaign, while a Military Training Committee would seek to monitor and prevent the teaching of militarism within British society, most notably in schools, as typified by Officer Training Corps organised in most public schools at that time.[126]

Following the proposal of these committees, numerous resolutions and amendments were suggested by various branches. Most striking was that several branches sought to prevent the winding up of the NCF. The Long Eaton, Streatham, Kentish Town, Kennington, Woolwich and

[124] BOA NCF Collection, 'Physical Force', *The Tribunal*, 5 June 1919, p. 3.
[125] BOA NCF Collection, 'The Future of the NCF: One Organisation or Two?', *The Tribunal*, 13 November 1919, p. 1.
[126] BOA, NCF Collection, 'Final Agenda for the National Convention of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 29 – 30 November 1919, p. 20.

Dundee branches all clamoured for the continuation of the NCF. The Kennington branch in particular felt the 'danger of the continuation of some form of Conscription is so great as to make it necessary that the N.C.F. shall continue as a permanent organisation'. Indeed, it was felt the decision to establish the three separate committees would merely lead to 'confusion, loss of time and weakening'.[127] The radicalism heavily discussed within *The Tribunal* all year also made itself clear. The Glasgow branch agreed that militarism within Britain needed to be stamped out, but for good measure also argued members should 'work for the overthrow of capitalism'.[128] Dulwich branch moved that 'the 'sacredness of human life' clause be deleted from the basis of the N.C.F.' a sentiment Kennington branch agreed with, whilst Kentish Town branch sought a compromise insofar those 'unable to accept the present basis of faith of the Fellowship may join as associates'.[129] Woolwich branch also agreed associate membership should be established for those opposed to conscription, if not opposed to violence in all forms, alongside a continuation of the NCF.[130] Oldham branch, perhaps realising disbandment would indeed take place, nonetheless proposed the movement's successor should allow membership for those opposed to conscription, 'irrespective of their attitude to pacifism'.[131] That these attempts to influence the National Executive came to naught is perhaps reflected in the attempted amendment of the Highbury branch, which pointedly proposed that 'all decisions arrived at by the Convention should be ratified by a referendum of the Fellowship', a resolution that, like all the others, failed to be adopted.[132] The last issue of *The Tribunal* proudly recalled the movement's history in great detail. When it came to the reasons for the

[127] Ibid., 21-22.
[128] Ibid., 20.
[129] Ibid., 20-22.
[130] Ibid., 22.
[131] Ibid., 24.
[132] Ibid.

NCF's disbandment, no mention was made whatsoever of the differences of opinion abundant within the movement. The publication merely stated that the three committees established to oversee future work 'cannot effectively be made through one organisation'. *The Tribunal* admitted that several branches had 'showed much divergence of opinion' during the two-day Convention in November, but happily noted the proposals of the National Committee were accepted.[133]

Nevertheless, events in Russia yet again intervened to overcome the decidedly neat end set out for the NCF. Allied intervention in the country, having begun just months after the Bolshevik Revolution ostensibly to prevent supplies being captured from German forces, had, after the armistice, become a clear-cut attempt to strangle the Bolshevik regime. This in turn led to a determined attempt by the British labour movement to prevent their government's interference in Russian affairs, with the establishment of the Hands off Russia Campaign in 1919, which proved to be the genesis of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).[134] The NCF played a major role, with the Southend, Forest Gate, Tottenham, Walthamstow and Leyton branches attending the first Hands off Russia conference in January 1919.[135] Tensions over British intervention reached their height with the onset of the Polish-Soviet war in the summer of 1920. The NCF executive took steps to inform Fellowship members that the 'position with regard to this country and Russia is becoming increasingly serious and at any moment we may be faced with a declaration of war on the part of Great Britain against Soviet Russia'. It was felt necessary 'for the Anti-Conscription Committee, appointed by the National Convention, to get ready for emergencies'. A memorandum was drafted asking that the

[133] BOA NCF Collection, 'The Concluding Convention of the N.C.F', *The Tribunal*, 8 January 1920, p. 2.
[134] J. Callaghan, 'The Communists and the Colonies: Anti-Imperialism between the Wars' in G. Andrews, N. Fishman and K. Morgan, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London, 1993), p. 5.
[135] BOA, CP/IND/POLL/1/6, Hands off Russia Conference Report, 18 January 1919.

'people of this country must at once make it clear that they will not support the Government in this criminal policy, and must prepare to resist' any and all measures including 'military preparations or the imposition of conscription for the purpose of war against Russia'.[136] The Anti-conscription and Pacifist committees in turn created a new Resist the War committee specifically dedicated to protecting the Bolshevik regime.[137] A letter was sent to all former NCF branch secretaries asking that:

> In every locality steps should at once be taken to call into existence the old N.C.F. machinery, and to organise into local groups on the widest possible basis all those who will unite in resisting the threatened war. The situation may develop seriously at any moment and no time should be lost in immediately mobilising our forces.[138]

That this committee was strongly supportive of the Bolshevik regime is evident. Brockway boasted in a letter to Morgan Phillips Price, a journalist sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, that the 'basis of the committee was sufficiently wide to include those who were prepared to fight in, say, a Red Army as well as pacifists'.[139]

Though the threat of war soon dissipated, the impact of Bolshevism appeared to have irretrievably altered the face of the anti-war movement. In a report on its activities for the year 1920, the Pacifist Committee acknowledged the schism Bolshevism had created within the international anti-war movement. There were now two main blocs 'forming on the Continent (1) Anti-Capitalist and Anti-Militarist, and (2) Absolute Pacifist'. It also appeared to have divided the British movement in a similar way. Previous hopes to create a whole new movement deriving 'from a federation of existing pacifist bodies' were smashed when it

[136] CAC, DMAR/4/32, Letter to members of Anti-Conscription Committee on Russian Crisis, 19 July 1920.
[137] CAC, DMAR/4/32, N.C.F. Trustees Annual Report: January to December 1920, p. 3.
[138] BOA NCF Collection, Letter to Branch Secretaries on Resist the War Committee, 11 August 1920.
[139] TNA, KV 2/567, Letter to Morgan Phillips Price from Fenner Brockway, 4 March 1921.

became apparent 'there is no distinctive work of a pacifist character to justify the formation of an entirely new body'. Members of the Fellowship 'who desire to be associated with fellow pacifists in an organised capacity' were instead advised to co-operate with pre-existing bodies, including Quaker organisations such as the Friendship of Reconciliation, socialist movements such as the Women's Peace Crusades and 'any Pacifist Communist Group that may be formed'.[140] Such an inclusion proved once and for all that communism had finally cemented itself into the British anti-war movement.

Conclusion

In analysing the No-Conscription Fellowship, it is clear the movement had strong socialist roots from the very beginning. A hostility towards all forms of compulsion, combined with a politically active membership, meant the organisation established key links with the wider labour movement during the First World War. As such, events in Russia impacted the NCF in much the same way as it did for the British political left more generally, with both the February and Bolshevik revolutions considered to be part of an international revolt against militarism. However, this created tensions between an NCF membership enthused with the possibilities Russia offered, and a cautious leadership keen to emphasise its moderation. While historians of the Fellowship have commented on the divisions within the movement, epitomised by the Home Office Scheme, this has mostly been perceived as a divide between members prepared to take part in alternative service and those refusing to undertake any activity for the British state. In actual fact, an intense politicisation occurred within the camps, with many using their position to attack a war-mongering government, to the dismay of a National Executive keen to minimise any antagonistic behaviour. Concrete attempts to follow

[140] CAC, DMAR/4/32, N.C.F. Trustees Annual Report January to December 1920, p. 2.

the Russian model in the form of the Workers' and Soldier's Councils were reined in by a hostile leadership. Lenin's accomplishments later that year caused a tidal wave of debate within the movement, and saw many advocating the use of physical force, in direct contradiction of the movement's statement of faith. These divergences seemingly caused an irreconcilable split within the NCF, and helped to hasten the end of the movement once the war was over. However, the lure of Bolshevism remained strong, with even the National Executive taking concrete steps to prevent British interference in Soviet affairs. Such actions may have highlighted the growing strength and influence Bolshevism had garnered within the British anti-war movement. Jones' statement that the Soviet regime marked for British labour the 'beleaguered spirit of socialism in Europe' also rang true in much the same way for the No-Conscription Fellowship.[141]

[141] B. Jones, *The Russia Complex: The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 1977), p. 5.

Chapter Three: Conscientious Objectors and the ILP, 1919-21

In April 1919, Phillip Snowden, Chairman of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), approached the podium in Huddersfield's Town Hall to open the Party's first official gathering since the Armistice's declaration the previous autumn.[1] The past few months had been bruising. Having deplored Britain's involvement in the First World War, the ILP was seemingly demolished as a political force in the recent 'khaki' general election called by Prime Minister David Lloyd George to take advantage of the hubristic elation that greeted the War's end. In Huddersfield, Snowden quickly addressed the infamous comments made during this election campaign, which denounced 'even the most tame of Labour candidates as Bolshevists, and even the whole of the Labour Party as a Bolshevist Party'.[2] The ILP, Snowden railed, 'are no partisans of violence. We opposed the war because of its inhumanity, its cruelty, and its bloodshed'. Indeed, any 'intelligent and self-conscious democracy need not, in a country like our own, resort to methods of violence to attain its aims'. However, Snowden could not help but warn his audience that Britain was 'still under the tyranny of the old order', and as such, if 'the revolution has to be achieved in Great Britain by violence it will come in that way because of the resistance of the Old Order to the New Birth'.[3]

Such language, though widely praised inside the conference hall itself, seemingly confirmed establishment fears that since the War's end, 'the pacifists have been busy tearing off their disguise, and re-appearing in their proper garb as revolutionaries'.[4] As the largest outright

[1] Huddersfield, it should be emphasised, was 'a hotbed of pacifism' during the First World War. See Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience.*

[2] BOA, ILP Huddersfield Conference Report, April 1919, p. 77.

[3] Ibid., 41-2. The heavy impact of these words can be seen in the fact that future CPGB General Secretary Harry Pollitt kept Snowden's quote in his notebook, no doubt to embarrass the future Chancellor of Exchequer for his former militancy in a chaotic post-war period. See BOA, CP/IND/POLL/1/3, Harry Pollitt Notebook Quotations, c. 1928.

[4] TNA, CAB 24/70, Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom and Morale in Foreign Countries, 18 November 1918, p. 1.

socialist party, with some 35,000 members in the immediate post-war period,[5] fears were expressed that the ILP might succumb to Bolshevik ideals, and help create a strong communist party 'able to speak in native accents and to appeal to native traditions'.[6] In 1919-21, the ILP, disillusioned by the failure of the Second International to prevent the descent into war in 1914, considered affiliation to the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern), created by Lenin in 1919 to spread worldwide revolution. Though finally rejecting any association with this body at its party conference in 1921, a vocal minority within the ILP, organising themselves into the Left Wing Group, remained determined to follow the directives of Moscow, viewing it as 'an experiment that had been tried and had succeeded',[7] and, in failing to sway the ILP, left en masse to join the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Though scholars have explored this brief period of seeming radicalisation within the ILP ranks, little attention has been paid to the fact that many of the most diehard supporters of the Moscow line were, in fact, former conscientious objectors. Indeed, much as the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) descended into acrimonious debate over the use of physical force to achieve concrete socialist goals, the very same arguments, at the very same time, raged also within the ILP. Throughout this period, pronounced levels of shock and horror from the majority of the ILP greeted the fact that so many former conscientious objectors could, in all honesty, advocate taking up arms to wage violent revolution in Britain. It is similarly notable that as the Left Wing Group joined the CPGB in early 1921, the nascent communist movement was now faced with an influx of former conscientious objectors, despite pacifism being anathema to the Party's ideology. British communists would, however, broadly accept this

[5] W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (London, 1969), p. 269.
[6] D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), p. 256.
[7] BOA, ILP Glasgow Conference Report, April 1920, pp. 67-8.

development, ensuring that from the very beginning of the CPGB's history, direct linkages were established between the anti-war movement and British Communism.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the ILP attitudes to the Bolsheviks and the Third International between 1918 and 1921. It argues that there was natural willingness to explore potential affiliation to the Comintern, driven in large part by dissatisfaction with the Second International, and through perceptions that the Bolsheviks were a successful, albeit extreme, anti-war movement. The second part focuses on the attempts of the Left Wing Group to persuade the wider Party to accept Comintern affiliation. Though emphasis was placed on their conscientious objector past to justify their sincerity, Comintern intransigence to fundamental ILP attitudes would ultimately make the Group's effort a lost cause. Finally, attention will be paid to the conscientious objectors who joined the CPGB in 1920-1, with a particular focus on the Caerphilly by-election in 1921, an event not only remarkable in being the first election contested by the CPGB, and, indeed, the first to see a former conscientious objector elected, but one dominated by attempts made to fuse pacifist pasts with communist mind-sets. Ultimately then, former conscientious objectors not only played a key role in shaping ILP attitudes towards the Comintern, but in embarking to join the CPGB after 1921, helped to shape the CPGB's own perceptions of anti-militarism.

The ILP and the First World War

The outbreak of the First World War shattered any preconceptions the ILP had with regards to its belief in international solidarity. Prior to 1914, as Dowse notes, the ILP had had little consistency in its approach to foreign affairs beyond a determined conviction that universal working class strike action, instigated by the Second International, would pay heed to the

possibility of war breaking out across Europe.[8] Though such lofty ideas were soon abandoned in the summer of 1914 by most socialist parties, who subsequently supported their respective country's war efforts, the ILP remained one of the most significant anti-war political parties in Britain.[9] While dismayed by the impotence of the Second International, the ILP would retain its almost utopian beliefs in the benefits of universal strike action in response to war even as the conflict ground on. In 1917, a clear majority of the Party supported a resolution proposing a refusal to support any future war entered into by Britain 'whatever the ostensible object of the war, and even if such a war is represented by any Government to be of a defensive character'.[10]

Such idealistic notions did not, as yet, translate into support for revolutionary aims. The outbreak of the 1917 February Revolution in Russia had been warmly greeted by the ILP, though unease was expressed at the 'surprising manifestation of revolutionary fervour' present at the Leeds Convention.[11] Similarly, the Russian-style Workers' and Soldiers' Councils unveiled at the Convention were, as Bush notes, immediately deemed a threat, with the ILP perceiving it as an attempt to undermine and supplant the Labour Party as a whole.[12] Such loyalty to its parent body was not, however, reciprocated. Though the ILP had been the intellectual powerhouse within the Labour Party prior to 1914, providing it with leadership and much of its activist base, its opposition to the war would increasingly see Labour turn

[8] R. Dowse, 'The Independent Labour Party and Foreign Politics, 1918-1923', *International Review of Social History*, 7 (1962), p. 33.
[9] The Socialist Labour Party similarly opposed the war, as did a majority of the British Socialist Party, which in 1916 succeeded in driving out the pro-war minority led by Henry Hyndman. Both these parties were instrumental in forming the CPGB after 1920. See R. Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London, 1977).
[10] The motion was passed by 226-56. See BOA, ILP Leeds Conference Report, April 1917, pp. 52-63.
[11] BOA, ILP Leicester Conference Report, April 1918, p. 31.
[12] Bush, op. cit., p. 77.

instead to the patriotic trade unions for organisational and political support.[13] Indeed, a clear sense of the mistrust exhibited towards the ILP as the war progressed is shown in the actions of Labour Party leader Arthur Henderson, who would also serve in Lloyd George's War Cabinet in 1916-17. Upon reading an article describing the chaos the February Revolution had brought to the Russian army, Henderson could only contemptuously scrawl that it was 'this kind of thing that most of the old I.L.P. want to produce on the Western Front'.[14]

As such, though the ILP 'emerged from the war in a weak position', this derived as much from an altered relationship with the Labour Party than public antipathy to their anti-war stance. Indeed, as Laybourn notes, it was less 'its official opposition to the First World War', than 'the emergence of a Labour Party committed, albeit loosely, to socialism in 1918' that fundamentally changed the dynamic in the ILP's relationship with the wider Labour Party apparatus.[15] Having changed its constitution in 1918, calling for the common ownership of industry, this embrace of socialist ideas within the Labour Party now left the ILP, previously the main 'source of policy, ideas and leadership' seemingly redundant as a political force.[16] Furthermore, Labour also intended to 'build a nation-wide network of constituency parties recruiting individual members directly to the Party',[17] again limiting the impact of the ILP which had previously been the 'most important individuals member's section'.[18] Bullock has more recently questioned such a sweeping assessment of the ILP's downgrading, highlighting that these new local constituency organisations only slowly developed in their infancy and

[13] R. Dowse, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (London, 1966), p. 30.
[14] Manchester Labour History and Archive Study Centre [Hereafter MLHASC], LP/HEN/14/2, Newspaper Cutting, c. August 1917.
[15] K. Laybourn, 'Recent Writings on the History of the ILP, 1893-1932', in D. James, T. Jowitt, and K. Laybourn, eds., *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax, 1992), p. 319.
[16] Dowse, *Left in the Centre*, p. 33.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 32.

that the ILP still remained the main means by which socialists participated within the Labour Party as a whole in the immediate post-war period.[19] Moreover, the ILP, in contrast to its views on foreign policy prior to 1914, now enjoyed a certain level of dynamism in its response to foreign affairs. Many prominent pacifists, liberal in ideology, had become disillusioned by the ruling Liberal Party's response to the war, particularly over the implementation of conscription in 1916. Drawn towards the ILP because of its unceasing hostility to the war, many prominent intellectuals, such as Norman Angell, E.D. Morell and Arthur Ponsonby, to name a few, helped ensure the ILP now 'received a comprehensive programme – almost a philosophy – of foreign policy'.[20]

To those on the left of the ILP however, this was a potentially dangerous development. Helen Crawfurd, who would ultimately leave the ILP to join the CPGB in 1921, noted that the influx of liberals marked the beginning of the rot. While it may have helped to strengthen the ILP's 'anti-war character', it also 'completely eliminated its anti-capitalist and pro-working class outlook'.[21] It was also considered unlikely such middle-class individuals could successfully utilise their 'philosophy' to engage in the key foreign policy issue for the ILP in the post-war period, the fate of the Internationals. While the Second International had lingered on following the cataclysm of 1914-8, many within the ILP felt that to continue to associate with the body was to associate with political parties who had 'all supported their nations respective war efforts'. Too much for an 'anti-war party', many were naturally inclined to 'look favourably upon the Third International'.[22] Indeed, the key impetus to the creation of the

[19] Indeed, it was because of such peculiarities that J.T. Walton Newbold, an avowed communist, was able to gain the support of the local Labour Party infrastructure for his candidacy for the Motherwell constituency in 1922. I. Bullock, *Romancing the Revolution: The Myth of Soviet Democracy and the British Left* (Athabasca, 2011), pp. 147-8.
[20] Dowse, 'The Independent Labour Party and Foreign Politics', p. 33.
[21] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/10/1, Helen Crawfurd Memoirs, n.d., 184.
[22] Dowse, *Left in the Centre*, p. 51.

Third International in 1919 derived mainly from the fact that the Second, having failed to prevent the descent into war, was a redundant body in need of replacement. To complicate matters, the Comintern was wholly dedicated to spreading revolution across the world, and affiliation would oblige the ILP to completely change its political outlook. As Dowse highlights, the key question for the ILP, whether it was 'to be a Party of social reform or social revolution, is indicative both of the ambiguity in the I.L.P's position after 1918 in British politics, and of the divisions within the Party'.[23]

Bolshevism and the ILP

Though the Comintern was not established until 1919, the ILP had had much time to delve through the issues Bolshevism had raised, at home and abroad, since it declared itself to the world. Upon seizing power in Russia in November 1917, many within the ILP, in a similar vein to the NCF, were prepared to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt. As Ceadel notes, the anti-war tendencies of the Bolsheviks, encapsulated by their signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in early 1918, 'encouraged pacifists to regard Communism at first as primarily a stop-the-war movement'.[24] Subsequent Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War, ostensibly to protect military supplies loaned to the Tsarist regime from falling into German hands, soon became a clear, if rather inept, attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks, and only further encouraged ILP sympathy with the nascent regime.[25] By January 1919, a resolution compiled by the ILP's National Administrative Council (NAC) would clearly set out its attitudes towards the Bolsheviks. Though 'not committing itself to approval of Bolshevism', it 'condemns the deliberate circulation of false reports about the conduct of the Bolshevik Government' as well

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain,* 55.
[25] For the most recent account of Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War see A. Reid, *A Nasty Little War: The West's Fight to Reverse the Russian Revolution* (London, 2023).

as Allied intervention within Russia itself.[26] Indeed, 'an equivocal tone' could often be found in ILP discourse with regards to events in Russia, with a particular desire 'to separate the "pro-peace" aspect of the Bolsheviks from the more disturbing features of their rule'.[27] From the very beginning however, it was abundantly clear that the ILP firmly 'opposed Bolshevism in Britain' itself.[28] Key to this hesitancy was the Bolshevik commitment to armed revolution, a factor 'clearly anathema to a Party which had only two years before embraced pacifism'.[29]

Despite a clear desire to keep Bolshevik tendencies at arm's-length, fears that ordinary ILP members were becoming ever more susceptible to the key tenants of the Russian ideology, the use of physical force to achieve political power in particular, dominated ILP discourse. Only months after the Bolshevik Revolution, ILP member Alfred Salter warned in March 1918 that elements within the ILP may be tempted to 'imitate the Bolsheviks' and become 'determined to overthrow the existing regime by sudden and violent upheaval and to set up something – anything – more tolerable and decent in its place'.[30] Such fears only increased following the Armistice, with the ILP's chief periodical, the *Labour Leader*, expressing consternation at the 'growing habit of interruption at Labour and Socialist meetings', directed not at 'avowed opponents of the object of the meetings, but to friends, or supposed friends, of the gatherings as the chief offenders'. Such interruptions were all too often accompanied by slogans such as '"Three cheers for Lenin"'.[31] Even more starkly, at a localised level, individual ILP branches were found to be fraternising with delegates from other political parties now wholly dedicated to Bolshevik methods, such as the British Socialist Party and the

[26] London School of Economics [Hereafter LSE], ILP/3/11, NAC Resolution, 11 January 1919.
[27] Bullock, op. cit., p. 149.
[28] Dowse, *Left in the Centre*, p. 37.
[29] Ibid., p. 52.
[30] 'The I.L.P. and the Bolsheviks', *Labour Leader*, 7 March 1918, p. 4.
[31] 'Interruptions at Meetings', *Labour Leader*, 16 January 1919, p. 2.

Socialist Labour Party. Impotent to prevent such free association, the NAC could only condemn such behaviour as 'disloyal' and 'disastrous'.[32] Phillip Snowden would argue for more inner-party discipline, warning that the situation 'is becoming serious and evidence is accumulating that unless the N.A.C. takes some steps at once to protect the branches from this insidious propaganda, the disruption of the movement is inevitable'.[33] So bad was the situation by the end of 1919, that in the NAC's Christmas address, members were not only urged 'to guard against sinking [their] identity in the local Labour Movement', but even reminded to actually read Party literature, so as to understand the ILP's core beliefs.[34]

In an attempt to staunch the flow of this seeming radicalism, the NAC spent much of 1919 compiling a report on Bolshevism's impact on the wider socialist movement. Entitled 'Socialism and Government', the report was released in February 1920.[35] In assessing the perceived popularity of Bolshevik ideas, the ILP could not refrain from commenting on the weaknesses of the British political system. Indeed, Britain's political institutions are 'more on trial to-day than ever it was since it was instituted'. Hardly surprising in light of their recent electoral bruising, the report would claim that elections 'give a maximum opportunity to the reaction to raise false and senseless issues', while political majorities are 'too easily secured by the manipulations of the press'. Furthermore, it was asserted that the 'authority of Parliament has seriously declined', and was now felt to respond too slowly to 'the real needs and wishes of the nation'. This was ensuring that more and more in Britain felt little choice but to 'turn to "direct action" and other forms of extra-Parliamentary pressure' for any meaningful political representation.[36] While therefore empathising with this groundswell

[32] LSE, ILP/3/11, Memorandum, 29 August 1919.
[33] Ibid.
[34] LSE, ILP/3/11, 'A Message for Members', 19 December 1919.
[35] BOA, ILP Glasgow Conference Report, April 1920, pp. 28-32.
[36] Ibid., p. 28.

support for Bolshevism, the report remained adamant in asserting that such weaknesses 'cannot be made good by revolution'. Indeed, talk of direct action would merely 'strengthen the hands of the reaction' and likely culminate in 'as much a massacre as a revolution'.[37] Instead, political disillusionment 'can only be overcome by persistent education and propaganda', as well as the strenuous activities of socialists in parliament itself.[38] The Soviet system, the memorandum concluded, was 'not the best form for an industrial democracy, though it may be a very efficient revolutionary form'.[39] Reports from the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch would note that wider socialist opinion in Britain was exasperated by the contents of the memorandum, quoting the SLP view which decried the memorandum as 'the culmination of a campaign which it says has been proceeding for many months to keep the I.L.P. branches from going "left."'[40] For its own part, Special Branch argued that the memorandum highlighted 'that the executive of the I.L.P. is now out of touch with its branches and these branches are recommended to signify their disapproval at the annual conference of the party'.[41] Indeed, the memorandum, showcasing the views of the NAC, effectively highlighted an abject refusal of armed revolution, and a continued belief in the benefits that parliamentary activity could offer socialist parties in Britain. This was the very antithesis of what the Comintern stood for.

Very clear arguments raged across the ILP's press in the memorandum's aftermath. One moderate opined in the *Labour Leader* that 'some of the elements of the extreme Left are, consciously or unconsciously, more reactionary than those of the extreme Right', with a

[37] Ibid., p. 30.
[38] Ibid., p. 29.
[39] Ibid., p. 30.
[40] TNA, CAB 24/95, The Labour Situation: Report from the Ministry of Labour for the fortnight ending 31 December 1919, p. 506.
[41] TNA, CAB 24/96, The Labour Situation: Report from the Ministry of Labour for the week ending 7 January 1920, p. 3.

tendency of 'pelting questions on tactics at propaganda meetings, to the confusion of likely converts'. A source of bewilderment to the writer, he fundamentally believed that a party 'which had so many members in prison as C.O.s […] cannot trifle with bloody revolution'.[42] And yet, one former conscientious objector did indeed seemingly feel obliged to do just this. C.H. Norman, following his role in leading strikes at the Home Office Camps in Princetown, Dartmoor in 1917, had subsequently led a further strike in protest at the death of another conscientious objector in February 1918.[43] He was swiftly sentenced to two years imprisonment.[44] Dowse's assessment, that 'the wartime experiences of the I.L.P. members in the N.C.F. burned deep into their political souls, and these experiences they attributed to the autocracy of the centralised State',[45] clearly applied to Norman himself. Fresh from prison, throughout the course of 1919 Norman became something of a thorn in the side of the ILP leadership in advocating support for the Comintern, and would soon be described by an exasperated *Labour Leader* as 'always interesting – and sometimes irritating'.[46] In examining Norman's attitudes, his radicalisation derived not so much from a fervent desire for armed force, but from a sense of clear antipathy towards the British State, exacerbated, no doubt, by his treatment as a conscientious objector throughout the war.

Writing to *Forward* in 1920, Norman wholly dismissed the NAC's arguments. Hopes for a clear electoral mandate to implement socialism, Norman argued, were misguided. The ILP could not merely 'achieve its program of drastic social reconstruction' by inducing the public to 'return a Socialist majority to the House of Commons'.[47] The political establishment, or what

[42] 'Bolshevism and the ILP', *Labour Leader*, 18 September 1919, p. 10.
[43] 'C.H. Norman and I.P. Hughes Arrested at Dartmoor', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 2 March 1918, p. 957.
[44] 'Princetown Strike', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 20 July 1918, p. 1043.
[45] Dowse, *Left in the Centre*, p. 27.
[46] 'Socialist War Points', *Forward*, 6 December 1919, p. 1.
[47] 'The Dictatorship of the Plutocracy', *Forward*, 27 November 1920, p. 5.

Norman described as the 'dictatorship of the plutocracy', would merely disregard such a government, and 'resort to every possible means, peaceful or violent, to preserve its interests'. As such, extra-parliamentary action was necessary. Only by 'industrial mass action' could the labour movement achieve 'what could not be secured by Parliamentary means'.[48] Though supportive of the Memorandum's findings that the press extended far too much influence within the political system, Norman would characteristically take this argument to extremes. Acknowledging that the 'English are suffering from all the evils of semi-education', rendering 'the national mind peculiarly open to Press influences and the organised campaigns of falsehood', Norman would claim the fact that most ordinary Russians 'cannot read' was really a source of good fortune. Such seeming limitations were a 'blessing when the only material most people can read are lies which they believe to be truths'.[49] While - thankfully perhaps - Norman's rather muddled comments on the benefits of illiteracy were not themselves directly challenged, his continued criticism of the ILP position would provoke none other than Ramsay MacDonald to write that Norman clearly wished to 'throw on one side all hope of the success of a political policy and adopt one of revolutionary method'.[50]

The 1920 ILP Conference and the Left Wing Group

As the next Party Conference loomed in the spring of 1920, it became abundantly clear that discourse on the Second and Third Internationals would dominate proceedings. The Comintern was enjoying intense popularity throughout the ILP ranks, certainly when compared to the Second International. At the 1919 Conference, Margaret Bondfield had sought to praise the attempts made to reform the Second International in Berne, proposing

[48] '"Third" Without Violence', *Forward*, 10 April 1920, p. 6.
[49] Marx Memorial Library [Hereafter MML], YA06/CON, C.H. Norman, *The Conspiracy against the People*, November 1919, p. 15.
[50] 'The Dictatorship of the Plutocracy: Replies to C.H. Norman', *Forward*, 11 December 1920, p. 5.

a resolution that hoped for a speedy reconstruction of the body, as well as a statement that 'Socialism cannot be permanently established unless it rests upon the triumph of democracy, and it is rooted in the principles of liberty'. C.H. Norman, roundly retorting that the Party was effectively being asked to 'condemn the Russian Republic', was seemingly speaking for many, and the resolution was defeated.[51] Even amongst those who deplored Bolshevism, there was a clear view that there was no real future for the Second International. Catherine Marshall, the former NCF secretary, was an ILP delegate to the 1920 Conference, and of the opinion that 'The Second International is a dying body, kept alive only by pumping oxygen – otherwise gas – into its lungs'.[52]

The Comintern, in sharp contrast, was enjoying a reputation of unparalleled dynamism within ILP circles at this point. As Bullock notes, prior to the 1920 conference, there was 'a groundswell of enthusiasm in the ILP for Comintern affiliation'.[53] Earlier, in January, the Scottish Division of the ILP had voted to both sever all connections with the Second International and join the Third by a majority of 151-28, while the Welsh Division endorsed a similar measure by a majority of 91-62.[54] At the Glasgow conference itself, an overwhelming majority supported leaving the Second International. However, a resolution to immediately join the Comintern did not secure a clear majority. Instead, a compromise was worked out. R.C. Wallhead, soon to replace Phillip Snowden as Chairman of the ILP, along with Clifford Allen, would tag onto a TUC delegation to Moscow and engage in a fact-finding mission to discover the conditions of Comintern affiliation. This settlement became the source of some controversy. Helen Crawfurd argued the NAC was deeply hostile to the Comintern, and had

[51] BOA, ILP Huddersfield Conference Report, April 1919, p. 67.
[52] CAC, DMAR/5/6, Letter from Catherine Marshall, 29 March 1920.
[53] I. Bullock, *Under Siege: The Independent Labour Party in Interwar Britain* (Athabasca, 2017), p. 31.
[54] Kendall, op. cit., p. 269.

sought to drag the issue out until the 'militancy' of the ILP party base had lessened. The mission to Moscow, which would take months, was therefore 'an astute piece of work on the part of the I.L.P. leaders'.[55] The Communist historian Klugmann similarly argues that the 'Glasgow decision gave them the time they needed – time for the revolutionary temper of their rank and file to "simmer down"'.[56] This is the standard communist perception. Yet it is notable that Kendall comments that the NAC interpreted the conference as giving it a 'free hand' to explore options other than Comintern membership,[57] whilst Bullock notes that though the ILP remained aloof, MacDonald and Snowden, in their Labour Party positions, had done much to reconstitute the Second International, and would have had little desire to see their old party turn towards Moscow.[58]

Indeed, Snowden himself, in his Chairman's address, had made his views clear from the very beginning of the conference. Conceding that the 'war may have modified some of our pre-war theories and methods', he remained adamant that 'permanent and lasting progress can only rest upon the intelligent will of an educated and socially conscious democracy'. Snowden had nothing but scorn for those who sought to achieve such progress by physical force, as he clearly felt the road to Comintern affiliation lay, arguing that those who would 'endeavour to exploit the misery and sufferings of a helpless proletariat by inciting and encouraging a hopeless resort to violence have learnt nothing from the lesson of the last five years of slaughter'.[59] Concluding that it was perhaps 'better to suffer under capitalism's domination and its oppression than gain economic power through blood and slaughter',[60] one delegate

[55] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/10/1, Helen Crawfurd Memoirs, pp. 230-1.
[56] Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Volume* I, p. 162.
[57] Kendall, op. cit., p. 270.
[58] Bullock, *Under Siege*, 31.
[59] BOA, ILP Glasgow Conference Report, April 1920, p. 54.
[60] Ibid.

delicately surmised that the Chairman's comments might provoke some 'disagreement amongst the delegates'.[61]

What provoked more disagreement, however, were the attitudes of so many of the former conscientious objectors attending the conference. One of the most forceful supporters of Comintern affiliation, J.T. Walton Newbold, had argued in the run up to the conference in *Forward* that it was 'notorious that thousands of conscientious objectors, who thought they were against all war, have since realised that, in the circumstances in which the Russian Communists found themselves, they would have fought with a right hearty enthusiasm'.[62] Such a view was not mere embellishment. Numerous delegates throughout the course of the conference commented on the seeming oxymoron of conscientious objectors passionately advocating in favour of fighting for the Comintern. One delegate would declare that she had:

> Taken her stand during the war on Pacifist platforms, and she was going to be consistent […] she thought it was disgraceful that men and women who belonged to a body like the I.L.P., which had upheld the anti-militarist standard during the war should now suggest the best way to attain their ends was to use armed force.[63]

Another felt obliged to ask whether the 'number of C.O.s' who supported Comintern affiliation believed 'a rifle was a kind of holy relic that was imbued with such virtue that the mere touch of it by some magical power would bring a man from the wrong side of a ballot box to the right side of a barricade?' They should instead 'drop nonsensical phrases and to get on with the work that the I.L.P. had done in the past'.[64] Others still would mock this seeming about-turn, with one declaring that she herself knew 'one of the extreme, extreme,

[61] Ibid., p. 55.
[62] 'The I.L.P. and the Third International', *Forward*, 13 March 1920, p. 3.
[63] BOA, ILP Glasgow Conference Report, April 1920, pp. 83-4.
[64] Ibid., p. 81.

extreme Left who would defend a bloody revolution if necessary and who came to her house almost trembling and in tears lest he should be arrested as a conscientious objector!'.[65] Though others on the left would delight in the outrage many delegates felt, with the *Workers' Dreadnought* in particular poking fun at those who made 'scathing remarks about conscientious objectors who, during the European War, refused to fight Prussian militarism, but who are now advocating armed revolution',[66] it appeared to merely bring sorrow to the ILP as a whole. One commentator in *Forward*, in the conference's aftermath, dejectedly commented that 'the Moscow men were as intolerant as a Jingo crowd at a street corner I.L.P. meeting during the war'. Almost perversely, the chief argument of such 'Moscow Men', '"Would you not use arms to defend the Socialist Republic!"', was a question deemed distinctly similar to 'the old stock question of the Tribunal: "Would you not defend your mother from a Hun!"'. That 'the C.O.s were keenest fighting the first question', was said to be giving many former NCF members '"severe mental agony"'. *Forward* could only conclude, with some bewilderment, that 'Moscow has become the emotional Mecca of our C.O's dreams'.[67]

In the immediate aftermath of the Glasgow conference, despite a clear rejection of the Second International, many on the ILP left were dissatisfied that an immediate declaration of support for the Comintern had not taken place. J.T. Walton Newbold in particular would contribute to that wider communist perception of NAC foul play, and argue that the ILP leadership still pined be present at meetings of 'that body – or corpse – at Geneva'.[68] As a result, those on the left who supported Comintern membership, including C.H. Norman,

[65] Ibid., 74.
[66] 'C.O.s and Armed Revolution', *Workers Dreadnought*, 1 May 1920, p. 7.
[67] 'The Great Debate: Observations of the Silent Delegate', *Forward*, 17 April 1920, p. 5.
[68] MML, 'The Task Before Us', *The International*, 19 June 1920, p. 1.

formally organised themselves into a faction entitled, creatively, the Left Wing Group. It could only be described as a splinter group. As Cowden notes, the Left Wing Group did not just desire ILP affiliation to the Comintern, but sought a wholesale merger into the Communist Party of Great Britain following its foundation in the summer of 1920.[69] Hardly a conspiratorial aim, the very first issue of the group's periodical, *The International*, would announce its desire for 'the upbuilding of a united Communist Party in Great Britain, of which the I.L.P. may be, in numbers and influence, the very core'.[70] The Comintern itself, desirous of bringing together all left-wing factions into a unified communist party, would promptly begin to fund the body.[71]

However, the chances of any meaningful success for the group was slight. As Kendall notes, the movement was severely weakened from the very beginning, with many prospective members deciding to skip the middleman and join the CPGB outright.[72] Thorpe has argued that in any case, the CPGB itself did not want the entirety of the ILP to join, desiring instead merely a 'sizeable breakaway',[73] putting the Left Wing Group at odds with what should have been a natural ally. While it is of little surprise that the *Labour Leader* attempted to ignore the group,[74] Cowden has suggested that even the Comintern itself, funding notwithstanding, remained contemptuous. Though two members of the Left Wing Group, Helen Crawfurd and Marjory Newbold, attended the Comintern's Second Congress in the summer of 1920, Crawfurd was denied voting rights, or even permission to participate in the debates. Newbold herself appeared to be a source of bemusement to the Comintern, who 'had some difficulty clarifying her position'. Such behaviour, deriving either from 'the contempt that the

[69] Cowden, M.H. (1984). *Russian Bolshevism and British Labor, 1917-1921*. Columbia University Press, p. 161.
[70] MML, 'Our Platform', *The International*, 19 June 1920, p. 1.
[71] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow,* p. 40.
[72] Kendall, op. cit., p. 269.
[73] Thorpe, op. cit., p. 40.
[74] Bullock, *Romancing the Revolution*, pp. 205-6.

