Chapter 2

The main political influences on the development of the Labour Party’s attitudes towards international affairs

The Labour Party was born out of domestic political discontent, and its policies – to a greater extent forged in opposition up until the 1940s – tended to reflect this. Because of these two factors, Labour's foreign policy reflected the party itself, the beliefs and standpoints of the various groups that came together to create it, and the dynamics between them, rather than necessarily the external world and experience and appraisal of international affairs. This issue will form a recurring theme throughout the next two chapters, which chart the early the years of Labour foreign policy, showing how Labour’s foreign policy. It is worth briefly considering the main influences on, and groupings within, the Labour Party. This will, by necessity, be something of a cursory sketch, and it is worth remembering that conflicts over ideology and policy occurred within the different groupings almost as much as between them. Jupp points out that until 1918 the Labour Party was more of a movement than a party, ‘in the sense of having little central discipline and being bound together by an agreement to accept all ideological positions critical of existing society and postulated on social change through political action. It had not orthodoxy, unlike the European social-democratic parties.’

The main groupings within the Labour Party and their influence on Labour’s world-view

As noted in the last chapter, when the LRC was set up in 1900 there were four main progenitors, each bringing their own influences on domestic and foreign policy: in no particular order of importance, the trade union movement, the ILP, the Fabian Society, and the SDF and
various Marxist groups. In addition to these, a fifth grouping had a remarkable degree of influence over Labour’s developing foreign policy, and this was composed of radical Liberals, epitomised by the members of the UDC. Each of these groups had its own particular influence over the way that foreign policy and international affairs were thought about. Each had their own particular analytical framework for understanding relations between states, and each their own way of responding to concrete situations. These different influences provided a rich source for ideas on international politics, but also produced impulses towards Labour’s appropriate response to particular foreign policy issues that were sometimes antithetical to each other. This has added to the problems of developing a typology of the British Labour Party’s foreign policy, while also explaining in part the depth of some of the intra-party conflict on international affairs.

The first main group and influence within the Labour Party, the trade unionists, tended to have a more materialistic viewpoint than some of their political colleagues in that they were at times more aware of the tensions between aims, such as international working-class solidarity, and the desire to protect British jobs; between anti-militarism and concern to protect the substantial British arms trade. The trade unions had a massive influence on the Labour Party’s foreign policy in the first half of the century. This was because they had an international department that was sometimes more extensive than that of the Labour Party, because they were better financed than the Labour Party and because they had more international experience than the Labour Party. In particular, the British trade union movement already had a history of involvement in labour affairs overseas, and in the international trade union movement. This was partly due to Britain having been the first highly industrialised nation, and partly due to Britain’s position in the world with its extensive empire.

Historically, there had been two forms of international trade union organisation, both of which emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. First, there were the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs). These were transnational associations of unions in a given industry, which tended to focus their activities in areas directly related to their industrial sector. The second type of international trade union organisation consisted of federations of the national trade union centres of various countries such as the TUC in the UK and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the US. While the ITSs tended to focus their activities on industry-specific questions, the federations had a more active political role. This was largely because the federations of
national congresses tended to parallel the division of the labour movement into communist and non-communist camps. Before the Second World War, the two main federations were the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), a non-communist federation consisting of some European centres and the AFL, and the communist Profintern, also known as the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which had been set up in the early 1920s. This organisation was in direct competition with the IFTU, and as the RILU affiliates were charged with the task of infiltrating and taking over their national trade union centres, great hostility existed between the two. At the end of the Second World War there was a doomed attempt to establish one international, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), but this split due to the developing hostilities of the Cold War and the enduring suspicion and inability to agree between the communist and non-communist unions.

Because of the important role of British trade union leaders in the international trade union movement, in the early years it was often they, rather than Labour Party politicians, who were the most experienced on the international stage. The union leaders tended to be critical of the intellectual wing of the party, and felt that they lacked real experience of dealing with matters at the international level. The man who represented the apogee of this viewpoint was Ernest Bevin. While it might have seemed remarkable that a trade union leader became the first Labour foreign secretary to operate within a majority Labour government, Bevin was highly experienced in the international arena. As with many of the union leaders in the first half of the century, Bevin was to the right of opinion within the Labour movement, and was instrumental in shifting the Labour Party from a position of pacifism to one of rearmament in the 1930s. The relationship of the trade union leadership being to the right of the party leadership on foreign and defence policy continued until the 1970s, when it was reversed.

