Chapter 3

Labour and the First World War

The Labour Party grew only moderately in parliamentary strength following its 1906 election success of thirty seats, gaining forty seats in the election of January 1910, and forty-two seats in the election the following December. However, the labour movement in general was growing significantly in terms of its economic, social and political impact, with trade union membership increasing from just under two million in 1900 to over four million in 1914, at a time of rising union militancy. Major strike waves broke out in 1908 and from 1910 through to 1914, when the number of working days lost rose from an average of two-to-three thousand days a year to ten thousand days a year, and hit a peak of nearly forty-one thousand days a year in 1913. Domestic discontent over trade union rights, social conditions, women’s suffrage and Home Rule for Ireland coincided with rising international tension. The European states became increasingly competitive over access to markets, with Germany and Italy in particular seeking to build up their own empires. Alliance diplomacy became increasingly volatile, and crises broke out in the Balkans in 1908–9 when Austria-Hungary annexed the provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina; and between French and German interests in Morocco in 1906 and 1911. The arms race between Britain and Germany escalated, as Germany appeared to be directly preparing to challenge Britain’s naval supremacy. However, despite these tensions, the outbreak of war in Europe came as a great shock to most of Britain. In the spring of 1914 the Cabinet had been focusing its attention on the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, to the extent that a permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office noted in May that ‘I have not seen such calm waters’ in foreign affairs.

The crisis that led to the outbreak of war in 1914 occurred when
Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated by a group of Serb and Croat nationalists during a visit to Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. To summarise events very briefly, on 23 July Austria-Hungary presented Serbia with an ultimatum to be met within forty-eight hours. This included the suppression of any anti-Austrian propaganda in Serbia, and Austrian participation in the Serbian investigation into the assassination. Serbia, which was suffering from domestic political problems at the time, raised objections to this last demand. Germany pressured Austria-Hungary into declaring war on Serbia on 28 July, with both thinking that if they were united, Russia, the Serbs’ ally, would not get involved. Austria-Hungary subsequently began mobilising its armed forces. However, Russia supported Serbia and felt that if it got its ally, France, to stand firm, Germany and Austria-Hungary would back off. Unfortunately, nobody backed off, and all the states involved began mobilising their troops. Britain, which had signed alliances with France and Russia, was under increasing pressure to announce its support for them, but, with divisions in the Cabinet over what course of action to take, the government was trying to avoid any public commitment to intervene. This situation changed somewhat when Germany demanded the right to move its troops through Belgium in order to launch a pre-emptive strike on France. Belgium had been guaranteed neutrality through an 1839 treaty by the main European powers, and Britain was one of the guarantors. The violation of Belgium’s neutrality, along with Britain’s treaty with France, the fear that the European balance of power would be undermined in Germany’s favour and a wider concern that if Britain remained aloof from a European-wide conflict its independence and its powerful role in the world would be undermined, led the British Cabinet members to reluctantly agree on 2 August 1914 that if Germany violated France, it would intervene. Germany declared war against Russia on 1 August and against France on 3 August. Britain declared war against Germany on 4 August. Germany started moving its troops through Belgium, and on 6 August the British government decided to send an expeditionary force to France. On 12 August Britain declared war against Austria-Hungary. The First World War, or ‘Great War’ as it was known at the time, had begun, which was to have far-reaching impact on British politics in numerous ways. It led to the introduction of conscription for the first time in 1916, due to the need to expand Britain’s relatively small land army; the introduction of government control over parts of the economy vital to the war effort, including mining, which involved far greater consultation with trade
union representatives than before; government control of the railways and shipping; government intervention in the supply and pricing of food; and the diversion of production to armaments. British defence expenditure rose from £91 million in 1913 to £1,956 million in 1918, by which time it accounted for 80 per cent of total government expenditure. Under Lloyd George’s Ministry of Munitions, production of guns, for example, rose from 91 thousand in 1914 to over 8 million in 1918, and production of machine guns rose from just 300 in 1914 to 120,900 in 1918.

In addition to the First World War and its aftermath, this time period was extremely influential in the development of the Labour Party’s foreign policy because of events in Russia. The revolution in Russia in 1917 was to have a resounding impact on Labour, in terms of temporarily raising hopes for a future based on international socialist solidarity, while quickly undermining this through the provision of a competing socialist world-view, foreign policy and international movement to that provided by the Labour Party.

Labour and the war

The outbreak of the First World War tested the Labour Party’s attitudes to foreign policy and defence as no previous event had. In particular, it revealed the problems of forming a party out of an alliance of left-wing groups. Until 1914, the Labour Party had proclaimed itself as largely anti-war, and some of its leading members from the ILP held pacifist views. The annual conference had regularly passed resolutions condemning militarism and war, and in 1912 had passed a resolution calling for an investigation into the extent to which a general strike in countries about to engage in war would be effective in preventing the outbreak of hostilities. The 1913 conference passed a resolution that called upon the wives and mothers of the working class to assist in defeating militarism and war ‘by teaching their children the meaning of the international solidarity of the workers’. At the following year’s conference another successful resolution called upon the conference to resist conscription, increased expenditure on armaments, and for the TUC ‘to consider joint action of the workers against war in this and other countries; and further urges the people to use their political power to democratise foreign policy and to replace our present system of armed peace by an alliance between all the workers of the world’. Tom Fox, the conference chairman said that ‘The Labour
Labour Party is here to denounce war and war-mongering in any disguise, to warn and to arm our fellow workers of all nations against the common foe.13