Bolsheviks had for the ILP, or to Bolshevik uncertainty about the faction', suggests in any case little confidence in the Group's future.[75] Collins has argued that the politics of the Left Wing Group were a mere 'jumble of ideas that at times resembled a lukewarm version of syndicalism', whilst *The International* was 'full of abstract discussions about the need for socialism, yet there was almost nothing about the class struggle that was raging around them'. A very glaring absence was the lack of commentary on the furore that the Polish-Soviet War, currently being waged, was producing within the British labour movement.[76]

The International

The circulation of *The International* is unknown, but not thought to have been significant.[77] Despite this, a consistent theme in the many articles produced in the periodical are clear references to the conscientious objector pasts of many of the Left Wing Group's members. Indeed, to have been a conscientious objector was akin to a badge of honour for the Left Wing Group, and proof of the validity of one's political views when compared to the wider ILP membership. In line with Crawfurd's earlier negative assessment of the changes engulfing the ILP after 1918, *The International* exhibited anger at the prominent role played by ex-members of the Liberal Party that had recently joined the ILP, and explicitly linked it to the ongoing debates with regards to Comintern affiliation. One contributor wrote it was 'interesting to be informed by some person in the movement as many months as you have been years that your policy is not the I.L.P. policy'. There was further irony, it was asserted, in being constantly 'told by people who have fought for the Capitalists that they will refuse to fight for the workers. The most pacific in our midst are many who did good service in the great world war blood

[75] Cowden, op. cit., 160-1.
[76] T. Collins, *Raising the Red Flag: Marxism, Labourism and the Roots of British Communism* (Leiden, 2024), p. 201.
[77] Kendall, op. cit., p. 273.

bath'.[78] This was an accusation made repeatedly, with another article commenting on 'the spectacle of the "Blood rollers" of the 1914-18 campaign weeping tears over the blood of the Bolshies'.[79] It highlights yet more tensions within the ILP. Though traditionally perceived as wholly anti-war during the First World War, Jowitt and Laybourn's study of local ILP branches during the course of the war have noted a more nuanced approach, with a 'fragmentation of opinion' suggesting many ILP members felt little conflict in supporting Britain's war effort.[80] Indeed, prominent ILP members like Clement Attlee and John Beckett heeded the call to arms after 1914. Not only was Attlee an anti-Bolshevik, a view that would accompany his long-standing career, but Beckett, as his son and biographer has noted, remained completely hostile to pacifists.[81]

Many within the Left-Wing Group may have therefore felt that their conscientious objector stance was proof of the sincerity of their beliefs, that their views enjoyed more authenticity than ILP members who had supported the war. Certainly, a conscientious objector past was frequently used within *The International* as a defence of one's revolutionary beliefs. One article asserted that those 'who moved in favour of affiliation to Moscow' have frequently 'suffered as a conscientious objector' in recent years, carrying on 'their propaganda not by the fireside but in the face of hostile audiences during and after the war'.[82] Indeed, another article, noting the prevalence of 'conchie' as a derogatory term, instead argued that 'Anti-militarists should accept the name […] and tie it to the mast' as 'the term of reproach of one day become[s] the title of honour of the next'.[83] One rather tongue in cheek article addressed

[78] MML, 'Comrades, Be of Good Courage!', *The International*, 3 July 1920, p. 3.
[79] MML, 'Tit-Bits from Scarborough', *The International*, 31 July 1920, p. 4.
[80] See T. Jowitt and K. Laybourn, 'War and Socialism: The Experience of the Bradford ILP, 1914-18', in *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 163-178.
[81] See F. Beckett, *Fascist in the Family: The Tragedy of John Beckett MP* (London, 2017), p. 31.
[82] MML, 'Editorial', *The International*, 17 July 1920, p. 2.
[83] MML, 'The Intelligence of the Conscientious Objector', *The International*, 31 July 1920, p. 2.

a study by a psychiatrist on the mental development of conscientious objectors. While acknowledging that conscientious objectors appeared to have greater intelligence than the servicemen guarding them in prison – particular scorn was shared for one officer who had never heard of Tolstoy – *The International* came to the less than serious conclusion that, as well as seizing the '"means of production, distribution and exchange," we shall have to take over from the Capitalist class the machinery of "disciplinary psychiatry"'.[84]

Less glib, however, were the attempts made within the pages of *The International* to justify why exactly conscientious objectors seemingly sought solace in Moscow and the Comintern. It was argued that the 'experiences of the war demonstrated the […] utter bankruptcy of revisionist tactics. The objector to the war – conscientious or political – soon felt the weakness of the current conception of the State: "The community organised politically for the common good"'. As the war proceeded, it followed, many 'began to realise that non-resistance would prove futile as a means to combat Imperialism and Capitalism. Only the organised might of the workers could overcome the forces of plunder'. Such views were only further entrenched with the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution, with it being ultimately argued that when 'the Bolsheviks were triumphant, the limitations of Pacifism became obvious'.[85]

Twenty-one Conditions

For the ILP left, great stock had been placed in the delegation to Russia. The Left Wing Group in particular had hopes that Clifford Allen would be amenable to the Bolshevik regime in Moscow.[86] Allen himself, prior to the trip, had believed the Second International dead and the 'I.L.P. leadership should long ago have opened negotiations with Moscow – though there

[84] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[85] MML, 'The Propaganda of the I.L.P.', *The International*, 25 September 1920, p. 2.
[86] Bullock, *Under Siege*, pp. 32-4.

could be no question of affiliation till they had all the facts'.[87] Unlike the NAC, Allen claimed to be open-minded with regards to certain Bolshevik tenets such as the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, believing that democracy 'could be meaningful only once economic equality had been achieved'.[88] However, he adamantly rejected violent revolution and the Soviet system for Britain, and clearly hoped the Comintern would be flexible in accommodating the ILP. Allen and Wallhead left Britain in April 1920, spending several weeks in Russia and meeting the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) twice. Once in Moscow, the pair 'quickly sensed the rigidity of the Russian attitude', and it became clear that the Comintern would not, after all, be flexible.[89] It doubtless helped that when Allen was introduced to Bolshevik leaders as a former conscientious objector, he was treated with contempt, with Trotsky exclaiming '"we can have nobody here who preaches peace and wants to stop the war"'.[90]

Just after the delegation returned home, in July 1920, the infamous 'Twenty-one conditions' of admission to the Comintern were unveiled at its Second World Congress. As McDermott and Agnew have argued, these conditions 'gained notoriety almost immediately on adoption'. Not only did they confirm 'complete Bolshevik hegemony over the International', the conditions sought to 'split the rank and file of the European Socialist Parties from the influence of their right-wing and centrist leaders who had 'betrayed' the revolution'.[91] Ramsay MacDonald himself was directly named in the seventh condition as a key betrayer of the socialist movement.[92] Such accusations seemed deliberately designed to infuriate the ILP.

[87] A. Marwick, *Clifford Allen: The Open Conspirator* (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 58.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Kendall, op. cit., p. 271.
[90] Quoted in Marwick, op. cit., p. 59.
[91] K. McDermott and J. Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 17.
[92] Ibid., 227.

As Howell notes, deep ties existed between the two. After resigning as Labour Party leader in 1914 for his anti-war stance, MacDonald came to rely on the ILP for moral and political support as the war developed, with the 'relationship between man and Party […] strengthened by shared experience and hardships'.[93] To suddenly jettison MacDonald was absurd, even for those supportive of Comintern affiliation. Ultimately then, to join the Comintern, the ILP would have had to depose 'its existing leadership, reconstitute its parliamentary faction, and open up fierce warfare on the whole established leadership of the British Movement'. Such an outcome was 'unthinkable'.[94] Furthermore, doing little to assuage ILP concerns that Moscow stood only for violent revolution, a commitment to armed force was clearly highlighted, with the Comintern arguing that 'the class struggle is entering the phase of civil war. Under such conditions the Communists can place no faith in bourgeois legality […] it is absolutely necessary that legal and illegal activity be combined'.[95] As Kendall notes, 'at the very time the revolutionary crisis was on the wane, the ILP found itself confronted with terms of entry which appeared more onerous than ever'. For the Left Wing Group, 'the 21 conditions could only serve to delimit and isolate the revolutionaries within the ILP'.[96]

To add insult to injury, the Comintern, in formally publishing their responses to the questions Allen and Wallhead had asked in Moscow about potential affiliation, did not even deign to send these back to the NAC, but to the Left Wing Group.[97] As *The Times* reported, the

[93] D. Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford 2002), p. 234.
[94] Kendall, op. cit., p. 272.
[95] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 227.
[96] Kendall, op. cit., p. 272.
[97] Bullock, *Under Siege*, p. 34; See University of Warwick Digital Collections, JD 10.P6 PPC 919, 'Moscow's reply to the I.L.P. : the reply of the E.C. of the Communist International to the questions of the British I.L.P., together with an appeal to the communists inside the party', https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/russian/id/5649 [Last accessed 23 January 2025].

Comintern's views were 'long and argumentative but abundantly explicit', consisting solely of 'revolution and bloodshed'.[98] Not only seeing fit to patronisingly give the ILP long lessons in both British and socialist history, the Comintern made it clear there could be no differing approaches to socialism that suited British sensibilities; 'there is only Communism'.[99] Indeed, 'in no country can the dictatorship of the proletariat be applied better and more directly than Great Britain',[100] as British workers can only hope to achieve 'victory by a heavy civil war'.[101] Such language blatantly proved that the Comintern was not interested in encouraging the ILP 'as a whole to pursue affiliation' but merely produce 'a schism'.[102]

The NAC, for its own part, soon declared that neither 'the policy nor the principles of this organisation are in accord with the attitude of the I.L.P.', and that 'it does not seem to us to be necessary to deal further with it, other than to say that it has succeeded in creating discord amongst the ranks of organised socialists, rejoicing in the secessions it has caused by weakening and dividing Parties'.[103] Not even bothering to wait until the next party conference in March 1921, the NAC decided by October 1920 to 'convene a conference of like-minded foreign political parties opposed to both existing internationals'.[104] The culminating result, the so-called 'Two-and-a-half International', dismissed as 'high-sounding' and 'vague',[105] would itself prove to be short-lived.[106]

[98] 'Red Call for Civil War', *The Times*, 30 July 1920, p. 13.
[99] 'Moscow's reply to the I.L.P.', p. 14
[100] Ibid., p. 15.
[101] Ibid., p. 17.
[102] Bullock, *Under Siege*, p. 34.
[103] BOA, ILP Southport Conference Report, March 1921, pp. 9-11.
[104] Cowden, op. cit., p. 163.
[105] Klugmann, op. cit., p. 162.
[106] The 'Two-and-a-half International' would shortly be replaced by the Labour and Socialist International after 1923, but would still be dissatisfactory to many within the ILP. See P. Thwaites, *Waiting for the Workers: A History of the Independent Labour Party, 1938-1950* (London, 2020), p. 54.

The 1921 ILP Conference

In a crushing symbol for the Left Wing Group, the Scottish Division, who had overwhelmingly voted for immediate affiliation to the Comintern just a year previously, now, fully aware of what Comintern affiliation actually meant, reversed its decision, as did the Welsh Division.[107] The NAC was able to prepare for the 1921 conference in Southport confidently anticipating a full-scale rejection of the Comintern, whilst the Left Wing Group could only seek to gloss over the harshness of the 'twenty-one conditions', relying instead on 'general principles' which merely left it open to 'counter-attack'.[108] It is of little surprise that Bullock would call ILP affiliation to the Comintern by this time a 'lost cause'.[109] Indeed, there was a clear sense of fatalism within the Left Wing Group prior to the Southport Conference. One Left Winger, Ernest Brown, reported to the CPGB in January 1921 that the Group had agreed to continue to work inside the ILP until Easter. If they 'lost on the floor' at Southport, and the CPGB advised seceding, then 'he along with a great many others were determined to take that advice'.[110] While Brown would attempt to be bullish in subsequent weeks, writing in one letter, in a deliberate nod to John Reed's account of the Bolshevik Revolution, about the upcoming 'Ten days that shook the I.L.P.', the struggle was clearly lost.[111]

Snowden, upon chairing the conference at Southport, would declare his hope that 'the discussions at conference will clarify the air, and differences of opinion regarding policy and methods be settled'.[112] While claiming there was 'ample room for […] discussion' within the ILP, 'there is no room for divided allegiance'. If some ILP members 'cannot accept the position

[107] The Scottish Division voted by 93-47. The Welsh Division voted by 49-18. See Kendall, op. cit., p. 273.
[108] Ibid., p. 274.
[109] Bullock, *Romancing the Revolution*, p. 208.
[110] MML, CPGB.03/REP, Report of the 1921 Leeds Unity Conference, 5 February 1921.
[111] TNA, KV 2/3197, Letter from Ernest Brown to Sharpurji Saklatvala, 16 March 1921.
[112] BOA, ILP Southport Conference Report, March 1921, pp. 27-8.

of our Party, then they should leave the Party, and join with an organisation to which they can honestly give their adherence'.[113] When the resolution over joining the Third International came up, the key arguments would emphasise yet again that the 'twenty-one conditions' 'cannot be accepted' whilst 'the idea that this country must follow Russian methods' was similarly rejected.[114] One delegate argued that the ILP would be 'bound hand and foot, to a foreign organisation', and turned into a 'secret conspiracy body'.[115] The Left Wing delegates could not ultimately refute such statements, and instead relied on counter-accusations stemming from personal experiences as conscientious objectors during the First World War. Helen Crawfurd sought to justify the 'need for illegal organisation' by pointing out that many ILP members had 'rendered valuable service in the illegal work that was carried on by the Party during the war (the work on behalf of the C.O.s)'.[116] C.H. Norman himself would point out that during the war 'thousands of I.L.P.ers were associated with the N.-C.F., which was an illegal organisation under Dora'.[117] Such arguments, however, only confirmed those accusations of deliberate evasion on the part of the Left Wing Group. In the end, the resolution advocating affiliation to the Comintern was resoundingly rejected, by a vote of 521 votes to 97,[118] a clear victory for the position that the ILP as a whole ultimately 'stood to be *limited* not *increased* by affiliation to the Communist International'.[119]

In the aftermath of Southport, all the Left Wing Group could do was fume that events had 'demonstrated that the Independent Labour Party had ceased to hold any Socialist conviction

[113] Ibid., p. 110.
[114] Ibid., p. 113.
[115] Ibid., p. 115.
[116] Ibid., p. 118.
[117] Ibid., p. 123.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Kendall, op. cit., p. 274.

but had become an Independent Liberal party'.[120] The decision was soon made to leave the ILP and join the CPGB, an offer doubtless welcomed by both Parties. As the minutes for the CPGB's Dundee branch highlight, typical standing orders with regards to new members, of 'cumbersome forms of registration, training and even examination',[121] were in this instance 'overlooked'.[122] Though it has been thought the split itself was not great in numbers, with perhaps only a few hundred members leaving,[123] the real detrimental impact for the ILP was in financial terms. Where the majority of a local ILP branch had joined the CPGB, such as in Barrow, Coventry and Liverpool, branch assets were often seized, obliging those remaining ILP members to ask the NAC for financial assistance and even, in some cases, help with legal proceedings.[124] Collins has highlighted that several within the Left Wing Group became key members of the CPGB, citing Ernest Brown, Emile Burns and Helen Crawfurd. This list would also include the CPGB's first two future Members of Parliament, J.T. Walton Newbold and Sharpurji Saklatvala.[125] A notable absentee, however, was none other than C.H. Norman himself. Clearly disillusioned, Norman had declared during the 1921 Party Conference that the vote on the Third International would decide if he stayed in the ILP, or 'withdraw from association with political parties altogether'.[126] He was as good as his word, announcing his resignation in a letter to *Forward* in April 1921.[127] Though Norman had been present as an observer at early CPGB conferences,[128] and would both contribute to the CPGB's Russian Famine Fund and even an article on international finance to *Communist Review* in December

[120] 'Split in Ranks of I.L.P.', *Dundee Courier*, 30 March 1921, p. 5.
[121] K. Morgan, G. Cohen and A. Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991* (London, 2007), p. 16.
[122] MLHASC, CP/LOC/SCOT/01/11, Dundee Minutes, 17 April 1921.
[123] Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, p. 71.
[124] LSE, ILP/3/13, Minutes, 21 April and 26 – 27 May 1921.
[125] Collins, op. cit., p. 222.
[126] BOA, ILP Southport Conference Report, March 1921, p. 123.
[127] 'Why I have Resigned from the I.L.P.', *Forward*, 9 April 1921, p. 7.
[128] Collins, op. cit., pp. 181-2; 'Communist Unity', *Workers Dreadnought*, 15 May 1920, p. 5

1921,[129] he ultimately refused to join the CPGB, and remained detached from party political affairs for the rest of his life.

Conscientious Objectors and the CPGB

A key aspect of the entry of the Left Wing Group into the CPGB in the spring of 1921 was the arrival of so many former conscientious objectors in the Party ranks. As revolutionaries, keen to ape Lenin in viewing pacifism as a limitation to a successful seizure of power, there could be, in theory, no tolerance for conscientious objectors. Indeed, Tom Bell, a prominent communist who set out to write the history of the CPGB some years later, would write that though the ILP had been a bastion of anti-war feeling during the First World War, he felt obliged to comment that the rank and file 'were bereft of leadership'. Their 'opposition to the war was blind and often took the line of "conscientious objection". The NCF itself was dismissed as a rag-tag collection of 'middle class intellectuals together with pacifist and religious elements'.[130] In the very early years of the Party, however, such views were not as clear-cut, and a flexible approach dominated the CPGB's relationship with the many conscientious objectors now declaring themselves communists. Soon after the Party's formation in the summer of 1920, prominent communist Robin Page Arnot would argue that there could be room for the two belief systems to function together, writing that:

> These two philosophies [of communism and pacifism] have approached one another in their practical application. And the British Government does not distinguish. It puts Bertrand Russell in prison as well as William Gallacher. Under the stress of war conditions, in their common protest

[129] *The Communist*, 15 October 1921, p. 3; 17 December 1921, p. 7.
[130] T. Bell, *The British Communist Party: A Short History* (London, 1937), pp. 34-5.

against the imperialist war the Communist, and what one of my friends calls the anarcho-aristocrat, appeared to be in the same boat.[131]

Indeed, when one examines the CPGB at this time, references to conscientious objection are seemingly all around. In April 1921, the same month the Left Wing Group joined, *The Communist* was happy to advertise an upcoming reunion for conscientious objectors, whereby all anti-militarists were invited to attend 'whatever their attitude in the last war'.[132] Sylvia Pankhurst, when expelled from the CPGB in September 1921, would recount that the mover for her expulsion 'was lately a conscientious objector and a member of the N.C.F.', obliging her to note bitterly that 'the Conscientious Objector has become the disciplinarian'.[133] Another prominent conscientious objector, Francis Meynell, became infamous in the immediate post-war period for smuggling Soviet jewellery into Britain to help fund the CPGB, and was at one point obliged to ''spend a sickly hour sucking […] chocolates and so retrieving the jewels''.[134] When the news of 'Moscow Gold' invading Britain's shores broke, and Meynell's own nefarious activities were made public, one member of the public wrote to *The Globe* to pointedly ask whether the Government, in its failure to apprehend Meynell, was 'afraid of conscientious objectors?'.[135]

Caerphilly

The year 1921, as well as witnessing the Left Wing Group's departure to the CPGB, also marked a watershed moment in the seeming rehabilitation of former conscientious objectors within Britain. The Caerphilly by-election, held in August 1921, was not only the first election

[131] 'Bertrand the Bolshevik', *The Communist*, 12 August 1920, p. 9.
[132] 'Re-unions of C.O.s' *The Communist,* 2 April 1921, p. 8.
[133] 'Freedom of Discussion', *Worker's Dreadnought*, 17 September 1921, p. 5.
[134] Quoted in D. Burke, *Russia and the British Left: From the 1848 Revolutions to the General Strike* (London, 2018), p. 166.
[135] 'Readers' Views', *The Globe*, 18 November 1920, p. 4.

the CPGB contested, but marked the first time a former conscientious objector, Morgan Jones of the ILP, was returned to Parliament. Remarkably, in that very same month, conscientious objectors became officially disfranchised for the next five years, as stipulated under the 1918 Reform Act. While not part of the original proposals for electoral reform, such was the 'climate of opinion' in the immediate aftermath of the First World War that some form of electoral discrimination was inevitable.[136] Historians have traditionally dismissed the impact of this seemingly draconian ruling. While Pugh notes that 'there was no justification for placing a retrospective penalty upon men who had merely availed themselves of the exemption from military service specifically granted to them by Act of Parliament', he is also quick to assert that the 'intrinsic importance of the disfranchisement was disproportionate to the controversy surrounding it'.[137] Indeed, actual implementation verged on the farcical. Aside from notorious individuals in the public view, such as Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway, few former conscientious objectors were actually struck off the electoral role. In any case, Allen and Brockway, and others like them, could still continue to contest parliamentary elections.[138] Brockway, with some forbearance, would merely describe this situation as 'very funny'.[139] Rae has also argued that this 'disfranchisement was enforced half-heartedly or not at all'.[140] In one demonstrative example, Bob Stewart, the communist candidate for the 1921 Caerphilly by-election, would not be struck off the electoral role until a month after the contest, as it seemingly did not occur to anyone to investigate the former conscientious objector, despite him making no secret of his activities during the war.[141] As a

[136] A. Bingham, 'The British Press and the 1918 Reform Act', *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), p. 157.
[137] M. Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace, 1906-1918* (London, 1978), pp. 113-4, 125-6.
[138] Ibid., p. 173.
[139] LUA, CO/012, Fenner Brockway Interview, c.1974, p. 8.
[140] Rae, op. cit., p. 235.
[141] TNA, CAB 24/128, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 22 September 1921, p. 10.

result of this legal half-heartedness, Pugh has suggested that little public vitriol remained for former conscientious objectors as early as 1922.[142] Furthermore, Durham and Pearce have highlighted that in some areas of Britain, little public concern was evident at the prospect of a former conscientious objector standing as a parliamentary candidate; it was not the 'political or personal 'badge of shame' which wartime propaganda might have implied'.[143]

While it was therefore perhaps unsurprising a former conscientious objector was elected to Parliament at Caerphilly in 1921, the by-election was notable for bringing two different tendencies of the No-Conscription Fellowship once more against each other, nearly two years after the Fellowship itself had dissolved. Both Morgan Jones and Bob Stewart were NCF members during the First World War, with Stewart in particular having served four separate prison sentences for resisting conscription.[144] While Jones' moderate politics and religious beliefs strongly contrasted with Stewart's forthright communist views, it is notable that Stewart had no issues in staunchly bringing his conscientious objector stance into the Party. Indeed, when one recalls the constant ILP refrain that communism ultimately meant armed violence and a fixation with rifles, Stewart's views are illuminating. At the CPGB's foundation congress in 1920, Stewart had been against 'stressing too much the point of the man with the gun', arguing that 'there might be moments when it was far more revolutionary to refuse to have anything to do with guns'.[145] Reminiscing some years later, Stewart felt that 'after my prison experiences, this kind of talk irked me'.[146] That such seemingly outspoken opinions

[142] M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (London, 1983), p. 235.
[143] C. Pearce and H. Durham, 'Patterns of Dissent in Britain during the First World War', *War and Society*, 34 (2015), p. 142.
[144] W. Kenefick, *Red Scotland! The Rise and Fall of the Radical Left, 1872-1932* (Edinburgh, 2007), p. 169.
[145] MML, CPGB.01/OFF, Official Report, Communist Party Unity Convention, 31 July – 1 August 1920, p. 9.
[146] B. Stewart, *Breaking the Fetters: The Memoirs of Bob Stewart* (London, 1967), p. 89.

caused little issue highlights the extent to which the CPGB had easily welcomed former conscientious objectors into its ranks.

In the Caerphilly by-election itself, the CPGB came last, gaining some 2,592 votes.[147] While hardly a stellar performance, and perhaps at odds with the leadership's later proclamation that 'the result fully justified our action' in putting up a candidate,[148] the importance of this contest lies more in the themes the CPGB propagated, which were later taken to account by Jones himself. Throughout the campaign, the CPGB mocked Jones for his 'personal addiction to pacifism, and […] his Party's alleged hatred for anything violent and coercive'.[149] There was, however, some clear consternation evident that Jones was becoming 'somewhat of a hero to the young men by reason of the anti-militarism with which he was credited'.[150] Such scorn ultimately stung the newly elected MP, for he began to engage in a bitter diatribe in *Forward* against the supposed hypocrisy of many within the CPGB. Jones cast doubt about the revolutionary credentials of many communists precisely because of their stance as conscientious objectors during the First World War, even predicting that they 'will have exhausted their revolutionary zeal, and become crusted Militarists as they already are in danger of becoming'.[151] Communist Willie Gallacher could only retort that:

> We may, of course, not be as effective as we might be, there may even be doubt as to our genuineness, but at any rate we all claim to be revolutionaries, and as such, recognising the folly of our Militarism or Pacifism, have set about the task of building up an organisation that will tide

[147] Klugmann, op. cit., p. 184.
[148] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/04, Report of Executive Committee at 1922 CPGB Congress, p. 7.
[149] 'Notes of the Week', *The Communist*, 20 August 1921, p. 12.
[150] '"Up with the Red!"', *The Communist,* 3 September 1921, p. 4.
[151] 'Communist Tactics at Caerphilly', *Forward*, 24 September 1921, p. 5.

over the transition period from Capitalism to Socialism. Whatever we may have been in the past we are agreed now on fundamentals.[152]

J.T. Walton Newbold would also weigh in, arguing that 'my Socialist anti-Militarist [stance] was incidental to my ceaseless propaganda against Capitalism. I repudiated the description of myself as "Pacifist" and declared myself as "anti-Militarist" and, from the end of 1917, "Bolshevist".[153]

Such blustering, however, ties into a wider theme with regards to the first generation of British communists. Rajani Palme Dutt, a key member of the CPGB, indeed often seen as the face of British Stalinism,[154] was himself a conscientious objector during the war.[155] In response to the outbreak of war in 1914, Dutt joined the ILP precisely 'because it was the biggest anti-war socialist group in the country'.[156] When conscription was introduced in 1916, Dutt duly appeared before his local tribunal to register his opposition both to the war and compulsory military service. Dutt's ethnicity, being of Indian and Swedish heritage, perplexed his local tribunal who in fact granted him an acquittal, thus depriving 'him of the honour of conscientious objection'.[157] Dutt appealed this on the grounds of his being a British subject, and the bemused tribunal thus ensured he was later imprisoned for refusing to serve in the armed forces.[158] Despite his determination to resist conscription, which involved a rather harrowing spell in captivity,[159] Dutt later became clearly embarrassed about his stance, and

[152] 'A Reply to Morgan Jones, M.P.' *Forward*, 1 October 1921, p. 5.
[153] 'More Caerphilly', *Forward*, 15 October 1921, p. 7.
[154] See Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt*.
[155] Dutt was also an early member of the ILP Left Wing Group, but soon left to join the National Guilds League, in order to participate in the CPGB's founding conference in the summer of 1920. See Collins, op. cit., p. 222.
[156] Callaghan, op. cit., p. 14.
[157] Ibid., p. 16
[158] University of Sheffield Special Pamphlets Collection, P. Nazir, *The Life and Work of Rajani Palme Dutt* (1986).
[159] Dutt, while ill, was at one point forced to convalesce in a venereal ward. See J. and M. Postgate, *A Stomach for Dissent: The Life of Raymond Postgate* (Keele, 1994), pp. 65-7.

largely remained tight-lipped on the subject for the rest of his life. Asked to edit his biography by the CPGB in 1944, Dutt's recollections of his activity during the First World War merely mentioned being expelled from Oxford University 'for international socialist propaganda', alongside a smug prediction of Bolshevik victory in Russia as early as June 1917.[160] When forced to confront his conscientious objector past head-on in 1969, after feeling obliged to correct *The Times* in their facts about Raymond Postgate, another early communist and former conscientious objector, Dutt's words were telling. Postgate was 'a socialist objector, as we all were at that time, because we knew no better and sought by that to express our opposition to the war'.[161] That even an arch-Stalinist was unable to successfully fuse his conscientious objector past with his communist beliefs, to meekly claim 'he knew no better', is fundamentally telling. The tensions that enveloped the first generation of British communists clearly encompassed a particular inability to cement two seemingly incompatible mind-sets.

Conclusion

On the face of it, it is possible to label the debates that raged within the ILP over potential affiliation to the Comintern between 1919 and 21 as something of a damp squib. The openness many felt towards Moscow derived as much from disillusionment with the Second International as an eagerness to adopt the tenets of the Third. The ILP, ultimately, did not follow the Moscow way, and remained committed to parliamentary methods, whilst those who advocated Comintern affiliation made good on their word and left to join the CPGB. A more thorough scrutiny of this period, particularly of the make-up of those individuals who

[160] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/06/11, R. Palme Dutt: Notes for Biography, c. July 1944.
[161] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/06/11, Letter from Rajani Palme Dutt to The Times, 13 March 1969.

sought Comintern affiliation, offers a very different interpretation. Many of those who sought the fundamental political changes that affiliation to Moscow offered were united in their pasts as former conscientious objectors. Within the Left Wing Group in particular, this was considered a boon in contributing to their supposed revolutionary credentials, and key to proving their authenticity, in sharp contrast to the ILP as a whole. The case of C.H. Norman in particular highlights that poor treatment by the British State during the course of the First World War did much to radicalise such individuals, and was the catalyst in ensuring a receptiveness to the alternative worldview Bolshevism offered, a worldview not only fundamentally different to what the ILP actually stood for, but one that the majority of that Party simply could not comprehend. The arrival of these conscientious objectors (excluding, of course, Norman) into the CPGB after 1921 would create its own set of issues. While the leadership would prove to be rather pragmatic in welcoming this cohort, the difficulties in seamlessly cementing together two contrasting beliefs was a weakness others outside the Party would attempt to pick apart. As the case of Rajani Palme Dutt proves, attempting to accommodate a pacifist past with a Bolshevik present was a contradiction even ardent communists struggled to resolve. For the time being, however, the CPGB was obliged to paper over this contradiction, content enough with a small expansion to its membership figures and a clear demarcation from the wider labour movement within Britain.

Chapter Four: CPGB Anti-Militarism, 1920-6

In 1925, Leon Trotsky, though engaged in fighting a bitter leadership struggle with Stalin and other members of the Soviet Politburo following Lenin's death the previous year, characteristically found the time to pick up his pen and write a searing polemic about the current state of affairs in Britain. Writing in the aftermath of the first Labour Government, Trotsky's *Where is Britain Going?* (1925) argued without much reserve that the Labour Party, in 'rejecting force' and believing only 'in the might of "ideas" [...] represent[s] the most counter-revolutionary force of Great Britain, and perhaps of all the world's development'.[1] Were Labour, somehow, to shed this ingrained belief in gradualism and advocate a revolutionary policy along the lines of the British communist movement, then for the ruling Conservative government 'it would be a question of life or death', and lead them to do all in their power to sabotage the Labour movement.[2] Even a descent into civil war, Trotsky pondered, was 'not to be excluded'.[3] Such an analysis, bread and butter stuff for communists, was unique for the contemporary reaction it received in Britain itself. The left-wing journalist, H.N. Brailsford, in his foreword to the English edition, would argue that Trotsky's prediction of a reactionary backlash had in fact already taken place, as a result of the CPGB's sheer existence. To Brailsford, 'the mere appearance in our politics of a tiny revolutionary party has sufficed to frighten the ruling class out of its respect for the liberty of opinion on which democracy is founded'.[4] Even Norman Angell, the prominent pacifist, in seeking to present a riposte to Trotsky in *Must Britain Travel the Moscow Road?* (1926), nevertheless conceded that current events seemed to be supporting Trotsky's analysis. The arrest and trial of twelve

[1] L. Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?* (London, 2012 edition), p. 75.
[2] Ibid., p. 76.
[3] Ibid., pp. 99-100.
[4] Ibid., p. v.

leading CPGB members the previous year for sedition was viewed by Angell as nothing less than 'a danger to rights of free speech', and, far from 'fighting communism', would be 'pretty certain to promote it'.[5] Trotsky's nightmarish vision for Britain, it seemed, was becoming a feasible prediction.

The source of such disquiet, the 'trial of the twelve', was an event that not only brought the CPGB to unprecedented levels of national attention, but, like the 1924 Campbell Case, a similar instance of state action against communist activity, arose as a direct result of the Party's anti-militarist propaganda. As a member of the Communist International, the CPGB, as set out in the 'Twenty-One Conditions' of entry, was obliged to conduct systematic anti-militarist agitation, targeting both the public and armed servicemen. Though Morgan asserts the CPGB established a mere 'thirty-one contacts' within the armed forces by 1925, suggesting such work was ultimately of little consequence, it nevertheless remained an issue of concern for successive governments.[6] The instigation of formal 'Anti-War Weeks' from 1924, commemorating the beginning of the First World War, and the onset of industrial unrest the following year, culminating in the 1926 General Strike, provoked increased fears that communists were subverting soldiers obliged to ensure the continuation of public services. The actions of both Labour and Conservative governments, in seeking to curb such activity, nonetheless backfired. The attempts made to restrict the CPGB's freedom of action merely propelled the Party to widespread national attention, which in itself created unprecedented opportunities for the CPGB to further spread its anti-war propaganda.

[5] N. Angell, *Must Britain Travel the Moscow Road?: With Special Reference to Leon Trotsky's Book Where is Britain Going?* (London, 1926), pp. 26-7.
[6] Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism', p. 233.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the CPGB's anti-militarist activity until 1924. It will be argued that an anti-militarist mind set did much to unite members of the Party in its early years, as a result of both the 1920 Polish-Soviet War and the 1922 Chanak Crisis, yet remained largely ineffective in its results. The second part will focus on the 1924 Campbell Case. While the Labour Government arrested communist newspaper editor J.R. Campbell and made preparations for a sedition trial on charges of incitement to mutiny after he published an article beseeching soldiers to lay down their arms, the case was controversially dropped, primarily for fear of giving the CPGB political martyrdom. It argues that the original purpose of Campbell's article, even at the time, was lost amidst uproar at the Labour Government's actions. Sympathy for the war veteran Campbell, 'a poor wounded soldier, who has fallen amongst wicked Communists', predominated over the fact that the article had been 'part of an international campaign waged by the Communist International on the 10th Anniversary of the World War'.[7] Indeed, far from sitting on this, the CPGB would seek to use the proposed trial to humiliate Labour Ministers who had themselves opposed the First World War. The chapter's third section concentrates on the actions of the Conservative Government that succeeded Labour in office at the end of 1924. The presence of fervent anti-communists within Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's Cabinet ensured an almost immediate demand for the severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain's counter-arguments, that such an openly hostile move would not only give succour to the Soviets, but be a boon for British communists, was seemingly ignored by his colleagues. Instead, increasing fears that communists were taking advantage of current industrial unrest to spread dissent amongst soldiers saw a further hardening of attitudes

[7] LSE, JF2(42)/B19, *My Case by J.R. Campbell*, c.1924, p. 2.

which ultimately culminated in the arrest and trial of the CPGB's leadership. The final section of this chapter examines the 1925 trial itself. It will be maintained that the CPGB's anti-militarist propaganda predominated the proceedings, while newly uncovered files confirm scholarly suspicions of its politicised nature. Not only did the trial, much like the Campbell Case, ultimately backfire for the Government insofar it failed to dampen down on the CPGB's ability to diffuse its anti-militarism, it also gave the Party a measure of sympathy from wider society. Treatment by the state as a supposedly persecuted movement brought substantial, if short-term, support for the Party as a whole.

CPGB Anti-Militarism until 1924

Anti-militarist work proved to be the genesis of the CPGB, with Callaghan demonstrating that the Hands off Russia movement, in which several sections of the No-Conscription Fellowship participated, helped to cement together the British communist movement, as well as create 'their zeal for the defence of Lenin's state', despite 'any real familiarity with the principles of Bolshevism'.[8] *The Communist*, the CPGB's weekly periodical which seamlessly replaced the British Socialist Party's *The Call* in August 1920, noted that anti-war demonstrations amidst the Polish-Soviet war that summer were the 'order of the day'.[9] The coming of many former conscientious objectors from the ILP into Party ranks in 1921, as highlighted in chapter three, also did much to influence the Party's understanding of anti-militarist affairs, albeit in unexpected ways. Despite 'the special obligation to carry on systematic and energetic propaganda in the army',[10] attempts to influence serviceman in the early years of the Party

[8] Callaghan, 'The Communists and the Colonies', p. 5.
[9] 'Local Reports', *The Communist*, 19 August 1920, p. 12.
[10] Degras, *The Communist International,* p. 169.

evidently came to naught. At the height of the mining crisis in April 1921,[11] when it appeared a general strike was looming, the Cabinet registered the possibility of 'Communists enlisting with a view to levanting with their arms'. Such suspicions, however, also extended to 'Sinn Feiners' and 'strikers' themselves,[12] suggesting that these fears reflected the overblown prejudices of the Government at a time of sharp industrial tension at home and ongoing conflict in Ireland, rather than any recognition that the CPGB was conducting a successful campaign of subversion.

The advent of the 1922 Chanak Crisis, a war scare between Britain and Turkey over territory in the Dardanelles which subsequently led to the downfall of David Lloyd George's Coalition Government, saw further anti-war demonstrations. Perhaps stung by accusations the previous year of the supposed insincerity of their anti-militarism, the Party was at pains to propel its revolutionary policy in the event of war. *The Communist* published the Executive Committee's resolution urging:

> Most strongly upon those members of the Party who are liable to be called up as Reservists that, instead of taking up a pacifist attitude, they should respond to the call, determined to do all in their power to ensure that the rank-and-file with whom they are associated shall understand for what they are again being torn from their homes.[13]

At the height of the crisis, during the Party Conference in October, Party Chairman Arthur MacManus was reported as saying in his opening address that 'the Communist Party is

[11] The privatisation of the mining industry in March 1921, following state control during the First World War, brought with it a reduction in pay and a subsequent lockout. It was widely expected that the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers' Federation, who with the Miners Federation of Great Britain formed the Triple Alliance, would strike in support of the miners, prompting the political chaos of a general strike. In the end, the events of 'Black Friday', 15 April 1921, saw these two unions refuse to support the miners, ensuring the crisis petered out. See M. Davies, 'The Triple Alliance, the Miners and Black Friday 1921', *Theory and Struggle*, 122 (2021), pp. 2-7.
[12] TNA, CAB 23/25, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 13 April 1921, p. 2.
[13] 'Make War on War', *The Communist*, 30 September 1922, p. 7.

prepared, not only not to do anything to help stop the war, but to do everything it can in any way possible to dislocate any means for carrying on the war'. MacManus was quick to emphasise that theirs 'is not a pacifist policy by any means. There must be no more war for capitalism. If war there be, it must be civil war, revolution'.[14] Demonstrations against war were widespread across the summer, and *The Communist* announced the Party's intention to participate in anti-war demonstrations organised by the No More War Movement (NMWM), a successor to the No-Conscription Fellowship. The chief demonstration took place at Hyde Park in late July, marking, as well as the imminent threat of war with Turkey,[15] the anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. Communist participation was granted little sympathy. *The Times* noted that alongside 'Girls with hair cut too short' and 'young men whose hair was too long' marched the 'Communists, [who] after joining with other organizations in a march to the park, held meetings of their own, where instead of peace, class war and hatred were preached'. Their involvement was deemed 'particularly impudent' as the 'revolutionaries jeered at the "mouthings" of the earnest-minded men and women on the other platforms, and preached class warfare'.[16] Unsurprisingly, communists were not invited to participate in any future NMWM demonstrations.

In retaliation, the next summer, when more marches were being organised by the NMWM, the CPGB put out a circular to its members directly addressing the movement, intercepted by Special Branch and published in its report on revolutionary organisations for the Cabinet. It argued that the movement was 'largely middle class in character, consisting of Pacifism, I.L.Pism and Free Church', an attitude best demonstrated 'by their excluding the communists

[14] TNA, CAB 24/139, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 12 October 1922, p. 2.
[15] The *Manchester Guardian* commented that the procession was greeted with the sight of newspaper placards etched with '"British Troops for Constantinople"'. See 'The Processions in London', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1922, p. 7.
[16] '"No More War Movement": Demonstration in Hyde Park', *The Times*, 30 July 1922, p. 12.

in London because at a previous year's demonstration Communists took part in the procession headed by a banner on which was inscribed 'NO MORE WAR EXCEPT THE CLASS WAR''. It remained crucial 'to point out to the working class that Imperialist wars will never be abolished under Capitalism and that the working class has nothing to gain by listening to the 'weak-kneed' doctrine of Pacifism'.[17]

From the very beginning of the CPGB's history, therefore, communists were at pains to point out their ideologically correct position with regards to anti-militarism and pacifism, even if they had no opportunity to prove the sincerity and practicality of such beliefs. Nevertheless, it appeared that within other elements of the far-left the memory of the First World War, and in particular the passive resistance conducted by conscientious objectors, remained dominant in directing political responses. *The Worker's Dreadnought*, a left-communist publication whose editor, Sylvia Pankhurst, had been expelled from the CPGB the previous year, encouraged its readers when considering the Chanak Crisis to remember 'the absolutist conscientious objectors', praising the courage which they displayed 'under exceptionally difficult circumstances in the last war' as they 'were young men with wives and little families who went to gaol, leaving their dependants to penury, rather than assist the Great War'.[18] For a self-professed communist publication, one whose editor supposedly suffered from the 'infantile disorder' of Left-Communism,[19] to propound such views suggests a lingering admiration for conscientious objection, in the face of a communist ideology that explicitly rejected any form of passive resistance.

[17] TNA, CAB 24/161, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 19 July 1923, p. 2.
[18] 'Take Courage', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 7 October 1922, p. 4.
[19] See V.I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (London, 1920). This critiqued the left-communist stance in Britain, typified by Pankhurst, which strongly rejected both parliamentary action and communist affiliation to the Labour Party, policies pursued by the CPGB.

The 1924 Campbell Case

The arrest of John Campbell, a prominent communist and then acting editor of the main CPGB periodical *Workers' Weekly*, in the summer of 1924 for publishing an article that instructed members of the British armed forces that 'either in the class war nor in a military war, will you turn your guns on your fellow workers',[20] has been remembered as a key event in leading to the downfall of the first Labour Government. Attorney-General Patrick Hastings had single-handedly authorised the arrest and the preparations for Campbell's trial under the 1797 Incitement to Mutiny Act, exasperating Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald as well as the wider Labour Cabinet, who agreed that in future political prosecutions could not proceed without the explicit approval of the Cabinet. MacDonald was aware of the propaganda opportunity for the CPGB and commented that if it had been 'put to me I should not have sanctioned it. I know the men and the game',[21] later writing that 'nothing that has happened since we came into office has roused more opposition and done us more harm than this Communist prosecution'.[22] Hasting's offer to abandon the case was accepted by the Cabinet but provoked widespread uproar. Accusations within Parliament, that there had been 'improper interference on the part of the political executive with the decision of the Attorney General' reinforced a belief that the Government's actions, combined with ongoing negotiations with the Soviet Union over a financial treaty, were tangible proof of Labour sympathies for Communism.[23] This would eventually lead to a vote of confidence, which the

[20] Quoted from L. Chester, S. Fay and H. Young, *The Zinoviev Letter*, (London, 1967), p. 6.
[21] TNA, CAB 23/48, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 6 August 1924, p. 5.
[22] TNA, HO 144/4684, Letter from the Prime Minister to Arthur Henderson, 23 August 1924.
[23] HC Deb 8 October 1924, vol 177, col 592, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1924-10-08/debates/e113376f-7abe-4e32-a614-cf26f1c5b153/Attorney-GeneralSExplanation?highlight=campbell#contribution-57260638-4993-4346-b062-48aa7e843c3e [Last accessed 5 July 2025].

minority Government lost, and a new election which, as well as witnessing a furore over the nefarious Zinoviev Letter, brought in a new Conservative administration.