The second of the main influences, the ILP, was founded at a conference in Bradford in 1893, where delegates included Ben Tillett, George Bernard Shaw, and Keir Hardie, and at which Eduard Bernstein of the German Social Democratic Party made an address. Ramsay MacDonald, in a short history of the ILP, described it as a product of the failure of liberalism to meet the new phase of conflict between capital and labour – where the struggle was no longer for political liberty but for economic enfranchisement – which challenged capitalism as a system. Indeed: “The socialism of the ILP was based partly on egalitarian and pacifist beliefs of Nonconformist religious
origins. It believed strongly in international and working-class solidarity, and saw the British empire as exploitative. For the ILP, domestic and foreign policy were parts of a whole, with social reform at home requiring the projection of democratic ideals abroad. It was largely pacifist, believed in international co-operation, was against overt militarism and war, and believed that an end to secret diplomacy could mean an end to international conflict. Both Kenneth O. Morgan and A. J. P. Taylor note that its leader, Keir Hardie, took an independent line on social questions from the moment he entered parliament in 1892, ‘But he kept quiet about foreign affairs until driven to explosion by the Boer war’. This was ‘lest he compromise his essential commitment to the cause of labour at home’. Despite this, the ILP was influential over issues of foreign policy in the early years through the role played by its leaders Keir Hardie and Ramsey MacDonald. MacDonald visited South Africa in 1902 shortly after the end of the Boer War, writing of the devastation that he saw in a series of articles for the Echo and the Leicester Pioneer. Following his tour of Canada, Australia and New Zealand in 1906 he wrote a short book on Labour and the Empire. Hardie visited India as part of his world tour of 1907, publishing his impressions of British rule in the ILP’s journal, the Labour Leader, and then in collected form in 1909 as India: Impressions and Suggestions. His criticisms were widely read and raised awareness of the less positive aspects of British rule in India. Lenin wrote that ‘the whole of the English bourgeois press raised a howl against the “rebel”’. Ramsay MacDonald visited India in 1909, and published his findings as The Awakening of India, the following year. Morgan notes that these publications ‘began the process of giving Labour a viable imperial and colonial policy, one which bore fruit in 1947.’ In 1912, MacDonald was part of a royal commission sent to investigate the Indian public services. Its findings were published in 1917, and he published his own book on The Government of India in 1919. These experiences led to the Labour Party giving an explicit commitment to freedom for India in its 1918 general election manifesto, which also said that Labour would ‘extend to all subject peoples the right of self-determination within the British Commonwealth of Free Nations.’

Ramsay MacDonald had a unique impact on the developing foreign policy of the Labour Party, as he was not only a leading member of the ILP, but was also a member of the SDF for a short period, was on the executive of the Fabian Society (he attended international conferences in that capacity) and was secretary of the Labour
Party from 1900 to 1911, and as such in charge of its organisational development. In 1906 he succeeded Philip Snowden as chairman of the ILP. He of course also became Labour’s first Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, and ‘one of the central themes of MacDonald’s career as prime minister and as leader of the Opposition is to be found in his concern for, and knowledge of, foreign policy.’ Both he and Hardie travelled widely and were closely acquainted with the socialist leaders on the continent.

The ILP was keenly involved in the Second International, and both Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald attended its congresses, Hardie as an ILP delegate, MacDonald as delegate for the Fabian Society and then for the LRC/Labour Party. Here they joined in with their French and German comrades in attacking Tsarist Russia, one issue which united the European socialists. MacDonald was bitterly opposed to the British government’s friendship with Russia, and protested against the King’s visit to Reval in June 1908. Hardie also vociferously condemned it, arguing that ‘For the King of Great Britain to pay an official visit to the Czar of Russia was to condone the atrocities for which the Czar’s Government, and the Czar personally, must be held responsible.’ He also declared at the 1912 Labour Party Conference that ‘if he was called upon to choose between the autocracy of Russia and the present German Government he would most unhesitatingly cast his lot on the side of Germany as against Russia.’ The Second International provided MacDonald and Hardie with an opportunity to make more strenuous denouncements of foreign policy than they tended to do at home, agreeing with the continental Marxists that capitalism was the cause of war, and international socialism the only alternative. However, the Second International rejected revolutionary means, and had a rule that only socialist parties and trade unions favouring parliamentary action should be admitted to its ranks. The Second International also provided ILP delegates with the opportunity to interact with their continental counterparts, and both men struck up friendships with many leading socialists, such as Jaurès in France and Eduard Bernstein and August Bebel of the German Social Democrats. In particular at this time, Hardie attempted to work against the rising tide of militarism and anti-German sentiment in the UK by strengthening links between the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats through the Second International. MacDonald believed that the key to peace was through joining forces with the German Social Democrats, who were opposed to the growing German militarism, and argued that one of the primary aims of British
foreign policy should be to ‘cultivate their friendship, and to help them in their struggle to democratize Germany.’

Both men differentiated between the German government and the German public. A recurring theme for Ramsay MacDonald was the need to educate the public about foreign policy in order to curb government’s tendency towards secret diplomacy and militarism.