In the run-up to the declaration of war, the Labour Party continued to pass resolutions denouncing war and urging arbitration. On 2 August, Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson took part in a mass anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square. On 3 August, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey announced to the House of Commons that Britain was committed to supporting the French, and that ‘it is clear that peace of Europe cannot be preserved.’ Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the PLP, responded by stating the somewhat ambivalent view that the Labour Party was against war, but if it were announced, would not take action against it. ‘We will offer him ourselves if the country is in danger. But he has not persuaded me it is.’ Indeed, MacDonald argued that the British ought to have remained neutral.14 The following day the Liberal government announced that Britain was at war with Germany. In response, on 5 August the Labour Party’s NEC passed a resolution by eight votes to four that the war was the result of ‘Foreign Ministers pursuing diplomatic polices for the purposes of maintaining a balance of power’, condemned Sir Edward Grey for committing ‘without the knowledge of our people the honour of the country to supporting France in the event of any war’, and declared ‘That the Labour Movement reiterates the fact that it has opposed the policy which has produced the war, and that its duty is now to secure peace at the earliest possible moment’.15 However, that same day the PLP decided to support the government’s request for war credits of one hundred million pounds, which was, in effect, a reversal of the party’s existing policy. Ramsay MacDonald resigned as leader of the Labour Party in protest at this particular decision, but more generally over the PLP’s view that it should support the war, and Arthur Henderson replaced him.

Once war broke out, it was supported by large sections of the working class, and trade unions agreed to suspend protective practices in order to increase war production, with areas such as mining and the railways coming under semi-government control for the duration. The Labour Party produced a manifesto in October 1914, The British Labour Party and the War. This stated that while the party had always stood for peace, the German military-caste were ‘determined on war if the rest of Europe could not be cowed into submission.’ It explained that the party had agreed to support the government’s recruitment campaign due to a ‘fervent desire to save Great Britain and Europe...
from the evils that would follow the triumph of military despotism'. 16

While before the outbreak of war the party had vehemently denounced militarism and continued to vote against increased military expenditure, once Britain had declared war, the party did not publicly speak against the war as such, or threaten the war effort in any way. It said that following the declaration of war, ‘the opinion of the majority of the Party, after several meetings to consider the situation, crystallised into a conviction that under the circumstances it was impossible for this country to have remained neutral.’ 17 In May 1915, Asquith decided that the war could not be prosecuted successfully without bringing other parties into the government. Asquith lacked popularity within his own party, with many Liberals having been bitterly opposed to Britain entering into war, and had been criticised more generally over his prosecution of the war, in particular over the shortage of munitions. He subsequently invited the Conservatives and the Labour Party to join him in a coalition government. This ‘caused much searching of hearts’, but the party decided to accept the invitation, and Arthur Henderson, now also a prominent member of the Fabian Society, was made president of the Board of Education and a member of the Cabinet. Henderson became the only Labour Cabinet minister in this coalition government, while the Conservatives were given nine ministerial posts, and the Liberals retained thirteen. Henderson himself was concerned about his position, seeing his post at the Board of Education as an office ‘for which he did not feel fit’. He also feared that the government would use him to put across to the Labour Party and trade unions ‘measures which were certain to arouse resentment, and that the effect might be to antagonise Labour from the war effort instead of strengthening its participation.’ 18 This duly occurred when Asquith formally proposed in December 1915 a Military Service Bill to introduce conscription. Conscription was highly controversial within the Liberal Party as well as Labour, and Sir John Simon, the Liberal Home Secretary, resigned in protest. Henderson also offered his resignation from the Cabinet, but Asquith persuaded the PLP that he should remain in the government. 19 At the January 1916 annual conference the party voted by 1,796,000 to 219,000 votes against conscription ‘in any form, as it is against the spirit of British democracy’, and furthermore supported a resolution declaring the conference’s opposition to the government’s Military Service Bill by 1,716,000 votes to 360,000. 20 The TUC had passed resolutions against conscription in 1913 and 1915. 21 However, Labour’s opposition to conscription then crumbled, and it voted to support temporary
compulsory military service in April 1916. Not only this, but the PLP and the NEC also agreed that the Labour Party organisation would join forces in a campaign to enlist military recruits, and that the party Head Office would be placed at the disposal of the recruitment campaign.

The January 1916 Labour Party annual conference had actually seen a turning point in the party’s position and reaction to the war. It moved publicly from grudging to outspoken support for Britain’s position during the debate on a resolution championing the government and denouncing German militarism. The resolution stated that,

[Conference] considers the present action of Great Britain and its Government fully justified in the present war, expresses its horror at the atrocities committed by Germany and her ally by the callous and brutal murder of non-combatants, including women and children, and hereby pledges the Conference to assist the Government as far as possible in the successful prosecution of the War.

The mover, James Sexton of the Dock Labourers, noted that this resolution ‘was practically word for word in substance and in fact’ the same as the one passed by the TUC in September 1915, and declared that ‘He was for this War and for all the risks associated with it, for the alternative was worse than any risk … If Germany won, nothing else in God’s world would matter!’ Another trade unionist posed the question of when there were trade union members fighting in the services, how could any trade unionists tell his members that he had voted against the war? The resolution was controversial, and Ramsay MacDonald spoke against it. He also called for toleration, with a plea not to let differences of opinion over the war become ‘reasons for permanent dispute in their midst’, but with little real effect. He was opposed by the speaker for the NEC, who asked the conference, ‘Who has the right to speak on behalf of the Labour Movement? Was it the small coterie of the Independent Labour Party or the great Trade Unions of the country who … carried the same resolution with but two or three dissentients [sic] in that very city four months ago?’ After an extensive and emotional debate, the resolution was passed by 1,502,000 votes to 602,000.