To the CPGB, however, the Campbell Case merely followed a continuation of the Party's anti-militarist activity, with Campbell's letter part of the Party's yearly Anti-War Week campaigns which occurred every August, commemorating, like the NMWM campaigns, the anniversary of Britain's entry into the First World War. Following Campbell's arrest, General Secretary Albert Inkpin, in a circular intercepted by MI5 who deemed it a 'long screed attempting to justify their anti-militarist propaganda', made it clear that Campbell's appeal 'was issued in connection with the Party's special campaign against war, the essence of which was to declare that under capitalism war is inevitable and that until capitalism was smashed and the rule of the workers established it is impossible to prevent war'. Inkpin also felt moved to cite Campbell's 'service in France during the war, where he won the military medal for bravery and lost half of both feet'.[24] Following his arrest, Wyndham Childs asked MI5 Director Vernon Kell to provide details of Campbell's war record, as 'he is posing as a war hero and I rather wanted to get a look at his combat sheet'. Kell replied, doubtless begrudgingly, that 'it is quite correct that he has the Military Medal and that his conduct appears to be good'.[25] In the immediate aftermath of Campbell's arrest the Party was keen to make as much political capital as possible, and play MacDonald's 'game'. A special Politburo meeting held to discuss the incident saw a huge increase in the numbers present from previous meetings, and even included representatives from the French and German Communist Parties. It was decided that 'the utmost political value [be] obtained from the prosecution', that 'a pamphlet be issued by the Central Committee reiterating the policy of the Party on the question of war', and 'a

[24] TNA, KV 2/1186, Circular CPGB Letter from Albert Inkpin, 6 August 1924.
[25] TNA, KV 2/1186, Correspondence between Wyndham Childs and Sir Vernon Kell, 7 – 11 August 1924.

special recruiting campaign be held during the second week in September, to take advantage of the ground gained during Anti-War Week, and the feeling against the prosecution of Campbell, to increase the membership of the Party'.[26] The Party also took great value in attention being called 'to the fact that most of the Labour M.P.s have at one time or another supported resolutions passed at I.L.P. and Labour Party Congresses to the effect that war must be fought by all means, including the general strike, which would produce a revolutionary situation'. Most strikingly, they planned for Labour politicians to be put in the witness box for Campbell's case 'to identify themselves with the statements for which Campbell was on trial or to demonstrate that all the resolutions they had supported amounted to nothing but pious phrases'.[27] It was clear that the Party wished to place public attention on the Labour Party's ambiguous role during the First World War. Though many within the Parliamentary Labour Party had supported the war effort, with Home Secretary Arthur Henderson serving for a time in Lloyd George's War Cabinet, current Chancellor Phillip Snowden had utterly opposed the war, while the Prime Minister himself, due to his own anti-war stance, had felt obliged to stand down as Labour leader in 1914.

Hasting's abandonment of the case prevented the CPGB from utilising an opportunity to comprehensively discredit the Labour Party. Though the Cabinet was dismissive of the CPGB's ploy, it is interesting to note that both the Prime Minister and Home Secretary felt obliged to address the result of a possible appearance as witnesses to Campbell's prosecution. Ramsay MacDonald, in a letter to Home Secretary Arthur Henderson at the end of August, noted that 'I see that a statement was made by Inkpen [sic] that I was to be summoned as a witness and that awkward questions were to be put to me', batting this away by asserting that the CPGB

[26] BOA, CP/CENT/PC/01/03, Meeting of CPGB Central Executive Committee, 7 August 1924.
[27] Ibid.

'could have put no awkward questions to me, as I have always said that to try and create mutiny in the army was both mischievous and cowardly'.[28] Three days later, in a letter to Lord Stamfordham, the King's Private Secretary, Henderson felt obliged to defend the Government's actions to the Monarch by noting that a prosecution of Campbell 'would do more harm by advertising the Communists than any harm which would follow the publication of the article, and that it would appear that far more importance was attached to the views and activities of the Communists than in fact they deserve'. In terms of the 'awkward questions', Henderson argued that it 'was almost needless to say at the date of the Cabinet's decision we had no knowledge whatever of any such intention, and if we had known of it, it is quite certain that the prosecution would have been proceeded with […] No such "awkward questions" could have been put to me'.[29] The CPGB may have lamented the lost opportunity, particularly the chance to discredit the Labour Party, as, after all, even if being called witness to Campbell's trial would not at all perturb Labour's Cabinet Ministers, communist Helen Crawfurd reminisced that it would nonetheless 'place the I.L.P. pacifists and conscientious objectors in a peculiar light if the Government pursued this prosecution'.[30]

The abandonment of the prosecution did not end the furore. As well as seeming to confirm to the parliamentary opposition that Labour was complicit with communism, thus eventually triggering the general election that was held in October, the Comintern itself ordered as much ground be made from the affair, with communist parliamentary candidates in the election ordered to 'distribute and sign Campbell's appeal' while Campbell himself should 'issue another manifesto to the soldiers' and sailors'.[31] Special Branch reports to the Cabinet

[28] TNA, HO 144/4684, Letter from the Prime Minister to Arthur Henderson, 23 August 1924.
[29] TNA, HO 144/4684, Letter from Arthur Henderson to Lord Stamfordham, 26 August 1924.
[30] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/10/1, Helen Crawfurd Memoirs, n.d., 262-3.
[31] J. Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919-1943 Documents: Volume II, 1923-1928*. (London, 1971), p. 172.

certainly noted that in the 'immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of the case […] a decided increase in seditious speeches'.[32] Detractors within Parliament would also comment that 'the law has been abased and [the] people who broke it have, ever since, been boasting constantly that the Government dare not enforce it against them'.[33] It appears, however, that the earlier emphasis on Campbell's war service may have been too effective. Campbell himself would profess irritation about such coverage, asserting 'that while I am an ex-Service man, I am also a revolutionary agitator'. The attempts made 'to deal with this case on personal grounds obscures the real vital issue', namely that of 'the struggle against capitalism and war by every possible means'.[34] Albert Inkpin was obliged to remind the Party's parliamentary candidates that it was 'extremely important that the class issues raised by the Campbell case should not be covered up by a flood of sickly sentimentality about "an innocent young crippled soldier, etc."' Instead a focus on the 'class significance' of the Party's anti-militarist in the election message was necessary.[35] Furthermore, in the aftermath of the election, the Party leadership was forced to remind members that the release of Campbell was not due to pressure from the masses, as was typically believed, but by the Labour Government's 'Capitalist Masters', who had realised that the mass dissatisfaction created by the case would have been favourable for the CPGB, and thus put an end to it.[36] The Comintern itself was more stark when evaluating the events, particularly of the October election campaign, in which ultimately 'too much was made of the Campbell Case' in contrast to other important factors

[32] ChAC, CHAR 22/78, Report on the Communist Movement in Great Britain for the Period of June 1924-February 1925, p. 11.
[33] HC Deb 8 October 1924, vol 177, col 596, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1924-10-08/debates/e113376f-7abe-4e32-a614-cf26f1c5b153/Attorney-GeneralSExplanation?highlight=campbell#contribution-57260638-4993-4346-b062-48aa7e843c3e [Last accessed 5 July 2025].
[34] LSE, JF2(42)/B19, op. cit., p. 11.
[35] TNA, KV 3/26, Letter from Albert Inkpin to Communist Parliamentary Candidates, c. 1924.
[36] Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [Hereafter RGASPI] F.495.OP.38.D.7, Theses, Proposals, Resolutions of the Politburo of the Communist Party of England, c. 1924, p. 40.

such as the international situation.[37] The CPGB had been found wanting, and worse was to come.

A New Government

The aftermath of the election at the end of 1924 brought with it new challenges for the CPGB. Prominent anti-communists were coming to the fore in the new Conservative administration, particularly the new Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson Hicks. Sir Wyndham Childs, who after the First World War had been appointed Assistant Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, recollected his hopes in the new government, and saw in Joynson Hicks 'a man who had the courage and energy to deal with the menace of Communism. I sincerely believe his enthusiasm almost exceeded my own, and had he had his way, there would be no Communist party in England to-day'.[38] Though Labour's Attorney-General Patrick Hastings was penitent for ordering the prosecution of Campbell in the first place and had himself suggested dropping it, the new Government remained convinced that the prosecution was abandoned entirely due to pressure from within the Labour Party. It was decided in December that the Home Secretary should publicly declare that Labour had limited the previous Attorney General's freedom of action. It was also thought prudent to remove MacDonald's instructions that cabinet agreement had to be on record before political prosecutions could take place.[39] Such a measure gave Joynson Hicks greater independence to tackle the communist problem, and he used this power extensively.

Some months later, in May 1925, the Home Secretary brought the cabinet's attention to the upcoming CPGB congress later that month. He advised that 'whatever British communists

[37] Ibid., p. 85.
[38] Childs, op. cit., 210.
[39] TNA, CAB 23/49, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 3 December 1924, p. 10.

may do' it was unacceptable to allow foreign communists to arrive in Britain for the Congress. Despite accepting that 'such action would of course be immediately challenged', Joynson Hicks was 'quite willing to take the responsibility of adopting these steps as Home Secretary' and 'state quite frankly that the Government mean to take all the steps in their power to prevent alien communists from coming here to foment unrest'.[40] As the *Daily Telegraph* noted, this made him 'the target of a great deal of contemptuous abuse, most of it coming from quarters in which the acceptance of Communist principles would be indignantly disclaimed'.[41] Nevertheless, 'Jix', as he was nicknamed, always ensured domestic communism was his main target. In notes prepared for a speech explaining his reasoning behind preventing foreign delegates attending the congress, the Home Secretary picked out various quotes emphasising the CPGB's revolutionary views, before commenting that those 'are the people who are holding their annual congress at Glasgow at the end of the month. Is there any reason why facilities should be granted to aliens of a similar pursuasion [sic] to come here and confer with them and encourage them in their activities?'.[42] Similar speeches led to the Soviet Plenipotentiary to the United Kingdom, Christian Rakovsky, approaching the Foreign Office to complain. Though there had been constant attacks against the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Zinoviev Letter affair, 'of these he did not complain, but he deplored them', Rakovsky felt Joynson-Hicks' defamatory comments contrasted heavily with the attitudes of both Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain and the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, which had 'been in every respect correct and had led him to hope that their attitude would assist him in his task of gradually developing more friendly relations between the two countries'. In

[40] TNA, CAB 24/173, Communist Congress at Glasgow: Memorandum by the Home Secretary, 2 May 1925, pp. 4-5.
[41] 'Communist Propaganda', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 June 1925, quoted from TNA, HO 144/5318.
[42] TNA, HO 144/5318, Notes Prepared for Jix's Speech on 28/5/25.

particular, Rakovsky was incensed that Joynson Hicks' condemnations were being openly reported in the press, and preferred any complaints regarding Soviet behaviour to be in the form of 'confidential communications, so as to avoid any quarrels reaching the public'.[43]

It can be surmised that Joynson Hicks' comments would have also frustrated the Foreign Secretary. Back in December 1924, Austen Chamberlain had circulated a memorandum to his fellow cabinet members that claimed to describe the current views of the Soviet government. Bruised by the impact of the Zinoviev letter (it was wryly commented that the letter 'had come as a great shock to the British "bourgeoisie"' although it would have 'contained nothing which would cause any great surprise to members of the Communist party'), it was ultimately concluded that any 'rupture with England would […] be directly harmful to Russian interests'. Soviet diplomacy should therefore 'be directed in the main to preparing the ground for fresh negotiations with Great Britain' as a complete severance of relations would 'only complicate the situation and snatch from under the feet of the British proletariat the necessary ground for bringing pressure to bear upon the British government'.[44] Such a memorandum, while by no means minimising Soviet hostility towards Britain, helped to support Austen Chamberlain's beliefs in the virtues of pursuing a relatively moderate form of diplomacy with the Soviet Union over the coming years. Indeed, as Schinness argues, in sharp contrast to vehemently anti-Bolshevik Cabinet members such as Joynson Hicks and Winston Churchill, Chamberlain was undeniably a 'moderate', who desired both continued diplomatic and trading relations with the Soviet Union.[45] With the wider Conservative Party unsympathetic to such a position, however, contemporaries deemed his viewpoint untenable, with one political correspondent

[43] TNA, HO 144/5318, Note by Sir W. Tyrell, 6 May 1925.
[44] ChAC, HAIL 2/2/6, Memorandum: Zinovieff Letter, 22 December 1924, pp. 3-4.
[45] R. Schinness, 'The Conservative Party and Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1925-7', *European Studies Review*, 7 (1977), p. 394.

estimating that 'Mr. Chamberlain will find great difficulty in maintaining the attitude at present attributed to him'.[46] Only days after Rakovsky's interjection, the *Daily Mail* reported that a group of Conservative back-benchers had visited the Foreign Secretary 'to urge the desirability of the Government adopting a strong line in dealing with the treasonable activities of Bolsheviks in this country'. Chamberlain frustrated the group by merely appearing 'to have laid stress on the need for treading warily'.[47] These attitudes were not, however, a form of appeasement. Schinness has commented that Chamberlain's attitudes to the Soviet Union merely marked a different approach to previous foreign ministers, be it Lord Curzon's 'habitual provocations' or MacDonald's 'conciliation without reciprocal concessions'.[48] Convinced the Soviets were desperate for British trade and industrial expertise, Chamberlain believed an overtly hard-line approach would dissuade them from coming to the bargaining table. As such, he considered a policy of 'aloofness' sufficient enough to ensure a relatively healthy continuation of Anglo-Soviet relations.

Setting out his approach at a Cabinet meeting in July 1925, Chamberlain informed the assembled ministers that with the 'Bolshevist system' dependant 'in essence on its extension to other countries', it was important for Britain to maintain an attitude of 'indifference' towards Russia, as that was 'what most disconcerted the Soviet Government'. The more the Soviet Union was denounced 'the greater was their satisfaction'. While Britain's formal relations with the communist state should be 'as distant as possible', they must nevertheless remain intact. It was therefore hugely important for the Government to ignore those calling for a severance in diplomatic relations, ever present since the Zinoviev Letter affair, while

[46] 'Cabinet & Red Plotters', *Daily Mail*, 9 May 1925, p. 9.
[47] 'Cabinet & Red Plotters', *Daily Mail*, 12 May 1925, p. 9.
[48] Schinness, op. cit., p. 394.

caution was advised in fellow ministers' public statements (perhaps a nod at Joynson Hicks) when discussing Russia. Chamberlain was also at pains to remind his peers that a general silence was important not only to frustrate Soviet ambitions of expansion, but to avoid assisting 'the extremists in this country at the expense of the moderate elements in the Opposition Parties which were opposed to Bolshevism'.[49] Though there were mutterings around the table that it would be hard to resist referring 'to the failure of their [Soviet] economic policy', his strategy was approved.[50]

'Red Friday' and After

The events of 'Red Friday' on 31 July 1925, only two weeks after Chamberlain had set out his vision for Anglo-Soviet relations to his fellow ministers, brought greater focus on British communists in light of the industrial tensions which would culminate in the General Strike ten months later. The Government's actions in providing a subsidy to maintain miner's wages, thus delaying inevitable strike action, caused great anger with Conservative backbenchers. One MP confided to his diary that 'a lot of our people are furious with the Government for surrendering to the extremists', although the same diarist claimed to have talked to the Prime Minister who felt 'the miners' case a fair and reasonable one', while 'a General Strike could not be faced on an issue on which the Party itself was divided'.[51] That the tensions of the mining dispute had been exacerbated, if not created, by communists was a common trope within the Conservative Party. One Home Office document written in the aftermath of Red Friday argued that though 'the basic causes of the dispute in the mining industry were economic' it could not be denied that 'on the industrial field as a whole, communist

[49] TNA, CAB 23/50, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 8 July 1925, p. 4.
[50] Ibid.
[51] S. Ball, ed., *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Diaries of Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1924-35* (London, 1992), p. 70.

propaganda has made a great advance in the last twelve months', and therefore needed to be urgently combatted, both domestically and abroad.[52] Chamberlain himself was convinced that Red Friday altered nothing in terms of relations with the Soviet Union, but it was agreed that 'Communist agents […] should be carefully watched'.[53]

Knowing a general strike was inevitable once the subsidy to the mining industry ran out in early 1926, the Government appeared keen to puncture communist influence both within and beyond the industrial field. A memorandum by the Director of Public Prosecutions, Archibald Bodkin, was written in September 1925, expressing disquiet at the influence of a legal political party that 'is ably led and highly organised', with the audacity to ensure it 'no longer works in the dark, but apparently has sufficient confidence in itself and its power to work, not underground, but in the open'.[54] Bodkin argued that current objects of the CPGB were '(1) To promote industrial unrest (2) To foster antagonism between employers and employed (3) To prolong the duration of strikes and to extend them as widely as possible and (4) To permeate Trades Unions'. He also noted that copies of 'Campbell's 1924 article had been recently distributed amongst communist factory propaganda'.[55] Seeing Britain's armed forces, or the 'Bourgeois Counter Revolutionary Shock Troops' as a serious obstacle to any successful strike action, and indeed, revolution, Bodkin commented that communists sought to 'undermine the allegiance and discipline of troops'. These actions had dominated not just 'the anti-war week campaigns of 1924 (Campbell's Case) but the anti-war campaign of 1925, and speeches and literature issued from King Street [CPGB headquarters] deal with this

[52] TNA, HO 144/5318, Communist Influence on the General Council of the Trade Union Congress, 12 August 1925, p. 4.
[53] TNA, CAB 23/50, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 5 August 1925, p. 1.
[54] TNA, HO 144/6682, Memorandum 'Re. The Communist Party and Sedition, pp. 8-9.
[55] Ibid., p. 7.

topic'.[56] Certainly the CPGB had claimed that its 1925 Anti-War Week campaign, novel as it was in the use of 'a large number of sticky-backs',[57] made sure that in view 'of the industrial conflicts (struggle in the mining industry) the main feature of this week's propaganda had to be the danger of the utilisation of troops for the suppression of the strike movement'.[58] The security services, in step with current attitudes prevailing within the Government, sought to portray communist activity as following one long insidious pattern, beginning during the First World War, when the '"No Conscription [Fellowship]"', a 'revolutionary element', had been actively engaged in 'seriously endeavouring to disseminate seditious propaganda in H.M. Forces'.[59] The only solution to combat such activity was to proceed 'under an Act of 1797',[60] and Bodkin certainly felt 'that there is evidence of complicity in seditious conspiracy'.[61] It is clear that attention was paid to the memorandum. At the beginning of October, Joynson Hicks informed the cabinet that he was 'keeping under observation the activities and speeches of Communists in this country, with a view to such action as might be appropriate at the proper time'.[62] Two days later, on 9 October, Hogg circulated a memorandum to the cabinet entitled 'The Present Law in regard to Sedition and Strikes'. It again highlighted the concern that there would likely be an 'attempt to prevent the armed forces of the Crown from carrying out their duties in the event of a strike'.[63] However, it was entirely possible, due to the fact that 'much

[56] Ibid., p. 9.
[57] The frequency of these stickers being found in a variety of locations irritated the Home Office, see TNA, HO 144/22372. One Special Branch report even notes them appearing in the latrines at Sheffield's Hillsborough Barracks. See ChAC, CHAR 22/82, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 20 August 1925, p. 2.
[58] TNA, KV 3/18, Information Material of the EC of the YCI, 8 September 1925, p. 4.
[59] TNA, KV 4/295, 'Summary, from 1919 to September 1925, of Communist Efforts to Undermine the Loyalty of H.M. Forces', c. October 1925, p. 1.
[60] TNA, HO 144/6682, Memorandum 'Re. The Communist Party and Sedition', p. 9
[61] Ibid., p. 10.
[62] TNA, CAB 23/51, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 7 October 1925, p. 4.
[63] TNA, CAB 24/175, 'The Present Law in regard to Sedition and Strikes: Memorandum by the Attorney General', 9 October 1925, p. 3.

of this law is archaic', for a communist to avoid being convicted by the 1797 Act, and thus 'there is nothing to prevent a Communist from stirring up discontent or giving vent to the most revolutionary sentiments'.[64] Though pondering possible amendments to current law, Hogg nevertheless emphasised that 'any proposal which avoids trial by jury is bound to be very jealously scrutinised'.[65] It can be surmised that any prosecution in the current climate needed a public trial, whether through an 'archaic' law or not. Four days later, assenting to Bodkin's own view the previous month, Hogg informed the cabinet that he believed enough evidence was available to justify the arrest and prosecution of leading members of the CPGB. Highly revealing of the antagonistic mind-set of the Government at this point in time, Hogg asked the Cabinet if there could be any factors 'in the national or industrial situation which rendered a prosecution undesirable', to which he received a reply in the negative.[66] The arrests, engulfing nearly the entire Executive Committee of the CPGB, began the next day, accompanied by a large-scale police raid on the party headquarters, and led to what Mowat has termed 'the chief instance of a purely political trial in the interwar years'.[67]

Around this time, the Labour Party held its first conference since leaving power the previous year. For Labour, not only had the Campbell Case's anti-militarist tones threatened the legitimacy of its Government, the Zinoviev Letter, coming as it did mere days before the polls, was seen to exacerbate the communist influence in Britain, and with it Labour complicity with its aims. It was clear something drastic had to be done to combat the CPGB. J.R. Clynes, Labour's deputy leader, argued in the aftermath of the 1924 election that strong action was needed to finally combat the communist influence as it 'has cost the Labour Party such a

[64] Ibid., p. 4.
[65] Ibid.
[66] TNA, CAB 23/51, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 13 October 1925, p. 2.
[67] C.L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940* (London, 1956), p. 297.

heavy price that we cannot, by leaving the Communists alone, further imperil the present position and future triumph of the Labour Party'.[68] At its September conference, two resolutions were passed which ensured no communist could ever interfere with the Labour Party infrastructure again. The resolutions, that no communist could stand for parliament under Labour backing, and that no communist could be a member of any organisation affiliated to the Labour Party, were all heavily backed, by 2,954,000 to 321,000 and 2,870,000 to 321,000 respectively.[69] That the conference took place between 29 September and 2 October, mere days prior to the Cabinet decision to arrest the CPGB's leadership, fundamentally shaped the perceptions of many British communists, and created the view that Liverpool had encouraged the government to arrest its leadership. Bob Stewart, acting leader following the arrests, felt that there was no doubt in his mind that Labour's Liverpool conference 'laid the foundation for the sweeping offensive against the working class which followed in 1925 and 1926',[70] while Mick Jenkins went further in his memoirs and argued that the 'action of the Baldwin Government was concerted with the action of the MacDonald leadership'.[71] Such a viewpoint became cemented as time passed. At the 1926 CPGB Congress, Thomas Bell noted that throughout 1925 there had been a 'persistent demand from the Tory Party for the Government to take action and suppress our Party'. He went on to argue that:

> The Government knew in their impending attack that our Party would prove a more formidable obstacle to the smooth working of their plans than the official Labour Party leaders. That was the meaning of their press barrage against us then. And when the Liverpool Conference of the Labour

[68] 'Communism and Revolution: A Menace to Labour's Progress', *The New Leader*, 21 November 1924, p. 9.
[69] TNA, PRO 30/69/1830, 'Where Labour Stands', c. 1925.
[70] Stewart, *Breaking the Fetters*, 165.
[71] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/1/1, Mick Jenkins Autobiographical Material, n.d., p. 36.

> Party – at the instigation of MacDonald, Thomas and the Liberal-Labour leaders – once more denounced our Party, we were at the mercy of the wolves. The Government decided to act.[72]

While such an argument is dubious to say the least (one need only examine the Labour response to the later communist trial to refute this assertion, of which below), it remained an entrenched communist viewpoint, and helped to poison relations between the two parties for the next decade.

The Trial of the Twelve

The trial itself took place across the course of eleven days in November 1925 at the Old Bailey in London. The twelve defendants, with one or two exceptions, effectively made up the entire CPGB leadership.[73] Much of the evidence used as part of the prosecution case was provided by Party literature sold to the general public and was, as Bell recalled to the Party Congress the next year, mostly 'anti-war material'.[74] Willie Gallacher would draw attention to the contradictions contained in the fact that such literature formed the main evidence for their sedition trial yet – far from being conspiratorial - remained freely available for purchase. The jury was informed that 'there is not one iota of evidence against us other than these publications that any of you, members of the jury, could have purchased any day in the Bookshop during the past several years if you had come in with a few shillings in your pocket'.[75] Campbell argued that the document which had provoked such furore in 1924, part of this trial's evidence, would have 'been broadcast in the whole of the Press of the country, so that civilians and soldiers everywhere could not have missed it. Yet because it is

[72] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, 'The Attack on Our Party' Section.
[73] The defendants were Thomas Bell, J.R. Campbell, Ernest Cant, William Gallacher, Walter Hannington, Albert Inkpin, Arthur MacManus, J.T. Murphy, Robin Page Arnot, Harry Pollitt, William Rust and Tom Wintringham.
[74] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 15.
[75] LSE, H-2 (42)/B17, *The Communist Party on Trial: William Gallacher's Defence*, c. 1925, pp. 2-3.

republished in 1925, a great noise is made about it and you are asked to take a very serious view of the question'.[76]

Nevertheless, the prosecution case, led by Attorney General Douglas Hogg, was determined to concentrate on this material, seeking to prove that communists sought 'the seduction from their allegiance of the armed forces of the Crown'. The key task of any communist, Hogg argued, was to corrupt soldiers 'so that they could start civil war if ordered to take part in a foreign war'. A 'more dangerous doctrine could not be conceived', Hogg informed the jury, before inviting them to consider the possible results had there been mutinies 'when the last war broke out'.[77] Largely representing themselves, the defendants would put forward the less than dynamic argument that their programme was '"an academic proposition"', with 'no evidence that any man, woman or child in this country had been influenced to do anything by any of the documents'.[78] In any case, 'preoccupied with the necessity for making a political as distinct from legal defence',[79] the defendants compared their own situation to the 1912-14 Ulster crisis in order to 'denounce what they saw as the mockery of capitalist justice'.[80] Numerous Conservatives, including current Cabinet members Joynson Hicks and Lord Birkenhead, had acted as 'sponsors of rebellion' in encouraging the formation of militias amongst Irish loyalists to prevent the implementation of the then proposed Home Rule Bill for Ireland.[81] Several communists, when later writing their memoirs, cite this event as significant. Helen Crawfurd, a key supporter of women's suffrage prior to the First World War,

[76] LSE, IF2 (42)/B18, *The Communist Party on Trial: J.R. Campbell Defence*, c. 1925, p. 27.
[77] 'Trial of Communists', *Gloucester Citizen*, 16 November 1925, p. 6.
[78] 'Communist Trial', *Western Times*, 20 November 1925, p. 12.
[79] T. Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London, 1941), p. 282.
[80] Macfarlane, op. cit., 137.
[81] M. Shefftz, 'The Impact of the Ulster Crisis (1912-1914) on the British Labour Party', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 5 (1973), p. 169.

described the Ulster Revolt as having 'a far reaching influence on my political development',[82] while Molly Murphy, another former suffragette, expanded further and harshly noted that whilst the Asquith Government had embarked on a 'policy of violently suppressing the militant women, [Edward] Carson [a key opponent of Home Rule] and his militants were openly preaching and preparing for an armed revolt in Northern Ireland'.[83] Such recollections also retained a potency for those outside the Communist Party. Norman Angell was quick to label Joynson Hicks as a 'Conservative Home Secretary who had himself been a preacher of mutiny and unconstitutional methods'.[84] The ILP would later pass a resolution stating that 'political persecutions of this character' contrasted 'with the liberty accorded to Lord Birkenhead, Lord Carson, and other prominent members of the Conservative Party', and was thus 'calculated to bring British justice into contempt'.[85] Such a defence made no impact on the court itself however, with the bored judge commenting that these events were 'a long time ago', to which Bell could only retort '"You are taking us back to 1797"'.[86]

The outcome was predictable. In summing up the trial, prior to sentencing, the judge ably described the current political atmosphere by falsely addressing the now guilty defendants as 'members of an illegal party carrying on illegal work in this country and it must stop'.[87] Though determined to imprison those defendants who had previously been charged and convicted, he surprisingly offered the remaining offenders their freedom if they agreed to have nothing more to do with communism, a deal none took up. This, in the view of Bell, confirmed 'the whole character and purpose of the prosecution […] we were not being prosecuted for our

[82] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/10/1, Helen Crawfurd Memoirs, p. 12.
[83] BOA, CP/IND/MURPH/1/2, Molly Murphy: A Prospective Biography, c. 1960s, p. 17.
[84] Angell, *Must Britain Travel the Moscow Road?*, p. 25.
[85] BOA, ILP 1926 Whitley Bay Conference Report, p. 98.
[86] Bell, *Pioneering Days*, 282.
[87] Manchester John Rylands Library [Hereafter MJRL], RMD1/5/3, Central Criminal Court Proceedings, 25 November 1925, p. 8.

opinions, but for belonging to this Communist Party'.[88] Certainly, this whim of the judge caused concern beyond communist circles. *The Sunday Times* felt obliged to comment that while they hoped 'the right to preach and advocate whatever theory of government or society' remained 'a traditional right of our people', it could not refrain from commenting that 'the implications in Mr. Justice SWIFT'S summing up may seem to trench upon this right'.[89] Regional newspapers also followed the trial with great interest, and the *Derby Daily Telegraph* was absolute in arguing that 'the present Government would have been well-advised had they treated the loose vapouring's of these Communist advocates with appropriate indifference'. Now, 'they will certainly make the most of their crown of martyrdom'.[90] Other periodicals, however, could not neglect the current political and industrial tensions at play with regards to the trial. Readers were reminded that communists 'print and circulate appeals to our soldiers and sailors […] who try to prevent industrial disturbances from developing into riots and civil war'. In any case, it was argued that 'we handle revolutionaries more tenderly than any other country'. Whilst 'in Russia those who incite to mutiny and rebellion are guilty of offences punishable by death', in Britain 'we impose sentences of six or twelve months'.[91]

The custodial sentences imposed for a crime so severe as sedition were indeed twelve months for those previously imprisoned, and six for those sentenced for the first time. Mowat has argued that this proved the defendants were 'put out of the way for the duration of any [industrial] trouble which might arise',[92] (the General Strike was at this point only six months away) and this view has been naturally reinforced by communists and sympathetic historians,

[88] Bell, op. cit., 282.
[89] 'The Communist Trial', *The Sunday Times*, 29 November 1925, p. 14. Capitalisation in the original.
[90] 'Is Communism Illegal?', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1925, p. 2.
[91] 'Missioners who Mislead', *Cornishman*, 9 December 1925, p. 4.
[92] Mowat, op. cit., p. 297.

most notably Klugmann.[93] MacFarlane has suggested that though it appeared the Government was ridding itself of an irritant in preparation for the General Strike, the methods used were hardly ruthless, leaving as it did several members of the Central Committee able to participate in the Strike once their six months sentence had been served.[94] However, as Ewing and Gearty have more recently asserted, 'the authorities were highly unlikely to have been able to predict the relatively light sentences for offences so grave'.[95] The opinion of Holmes, that 'the trial turned on politics and that those imprisoned were, in effect, political prisoners', remains perhaps the most accurate assessment of the trial.[96]

As part of this research, a Freedom of Information Request to access records from this period was submitted to the Metropolitan Police. These documents confirm the politicised nature of this trial. Correspondence within Special Branch, who had taken responsibility for the arrests, highlights a lack of illusion as to the trial's real purpose. William Horwood, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, wrote in the aftermath to Archibald Bodkin, the Director of Prosecutions, that:

> Our work in respect to this illegal organisation has been going on steadily for such a long time now, and is so familiar in every detail to the members of the Special Branch, that it did not require any extensive investigation at the last moment; we have been waiting the order "to go" for the last three and a half years.[97]

[93] Klugmann, J. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Volume II,* p. 80.
[94] Macfarlane, op. cit., p. 138.
[95] Ewing and Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties*, p. 145.
[96] C. Holmes, 'The Raid on the Headquarters of the CPGB. H.O.144/6719/485074: The Closed File', *Bulletin – Society for the Study of Labour History*, 40 (1980), p. 23.
[97] Records of the Metropolitan Police Office [Hereafter MEPO] 38/20, Letter from William Horwood to Archibald Bodkin, 27 November 1925.

Horwood also emphasised to his officers that those 'of us in the know realise that the case was the culminating point of four years' real hard work […] which was often made harder by the excuses that were openly made by some who were for the time being in authority over us'.[98] An echo of Wyndham Childs' own frustrations with a government reluctant to fully tackle the communist threat, the current industrial tensions appeared to have finally persuaded the Government to act in a way far bolder than previous governments would have done, having, by and large, been concerned with minimising the propaganda opportunities communists could make from political persecutions.

Though the passing of the 1920 Emergency Powers Act allowed Lloyd George to retain the extensive powers of the 1914 Defence of the Realm Act in peacetime,[99] creating tensions with the political left,[100] an element of caution was shown in dealing with individuals, nearly always communists, accused of sedition. In sharp contrast to the opinion of MI5, Albert Inkpin was still, in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, considered small fry, and when it was proposed to prosecute him in January 1918, the War Cabinet asserted that 'if prosecutions were to be made, they should be directed at more influential persons than Mr. Inkpin'.[101] A year later, in the aftermath of the War, Edward Shortt, Home Secretary, was to argue that in general, prosecutions for seditious speeches 'did more harm than good'.[102] It appeared that this cautious policy was followed even after Lloyd George resigned. His

[98] MEPO 38/20, Statement by William Horwood, 29 December 1925.
[99] It was first used in 1921 in the run up to 'Black Friday', when the Transport Workers and Railway Unions refused to join the miners on strike following the privatisation of the mining industry and the reduction of miners' wages. It was also used extensively during the 1926 General Strike. It is thought Ramsay MacDonald may have considered implementing the Act in response to the 1924 Dockers Strike.
[100] Harry Pollitt was later to mock the Labour Party in their response to the Act, they were to 'tearfully exclaim, "Don't do this or that, you are the best friends the Communists ever had. Here we are trying to maintain the worker's belief in democracy, while you do the very things that smash democracy"'. See BOA, CP/CENT/IND/11/03, 'The Tenth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the RILU', c. 1927, pp. 135-6.
[101] TNA, CAB 23/5, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 31 January 1918, p. 3.
[102] TNA, CAB 23/9, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 7 February 1919, p. 8.

replacement, in a wholly Conservative administration for the first time since 1905, Andrew Bonar Law, echoed such calm when his Cabinet was forced to ponder a National Unemployed Worker's Movement demonstration at Trafalgar Square that had seen the utterance of seditious speeches. The Cabinet contented itself with ensuring attention was brought to the movement's 'Communist character', believing any stronger action in the form of prosecution would merely unite the Labour Party against the Government in the House of Commons and give 'a wide advertisement to the Communists'.[103] Even more recently, and infamously, the Labour Government had demurred at the idea of prosecuting Campbell, and were to all intents and purposes following a precedent established by Lloyd George. As Kiel notes, such actions highlight that while successive governments following the First World War were 'prepared to take drastic measures […] the necessity never materialised'.[104] Instead, a mixture of 'limited concessions and targeted repression' remained the best course of action in combatting industrial and political unrest. While Albert Inkpin was admittedly convicted in 1921,[105] this reflected the 'moral panic' then endemic within British society over the 'alleged influence of subversive activities of communist agents and the threat of revolution'.[106] With such an atmosphere having clearly dissipated by 1925, the actions of the Baldwin Government, in arresting almost the entire CPGB leadership, appear almost incongruous.

Though the Conservative Party had been incensed by communist activity and regarded it as responsible for the industrial tensions that year, it can be suggested that this certainly was not a view emanating from within the CPGB itself. Membership at the time of the arrests was

[103] TNA, CAB 23/39, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 20 November 1922, p. 488.
[104] A. Kiel, *Emergency Powers and the Home Fronts in Britain and Germany during the First World War* (Oxford, 2025), p. 210.
[105] That Inkpin was charged for possessing Comintern literature aptly reflects the hysteria of the time. See Ewing and Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties*, pp. 105-112.
[106] Kiel, *Emergency Powers*, p. 210.

barely five thousand,[107] while Special Branch reports to the Cabinet found that throughout 1925 the CPGB was not particularly enjoying any increased success. It was reported that as 'a political force, the Party has lost, rather than gained ground during the last twelve months'.[108] Later observations also confirmed that the Party 'remains of little account politically',[109] with the only 'tangible signs of its growth […] found in the increase in class hatred' across Britain, a hardly specific threat, yet clearly one the Government felt obliged to deal with.[110]

Many were far from buoyant within the Party itself. Harry Pollitt had recently felt obliged to inform the Comintern that 'I don't think it is yet understood how great a part fear plays in preventing active sympathisers with our party from joining'.[111] Furthermore, while that year's Anti-War Week demonstrations had focused on the industrial climate, as Bodkin had noted, in particular in attempts made to disseminate anti-militarist propaganda within the factories, the Agit-Prop department admitted that its factory newspapers appeared to be haphazard 'and naturally we are obliged to continue in the experimental stage. We do not say that they are perfect or the last word'.[112] As such, in Thorpe's words, a large-scale trial coming at this point had 'a degree of irony'. While there had indeed been 'a strong tinge of the illegal' following the Party's formation in 1920, this had soon dissipated and the Party was, at the end of 1925, 'steadily maturing and becoming, in many ways, more homogenous'.[113] The leadership itself appeared to exhibit a certain element of pragmatism at this point. Special Branch intercepted a letter from Albert Inkpin, only days before he himself would be arrested,

[107] A. Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *The Historical Journal*, 43 (September 2000), p. 781.
[108] ChAC, CHAR 22/81, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 14 May 1925, p. 2.
[109] ChAC, CHAR 22/78, Review of the Communist Movement, June 1924-January 1925, p. 46.
[110] Ibid., 22.
[111] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.7, Aspects and Tasks of the Party, c.1924, p. 62
[112] TNA, KV 3/20, Letter from CPGB Agit-Prop department, 29 August 1925.
[113] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow,* pp. 70-71.

responding to the arrest of two communists in Glasgow in which he betrays almost a sense of world-weariness:

> The whole idea of spending £150 or £200 on a 'free speech' fight which will secure little or no positive results to the Party even if it is won (which it is not likely to be), is altogether out of keeping with the present ideas of Party activity and line of approach. If public meetings and demonstrations could build a party we should have the biggest party in the country; but we know perfectly well that they don't, and the work for us to do, instead of getting our heads broken or sent to prison for holding a public meeting in defiance of the authorities, is to dig ourselves in in the Labour and Trade Union Movements and establish our groups and nuclei in the factories and workshops, and the trade union branches.[114]

Such a letter, reproduced by Special Branch without access to the original source, may as such be considered of doubtful veracity. Nevertheless, its candidness and lack of bombast certainly confirms contemporary and academic accounts of the Party's state at this point. With this letter having been written on 6 October 1925, only a week before the arrests were sanctioned, one may ponder whether the Cabinet, after reading it, could have taken courage from such a frank statement of weakness and been spurred on to act further.

Despite Inkpin's general belief in the futility of a ''free speech' fight', it was clear once the trial began that this was an unprecedented chance to disseminate their propaganda publicly, much surpassing the opportunities the Campbell Case had offered. Molly Murphy, with her husband a defendant, noted with only a touch of resentment that 'as soon as we had seen our husbands off to gaol', the Party 'sought to make as much political capital out of the situation as possible', with herself participating in a '''Wives' Committee''' that sought to bring

[114] ChAC, CHAR 22/83, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 15 October 1925, p. 16.

public attention to the twelve.[115] Bob Stewart, seemingly forgetting his previous claim that the Labour Party had instigated this 'sweeping offensive', was happy to boast that many 'branches of the Labour Party, the trade unions, hundreds of trade councils, poured in protests to the Home Office against the arrests and demanding the twelve be released',[116] a factor which Worley notes as serving 'temporarily to rally the labour left in defence of the Communist Party'.[117] This assessment, while true, neglects the involvement of seemingly all elements of the labour movement. Ernest Bevin, a passionate anti-communist, informed Ramsay MacDonald of his Transport and General Workers' Union's resolution on the matter, which viewed 'with alarm the prosecution of the Communists for expression of opinion, thereby infringing the liberty of political thought and speech and Press', and condemned the trial as both 'foreign to British tradition', and 'an attack upon an open British political organisation'.[118] MacDonald in return promised Bevin 'that we shall have the fight out here',[119] and made in Parliament what his biographer Marquand described as an 'effective onslaught' against the Government.[120] J.R. Clynes, who only a year previously had declared that communists threatened the 'future triumph' of his own party, approached Joynson Hicks, under his own steam, to request the twelve prisoners be transferred to the first division,[121] which the Home Secretary, with Cabinet approval, denied.[122] Such support might not have been guaranteed had the CPGB followed the tactics they had planned for Campbell in 1924. Prior to the trial, one periodical reminded its readers that the CPGB had then 'threatened to put the then Prime Minister and Home Secretary into the witness box. It was even said at the

[115] BOA, CP/IND/MURPH/1/2, Molly Murphy Biography, p. 90.
[116] Stewart, *Breaking the Fetters*, 166.
[117] Worley, *Class against Class*, p. 10.
[118] MJRL, *RMD1/5/5*, Letter to Ramsay MacDonald from Ernest Bevin, 25 November 1925.
[119] Ibid., Letter to Ernest Bevin from Ramsay MacDonald, 30 November 1925.
[120] Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 427.
[121] First division prisoners were granted more lenient conditions and special privileges.
[122] TNA, CAB 23/51, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 16 December 1925, p. 1.

time that the prosecution of Mr Campbell was abandoned because of this threat'. It therefore suggested the defendants would once more seek 'to call both Mr Ramsay MacDonald and Mr Arthur Henderson as witnesses for the defence'.[123] That this decision was not made ultimately highlights the CPGB's awareness that it was perhaps ill advised to needlessly antagonise potential supporters. In any case, though Bell would dismiss the Labour leadership's involvement as 'the desperate efforts of the reformist leaders to narrow the issue to one of democratic rights',[124] he felt it not 'an exaggeration to say that the Communist trials acquainted thousands of workers with the principles of our Party'.[125]

Indeed, the Party's influence enjoyed an upward trajectory over the next year. Though the General Strike, when it finally came in May 1926, collapsed after only nine days, the Government considered it an existential crisis and demanded harsh punishment for arrested strikers.[126] Pelling has noted a significant amount of communists, disproportionate to the overall size of the Party itself, were arrested during this period, including its sole MP, Sharpurji Saklatvala, allowing them 'the martyrdom of arrest and imprisonment for the cause'.[127] Such dedication clearly impressed some strikers, particularly in mining communities, and resulted in a sizeable increase in membership, more than doubling from some five thousand members at the time of Red Friday in July 1925 to around twelve thousand by the end of 1926.[128] These figures included a significant increase in female members, around one in five of the total membership,[129] which allowed the CPGB to later boast about their ability to reach out to

[123] 'The Communist Trials', *Western Daily Press*, 21 October 1925, p. 4.
[124] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 2.
[125] Ibid.
[126] For example, the Home Office monitored legal proceedings against arrested strikers in Ipswich after several sentences were deemed 'totally inadequate'. See TNA HO 144/22377.
[127] Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, p. 36.
[128] Thorpe. 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain', p. 781
[129] Ibid., 784.