The third influence on the fledgling Labour Party was its intellectual wing, epitomised by the Fabian Society, which had been founded in January 1884. Its most prominent members in its early years included George Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant, and Sidney Webb, who had joined in 1885 while working as a clerk in the Colonial Office. The Fabians initially contained both an anarchist wing and a wing that supported reform through constitutional means. In 1886 they voted to follow the parliamentary route, rejecting anarchism and revolution, and thus embraced a form of socialism that had much in common with French ‘Possibilism’, a type of Marxism which believed in gradual parliamentary reform.

Margaret Cole described Fabian thinking as being characterised by eclecticism, taking ideas from many thinkers including Marx, John Stuart Mill, and De Tocqueville; by a belief in democracy and parliamentary reform as the political agent of socialism, rather than revolution and class war; and gradualism. Sidney Webb wrote in the first collection of Fabian essays that,

All students of society who are abreast of their time, Socialists as well as Individualists, realize that important organic changes can only be (1) democratic, and thus acceptable to a majority of the people, and prepared for in the minds of all; (2) gradual, and thus causing no dislocation, however rapid may be the rate of progress; (3) not regarded as immoral by the mass of the people, and thus not subjectively demoralizing to them; and (4) in this country at any rate, constitutional and peaceful.

The Fabians did not have strong links with the trade unions, and were predominantly middle-class, London-based, and somewhat exclusive, if not elitist. For them, the main role for the working class was in terms of electing representatives who could then act as a check on the running of the state by expert administrators from the civil service. Thus, ‘Fascinated by the prevailing doctrines of Positivism, with its belief in a gradual evolution of a harmonious and well-ordered society guided by an educated elite, Webb’s Civil Service background reinforced his collectivist belief that individuals must subordinate themselves to the common good.’ The Fabians, while having links
with the ILP, were initially committed to working through the reformist wing of the Liberal Party, rather than calling for the establishment of a new party. Indeed, Beatrice Webb, who in partnership with her husband Sidney came to have considerable influence within the Fabians, not least through their role in establishing the London School of Economics in 1895, proposed a policy of ‘permeation.’ This involved converting to Fabian socialism, or at least to parts of the immediate Fabian programme, people in positions of influence, whether as politicians or as advisors.24 Such people could remain members of whatever party they wished, as long as they were convinced of the superiority of the Fabians’ proposals – a sort of very English Trotskyite entryism in reverse.

Of all the groups on the left in Britain at this time, the Fabian Society were the least interested in foreign policy and international affairs. Issues of war and peace were not of immediate concern to them, and they had few links with overseas socialist organisations, apart from sending delegates to the Second International. The one issue that did impinge on their consciousness was British imperialism, and this was only because it became impossible not to discuss it once the Boer War had broken out. As will be demonstrated below, the Fabians were divided over the Boer War, to the extent that they declined to even make a public statement on it. Instead, in October 1900 they published a manifesto intended to clarify their views on imperialism, called Fabianism and the Empire, but this document was rather ambivalent. They accepted as ‘a matter of fact’ that the world was being divided up amongst the Great Powers, and took ‘the problem before us’ as being how this could be ‘ordered’. They implied that they supported imperialism, as long as it was carried out by civilised countries, such as Switzerland, rather than uncivilised countries, such as Russia. Free trade was seen as a civilising influence across the globe, and states had a right to trade, which involved ‘a right to insist upon a settled government which can keep the peace and enforce agreements.’ Where a ‘native government’ could not be relied upon to do this, as in China, then ‘the foreign trading power must set one up’. They were, however, against ‘pure piratical conquests of weaker states.’25 Thus, they ‘not only recognized that the world was being divided up amongst the Imperialist powers, but in a general way they approved and justified the tendency. They seem to have been of the opinion that the states of Western Europe could and would benefit “less developed” communities by taking over or ruling them, at least for a while.’26 Foote notes that ‘The elitism which came so naturally to the Fabian
leaders went hand-in-hand with a commitment to a socialist Empire. 27 It was proclaimed that, ‘In the Socialist view, the guardianship of the non-Adult races of the world must be undertaken as a corporate duty by the Eight Great Powers, either jointly or separately.’ 28 Following their first foray into imperialism, the Fabians wrote more widely about the British empire, and the need for successful and productive management by Britain. They provided a Fabian gradualist ideology of reform, and the Fabian Colonial Research Bureau had a particular impact on the party’s plans for imperial reform post-1945. 29

Much more cautious in their assessment of the chances of international working-class solidarity than some of the other component parts of British socialism, they tended not to be concerned about any possible conflict between class interest and national interest. The one issue where they did overcome their particular British perspective on world politics was in their opinion of the Soviet Union. Many of the high-profile Fabians supported strong relations with the Soviet Union, discovering much in their fact-finding missions to recommend about Soviet planning.