Thus, the First World War led to a widening gulf within the Labour Party between two competing perspectives. The majority supported the war once it was underway, and also supported the coalition government. Some of the working class actually prospered under the war due to the boom created by weapons production, ensuring
employment and good wages. The minority still supported the pre-war policy of international solidarity, and put this before what they saw as national self-interest. G. D. H. Cole noted that in Britain, as in other countries,

[T]here were really two anti-war oppositions, the one, headed internationally by Lenin, revolutionary and entirely unconcerned with the merits of the case advanced by any capitalist government, and the other either out-and-out pacifist or working for peace by negotiation, but opposed to any attempt to invoke revolutionary violence as a means of ending the war by international working-class revolution.26

The ILP, led by Ramsay MacDonald, formed the centre of the opposition to British foreign policy and the war, and was criticised by the Labour Party and the TUC for doing so.27 It was argued that, had events been left to the ILP, ‘the Germans would be here now.’28 While there was no great public schism between the two parties, the ILP lost much of its influence within the Labour Party during the war. When Keir Hardie died in 1915, at the resulting by-election in Merthyr the ILP candidate was defeated by the trade union candidate standing for the Labour Party who stood on a platform of support for the war. At the 1916 Labour Party annual conference, a resolution proposed by the ILP criticising British foreign policy, which before the war would have been uncontroversial, was defeated.29

The Fabians were more divided over the stance to take in response to the war. Following their brief interest in foreign affairs caused by the Boer War, they had returned to their domestic focus, and had said little on international relations. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, they held a discussion on the attitude to take to the war, which demonstrated divisions between the ‘old guard’ Fabians such as the Webbs who, like the Labour Party, supported the war, and the newer generation of Fabians who supported the ILP’s opposition to the war.30 However, in the end, Edward Pease, Secretary of the Fabian Society, noted that ‘In accordance with the rule which forbids it to speak, unless it has something of value to say, the Society has made no pronouncement and adopted no policy’ on the First World War.31 This was in much the same way as it had made no pronouncement and adopted no policy on the Boer War. The main Marxist organisation, the British Socialist Party was split over the issue of the First World War. In 1916 Hyndman’s more nationalistic faction withdrew from the British Socialist Party to form the National Socialist Party, where Hyndman campaigned for a more vigorous prosecution of the war
abroad, while at the same time arguing for better conditions for the working class at home, and working on plans for the nationalisation of the railways and greater government control of industry. The remainder of the British Socialist Party opposed the war, with some of its members being imprisoned for their political activities and for objecting to military service. In its Huddersfield branch alone, at one point twenty-five members were imprisoned.

While the importance of the ILP and the other opponents of the war declined at this time, paradoxically the UDC gradually increased in importance. Morel, the Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the UDC, proclaimed that the organisation ‘has one supreme end and aim’. This ‘is to create a public opinion in Great Britain, and eventually throughout the world, which will compel the so-called civilised and the so-called Christian Governments of Europe to settle their differences in future by some other means than the massacre and mutilation of multitudes of human beings.’ In its first pamphlet, The Morrow of War, the UDC said that it was set up to secure a new course of policy that would prevent the peril of war befalling the British empire again. It believed that ‘First, it is imperative that the war, once begun, should be prosecuted to a victory for our country. Secondly, it is equally imperative, while we carry on the war, to prepare for peace.’

The UDC was formally constituted at an inaugural meeting on 17 November 1914. At this meeting four ‘cardinal points’ were adopted. These were, first, that no province was to be transferred from one country to another without the consent of the population. Second, no treaty or agreement was to be entered into by the government without the consent of Parliament. ‘Adequate machinery for ensuring democratic control of foreign policy shall be created.’ Third, British foreign policy was to aim not at maintaining a balance of power but at concerted action between the powers to set up an international council with machinery for securing an abiding peace. Fourth, Britain should propose, as part of any peace settlement, a drastic disarmament agreement between the powers, the general nationalisation of armaments industries, and controls over the export of armaments between states.

The UDC and the ILP co-operated in their anti-war activities, and in this way the ILP in general, and Ramsay MacDonald in particular as a leading member of both groups, were to have an indirect impact on Labour’s thinking about war and peace. While there was sometimes friction between the two groups, both came under virulent, and occasionally violent, criticism for their stance on the First World War. Marquand notes that ‘the very fact that both groups were swimming
against one of the strongest and fiercest tides of opinion in recent British history created in both an exalted, almost religious, atmosphere of dedication and solidarity – the solidarity of persecution.\(^{38}\)

The UDC blamed the outbreak of the Great War on balance-of-power politics, secret diplomacy, the arms race between states, and the arms trade.\(^{39}\) They were not pacifists as such, though they abhorred war. While condemning war in general, and blaming the First World War on all the participants rather than seeing it as a simple fight between good and evil, the UDC believed that Britain must win the war.\(^{40}\) They were critical of the Foreign Office, believing that it had become ‘avowedly and frankly autocratic.’\(^{41}\) ‘They saw the war as the failure of diplomacy, and ‘Instead of taking advantage of the marked growth in the pacific inclinations of the peoples of the world’, statesmen ‘have insisted on encouraging between the Governments of Europe the most deadly and determined competition in preparation for war that the world has ever known.’\(^{42}\) Thus, in the future, foreign policy should not be left in the hands of the professional diplomats and statesmen. Rather, there should be some form of popular control over foreign policy. As it was not in the interests of the public to go to war, they would resist aggression. Public opinion, if allowed to play a role in international affairs, would act to prevent war. The UDC believed in a rational, evolutionary view of the world, that modern, civilised, educated people, if only made aware of the facts, would choose peace not war, and so it was possible to get rid of war by willing it so and simply creating the necessary international machinery for conciliation and peace.