'large numbers of working women, who have hitherto not been attracted in any great number towards our Party, but have been permeated with the doctrine of Socialist Pacifism'.[130]

While membership soon stagnated and decreased, particularly after the implementation of the sectarian 'class against class' policy after 1927, Bell was ultimately right in commenting that the Government, hoping 'by this prosecution to strike a deadly blow at our party and to intimidate workers from joining its ranks without taking the open course of declaring the party an illegal organisation', had ultimately failed.[131] Indeed, the trial not only brought the CPGB national attention, and with it a degree of unprecedented public sympathy, its participation in the General Strike created a swathe of new members that might have been previously indifferent to their ideology. The CPGB could not be completely self-satisfied however. The General Strike's failure could not, after all, be interpreted as anything but catastrophic. Influenced by the domestic response to the Polish-Soviet War in 1920, co-ordinated industrial action was viewed by communists as 'the chief obstacle in the way of an attack on Russia'. Now deemed redundant in the eyes of the labour movement, if not necessarily within the CPGB itself, communists may have had some foreboding for as 'long as the capitalist world endures the danger to the Soviet Union will endure'.[132] The CPGB could not be complacent.

While war was doubtless as far away from their thoughts as possible, discussions about the Soviet Union in the Cabinet in the aftermath of the General Strike had certainly hardened. The police raid on the CPGB headquarters the previous year had finally given the Government tangible proof of Moscow's 'moral complicity' in financing the British communist

[130] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 35.
[131] Bell, *Pioneering Days*, p. 283.
[132] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 25.

movement,[133] while all were in agreement in condemning Soviet support for an 'illegal and unconstitutional' mass industrial action, illustrated most bluntly by its financial contributions to the Miners Federation of Great Britain.[134] 'Complete unanimity' was shown in condemning 'the malignant hostility to the British Empire of the Soviet Government, repeatedly announced by its leaders, and acted upon in all parts of the world and on every opportunity'. Steps should be taken, it was agreed, to 'enlighten the public' as to the nefarious attitude of the Soviets towards Britain. The Lord President of the Council was instructed to inform the House of Lords that 'common sense showed that the Soviet Government had supported the strike as a step towards Great Britain' whilst amazement was expressed that 'people in Great Britain could accept the contributions of Russian workers who were far less well paid than themselves'.[135] Though still wary of a complete rupture in diplomatic relations, another meeting in December realised the difficulties in actually 'securing evidence which would be used in regard to the hostile activities of the Soviet representatives in this country', the Cabinet agreed the 'question of policy towards Russia must be one to be kept under daily observation', with the situation being considered 'afresh' in the new year. It remained to be seen what 1927 would bring, but none could envision 'aloofness'.

Conclusion

The anti-militarist views of its members did much to help cement the newly formed CPGB after 1920. The example of the 1922 Chanak Crisis highlights that when faced with the threat of war, communists were at pains to highlight a distinct revolutionary position which naturally

[133] ChAC, CHAR 22/147, Report on Revolutionary Reports in the United Kingdom, 21 January 1926, p. 2.
[134] This donation was originally offered to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, who politely declined, a fact the Cabinet conveniently chose to ignore. See G. Gorodetsky, 'The Soviet Union and Britain's General Strike of May 1926', *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 17 (1976), pp. 298- 300.
[135] TNA, CAB 23/53, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 16 June 1926, pp. 5-7.

rejected any association with pacifism. It is of some irony then, that though such propaganda made little headway amongst the general public, not to mention the armed forces themselves, successive governments, in seeking to clamp down on such activity, merely helped to propagate it further. To an extent, the Campbell Case can be explained away as a hasty and regrettable decision made by an Attorney General who, unlike the rest of his Labour colleagues, failed to realise that by ordering Campbell's arrest and offering him up as a martyr, he had granted the CPGB the unprecedented opportunity to spread their anti-militarist arguments to a national audience. Nevertheless, the response of Parliament as a whole, in discrediting the case's abandonment, highlights a sustained belief in the overall correctness of prosecuting such views. After 1924, the actions of the newly elected Conservative Government, in choosing to once again seek to indict the CPGB's leadership for their anti-militarist propaganda, reflected not only a deeply felt ire at being obliged to continue diplomatic relations with a Soviet Union that was ultimately felt to be responsible for the CPGB's actions, but concern that such a potent message might have resonance at a time of deep industrial turmoil. This decision, in abandoning an unwritten precedent maintaining that prosecutions did more harm than good, allowed communists to turn their largely unpopular anti-militarist arguments into a broader fight for civil liberties, one that gained them widespread sympathy. At the same time, this sympathy failed to translate into sustained, long-term support. The failure of the 1926 General Strike, moreover, not only made CPGB hopes for widespread, industrial action redundant as a viable tactic, it created fears a more antagonistic stance was now set to be directed against the Soviet Union, perceived by the British Government to have been the mastermind behind the Strike itself.

Chapter Five: The British Government and the 1927 Soviet War Scare

The USSR was greeted by the arrival of 1927 with a rude awakening. Though several years had passed since the upheaval of revolution and civil war, the Soviet Union's population yet again received news which 'caused panic in the population, leading to the hoarding of grain and other commodities', greatly straining an economy already struggling to match the country's pre-war output.[1] A variety of Soviet politicians, all within the space of a few weeks in January, 'warned that war [with the west] could come either within days, by the spring or by the autumn'.[2] Citizens were alerted to the fact that:

> England was ready to invade their country. Defeat would mean the transformation of their homeland into a colony of British bankers; it would mean a return of capitalists to the factories, of squires to the land, and of Russian oppressors to the minority areas. A National Defence Week was proclaimed, and rumors were whispered that the government had distributed 100,000 rifles to factory workers.[3]

Fears of war would continue to be expressed throughout that year. Theodore Rothstein, an Old Bolshevik who had lived in exile in Britain prior to 1917, wrote to his son Andrew, a prominent member of the CPGB in October, hoping that he 'reads Russian papers and knows of internal conditions there. They are very angry with all their enemies'.[4] In Britain, the Government was certainly 'well aware of the delusion […] that Great Britain is continually occupied in plotting against the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics',[5] but would have scoffed

[1] S. Fitzpatrick, 'The Foreign Threat during the First Five-Year Plan', *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique*, 5 (1978), p. 26.
[2] J.P. Sontag, 'The Soviet War Scare of 1926-7', *The Russian Review*, 34 (January 1975), p. 69.
[3] A. Meyer, 'The War Scare of 1927', *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique*, 5 (1978), p. 1.
[4] TNA, KV 2/1578, Intercepted Letter from Theodore Rothstein addressed to Andrew Rothstein, 5 October 1927.
[5] TNA, CAB 24/184, Relations between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics: Draft Note to the Soviet Government, 21 January 1927, p. 159.

at the idea that 'in their nightmares, Soviet officials saw England preparing an attack against the USSR'.[6] Nevertheless, by the beginning of 1927 diplomatic relations were certainly at their lowest, with one Cabinet report memorably opining the 'indisputable fact that the Soviet [Union] is to all intents and purposes – short of direct armed conflict – at war with the British Empire'.[7] The same January this memorandum was being considered, a British military force was dispatched to China, to defend its concessions from marauding Chinese nationalists who were perceived to have been egged on by the Soviets. In May, a government-sanctioned police raid on Soviet diplomatic property in London, the ARCOS (All Russian Co-operative Society) Raid, was followed some weeks later by a complete severance of diplomatic relations. Compton Mackenzie, a famous contemporary novelist, seemingly spoke for many when he pondered that the Soviets 'might be forgiven for supposing that the mind of the country was being prepared for a declaration of war against the U.S.S.R.'[8] Such attitudes highlight that from a domestic perspective, Soviet fears of war registered an impact far beyond the CPGB, now duly obliged, as a Comintern member, to turn this potential 'imperialist' conflict into a revolutionary civil war (see chapters six and seven). Indeed, that it increasingly preoccupied the attentions of the British Government itself is an underrated feature when it comes to scholarship of the war scare as a whole.

This chapter, in seeking to highlight the response of the British Government to the war scare, shows that the incessant clamour for a rupture with the Soviet Union - ever present since the Conservatives had entered office in the aftermath of the Zinoviev Letter affair in 1924, and in further overdrive following the 1926 General Strike – did much to contribute to Soviet fears

[6] O. Velikanova, *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 50.
[7] TNA, CAB 24/184, Russia: Memorandum by Mr. Gregory, 10 December 1926, p. 205.
[8] Quoted in R. Davenport Hines, *Enemies Within: Communists, Cambridge Spies and the Making of Modern Britain* (London, 2019), p. 103.

of war. Such attitudes, reflecting an increasing inability to separate domestic and foreign policy concerns, ensured ongoing tensions with China during this period were similarly framed within the wider context of a breakdown in Anglo-Soviet relations. To previous scholars, the rupture of 1927 is viewed primarily through a domestic lens, unique insofar as it marked one of the few instances of a successful backbench rebellion in the inter-war period. This has ensured primary focus has been placed on Stanley Baldwin's leadership, in particular the inability to control his own Party. The collision of domestic and foreign policy concerns at this point in time, however, requires renewed focus on the actions of Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain. At the height of the scare, the Comintern would crudely infer that as 'Chamberlain comes from Birmingham, where he possesses considerable interests', he stood to personally gain from the revival of industrial production war with Russia would instigate.[9] Nothing could, in fact, be further from the truth. Chamberlain, increasingly out of step with his Party, sought to dampen down on the extreme rhetoric that was emanating within the Government over China and the Soviet Union, fearing himself that a severance of diplomatic relations might very well see Soviet predictions realised, and lead to a possible outbreak of hostilities.

This chapter begins by introducing the reader to the historiography of the 1927 Soviet war scare. Traditionally perceived by historians to be a cynical ploy used by Stalin to weaken internal opposition, historians in more recent years are now prepared to accept the veracity of Soviet predictions of war. At the same time, there remains little research undertaken to measure British perceptions of the war scare, something this chapter aims to rectify. The second part of this chapter seeks to place British dealings with China within the wider context

[9] London School of Economics Comintern Microfiche [Hereafter LSECM], 2nd Session, 18 May 1927.

of Anglo-Soviet relations. Issues with China, bubbling over since 1925, were viewed as synonymous with ongoing tensions with the Soviet Union, with Soviet advisors in China perceived by many Conservatives to have encouraged the clamour of anti-British rhetoric. Chamberlain's attempts to calm the situation were ultimately broken with the attacks made by Chinese nationalists on British treaty ports in early 1927. The response of the Government, to despatch British armed forces to China, was, it will be argued, viewed by many as an action undertaken to deliberately warn off the Soviets, and in Chamberlain's mind, increased the potential for conflict. The final section of this chapter will focus on Chamberlain's attempts to resist the staunch Conservative demands for a severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Though such attempts ultimately failed, with the ARCOS Raid in May 1927 guaranteeing that rupture in diplomatic relations, Chamberlain nonetheless felt severance would have dire consequences for both the domestic and international spheres. At home, the Foreign Secretary believed the political gulf would be widened, whilst abroad, Chamberlain remained wary of the impact severance would have for the situation in eastern Europe. Poland, practically a loose cannon, might very well take solace from such definite moves by Britain, and confirm Soviet fears by attacking its eastern neighbour. In assessing British responses to the war scare, therefore, it is important to emphasise that fears of war were not solely propagated by communists. Far from being dismissed as mere alarmism, the war scare would preoccupy individuals across the political spectrum.

Historiography of the 1927 Soviet War Scare

A fear of invasion within the Soviet Union was deeply rooted in the bitter experiences of Allied Intervention during the Russian Civil War. To Shearer, war 'was a constant motif for all the early Bolshevik leaders', and in the eyes of the Soviet leadership was by no means a vague

threat, nor had its possibility dissipated as the 1920s wore on.[10] The issuing of the Curzon Note in 1923, a warning from Britain's Foreign Secretary for the Soviets to cease its aggressive propaganda efforts across the British Empire or face a rupture in diplomatic relations, was considered by communists to be 'an attempt to justify an invasion before a European and American public still thoroughly sick of war',[11] while the 1925 Locarno treaty was perceived as an attempt to 'involve Germany unconditionally' in plans 'to organise hostilities against the Soviet Union'.[12] As Whitewood has argued, such factors demonstrate that fears of war did not suddenly emerge in 1927. Instead, Soviet interpretations of that year's events 'should be understood in the context of the long-standing Soviet predictions of future war dating back to the Civil War era'.[13]

Nevertheless, 1927 did witness a new intensity in the supposed plots of western powers to overthrow the Bolshevik state, with Britain believed to be playing a leading role in either planning to attack the USSR or, at the very least, encouraging a coalition of eastern European states, typified by Poland and Romania, to invade the USSR's western borders. A series of factors helped to cement this belief in the Kremlin. Soviet support for, in their view, the 'illegal and unconstitutional' General Strike the previous year had angered the Conservative Party.[14] Though the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin has been remembered as a tolerant premier, engineering consensus politics which allowed the Labour Party to prove itself in government for the first time in 1924,[15] he was not himself adverse to 'red-baiting', and maintained a

[10] D. Shearer, 'Stalin at War, 1918-1953: Patterns of Violence and Foreign Threat', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 66 (2018), p. 190.
[11] J. Harris, 'Encircled by Enemies: Stalin's Perceptions of the Capitalist World, 1918-1941', *Journal of Strategic Studies,* 30 (2007), p. 518.
[12] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/08, 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 25.
[13] P. Whitewood, *The Soviet-Polish War and its Legacy: Lenin's Defeat and the Rise of Stalinism* (London, 2023), p. 134.
[14] TNA, CAB 23/53, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 16 June 1926, p. 5.
[15] S. Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 4.

strong, yet false, belief that the National Minority Movement, a trade union organisation created by the CPGB to infiltrate and radicalise British unions, had 'encouraged groups of 'revolutionaries'' to organise the 1926 General Strike.[16] Even the Communist International, no stranger to embellishing the successes and abilities of communist groups, felt obliged to criticise how Baldwin 'deliberately exaggerates the actual control which the Minority Movement had in the Trade Union movement'.[17] Communists both in Britain and abroad commented on how back-bench 'Diehard' MPs began to hold an unprecedented amount of influence on government policy towards Russia. Ramsden, one of the key authorities on the Conservative Party, has argued that after the 1926 General Strike Baldwin's 'New Conservatism' was in ruins, and the Prime Minister was obliged more and more to appease the reactionary members of his party.[18] Through this lens, the rise of Józef Piłsudski via a military coup in Poland, which began just as the British General Strike faltered in May 1926, was attributed to the nefarious hand of these same Conservatives, a belief shared even by Chicherin, the famously level-headed Soviet Foreign Minister who had worked with the No-Conscription Fellowship during the First World War.[19] The assassination of Pytor Voikov, the Soviet ambassador to Poland, mere days after Britain severed its relations with the USSR in May 1927, seemed to confirm Soviet suspicions, and in particular marked a turning point in convincing Stalin that war was near.[20] However, 1927, and indeed the rest of the inter-war period, saw no invasion. When the Soviet Union was finally attacked by Nazi Germany in 1941, capitalist Britain was not the enemy, but an eventual ally in the conflict. As a result, it is hardly

[16] P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 236.
[17] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.12, A Business, 'Resolution on the Situation in Great Britain', 17 May 1927, p. 24.
[18] J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940* (London, 1978), p. 288.
[19] Harris, op. cit., 520.
[20] D. Shearer, *Stalin and War, 1918-1953: Patterns of Repression, Mobilization, and External Threat* (London, 2023), p. 19.

surprising that orthodox scholarship of the war scare has dismissed the veracity of any substantial threat to the Soviet Union in 1927, with much of the historiography dominated by those who label the war scare a ploy by Stalin to discredit his rivals and further his leadership ambitions.

As Hudson Jr. has highlighted, debate on the actual existence of a war danger in 1927 began that very year, when *The Slavonic Review* argued that the Soviet leadership had 'found it expedient to stimulate the idea of the 'war menace'',[21] which was 'central to the climax that had been reached in the "long-smouldering feud between Trotsky and Stalin'.[22] Following the death of Lenin in 1924, a struggle for the leadership of the USSR broke out between Trotsky, Stalin and others. By 1927, the climax of the conflict, Stalin had united with Bukharin against Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev and was soon to cement his power.[23] *The Slavonic Review's* interpretation of the war scare as a 'Stalinist fraud' came to dominate the historiography of this period.[24] The usage of the war danger, as summarised by Gorodetsky, served two purposes. These were to discredit any domestic political opposition to Stalin, which was seen as weakening, deliberately or otherwise, the Soviet government at a time of supposed international unrest, and to encourage the development of the Soviet state's industrial spheres, to ensure a readiness to resist any kind of military attack.[25] Debate around the time of the half-centenary of this fateful year echoed similar viewpoints. Sontag certainly felt that there was 'no doubt that the war scare was a powerful weapon against the Trotsky-Zinoviev opposition in 1927 and that there was considerably less danger of war in mid-1927 than

[21] 'Chronicle: Russia', *The Slavonic Review*, 6 (1927), p. 444.
[22] H. Hudson Jr, 'The 1927 War Scare: The Foreign Affairs-Domestic Policy Nexus Revisited', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review,* 39 (2012), p. 146.
[23] For an accessible account of the leadership struggle see S. Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 32-42.
[24] Hudson, op. cit., p. 146.
[25] G. Gorodetsky, *The Precarious Truce: Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1924-1927*, (Cambridge, 1977), p. 239.

Stalin's followers in the press claimed to perceive'. However, in his view, that did not necessarily mean the fears of war were in themselves false.[26] Tucker went further in suggesting that 'it is not surprising that Soviet leaders were afraid that the Western powers were hatching plans for an anti-Soviet war'. Indeed, such fears, 'however unjustified, were real'.[27] These attempts at revision were strongly rejected by other historians, with Meyer arguing that although 'Soviet foreign policy had recently received major setbacks', the war scare itself was 'a phony issue manipulated by Politicians in the course of a factional struggle'.[28] This appeared to remain the dominant view in the literature, with Simonov reiterating in the 1990s that 'an imminent large-scale foreign war was completely groundless'.[29]

Research in the twenty-first century, however, has shown signs of revision, pioneered by Harris and Shearer, doubtless thanks to the help of greater access to Russian archival material following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. To Harris, the views of Sontag and Tucker were accurate, that 'though no such threat existed before the late 1930s', Stalin did truly believe in the possibility of invasion by western powers. Indeed, though 'the fear of war appears to have been driving domestic and foreign policy', as Gorodetsky previously identified, it was not in fact 'cynically employed'.[30] While war did not break out, 'Stalin assumed this was not for want of trying', and instead believed that it indicated a failure of the anti-Soviet coalition to fully get behind their task.[31] Even after 1927 had passed, Stalin felt an invasion was imminent and would later widely circulate a report suggesting war would break

[26] Sontag, op. cit., p. 71.
[27] R.C. Tucker, 'The Emergence of Stalin's Foreign Policy', *The Slavic Review*, 36 (1977), p. 566.
[28] Meyer, op. cit., p. 2.
[29] N.S. Simonov, 'Strengthen the Defence of the Land of the Soviets': The 1927 'War Alarm' and Its Consequences', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48 (1996), p. 1356.
[30] Harris, op. cit., 514.
[31] Ibid., p. 521.

out at the beginning of 1929. As late as 1930, Stalin expressed unease that no invasion had yet taken place; '"Is Poland not ready? Is Romania not ready? […] What does it mean […] that intervention 'can' be postponed?'[32] It becomes clear, therefore, that a focus on 1927 alone is too narrow. The '1927' war scare can only really be considered to have ended in 1932 when, with Soviet attention turning to the threat to its eastern borders following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Stalin succeeded in signing a non-aggression pact with Poland.[33]

It becomes necessary, therefore, to look beyond 1927 when analysing this event. Furthermore, as Hudson Jr. argues, the 'discussion of the "reality" of the war scare is usually treated solely within the bounds of the Soviet Union and its internal political machinations', though in fact 'British political assumption, and discourse, are central to a proper understanding'.[34] Where historians have examined this period, it has been commonly held that the British Government ridiculed any suggestion that it intended war against the Soviet Union. As Neilson has shown, the Foreign Office 'greeted calmly' Soviet fears of war in 1927, encouraged by the assurances of the British chargé d'affaires in Moscow that all the fuss would soon die down.[35] MI5, when confronted with Stalin's fears of invasion in 1929, commented that it showed 'an interesting light on Soviet mentality', though with some exasperation asked 'who is leading these people up the garden?'[36] As this chapter will show, however, such sweeping views neglect the genuine fears held within certain quarters of the

[32] Shearer, *Stalin and War*, p. 21.
[33] Ibid., 24-5.
[34] Hudson Jr. op. cit., p. 147.
[35] K. Neilson, '"Pursued by a Bear", p. 199.
[36] TNA, KV 3/308, 'An Alleged Franco-British Military Agreement against the USSR', 27 – 29 August 1929.

British Government at the prospect of a decline in diplomatic relations, with belief in the possibility of war far from being the sole preserve of the Soviet Union.

Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1925-7

Britain had maintained a territorial presence in China since the nineteenth century. While its territory centred largely on its Treaty Ports and concessions on the coast, its influence spread into the mainland itself, ensuring it had become the leading imperial power as well as the foremost foreign creditor to China by the early twentieth century.[37] Suffering from nationwide instability since the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Chinese Nationalism had become a dominant political presence by the 1920s. As Read has argued, this came in no small part as a result of perceived western machinations at the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles, in granting the former German concession of Shandong to Japan, rather than returning it back to China, confirmed to Chinese citizens the barrenness of western ideas of national self-determination, and led to disillusionment amongst many intellectuals 'who turned, instead, to the Russian Revolution model'.[38] Sun Yat-Sen, the 'Father of the Nation' and the head of the nationalist Kuomintang Party (KMT), had established links with the Russian Bolsheviks soon after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been formed in 1921, establishing by 1924 a 'united front' dedicated to unifying the nation and defeating the various warlords that rejected the KMT's republican programme. It became clear that the Soviets, at least at that point, had no ambition to establish a communist China. Instead, the Chinese communists were ordered to simply maintain their alliance with the KMT and 'piggy-back on the national revolution'.[39]

[37] P. Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat from China* (London, 2017), p. 6.
[38] C. Read, *Lenin Lives?* (Oxford, 2024), p. 107.
[39] P. Snow, *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord* (Yale, 2023), p. 209.

When KMT propaganda on unification soon began to target the foreign powers that held so much sway within the country, Britain could only be at the forefront of such vitriol, with the events of 30th May 1925 ensuring that 'China imposed itself on the British political consciousness' from then on.[40] On that date, nationalist protests led by Chinese students in the Shanghai International Settlement were met by gunfire, killing several protestors, and provoking even further demonstrations as well as a long-term nationwide boycott of British goods. That the boycott severely affected Britain cannot be understated, with even the King feeling obliged to ask Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain whether 'some practical proof of our self-assertion might have a salutary effect at the present juncture'.[41] Unsubstantiated rumours in July that 'large numbers of Russian arms are being imported' into China whilst strikers were 'being armed and drilled by the Russians' confirmed the British Government's view that this step up in Chinese hostility was attributed to Soviet influence.[42] As Chow has argued, Chinese nationalism 'had always been linked with anti-imperialism, which was conveniently a major component of Comintern strategy in spreading world revolution'.[43] Indeed, as Snow notes, Russian involvement in China was intended to be hostile to Britain, with 'the high-minded purpose of weakening the imperial powers (Britain and Japan in particular) that were battering on the economies of the colonised and 'semi-colonised' Asian lands' as well as acting as a defensive tactic 'insofar as it was those same imperial powers that had intervened on the White side in the Civil War and posed a continuing threat to the new Soviet Russia'.[44] That Soviet intervention in China began in the early 1920s, at the same time

[40] P. Chow, 'Parliament and the Problem of China, 1925-7: Priorities, Preoccupations and Stereotypes', *Parliamentary History*, 29 (2010), p. 359.
[41] TNA, FO 800/258, Letter from Lord Stamfordham to Austen Chamberlain, 21 August 1925.
[42] TNA, CAB 23/50, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 22 July 1925, p. 6.
[43] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 362.
[44] Snow, op. cit., p. 218.

Lenin was trying to establish links with key western nations, most notably Britain, made it a typical example of Soviet foreign policy. Sergeev has described it as 'combining the instigation of revolutionary crises abroad with attempts to consolidate the Soviet regime by political and economic means',[45] or, as one British diplomat acidly put it to Foreign Secretary Chamberlain in late 1925, of 'pursuing two incompatible aims – to obtain money from London and to constitute a great Asiatic block on anti-English lines'.[46]

With events in China coming only months after the 1924 Zinoviev Letter affair, Knüsel has noted that 'existing anticommunist sentiment in Britain' ensured the ongoing domestic 'Red Menace was used to frame the May Thirtieth Movement'.[47] Domestically, 1925 witnessed industrial tensions which would culminate in the arrest of the leadership of the CPGB, and a general strike. It became clear that the 'Cabinet's fears' over China were, as Chow has argued, based on their own current 'domestic anti-Bolshevism'.[48] As such, much as the Soviets were perceived to be using the CPGB to destabilise British interests at home, Chinese nationalists, not to mention communists, 'seemed to many to be pawns in the Soviet Union's game to bring down British imperial power'.[49] As early as July 1925, under pressure from the wider Conservative Party to sever relations with the Soviets following the events of the Zinoviev Letter the previous year, Chamberlain had justified his decision not to in part by citing that 'it would confirm the Bolshies in the estimation of the Chinese in their part of protectors of Chinese nationalism'.[50] Over the next year, much as Chamberlain stuck to his policy of

[45] E. Sergeev, *The Bolsheviks and Britain during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917-24* (London, 2024), p. 123.
[46] TNA, FO 800/258, Letter from Lord D'Abernon to Austen Chamberlain, 19 October 1925.
[47] A. Knüsel, 'British Conservatives, The Red Menace and Anti-Foreign Agitation in China, 1924-1927', *Cultural History*, 2 (2013), p. 72.
[48] Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat*, p. 150.
[49] Ibid.
[50] R.C. Self, ed., *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters: The Correspondence of Sir Austen Chamberlain with his Sisters Hilda and Ida, 1916-37* (Cambridge 1995), p. 278

'aloofness' with Russia, he also remained steadfast over China, informing the Cabinet in December 1926 that though the Nationalists had 'a Bolshevik complexion', there was no evidence that they were fundamentally 'Bolshevist in character'. Indeed, he argued that the Nationalists' 'Bolshevik proclivities were due to the act that the Soviet Government was the only quarter from which they had been able to obtain any help', and thus beseeched his colleagues to publicly avoid making speeches linking the two movements together.[51] He would further confide to his own officials that:

> I wish that my colleagues would not insist so much upon the Bolshevik character of the Cantonese Government. You know how conflicting is our information on this point, and how impossible it is at present to decide whether Bolshevism is really dominant in their councils, or whether it has only played so large a part hitherto because Bolshevism presented itself as a friend, and the only friend, of Nationalism.[52]

Though the Cabinet had originally agreed in the aftermath of the Chinese blockade that 'no concessions should be made until order was restored',[53] the dire economic consequences of the embargo, which showed no signs of abating over the next year, ensured a change of attitude within Chamberlain, if not in the Cabinet as a whole. By the end of 1926, Chamberlain was able to persuade his reluctant colleagues to adopt his December Memorandum, a document produced 'semi-autonomously' by the Foreign Office, without any real co-operation with other Government departments, to highlight 'Britain's willingness to accede to Chinese demands for treaty revision[54] in a spirit of friendship and conciliation' as well as its

[51] TNA, CAB 23/53, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 15 December 1926, p. 7.
[52] TNA, FO 800/259, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to William Tyrell, 9 December 1926.
[53] TNA, CAB 23/50, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 1 July 1925, p. 3.
[54] A reference to the so-called 'unequal treaties' established during the nineteenth century, which enforced cessions of Chinese territory to Britain, the opening of treaty ports and extraterritoriality rights for British citizens living within China.

openness to re-negotiating issues like trade and extraterritoriality in an attempt to assuage Chinese opinion.[55] Such candidness, it was felt, would help detach them from the Soviets. Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks refuted Chamberlain's assessment, informing the Foreign Secretary directly that 'I do not accept the F.O. theory that China will get rid of her Bolshevik advisers as soon as she gets her freedom'. Believing 'the Chinese leaders are Bolshie in heart', Joynson-Hicks felt 'that unless we are very careful we may find the Bolshie led Cantonese in command of the whole of China'.[56] Subsequent events would seem to confirm the Home Secretary's assessment.

The Shanghai Defence Force

Following the commencement of the Northern Expedition, the KMT's military campaign to unify the country in the summer of 1926, fears emerged that Britain's Treaty Ports would become a possible target.[57] Such predictions were realised in January 1927, when the KMT occupied the British concession of Hankou, at which point most 'newspapers pointed to the machinations of the Soviets as the source of the troubles'.[58] It certainly shook Chamberlain, ruining any chance of his December Memorandum producing concrete results, and forcing him to ask whether the Chinese were indeed 'so tied to the Bolsheviks that in fact no offer however reasonable has any chance of success?'[59] Shortly followed by the Nanking Incident in March, when another Treaty Port was stormed by the KMT, leading to widespread looting and the deaths of British citizens, it seemed to confirm in British eyes that Soviet intrigue was

[55] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 366.
[56] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Sir Joynson Hicks to Austen Chamberlain, 7 January 1927.
[57] K. Stevens, ''Duncan Force' - The Shanghai Defence Force in 1927, & The Career of Captain Ronald Spear', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 48 (2008), p. 153.
[58] Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat*, p. 203.
[59] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Lampson, 11 January 1927.

responsible for exacerbating events.[60] One Conservative backbencher MP, Cuthbert Headlam, spoke for many within his party when writing in his diary that 'it is tolerably clear that the Bolsheviks are going all out to make trouble and that if we are not going to scuttle out of Shanghai as we scuttled out of Hankow we must send reinforcements of troops & ships to China'.[61]

Hankou did indeed serve as the final straw, with the Cabinet, at the end of January 1927, duly ordering the dispatch of the Shanghai Defence Force (SDF), an armed military convoy to defend Shanghai and other British concessions from further Chinese intrusion. The SDF, numbering at its height some 17,000 troops,[62] was immediately castigated by the political left at home who felt that its goal of 'protecting British citizens in China was only a pretext to fulfil imperial ambitions'.[63] While *The Times* was content merely to report on the 'large and enthusiastic' crowds which mobbed departing troops,[64] other periodicals seemingly confirmed such accusations, expressing unease at the SDF's size. The *Manchester Guardian* argued that the 'Government cannot be surprised that the large reinforcements which they are sending to China are causing serious misgiving'. While 'Military measures which are necessary to the defence of British lives will always be supported by the public', similar measures taken 'in defence of property, or the much vaguer thing called "interests," will evoke a very different response'.[65] An awareness of such public attitudes ensured Chamberlain was obliged to find the time to justify the SDF to both Ramsay MacDonald and David Lloyd George as the leaders of the two main opposition parties, as well as meeting with

[60] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 371.
[61] Ball, *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald,* p. 111.
[62] Stevens, op. cit., p. 157.
[63] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 367.
[64] 'Troopships in the Thames', *The Times*, 31 January 1927, p. 12.
[65] 'Troops of Defence', *Manchester Guardian*, 26 January 1927, p. 8.

representatives of the Trade Union Congress and Labour Party 'in order to explain the position to them'.[66] The view of the *New York Times*, in witnessing events from afar, that 'Great Britain is being treated to scenes not unreminiscent of war days',[67] no doubt annoyed a government keen 'to inform the world of our true attitude […] that the forces despatched to China were for defensive purposes only and not in pursuance of any aggressive design'.[68] Indeed, there had long been a reluctance to commit troops to China. Before the Hankou incident, in December 1926, the British Minister to China, Miles Lampson, had argued that 'the mere announcement that reinforcements were coming would have a salutary and restraining effect'.[69] Though it was subsequently agreed to send a token amount of troops to Hong Kong, the Cabinet deemed it 'inadvisable to make an announcement of these reinforcements'.[70] Throughout January, when preparations were made for the despatch of the SDF, the Cabinet still believed 'it was of the utmost importance that no hint should be made public that we were considering any large military movement'.[71] The SDF itself was made up only of regular servicemen, as it was recognised that 'any calling out of reservists would be regarded by the public as very serious'.[72] Even if attempts were made to dissuade the public from any association with the mass mobilisation that had characterised the First World War, it clearly brought back bitter memories for many. Chamberlain would inform Lampson, in the thick of it in China, that:

> The Great War still haunts every household. I am told that the first reaction of the sending of the Suffolks [a regiment within the SDF] was that the women in the villages of that county were saying:

[66] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 26 January 1927, p. 2.
[67] '12,000 More Troops are Being Sent to China', *New York Times*, 25 January 1927, p. 1.
[68] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 26 January 1927, p. 2
[69] TNA, CAB 23/53, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 13 December 1926, p. 3.
[70] TNA, CAB 23/53, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 15 December 1926, p. 9.
[71] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 12 January 1927, p. 5.
[72] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 21 January 1927, p. 2.

> "You are sending our men to their deaths. It is beginning over again. We shall see them no more". Far away from England and with the constant provocations and outrages of the Chinese ever before your eyes and in your ears, you can have no conception of how profoundly pacific our people now are.[73]

In the end, however, aside from some sporadic skirmishes in March, the force saw little action.[74] This was largely due to events developing on the ground. Soviet influence over the KMT was never as strong as had been assumed. With the death of Sun Yat-Sen in early 1925, even before the events of 30 May, both the CCP and the Soviets began to see their influence over the KMT and its new leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, wane.[75] In April 1927, fearing the influence of the CCP, Kai-Shek ordered a purge of thousands of Chinese communists in the Shanghai Massacre. Accompanied by the banishment of his Soviet advisors in the summer, it effectively marked a full severance of KMT links with the Soviet Union.[76] To the British Government, the massacre, as Chow has recorded, was 'a cause for relief', making it possible to effectively scapegoat the CCP, and consider the crisis closed.[77] In its aftermath, Chamberlain would write to Lampson that Kai-Shek 'has acted with vigour against the extremists and so has somewhat relieved the tension […] It would appear therefore unwise to do anything to antagonise or weaken him'.[78] The SDF was subsequently reduced in numbers, only amounting to a single brigade by March 1928.[79]

[73] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Lampson, 11 April 1927.
[74] Stevens, op. cit., 157.
[75] Snow, op. cit., pp. 224-6
[76] Chow, *Britain's Imperial Retreat from China*, p. 227.
[77] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 373.
[78] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions (Appendix III), 27 April 1927, p. iii.
[79] Stevens, op. cit., p. 165.

Nevertheless, 'the Shanghai Defence Force was not so much an Anglo-Chinese issue as it was an Anglo-Soviet issue' for many Conservatives,[80] with the Cabinet keenly aware, public opinion in Britain aside, that the dispatch of armed troops to China was a potentially dangerous step. Frederick Hirtzel, Permanent Under Secretary of State for the India Office, felt that 'Here, I am convinced, is going to be the decisive trial of strength between Russia and ourselves […] if and when it is found that India is sending troops to China [several battalions of the SDF came from the British Indian Army], I fully expect that the Russians will attempt some kind of diversion in Afghanistan'.[81] Though nothing of the sort took place, it marked a continuation of events in China that created worry about the threat to Britain's imperial interests, all assumed to be targeted by the Soviet Union. Previously, amidst the Chinese boycott of British goods in August 1926, Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India, informed Chamberlain that Britain might be drawn into conflict with Russia over Afghanistan as a result of ongoing tensions over the disputed island of Urta-Tagai, action which could not but involve Britain due to the geographical proximity of its key colonial possession India.[82] Birkenhead suggested that the Soviets be informed that any military involvement within Afghanistan 'in whatever way effected and however disguised' be regarded as a 'casus belli'. Chamberlain was appalled:

> Now I venture respectfully to submit that, given our existing relations with the Soviet Government and the temper of the public at home in regard to foreign commitments, it is quite out of the question to inform Moscow that we regard any policy the Soviet Government may contemplate as a casus belli. It is utterly useless to threaten, unless we are prepared to carry out our threat, and

[80] Chow, 'Parliament and the Problems of China', p. 370.
[81] TNA, FO/800/260, Letter from Frederick Hirtzel to Austen Chamberlain, 17 January 1927.
[82] See S.B. Panin, 'The Soviet-Afghan Conflict of 1925-6 over the Island of Urta-Tagai', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. 12 (1999), pp. 122-33.

> we have no means anywhere of even twisting the Bolshevik tail, let alone making war. Russia is, in other words, politically and militarily (if possibly not economically) invulnerable.[83]

Such fears of Soviet escalation have been described by Andrew as 'almost a mirror image of the equally irrational Soviet fear of British attack',[84] and highlight the importance China played in the breakdown of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Indeed, though war with Russia remained, by and large, unthinkable for the British, as Neilson has highlighted,[85] events in China nevertheless played a key role in exacerbating relations between the two nations, thus propagating further talk of conflict.

Chamberlain and Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1926-7

With the Chinese crisis worsening as 1926 turned to 1927, Chamberlain appeared to be losing support for a moderate policy towards both China and the Soviet Union even within his own ministerial department. Chamberlain has often been portrayed as an aloof figure, with his half-brother, Neville Chamberlain, commenting in August 1926 that he 'hardly comes to the House [of Commons] at all now and is gradually dropping out of the ken of the ordinary member. He remains a somewhat mysterious […] figure'.[86] The Foreign Secretary's determination to avoid a definitive breach with Russia ensured that he became out of step, not only with his Cabinet colleagues, but even amongst his own officials in the Foreign Office. In December 1926, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, William Tyrell, had breezily informed Chamberlain of a weekend spent with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin at Chequers,

[83] TNA, FO 800/259, 'Russia and Afghanistan' Memorandum, 22 June 1926.
[84] C. Andrew, 'British Intelligence and the Breach with Russia in 1927', *The Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), p. 960.
[85] Neilson has argued that while the British military embellished the Soviet threat in order to ensure continued funding, foreign policy makers ultimately realised that 'Soviet power was at a relatively low ebb', and so were unlikely to launch an unprovoked military campaign. See Neilson, op. cit., p. 219.
[86] S. Ball, ed., *Conservative Politics in National and Imperial Crisis: Letters from Britain to the Viceroy of India, 1926-31* (Abingdon, 2014), p. 77.

attempting to persuade Baldwin to adopt his own view that 'the Russian interference in our coal strike and Russian proceedings in China might justify us in assuming that we are virtually at war with that country'.[87] Jabara Carley has suggested that a Civil Servant directly addressing the Prime Minister with such stark views appeared to be a policy, deliberate or otherwise, 'of going around him to break out of the Foreign Secretary's more cautious approach to Moscow'.[88] Indeed, it seemingly opened the floodgates for other officials to follow suit. John Duncan Gregory, Assistant Under-Secretary of State, shortly afterwards followed Tyrell's statement by confirming that it was an 'indisputable fact' Britain was essentially at war with the Soviet Union.