The fourth main influence on, and grouping within, the Labour Party were the Marxists. Many of the people who joined the party had a basic Marxist belief in terms of capitalism being an exploitative class mode of production, but did not necessarily see Marxism as a political ideology that should determine policy. The main Marxist grouping at the time in Britain, the SDF, was involved in the establishment of the LRC in 1900, and key future Labour Party leaders such Ramsay MacDonald, George Lansbury and Herbert Morrison were influenced by their time spent as SDF members. 30 Under the autocratic leadership of Henry Mayers Hyndman, the SDF had a ‘penchant to split on doctrinal grounds’, 31 and many prominent figures on the British left tended to have only a short stay in the organisation. The SDF disaffiliated from the LRC in August 1901 because it would not accept the SDF doctrine of class war. 32 ‘The SDF had moved from a position of supporting parliamentary reform at its establishment in 1884, to a semi-revolutionary attitude by 1888, back again to reform by 1890, and then to supporting a form of revolution rather than peaceful change by 1900. The SDF argued that war and conflict was brought about by the capitalist system, and that this was to be resisted through the means of a general strike, or even revolution. Hyndman had been greatly influenced by Marx’s Capital, to the extent that Marx felt that Hyndman had plagiarised him in his work, The Text-book of Democracy: England for All. 33 However, Hyndman was also a very British Marxist,
being seen by many on his contemporaries as ‘jingoistic’, and tending
to support an independent nationalism rather than any creed of inter-
national working-class solidarity. He strongly supported the British
empire while at the same time advocating Indian self-government, and
published many articles, books and pamphlets criticising British rule
there.34 Hyndman also supported the campaigned for Irish Home
Rule. He was unusual on the left in Britain in that he had started off
as a Conservative radical and was strongly anti-Liberal. The SDF
renamed itself the Social Democratic Party in October 1907, and then
formed the largest section of a newly created British Socialist Party in
1911, which included some rebels from the ILP and representatives of
other socialist societies.35 ‘The British Socialist Party split during the
First World War, when the more nationalistic faction led by Hyndman
broke away to form the National Socialist Party. The internationalist
section of the British Socialist Party opposed the war and, in 1920,
became one of the elements in the British Communist Party.36 While
the SDF and then the British Socialist Party remained relatively small
organisations, Marxism and Marxists to the left of the main political
Labour Party grouping continued to have a massive impact on it. This
was not only through their involvement in the trade unions and party
as, alienated by Hyndman and the SDF they sought to build the
Labour Party into a Marxist party with its basis in the mass labour
movement, but also because of their impact on the left as it sought to
delineate itself as distinct from the far or hard left inhabited by the
Trotskyite and communist groupings.

The fifth grouping, not involved in the actual creation of the
Labour Party as such, but relevant for its influence upon Labour
foreign policy, is the Liberals.37 While the Labour Party led to the
demise of the Liberals, the Liberals in turn had a much greater impact
on the party than tended to be appreciated at the time. There was a
strong radical tradition within the Liberals, particularly on the issue of
foreign policy and international peace, which is wonderfully outlined
in A. J. P. Taylor’s book *The Trouble Makers*. The radical Liberals,
working within the Parliamentary system at the end of the nineteenth
century, argued against secret diplomacy with its disregard for any
form of popular control of foreign policy, proposing instead that
treaties should be subjected to Parliamentary ratification before being
signed. They tended to see foreign policy as ‘a conspiracy run by the
old order’ that ‘would disappear with the triumph of Radicalism’.‘Imperialism

was a product of Radical enthusiasm’, as well as being bitterly critiqued by it.  

In August 1914, following the outbreak of the First World War, Ramsey MacDonald joined with radical Liberals E. D. Morel, Norman Angell, Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby, to establish the UDC. The UDC was particularly important during the First World War and the inter-war period for its role in shaping Labour’s foreign policy. Morel, for example, was editor of the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*. His pamphlet, *Morocco in Diplomacy*, contained the secret clauses of the Anglo-French *entente*, documents that revealed the secret diplomacy at the heart of foreign policy. A. J. P. Taylor points out that this pamphlet ‘had an influence without parallel.’ Ramsay MacDonald said of it: ‘From that time I suspected our diplomacy, and ceased to believe the assurances given by Ministers in parliament or out of it.’

The UDC joined the Labour Party, but members such as E. D. Morel and Arthur Ponsonby had entered the party ‘mainly because it gave a hearing to their ideas on foreign policy. Their private attitude toward the party appeared frequently to be conditioned by a conviction of their own superiority to rank and file and leaders alike.’ For instance, Morel, while trying to explain the nature of the British Labour Party to Count Max Montgelas, wrote that the British Labour Party ‘has never contained among its leaders intellectuals of even second-rate or third-rate type … The British Labour Party has never thought internationally; has never been developed intellectually.’ Though he claimed that ‘In the last six years we have acquired a prodigious moral influence upon this vast mass [of ignorance].’ These radical Liberals believed in the extension of national law to the international arena and the operation of international organisations, with many of them calling for a League of Nations. Foreign policy should not be pursued by individual states, aiming at creating alliances for the purpose of maintaining a balance of power, but through a supranational body with the capability of securing international agreements. It was argued in the House of Commons by Lees-Smith during a discussion on German peace proposals that ‘I believe security can only be obtained by a scheme by which the nations of Europe and outside agree together that all will guarantee each and each will guarantee all … we shall achieve the purposes of this War not according to whether or not we obtain a military decision, but according to whether or not there is created out of it a league of nations’ with ‘an absolute and decisive veto upon any mere aggression’. This was not Utopian, for
‘We are standing upon the threshold of a new order of the world ... If Christian Europe does not now make up its mind to make an end of war, I do not see how civilisation as we have known it can go on.’