The machinery for peace was to be through a League of Nations. The suspicion and fear caused by exclusive alliances could be done away with by extending national law to the international arena and creating a League of Peace, ‘which should undertake, in the event of a dispute, to offer mediation’. If one or both sides then resisted mediation, the League would throw its weight against the greatest aggressor though a system of collective security. ‘If a sufficient number of nations entered into such a League, they could make aggressive war obviously doomed to failure, and could thereby secure the cessation of war.’\(^{43}\) Richard Crossman described the League as an attempt ‘to apply the principles of Lockeian liberalism to the building of a machinery of international order’.\(^{44}\)

With hindsight it is possible to criticise the UDC for being unduly optimistic about the potential nature of international relations and the role that public opinion could play, as E. H. Carr scathingly did in
1939 when he compared the ‘utopian’ view of international politics as propounded by groups such as the UDC with what he described as the ‘realist’ perspective, which emphasised the over-riding importance of power in international politics and the competitive nature of relations between states in their pursuit of national power. However, at the time, the views of the UDC anticipated and helped shape the general consensus about the ability of the League of Nations and open covenants to prevent war in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the UDC developed ideas about foreign policy which have remained with the Labour Party, such as the need for the control of the arms industry, and the importance of the role of public opinion, particularly in preventing aggression between states.

One consequence of the First World War was that it recast divisions within the various groupings of the Labour Party, with the ILP declining in importance in particular. Another was that it led to Labour MPs, most notably Arthur Henderson, entering government for the first time. The coalition government that Asquith had formed in May 1915 was faltering, and on 5 December 1916 he resigned rather than accept demands from his ministerial colleagues that he establish a war committee led by Lloyd George to co-ordinate Britain’s war effort. Lloyd George replaced him as Prime Minister on 6 December, forming a new coalition government. Lloyd George held a meeting with members of the Labour Party the following day at which he offered places in a coalition government. Beatrice Webb noted in her diary that ‘The pro-war Labour members drank in his sweet words; the pacifists maintained a stony silence whilst Sidney [Webb] and one or two of the waverers asked questions to which Lloyd George gave non-committal answers.’ However, she did feel that this signified defeat for the pacifist wing of the party, as ‘From the narrow standpoint of the pacifist movement, as a sect, the inclusion of pro-war Labour members in the Lloyd George Government may be a fortunate circumstance – a discredit to their warlike opinions.’ Conference had in fact voted overwhelmingly, by 1,674,000 votes to 269,000, to support entry into the Cabinet in 1916, and supported it retrospectively in 1917. Henderson duly became a member of the inner War Cabinet, John Hodge became the newly created Minister of Labour, with four others in more minor posts. However, during 1917 the atmosphere changed, as the United States joined the Allies, and Russia defected after the October Revolution. Tensions quickly developed within the Labour Party over whether to stay in the war government or not, especially over the issue of British relations with Russia.
The 1917 Russian Revolution

Events in Russia caused another rethink in foreign policy, and a volte-face back to the anti-war and internationalist sentiments of the pre-war years. For example, in January 1917, the Labour Party had rejected an invitation to attend an international socialist conference in Stockholm on war aims and peace plans, but accepted it, after much prevarication, once Russia had indicated its willingness to take part following the revolution of February 1917.51 ‘Joy – an admixture of relief and pleasure – was the characteristic British reaction’ to this revolution in Russia, and this was not confined to the Labour Party.52 In the House of Commons, Chancellor of the Exchequer Bonar Law moved the government’s statement of congratulation, saying that, ‘This House sends to the Duma its fraternal greetings and tenders to the Russian people its heartiest congratulations upon the establishment among them of free institutions’, though he could not resist tendering his compassion for the deposed Tsar.53 Nye Bevan later described the emotional and psychological impact of the revolution thus:

I remember so well what happened when the Russian revolution occurred. I remember the miners, when they heard that the Czarist tyranny had been overthrown, rushing to meet each other in the streets with tears streaming down their cheeks, shaking hands and saying: ‘At last it has happened.’ Let us remember in 1951 that the revolution of 1917 came to the working class of Great Britain, not as social disaster, but as one of the most emancipating events in the history of mankind. Let us also remember that the Soviet revolution would not have been so distorted, would not have ended in a tyranny, would not have resulted in a dictatorship, would not now be threatening the peace of mankind, had it not been for the behaviour of Churchill, and the Tories at that time.54

In response to the Russian Revolution of February 1917, the United Socialist Council, made up of the various British socialist organisations that had temporarily joined forces in 1916, organised the Leeds Convention of June 1917. This was described by Ralph Miliband as ‘perhaps the most remarkable gathering of the period’, for it brought together both the revolutionaries and constitutionalists on the left.55 Graubard is less positive with his description that, ‘The Leeds Convention stands out as one of the great anomalies in British Labour experience’, for leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden, who had always argued that it was necessary to work inside the parliamentary system, agreed to a resolution creating extraparliamentary workers’ councils. ‘The most generous interpretation
would be that they were themselves swept along by the emotion of the mass. The least generous would be that they knew that nothing would come of the whole effort and simply enjoyed the platform provided them.\textsuperscript{56}