Amidst all this, grassroots organisations such as the Young Britons had been established 'to counteract the blasphemous and seditious doctrine of the Communists',[89] while Schinness highlights the impact of the 'Clear Out the Reds Campaign', an anti-Bolshevik movement formed by various back-bench MPs in the autumn of 1926. By January 1927, the latter had even labelled Chamberlain 'a danger to the country' for refusing to sever relations with the Soviet Union.[90] What most incensed Conservative MPs, alongside ongoing events in China, was the seemingly never-ending flow of anti-British propaganda emanating from Moscow, chiefly orchestrated by the Comintern. Such material often infuriated Soviet diplomats themselves, aware that it acted as 'the main obstacle to progress in London'. Their repeated claims, however, that the Comintern was separate from the Soviet government were regarded as 'only technically true and derided in the West'.[91] To Chamberlain himself, the

[87] TNA, FO 800/259, Letter from William Tyrrell to Austen Chamberlain, 6 December 1926.
[88] M. Jabara Carley, *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations* (Maryland, 2014), pp. 268-9.
[89] Quoted in S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the Evolution of the Party Organisation' in Ball and A. Seldon, eds., *The Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), p. 275.
[90] Schinness, op. cit., pp. 397-9.
[91] Jabara Carley, op. cit., p. 181.

point was moot. While hostile propaganda, of Soviet or Comintern origin, was certainly a contravention of the 1921 Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement, the treaty which had established relations between the two countries, to sever relations over this matter was pointless. Indeed, he had made successive efforts to make his colleagues aware just 'how little this [severing of relations] would affect the kind of propaganda which creates the agitation'.[92]

Following the Christmas break, in an attempt to placate the Cabinet, his political party, and even his own civil servants, Chamberlain began to formulate a draft protest to the Soviet Government. Gloomily questioning whether 'the case so presented is good enough to make it worthwhile to send the protest', it became clear his chief motivation was ensuring 'the sending of such a protest give[s] satisfaction to the more restless of our followers'.[93] In addition to his draft protest, Chamberlain presented the Cabinet with a memorandum entitled 'Diplomatic Relations with the Soviet Government'. Unusually for a Foreign Secretary who rarely intervened in domestic policy,[94] he was forceful in emphasising the domestic repercussions of severance. In his view, the General Strike had left 'the Labour Party profoundly divided' between the moderate leadership of Ramsay MacDonald and its more extremist elements. Should the moderates lose their position within the Party, Chamberlain asserted, it would certainly in the short term 'alarm the country and strengthen our own Party position'. However, the 'ultimate consequences might be disastrous in their effect on the industrial position and life of the nation'. Severing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union would, the Foreign Secretary felt, ensure the moderates would not just be 'in agreement with the extremists within their own party', but would be 'forced to unite with the avowed

[92] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter to John Anderson, 24 January 1927.
[93] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Arthur Balfour, 22 January 1927.
[94] B.J.C. McKercher, 'Austen Chamberlain's Control of British Foreign Policy, 1924-1929', *International History Review*, 6 (1984), p. 574.

Communists outside it'.[95] Though other Conservatives had indeed noted that 'the breach between them [the moderates of the Labour Party] and the Bolshies is growing every day', the summary of Conservative MP Henry Betterton, that simply, 'All this is to the good', makes it unlikely that these particular arguments held any substantial weight within the Cabinet.[96]

Chamberlain was starker with regard to the potential consequences of a rupture within the international sphere. Throughout the 1920s, the Soviet Union had firmly believed that Poland, resurrected as a nation state following the First World War, enjoyed no autonomy, but existed merely to serve British and French interests, a contention based on its ideological view of the 1920-1 Polish-Soviet War. As Whitewood has noted, the Soviet leaders had 'misperceived the nature of the 1920 war from the beginning, attributing outsized roles to Britain and France as the chief coordinators and financiers of the Polish armed forces'. It was because of perceived Polish subservience to British interests, particularly in acting as a starting off point for military action against Soviet Russia, that ensured Poland would remain 'the leading danger' in Soviet eyes for years to come.[97] Chamberlain, far from dismissing such views as simple paranoia, in fact addressed these fears in his draft note of protest. Noting the accusation that Britain 'has never ceased to guide the policy of such countries as Poland and the Baltic States […] into an orientation directed against Soviet Russia', Chamberlain was frustrated that no 'impartial study of the policies of those countries, no dispassionate examination of facts and no acceptance of assurances from His Majesty's Government have availed to dispel an obsession which is as illogical as it is ill-founded'.[98]

[95] TNA, CAB 24/184, 'Diplomatic Relations with the Soviet Government', 24 January 1927, pp. 2-3.
[96] Ball, *Conservative Politics in National and Imperial Crisis*, p. 111.
[97] Whitewood, op. cit., p. 184-5.
[98] TNA, CAB 24/184, Relations between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics: Draft Note to the Soviet Government, 21 January 1927.

Indeed, as early as August 1925, Chamberlain had deplored the 'rumours so assiduously circulated from Soviet sources that I am engaged in an attempt to build up some kind of united front against Soviet Russia', and asked the British Ambassador to Poland, Max Muller, to find out if such views were 'genuinely held in Government and Diplomatic circles in Warsaw'.[99] Muller's subsequent discussion with Count Skrzyński, the Polish Foreign Minister, seemingly confirmed the worst. The Locarno Act, arguably the high point of Chamberlain's foreign policy career in helping to bring Germany back into the European fold following the First World War, was unsurprisingly viewed by the Soviet Union as a hostile act, perceived as an attempt to sabotage its own semi-alliance with Germany. More starkly then, it was clear that Skrzyński also assumed Locarno had been enacted purely to 'detach her [Germany] from Russia'. Indeed, the Foreign Minister expressed surprise that Britain 'did not realise it was in their interest to detach Germany from Russia'. Though the Count himself was quick to assure Muller that there was obviously 'no foundation' to the Soviet view 'that His Majesty's Government were trying to form a league against them', it was nevertheless 'commonly accepted as such […] in Poland and the Border States'. More ominously, Skrzyński informed Muller that while he was sure Chamberlain's ongoing policy of aloofness towards the Soviet Union was 'undoubtedly the best for England […] it was difficult for a limitrophe country like Poland'.[100] Soviet beliefs, then, that Britain was indeed organising a hostile front against Russia were seemingly held, and even considered logical, within Poland itself. Less than a year later, in the summer of 1926, Piłsudski seized power. That his coup had been orchestrated by Britain 'in the interests of accelerating plans for an attack on the Soviet Union' was taken for granted by the Soviets.[101] Indeed, the Soviet Foreign Minister Chicherin, alongside his deputy

[99] TNA, FO 800/258, Letter to Max Muller from Austen Chamberlain, 12 August 1925.
[100] TNA, FO 800/258, Letter from Max Muller to Austen Chamberlain, 25 August 1925.
[101] Harris, op. cit., 520.

Litvinov, though pragmatic in their attitudes to the west, remained unlikely to reject 'the basic premise underlying the Bolsheviks' conspiratorial view of the world: that anti-Soviet coalitions were constantly in some stage of creation' and, more often than not, focused around Poland.[102] Later in July, Chamberlain would have taken little comfort from news received by the British ambassador to Germany, Lord D'Abernon, of an 'unofficial' representative of Poland currently present within Berlin. This particular individual was, according to D'Abernon, 'obsessed by the belief that England desires to use Poland against Russia', although in all other respects, he was quick to assure the Foreign Secretary, he appeared to be 'a very intelligent man'.[103] That such a mind-set appeared to be commonplace within Polish diplomatic circles worried Chamberlain, and he lamented his inability 'to eradicate from some Polish minds the suspicion that we want to use Poland against Russia'. Such Polish obstinacy was 'a complete misconception of my policy', and ultimately the 'safer Poland is, the safer peace will be'.[104]

By early 1927 then, an awareness of current Polish attitudes had strongly influenced Chamberlain's arguments within his 'Diplomatic Relations with the Soviet Government' memorandum. In assessing the potential impact of Britain severing relations with the Soviet Union, Chamberlain commented on the 'very disturbing effect' it would have in that state. 'Poland under Marshall Pilsudski', Chamberlain argued, 'is showing great restlessness; his policy is uncertain', while his 'language' was 'disquieting'. While Chamberlain was confident that the other Ministers in the Polish Cabinet had 'no desire for adventure', he 'cannot say the same about the Marshall, and I cannot forecast the effect on him of such action on our part'.[105] Schinness has interpreted this to mean that Chamberlain directly believed Poland

[102] Whitewood, op. cit., 137.
[103] TNA, FO 800/259, Letter from Lord D'Abernon to Austen Chamberlain, 28 – 29 July 1926.
[104] TNA, FO 800/259, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Lord D'Abernon, 6 August 1926.
[105] TNA, CAB 24/184, 'Diplomatic Relations with the Soviet Government', 24 January 1927, p. 1.

would 'attack' the Soviet Union, highlighting exactly what was at stake when it came to the question of severing Anglo-Soviet relations.[106] Indeed, the forcefulness of Chamberlain's argument appeared to shake the Cabinet's complacency, which subsequently agreed at a meeting on the 18 February 1927 that after being partly 'impressed by the grave consequences on the state of unrest in Europe', particularly as 'no preparation for such an eventuality had been undertaken', the moment was inopportune for a rupture. Nevertheless, more integral, in their view, was the fact that 'no especially significant event had occurred' comparable to the Zinoviev Letter affair in 1924 or 'the intervention of the Russian Soviet' in the 1926 General Strike which could ultimately justify a rupture. Ongoing events in China were thus sized up to be seen as the next 'significant event', although the eventual KMT purge of the CCP in April ultimately prevented the British Government from using events in China as a pretext.[107] For the time being then, Chamberlain was authorised to send his note of protest to the Soviets, with the Cabinet concurring this would act as 'a useful first step in preparing the way, both at home and abroad, for a rupture of relations'.[108]

Despite a complacent Cabinet, it soon became clear that Chamberlain's protest note had deeply unsettled other European countries, not to mention the Soviet Union itself. At the end of February, the British ambassador to Germany informed Chamberlain that there was 'a good deal of nervousness' emanating from within the country, which had 'spread to their view of Baltic and Polish questions'. In particular, German diplomatic spheres considered that current 'Polish obduracy' towards them was 'due to some sort of encouragement from England'.[109] As such, despite the Foreign Secretary's attempts to forcefully denounce the idea that Britain

[106] Schinness, op. cit., p. 399.
[107] It had been agreed at this Cabinet meeting that 'if bloodshed should unhappily occur in China as the result of a policy instigated by the agents of Soviet Russia' then 'a breach might become inevitable'.
[108] TNA, CAB 23/54, Cabinet Meeting Conclusions, 18 February 1927, pp. 1-2.
[109] TNA FO 800/260, Letter from Robert Lindsay to Austen Chamberlain, 26 February 1927.

directed the policy of eastern European states, these typical Soviet accusations were given credence in other countries. Chamberlain could only reply to the Ambassador that 'it was the certainty of such a reaction in Germany and of the equally inevitable reactions in the Baltic States and Poland that has hitherto restrained me from a course which the continued provocations of the Soviet Government have at last obliged me to take'. The note itself, he added gloomily, merely 'carries us a stage further towards a breach'.[110] The Foreign Secretary soon had the opportunity to detect the unsettled atmosphere himself. The next month, March, found him in Geneva attending a League of Nations Council meeting on disarmament. He found the city 'full of rumours of British plots and counter-plots', an 'inevitable result of our note'. Chamberlain himself could 'elicit no sign of an inclination to follow us if we break off relations […] In fact, the situation is very much as I anticipated. No country likes the Soviet Government; no country is satisfied with its relations with them; but no country wishes to be involved with our quarrel'.[111] After leaving Geneva, he would have taken little solace in a letter from Robert Cecil, the minister responsible for British involvement with the League, who informed Chamberlain that the general atmosphere at the disarmament talks remained 'slightly sceptical. Perhaps I am wrong, but I have a feeling that there is a nervousness abroad, partly the result of China, partly perhaps the result of our note to Russia'.[112]

The ARCOS Raid

It was the ARCOS Raid, a police search of a London-based Soviet Diplomatic Property in May 1927, that served to act as the straw that broke the camel's back. ARCOS (The All-Russian Co-operative Society) had been founded in 1920 and, following the semi-legitimisation of the

[110] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Robert Lindsay, 1 March 1927.
[111] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to William Tyrell, 9 March 1927.
[112] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter from Robert Cecil to Austen Chamberlain, 15 March 1927.

Soviet regime on the heels of the 1921 Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement, became the chief economic organisation responsible for conducting trade between Britain and the Soviet Union.[113] Suspicions had long been raised that the Society had habitually engaged in espionage and subversion, particularly after the 1925 raid on the headquarters of the CPGB, but it was only after reports that an army training manual had been illegally secured and reproduced within the building that a police search was finally ordered by the Home Office. The raid was, as Andrew describes, 'poorly prepared and badly co-ordinated'.[114] During an extensive search of the entire building lasting several days, what Florry describes as a 'lightning raid' which soon descended into a 'morass',[115] the police were unable to find the document in question, leading Austen Chamberlain to write that 'I can only trust that they will find something worth all the fuss. They and we will look foolish if they don't'.[116] In the end, however, the raid did little more than confirm pre-existing suspicions that ARCOS had been used as a base 'for directing subversive activities and disseminating hostile propaganda'.[117] The documents seized did not, as MI5 themselves admitted, 'appear to be of very great value'.[118] More crucially, they failed to prove that the Soviet diplomats within ARCOS itself were complicit with espionage. Mowat's apt recording of Baldwin's response to Parliament in the aftermath of the raid, that 'We will do the best we can to produce something … [interruption]',[119] highlights the quandary the Government found itself in, and forced the Prime Minister to publicly quote secret Soviet telegrams decrypted by the British security services in an attempt to justify the raid. Such a move simply made Moscow aware

[113] Sergeev, op. cit., pp. 99-100.
[114] C. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5*, (London, 2010), p. 154.
[115] H. Florry, 'The Arcos Raid and the Rupture of Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1927', *Journal of Contemporary* History, 12 (1977), p. 716.
[116] Self, op cit., p. 278.
[117] Florry, op. cit., p. 708.
[118] TNA, KV 3/15, Recovery of British official documents by raids on ARCOS Ltd, 16 May 1927.
[119] Mowat, op cit., p. 338.

its communication codes had been cracked, and after changing them accordingly, ensured that while the ARCOS Raid disrupted 'existing Soviet espionage operations in Britain', the Government's response caused 'even more serious disruption to British intelligence collection'.[120] Questions were also raised over the legality of the raid, with many commenting that the ARCOS building, along with its employees, were widely considered to have diplomatic status. It was thus a desperate need to save face, after having little to show for the exertions of the police, combined with the possibility of the Government itself having potentially breached diplomatic law, that ensured relations with the Soviet Union were finally severed on 26 May.[121]

Severance, when it came, was alarming not only to the Soviets, who informed the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee that 'the situation was extremely serious, and that war against Russia might break out suddenly',[122] but across the British political spectrum. Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress wrote to Baldwin that the rupture 'is a serious menace not only to preservation of peace between the two countries, but also to the peace of the world',[123] while the Labour Party condemned the Conservatives for encouraging 'the spread of war alarms in Soviet Russia'.[124] Such views could be found even within the Cabinet, with Eustace Percy, President of the Board of Education, arguing that severing relations was 'really an introduction to a state of war'.[125] The Foreign Secretary

[120] Andrew, op. cit., pp. 155-6.
[121] Mowat, op. cit., p. 338.
[122] University of Warwick Digital Collections, 292/947/25/6, Anglo-Russian Committee Proposed Meeting, 18 – 19 June 1927, https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/russian/id/6105 [Last accessed 3rd April 2024].
[123] LUA, Pamphlets BC Mattison/ANG, Raid on Arcos Ltd. and the Trade Delegation of the U.S.S.R.: Facts and Documents, c. 1927.
[124] ChAC, NBKR 2/1, Labour Party Research Department: Labour Party Conference Decisions on Peace and War, 25 April 1940, p. 11.
[125] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter to Austen Chamberlain from Eustace Percy, 19 May 1927.

himself was, initially at least, rather bullish about severance, acknowledging later that while 'the actual moment chosen for the breach was an accident […] the timing was opportune for they [the Soviets] had already received a severe set-back in China and a second blow coming so rapidly and from so influential a quarter produces double effect'.[126] Nevertheless, it is clear that his attention was quickly re-focused by a report from the departing British chargé d'affaires in Russia. The diplomat wrote that 'the atmosphere in Leningrad prior to our departure was one of the greatest tension'. The impact of Britain's severance had been exacerbated by a series of bomb attacks in the city, of 'subterranean organisations, […] venturing forth to hurl bombs at Communists in session in their clubs'.[127] Such an attack, conducted by Russian émigrés under their own steam, provoked fevered attempts by the Soviets to 'uncover supposed connections between domestic anti-Soviet networks and foreign intelligence services'.[128] The clear implication, that such 'terrorists' were directly 'employed by the British Government',[129] clearly alarmed Chamberlain, and for the remainder of his time in office the Foreign Secretary endeavoured to ensure there could be no seeming justification to Soviet accusations of British subversion.

Later that year, in November, Chamberlain felt obliged to reject a proposal from King George V of a visit by Grand Duke Nicholas, the symbolic figurehead for the anti-Soviet Russian monarchist movement, on the grounds that it would undoubtedly be perceived as 'proof that the British Government were conspiring against the government of Russia'.[130] Reiterating his

[126] TNA, FO 800/261, Letter to George Lloyd from Austen Chamberlain, 30 May 1927.
[127] TNA, KV 3/307, Letter from Thomas Preston to Austen Chamberlain, 13 June 1927.
[128] Whitewood, op. cit., p. 139.
[129] TNA, KV 3/307, Letter from Thomas Preston to Austen Chamberlain, 13 June 1927.
[130] The King grumbled that only a decade ago 'Russia was our ally and the Grand Duke Nicholas notably one of the staunchest friends of England'. In the meantime, diplomats from 'Enemy countries', namely Germany, had been heartily welcomed by both the King and Government. See TNA FO 800/261, Letter to Lord Stamfordham from Austen Chamberlain, 25 November 1927.

views to the Monarch the next year, Chamberlain made it known that it had 'always been clear to me that any attempt to remedy the Russian evil by a combination of the so-called Western powers against Russia could only defeat its own object by playing directly into the hands of the Bolsheviks'.[131] It was therefore 'essential', as he wrote to a British diplomat in Poland, to abstain from any 'interference in the internal affairs of Russia' so as to ensure that the Government would not 'expose ourselves to any reasonable suspicion that we practice ourselves the policy which we condemned when practiced by the Soviet Government'.[132] This cautious approach, which endured until Chamberlain left office in 1929, offers a new interpretation of the cessation of Anglo-Soviet relations in 1927. Historians have agreed that Soviet issues largely disappeared from British politics following the rupture. Schinness has asserted that 'the Tories virtually ignored Russia' for the rest of their time in office,[133] ensuring that the severance, as Knüsel comments, had marked the 'climax' in anti-Soviet rhetoric.[134] Chamberlain's proactive approach in giving no justification to Soviet claims of British plotting, however, makes it clear that fears of war, far from being contemptuously dismissed, were taken seriously. While Chamberlain may have ruefully shared the exasperation Britain's security services felt, at the ease with which the Soviets could be led 'up the garden' in believing that Britain was constantly planning for war, he took determined measures to ensure that no such accusations could be placed at his door.

Conclusion

In assessing the rupture of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union, a key event in the history of the 1927 Soviet war scare, one cannot help but comment on the

[131] TNA, FO 800/262, Letter to Lord Stamfordham from Austen Chamberlain, 8 May 1928.
[132] TNA, FO 800/262, Letter to William Erskine from Austen Chamberlain, 26 January 1928.
[133] Schinness, op. cit., p. 402.
[134] Knüsel, op. cit., pp. 84-5.

forcefulness of Conservative anger towards the Soviet state, particularly by the time severance eventually came about in May. To previous scholars, the rupture is unique insofar as it marked 'one of the few times during the inter-war period that Conservative backbenchers successfully revolted against their leader's policies', forcing the latter to sever relations with Soviet Russia.[135] This distinctive event, then, ensures an inclination to focus largely on the leadership of Stanley Baldwin, and his seeming inability to control his Party. The Prime Minister was no moderate, as shown in his assertion that the communist-run National Minority Movement had unparalleled influence within the wider trade union movement, a belief which frankly bemused the Comintern, as well as in his refusal to allow foreign aid for miners' families in their continued lockout after the General Strike.[136] Despite these particular instances however, the Prime Minister was unable, as Grimley Ward has shown, to make his own anti-socialist views resonate with the more aggressive nationwide Conservative propaganda that had gained ever increasing support after 1924.[137] To most ordinary Conservative MPs, anti-British activity in China after 1925 was merely another, though extreme, example of Soviet perfidy, thus heightening already urgent demands for a rupture, whilst the ARCOS Raid, despite being poorly planned and devoid of a much needed smoking gun in confirming Soviet subversion, 'delighted', in the words of Cabinet Minister Samuel Hoare, many Conservatives, who 'did not in the least mind whether or not there was a justification for the raid'.[138]

[135] Schinness, op. cit., p. 403.
[136] Such a tactic would give British communists an open goal in claiming that the Prime Minister was deliberately setting out to 'starve the babies'. See BOA CP/CENT/CONG/01/08*,* 1926 CPGB Congress, p. 30.
[137] J. Grimley Ward, 'Bolshevik Bogies: Red Scares in Britain, 1919-24', *Contemporary British History*, 38 (2024), p. 148.
[138] Ball, *Conservative Politics in National and Imperial Crisis*, p. 154.

It was perhaps this seeming complacency that most alarmed Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain. Too easily had aggressive language been used within the Government when discussing the Soviet Union. Cabinet members such as Lord Birkenhead flippantly talked of issuing the Soviets a 'Casus belli', while Conservatives as a whole had welcomed the display of military might the Shanghai Defence Force offered in defence of British imperial interests in China. While war against Russia was never considered a serious option, even by the most hard-line of Conservatives, Chamberlain was deeply aware of the potential repercussions such frivolous talk of force might unleash. A rupture with the Soviet Union would not only unite the Labour Party, he argued, it would strengthen domestic communism at exactly the same time the Conservatives were determined to strike a blow at a communist state. Furthermore, Chamberlain pointed out that severing relations could plausibly justify Soviet fears of war. Poland, in his view, was deeply unpredictable and perhaps only needed a small spark to justify attacking its eastern neighbour. Chamberlain feared that a rupture could act as that particular spark. This fear of international instability served as his key justification in maintaining relations with Russia, even at the risk of alienating his Party, until circumstances wrenched it away from him after the fait accompli of the ARCOS Raid. Indeed, it was Chamberlain's hesitance in introducing 'one more disturbing element into a world that is already sufficiently restless' that perhaps best defines his role, not only in the cessation of Anglo-Soviet diplomatic relations, but within the Soviet war scare as a whole.[139]

[139] TNA, FO 800/260, Letter to Arthur Balfour from Austen Chamberlain, 22 January 1927.

Chapter Six: The CGPB and the 1927 Soviet War Scare

Writing in July 1927, it struck Rajani Palme Dutt that 'in no time since the war have the thunder clouds been so heavy and threatening'.[1] Comparing it to a 'gathering storm', the communist theoretician went on to assert that:

> The signs of offensive preparation and action are open and evident on every hand. The war in China, the military and naval preparations, the diplomatic intrigues and fostering of counter-revolution in Europe; and at the same time the Trade Union Act and House of Lords scheming at home: all these are signs that point as clearly as the time-fuse of a bomb in one direction, and in one direction only, the direction of war on the workers and counter-revolution.[2]

Such rhetoric would prove that the CPGB was more than capable of aping Soviet traditions in labelling various events as part of a sinister capitalist plot to subjugate Russia. As indicated in the previous chapter, scholarly approaches to the 1927 war scare remain centred on internal Soviet politics, with little research having been undertaken on the actions of the key antagonist, Great Britain, or, indeed, of those British communists who would have found themselves in a most uncomfortable position had war been declared on the USSR. This chapter, in examining the CPGB's responses, suggests, however, that the Party was ultimately lacklustre in its attempts to tackle the Soviet war danger. This sluggishness derived not only from a natural focus on *actual* British intervention, in China, but through disagreement with the anti-militarist policies propounded by the Communist International, whose talk of revolutionary subversion appeared incongruous to the British domestic situation, and all too often clashed with the actual anti-militarist experiences many British communists had had as conscientious objectors during the First World War. This chapter therefore begins with an

[1] British Library [Hereafter BL], CUP.1262.K.4, 'Notes of the Month: Counter-Revolution', 23 July 1927, p. 1.
[2] Ibid.

examination of CPGB responses to British involvement within China during 1927. It will be argued that such activity, epitomised by the 'Hands off China' campaigns, overshadowed the Party's responses to the Soviet Union's own fears of war. The second part focuses on Party discussions regarding a potential introduction of conscription within Britain. Tellingly, it was the ongoing situation in China, rather than any perceived threat towards the USSR, that helped to kick-start these debates. The stark views expressed not only challenged Comintern thinking on anti-militarism, but suggest that First World War pacifist movements like the No-Conscription Fellowship maintained a lingering influence on the CPGB. The third section will focus on the responses of the Communist International towards the CPGB's anti-militarist views, in particular exploring its condemnation of the CPGB's seemingly pacifist tendencies. Finally, the last segment of this chapter explores the CPGB's activity in the second half of 1927, arguing that despite the stern warnings of Moscow, and a seemingly worsening international situation for the USSR, British communists remained unable to overcome their fixation on Chinese affairs or fully get behind the view that the Soviet Union was indeed at risk of invasion.

The 'Hands off China' Movement

Despite Moscow's dire warnings of an attack within a matter of 'days' in January 1927, the directives duly issued by the CPGB that same month regarding 'the present war' did not concern conflict with the Soviet Union, but very real British intervention in China.[3] As examined in the previous chapter, anti-British protests in China had done much to exacerbate Anglo-Chinese relations since 1925. As members of a political party right at the heart of an imperialist power however, these anti-colonial protests had come as a succour to communists

[3] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, Statement issued by Central Committee of CPGB, 19 January 1927.

in Britain, and there were clear indications that the CPGB made immediate moves to support them. Less than a month following the bloodshed of 30 May 1925, the Party's Colonial Department asked its chief organiser in London, Ernest Cant, to make arrangements for a special conference to bring attention to China's plight,[4] whilst correspondence to General Secretary Albert Inkpin in July indicated localised attempts were being made across the country to form pro-Chinese committees.[5] The result of this, the 'Hands Off China' movement – a deliberate echo of the 1919-20 'Hands off Russia' movement – has been regarded by the CPGB's official historian, Klugmann, as one of the 'most important anti-imperialist campaign carried on by the Party' during this period.[6] As the situation deteriorated for the British Government in subsequent months, the Cabinet would be informed that events in China were 'receiving considerable attention at the hands of communists and other extremists in this country'.[7] The despatch of the Shanghai Defence Force (SDF) in January 1927 would only further galvanise the CPGB, leading the Central Committee to solemnly declare that 'The British Government has determined war on China'.[8] As reports to the Cabinet made clear, the CPGB declared that '"a Stop the War campaign"' must now take place throughout the country, involving '"the formation of 'Hands off China' committees in every town and for the placing of an embargo on movements of troops, ships and munitions"'.[9] Such enthusiasm ensured that soon 'all communist propaganda […] has been devoted to the organisation of opposition to the Government policy in China'.[10] There were, however, immediate signs that the 'Hands

[4] TNA, KV 3/19, Letter to Ernest Cant from CPGB Colonial Department, 25 June 1925.
[5] TNA, KV 3/19, Correspondence from Manchester 'Provisional Committee for Hands off China' to Albert Inkpin, 7 July 1925.
[6] Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Volume* II, p. 305.
[7] ChAC, CHAR 22/186, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 6 January 1927, p. 8.
[8] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, Statement from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 19 January 1927.
[9] ChAC, CHAR 22/186, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 27 January 1927, p. 1.
[10] Ibid.

off China' Campaign was gaining little support. In early February, the Cabinet would be informed that there 'is as yet no definite evidence that the vast body of moderate British labour is taking any great interest in the extremist campaign against the Government policy in China', with agitation confined solely 'to the communists'.[11] By March, the campaign was deemed to be 'declining somewhat in vigour',[12] and, 'as a whole, waning'.[13] From April, the same month that witnessed the massacre of Chinese communists in Shanghai, thus effectively ending the crisis for the British Government, CPGB activity had begun to concentrate on upcoming Government legislation concerning the British trade unions, ensuring 'The "Hands off China" campaign has, for the time being, taken second place'.[14]

The CPGB would itself admit shortcomings with 'Hands off China'. Whilst Thomas Bell would later claim that the CPGB had conducted 'an energetic campaign',[15] he pointed out that at **'the same time it has to be recognised that the Party did not succeed in stopping a single troopship or other form of reinforcements'.**[16] Even more starkly, when confiding to the Comintern, it was admitted that 'activity itself was really begun when the first troops were mobilised in England', and that it was only 'this event [that] first awakened them to the full seriousness of the situation'.[17] The Comintern itself was typically more cutting. Corroborating Cabinet reports noting 'the difficulty of obtaining up to date news from sympathetic sources in China is hampering the "Hands off China" agitation',[18] it sternly pointed out that the CPGB had been limited 'mainly to transmitting what had appeared in the Russian press on Chinese

[11] ChAC, CHAR 22/186, Report, 3 February 1927, p. 7.
[12] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report, 3 March 1927, p. 1.
[13] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report, 10 March 1927, p. 1.
[14] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report, 28 April 1927, p. 1.
[15] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/09, CPGB 1927 Congress, p. 119.
[16] *Ibid*., p. 42. Emphasis in the original.
[17] LSECM, 'The Activity of the British Communists during the First Phase of the Intervention in China', 14 May 1927, p. 11.
[18] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 9 June 1927, p. 2.

questions'.[19] Ultimately, none 'of the Communist Parties of the capitalist countries developed any serious work in its own country, and as a result, this campaign was wholly and completely unsuccessful'.[20] Scholarly assessments have reinforced this view. Macfarlane notes that while the CPGB had attempted to emphasise to British workers that they were faced with 'a crisis comparable to the Russian crisis of August 1920', he wryly noted that 'this time there was no 'Jolly George' victory to celebrate'.[21] Thorpe, while conceding that these comparisons were logical, nevertheless argued that China was 'extremely complicated: it was not as easy to convey its significance as it had been with the earlier 'Hands off Russia' Campaign'.[22] More bluntly, this 'near obsession' with Chinese affairs alienated many of those new members who had joined the Party in the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike,[23] ensuring membership fell from a height of 12,000 in October 1926 to a mere 6,400 just one year later.[24] Communists who had pointed out this uncomfortable fact were, nonetheless, strongly castigated.[25] Such interpretations neglect, however, those subsequent CPGB discussions regarding a possible reintroduction of conscription as a direct result of Chinese events.

[19] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/05/11, The Communist International between the Fifth and Sixth Congresses: A Report on the Position in all Sections of the World Communist Party, pp. 41-2.
[20] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, International Red Day: The Workers' Fight against Imperialist War, c.1929, p. 35.
[21] Macfarlane, op. cit., 179.
[22] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, pp.* 105-6.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain', p. 781.
[25] To the ECCI, Hugo Rathbone would note that 'some very serious and it should be stated dangerous, statements were made by the representatives of the Central Committee', namely that the recruitment and consolidation of new members had been 'a failure, due partly to divergence caused by the 'Hands off China' [campaign]'. See LSECM, 'Report on the Policy and Work of the CPGB since the Seventh Enlarged Plenum', 9 May 1927, p. 2.

China and Conscription

The anti-imperialist and anti-militarist propaganda produced by the CPGB in response to the SDF, though of little influence on wider public opinion, nevertheless marked a new development in the Party's anti-militarist outlook. Indeed, British intervention in China directly helped to shape communist debates on the issue of military service. The views expressed would not only cause internal tensions, but seemingly highlight the personal experiences of conscientious objection many communists held during the First World War. At the beginning of the Chinese crisis, the CPGB had followed precedent when discussing military service, echoing its advice shared during the 1922 Chanak Crisis that at 'a time like the present, […] we would urge workers not to join the army for the brunt of the struggle is still at home'. In 1927 however, such a view only came with the caveat 'when conscription is not yet imposed'. If that unhappy event came to pass, as some evidently thought possible, then 'the situation changes'. With compulsory military service ensuring 'the masses are drawn directly into the armed struggle', the CPGB declared that 'every class conscious worker should be in the army' as a result. There was no patience for pacifism, with conscientious objection roundly condemned as 'individualist petit-bourgeois selfishness', which merely 'isolates the workers from those who are best able to guide them. No class conscious revolutionary can be a conscientious objector'.[26] Such grandiose statements did, however, belie an awkward truth. During the First World War, at a time before Lenin had come to international prominence, many future Party members, deprived of Bolshevik teachings, had declared themselves

[26] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/01, Political Letter No. 17: WAR, 28 January 1927, pp. 1-2.

conscientious objectors. Indeed, Andrew Rothstein would be one of the few communists to publicly admit that during 'the last war, party members had adopted the role of pacifists'.[27]

In 1927 then, communists, in the event of war, were expected to practice revolutionary defeatism. The introduction of conscription would be welcomed as an opportunity to infiltrate the armed forces and subvert fellow soldiers, before attempting to steer a 'capitalist' war into a civil war which would create a revolutionary situation and secure a communist seizure of power.[28] Following the despatch of the SDF, these dogmatic views were frequently disseminated to the public, and the Cabinet was soon aware of the CPGB's consistency in suggesting conscription's imminence as well as its fulsome condemnation of both conscientious objection and pacifism. The CPGB's youth wing, the Young Communist League, particularly emphasised that 'young workers' would be first in line for any compulsory military service,[29] leading many Party members, such as the former ILPer Ernest Brown, to explicitly label young communists as key to subverting fellow conscripts. At a March demonstration in Liverpool, he declared that:

> The first task of the Communist Party would be to place the youngest members in the Army, to sabotage and betray the Army, and to distribute leaflets. There men will keep in touch with headquarters and they will be instructed to do all in their power to overthrow the British Government and substitute a Soviet Republic'.[30]

Such rhetoric, coming as it did from a former conscientious objector, suggested Brown had successfully shed any belief in the merits of individual resistance to war, and was wholly

[27] TNA, KV 2/1578, Copy of Scotland Yard Report on speech made by Andrew Rothstein, 29 September 1927.
[28] P. Le Blanc, *Lenin: Responding to Catastrophe, Forging Revolution* (London, 2023), p. 76.
[29] ChAC, CHAR 22/186, Report, 10 February 1927, p. 2.
[30] TNA, KV 2/3197, Letter to Sir Vernon Kell, 31 March 1927.

committed to revolutionary defeatism.[31] However, there was an awareness from other Party members that such radicalism was inconceivable for many. William Rust, General Secretary of the Young Communist League, addressed one demonstration that April in Birmingham:

> Should conscription come in, then my advice to you is not to become pacifists and get flung behind prison doors where you cannot do any revolutionary work, but to join up and get among the masses of young workers that are ignorantly shepherded into the army, navy and air force, and spread the propaganda there where it will take effect. Comrades, you may think that the order I am giving is a peculiar one, but let me tell you that this question has been studied and the message that I have just given to you is the one that the executive have decided upon. Join the armed forces by all means and get among the masses that have joined up, who have gone into the army on the usual cry of patriotism from the capitalist press of this country. Comrades, this message is one of great importance and I want you to make propaganda of the message among the young workers. What is the good of a section of young workers like the Young Communist League being thrown into prison and being kept there?.[32]

Rust's bombastic words, clearly infused with the typical experiences of many conscientious objectors who had faced imprisonment during the First World War, were meticulously recorded by MI5, who as late as 1946 would cite this speech within his security file.[33] His frankness, however, in admitting this message may seem 'a peculiar one' also registered an awareness that such views would ultimately be alien to many Britons. His buoyancy in asserting, nevertheless, that this 'this question has been studied' and 'decided upon' by the

[31] McIlroy and Campbell note that Brown had been 'elected national secretary of the body representing conscientious objectors interned in government camps, and led a prisoner's strike at Dartmoor', suggesting he had participated in C.H. Norman's slacking campaign in 1917. See McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Core Leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain', 379.
[32] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report, 7 April 1927, p. 2.
[33] 'At a meeting in Birmingham [Rust] advised members of the Y.C.L. to join the Armed Forces in order to spread communism'. See TNA, KV 2/1050, William Charles Rust: Summary of Files, August 1946.

leadership suggests a level of consensus within the Party over the conscription issue that simply did not exist.

Conscription Debates

In April 1927, a special meeting of the CPGB'S Central Committee (CC) was convened to discuss the Party's policy towards military affairs. Led by Rust, it reaffirmed the view that Britain would be forced to introduce conscription should any war break out. While the CPGB should seek to resist it, 'once it had become a fact […] it would then be our job not to attempt propaganda against workers joining the army, but to concentrate our energy on Party members and revolutionary forces inside the army'. Perhaps remembering the jingoism of 1914, Rust was of the opinion that, in any case, a majority of workers would heed the call to enlist, and therefore the CPGB should 'not isolate the more class conscious workers from the mass of workers in the army'. Aware that this tactic would 'undoubtedly be misunderstood by a large number of workers […] we must nevertheless, pursue this policy'.[34] William Loeber, a CC member who had himself fought in the First World War,[35] would prove to be the polar opposite to the former conscientious objector Ernest Brown, vehemently disagreeing with 'the view that once conscription had become a fact […] the Party should abandon its opposition to it'. 'In a capitalist war', he bluntly argued, 'they must be pacifists'.[36] Bob Stewart, a former conscientious objector and, in the words of Harry Pollitt, a figure who had 'helped build the "No Conscription Fellowship" in Scotland',[37] would concur, suggesting that there 'was a danger of our become *[sic*] recruiting sargeants [*sic*] to the capitalists'. Furthermore,

[34] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB on Certain Political Questions: Part III - The Danger of War', 15 May 1927, pp. 3-4.
[35] Mcilroy and Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism', p. 222.
[36] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB on Certain Political Questions: Part III - The Danger of War', 15 May 1927, p. 4.
[37] MLHASC, CP/IND/MISC/9/9, Letter from Harry Pollitt to Bob Stewart, 15 February 1952.

he argued, to 'tell known Party members to enter the army and then to work against the war, would be just suicide for them'.[38] This was no embellishment. During the First World War, several conscientious objectors had been forcibly sent to France and, once under direct military control, were sentenced to death for refusing orders, a verdict only commuted at the last minute.[39] Even more recently, in February 1927, amidst British military preparations for China, Cabinet Minister Sir William Mitchell-Thomson had publicly declared – albeit without any official sanction – that communists, in resisting mobilisation, may 'end up, and very properly too, against a wall with a firing party in front of them'.[40] Stewart therefore believed the correct attitude to take 'was not to tell the workers to go into the army and to play hell' but to carry 'on our revolutionary propaganda amongst the workers, exposing the nature of pacifism and explaining that only the revolution can bring about peace'.[41] Rust, however, remained steadfast in emphasising that it 'was a question of how best to carry on the class struggle during a war. This could not be done by a small group refusing to serve, but by disintegrating the forces'.[42] With regard to Stewart's worries about the fate of Party members caught infiltrating the army, Rust, a rising figure in the Party that would soon come to encapsulate its most overt Stalinist tendencies,[43] would chillingly claim 'it was not a question of Party members, but of directing Party propaganda to the whole of the workers who were participating in the war'.[44] Though Rust was, in the end, able to maintain a semblance of unity, the strong levels of dissension raised over the Party's anti-militarist tactics at this meeting could not simply be ignored.

[38] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB on Certain Political Questions: Part III - The Danger of War', 15 May 1927, p. 4.
[39] Pearce, *Communities of Resistance*, p. 53.
[40] 'Minister's Reply to Socialist Threats', *Manchester Guardian*, 16 February 1927, p. 11.
[41] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB on Certain Political Questions: Part III - The Danger of War', 15 May 1927, p. 4.
[42] Ibid., p. 5.
[43] See A. Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe* (London, 1997).
[44] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB' p. 5.

The Eighth ECCI Plenum

The next month, May, saw the convening of the Eighth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). Held in Moscow over the course of twelve days, it has primarily been viewed as a turning point in the leadership struggle between Stalin and Trotsky.[45] Indeed, at this Plenum, a British communist, Jack Murphy, would be tasked with expelling Trotsky from the ECCI. Though this was described by Trotsky's biographer as a deliberate snub, using an 'insignificant envoy of one of the most insignificant foreign Communist parties' to expel such a prominent revolutionary,[46] it was more likely an indication of the level of confidence the ECCI had in the CPGB's representative in Moscow at this time.[47] While this internal power struggle in the Soviet Party leadership had certainly had an impact on the ECCI's relationship with its national sections, preventing any congress from being held since 1924,[48] the Eighth Plenum itself was, as contemporary reports argued, 'devoted mainly' to 'the danger of a new war'.[49] Significantly, because of 'Gt. Britain's exceptionally active role in the preparation of the world war', a stringent focus was placed on 'the tasks of the British Communist Party'.[50] From the very beginning of the Plenum, communists from a variety of parties would argue that an inadequate level of attention had hitherto been placed on the danger of war. The French representative would lament that 'only a section of the proletariat realises the imminence of war',[51] whilst one German speaker, agreeing that 'most workers'

[45] McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, p. 70.
[46] I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (Oxford, 1970), p. 359.
[47] R. Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy* (Liverpool, 1998), pp. 154-7; McIlroy, J. and A. Campbell, 'The British and French Representatives to the Communist International, 1920-1939: A Comparative Survey', *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), p. 216.
[48] A. Vatlin, 'The Comintern', in S.A. Smith, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 190-1.
[49] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/17/1, 'Information Re. The History of the Comintern', c. 1928, p. 15.
[50] Ibid.
[51] LSECM, 3rd Plenary Session, 19 May 1927, p. 150.

were not 'sufficiently prepared for the struggle against the coming and inevitable war', went further in adding that 'also many communists do not believe in the existence of the war danger'.[52] Such accusations were clearly directed towards the British representatives present. Indeed, as a direct result of that April CC Meeting, the CPGB was accused of being infected by 'Ideological confusion', as certain 'prominent comrades flounder on the position of vulgar pacifism (Great Britain)'.[53] Loeber's statement at that meeting, quoted as 'In a capitalist war they (the masses) must be pacifists' was wholeheartedly condemned and considered a key example of a 'fairly widespread phenomenon' of communists, not just the masses, refusing to believe in the war danger.[54] Two British representatives, Thomas Bell and John Campbell, were allowed to respond. Bell would be a hardliner, fully on board with the Comintern's arguments. Campbell, on the other hand, would question Comintern orthodoxy, casting doubt not only on the wisdom of its anti-militarist policy, but the very idea that conscription, if not quite war, was inevitable.