This was to be realised more fully by the United Nations (UN), rather than the settlements following the First World War. Members of the UDC, such as Hobson, Brailsford and Woolf, published detailed schemes for a League of Nations. However, not all the UDC agreed on the need for such a League: ‘Morel ignored the agitation for a League. Ramsay MacDonald did more: he dissented from it. The League, in his own favourite word, was “quackery”.’ For them, disarmament, open diplomacy and the democratisation of foreign policy were more important.

The UDC also had a great impact in terms of expressing and generalising pacifism, though their belief in pacifism was more complex than often presented. Norman Angell, for instance, railed against his critics who accused him of arguing in *The Great Illusion* that war was impossible; rather, he had argued that a modern nation cannot profit by conquest, ‘the argument is not that war is impossible, but that it is futile.’ These issues are explored in more depth below. Many in the UDC supported Britain’s role in the First World War, while denouncing the war itself.

Each of these five main influences had their own particular impact on the development of Labour’s foreign policy. The radical Liberals obviously contributed greatly to Labour’s liberal internationalism, while the Marxists, the trade unions and the ILP each contributed to Labour’s socialist internationalism. The Fabians provided in part the rationalist underpinning of Labour’s views on international relations, while the ILP provided the impulse towards common fellowship with other states. The ILP and the radical Liberals reinforced each other in their beliefs that militarism and secret diplomacy leads to war. Some of the radical Liberals influenced the Marxist perspective on the economic basis of inter-capitalist rivalry. These different contributing streams to Labour’s foreign policy also often pulled in opposing directions.

Nothing revealed this more than the split over attitudes towards pacifism and war, brought to a head with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, but it also evident in the other major debates of the time, in particular over the Boer War and imperialism. What was agreed, however, by all the contributing groups, was that foreign policy could not be viewed in isolation, as domestic and international policies were inter-related and also because foreign policy was affected by economic relations as well as political ones.
The Boer War

The Boer War is significant because it raised the profile of foreign policy within the Labour Party from the very start of its organisational life. At the first annual conference of the LRC on Friday 1 February 1901, a resolution on the Boer War forwarded by the ILP was unanimously agreed to. ‘This Congress, believing the harrowing war in South Africa to be mainly due to the corrupt agitation of the Transvaal mineowners, having for its object the acquisition of monopolies and a cheap supply of coloured and European labour’, urges the government to seek the termination of hostilities and arbitration in South Africa. Keir Hardie argued that ‘The [Boer] war is a capitalist war. The British merchant hopes to secure markets for his goods, the investor an outlet for his capital, the speculator more fools out of whom to make money, and the mining companies cheaper labour and increased dividends.’ Hardie ‘became passionately absorbed by the Boer War’, denouncing the war in the Labour Leader between 1899 and 1902. He drew on both Marxist explanations of the Boer War as the result of the inevitable decay of monopoly capitalism, and radical explanations of the war as the result of a small band of gold speculators. He became a member of the Stop-the-War committee, along with Liberals such as Lloyd George. However, some of the Fabians endorsed the British position on the war. ‘They supported war with the Boer republics as a means of achieving “national efficiency” at home and a secure imperial relationship overseas.’ When it was suggested that they make a statement condemning the war, the leadership of the society was divided. Ramsay MacDonald and sixteen other members of the Fabian Society resigned in protest when the Fabians voted by 259 votes to 217 against supporting the issuing of a such a statement. This was the most serious division to occur in the Society, and had an impact on the LRC, where, overall, the Boer war roused much passion:

The socialists were divided; the Fabians were inclined to support it, but the ILP and the SDF came out on the side of the ‘pro-Boers’ and incurred great unpopularity. MacDonald and Hardie, in deploiring the attack of a large nation on a small, were hardly to be distinguished from the Liberal Radicals. With the latter they accepted the Marxist analysis of the SDF – the war had been brought about by the machinations of international armament rings sponsored by international financiers.