There were 1,150 delegates present at the Leeds Convention, including Ernest Bevin, Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, Tom Mann, Ben Tillet, Bertrand Russell and Sylvia Pankhurst. Four resolutions were passed by the convention. First, one proposed by Ramsay MacDonald was simply that the convention ‘hails the Russian Revolution. With gratitude and admiration it congratulates the Russian people upon a Revolution which has overthrown a tyranny.’ The second resolution supported the declaration on foreign policy and war aims of the Russian Provisional Government, and the third called for a charter of civil liberties establishing complete political rights for all. The fourth, and most controversial, called for the establishment of workers’ and soldiers’ councils in Britain ‘for initiating and co-ordinating working class activity’, which some interpreted to mean extra-constitutional and revolutionary activity. A message was also sent to the Russian Workers’ Councils that the convention ‘has today endorsed Russia’s declaration of foreign policy and war aims, and has pledged itself to work through its newly constituted Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council for an immediate democratic peace’.\textsuperscript{57} The conference is significant for it united both constitutionalists and revolutionaries, and ‘Reacting to the mood of their audience, mild trade unionists talked like Bolsheviks and for a few hours, within a crowded hall, a socialist revolution in Britain seemed a viable proposition.’\textsuperscript{58} White, however, has argued that the Leeds Convention ‘is better understood in a pacifist than in a revolutionary perspective’, and reflected an opposition to the continuation of the First World War in the pursuit of total victory.\textsuperscript{59}

The euphoria was short-lived. The Leeds conference was described by the Labour Party as being ‘unrepresentative’, and it stated that any members of the party present were there as individuals, and not as representatives of the party.\textsuperscript{60} Not unsurprisingly, the appeal to establish British workers’ soviets was not carried through. However, the first major problem that the Russian Revolution caused for the Labour Party was created by Russia’s request for British involvement in a meeting of the International Socialist Congress, made up of all Socialist and Labour Parties, including Germany, to be held in Stockholm to discuss war aims. This caused tensions within the movement. The party’s NEC rejected an invitation in May 1917 to send a delegation to the Stockholm conference,\textsuperscript{61} but then voted in favour of
attendance at the special Labour Party conference of August 1917 following a plea from Arthur Henderson. Henderson had just returned from an official visit to Russia, sent by an alarmed British government as ‘its most conciliatory representative’ to St Petersburg to find out ‘what might be the result of the changes’.62 He told the Labour Party conference that the Stockholm meeting would be held with or without British involvement, and ‘it would be highly inadvisable and perhaps dangerous for the Russian representatives to meet representatives from enemy and neutral countries alone’. As long as Russia agreed that the conference would be for consultative purposes rather than being obligatory and binding, then the Labour Party should attend.63 However, the British government had announced that it would refuse passports to delegates, and debate still raged within the Labour movement on whether minority groups, such as the ILP and the British Socialist Party, should be represented at Stockholm. Another vote on whether Britain should attend the Stockholm conference was held. This resulted in a tiny majority of 1,234,000 to 1,231,000, but in the end there was no British delegation.64 Henderson, who supported Stockholm and all that it stood for in pursuit of peace, resigned from the Cabinet on 11 August following the ‘doormat incident’, when Lloyd George kept him waiting for an hour outside the doors of a Cabinet meeting while his Cabinet colleagues discussed his recent activities in promoting the Stockholm conference.65 This did not result in Labour itself withdrawing from the coalition government, for Henderson was replaced in the inner War Cabinet by G. N. Barnes. This incident demonstrated the conflicting tensions within the party between socialist solidarity and national concerns, with a tenacious feeling against any negotiations with socialists from enemy countries, and was prescient of the troubles to come over the establishment of a post-war Socialist International.

These events also had an enduring impact on the Labour Party in that Henderson, slightly bruised from his experience of government, then devoted himself to reorganising the Labour Party’s structure, drawing up the new constitution that was approved in 1918.66 He was determined to change the party from a collection of affiliated organisations on the left to an organised, national, centralised but broad-based and moderate socialist party that was resistant to the extra-parliamentary and revolutionary left, for his trip to Russia had convinced him of the need to prevent extremists from taking control of the party.67 He was also determined to create an organisation that
would be able to exert more influence in parliamentary politics, following what he perceived as the coalition government’s shoddy treatment of the labour movement. Labour’s international committee, the Advisory Committee on International Questions, was set up as part of the major reorganisation of its machinery for the handling of foreign policy. This body had responsibility for making recommendations to the Executive and the Parliamentary Party on foreign policy. Allied intervention in Russia was the first important issue that the committee discussed. At its first meeting of 30 May 1918, Sidney Webb was appointed chairmen, and Leonard Woolf secretary. Members included H. N. Brailsford, G. D. H. Cole, Arnold Toynbee and, from July, Ramsay MacDonald.68

If the Russian Revolution of February 1917 had created a complex situation for the Labour Party to respond to, the October Revolution, which saw the more militant Bolsheviks oust the Mensheviks, compounded this. At this time there was no Communist Party in Britain, only the British form of Marxism propounded by the British Socialist Party and Hyndman’s newly formed National Socialist Party. However, ‘Bolshevik Russia was already becoming a focus of loyalty for the extreme left in all countries – and at the same time, or course, a focus of opposition for the right, whose friends among the Russian Socialists had been driven from power and in many cases were fleeing into exile.’69 Many on the left were dismayed by the violence surrounding the second revolution, and ‘The direct and muscular Marxism of the Bolsheviks was alien to the Fabian gradualists of the Labour Party and the socialist pacifists who led the ILP.’70 Events in Russia radicalised the Labour Party, in that it provided a socialist ‘utopia’ for those on the far left to look to, work with and emulate, and, it is argued, major revolutions ‘exert a demonstration effect’ to those in other countries who also seek to overthrow the state.71 The establishment of the Bolshevik regime also provided a communist foe for those on the centre and centre-right of the labour movement to be fearful of, thus deepening existing divisions between the revolutionary and the parliamentary left. As Skocpol points out, revolutions ‘also affect those in other countries who oppose revolutionary ideals but are compelled to respond to the challenges or threats posed by the enhanced national power that has been generated’ by a revolution.72