When given the floor, Thomas Bell began by observing that 'some comrades are sceptical about the wisdom of concentrating on the question of war', before asserting that 'nothing could be more fatal for the CI and the working masses than an underestimation of this question'.[55] While this plenum marked 'the first time the [war] question has received special treatment' it was evidently 'high time, as a great many of our sections remain passive'.[56] Bell would not shy away from referring to his own Party, and, in referencing that April CC meeting, would comment that 'we found to our surprise that a great deal of confusion actually exists

[52] LSECM, 6th Plenary Session, 21 May 1927, p. 224.
[53] LSECM, 'Theses on War and the Menace of War', 19 May 1927, p. 139.
[54] LSECM, 'Shortcomings and Vacillations in the CPs in the Struggle against the War Danger', n.d., p. 1.
[55] LSECM, 2nd Plenary Session, 18 May 1927, p. 62
[56] Ibid., p. 78

upon quite a number of questions we thought we re [*sic*] already settled'.[57] Though pointing out that anti-militarist work had been established as a permanent function for Communist Parties since the Third Comintern Congress in 1921, 'our Anglo-Saxon sections, though many continental parties too, are doing little or nothing to realise the terms of the III Congress resolution'. Ultimately:

> Communists, therefore, cannot refuse to urge going into the army for fear, as it has been said by some comrades in England, of becoming "recruiting sergeants" for the imperialists. Unless we have reliable nuclei inside the barracks, in the ranks of the soldiers, we can never hope to understand the vital problems put before them by the objective surrounds and our Party. While we are emphasising this to our Anglo-Saxon sections, this applies equally to every country and every section.[58]

Bell's concluding comments, that there 'is still too much passivity in our ranks; too great a tendency to follow the old Social Democratic ways',[59] was particularly notable, and would become a smear used ever more frequently against the CPGB in subsequent years.

Campbell, in clear contrast to Bell, would beseech the Comintern to be more considerate of Britain's unique situation. While it could not be denied that 'the question of Communist work in the army is one of great importance', Campbell emphasized that 'we have had to face special problems in England. We have never had, until the world war of 1914-18, such a thing as a conscript army'. Furthermore, as 'there has never been in the English Labour movement any tradition of anti-militarist work or active propaganda in the army', British anti-militarism had been largely dominated by 'a pacifist tradition centering [*sic*] around the Independent

[57] Ibid., pp. 78-9.
[58] Ibid., p. 76.
[59] Ibid.

Labour Party'. Because of such limitations, 'It is therefore only since 1924 that the English Party has seriously commenced work in the army, and while our anti-military apparatus is small, nevertheless, we have obtained a certain amount of results'. Campbell would even lightly chide the Comintern itself, arguing that 'It is also true, I think, to say that much of the propaganda – the anti-militarist propaganda – of the Communist International has hitherto had, in view more countries which possessed a conscript army than countries with mercenary armies of the type that exists in England'.[60] Defending the CPGB's lack of success over China, Campbell could only argue that the 'recent despatch of troops to China […] had no precedent in the International movement'. Furthermore, while 'we had to make it quite clear that it was not a Communist position to advocate individual resistance or individual desertion as a weapon against the war' during the Chinese crisis, Campbell was defiant in suggesting that 'there was no question of conscription being immediately employed in England as a means to recruiting the army'. Indeed, even if 'the events in China developed to such an extent that the present English army was insufficient for the needs of the English bourgeoisie before conscription would be introduced', any attempts made to increase recruitment would be made 'not by conscription, but by methods of voluntary recruiting'. As such, 'While it was necessary […] to send Communists into the army to carry out special work, at the same time we must not advocate the general entry of the workers into that voluntary recruited army'.[61] On that infamous CC meeting, Campbell would be facetious, merely commenting that 'in the English Central Committee, ~~many~~ some [a rather telling correction] comrades' doubted 'the

[60] LSECM, 4th Plenary Session, 19 May 1927, p. 55
[61] Ibid., 56.

value of carrying on anti-militarist work inside the Capitalist army', a seemingly innocuous opinion.[62]

Campbell's comments, while unorthodox, have nevertheless been corroborated by scholarly research. Morgan, in his comparative study of anti-militarism within the British and French Communist Parties, has argued that the Comintern did indeed register little distinction between various national situations, and deliberately ensured anti-war campaigns remained broadly uniform amongst all communist parties.[63] He further demonstrates that the key issue for the CPGB was not just that Britain's tradition of voluntary service made it different to other European states, but through the fact that the armed forces had always remained antithetical to the British labour movement. Indeed, while for other countries conscription could act as 'a conception of revolutionary provenance', with the idea of 'the nation in arms' being particularly 'indigenous to the French left', such an outlook in Britain 'was associated mainly with the political right'.[64] Pugh has previously argued that during the First World War, the anti-war section of the British labour movement was loath to fraternise with British soldiers, assuming the army was inherently reactionary and beyond any hope of meaningful political support.[65] Indeed, because of such entrenched views, and an awareness that troops could be used against any labour unrest, as they were prior to 1914,[66] the Labour Party had demanded demobilisation as soon as possible following the 1918 Armistice.

[62] Ibid., 57
[63] Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism', pp. 230-1.
[64] Ibid., 209.
[65] Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939* (London, 1983), pp. 193-4.
[66] See R. Darlington, *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14* (London, 2023).

Comintern reflections on the No-Conscription Fellowship

Perhaps already aware of such unique nuances within the British political system, the Comintern, in preparation for the Eighth Plenum, had registered a need to examine the British labour movement's experience of the First World War, and duly conducted a comprehensive, if ideologically stinted, survey of Britain's anti-war movements.[67] Both Bell and Campbell, doubtless keen to improve their ideological standing in light of recent events, and perhaps aware of their own national inadequacies when compared to Bolshevik achievements, were hostile to such explorations. Campbell argued that even the most 'advanced groups' had merely 'adopted the attitude of individual refusal of military service',[68] whilst Bell commented that the perceived 'passivity' of anti-war movements such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP) 'was a great service to the English bourgeoisie in carrying on the war', adding for good measure that its 'opposition to violence and its puritanical love for the "Constitution" makes this group one of the most dangerous forces we have to contend with in England'.[69] The Comintern itself, in its report entitled 'The British Labour Movement and the World War, 1914-1917', would be more generous. Despite a long-standing hostility towards the ILP, it nevertheless acknowledged that it had 'set the tone of the anti-war movement and even to a large extent moulded the policy of the [CPGB forerunners] BSP […] and of the SLP'.[70] It also took great interest in the 'organisation that dominated the anti-war campaign throughout the war': The No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF).[71]

[67] LSECM, 'Draft Plan for the Preparation of Material on the danger of war with regard to England', n.d., p. 22.
[68] LSECM, 14th Session, 26 May 1927, p. 20.
[69] Ibid., 74.
[70] LSECM, 'The British Labour Movement and the World War', n.d., p. 6.
[71] Ibid.

While admitting that most conscientious objectors had 'claimed exemption on the ground that they were opposed to war for religious or moral reasons', it was asserted that a large number were conscientious objectors 'on the ground of working class solidarity and their opposition to capitalist war'.[72] Thomas Bell, in his earlier address, had argued that 'Anti-militarist work has little meaning and will lead nowhere unless it has the support of an illegal organisation'.[73] It is notable, then, that great stock was placed in an anti-war movement that had, after all, 'the character of an underground resistance movement'.[74] The NCF was praised for its 'considerable skill in organising secret hiding places for thousands of those who evaded military service' as well as its ability in 'preserving its organisation from the attempts of the government to break it up, for it managed to carry on wide public propaganda while maintaining its apparatus as a purely underground organisation right up to the end of the war'.[75] However, despite acknowledging that the 'fight against military service was the predominant form of combatting the war in Britain', the NCF was criticised for isolating its 'really revolutionary elements […] from the army, where, if they had joined it they ought to have done some revolutionary work'. Instead, the NCF's 'effect was to make the armed forces safer from the point of view of the governing class'.[76] While the report failed to explain how, exactly, the NCF could have engaged in this revolutionary work, these observations ultimately highlight that the Comintern would not brook any reliance on the experiences many British communists had of anti-war activism within such 'pacifist' organisations.

[72] Ibid.
[73] LSECM, 2nd Session, 18 May 1927, p. 76.
[74] Pearce, *Communities of Resistance*, p. 51.
[75] LSECM, 'The British Labour Movement', p. 7.
[76] Ibid., p. 8.

Comintern Reflections on the Trade Union Bill

As the Plenum went on, it became clear that the CPGB was not only being accused of 'vulgar pacifism' for its stance on conscription, but was also being challenged because of views expressed toward upcoming trade union legislation following the 1926 General Strike. The 1927 Trades Disputes and Trades Union Act, the contents of which were released to the public in April, and given Royal Assent in July, crippled organised labour for a generation.[77] From a communist point of view, the Act was interpreted as having an even more sinister purpose. Severely weakening the labour movement would in theory allow Britain to declare war on the Soviet Union without worrying about a repeat of the Councils of Action that had sprung up in response to British support for Poland during the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, described by Dutt as the 'highest point' thus far of Britain's 'revolutionary wave'.[78] Prior to the Plenum, the CPGB had noted 'not only the General Strike as such is illegal, but that also strikes having for their object the refusal to make munitions, to transport troops, to equip or loan boats, are also illegal'.[79] Communists were not alone in commenting on this. Fenner Brockway, a leading figure within the No-Conscription Fellowship and a member of the much denigrated ILP, also viewed with concern the outlawing of any industrial action against war. Similarly linking it back to 1920, Brockway believed it to be revenge for 'Labour's threat of unconstitutional action' during the Polish-Soviet War.[80] Furthermore, whilst communist demonstrations in the run up to the Bill had typically focused on this aspect, with Wal Hannington asserting to one crowd that it was 'part of a scheme of the Capitalists of the World to attack the workers',[81]

[77] A. Williamson, 'The Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act Reconsidered', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 37 (2016), p. 35.
[78] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/15/1, Open Letter to CPGB Members, 5 January 1928, p. 3.
[79] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, Notes on Trade Union Bill, 12 April 1927.
[80] F. Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament,* (London, 1942), p. 133.
[81] TNA, MEPO 38/84, Metropolitan Police Report on CPGB demonstration in Bethnal Green, 29 May 1927.

similar marches organised by other elements of the labour movement expressed comparable fears. One ILP speaker reiterated that it was because of Government concerns 'that organised Labour would take militant steps to prevent another war, that the Bill was formulated',[82] whilst the No More War Movement, the NCF's successor, argued that Britain was now in a situation 'which might at any time develop into a war which, if such took place, would mean the end of civilisation'.[83]

The Comintern, encouraged by such fulsome condemnation across the political left, argued that the logical response to prevent the Bill's implementation was to demand yet another general strike. As Macfarlane asserts, such an alarmingly naive view 'was completely unrealistic', and exhibited a refusal 'to draw the lesson that the militant temper of the workers had suffered a great setback' following the defeat of last year's General Strike.[84] In a similar vein to those Party members who had questioned the detrimental impact 'Hands off China' activism had had on membership figures, some communists now questioned the wisdom of advocating a general strike, yet these 'realists were in a minority'.[85] During the Plenum, then, the Comintern took the CPGB to task for a meeting - held around the same time as that other notorious CC meeting - that 'revealed "an acute difference of opinion as to whether the slogan of the General Strike could be included in the [CPGB's anti-TU Bill] manifesto at the present stage"'. An indication of the aggrieved nature of the debate can be seen through Willie Gallacher's tart observation that 'the present form in which the discussion was raised' ensured no actual 'discussion on the trade union bill', but '"abstract arguments

[82] TNA, MEPO 38/84, Metropolitan Police Report on ILP demonstration at Parliament Hill Fields, 29 May 1927.
[83] TNA, MEPO 38/84, Metropolitan Police Report on No More War Movement demonstration at Finsbury Park, 29 May 1927.
[84] Macfarlane, op. cit., p. 182.
[85] Ibid., 183.

on the question of the General Strike"'.[86] Gallacher, one of the policy's detractors, has been described by Thorpe as being 'in virtual apoplexy' over the issue, even going so far as to threaten to emigrate to Canada.[87] While, in the end, the general strike slogan was approved, the small majority of 5 to 4 irritated the Comintern, and led to censure.[88]

However, despite clear vacillations on both the conscription and general strike issues, the Comintern was surprisingly indulgent to the CPGB. At the Plenum's end, the ECCI, in writing its concluding thesis on the situation in Great Britain, originally wrote two drafts. The first spoke of 'differences of opinion' which 'must be eliminated' because a 'true Leninist policy [must be] arrived at if the Party is to progress'. With regards to the conscription debates, it condemned the 'semi-pacifist opinions' expressed as 'erroneous and dangerous'. However, the ECCI nevertheless recorded 'with pleasure the loyal acceptance of the decision by the comrades who formed the minority and regards the question as closed'. Campbell's arguments were even acknowledged, with it being conceded that 'due account must be taken of differences between a voluntary and a conscript army'.[89] The second draft would be even more generous. This time the ECCI merely warned of the danger of 'pacifist and semi-pacifist tendencies and traditions, which are particularly dangerous in the present situation in Britain'. Astonishingly, it even wrote that it 'approves of the anti-militarist work already undertaken by the Party, particularly in connection with the departure of troops for China'.[90] Thorpe has suggested that a key reason for the 'generally easy ride' the CPGB received stemmed back to the bitter factional conflict between Stalin and Trotsky. The now Stalinised Comintern, in its attempts to garner as much support as possible to discredit Trotsky, still needed the British

[86] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB On Certain Political Questions', 15 May 1927, p. 5.
[87] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow,* p. 108.
[88] LSECM, 'Attitude of the CPGB', 15 May 1927, p. 5.
[89] LSECM, 1st Draft of Thesis – Recent Party Controversies, 16 May 1927, pp. 2-4.
[90] LSECM, 'Resolution on the Situation in Great Britain: 2nd Draft, n.d., pp. 15-6.

Party on side, and was thus prepared to be lenient over its infractions.[91] The CPGB had certainly been slow on the uptake. Rajani Palme Dutt, the Party's resident Stalinist, had nevertheless complimented Trotsky's 'sure hand and objective arguments' in his 1925 polemic *Where is Britain going?*,[92] whilst Jack Murphy, that same year, had professed 'great surprise' to see the Comintern 'in the throes of a great controversy with Comrade Trotsky'.[93] A key reason for these slips, as Murphy's biographer Darlington notes, was due to the fact that these factional tensions had been 'effectively concealed' from the CPGB as a 'purely internal affair of the Russian party, with no relevance to the work in Britain'.[94] While the need to remove Trotsky had therefore ultimately taken precedent at this Plenum, there were already signs of internal dismay over the Party's direction. Osip Piatnitsky, a key Comintern functionary, was forced to reject a call demanding an examination of 'internal conditions in the Central Committee of the British Party'. While Piatnitsky was satisfied that there was at present no need to investigate 'who is right in the Central Committee and who is not',[95] it would become clear that the CPGB, and its leadership, would not be given a second chance.

Post-Plenum

Much had occurred whilst key members of the CPGB were in session in Moscow. Just as attention on China earlier in the year had been superseded by a focus on the upcoming Trade Union Bill, so was this agitation displaced by the news of the ARCOS Raid on 12 May and the subsequent British severance of diplomatic relations with the USSR. Indeed, it can be

[91] Thorpe, op. cit., p. 108.
[92] 'Trotsky and his English Critics', *Labour Monthly*, 8 (1926), https://www.marxists.org/archive/dutt/articles/1926/trotsky.htm [Last accessed 15 August 2024].
[93] Resolution of The Central Committee of the R.C.P'., in *The Errors of Trotskyism: A Symposium* (1925), https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/pamphlets/1925/trotskyism/resolution.htm [Last accessed 15 August 2024].
[94] Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy*, pp. 137-8.
[95] LSECM, 'Piatnitsky on Amendment to Point 22', n.d., p. 4.

suggested that the Party was struggling to keep up with events. In late May, the Cabinet was informed that it 'is admitted at Party headquarters that the amount of propaganda circulated to local organisations has been "enormous". Despite this fact, however, fresh instructions and literature are still being issued'.[96] Communists, in the immediate aftermath of the severance, were clearly alarmed by events. However, it is notable that Special Branch reports to the Cabinet did not pick up on any real mention of a looming conflict with Russia, with circulars from this period, rather than making direct accusations, merely warning of 'the menace of war on Soviet Russia'.[97] Instead, it seems the CPGB was more concerned about its own prospects. Aside from a snide suggestion that leading communists 'anticipate losing lucrative employment' as a result of the severance, there was reportedly 'widespread alarm in communist circles' and fears 'their activities will be hampered and their policy restricted', whilst it was even suggested that 'the Trade Union Bill might result in the Party being made illegal'.[98] Perhaps as a result of such fears, and despite Moscow's instructions, it appeared that many within the CPGB were failing to knuckle under in demanding a general strike in response to the Trade Union Bill. The Cabinet was informed that 'there is a lack of enthusiasm for the communist demand for a general strike against the Trade Union Bill', not only 'in the wider sphere of organised Labour' but within 'communist circles' themselves. Such was the state of lethargy that Albert Inkpin had been obliged to berate local branches, arguing there was 'absolutely no excuse for such utter apathy and negligence on this important question'.[99] Furthermore, in examining these local branch activities, it still appeared that many communists continued to prioritise Chinese affairs over the Russian war threat. The minutes

[96] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 26 May 1927, p. 5.
[97] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, CPGB Circular: 'The Raid on the Soviet Offices', 16 May 1927.
[98] ChAC, CHAR 22/187, Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 26 May 1927, pp. 1-2.
[99] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report, 9 June 1927, pp. 1-2.

of the Dundee Branch, to which the former conscientious objector Bob Stewart belonged, highlight that while the first mention of Chinese activity in 1927 began on the 18 January, and continued to be a prominent feature of weekly Party meetings for much of the year, there was no mention of the dangers of western intervention against Russia until the 12 July, a whole two months following the severance of diplomatic relations, and at a point in time when communist activity should have been sharply geared towards propaganda focusing on the Soviet war danger.[100] Similarly, the London District Party Committee, in early July, continued to emphasise the level of activity it had undertaken to protest British intervention in China, yet would only make a furtive reference to 'Russian war preparations'.[101]

Government circles, when able to understand this fixation on capitalist intervention, also detected a lingering focus on China. At the beginning of August, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Archibald Bodkin, was deliberating over a potential prosecution case for an article in *Workers' Life*, the CPGB's main publication. To Bodkin, the 'Anti-war number' written by William Rust contained 'some striking anti-militarist posters' and 'goes further than most Communist literature I have seen since the Campbell case'. More striking is Bodkin's bemused understanding of the topic. The purpose of the article, he hazarded, was to 'stop the war (i.e. in China)'. His ultimate decision not to prosecute arose not only through a wariness of 'magnifying the importance and influence of the paper', but chiefly through the fact 'the position in China is not war and that there is no war reasonably to be apprehended elsewhere', making any prosecution, not to mention the article's purpose, superfluous.[102] That Government officials were unable to pick up on any consistent agitation against the

[100] MLHASC, CP/LOC/SCOT/01/10, CPGB Dundee Branch Minutes for 1927.
[101] MLHASC, CP/LON/CONG/0/02, Communist Party of Great Britain London District Party Committee Report to District Congress, 9 – 10 July 1927.
[102] TNA, HO 144/9486, Correspondence between Douglas Hogg and Archibald Bodkin, August 1927.

threat of war with the USSR speaks volumes. Certainly, the Comintern had always argued that British intervention in China was merely a precursor to the inevitable capitalist assault on the Soviet Union. British communists, or at least those based in Moscow, could not but be aware of this. Indeed, Jack Murphy, the CPGB's representative in the ECCI, 'had direct personal links with the Russian state and its leaders during the 1920s',[103] and would have been intimately aware of their views. As early as February 1927 Murphy had relayed to the CPGB leadership at home Moscow's message that 'British tactics in China are "a necessary part of the general plan of the headquarters of the world bourgeoisie" to strangle the Chinese revolution and to prepare and rehearse war against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics'.[104] Despite this, communists in Britain remained unable to successfully connect these two subjects in a way that was either consistent or effective. While this had been freely admitted at the time of the Eighth Plenum in May, with Hugo Rathbone confessing that 'with regard to the war with China' the CPGB had not succeeded 'in bringing out clearly enough the connection of this war with the capitalist offensive not only at home but also against the USSR',[105] it would remain an issue unresolved for the rest of the year.

Anti-War Week and After

Such difficulties marked a bad portent for 1927's 'Anti-War Week' demonstrations in August. Considering the level of focus placed on the war danger by the Comintern, there was undoubted pressure on the CPGB to conduct effective propaganda. There was certainly an awareness of this within Party headquarters and, in an attempt to gee up branches across the country, a new periodical focusing on anti-militarist affairs, *Red Star*, was announced. It was

[103] Darlington, op. cit., p. 142.
[104] ChAC, CHAR 22/186, Report, 3 February 1927, p. 6.
[105] LSECM, 'Report on the Policy and Work of the CPGB since the Seventh Enlarged Plenum', 9 May 1927, p. 4.

clearly needed. In explaining the newspaper to local branches, it was stated that while there was, naturally, 'a tendency on the part of the working class […] to look upon the agitation against the danger of war against Russia as being exaggerated', it was deemed alarming that this 'attitude exists to a small extent among Party members. THIS IS WRONG and the whole question must be brought before the workers insistently and immediately'.[106] Indeed, the first issue of *Red Star,* with headlines like 'TORIES PLOTTING WAR AGAINST SOVIET REPUBLIC', 'WHY THEY COVET RUSSIA' and 'FIXING THE FASCIST RING ROUND RUSSIA', made it abundantly clear exactly what propaganda British communists should be actively disseminating.[107]

Despite such preparations, however, the Cabinet would be informed that 'the anti-war week, judging from the reports so far received, can only be described as a failure'.[108] One reporter for Special Branch, aside from suggesting that 'the revolting posters issued from communist headquarters as illustrations of the horrors of war' were not to his taste, felt it notable that most speakers 'were guarded in their remarks' on the war danger 'and devoted as much of their attention to the case of Sacco and Vanzetti as to the anti-war campaign'.[109] The press itself neglected to comment on the campaign. 'Politics during the last week', wrote *The Sunday Times*, in a snub to communist activity, 'have been almost as non-existent as are snakes in Iceland'.[110] The reasoning for such a glaring lack of coverage, aside from the natural distaste held for revolutionary politics, may have derived from a clear belief that the severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union earlier in May had dealt a mortal blow

[106] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report, 21 July 1927, pp. 2-3. Emphasis in the original.
[107] University of Warwick Digital Collections, 15X/1/250/1, *Red Star*, 1, (July 1927), https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/russian/id/7803/ [Last accessed 28 August 2024]. Emphasis in the original.
[108] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report, 11 August 1927, p. 2.
[109] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report, 11 August 1927, p. 4.
[110] 'Political Notes', *The Sunday Times*, 7 August 1927, p. 11.

to communist activity in Britain itself. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* was to write later in August that 'the Communist organisation in Great Britain should not be reconstituted now that it has been broken up'.[111] The CPGB leadership itself was unimpressed with the week's results, and condemned 'a general lack of seriousness in understanding and carrying out agitation and propaganda'. Throughout the week, 'it was plain that neither interest nor organisation was put into the campaign, with the result of failure of the meetings, disappointment and irritation, waste of time, energy and money, and a way left open for discouragement in the localities'. Should such behaviour continue, it was warned, then 'this means further loss of membership and weakening of organisation'.[112]

By the time of the Party Congress in October, then, it was clearly necessary to try and place an optimistic spin on the year's events. Indeed, in sharp contrast to the terse attitudes behind closed doors in Moscow, which now appeared to be spilling over at home, Thomas Bell, in making the Congresses' keynote speech, would be positively gushing in recounting the Party's activities throughout 1927. Beginning with a summary of all the major international and domestic events of the past year, and confirming them as 'definite moves in the direction of isolating the U.S.S.R. and a prelude to war', Bell was keen to brush over the Party's own inaction, instead asserting that 'I want to say here quite definitely that if, in spite of all our efforts, a war attack is made on Russia as a result of capitalist hate, our Party will stand by our class, represented by our Russian comrades, as against capitalism represented by this Tory Government'.[113] Though reluctant to quite describe the levels of dissension that had emerged within the Party regarding its stance on any possible introduction of conscription, Bell could

[111] 'Stolen Petrol and Public Safety', *Daily Mail*, 29 August 1927, p. 8.
[112] ChAC, CHAR 22/188, Report, 13 September 1927, p. 5
[113] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/09, 1927 CPGB Congress, p. 4.

not avoid recognising its impact throughout the year. The 'Hands off China' campaigns, he acknowledged, had been 'coupled' with action 'against pacifism and "conscientious objection"', as a means to expose 'the reactionary character of […] "individual resistance"' with the slogan '"Every conscientious objector is an ally of Baldwin"'.[114] Bell also conceded the importance placed on the conscription issue at the Eighth Plenum. 'One of the most important questions arising out of this [Plenum]', Bell informed the Congress, 'was that of "individual resistance."' This had been a feature 'particularly necessary to clear up in this country owing to the experience of conscientious objectors in the late war'. Bell, however, felt no need to dwell on such a thorny issue, instead disingenuously stating that resolutions on both the Party's anti-militarist campaigns and, indeed, its 'demand' for a general strike had been 'subsequently endorsed by the E.C.C.I'.[115] While the rest of the Congress passed off in a similarly upbeat manner, it cannot be denied that the CPGB's response to the war scare had been found lacking. The Comintern itself would later condemn the widespread failure of many national sections 'in carrying out our original intention, i.e., in making the campaign against war a permanent part of the entire agitation activity of all our Parties'.[116] There could be no doubt that the CPGB was included in this castigation. After all, despite the numerous Soviet proclamations announcing that an invasion of the USSR would occur within 'weeks' at the beginning of 1927, December would still see the CPGB compiling resolutions finding it 'necessary to work out all fundamental political questions'. That these fundamental political questions included, but were not dominated by, the threat of war against the USSR most succinctly highlights the Party's lethargy in responding to the 1927 Soviet war scare.[117]

[114] Ibid., p. 42.
[115] Ibid., p. 56.
[116] MLAHSC, CP/CENT/CI/05/11, 'The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses 1924-8: A Report on the Position in all Sections of the World Communist Party', July 1928, p. 41.
[117] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/15/1, Resolution, 15 December 1927.

Conclusion

In examining the response of the CPGB towards the Soviet war scare of 1927, one is struck by the sluggishness of what had been largely regarded as a 'model section' by the Comintern up to this point.[118] The dedication of the British Party to the Soviet Union was never in doubt, and yet throughout that eventful year, there seemed a reluctance to fully get behind the idea that the USSR was in immediate danger of invasion. Certainly, war against the Soviet Union, as shown in the previous chapter, was never a serious policy option for the British Government, and there was probably a pragmatic awareness, naturally unspoken of, within the CPGB of this fact. The 'Hands off China' campaign, if anything, highlights that when British intervention *did* take place, communists did their utmost to resist it, even if, alas, the results were far from satisfactory. Furthermore, it was chiefly action over China, rather than fears of intervention against the USSR, that helped to kick-start internal Party debates regarding communist tactics in the event of a full-scale war. This, perhaps one of the core findings of this thesis, highlights a fundamental reluctance to fully engage with Soviet fears of war, and challenges standard assertions of CPGB subservience to Comintern directives. Similarly, the issue of conscription, when the CPGB was obliged to engage with it, reveals that many communists continued to retain a mind-set seemingly influenced by their Great War experiences, discrediting the possibility of infiltrating the armed forces and instead advocating for a position akin to conscientious objection. While it is perhaps unsurprising that former conscientious objectors like Bob Stewart were loath to fully jettison a simple pacifist stance in the face of war, it is notable that even hardliners like William Rust were aware of the incongruity of preaching revolutionary civil war to a no doubt bemused British public.

[118] Darlington, op. cit., 140.

Furthermore, such discussions reinforced the awkward fact that Comintern policy failed to recognise Britain's unique circumstances in viewing conscription as an aberration rather than, as it was for many European countries, the norm. The Comintern would be surprisingly understanding, and even prepared to share its own objectively perceived musings on the First World War pacifist movement in Britain. Nonetheless, it was hardly the case that the Comintern would brook any tolerance for these pacifist influences, and its relative benevolence in 1927 stemmed only from a pragmatic need to garner enough support to ensure Trotsky's expulsion from the ECCI. Internal rumblings expressing discontent with the CPGB's leadership had already made themselves known at the Eighth Plenum, and the war scare itself would show no signs of abating as 1928 dawned. If it was to maintain Moscow's confidence, then the CPGB would be required to urgently shake off its lethargy in combatting the war danger. There would be no Trotsky next time around.

Chapter Seven: 'Class against Class' and the Soviet War Scare, 1928-9

Following the CPGB's Ninth Congress in October 1927, communists John Campbell and Idris Cox, accompanied by a fraternal delegate, retired to the pub. Though they had been on opposing sides throughout the congress, Campbell and Cox's ability to get on well enough that evening 'simply amazed' the comrade from abroad, who 'really expected us instead to be at each other's throats'. Campbell's explanation that political differences did not destroy personal friendships 'amazed our comrade even more', and Cox would wryly recollect that henceforth the CPGB would be labelled by the Comintern as a '"Party of friends"'.[1] After 1928 however, these 'friendly' debates would morph into 'a tense inner-party struggle'. Cox throughout this time happened to be living in the house of Albert Inkpin, the Party's General Secretary, who would be unceremoniously stripped of his leadership role during the course of this 'struggle'. While Cox asserted in his memoirs that he continued to stay 'on friendly terms' with the now disgraced Inkpin, it is telling that he nevertheless felt that it 'was obviously unwise to go on staying there'.[2] Such personal breaks, seemingly out of touch with the spirit of the CPGB, sharply display the changes that engulfed British communism in 1928-9.

The catalyst to all this was 'class against class', a Comintern-ordered leftist turn intended to promote a truly revolutionary movement. However, fears raised by the CPGB's leadership, particularly Inkpin, that within the context of British domestic politics such radicalism was inopportune, and threatened to politically isolate the movement, led to a 'series of denunciations, expulsions and resignations' that rocked the Party.[3] This chapter will argue

[1] BOA, CP/IND/MISC/2/3, Idris Cox memoirs, n.d., p. 30.
[2] Ibid., 39.
[3] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 83.

that ‘class against class’, traditionally viewed in light of the CPGB’s changing attitudes towards the Labour Party, remained fundamentally linked to the ongoing Soviet war scare. Indeed, as ‘class against class’ ramped up in tempo, so too did Soviet fears of war, creating ever growing pressure on the CPGB to deliver concrete results in its anti-militarist activities. The subsequent failures of the Party in propounding the war scare, it will be argued, were just as significant as prevailing attitudes towards the Labour Party in weakening Comintern confidence in the leadership.

This chapter begins with an exploration of traditional interpretations of the impact of the ‘class against class’ policy on the CPGB in 1928-9. It will be argued that generational tensions were key in the resulting sectarian conflict that plagued the Party over this period, and even impacted the Party’s attitudes towards the Soviet war scare. The second part of the chapter focuses on changing developments in the war scare itself, which, as well as intensifying, developed new features which only increased pressure on the CPGB. Not only forced to perceive the Labour Party as complicit in preparations for an invasion of the Soviet Union, communists were also obliged to disseminate the idea that an Anglo-American war was similarly inevitable. The final section will focus on the CPGB’s activity throughout 1929, a year that marked a new low in the Comintern’s confidence. Much of this lack of support, it will be argued, not only derived from the leadership’s reluctance to fully embrace ‘class against class’, such as in the May 1929 General Election, but through its inability to conduct successful anti-war campaigns. Particular failures on International Red Day in August would not only highlight old ‘social democratic traditions’ in fighting war, but be considered a blatant example of the dangerous ‘right tendencies’ infecting the Party, anticipating the leadership’s removal by the end of the year.

'Class against Class' and the CPGB

'Class against class' was first propounded as a political doctrine by the Comintern in September 1927. That this took place at the supposed height of the war scare, only months following the British severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, was no coincidence. As McDermott and Agnew have demonstrated, it was precisely because of 'impending imperialist wars and the danger of foreign intervention against the USSR', that a more left-leaning policy was envisioned, going hand in hand with the concept of 'social fascism'. As a result of the 'catastrophic theory of capitalist crisis' that made war against the Soviet Union inevitable, it was asserted that 'the bourgeois nature of reformism' would inevitably ensure that social democratic parties would spring to the defence of their respective nation's war efforts 'at the expense of its working-class base and mission to prosecute working-class interests within capitalism'.[4] Thus dismissed as nothing more than a 'moderate wing of fascism', and confident that any conflict against the USSR would create a 'new revolutionary upsurge' amongst the worldwide proletariat, it was integral for Comintern sections to cut off all ties with reformist parties and become the sole revolutionary working class party.[5] For the CPGB, fundamentally, this meant a complete change in policy with regards to its relations with the Labour Party. Since the CPGB's formation in 1920, communists had been obliged to follow the policies of the 'united front'. This ensured, in the words of Rajani Palme Dutt, that:

> Our party, while maintaining criticism of the reformist leadership both within the Labour Party and in general agitation and propaganda, has refrained from directly fighting this leadership in the

[4] J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, 'Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: A Historical Controversy Revisited', *Labor History*, 60 (2019), pp. 180-1.
[5] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 73.

> political field, has left them a free field at elections and advocated support, has endeavoured to secure the adoption of Communists as Labour candidates, and in the demand for affiliation has expressed its readiness to accept the constitution and discipline of the Labour Party.[6]

The demand for affiliation was a key component of the 'united front', and would largely define the CPGB's relationship with the Labour Party for most of the 1920s. Though a bitter pill to swallow for those who deplored Labour's moderation, affiliation nevertheless had its own logic, with communists pointing towards the recent example of the Independent Labour Party enjoying 'liberty of action inside the [pro-war] Labour Party […] during the period of the war', despite holding seemingly incongruous anti-war views.[7] The similarly anti-war British Socialist Party (BSP), a CPGB vanguard, had also affiliated to Labour in 1916, leading many communists to argue there was 'no reason why they should not continue to belong to it now that they held Communist Party cards instead of B.S.P. cards'.[8] Despite successive applications each year between 1920 and 1923, however, the campaign for affiliation failed as a result of Labour's staunch refusal to contemplate any association with communism, with the 1925 Labour Party Conference in Liverpool marking the final severance.[9] Notwithstanding such definite rejection, the CPGB, in an attempt to carry on the United Front line, formed the National Left Wing Movement, a collection of local Labour Parties that refused to cut ties with communists. This movement, in any case overwhelmingly dominated by the CPGB, amounted to little more than a damp squib, and could only limp on until eventual dissolution in 1929.[10]

[6] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/14/14, 'The New Phase in Britain and The Communist Party', c. 1929, p. 4.
[7] 'The Great Taboo', *The Communist*, 30 September 1920, p. 4.
[8] Macfarlane, op. cit., p. 94.
[9] TNA, PRO 30/69/1830, 'Where Labour Stands', c. 1925.
[10] See L. Parker, *Communists and Labour: The National Left-Wing Movement, 1925-1929* (London, 2018).

Faced with little progress, when the Comintern began to muse in 1927 that the 'united front' merely 'entailed the danger of sliding into reformism, of lagging behind the social democrats' in both popularity and action,[11] it is of little surprise that these views found a ready response among many CPGB members. As Worley notes, when 'class against class' was formally unveiled, after years of consistent Labour rejection, it seemed a 'logical response'.[12] Indeed, such sectarian policies enjoyed a strong backing, with unanimous acceptance in Manchester and Birmingham, alongside clear majorities in South Wales, Liverpool, Sheffield, Tyneside and Scotland.[13] While *The Times* registered the particular emphasis '"to give battle" to the Labour Party',[14] it nevertheless felt the 'programme contains much stale matter'.[15] Indeed, it was languidly commented that 'the Communist vocabulary and the machine-made doctrines of the movement become monotonous when they are expounded hour by hour'.[16] Harry Pollitt, whose support for the new line would ensure his promotion in due course, was nonetheless taken with rapture at the move, comparing it to Keir Hardie's rejection of the Liberal Party, and subsequent creation of the Labour Party, at the close of the nineteenth century.[17] Such enthusiasm was in marked contrast to the views of many within the CPGB's Central Committee, epitomised by General Secretary Albert Inkpin, who feared a fully sectarian turn would merely lead to political insignificance, and hasten the Party's decline. In defiance of the Comintern, Inkpin and the rest of the Central Committee would continue to run the Party with a 'United Front bias, against the wishes, not only of the Comintern, but of a very substantial section of the CPGB membership, and, arguably, against the realities of the British political

[11] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 73.
[12] Worley, *Class against Class,* p. 90.
[13] Ibid., 102.
[14] 'Orders from Moscow', *The Times*, 24 February 1928, p. 6.
[15] 'A Programme for Communists', *The Times,* 1 June 1928, p. 13.
[16] 'Communists in Conference', *The Times*, 27 August 1928, p. 14.
[17] BOA, CP/IND/POLL/1/3, Harry Pollitt Notebook Quotations, c.1928.

situation'.[18] A telling indication of just how far removed the leadership was from the views of ordinary members can be seen in the example of Sharpurji Saklatvala, the Party's sole Member of Parliament in the period 1924-9. Saklatvala, though of national renown, was often treated with suspicion by the CPGB leadership, who viewed him as 'a maverick […] an Indian nationalist, a well-intentioned socialist, hardly a Bolshevik'.[19] Yet this non-Bolshevik had, in the aftermath of the 1925 Labour Party Conference, declared that 'the C.P. must now set itself up as the only avowed anti-Capitalist Party', while demanding 'merciless measures to fight the Labour Party',[20] in essence predating Moscow doctrine by some two years. The Central Committee's protracted resistance towards this new political doctrine not only delayed its full implementation until 1929,[21] but ensured the Party became increasingly bogged down in ever sharper confrontation and disunity. Meanwhile, the creeping Stalinisation of the Comintern would see opponents of 'class against class' castigated for 'committing grave opportunist mistakes and displaying strong right tendencies'.[22] Suspicions became increasingly raised that this opposition was a deliberate attempt to weaken the international communist movement as a whole, and culminated in the replacement of Inkpin by Harry Pollitt, and the removal of much of the CPGB's Central Committee, by the time of the Eleventh Party Congress in late 1929.

The Sects

In analysing the impact of 'class against class', it is telling that at the height of the inner-party struggles, Rajani Palme Dutt, a key advocate of the new line, would argue that the current

[18] A. Thorpe, 'The Communist International and the British Communist Party', in T. Rees and Thorpe, eds, *International communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943* (Manchester, 1998), p. 76.
[19] Mcilroy and Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism', p. 226.
[20] MML, YC01.12/COM, Letter written by Sharpurji Saklatvala, 7 October 1925.
[21] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 70.
[22] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Letter from CPGB Secretariat to CPGB Local Branches, 22 October 1929, p. 1.

errors of the leadership 'do not belong only to the past two years', i.e. since the first rumblings of 'class against class', 'but have run right through the nine years of life of our Party'. Indeed, Dutt would maintain that the Party's key task was 'to get rid of the last relics of a Left Social-Democratic Party which have continuously clung about and hampered our work'.[23] Such a viewpoint, in referencing the very origins of the Party, reinforces perceptions that the change in leadership in 1929 was an 'exploitation of generational tensions'.[24] Though it has been acknowledged that the CPGB during this period was an overwhelmingly 'young' party, full of members still in their twenties and thirties,[25] there was a very marked difference between those individuals in the leadership who had begun their political activism in the pre-1917 British labour movement, as members of the BSP or SLP, and those younger communists that replaced them. While Harry Pollitt was seemingly the key beneficiary, his promotion was something of an anomaly insofar he was of similar age to Inkpin.[26] Instead, it was younger figures like William Rust - born in 1903 - that 'formed the real driving force in the leadership' after 1929.[27] As Campbell and McIlroy have demonstrated, those British communists of Rust's generation 'became aware of the Russian Revolution […] when they were entering adult life and were politically impressionable and malleable'.[28] Having little experience of the British labour movement prior to the Revolution, by virtue of their age, their politics therefore 'developed around, and after, the formation of the CPGB'. In particular, their attitudes would be increasingly bound to the Comintern itself.[29]

[23] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/10/13, Rajani Palme Dutt memorandum, 'Towards the Party Congress', 15 November 1929.
[24] Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society,* p. 234.
[25] Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain', p. 785.
[26] Inkpin was born in 1884, whilst Pollitt was born in 1890.
[27] Thorpe, 'The Communist International and the British Communist Party', p. 77.
[28] Campbell and McIlroy, 'The British and French Representatives to the Communist International', p. 219.
[29] Ibid.