Indeed, ‘In general the episode revealed many naiveties in the Labour Party’s approach to foreign affairs.’
The Boer War also raised the profile of foreign policy and war more generally within the fledgling Labour Party. It highlighted all that was wrong with British imperialism, and became an argument against it, as the war appeared to be ‘contrary to all our ideals of national political justice’. \(^5^3\) While during its first year ‘critics of the war were a distinct minority and ready targets for abuse and persecution’, as information about Kitchener’s concentration camps filtered through, the ‘anti-war critics gained a new respectability’. \(^5^4\) Before the Boer War the imperialists had appeared to win the moral argument over British imperialism, claiming that they brought about the abolition of slavery and the creation of schools, railways and health services to the colonies. The Boer War turned the tables of morality against the imperialists, as their claim to be fighting for the sake of the native peoples in South Africa ‘was no good’. \(^5^5\) Campbell-Bannerman’s attack on the ‘methods of barbarism’ in fact ‘switched the argument from the causes of the war to the way in which it was being conducted.’ The ‘muddles and disappointments’ of the war ‘discredited not only the competence, but also the principles, of those who had run it’. \(^5^6\)

Furthermore, the Boer War raised questions that would later cause so many divisions at the outbreak of the First World War, such as the legitimate role of a political party at odds with government policy during times of conflict. A. J. P. Taylor argued that these issues receded following the end of the Boer War, and the overall domestic focus of the fledgling party is evident in their annual congress reports and election manifestos in terms of how little is said on foreign affairs. However, the early manifestos were themselves remarkably short, so the small amount of attention given in them to foreign policy does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. \(^5^7\) The annual conference reports do contain a significant number of resolutions on international affairs, suggesting that the issues of war, militarism and imperialism had not receded. For example, the party held a special party conference on disarmament at Leicester in 1911, and attended annual congresses of the Peace Association. \(^5^8\) At the 1911 annual conference a proposal to inquiere into ‘the utility of the strike’ was defeated, but was passed the following year when Bruce Glasier of the ILP moved a resolution that stated that Conference ‘expresses its approval of the proposal to investigate and report on whether and how far a stoppage or work, either partial or general, in countries about to engage in war would be effective in preventing an outbreak of hostilities’. \(^5^9\) The issue of a general strike in response to the outbreak of war was remitted to the International Socialist Bureau, with Keir Hardie and Arthur
Henderson writing to ask each affiliated organisation their views on the issue, in particular whether they were ‘in favour of the organised Working Class Movements of all countries being asked to come to a mutual agreement whereby in the event of war being threatened between any two or more countries, the workers of those countries would hold themselves prepared to try to prevent it by a mutual and simultaneous stoppage of work in the countries affected’. While little came of the inquiry, with the outbreak of the First World War interrupting the International’s efforts to garner support for a general strike, in Britain the issue was returned to at Labour’s annual conferences in the 1920s.

The Labour Party and the trade unions became increasingly involved in international affairs in the years leading up to 1914, as evinced by the conferences and meetings they attended and the increasing volume of resolutions and writings on international affairs. Militarism and rearmament involved trade unionists in particular on two levels. On the one hand, militarism and a concomitant focus on military strength was something to be deplored as a signal of an increase in hostilities between countries. On the other hand, rearmament and an arms race provided jobs and a steady wage. Hence, ‘there was pressure from the dockyard towns, and to a less extent from the ports, against any opposition which might reduce the number of jobs.’ This tension has existed throughout the twentieth century. However, it has been argued by some that it was not until the outbreak of the First World War that the Labour Party really took seriously questions of foreign policy. Attlee noted that ‘The Party … had no real constructive foreign policy, but shared the views which were traditional in radical circles.’ The lack of a ‘constructive foreign policy’ reflected the problems of pulling together the diverse influences on Labour’s foreign policy rather than a lack of interest in it. Many in the party did pay attention to foreign affairs, particularly those from the ILP. At the 1912 annual conference, Keir Hardie moved a resolution on foreign policy, stating ‘That this Congress, believing the anti-German policy pursued in the name of the British Government by Sir Edward Grey to be a cause of increasing armaments, international ill-will, and the betrayal of oppressed nationalities, protests in the strongest terms against it.’ This diplomacy had led the government ‘to risk war with Germany in the interests of French financiers over Morocco, to condone the Italian outrage in Tripoli, the Russian theft in Mongolia, and, above all, to join hands with Russia in making an assault on the national independence and freedom of Persia.’ This resolution was
passed unanimously. The next resolution was forwarded by J. Bruce Glasier of the ILP:

That this Conference, realising the menace to social progress and working-class welfare involved in War, and the terrible suffering, sacrifice of life, and waste of material resources which it involves, hereby, as in previous years, expresses itself against the growing burden of armaments and protests against Militarism and Compulsory Military Service in all its forms; and declares that national disputes should be settled by arbitration ...63

This resolution caused concern to those in the armament industry, who were concerned about the 130,000 workers directly employed in armaments, but was unanimously carried.64 These statements, forming Labour Party policy, were unequivocal on their stance on foreign policy, and were strongly supported by the party despite its still disparate strands.