This tension was given an added dimension when the British Socialist Party, along with some smaller parties, formed the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) on 1 August 1920. The instructions from Moscow were for the CPGB to affiliate to the
Labour Party and convert the bulk of the party to the communist cause. The CPGB’s requests for affiliation were turned down in 1921 and 1922, and at the 1925 Labour Party annual conference a constitutional resolution proscribing all dealings with the CPGB was passed. In March 1919, the first meeting of the Third International (also called the Comintern or Communist International), was held in Moscow, which proclaimed the arrival of world revolution. Part of its role was to bolster communist parties around the world, which were to be loyal to Moscow, follow Comintern policy and submit to its authority. However, while Moscow supported the fledgling CPGB, financially and otherwise, it also undermined its legitimacy on the left through the insistence that it be loyal to Moscow above all else. As Jupp notes, the establishment of the Comintern gave the leaders of the Labour Party the opportunity to exclude from its membership Marxists who wished to join it. This in turn ‘hastened the process by which the Labour Party developed into a unitary political party in alliance with the trade unions and with a commitment to parliamentary socialism’. Indeed, before the Bolshevik revolution, the issue of whether Marxists belonged within the Labour Party, was a matter for individuals. After, it became an issue of party unity and control.

Another attempt to affiliate to the Labour Party was made in 1935, as part of the campaign for a ‘United Front’ against fascism, which led the party leadership to delineate the difference between it and the Communists in its statement ‘British Labour and Communism’. This stated that for nearly twenty years the Communist Party had sought to subvert the British labour movement, and ‘Throughout the whole period the British Labour Movement has been subjected to one long stream of invective and vilification by the Communist Press subsidised by Russian money.’ The sympathetic interest that British labour had shown in the Soviet Union ‘has been qualified by growing resentment against Russian effort through the Communist International to establish and finance revolutionary Communist Parties in other countries with the object of destroying existing democratic industrial and political Labour Movements, and of bringing about the overthrow of the existing social system by violence.’

The second 1917 revolution also had a particular impact on Labour’s thinking on foreign policy in that it provided a major issue of contention between Labour and its Liberal and Conservative opponents. British foreign policy towards Russia following the October Revolution was based on non-recognition of the Soviet
Union, and limited intervention. The Labour Party bitterly opposed this, seeing it as the cause for bad relations between the Soviet Union and Europe, for ‘By maintaining troops against Russia, the Allied Governments violate in their most flagrant manner the right of the Russian people to [govern] themselves … They are thereby multiplying the reasons for civil war in Russia.’ The Labour Party launched a manifesto in January 1920 that called for the ‘Complete raising of the Blockade and a complete peace with Russia.’ It also called for full recognition of the Soviet government, while pointing out that ‘Such a formal recognition of a Government would no more imply moral approval of it than did our formal recognition of the Tsar’s Government.’ One of the main actions of the first Labour government of 1924 was to recognise the Soviet Union. However, Labour was never fully comfortable with the Soviet Union, and large sections of the party quickly came to see it as a source of conflict in foreign policy, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

The Internationals, the post-war settlement and establishment of the League of Nations

One major consequence of the outbreak of the First World War was that it demonstrated the problems of transcending national loyalties in order to reach the goal of international socialist solidarity, and this was illustrated most clearly by the collapse of the Second International, the main international socialist body at that time. The Second International had had an impact on the development of Labour’s foreign policy in its early years, providing a forum for British socialists to meet with their overseas counterparts, and an opportunity to focus on international issues. The split between parliamentary and revolutionary socialists within the Second International had become institutionalised when it moved to exclude anarchists and anti-parliamentarians from its meetings, but one remaining notable division was over the issue of whether to hold a general strike in the face of war. Within the British contingent, Keir Hardie and the ILP tended to support a general strike, while most Fabian socialists and some of the other members of the Labour Party did not. However, Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson had proposed a resolution supporting the calling of a general strike to be used, if political action had failed, to prevent the outbreak of war. All the members of the Second International had been invited to comment on this resolution,
and at an extraordinary Congress of the Second International held at Basle in 1912 the resolution had been passed. This meant that at the outbreak of the First World War, the policy of the Second International was to call for a general strike in response to the threat of war. However, while the Second International held a series of rallies across Europe in the summer of 1914, with Hardie leading an anti-war demonstration in London on 2 August, its plans for mass popular resistance in the face of war came to little, and it disintegrated into different camps.

Despite the collapse of the Second International, the Labour Party still kept in close contact with some of its European counterparts. Issues that united the British and European socialist parties were a belief that labour should have a role in the drawing up of the post-war settlement; that there should be some form of international socialist body to replace the Second International; and that socialist parties should campaign for the establishment of an international body to arbitrate between states and so prevent war. A conference was held by the Socialist Parties of the Allied Nations in London in February 1915, where it was agreed that,

On the conclusion of the war the working classes of all the industrial countries must unite in the [Socialist] International in order to suppress secret diplomacy, put an end to the interests of militarism and those of the armament makers and establish some international authority to settle points of difference among the nations by compulsory conciliation and arbitration, and to compel all nations to maintain peace.

The aim of internationalism and the commitment to an international federation of nations was then formally incorporated into the Labour Party’s constitution, which was adopted in February 1918. This committed the party

To co-operate with the Labour and Socialist organisations in other countries and to assist in organising a Federation of Nations for the maintenance of freedom and peace, for the establishment of suitable machinery for the adjustment and settlement of international disputes by conciliation or judicial arbitration and for such other international legislation as may be practicable.

The commitment to international socialist co-operation, to the establishment of an international body for the socialist parties and to the establishment of an international body to act as a federation of nations, was clear. At a joint TUC and Labour Party conference on post-war
aims on 28 December 1917, a resolution calling for a League of Nations was accepted.