It is of little surprise then, that in contrast to those younger communists wholly immersed under the Comintern's influence, the original CPGB leadership were less heavily versed in Marxist-Leninist polemics. Eaden and Renton have demonstrated that within the Party, more emphasis was placed on 'workerism' than Marxist dogma,[30] while Dutt would argue that many of the seeming mistakes made throughout the 1920s derived from 'our general weakness of theory in Britain'.[31] Though Albert Inkpin came to communism from the BSP, many other key leaders of the CPGB in the 1920s, including Thomas Bell, Arthur MacManus and Jack Murphy, were all former members of the SLP. Murphy's own admittance that their contingent was not especially well versed in Marxist ideology is seemingly confirmed by Burke's revelation that months after the Bolshevik Revolution, the SLP was forced to ask around émigré circles in London for more concrete information on Lenin, as they had merely been 'under the impression' that Lenin had 'written something on theoretical Marxism on either economics or history'.[32] The decline of Quaker influence in pacifist affairs at the coming of the First World War, as Ceadel has highlighted, similarly ensured many conscientious objectors lacked a theoretical basis for their anti-war beliefs.[33] The hardly uncommon perception that Bolshevism was first and foremost a 'stop-the-war movement' therefore allowed for a crossover evident most of all in these early years of the Party.[34] Indeed, it is notable that an unfazed MacManus appointed the former conscientious objector Francis Meynell, a 'Roman Catholic who knew nothing about Communism', to edit *The Communist* in

[30] J. Eaden and D. Renton, '*Comment: The Inner-Party Critics*', *Labour History Review*, 69 (2004), p. 349.
[31] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/10/13, 'Towards the Party Congress', 15 November 1929.
[32] Quoted in M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain* (London, 1975), p. 73; Quoted from Burke, *Russia and the British Left,* 125.
[33] M. Ceadel, 'British Quakerism, 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community', *The English Historical Review*, 117 (2002), p. 1009; 'The London Peace Society', p. 512.
[34] Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain*, p. 55.

1921.[35] By 1922, then, a wide consensus had emerged within both the Comintern and the CPGB that the lingering influence of 'the sects', i.e. of the SLP and BSP mentalities that dominated Party attitudes, had not only ensured the Party remained 'un-Bolshevik', but had become increasingly 'chaotic and factionalized'.[36] As part of the Bolshevisation process that would engulf all sections of the Comintern in the mid-1920s, a special Party Commission was established, aiming not only to ensure better centralization and 'tighter operating systems', but to fundamentally mark 'a break with the federalism and propaganda orientation of the CPGB's predecessors',[37] and in particular 'shift the Party away from the old-style organisation' of groups such as the SLP and the BSP.[38] This Party Commission, dominated by Rajani Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt, would not only mark the beginnings of their long-lasting partnership, but be used as a springboard to mount an attempted leadership coup.

Presenting their findings to the Third Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in Moscow in the summer of 1923, Dutt would reiterate that the CPGB's productivity remained hampered by the domination of these old socialist tendencies. Not only pointedly stating that he and Pollitt had never been 'actively connected in any way with the old sects',[39] Dutt would demonstrate instances within various local party branches throughout the country, such as in Glasgow, where 'old timers' continued to dominate branch affairs, and yet were 'useless for our purposes', while there existed 'new forces, still young and inexperienced' but nonetheless determined to 'get something done'.[40] The Comintern itself would support their arguments, sanctioning a twelve page report entitled 'The Old

[35] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.1, Transcripts of the meetings of the English Commission of the ECCI, 19 June – 7 July 1923, pp. 29-30.
[36] Mcilroy and Campbell, 'Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern', p. 175.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Thorpe, 'The Communist International and the British Communist Party', p. 71.
[39] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.1, op. cit., p. 11.
[40] Ibid., p. 13.

Elements' which established that the old tendencies 'have remained strong', and done much to prevent 'a real Communist Party' from forming.[41] Tensions naturally spilled out during the Plenum. CPGB MP Walton Newbold, a Plenum delegate and Dutt supporter, would comment that '"we had a big palaver [..] Albert [Inkpin] saw, was seen and was judged at his real if not his own value"'.[42] Nevertheless, Dutt and Pollitt's hopes for fundamental change went unfounded, with Newbold correctly ascertaining that '"I do not think there will be so drastic an overhauling immediately"', though he would rather presciently write '"it will come eventually"'.[43] It could be suggested, then, that when 'class against class' came, long-standing bitterness that the 'older […] sects' remained in control helped to reinvigorate these old inner-party disputes.[44]

At the same time, it can be argued that the 'generational tensions' that so transfixed the 'class against class' years also included that influx of First World War conscientious objectors who joined the CPGB after 1920, indeed, even those individuals who had themselves fought in the First World War. While it is true that Francis Meynell bid a speedy retreat from communism in 1921, and thus brought little harm to the Party's bearing, it is notable that another former conscientious objector, Bob Stewart, continued to occupy key positions within the CPGB. As well as the Party's candidate for the first electoral contest it fought, the 1921 Caerphilly by-election, Stewart was also trusted to take over as acting leader of the Party in both 1921 and 1925. Nevertheless, Stewart seemingly refused to shed his conscientious objector views. In 1920, at the CPGB's founding Congress, as highlighted in chapter three, he would deplore any talk of revolutionary violence, and brushed off the importance of the Dictatorship of the

[41] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.4, Articles, Theses, Statements by Borodin, Howard, Lozovsky, c.1923, pp. 48-60.
[42] TNA, CAB 24/161, Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 19 July 1923, p. 2.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Morgan et al., *Communists and British Society*, p. 234.

Proletariat to the Party's identity, whilst in 1923, Stewart asserted to Moscow that it had been 'the experience of the war', not simply the Bolshevik Revolution, that instigated the CPGB's formation.[45] Stewart was not alone in his convictions. As already noted in the previous chapter, Stewart and William Loeber, a veteran of the Great War,[46] had been loath to abandon the 'semi-pacifist' views they so infamously uttered in 1927, while John Campbell, not only an ex-serviceman, but a wounded and decorated one,[47] challenged Moscow's orthodox stance on anti-militarism that same year. Whilst such views are hardly surprising in light of their personal experiences, these three individuals nevertheless continued to occupy prominent positions as Central Committee members well into the 'class against class' years, suggesting that Dutt's accusations of fundamental faults within the Party may have equally included divergent anti-militarist attitudes. Indeed, it is notable that one of the key beneficiaries of 1929, William Rust – too young to have been subjected to compulsory military service after 1916 – could effortlessly toe the correct ideological line with regards to conscription, while his older comrades simply could not. Worley's assertion that 'the threat of 'imperialist aggression featured prominently in the pronouncements of the CPGB and the Comintern both prior to and during the third period',[48] also ensured there could be no doubt that 'class against class' was fundamentally linked to the ongoing Soviet war scare. Ever increased scrutiny and pressure awaited the CPGB's anti-militarist campaigns.

1928

The changing political attitudes that 'class against class' brought to the CPGB were made abundantly clear as early as February 1928. That same month, Albert Inkpin was obliged to

[45] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.1, op. cit., p. 18.
[46] McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism', p. 222.
[47] McIlroy and Campbell, 'The 'Core' Leaders', p. 389.
[48] Worley, *Class against Class*, p. 66.

report to the wider Party that the ECCI 'is paying special attention to the method of organisation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which is considered unsatisfactory'.[49] This dissatisfaction was clarified at the CPSU's own congress in Moscow some weeks later, when the head of the Comintern, Bukharin, would assert that within the CPGB, 'the party leaders and certain party members continue to commit pronouncedly opportunist blunders'.[50] The ostensible breathing space given to the CPGB over anti-militarist affairs, already short, was now over, with particular blunders over this issue in 1927 once again brought to the fore. While Bukharin would opine that the CPGB had 'done some good anti-militarist work',[51] others would rehash old arguments that 'In the English Party we have a group – in the minority however – which regards work in the army unnecessary'. Similarly, a minority 'of the Central Committee adopts a rejective [*sic*] attitude towards the slogan of the general strike against the trade union bill. The vacillations with regard to the changes in our present political course in England are, unfortunately, not merely the vacillations of separate individuals'.[52]

Such accusations would put the CPGB's leadership on the defensive, and it was reported in March 1928 that attempts had been made to 'hoodwink' both Comintern and CPGB members into thinking that the Comintern's thesis on 'class against class', particularly with regards to 'communist policy towards the Labour Party', remained 'virtually identical' to the CPGB's own previous assessments. This seemingly ensured that while 'the resolution of the Executive Committee of the Communist International will be formally accepted', the policy remained 'that of the [previous] Party thesis".[53] Such machinations, provoking 'vehement protest from

[49] ChAC, CHAR 22/224, Report, 12 January 1928, p. 2.
[50] ChAC, CHAR 22/224, Report, 3 February 1928, p. 2.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., p. 5.
[53] Ibid., p. 2.

the more intelligent British communists',[54] forced an embarrassing backtrack at the end of March when it was finally admitted that there were, in fact, '"basic differences" between the majority thesis of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Plenum resolution'.[55] The seeming duplicity of the leadership, in attempting to hoodwink both the Comintern and Party members, ultimately marked a point of no return in the Comintern's confidence. Special Branch, somewhat taken aback, would comment that this 'is the first occasion for several years in which leading members of the British Communist Party have ventured to hold opinions differing from those of their Moscow masters'.[56] Soon enough, it also detected a minority 'Pollitt-Dutt group', once again crawling out of the woodwork to attack the leadership,[57] with gravitating Comintern support for the pair apparently causing 'confusion and some resentment among communist leaders'.[58]

To make matters worse, actions from an unexpected quarter would further weaken Comintern confidence in the Party's leadership. In a final spasm of anti-communist fervour following the severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union the previous year, Home Secretary William Joynson Hicks, after launching investigations earlier in the year, declared to Parliament in June 1928 that the Moscow Narodny Bank was continuing to fund the CPGB.[59] While *The Manchester Guardian* would merely judge that 'the only people who are likely to suffer are those who are known to be dependent upon foreign subsidies for their existence',[60] Cabinet reports would delightedly note the impact on the CPGB, that 'the salaries of officials

[54] CHAR 22/224, Report, 8 March 1928, p. 1.
[55] CHAR 22/224, Report, 22 March 1928, p. 1.
[56] CHAR 22/224, Report, 1 March 1928, p. 2.
[57] CHAR 22/224, Report, 23 February 1928, p. 1.
[58] CHAR 22/224, Report, 1 March 1928, p. 2.
[59] See University of Warwick Digital Collections, 41 M 35 Cmd.3125, *Russian Banks and Communist Funds: Report of an Enquiry into Certain Transactions of the Bank for Russian Trade, Ltd., and the Moscow Narodny Bank*. https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/russian/id/4612 [Last accessed 10 October 2024].
[60] 'Moscow Gold', *Manchester Guardian*, 12 June 1928, p. 10.

of the Communist Party and its allied organisations during the last fortnight were either delayed, paid in part or not at all'.[61] It perhaps never occurred to the intelligence services to record the more sinister connotations such declarations would have for the Comintern. As Thorpe highlights, in the current atmosphere, which continually warned of impending invasion by the west, the Moscow Narodny affair could have 'been a green light for reactionaries to put their plans into action' and duly prepare for war with the Soviet Union.[62] A scapegoat within the CPGB was therefore required, and Inkpin, as General Secretary, after admitting 'negligent oversight' was ordered to 'cease supervising such sensitive operations and function as an office manager rather than a political secretary'.[63] Replaced as General Secretary by John Campbell, Inkpin remained on the Central Committee, but confidence in the CPGB's leadership could only have been further weakened.

Developments in the Soviet War Scare, 1928-9

As 'class against class' developed after 1928, so too did interpretations of the Soviet war scare. Within the CPGB, greater emphasis was placed on the need to enlist support from previously neglected sections of the population. Following the establishment of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act, women were granted electoral equality with men, and it is clear the CPGB saw potential benefits in their increased participation in the public sphere. At the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in the summer of 1928, Marjorie Pollitt would cite the example of the No-Conscription Fellowship, in particular its strong element of female support, as an example to be followed,[64] while Thomas Bell suggested women should be a key target for the CPGB's anti-militarist activities as they were deemed 'particularly susceptible to pacifist

[61] ChAC, CHAR 22/225, Report, 14 June 1928, pp. 11-12.
[62] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow,* pp. 131-2.
[63] Mcilroy and Campbell, 'The 'Core' Leaders', p. 378.
[64] ChAC, CHAR 22/226, Report, 27 September 1928, p. 6.

propaganda'.[65] That year's Anti-War Week would certainly include a women's demonstration at Trafalgar Square, 'an event which was preceded by weeks of painstaking organisation',[66] witnessing unprecedented levels of support. While the *Daily Mail* declined to attribute more than fifteen hundred participants,[67] other newspapers were happy to claim that 'thousands' were in attendance.[68] However, this brief spark of success remained overshadowed by a lack of progress in the wider anti-war campaign, doubtless helped little by the CPGB's 'scarcity of new matter, owing possibly to the fact that so much has been written and spoken by communists on the "war danger".[69] Indeed, propaganda mostly 'followed the Moscow text, namely "war can only be abolished by overthrowing capitalism and setting up the dictatorship of the proletariat"', doing little to staunch the typical results of 'small meetings, smaller collections and scarcely any recruits'.[70] A lack of any palpable success in emphasising the war danger could only force Bell to lamely claim, once again, that '"too few Party members fully realised the danger of war was more imminent than ever […] and the British Party was doing practically nothing in the direction of anti-war propaganda"'.[71]

Despite any palpable sense of progress in diffusing the Soviet war scare, the CPGB was nevertheless expected to adapt its anti-militarist propaganda in line with 'class against class', and in particular slot prevailing anti-social democratic views into its anti-war work. When 'class against class' was originally formulated, Bukharin, in addressing the war scare, argued that social democrats posed as much a threat as the most reactionary conservative,[72]

[65] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[66] CHAR 22/225, Report, 2 August 1928, p. 2.
[67] 'Communist Women's London Trip', *Daily Mail*, 30 July 1928, p. 11.
[68] 'Off to Russia', *Aberdeen Journal*, 30 July 1928, p. 7; 'Women Hold Peace Demonstration', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 July 1928, p. 4.
[69] ChAC, CHAR 22/225, Report, 26 July 1928, p. 3.
[70] ChAC, CHAR 22/225, Report, 9 August 1928, p. 7.
[71] ChAC, CHAR 22/226, Report, 4 October 1928, p. 2.
[72] McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., pp. 74-5.

particularly through their tendency to help 'imperialism […] screen its war preparations with the flag of pacifism'.[73] At first glance, it seemed likely the CPGB would be more than capable of adapting to this viewpoint. During Labour's first time in office in 1924, the CPGB had been quick to accuse the Government of maintaining 'the building up of armamenots [*sic*] and the preparation for new wars', a factor that 'doesn't appear to present very great difficulties to the pacifists and idealists who make up the Government'.[74] At the same time, however, many communists were reluctant to deviate from the 'united front' script, obliging the Comintern to criticise those within the CPGB who still saw themselves as 'an honest Left Wing of the Labour Party ready to loyally desist from criticism', instead of realising that Labour's eventual 'liquidation' was necessary.[75] Such chiding clearly had little effect, as the CPGB publicly declared in 1927 its expectations that the Labour Party, once it re-entered government, would promote more definite socialist policies.[76]

When 'class against class' was introduced, and the Comintern's interpretation of the international situation as an ever 'nearer approach to war', necessitated 'sharpening the fight against Social Democracy',[77] Rajani Palme Dutt, the key theoretician of the Party, was able to wax freely on this subject. 'The Labour Party', he would write in his periodical *Labour Monthly*, 'is based on the maintenance of the existing capitalist state, of the existing capitalist and imperialist machine and its armaments'. Its foreign policy 'is identical with the Conservative and Liberal Parties' and emphasis was placed on its '"continuity"' and being '"above party" –

[73] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/05/14, Communism and the International Situation: Thesis on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist International, adopted at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International, c. 1929, p. 25.
[74] BOA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/06, 1924 CPGB Congress, p. 9.
[75] RGASPI, F.495.OP.38.D.7, Theses, Proposals, Resolutions of the Politburo of the Communist Party of England, c.1924, 'The Development of the Communist Party in relation to the Labour Party', p. 43.
[76] Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt*, p. 115.
[77] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/14/14, 'The New Phase in Britain and the CPGB', c. 1929, p. 1.

i.e. that the imperialist machine must continue its course, whatever party is in office'. Such a foreign policy, however, could 'only lead to intensified international commercial competition and accelerated approach to war'.[78] The aim of 'the British bourgeoisie to smash the Soviet Union […] has never been abandoned',[79] and the Labour Party, in aping the policies of the Baldwin Government, was merely 'acting as war-lieutenants of the capitalist class in preparation for the coming war',[80] while its professed pacifism would ensure that 'a MacDonald would serve the purpose for the opening of a war on the Soviet Union, when the time is ripe, far more effectively than a Chamberlain'.[81] Despite the incongruity of such views, particularly as Labour intended to resume diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union upon entering office in 1929, and duly did,[82] Dutt was unequivocal that the 'preparation of war against the Soviet Union will go forward […] nominal "recognition" of the Soviet Union or not'.[83] In the end, all the Labour Government got from the CPGB was a declaration that as the restoration of relations had not come 'promptly and unconditionally', definite 'war actions against the U.S.S.R.' were surely planned.[84]

Not only was the CPGB obliged to condemn the Labour Party as explicit war-mongers, it also had an entirely new conflict to grapple with. British relations with the United States of America had been cool since the end of the First World War, exacerbated by America's supplanting of Britain as a global power, particularly in financial and naval affairs.[85] It was

[78] BL, CUP.1262.K.4., 'The Election and the Coming War', 10 April 1929, p. 13.
[79] Ibid., p. 10.
[80] Ibid., p. 15.
[81] BL, CUP.1262.K.4., 'Coalition and War', 21 November 1928, p. 5.
[82] See D.N. Lammers, 'The Second Labour Government and the Restoration of Relations with Soviet Russia (1929)', *Historical Research*, 37 (1964), pp. 60-72.
[83] BL, CUP.1262.K.4., 'The Election and the Coming War', 10 April 1929, pp. 10-11.
[84] BOA, CP/CENT/IND/11/03, Sixth Congress of the National Minority Movement: Resolutions, c.1929, p. 4.
[85] See F.C. Costigliola, 'Anglo-American Financial Rivalry in the 1920s', *The Journal of Economic History*. 37 (1977), pp. 911-34; B.J.C. McKercher, '"A Certain Irritation": The White House, The State Department, and the Desire for a Naval Settlement with Great Britain, 1927-1930'. *Diplomatic History*. 31 (2007), pp. 829-63.

therefore assumed by the Comintern that the 'old decaying British Empire, with its monopoly of colonies, is at death grips with the young rising imperialist America, which needs colonies'.[86] In line with its ideological worldview of international capitalism's internal contradictions, it was deemed inevitable that the two countries would soon be at war over resources. Relations were certainly tense, forcing Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain to comment in 1927 that 'English opinion about America is more sore than I have ever known it'. However, Chamberlain would assert that 'the thought of war does not enter into anyone's calculations', and, should it somehow break out, Britons 'would hang the Government that were responsible'.[87] Perhaps an even more bizarre feature of this concept was that it did not even neatly slot into the Stalinist worldview that dominated the Comintern. As Tucker has highlighted, Stalin never deviated from his belief that the world was divided into only two mutually hostile 'camps', of Soviet Russia, and '"Anglo-America"' itself. Fundamentally, this 'prevision of a bipolar world did not change'.[88] While Dutt was, naturally, able to play the game, and effortlessly spin this doctrine of Anglo-American conflict in *Labour Monthly,*[89] the rest of the CPGB was seemingly caught in ideological polemics for the sake of it, and ultimately struggled to balance the supposed threat of war against both the Soviet Union and the United States. Nevertheless, despite Stalin's own seeming ambivalence on the subject, Comintern delegates to the Tenth CPGB Congress in January 1929 were reminded to ensure 'that the Conference should pass a special manifesto about ANGLO-AMERICAN rivalry'.[90] When, however, this manifesto was duly given, the CPGB was subsequently accused of minimising

[86] BOA, CP/CENT/IND/11/03, Sixth Congress of the National Minority Movement: Resolutions, c.1929, p. 5.
[87] TNA, FO 800/261, Letter from Austen Chamberlain to Esme Howard, 10 August 1927.
[88] Tucker, op. cit., p. 571.
[89] See BL, CUP.1262.K.4, 'Are Britain and the United States Driving to War?', 14 March 1929.
[90] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/04/07, Instructions for the Comintern Delegation to the Conference of the Communist Party of Gt. Britain, c. 1929. Capitalisation in the original.

the Soviet war danger, and sternly warned by the Comintern the idea that 'war against the U.S.S.R. is less likely than war against the USA is an illusion to be combatted'.[91] It was in such unenviable conditions that the CPGB was expected to continue to carry on its anti-militarist propaganda.

The Tenth CPGB Congress

By the end of 1928, the now open antagonism many Party members felt towards the leadership over 'class against class' was becoming ever more blatant. It was reported in December that 'the Party was in a critical position and that there was a definite Right Wing element in the Executive Committee'.[92] A key impact of this sectarian conflict, in British intelligence's view, was that the CPGB was actually becoming less of a threat, and in January 1929, Special Branch would notify Cabinet Ministers that its Revolutionary Reports, struggling to find interesting material, would henceforth only be issued fortnightly, for the first time since 1919.[93] Meanwhile, mistrust within the Party was made evident in the preparations for the CPGB's Tenth Party Congress, where the topics to be discussed were shared and 'discussed at special local and district meetings, in order', it was revealingly put, to ensure that Party policy "shall be based upon the conviction of the membership and not a mechanical acceptance of an order"'.[94] The Comintern sent their own delegates, instructing them 'to test, both in the conference itself and afterwards, to what extent the Communist Party of Gt. Britain is carrying out in practice all the decisions of the Plenums and Congresses of the Comintern'.[95] The Congress, held in London between 19 and 22 January 1929, discussed not

[91] BOA, CP/CENT/PC/01/15, Report of Voting in Executive Committee and Political Bureau from the 10th- 11th Congresses, c. 1929, p. 22.
[92] ChAC, CHAR 22/226, Report, 13 December 1928, p. 2.
[93] See ChAC, CHAR 22/246, Report, 3 January 1929.
[94] ChAC, CHAR 22/226, Report, 8 November 1928, p. 2.
[95] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/04/07, Instructions for The Comintern Delegation, p. 1.

only those issues relating to the transition to 'class against class', such as the fate of the National Left Wing Movement, the ultimate symbol of 'united front' politics, but the CPGB's response to the war danger.[96] John Campbell, as the newly promoted General Secretary, was reported to have 'stressed the danger of war' in the opening address,[97] while Thomas Bell would once more emphasise the need to 'prepare for a period of illegal activity'.[98] Nevertheless, a clear indication that mistrust of the leadership had extended even to these discussions could be seen when Inkpin, in reading out instructions for the Party's anti-militarist tactics, had 'asked the Congress to accept the document "without discussion"', solely to ensure secrecy could be maintained, yet was met with conspicuous 'opposition'.[99]

The ECCI would criticise the Congress proceedings, and in particular compare the 'serious deficiencies in the leadership', with the 'much keener critical mood' of ordinary delegates 'in discussing the situation in the Party'.[100] The Comintern's criticisms also extended to the war scare, with it being felt that the 'international situation was not adequately dealt with by the Congress'. Though Campbell had highlighted the war scare in his opening report, serious discussions on the subject, the ECCI argued, did not take place 'until the third day' of the Congress, and even then were only 'hurriedly sandwiched' in between other reports. Fundamentally, there was 'an absence of self-criticism regarding our anti-militarist work'.[101] Jumping on the bandwagon, one Party delegate, found it 'significant that at the Congress there was very little mention of the War Danger, and at this executive there has been no

[96] ChAC, CHAR 22/226, Report, 20 December 1928, p. 2.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., p. 4.
[99] ChAC, CHAR 22/246, Report, 7 February 1929, p. 5.
[100] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/1/1, Closed Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, c. 1929, p. 1.
[101] Ibid., p. 5.

mention of it at all',[102] before parroting the Comintern line that 'we must overcome our own indifference to the question of war'.[103]

More distressing, from the Comintern's point of view, was the fact that despite clear dissatisfaction with the leadership, the Central Committee had weathered the storm, and retained its dominance over the Party. Having desired 'above all, that new elements be brought into the ranks of the Executive',[104] the ECCI fumed that the 'new Executive, chosen as a result of "free elections" is to us a matter of great consternation'.[105] That the Central Committee remained largely unaltered was indeed surprising. One Party member, prior to the Congress, had raged that 'when you know that you are expected to obey unquestionably people for whose judgement you have no respect whatever then it becomes an almost impossible task', before mistakenly predicting that Bob Stewart, at least, would 'go out'.[106] It was hardly a cause for celebration within the leadership, however. As Thorpe has suggested, such was the pronounced apathy of delegates, that many had merely sought to 'disown', rather than change, the Central Committee.[107] The ECCI, however, suspected foul play, particularly as key figures such as William Rust, who had 'recently expressed a critical attitude with regard to mistakes committed' by the leadership, were notably absent in the nominations, a factor that could be 'interpreted as a certain demonstration against the Comintern' itself. It was thus recommended, or rather ordered, that 'the Central Committee should consider the advisability of taking steps at the time of the next Congress to ensure that

[102] BOA, CP/CENT/PC/01/15, Report of Voting in Executive Committee and Political Bureau from the 10th – 11th Congress, c.1929, p. 3.
[103] Ibid., p. 22.
[104] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/1/1, Closed Letter, p. 5.
[105] Ibid.
[106] ChAC, *CHAR 22/226*, Report, 15 November 1928, p. 5.
[107] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party*, p. 137.

new elements […] shall be elected to the Central Committee'.[108] The ECCI's interpretation of the Congress came chiefly from reports made by Bell, Pollitt and Rust. While it is unsurprising to note that both Pollitt and Rust, key proponents of the new line and hostile to the 'right' leadership, would colour the Congress with antagonism, Bell, despite always toeing the Comintern line, felt obliged to make 'a spirited defence' of the leadership, an action that would promptly see him accused of being a 'rightist'.[109] Special Branch was able to warm to the inner-party machinations taking place. It reported that while the Central Committee was full of 'people who have been members of the Party for some years […] who are quite content to read the instructions sent from Moscow, and then put into practice what they consider to be right for the workers in this country', those on the left like Rust, Pollitt and Dutt 'clearly understand the cat and mouse game which has to be played in this country'.[110]

The 1929 General Election and its Consequences

The 1929 General Election, held on 30 May, not only returned a minority Labour Government, it also marked the first concrete opportunity for the CPGB to put forward the 'class against class' programme to the population at large. It was, however, disastrous for the Party. Twenty five CPGB candidates gained altogether a mere 50,000 votes, whilst MP Sharpurji Saklatvala lost his seat to Labour and even came third place, behind the Conservatives.[111] However, as even the CPGB's official historian admits, no one 'was prepared to suggest that this might in part be attributed to the new line'.[112] As reported in the press, the CPGB could only grumble that the electors 'have been deceived by all the Parties, including Labour'.[113] Notable focus

[108] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CI/1/1, Closed Letter, p. 5.
[109] Thorpe, op. cit., p. 138.
[110] TNA, KV 3/327, 'Communist Party Activity', c. 1929.
[111] N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London, 1985), p. 38.
[112] Ibid., 45.
[113] 'A Communist Manifesto', *Gloucester Citizen*, 3 June 1929, p. 9.

was also placed on the consequences for anti-militarist activity, with the lack of attention given to largescale anti-war campaigns planned for August particularly condemned.[114] Such neglect proved, yet again, that the Party was failing to 'link up all its campaigns, whether economic or political, with the struggle against the war danger, which remains the central point of all Party activity in the present period'.[115] The leadership itself would be accused, and not without reason, of explicitly ignoring 'class against class'. In the run up to the General Election, five members of the Central Committee, including Campbell and Inkpin, were forced to recant for having recommended voting for Labour candidates in those constituencies where no CPGB candidate existed, citing, quite understandably, the 'tactical disadvantages of what might be interpreted […] as a policy of absentionism [*sic*] and of help for the Baldwin Government'. Though forced to 'state definitely that this was a serious Right mistake on our part',[116] such self-criticism was not enough, and it was declared that the 'present situation demands the intensification of the fight against the conciliators, who have now become a rallying centre for right wing elements'. Unless 'a bitter fight, by organisational means as well as ideological means, is waged against the right wing and conciliatory tendencies, the parties will be unable to free themselves of the paralysing effects of this opportunist poison'.[117] It was taken as given that such tendencies could be found within the Central Committee.

In June 1929, several members of the Central Committee were ordered to travel to Berlin to receive instructions from Comintern delegates.[118] MI5, able to monitor the meeting, noted that 'it was decided to re-organise the personnel of the British Party', a decision said to have been unsurprisingly met with the 'strenuous opposition of officials who were to be displaced'.

[114] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1*,* The Tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain, c. 1929, p. 7.
[115] Ibid., p. 10.
[116] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Declaration of the Five Comrades, c. 1929.
[117] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, 'The Tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain', c.1929, p. 3.
[118] Worley, *Class against Class*, p. 139.

In the end however, Harry Pollitt was ordered to replace John Campbell as General Secretary and henceforth 'take charge of all Communist Party organisation'.[119] While the positions 'of comrades Inkpin and Stewart [were] to be further discussed',[120] it became clear that Inkpin, though still a Central Committee member for the time being, would be gradually removed from any meaningful role. Nonetheless, his squeezing out was not without difficulties. Another report, from July, would declare that although 'Inkpin was reported some weeks ago to have been asked to resign from the Secretaryship [*sic*] of the C.P.G.B., he is still holding this post in the Party. When asked to tender his resignation, he drew particular attention to the fact that they must remember "how much he knew", with the result that the matter is still pending'.[121] Though British intelligence had been able to detect the factionalism engulfing the CPGB at this point, it still appeared to underestimate the level of Comintern dissatisfaction with the leadership. On this most recent change, one official argued that either 'the persons […] have proved themselves inefficient. The other [explanation] is that they have been put on to more important work for which they are better suited. I prefer to take the latter view'.[122] However, one need only read the official statements made by the Party at this time, particularly that the Central Committee interpreted 'the new line as being mainly a changed electoral tactic, and failed to clearly understand it as an entirely new tactical line'. Indeed, this 'failure to correctly carry out the new line' lay in a continued inability 'to understand the characteristics of the third period, i.e. the increased capitalist antagonisms and growing war danger, the new role of the reformist leaders, and the growing revolutionary spirit amongst the working class'.[123] Within such figures like Inkpin and Campbell, there was 'a certain

[119] TNA, KV 3/328, 'The Communists: Changes in Official Positions', 27 June 1929.
[120] BOA, CP/CENT/PC/01/15, Report of Voting in Executive Committee and Political Bureau, p. 22.
[121] TNA, KV 2/1533, Albert Inkpin, 22 July 1929.
[122] Ibid.
[123] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, The Tasks of the CPGB, p. 6.

unprincipledness [*sic*] to be observed, which is expressed in a willingness to change position because of convenience and not of conviction'. This lack of conviction in the Central Committee, it was argued, 'shows the influence of bourgeois ideology on the Party and brings home the necessity for the decisive eradication of the old non-Bolshevik traditions'.[124] Only through 'immediate changes in the leadership', it was declared, can 'the carrying on of a persistent daily struggle against the right danger, which is deep-rooted in the daily life and traditions of the Party', be finally achieved.[125]

International Red Day

While anti-militarist demonstrations in the first week of August had been a CPGB mainstay for several years, in light of bruising Comintern judgements about the CPGB leadership's ability throughout 1929, there could only have been huge amounts of pressure placed on the Central Committee to conduct a successful series of demonstrations that particular summer. The omens were hardly auspicious. Anti-war demonstrations held earlier in the year, for May Day, were dismissed as 'a dull and depressing affair', with one police report commenting that if 'the demonstration was meant to strike terror into the hearts of the bourgeois shoppers in Oxford Street, it failed miserably in its purpose', and merely provoked 'a mixture of pity, contempt, and, in many cases, open amusement'.[126] The Comintern itself would sternly remind the CPGB that it 'represents a country playing a particularly important part in the preparation for imperialist wars', yet it failed to 'adequately fulfil its international obligations so far as May Day was concerned'.[127]

[124] Ibid., p. 7.
[125] Ibid., p. 6.
[126] TNA, KV 3/328, Report on May Day Demonstration in London, c. 1929, pp. 1-3.
[127] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, International Red Day: The Workers' Fight against Imperialist War, p. 37.

That summer, the Comintern had announced that 1 August 1929 would mark 'International Red Day', and ordered communist parties to not only stage demonstrations warning of war's inevitability, but launch a general strike, a grandiose aim dismissed by one historian, unsurprisingly, as a 'completely abortive call'.[128] The date chosen hardly lent itself to British socio-economic conditions. As the *Daily Mail* recorded, 'the date coincides with harvest and harvest-hands should be incited to demonstrate against their employers'.[129] Undeterred whatsoever, the Comintern would warn that that the 'lack of systematic anti-militarist activity and the passivity prevailing among certain sections of the Party in this field are symptomatic of an under-estimation of the danger and imminence of imperialist war'.[130] That these 'certain sections' included the CPGB was likely. Though not directly cited, the Comintern's attack on the 'provincialism' of many Communist Parties in their attitudes towards anti-militarism may have been a thinly veiled reference to Campbell's 1927 emphasis on Britain's voluntary traditions within the armed forces, which was not only 'a merely feeble development of a militant internationalism', but a 'direct heritage of the social-democratic origins of the Communist Parties'.[131] Furthermore, the 'passivity' of many Communist Parties, of which it would be impossible not to label the CPGB, was now deemed a tool of the 'right tendency', as it encapsulated 'the outward expression of a concealed and therefore still more dangerous form of opportunism'.[132] It was made abundantly clear then, that the aims of International Red Day were not merely to publicise the war danger in a coordinated event across Europe,

[128] Macfarlane, op. cit., 230.
[129] 'Executioners on Tour', *Daily Mail*, 7 June 1929, p. 5.
[130] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, International Red Day (August 1 1929): The Workers' Fight Against Imperialist War, p. 7.
[131] Ibid., p. 35.
[132] Ibid., p. 36.

but, perhaps more importantly, to ensure 'that all right-wing and conciliatory tendencies' are crushed.[133]

Within the CPGB itself, in the run up to August, internal instructions echoed the Comintern's views, International Red Day would be used to sharply oppose 'the passive and in part opportunist attitude of broad sections of the officials and of the membership in the war danger question', and above all, to 'assist in wiping out the liquidatorial and conciliant tendencies and opinions in the Party'.[134] It was even suggested that this campaign 'be regarded as more important than election campaign[ing]', while Party members were reminded that believing 'war against the U.S.S.R. is less likely than war against U.S.A.', now a 'conciliant' opinion,[135] was an 'illusion to be combatted'.[136] Ernest Cant, chief Party organiser for the Nottingham area, was one official charged with the unenviable task of attempting to clarify the war scare's intricacies in the run up to August. In the end, he was forced to demonstrate that there were no less than 'three angles' by which the 'possibilities of war confront the workers', namely 'Economic Rivalry between capitalist states - Britain and America', against 'colonial people in order that the capitalist class may retain control of markets and sources of raw materials' and last, but certainly not least, 'war between the workers and the capitalist class expressing itself in the struggle between Imperialist Capitalist Nations and Soviet Russia'.[137] Such bloated rhetoric can hardly have helped matters, and in some desperation the Central Committee would write that 'we must look for allies' in propounding the protests. Their own suggestions, however, to merely encompass

[133] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, RESOLUTION: Concerning the Tasks of the Parties in connection with the Preparation and the carrying out of the Anti-War Day on the 1 August, p. 1.
[134] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, INSTRUCTIONS: For the Party Press Concerning the Carrying out of the Anti-War Campaign, p. 1.
[135] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, RESOLUTION, p. 1.
[136] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/28/09, 'Practical suggestions arising out of meeting last week', 27 June 1929, p. 2.
[137] CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, Letter from Ernest Cant, c. July 1929.

movements already directly linked to the CPGB, such as the International Class War Prisoners Aid, the Friends of the Soviet Union and National Minority Movement, only further demonstrated the Party's damning isolation. Within the all-important factories and workshops on which a general strike depended, there was a tacit realisation of the 'special difficulties' preventing any meaningful support, and it was optimistically suggested that perhaps 'a number of militant workers, two, three, or five as circumstances permit' could 'assist with the distribution of leaflets, chalking slogans, and sticking up posters'.[138] It was with such forces that a general strike would take place in Britain.

A sense of the apathy and despair engulfing the Party as 1 August loomed can be seen in the views of a particular communist, Maurice Ferguson. Though a fervent supporter of 'class against class', it is telling that he felt obligated to write to the Central Committee to oppose 'the call for a ONE DAY STRIKE', which he deemed 'a mechanical demand which ignores the situation in Britain at the moment', as 'the masses in Britain have been little awakened to the war danger, and certainly do not see or feel the need for so sharp a demonstration as leaving the factory on Aug. 1'. More starkly, Ferguson rejected a fundamental tenet of the war scare, regarding Labour complicity in war preparations as nonsensical since 'whatever fears existed are for the moment allayed by the advent of a Labour Government and its apparent peace gestures to Russia and America'. When workers 'find it difficult to strike for immediate needs of the most urgent kind', he concluded, why would they 'strike against a danger which they do not believe in as yet? […] It is hectic and artificial'.[139] The Central Committee, in responding, would themselves argue that it was 'precisely because the masses have been little awakened to the war danger […] that the propaganda for strikes […] as a means of combatting war must

[138] CP/CENT/SUBJ/01/01, Letter from CPGB Central Committee to Local Branches, 12 July 1929.
[139] CP/IND/DUTT/28/09, Letter from Maurice Ferguson to CPGB Central Committee, 14 June 1929.

be carried on'. However, they nevertheless split hairs in rejecting 'the impression that we were issuing a general call for a General Strike on August 1'. There was also a clear sense of fatalism over the issue. Ferguson's arguments were 'likely to be repeated in all sections of the International. If we were to allow this sort of argument to stop us, you must realise that we should be totally unprepared for a far more difficult situation which will arise'. Ferguson was then informed that 'Comrade Webb' was being sent to help 'clear up your misgivings'.[140] Lilly Webb, a Central Committee member, had in the course of 1929 strongly embraced the sectarian infighting within the CPGB, so much so that she would even opine at one point that William Rust was '"not a critic, he has capitulated to the right"'.[141] Webb was, incidentally, also married to Ferguson, leaving one to imagine the personal and political pressures that marked that particular conversation. In any case, Ferguson, a changed man, would promptly declare to the Central Committee that 'I support the popularisation of the strike slogan and the whole campaign as agreed upon by the C.C'. In fact, Ferguson hastened to add, he 'was never against the strike call under certain conditions', and could only lamely conclude that his 'letter was written in great haste […] and consequently gave the impression not intended'.[142]

The events of 1 August were, as reported by mainstream newspapers, a failure. *The Times* registered 'no results' for the CPGB, as 'the extremists were ignored by the people they sought to influence',[143] while another periodical did not even deign to report on British proceedings, seeing events in France as quite indicative of the Comintern's plans as a whole, and laconically commenting that 'three per cent. of Paris workmen remained idle yesterday. The city was quiet'.[144] The CPGB itself could do no other than register 'serious alarm' that in

[140] Ibid., Letter from CPGB Central Committee to Maurice Ferguson, 17 June 1929. Capitalisation in the original.
[141] Branson, op. cit., p. 47.
[142] CP/IND/DUTT/28/09, Letter from Maurice Ferguson to CPGB Central Committee, 21 June 1929.
[143] 'Communist Agitation', *The Times,* 2 August 1929, p. 12.
[144] 'International Red Day', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 2 August 1929, p. 16.

'no part of the country were we successful in getting the workers to take action in the form of strikes'.[145] Such blatant failure, it was assumed, derived from those hostile tendencies within the CPGB. Two days after International Red Day, Rajani Palme Dutt would declare that 'in all the successive issues and mistakes of the past two years there is discernible a common line expressing itself continuously at the centre of the Party, and that line is a Right line'.[146] This 'Right tendency' endeavours to conceal its opposition to the international line under the form of acceptance, i.e. Conciliationism'. Dutt's own definition of this term, as 'the formal acceptance of the international line, combined with failure to carry it out in practice', even 'simply lack of conviction or enthusiasm in carrying out the line',[147] combined with the timing of his statement, ensured that he could only be referring to the failed anti-war campaign, and suggests that the campaign's failure was deliberately planned by those malevolent tendencies within the Party.