Imperialism

One of the major issues discussed by those on the left at the beginning of the twentieth century was that of imperialism. Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie had long spoken against imperialism, and MacDonald had argued that ‘Further extensions of the Empire are only the grabbings [sic] of millionaires on the hunt.’65 At the first annual conference in 1901, a resolution was forwarded by the Independent Labour Party

That, inasmuch as modern Imperialism with its attendant militarism is a reversion to one of the worst phases of barbarism, is inimical to social reform and disastrous to trade and commerce, a fruitful cause of war, destructive of freedom, fraught with menace to representative institutions at home and abroad, and must end in the destruction of democracy, this Congress desires most earnestly to impress upon the working class the urgent need there is for combating this dangerous and barbaric development in all its manifestations.66

Thus, imperialism was seen as a danger to democracy within Britain as well as leading to war between states.

Influenced by the experience of the Boer War, J. A. Hobson, a radical Liberal economist who later joined the Labour Party, wrote what was to become a major text, Imperialism: A Study, which appeared in 1902. He argued that imperialism was not caused by selfish individuals, or by capitalists seeking raw materials or markets,
but that it was economically determined by under-consumption. Hobson’s theory of under-consumption argued that capitalists had to invest profits abroad, to export capital, and that this caused imperialism. “The economic root of Imperialism is the desire of strong organized industrial and financial interests to secure and develop at the public expense and by the public force private markets for their surplus goods and their surplus capital. War, militarism, and a “spirited foreign policy” are the necessary means to this end.”67 Furthermore, “Imperialism makes for war and for militarism, and has brought a great and limitless increase of expenditure of national resources upon armaments. It has impaired the independence of every nation which has yielded to its false glamour.”68 Indeed, according to Hobson, “Imperialism is a depraved choice of national life, imposed by self-seeking interests which appeal to the lusts of quantitative acquisitiveness and of forceful domination surviving in a nation from early centuries of animal struggle for existence.”69 Not only did he provide an economic explanation for foreign policy, but he also provided an explanation for the relationship between the working class and imperialism. Imperialism not only benefited financial and industrial interests, but also appealed to those classes of workers in trades particularly dependent on government employment or contracts, such as shipbuilding, car and aeroplane manufacturing, and the arms trade.70 However, in terms of Hobson’s methodology, Taylor notes that “Hobson put the growth of external investments in one column of the figures, the increase of colonial territories in another; and, since they were both going up, argued that the caused the other. The conclusion may have been faulty. Nevertheless its political influence was enormous.” It provided an explanation for international relations and the causes of war for both Labour and the radical Liberals, lending them “a common ideology and rhetoric”,71 as well as impacting on the Marxist understanding of international conflict through the subsequent study by Lenin.

Lenin used Hobson’s work as the basis for his study of imperialism, first published in 1917, which became the starting point for any Marxists’ understanding of international relations. Lenin noted that in Britain, the ‘tendency of imperialism to divide the workers, to encourage opportunism among them and to cause temporary decay in the working class movement’, had revealed itself in the middle of the nineteenth century, earlier than in other countries, because of its vast colonial possessions and its monopolist position in the world market.72 For Lenin, imperialism was the monopoly stage of capitalism, where the
export of finance capital (the combination of bank and industrial capital) led to the formation of international capitalist monopolies which had divided the world among themselves. The territorial division of the whole world among the greatest capitalist power was now completed, and this lead to tension and conflict between them. This viewpoint strongly reflected the Marxist reaction to the First World War, which had been seen as a conflict between competing imperialist powers. The more underlying influence of this economic perspective of imperialism, international relations and conflict, however, was the perspective that politics and economics were intimately linked and that it was not possible to separate out the two. This tied in with Norman Angell’s work, The Great Illusion, though this claimed to destroy the economic argument for war. He explained that the motivation for the international rivalry in armaments was due to the view that military and political power gave a nation commercial advantage, and that it was to a state’s economic advantage to subjugate a weaker state. This, Angell argued, was an optical illusion, for it is an impossibility for one nation to enrich itself by subjugating another. While war was entered into for economic reasons, the victor was left the poorer, and so war was economically futile. Modernisation was leading to the disappearance of state rivalry, but ‘so long as nations believe that in some way the military and political subjugation of others will bring with it a tangible material advantage to the conqueror, we all do, in fact, stand in danger from such aggression.’ The real guarantee of the good behaviour of one state to another ‘is the elaborate interdependence which, not only in the economic sense, but in every sense, makes an unwarrantable aggression of one State upon another react upon the interests of the aggressor.’