The Labour Party took part in two Inter-Allied Conferences of Labour and Socialist Parties, held in London in February and in September 1918. The second of these passed resolutions strongly supporting the establishment of a League of Nations and welcomed the fourteen points laid down by President Wilson. Following a speech by Kerensky, a moderate socialist who had been the Russian Prime Minister from July 1917 until he was ousted by the October Revolution, a resolution was passed that said that ‘the present effort of the Allied Governments to assist the Russian people must be influenced only by a genuine desire to preserve liberty and democracy in an ordered and durable world peace in which the beneficent fruits of the Revolution shall be permanently secure.’ It denounced the Versailles Treaty for its harsh treatment of Germany, in particular the ‘War Guilt’ clause. This stated that ‘Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to the Allied governments and their nationals imposed on them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.’ Following this, an international labour and socialist conference was held in Berne in January 1919, at which steps were taken to reconstitute the Second International, which also became known as the Berne International. Resolutions were passed that welcomed German involvement in the conference, and said that this ‘has convinced the Conference that, from now onward, the united working classes of the whole world will prove the most powerful guarantee for the suppression of all militarism and of every attempt to destroy international democracy.’ Despite the First World War providing evidence to the contrary, the Labour Party still expressed the belief that international socialist solidarity was possible.

Another socialist international, the ‘Two-and-a-Half’ International, was established shortly afterwards, which aimed to unite the new Second International with the recently established Third (Communist) International. This body only existed for a short time, merging with the Second International in May 1923 at a conference in Hamburg to form the new Labour and Socialist International (LSI). This conference declared the post-war situation to be an ‘imperialist peace’. It argued that: ‘The imperialist war had for its objectives the conquest of the world’s wealth and ended in the destruction of this wealth.’ However, ‘The Peace Treaties violate all economic principles; … They have brought to the defeated nations insecurity and the menace of continuous violent oppression.’ Therefore ‘Labour opposes
to the policy of imperialism its policy of peace’, and ‘One of the most important tasks of the workers of all countries is to watch over the foreign policy of their Governments.’ The Labour and Socialist International continued in existence up to the Second World War, with its headquarters initially in London, and then in Zurich. Arthur Henderson was its president until 1929. The LSI continued the work of the Second International, focusing on the gradual improvement of international relations and of working-class conditions by Parliamentary and trade union efforts. However, the prospects for international socialist co-operation deteriorated through the rivalry of the LSI and the Third International, with the Third International instructed to wage a war on centrists, revisionists and social democrats, while the LSI sought to protect itself from dangerous revolutionaries.

The Labour Party’s international role expanded in the immediate post-war years, with a greater influence within the Socialist International than before, partly as a result of the decline in the role of the German socialists within the International. The party also had a greater confidence in its right to have a role at the international level. This was largely evinced through its lobbying on the post-war international settlement, and on its stringent critique of the Versailles Treaty. A. J. P. Taylor has suggested that the Versailles settlement was condemned by the party before it was even made. Winkler has argued that the immediate reaction to the peace settlement ‘was bitter, and it was virtually unanimous’. Official party statements denounced the unilateral disarmament of Germany, and warned that the burden of reparations might ruin Germany and therefore endanger the entire European economy. They also made it clear that ‘the party considered France — strong, armed, and in their view aggressive — a much greater danger to European stability than was Germany.’ Certainly MacDonald argued that the Versailles Treaty would result in ‘unsettlement and war’ and referred to the Paris peace negotiations as ‘a heartless farce sinking into a melancholy tragedy’. However, Labour’s major contribution to the post-war settlement was over its drive to create a League of Nations, which was founded at the Paris Peace Conference on 24 April 1919.

Winkler also highlights that the Labour Party criticised the League of Nations once it was established. ‘As for the League of Nations, Labor, whose agitation and enthusiasm had helped to make it possible, was profoundly disappointed. It was disappointed with the league’s membership, its structure, and its proposed functions.’ This is too strong an interpretation, for Labour’s attitude towards the League was
more complex than this suggests. The party welcomed the League, and argued that it was better fitted than its political opponents to make a success of the League. The party felt a sense of pride in the lobbying role it had played in the League’s creation. However, the party had major reservations about it as it was constituted. It regretted that it was a league of governments, and not an assembly of delegates chosen from national parliaments, that is, elected representatives. Labour had wanted a League that was ‘so strong in its representative character and so dignified by its powers and respect that questions of national defence sink into the background of solved problems’. In 1919 the Labour Party and TUC held a special congress to discuss the Covenant of the League of Nations. While it welcomed the League, the congress drew up a list of twenty-two proposals for amendments to the Covenant. These included the proposal that the League be under the control of a body of elected delegates, and not the Executive Council; that all countries, including Russia and Germany, be invited to join the League, as long as they agree to abide by its rules and decisions; and that the manufacture of armaments be under the direct control of the League. The Labour Party was afraid that the League and the peace settlement were designed to shore up balance-of-power politics. It was argued that ‘Each successive Peace Treaty, and almost every decision of the Supreme Council, has been conceived in a spirit of imperialism and national aggrandisement utterly inconsistent with the professed aims with which the country waged war’, whereas the League of Nations had so far ‘been quietly strangled by the victorious Powers almost at the moment of its birth’. By excluding certain countries, and failing to address the issue of militarism and the causes of war, it was feared that the League would be undermined in its ability to carry out its role. Despite this, the League still provided the Labour Party with hope for the future, and was seen as the mechanism through which international disputes could be settled though conciliation and arbitration, and as the key to maintaining international peace.