In September, the Party would issue a comprehensive statement on the campaign, noting that its lack of any meaningful success was 'characteristic of the whole attitude of our Party during the past year', particularly in its perception as an 'unwarranted interference', while inner-Party discussions 'upon the objective of One Day Strikes', had revealed 'the necessity of convincing even a considerable number of Party members of the correctness of our slogan'. Worst of all, 'because we did not really believe our campaign would rally the support of the workers', there was a complete 'lack of conviction in the objective of the campaign'.[148] Taking Dutt's views to heart, this continuing 'widespread disbelief in the immediate danger of war'

[145] MLHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/14/14, Letter from Rajani Palme Dutt to CPGB Central Committee, 3 August 1929, p. 3.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Lessons of Anti-war campaign, 13 September 1929, p. 6. Emphasis in the original.

could only derive from the 'dangerous Right tendencies in our Party'.[149] In particular, a constant feature of the campaign had been a reliance on pacifist slogans. Stalin's future master spy, Richard Sorge, was, in 1929, a Comintern agent working in Britain, and in witnessing the CPGB's response to International Red Day first hand, had taken umbrage at the decision of the Manchester Party organisation to come out with a slogan of 'war against war', noting that such juvenile 'pacifist illusions' were present throughout the CPGB, even 'among some of the leaders of the Party'.[150] The CPGB itself would therefore declare that 'the tendency towards pacifism in our posters, leaflets and propaganda' was emblematic of this 'Right Danger', and 'rests upon the Party leadership which has failed to keep the important question of war in the forefront of all our activities', regarding the issue as they did 'too mechanically'. It was concluded then, that it was 'of the utmost importance that these serious dangers in the leadership of the Party should be dealt with effectively'.[151] That reckoning would come at the next Party Congress in November.

By this point - late 1929 - the frequency in which 'Right tendency', 'Right Danger' or 'Conciliationism' appeared in internal Party discourse invites some consideration towards the language used by the detractors of the CPGB's leadership. These terms, at first glance, could be perceived as following in the footsteps of the rather turgid and overblown language that had long characterised communist proclamations. Indeed, as Worley and Taylor have highlighted, the CPGB, in drawing inspiration from the Bolshevik Revolution, sought to internalise the 'methods, codes, languages and convention of Soviet Communism' from the

[149] Ibid., p. 2.
[150] RGASPI, F.495.OP.72.D.52, Minutes, Transcripts of the Anglo-American LS IKKI, 'Report of Comrade Sorgue on Situation on Britain at Meeting of Anglo-American Secretariat, 1 October 1929.
[151] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Lessons of Anti-war campaign, 13 September 1929, p. 6.

very beginning.[152] As Morgan has recorded, an 'imported nomenclature' served to triumphantly highlight the CPGB's position as the British outpost of the worldwide revolutionary movement that was the Comintern.[153] Even those outside the Party could not but be aware of such novel linguistic phrasing, as typified by Director of Public Prosecution Archibald Bodkin's acknowledgment of British soldiers as 'Bourgeois Counter Revolutionary Shock Troops'.[154] Nevertheless, the increased forcefulness in which these new terms, 'Right Tendency' and 'Conciliationism', made themselves known in 1929 were a source of bewilderment for some. Thomas Jackson, a former SLPer, would denounce such ''Inprecorisation''[*Inprecor,* or *International Press Correspondence* was the official press service of the Comintern], whereby 'an unintelligible "Babylonish dialect" [was] used sacramentally as evidence of righteousness' within the CPGB.[155] Key in propagating the use of such semantics was the influence of the International Lenin School (ILS), founded in Moscow in 1926.[156] Part of the Comintern's 'Bolshevisation' process, it sought to create 'a revolutionary elite' by stiffening its selected students 'with the vigilance, discipline and commitment' expected of Marxist-Leninists.[157] Courses in economics, working-class history and Marxist theory were accompanied by military training and an induction into clandestine work.[158] At least one hundred and sixty British communists attended the school until its

[152] K. Taylor & M. Worley, 'Testing the Limits: Stalinization and the New Zealand and British Communist Parties' in *Bolshevism, Stalinisation and the Comintern*, p. 233.
[153] Morgan et al., *Communists and British Society*, p. 213.
[154] TNA, HO 144/6682, Memorandum 'Re. The Communist Party and Sedition', pp. 8-9.
[155] Morgan et al., op. cit., p. 237. Jackson, unsurprisingly, would be stripped of his leadership role in December 1929. See McIlroy and Campbell, 'The 'Core' Leaders', p. 377.
[156] M. David Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Cornell, 1997), p. 182.
[157] G. Cohen and K. Morgan, 'Stalin's Sausage Machine: British Students at the International Lenin School, 1926-37', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), p. 330.
[158] Cohen and Morgan, however, believe such training had 'little practical significance for the British students'. Ibid., 331.

closure in 1938. With the average age of ILS attendees in 1931 under twenty five,[159] it is clear such students, in being trained up as a vanguard, contributed to those perceptions of a generational struggle, particularly as they were expected to 'effect a final break with reformism', which notably lingered 'as an influence on the founding generation of communist activists'.[160] These students, in being 'vetted' 'for their loyalty to the dominant 'Stalinist' faction inside the Soviet Party', were clearly expected to witness the political developments taking place within the Soviet Union, and bring such discourse back to Britain.[161]

Indeed, following the defeat of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1927, Stalin had subsequently turned on his erstwhile allies, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, in the course of 1928-9. As David Fox has highlighted, in sharp contrast to the Trotsky group, whose actions were justifiably perceived as outright opposition to the Party line, the Bukharin group 'obviously conceived of themselves neither as rightists nor as deviationists; they were revealed as such'.[162] This 'political-ideological creation of a Right opposition' thus precipitated a shift in the culture of communist politics. Conscious opposition, as epitomised by Trotsky, was now eclipsed by 'the shadow world of masked dissent; the emerging centrality of the unmasking itself as process; and the diffusion of the "omnipresent conspiracy" to the point where hidden rightists were both everywhere and nowhere'.[163] The 'transnational' relation between the Comintern and communist parties worldwide, as identified by Studer,[164] therefore makes it clear that the current climate within the Soviet Union, one 'that led to a sharp increase in conspiratorial thinking, one casting suspicions on the ostensibly loyal and

[159] Ibid., 334.
[160] Ibid., 335.
[161] Worley and Taylor, op. cit., p. 230.
[162] David Fox, op. cit., p. 182.
[163] Ibid.
[164] B. Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke, 2015); *Travellers of the World Revolution: A Global History of the Communist International* (London, 2023).

orthodox in a variety of contexts',[165] could, and should, be easily translated to British circumstances. The propagation of 'Rightist' behaviour exemplified this first and foremost. Indeed, ILS students were often wont to come back to Britain and found to be 'speaking a different language',[166] a language which not only disconcerted older communists like Jackson, but emphasised the existence of a conspiratorial 'Right Tendency' within the ranks of the CPGB's leadership. That such usage reached its height in the aftermath of the colossal failure that had been International Red Day highlights that just as the threat of 'hidden rightists surely helped cripple inner-party objections' to Stalin's leadership,[167] so did the threat of hidden rightists within the CPGB help to cripple internal objections to the CPGB's anti-militarist campaigns. Such developments, in directly utilising the language currently prevalent within the USSR, also confirm the CPGB's ultimate subservience to the Comintern, and a determination to remove those domestic influences seemingly widespread within Party ranks until this point.

The Eleventh CPGB Congress

In the run-up to November, it was clear to all within the CPGB that wholesale change would come. While the failings of the January Congress had already 'showed the imperative necessity for decisive changes in the leadership',[168] the aftermath of International Red Day had provoked plentiful 'political discussion […] throughout the Party', which was not only 'of immense advantage', but would doubtless 'result in a correct Bolshevik leadership being elected at the Party Congress in November'.[169] Indeed, in a warning to Central Committee

[165] David Fox, op. cit., pp. 182-3.
[166] Morgan et al., op. cit., p. 238.
[167] David Fox, op. cit., p.184.
[168] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Letter to CPGB Local Branches, 22 October 1929, p. 2.
[169] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Letter to CPGB Local Branches, 18 October 1929.

members, the CPGB 'must not be allowed […] to hide the particular responsibility, record and traditions of each member'.[170] It was hoped that by introducing new members to the Central Committee straight 'from the workshop' that it would be possible 'to weaken old traditions, to bring in new influences and to develop a new approach'.[171]

The Eleventh Party Congress, held in Leeds between the 30 November and 3 December was, as Special Branch reports were able to ascertain, therefore 'remarkable chiefly for personal abuse and recrimination. The orgy of criticism in which districts, locals and individuals have indulged for months past culminated in rank and file control of the conference'.[172] It could only be described as a purge, as many leaders 'who have been on the executive since the formation of the Party, were dismissed',[173] and only twelve of the thirty five members elected to the previous Central Committee would remain in office.[174] Albert Inkpin, deprived of any meaningful role since the summer, was finally removed and clearly deemed fair game for yet more abuse. The official statement, that he had 'regarded his duties mainly from a technical-administrative standpoint and not from a political point of view', and had 'failed to participate effectively and consistently in the political life of the Party',[175] belies the pure vitriol he was subjected to. From the summer onwards, rumours had been spread that 'Inkpin is too fond of the ladies and that no comrade's daughter is safe with him',[176] whilst the Leeds Congress would hear others suggesting he kept a pub as a side-line and was blackmailing the Party over assets held in his name.[177] The new General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, was clearly

[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid
[172] BL, L/PJ/12/381, National Congress of Communist Party of Great Britain: Extract from Special Branch Report, 12 December 1929, p. 1.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Worley, Class against Class, p. 141.
[175] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Letter to CPGB Local Branches, 22 October 1929.
[176] TNA, KV 2/1533, Albert Inkpin, 22 July 1929.
[177] K. Morgan, *Harry Pollitt* (Manchester, 1993), p. 71.

uncomfortable with the level of malevolence directed at his predecessor, but in defending Inkpin would himself be accused of 'rightist' sympathies.[178]

No compassion could be expected for any of those dismissed, with one delegate heard remarking "it would not hurt them to have a taste of unemployment: it would bring them nearer to the masses that they so often talk of"'. Personal relations clearly played a role in deciding who was punished, with Ernest Cant seemingly a victim due to his longstanding friendship with Inkpin.[179] In a last roll of the dice, Cant would desperately seek to justify his revolutionary credentials, pointing out that he had 'served three years in prison as a war objector, though never as a pacifist, and was released after a period of hunger striking'.[180] In this fevered climate however, any mention of conscientious objection, pacifist or not, was doubtless a red flag to the newly installed Central Committee, and Cant was unceremoniously cast off. He would himself reflect that his own labelling as a 'right danger' occurred because 'I had too close personal ties with that section of the old leadership which had been removed', and would point out, with some disgust, that 'personal character' had played as much a role as an individual's 'political line'.[181]

Certainly, Cant's observations appear true in regards to those communists who had fallen foul of the Party line since the Soviet war scare had ensued. Bob Stewart, when removed from the Central Committee, declared with some bemusement that 'I don't know that I have been politically opportunist', but was reinstated when the political line eased in 1935, remaining a

[178] Ibid., pp. 70-2.
[179] MI5 files on Cant suggest he and Inkpin had been friends since at least the First World War, when the two were BSP members. While imprisoned for resisting conscription in 1917, Cant passed on his 'hopes that Inkpin and central office are going on well'. See TNA, KV 2/1051.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.

Party member until his death in 1971.[182] His comrade in propounding a 'pacifist' line to conscription in 1927, William Loeber, was similarly removed, but in any case he had become 'sceptical' of 'class against class', and would distance himself from the CPGB in favour of union activism.[183] Other key figures that had incurred indemnity for questioning the Comintern between 1927-9, such as Willie Gallacher and John Campbell, were treated with suspicion, but nonetheless retained their positions, and enjoyed longstanding careers within the CPGB for the rest of their lives.[184] The most surprising victim of the Congress was Thomas Bell, despite his longstanding orthodoxy. Previous historians have surmised that Bell's fall from grace 'had more to do with caution, lack of allies, and others' sense he was dispensable, than critical thinking on his part'.[185] It doubtless helped matters little that he defended the old leadership at the time of Tenth Congress in January 1929, and as an old SLPer, may have been considered too irretrievably associated with the 'Sects'. Albert Inkpin himself perhaps trod the loneliest path, and was sent to Europe in quasi-exile for the next decade, away from his family, to act as secretary for the Friends of the Soviet Union, a position granted only at the behest of the sympathetic Pollitt. Special Branch sporadically monitored his movements, reporting in September 1930 that he 'has not lost all hopes of re-gaining a good position in the Communist Party of Great Britain', but 'is said to be lonely without his family'.[186] Such optimism had clearly dissipated by the end of the year, when Inkpin was said to have 'expressed keen disappointment at what he calls his banishment from party politics in this country, and the thus enforced separation from his wife and family'.[187] Until the outbreak of

[182] McIlroy and Campbell, 'The 'Core' Leaders', p. 381.
[183] McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism', p. 222.
[184] Admittedly, Campbell was sent to Moscow 'to correct his right tendencies', but had bounced back by 1932. See Mcilroy and Campbell, 'The 'Core' Leaders', p. 389.
[185] J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, 'The Socialist Labour Party and the Leadership of Early British Communism', *Critique* 48 (2021), p. 647.
[186] MEPO 38/37, Special Branch Report on Albert Inkpin, 6 September 1930.
[187] Ibid., 9 December 1930.

the Second World War obliged him to return home, Inkpin was reported to come to 'this country only for short periods, when he visits his wife and family'.[188] He would, nevertheless, remain a Party member until his death in 1944.

Perhaps, as a postscript, it is important to note the impact such accusations of 'rightist deviations' may have had for those communists suddenly cast out of their positions. 'Class against class' was intended to 'breathe new life into the frail frame of the CPGB'.[189] Instead, until the Comintern changed tack once more in 1935, the CPGB, as so many had predicted, remained fundamentally weakened. In particular, there existed 'a constant feeling of uncertainty and mistrust', which ensured preparations were made 'for the C.P. to go underground if necessary'.[190] As the 1930s dawned, and widespread repression against communist parties across Europe became commonplace, it was by no means taken for granted that this would not occur in Britain itself.[191] Were the unthinkable to happen, and the CPGB were forced to flee to the Soviet Union for refuge, like so many Central European communists did, it was more than likely that, deprived of the rights of a British passport, they would be caught up in Stalin's purges after 1936. In a period of such blatant paranoia, a 'wholesale recasting of one's actions, of one's past, present and future' awaited any exile in Moscow. When, as Studer highlights, any 'suspicion of political opposition was cataclysmic in its consequence',[192] the *confirmed* political opposition of so many British communists in 1929 would surely have come back to haunt them. Those accusations then, of 'oppositionist', or 'conciliator', freely levelled at so many communists, in so many conference halls and party

[188] Ibid., 9 April 1937.
[189] E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935* (London, 1982), p. 208.
[190] TNA, KV 2/1578, Recent Changes within the C.P.G.B, 24 September 1929.
[191] Branson, op. cit., 188-9.
[192] Studer, Travellers of the World Revolution, p. 368.

meetings across Britain, were not empty curses, but – in different circumstances – potential death sentences for both them and their families.

Conclusion

'Class against class' had a monumental impact on the CPGB in the years 1928-9. The most clear-cut feature of this period, the wholesale - and pitiless - removal of the Party's original leadership, did not derive from sudden dissatisfaction with the way it handled the new political doctrines thrust upon them. Instead, 'class against class' exacerbated tensions already present within the Party. One key explanation for the bitterness that engulfed British communism during this period, that generational tensions came to the fore, can similarly help explain the animosity that engulfed the Party over its anti-militarist activities. Those younger communists wholly committed to the new line could easily embrace the tenants of revolutionary civil war in a way that older communists, with direct experiences of conscription and war, simply could not. As the Soviet war scare raged in ever greater force after 1928 (indeed, it remained a fundamental feature of 'class against class'), the CPGB's inability to successfully propound the war danger, and to continue to use 'pacifist' slogans as late as International Red Day in August 1929, was just as consequential as its foot-dragging over changing relations with the Labour Party. Its lack of belief in the war danger, real or supposed, was therefore key in convincing the Comintern that the CPGB had been irretrievably swayed by those dangerous 'rightist' tendencies. It must have been a bewildering experience for any communist, after being treated as an existential threat to British society for resisting conscription during the First World War, to be subsequently deemed a menace to the cause of international communism a mere decade later.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In 1967, the historian Arthur Marwick reviewed L.J. MacFarlane's recently published work on the CPGB.[1] In his broad assessment of British communism, Marwick would seemingly follow the iconoclastic tone established by A.J.P. Taylor,[2] commenting that three hundred pages seemed 'excessive for ten years in which nothing very much happened'. Particular umbrage was taken at Macfarlane's refusal to 'peep over the self-imposed barrier into the thirties'. The decision not to explore a period 'when the Party did for a time enter into the broader perspective of British social and cultural history' was, frankly, 'perverse'.[3] This thesis, in seeking to highlight the early development of the CPGB's anti-militarist policies, makes no apologies for following the same course as Macfarlane. In fact, far from a 'self-imposed' barrier, it is staunchly argued that 1929 marks a logical cut-off point.

The Eleventh Congress, held late that year, confirmed the removal of much of the original CPGB leadership, replacing it with a younger generation of communists. These 'young Turks' were perceived, in sharp contrast to those that had come before them, to be absolute in their dedication to the Soviet Union, and unquestionable in their loyalty to the tactics and worldview of the Comintern. As the examples of permanently or temporarily jettisoned communists Albert Inkpin, Bob Stewart and Ernest Cant highlight, a personal experience of conscientious objection during the First World War was a common denominator amongst this first generation of British communists. Indeed, to many of the detractors of the CPGB's leadership over the course of 1928-9, such a past, so painfully at odds with a communist mind-set that emphasised subversion and infiltration over passive resistance, was a clear indication

[1] Macfarlane, op. cit.
[2] 'Of course, none of it mattered' was Taylor's measured assessment. Quoted from Morgan et al., op. cit., viii.
[3] A. Marwick, 'Review of *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929*, by L.J. Macfarlane', *History*. 52 (1967), pp. 107–108.

of the 'social-democratic influences' and 'old non-Bolshevik traditions' that had characterised the development of the CPGB thus far.[4] Therein lies the fundamental argument of this thesis, that the CPGB's anti-militarism, if not the Party as a whole, remained, until 1929, fundamentally linked to the First World War conscientious objector movement.

Such an interpretation has allowed for a unique insight into the CPGB's early development. As highlighted in chapter one, the historiography of the British communist movement, particularly in the inter-war period, remains dominated by discussions over the extent of Comintern - read Soviet - control over British communist affairs. The CPGB's fundamental dedication to the Soviet Union ensured a willing deference to the Comintern's aims and tactics; it was, after all, intrinsically tied to the sole nation to have carried out a successful communist revolution. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the impact of a conscientious objector past for many communists contributes to revisionist assessments that argue that the Party should be seen 'as part of British political culture, and not as some alien imposition'.[5] The first cohort of British communists, in coming of age politically in the pre-1917 British labour movement, saw no issue in passive resistance as a means to resist conscription when war came in 1914. Even after 1920, when, as fully fledged communists, lip service was paid to the concepts of revolutionary defeatism in the event of war, there was, crucially, little need to prove their sincerity. After 1927 however, when the Soviet war scare came along in full force, there was a distinct reluctance to follow the tenants of Lenin, with prominent communists instead reverting back to the old methods they themselves had undertaken during the First World War as conscientious objectors. Such actions, going hand in hand with the tensions of

[4] MML, CPGB.11/TAS, 'Tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain: The 10th Plenum and the International Situation (To be Submitted to the 11th Party Congress), c. 1929, p. 8.
[5] Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow*, p. 280.

'class against class' over the course of 1928-9, highlight not merely a failure of Bolshevisation, as claimed by detractors at the time, but also the existence of staunch domestic influences continuing to predominate Party affairs, until the fait accompli of the Eleventh Congress forcefully cut these down. This event, traditionally seen as integral solely within the context of CPGB history, instead might take greater significance in marking one of the first major splits to have occurred in the unwritten association made between socialist and pacifist thought as a result of the First World War. Scholars, in demonstrating the limitations of pacifism and its clashes with socialism, have traditionally pointed to the example of the prominent pacifist George Lansbury, thrust into the Labour leadership following a disastrous election result in 1931. Admitting '"the difficulty of squaring my pacifist principles with the policy of the [Labour] Party"', Lansbury's downfall came in 1935, when he refused to back economic sanctions against Italy, following its invasion of Abyssinia.[6] Fearing that military sanctions could just as easily follow economic ones, and thus lead to war, the Labour leader appeared to be paralysed, and was famously castigated by the trade unionist Ernest Bevin for '"taking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what to do with it'".[7] Brock has commented that 1935, in marking Lansbury's ignominious resignation, thus served to ensure that 'British pacifism's connection with official labour was severed'.[8] While undeniably true, the actions of the Comintern, in jettisoning former conscientious objectors from the CPGB some six years prior, marked a similar severance in the – admittedly ill-defined – relationship between the far left and those former anti-war activists that had resisted conscription during the First World War. 1929, it can be argued, might well have been the precursor to 1935.

[6] J. Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour* (Oxford, 2002), p. 318.
[7] Ibid., p. 325.
[8] Brock, *Twentieth Century Pacifism*, p. 135.

It is notable that the key finding of this thesis, namely that clear links were indeed established between First World War conscientious objectors and the CPGB, was, in fact, a view commonly held by no less an authoritative body than the British Government of the time. It is of course possible to argue that such perceptions were deliberately dampened down upon in the war's aftermath. Lawrence has commented on the intrinsic fears that developed within immediate post-war society, of so many Britons of military age, brutalised by their experiences of war, perhaps going on to upset the political and social balance of the nation. Deliberate attempts made to emphasise the country's traditional perception as a 'peaceable' nation, obliged to undergo the horrors of war solely to secure the final defeat of militarism, might just have easily been disseminated to draw a line under the maltreatment of those who had actively sought to resist the war effort.[9] After all, as noted in chapter three, though official restrictions were made intending to delimit the participation of former conscientious objections within post-war British society, such measures were rather pitifully implemented. Regardless, research questions formulated to explore why such an opinion predominated within the ranks of the political establishment, namely the nature of the relationship between conscientious objectors and the British State, has uncovered new interpretations of the NCF's development, which in turn allows for a revised assessment of the CPGB's subsequent expansion. The traditional understanding of conscientious objectors, as victims of their conscience duly punished by a state keen to minimise their influence, neglects not only the intense politicisation that took place over the course of the war for so many individuals, but a recognition that the state itself was increasingly fearful of such developments. Research undertaken within this thesis has highlighted that while the NCF's leadership consistently

[9] See J. Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *The Journal of Modern History* 75, (2003), pp. 557-589.

strived to assert that it was first and foremost an apolitical movement, with the sole goal to provide support for those who chose to resist conscription, the rank-and-file's outlook was clearly very different. The issue of the Home Office Scheme throughout 1917 reflects the development of key tensions between the leadership and grassroots members. While acknowledging that the Home Office Scheme was a major source of controversy for the NCF, pitting as it did those conscientious objectors prepared to undertake work of national importance against 'absolutists' destined to while away their days in prison, such a simple assessment belies the discord it created for the Fellowship as a whole. Far from pliant individuals amiably settling down to work within the camps, many of the Home Office men used the Scheme as a platform from which to declare their opposition to militarism as a whole. This not only hardened Government attitudes, as reflected in the conversations between Catherine Marshall and General Childs, but disconcerted the NCF leadership. Discourse circulating within these camps, encompassing even a wholesale rejection of capitalism, splintered internal relations within the Fellowship, and saw each party accuse the other of letting the side down. Perhaps the most notable impact of the fallout over the Home Office Scheme, however, is its demonstration of internal radicalism even before Bolshevism had reared its ugly head. This would ensure ever greater dissension stood to become endemic as the war progressed.

The second research question, in seeking to explore the reaction of the NCF to the Russian Revolutions, further emphasises such internal discord. As the example of Bertrand Russell highlights, the NCF certainly viewed the February Revolution as marking a step closer to overall peace. Nevertheless, the domestic consequences of the first Russian Revolution, namely the Leeds Convention in June 1917 which saw the propagation of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, further exacerbated tensions within the NCF. While a desire to follow the

Russian model was clear-cut, the leadership did its utmost to stymie such developments. The arguably underhanded way in which this was achieved merely opened up the leadership to further criticism. The coming of the Bolshevik Revolution later in 1917 further speeded up the perception of an impasse. While radical views within the NCF had made themselves known prior to Lenin's seizure of power, perhaps the ultimate internal consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution was a growing lack of belief in the Fellowship's fundamental tenants. Whilst the sanctity of human life had been the movement's cornerstone, the clearly alluring example of Bolshevism, in advocating armed force to implement a successful revolution, saw many conscientious objectors ready to commit themselves to a programme vastly different to the NCF's original objectives. The debates that waged across *The Tribunal* in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution would not only highlight that poor treatment by the British State had contributed to this change in perceptions, it also expressed clear views that the Fellowship itself was on borrowed time. Indeed, though the movement disbanded in late-1919, final sporadic action in defence of the Bolsheviks, as a result of the Polish-Soviet War in the summer of 1920, only served to confirm the intrinsic ties that had been established between anti-war activists and Bolshevik supporters.

In detailing the convergence between First World War conscientious objection and British communism after 1920, the development of the Independent Labour Party in the immediate post-war period marks a clear focal point. One of the few political parties in Britain to have opposed the war, the ILP had functioned as a bastion of support for the NCF, with many conscientious objectors simultaneously belonging to this other group. Much like the NCF, many within the pacifist ILP were prepared to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt upon their seizure of power, its support for armed force notwithstanding. The Comintern's dynamic image after its formation in 1919 certainly contrasted favourably with an impotent

Second International unable to prevent the descent into war in 1914. Whilst the internal debates regarding ILP affiliation to the Comintern between 1919-21 have been previously explored by scholars, this thesis has highlighted for the first time the key role former conscientious objectors played in instigating this pro-communist stance within the ILP. Focus on C.H. Norman, emulative of that cohort of NCF members that participated in these key debates, highlights the transition in attitudes many former conscientious objectors underwent in the war's aftermath. Norman seemingly spoke for many in asserting that his observations of 'Capitalist Governments for the last five years' had left him with the lesson that 'democracy was only tolerated as long as it voted wrongly'. The idea of a peaceful, parliamentary path to socialism, as advocated by his own Party, was 'the most amazing delusion'.[10] Such views, deriving from his experience of resisting conscription, saw Norman open to the possibilities of Bolshevism, and subsequently advocate his support for the goals of the Communist International. The Left Wing Group, and in particular its periodical, *The International*, in clamouring for Comintern affiliation, placed great stock on a conscientious objector past, with such experiences even considered proof of revolutionary credentials. The decision not to seek Comintern affiliation, finally made by the ILP in 1921, would see many on the ILP left go on to join the CPGB, confirming direct linkages between British communism and the First World War conscientious objection movement.

The third research question of this thesis originally sought to place both the 1924 Campbell Case and the 1925 trial and arrest of the CPGB leadership within the wider context of the Party's anti-militarist campaigns. In pursuing this objective, the thesis has uncovered the importance of anti-militarist activity in unifying the CPGB from its very formation. Despite an

[10] BOA, ILP Glasgow Conference Report, April 1920, p. 75.

obligation to discredit pacifist activity, British communists would welcome with open arms those elements from the ILP that came into the Party in 1921, reflecting its culture of openness with regards to former conscientious objectors. The Caerphilly by-election, held that same year, was an important milestone insofar it marked the first election the Party contested. Yet in considering this event from an anti-militarist perspective, aside from the fact it brought the first former conscientious objector to Parliament, it is clear to see that tensions in accommodating a pacifist past with a communist present emerged almost from the very beginning. Accusations from the wider political left of CPGB hypocrisy in condemning successful ILP candidate Morgan Jones for his pacifist views, when so many communists themselves had similarly been conscientious objectors, was an assertion limply batted away, as the core examples of Bob Stewart and Rajani Palme Dutt demonstrate. The 1922 Chanak Crisis proves, however, that when the threat of war loomed, at least before 1927, communists were able to mask such uncertainty by espousing an orthodox doctrine that emphasised subverting Britain's war effort, even if their commitment to this line was never put to the test.

When examining the 1924 Campbell Case and the 1925 trial and arrest of the CPGB leadership, state action in seeking to curb the Party's anti-militarist propaganda dominates the traditional narrative of these events. Such an interpretation also suggests the CPGB was a victim of events, unable to fully respond to these external challenges. This thesis has argued that the Party was in fact far from passive in responding to such hostility, and did its utmost to utilise the opportunities suddenly thrust upon them. While its solid anti-militarist propaganda had previously failed to interest the wider public, the unprecedented publicity which greeted both the 1924 Campbell Case and 1925 trial ensured communist proclamations now secured national attention. Political capital was sought from Campbell's proposed trial, with the aim to create moral equivalence between his arguments and the personal views of

Labour cabinet ministers who had themselves opposed the First World War. While the 1924 Labour Government, tacitly realising the potential consequences of such bold declarations in court, sought the case's abandonment, its Conservative successor refused to back down in its own duel with the CPGB.

Ongoing industrial tensions throughout 1925, culminating in the 1926 General Strike, were perceived by Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Government to have been directly instigated by the CPGB's anti-militarist propaganda, prompting the arrest and trial of its leadership. Whilst primary evidence utilised in this thesis for the first time confirms pre-existing suspicions of its politicised nature, the trial, much like the Campbell Case, backfired for the Government, provoking public sympathy for a movement seemingly under 'the spirit of persecution'.[11] That anti-militarist propaganda remained the cornerstone from which state activity, in seeking to curb the CPGB in these years, had ultimately developed, highlights its paramount importance to communist activity overall.

Within this thesis, the Soviet war scare functions as a climax to the original development of the CPGB's anti-militarism. This event, for too long a neglected and under-studied episode within the wider political history of the Soviet Union, has, in recent years, enjoyed a renaissance in scholarly perceptions. Historians are now prepared to accept the war scare's veracity, which remained sharply rooted in memories of Allied Intervention during the Russian Civil War.[12] As one scholar has recently noted, war scares have now become a 'recurrent if understated theme in Soviet history'.[13] Though historians are now more likely to

[11] MJRL, RMD/1/5/4, Sir Henry Slesser comments on the Communist Trial, c. October 1925, p. 2.
[12] James Harris has particularly emphasised this point in his research, as has David Shearer in his most recent output. See J. Harris, *The Great Fear: Stalin's Terror of the 1930s* (Oxford, 2016); D. Shearer, *Stalin and War* (London, 2023).
[13] A.J. Rieber, *Stalin as Warlord* (Yale, 2022), p. 276.

treat Soviet fears of war in 1927 - and, indeed, beyond that year - as sincere, there still remains little focus on the actions of Great Britain, despite its role as chief antagonist. In seeking to contribute a new perspective to existing literature, this thesis had originally sought to trace the scare's impact solely on the CPGB. However, empirical research undertaken to achieve this goal has allowed for an even broader outlook. In particular, it has been demonstrated that the British Government exhibited a more proactive response to Soviet fears of war than has been previously suggested.

In examining the actions of the Conservative Government towards the war scare, it is clear to see domestic and foreign policy concerns became increasingly merged after it was elected in 1924. An ever greater deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union, typified by calls for diplomatic rupture in Conservative circles as early as the 1924 Zinoviev Letter, did much to exacerbate tensions with Soviet Russia, and ensured an increased tendency to view successive events through the lens of pernicious Soviet activity. The 1925 trial of the CPGB's leadership can, in part, be blamed on Government fears of Soviet involvement in the industrial tensions that led to the 1926 General Strike. Events in China from 1925 onwards were similarly perceived to be instigated by Soviet activity on the ground, with the ultimate goal to threaten British imperial interests. Such an understanding ensures that the severance of diplomatic relations, when it finally came in May 1927, was seemingly long overdue in the face of consistent Soviet belligerence. Examining this period of Anglo-Soviet relations through the perspective of Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain, however, allows for a more nuanced interpretation. From the very beginning of his time in office, Chamberlain was aware of Soviet attitudes that emphasised constant planning by Britain to subvert Russia by military means. Though increasingly out of step with a Conservative Party that cared little for Soviet feelings of vulnerability, Chamberlain sought to dampen down extreme anti-Soviet rhetoric. His

efforts to resist calls for a severance in diplomatic relations and deny any palpable links in formulating the foreign policy of eastern European nations reflects the credence given to Soviet fears of war. Such arguments ultimately contribute to a new interpretation of the war scare as a whole.

In seeking to explore CPGB perceptions of the war danger, it should be emphasised above all that war scares should not have been treated as a novel occurrence. In 1923, when diplomatic relations between Britain and the Soviet Union were at a similarly low point, the open letter written by then Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, the Curzon Note, warning the Soviet Union against its hostile propaganda towards the British Empire obliged the CPGB to alert workers that they were 'on the brink of another world war'.[14] Later, in 1925, a convening of the League of Nations in Geneva was dubiously portrayed as an instance where 'plans were discussed in secret for carrying out the plan of attack on the Soviets'.[15] Such propaganda reflected the communist belief, as J.T. Murphy recalled, that this period truly was nothing more 'than a breathing space between two wars'.[16] The war scare that emerged in 1927 was, however, unprecedented in its intensity. A barrage of apocalyptic propaganda made clear the dire consequences soon to come, that, amongst other things, thousands of 'Communists and revolutionary workers, whose names have been listed beforehand, will be put away in concentration camps'.[17] On the face of it, the CPGB aped Soviet views, informing the Comintern that every 'lead on the front page of the paper since the [ARCOS] raid, every

[14] MLHASC, CP/CENT/STAT/1/1, 'Stand by the Worker's Republic: Manifesto of the Communist Party of Great Britain', c. 1923.
[15] MLHASC, CP/CENT/SPN/2/11, 'Draft Speeches for Red Week, 1925', c. July 1925.
[16] BOA, CP/IND/MURPH/1/7, J.T. Murphy, 'Working with Destiny: A Prospective Biography', c. 1950s.
[17] MML, YA01.01/STR, 'The Struggle against War', c.1929, p. 58.

manifesto which the party had issued' all emphasised 'the war danger'.[18] However, in the course of 1927, it became very clear that there was a reluctance on the part of British communists to fully engage with Soviet fears of war, with more attention directed towards current British intervention in China. While discussions were held over CPGB policy in the event of war breaking out and conscription was implemented, it is notable that key members of the Central Committee, with direct experience of the First World War, were reluctant to adopt a revolutionary policy of infiltrating the armed forces. The Comintern was thus obliged to bring the CPGB to task for having failed 'to devote sufficient attention to popularising the proper Leninist method of fighting against war among the members of the Party'. Rather than instigate a true communist policy, it was lamented that many remained 'influenced by the bourgeois and Social Democratic propaganda for "peace"'.[19]

While war did not break out in 1927, Soviet fears of conflict continued unabated for the rest of the decade. In acknowledging the potency of the war scare in dominating Comintern proclamations, this thesis has considered the role it played in the instigation of 'class against class' within Britain. This programme, thrust upon the CPGB after 1927, obliged the Party to sever all ties with the wider labour movement. The reluctance of the Central Committee to fully expound on the tenets of 'class against class', fearing a descent into political impotence, provoked a bitter struggle within the Party ranks between 1928-9, with detractors of the new line ever increasingly castigated as part of an anti-Party 'right tendency'. The importance of the war danger in helping to propel 'class against class' was unmistakable within Party ranks at the time. 'The central feature of the present period of world capitalism', it was argued in

[18] RGASPI, F.495.OP.72.D.52, Minutes of the Anglo-American Lander Secretariat of the ECCI, 'Report by Comrade Smith on the operation by the British Communist Party of the decisions of the Plenum', c. 1927, p. 12.
[19] MML, YA01.01/STR, op. cit., p. 56.

1929, 'is the forces which make for war. If we do not realise this, we fail completely to understand the Third Period'.[20] Thus, while the war scare was a key driver in pushing forward a new political programme after 1927, this thesis has for the first time evaluated its impact on the leadership struggle within the Party between 1928 and 1929. Those supposedly reluctant to fully combat the threat of war were deemed part of this sinister tendency and, as claimed in the CPGB periodical *Workers' Life*, were deliberately 'Holding Us Back From Fighting War'.[21] By the time of the Eleventh Party Congress at the end of 1929, the 'under-estimation of the war danger' against the Soviet Union had been labelled 'one of the most important Right mistakes of the Party'.[22] The subsequent removal of much of the CPGB's original leadership ultimately derived from these supposed mistakes, and encapsulated generational differences within the Party. In contrast to those younger communists like William Rust who would benefit from the changing of the guard, figures like Albert Inkpin had been active in the pre-1917 British labour movement. This ensured the Party had 'repeatedly succumbed to […] social-democratic influences' and remained 'weak in Leninist theory'.[23] That the war scare remained such a potent issue within this leadership struggle also suggests that in the Comintern's determination to ensure that 'old non-Bolshevik traditions' were 'decisively eradicated', an inability to fully propagate the war scare on Leninist lines, deriving from personal experiences of conscientious objection during the First World War, remained a central factor.[24]

[20] MLHASC, CP/CENT/CIRC/70/02, Lessons of the Anti-War Campaign, 13 September 1929.
[21] LSE, (N16), 'Holding Us Back From Fighting War', *Workers' Life*, 20 September 1929, p. 2.
[22] MML, CPGB.11/FIG, The Fight against the War Danger in Britain, Draft Resolution for 11th Congress, c. 1929.
[23] MML, CPGB.11/TAS, Tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain: The 10th Plenum and the International Situation (To be Submitted to the 11th Party Congress), c. 1929, p. 8.
[24] Ibid.

Direction of Future Research

In focusing on the development of the CPGB's anti-militarism throughout the 1920s, much emphasis has been placed on how the CPGB responded to both the overall threat of war, and any possible introduction of conscription. There are, arguably, comparisons between the stinted response to the war scare between 1927-9 and the actual outbreak of war with Germany in 1939. The events of 1939 are well documented. Following the implementation of the Popular Front as Comintern policy after 1934, the CPGB was expected to form alliances with any and all political movements opposed to fascism. At the same time, the Popular Front had allowed for a renewed emphasis on national traditions. In 1927-9 in particular, the CPGB had been obliged to view the theoretical implementation of conscription as an opportunity to be seized, granting communists the ability to infiltrate and subvert the armed forces at a time of war. The Popular Front years, however, allowed the CPGB, with Comintern encouragement, to proudly emphasise Britain's tradition of voluntary military service.

The CPGB duly espoused this attitude in response to the Conservative Government's attempts in April 1939 to introduce conscription for men between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. The Comintern, however, fanned accusations that the CPGB, in refusing to support conscription, was in fact reluctant to fight fascism.[25] Though these cracks were temporarily papered over, clashes of an unprecedented magnitude would break out again just five months later. In September, when Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, the Party was naturally in step with this anti-fascist struggle. Just days later however, the Comintern forced the CPGB to conduct a humiliating about-turn, dismissing the war as a mere imperialist conflict, which

[25] Morgan, 'Militarism and Anti-Militarism', pp. 207-8.

warranted neither the support nor sacrifices of the working classes.[26] These events prove above all the supremacy of the Comintern in dictating the CPGB's fundamental political goals and objectives in the period since 1929, not least in anti-militarist affairs. While this thesis has highlighted the CPGB's unceasing resistance to compulsory military service in the inter-war period, albeit in a way that had to accommodate the views of the Comintern, dissolution in 1943 effectively ended Soviet domination of British affairs, suggesting the Party had greater freedom of action in formulating its policies. No studies exist to explore the CPGB's response to peacetime national military service when it was re-introduced in 1947, despite the fact that the Party was at the height of its cultural influence and that national service remained continually unpopular with the British public.[27]

Such a study is arguably long overdue. The period in which national service was implemented, 1949-1960, was marked by a series of anti-imperialist struggles which rocked the British Empire, particularly in Malaya, Cyprus and Kenya. Linstrum has recently identified not only widespread public awareness of these conflicts, obliging him to label the post-war period, ostensibly a time of peace, as an 'age of emergency', but the fact that national servicemen – conscripts – were often used to put down such insurgencies.[28] Billam's recent emphasis on the linkages established by the CPGB across the British Empire, creating coordinated networks of anti-colonial activism, also suggests that British communists could be actively involved in resisting these counter-insurgencies.[29] Exploring the extent to which the CPGB was able to

[26] Thorpe, op. cit., pp. 256-60.
[27] For the cultural influence of the CPGB See Harker, *The Chronology of Revolution*. For an overview of National Service in Britain, see R. Vinen, *National Service: Conscription in Britain, 1945-1963* (London, 2015).
[28] E. Linstrum, *Age of Emergency: Living with Violence at the End of the British Empire* (Oxford, 2023).
[29] See G. Billam, ''Uncomradely and Un-communist': Breakdown in the Communist Anglosphere? The Communist Party of Great Britain and Communist Party of Australia Debate, 1947-1948', *Labour History Review*, 88 (2023), pp. 43-74; 'Life after the Comintern. Co-ordination across the British Commonwealth during the 'Empire Conferences', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 26 (2024), pp. 104-134.

reconcile its anti-imperialist tendencies with the ongoing campaign against compulsory military service not only marks a logical development of this thesis' findings, but reflects conscription's continuing relevance as a prevalent issue within British political discourse to this day.

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