H. N. Brailsford’s The War of Steel and Gold applied Hobson’s 1902 theory of imperialism, that is, the search for profitable investment overseas, to the European powers. He critiqued the current faith in a balance of power, for ‘The balance is a metaphor of venerable hypocrisy which serves only to disguise the perennial struggle for power and predominance. When a statesman talks of a balance, he means a balance favourable to himself.’ He argued that the leaders of finance capitalism controlled the policy of their respective states, and that ‘It is an economic motive which underlies the struggle for a balance of power.’ The doctrine of continuity in foreign policy in Britain meant that there was little chance of change, and ‘whichever party is in power, the Foreign Secretary will always be an Imperialist.’ However, he thought that war between the European powers was
unlikely, as ‘In Europe, the epoch of conquest is over, and ... the frontiers of our modern national states are finally drawn.’ This book was published in May 1914, and so he was proved wrong on this point, but it was sufficiently popular that a second edition was printed in December 1914 and a third in June 1915, in which he argued that the Great War demonstrated that the system of alliances had to be replaced with an international organisation, and laid out a ‘rough tentative sketch’ of the constitution of a League of Peace, ‘which might direct its united forces against any Power which breaks the harmony of Europe.’

This chapter has demonstrated the impact that the different influences on the Labour Party had on its developing foreign policy. The ILP, the trade union movement, the SDF and various Marxist groups, the Fabian Society and the radical Liberals, each had their own particular influence over the way that foreign policy and international affairs was thought about. Each had their own particular analytical framework for understanding relations between states, and each their own way of responding to concrete situations. These different influences provided a rich source for ideas on international politics, but also produced impulses towards Labour’s appropriate response to particular foreign policy issues that were sometimes antithetical to each other. This demonstrates the problems of attempting to generalise about the nature of Labour’s foreign policy from its very beginnings in 1900, while also explaining in part the depth of some of the intra-party conflict on international affairs. These conflicts are examined in more depth in the following chapters, starting with an assessment of Labour’s response to the First World War.

Notes

3 In 1945, the AFL was the larger of the two trade union national centres
in the US, the other being the more recently established Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). These were rivals until the mid-1950s when they merged. See, for example, Windmuller, *The International Trade Union Movement*.

4 J. Ramsay MacDonald, *The History of the ILP* (London: ILP, 1921), pp. 5 and 6, held in the University of Leeds Library, Brotherton Collection, Mattison, LAB.

5 Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain*, p. 17.


13 At the 1896 London Congress, Hardie and Tom Mann voted in favour of seating the anarchist delegations, MacDonald voted against, having ‘a deep loathing for anarchism as a political movement’, Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 60.

14 Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 165. There is correspondence regarding MacDonald’s protests over the King’s visit to the Tsar of Russia in *Labour Leader* in the Public Records Office, Kew, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, 30/69/1417, folios 16–22.


16 *Labour Party Annual Conference Report* (hereafter *LPACR*), 1912, p. 98.


MAINE POLITICAL INFLUENCES

25 G. Bernard Shaw, ed., *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto by the Fabian Society* (London: Fabian Society, 1900), pp. 3 and 44–6, held in the University of Leeds Library, Brotherton Collection, Mattison, FAB.
28 *New Statesman*, 2 August 1913, p. 525, cited in *ibid*.
31 Dowse, *Left in the Centre*, p. 2.
38 Taylor, *The Trouble Makers*, pp. 33 and 90.
39 The decision to establish the UDC was taken at a dinner party. See Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 171. See also Marvin Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics During the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Morel became the Secretary of the UDC.
40 Taylor, *The Trouble Makers*, p. 120.
41 Cited in *ibid*.
45 Taylor, The Trouble Makers, p. 145.
49 Morgan, Keir Hardie, p. 104.
50 Ibid.
51 For accounts of this, see Cole, Story of Fabian Socialism, pp. 98–101; McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, pp. 120–5; Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, p. 66.
52 Bealey, Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party, p. 11.
54 Morgan, Keir Hardie, p. 105.
56 Ibid., p. 109.
57 The 1900 Labour manifesto called for the ‘Abolition of the Standing Army, and the Establishment of a Citizen Force. The People to decide on Peace and War.’ The 1906 general election manifesto stated that ‘Wars are fought to make the rich richer, and school children are still neglected.’ Both manifestos were extremely short, consisting of a list of points. See Craig, British General Election Manifestos 1900–1974, pp. 3–4 and 9–10. See also Iain Dale, ed., Labour Party General Election Manifestos (London: Routledge, 2000).
58 LPACR, 1912, p. 10; LPACR, 1913, p. 20.
60 LPACR, 1913, pp. 123–4. They also said that, ‘War with all its horrors is always inimical to the interests of the working class, and is always in these days undertaken for the benefit of the financial and propertied classes.’ The Boer War was given as a recent example of this.
61 Bealey, Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party, p. 11.
63 LPACR, 1912, pp. 98–9.
64 Ibid., p. 100.
65 Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, p. 65, citing ILP News (January 1898).
68 Ibid., p. 138.
69 Ibid., p. 368.
70 Ibid., pp. 48–9.
MAIN POLITICAL INFLUENCES

73 Ibid., pp. 88–9.
78 Ibid., pp. 35 and 132.
79 Ibid., p. 319.