As a consequence of the First World War and the resulting deliberations over the establishment of a League of Nations, some on the left, and in particular the UDC, began to wonder whether nationalism, rather than capitalism, was at the heart of militarism and war. The doctrine ‘that peace could result only from national self-determination, had left its followers in disarray. It had caused chaos at the Paris peace conference, and it was increasingly clear that this mode of thought lent itself far more readily to right-wing authoritarianism … than it did to any form of parliamentary democracy.’ Norman Angell pointed out
that ‘Governments formed by Socialist, Labour or Pacifist parties continue in some measure the policies of their bourgeois and Imperialist predecessors.’ As he explained, the problem of the ‘disorderly’ state in the international system ‘is not created by Capitalism, nor would it be solved by Socialism. It is the product not of Capitalism but Nationalism. And Socialist States which were also Nationalist would have even more cause for quarrel than States which permit individuals to form economic organizations which are often in fact international, which function in large degree irrespective of national barriers.’

The irony of the situation was that the ILP had declined in its importance within the Labour Party due to its opposition to the party’s position on the war, and had also declined in its international role as the Labour Party increased in its. However, the UDC, which had shared some of the ILP’s opposition to the war and included ILP members, in particular Ramsay MacDonald, gradually built up influence on the left so that when the war was over they became a guiding force for the Labour Party on foreign policy. Many of Labour’s ideas on a League of Nations, on the importance of self-determination, on the dangers of the Versailles Treaty, originally came from the UDC. ‘By 1918 UDC policy had virtually become Labour Party policy – the anti-war ILP-ers had joined the UDC and the anti-war Liberals had joined the Labour Party. Both groups together dominated the new Labour Party Advisory Committee on International Questions.’

Despite the divisions and contentions caused by the First World War, not only within the Labour Party but within international socialism as a whole, by the early 1920s the internationalist, anti-war section of the party held sway, with a resolution agreeing to ‘oppose any War … whatever the ostensible object of the war’ being passed at the 1922 annual conference.

In conclusion, the first major test of Labour’s developing world-view was over the response to the outbreak of the First World War. This undermined certain meta-principles of Labour’s ideology, namely an optimistic view of human nature, and a belief in progress and in international socialist solidarity, while at the same time providing evidence of the disastrous effects of militarism, secret diplomacy and imperialism, which Labour had been agitating against. Internationally, the First World War demonstrated that socialist parties had not yet found a way to overcome their national loyalties, nor achieved international socialist solidarity, with the collapse of the Second International
following the outbreak of war in 1914. At home, the war led to bitter divisions within the Labour Party over foreign and defence policy. The majority of the party supported the war and the coalition government and put national interest before class interest. The minority of the party still supported the pre-war policy of international solidarity, and put this before national self-interest. However, out of this conflict developed an increased desire for a new approach to world affairs, strongly influenced by the work of the Union of Democratic Control, based on a League of Nations which would settle international disputes through conciliation and arbitration, and a renewed optimism in internationalism. This was to be severely tested by Labour’s first experiences in government, which are analysed in the next chapter.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 372.
5 See Margaret Cole, The Story of Fabian Socialism (London: Heinemann, 1961), pp. 161–2, for an account of how unexpected the war was to the bulk of the population.


11 *LPACR*, 1913, p. 111.

12 *LPACR*, 1914, p. 121.

13 Ibid., p. 93.

14 *House of Commons Debates* (hereafter *H.C. Deb.*), fifth series, vol. 65, cols 1809, 1830–1, 3 August 1914.


17 *LPACR*, 1916, p. 51.


21 *Trades Union Congress Annual Report* (hereafter *TUCAR*) 1913, pp. 337–9; TUCAR, 1915, pp. 79–91. There was no annual congress in 1914.

22 See *LPACR*, 1917, p. 4.

23 *LPACR*, 1916, p. 5.

24 Ibid., p. 100.

25 Ibid., pp. 103 and 105.


27 See *LPACR*, 1916, p. 102; *TUCAR*, 1915, p. 328.

28 *LPACR*, 1916, p. 102.

29 Ibid., pp. 132–3.


33 Ibid., p. 235.

34 E. D. Morel, *War and Diplomacy* (London: UDC, pamphlet no. 11, 1915), p. 2. The contents of this pamphlet were originally given as a speech on May 15 at a public meeting called by the Society of Friends at Devonshire House, London. This and subsequent UDC pamphlets are held at the University of Leeds Library, Brotherton Collection, Mattison, UNI.

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38 Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 184.
46 See Jenkins, *Asquith*, chs 16 and 17.
54 *LPACR*, 1951, p. 121.
60 *LPACR*, 1922, p. 80.
61 *LPACR*, January 1918, p. 3.
64 *LPACR*, January 1918, p. 5.
66 The new constitution included the celebrated ‘Clause Four’, committing the party to the common ownership of the means of production.
70 Jones, *The Russia Complex*, p. 4.
73 *LPACR*, 1922, pp. 74–83; *LPACR*, 1925, pp. 38, 181–9. An application by the CPGB to affiliate to the Labour Party was also rejected in 1936, see *LPACR*, 1936, pp. 50–1, 296–300.
76 *LPACR*, 1919, Special resolution on ‘Intervention in Russia’, p. 225.
80 *LPACR*, 1916, p. 32.
81 See *LPACR*, 1918, p. 141. This part of the constitution remained unaltered until 1953 when the language was updated. See *LPACR*, 1953, p. 217.
82 *LPACR*, 1919, pp. 3–10.
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85 LPACR, 1919, p. 196.
87 LPACR, 1923, pp. 11–12.
89 Taylor, The Trouble Makers, p. 158.
93 MacDonald, A Policy for the Labour Party, pp. 131, 161 and 172.
94 LPACR, 1919, pp. 23–4.
95 Chairman’s address, LPACR, 1920, p. 112.
100 LPACR, 1922, p. 200.