Chapter 5

The Labour Party, pacifism and the Spanish Civil War

On 18 September 1931 Japan invaded China on the pretext that a Japanese railway in Manchuria had suffered from Chinese sabotage. Japanese troops over-ran Manchuria and set up a puppet state. China appealed to the League of Nations for assistance under Article 11 of the Covenant, and the League responded by asking Japan to evacuate the territory it had occupied. Japan, which had signed up to the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Briand-Kellogg Pact (thereby agreeing to respect the territorial integrity of other member states and never to use war as an instrument of policy), then used Shanghai as a base for further incursions into China. Condemnation of Japan by the League was muted, as both public opinion and the Western governments tended to think that China was exaggerating the threat from Japan. There was little sympathy for China, which, it was felt, was unable to govern and bring order to Manchuria. It was also argued by many that intervention by the League would do more harm than good. The Labour Party and the TUC issued a declaration on ‘The Far Eastern Situation’ on 23 February 1932, saying that it was clear that Japan was ‘responsible for this state of war’. They recommended that the member states of the League of Nations consider recalling their ambassadors from Japan, but hoped that this would not be necessary, and ‘hope and believe that a manifestation of world opinion that the war must cease will not go unheeded in Japan’. If, however, Japan continued in its course then it may be necessary for the British government to propose that the League consider financial and economic measures. George Lansbury, who had become leader of the Labour Party following the 1931 election, felt that ‘There need not be war. The European powers, with the USA, have only got to make it plain that they will boycott Japan unless it acts reasonably and Japan...
Stanley Baldwin, leader of the Conservative Party and a Cabinet minister in the National government, argued that military action was too dangerous to consider as there was no defence against air attack, and ‘the bomber will always get through’. Indeed, by this point, concern about the ability of air power to render nations vulnerable to attack increased the belief that war was to be avoided at all costs. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, after some prevarication, rejected America’s proposal that the two countries should make a joint protest against Japan’s actions. ‘The Admiralty had made it clear that Britain was in no condition to go to war with Japan’, and that Britain’s armed forces were not strong enough to be able to back up any threat with the use of force. The outcome of the Manchurian crisis was that Japan ignored the statements by the League of Nations. This discredited the League somewhat, and started to undermine the belief in the system of collective security that had been developed with Covenant of the League of Nations and the Geneva Protocol, designed to prevent the use of force and the outbreak of war between member states. This was the context in which the Labour Party embraced the most pacifist stance of its history, just as the optimism of the 1920s was being replaced by the growing fear of fascism in the early 1930s.

Labour and pacifism

The Labour Party’s official foreign policy after the defeat of 1931 was based on collective security through the League of Nations, with support for the Geneva Protocol and the ultimate use of sanctions, and this was the policy supported by the bulk of the labour movement. In addition to this, the party was committed to supporting any multilateral agreements that arose from the World Disarmament Conference, held in Geneva in February 1932. However, the Labour Party came very close to briefly embracing pacifism instead of collective security as its remaining leaders, Lansbury, Attlee, and Cripps, all rejected the existing system of international relations and advocated their own visions of Labour’s foreign policy. Lansbury, who had very strong Christian as well as socialist and pacifist views, espoused a form of absolute pacifism, opposing the use of force on humanitarian grounds under any conditions. He advocated unilateral disarmament and the dismantling of the British empire. He argued that ‘Our people must give up all right to hold any other country, must renounce all imperialism and stand unarmed before the world.’
become the strongest nation in the world fully armed by justice and love ... Socialism, which is religion, is the one road which will lead to salvation. A strong believer in the power of public opinion, he told Cripps what they needed was a public campaign on peace and disarmament, for ‘no nation can stand out against the public opinion of the world’. Atlee espoused what could be described as national pacifism, rejecting national defence in favour of an international military or police force. He argued in the House of Commons that ‘There is no effective defence against air attack’, and so in these circumstances ‘the pacifist is the realist’. Atlee went further when he stated that Labour ‘did not believe in national armaments; we could only agree to armaments if those armaments were part of a system of pooled security to be used on behalf of the League for keeping the peace of the world.’ However, recent events had shown that today there was no system of pooled security, and that the League had failed. His pessimistic viewpoint lead him to conclude that the League of Nations needed to be replaced by a new organisation, such as a world commonwealth, which could provide collective security through an international military force. Sir Stafford Cripps, who had moved sharply to the left following the collapse of the 1931 government, espoused a form of class pacifism – war was to be resisted on all counts, unless it was a class war, and he argued against the working class joining the military forces, as the only acceptable form of army was a ‘citizens’ army’. Cripps had ‘an incorrigible obtuseness to the effect of his utterances’, and Dalton, who had a low opinion of Cripps generally, said that his ‘oratorical ineptitudes’ meant that ‘Tory H.Q. regard him as their greatest electoral asset.’ For Cripps, war was the result of economic nationalism caused by developed capitalism. This was a return to the left-wing view of imperialism espoused before the outbreak of the First World War. He was scathing about the League of Nations, arguing that it had become ‘nothing but the tool of the satiated imperialist powers’, and argued against the use of sanctions by the League as a deterrent to aggression, calling it an ‘International Burglars Union’.

While support for the League of Nations and multilateral disarmament through the work of the Disarmament Conference remained official party policy, a pacifist position was strongly asserted at the 1933 annual conference. One resolution was passed which called for the ‘total disarmament of all nations throughout the world and the creation of an International Police Force’. Another resolution was carried unanimously, which asked the party ‘To pledge itself to take no part in war’, to consult with the trade union and co-operative
movements with a view to deciding ‘what steps, including a general strike, are to be taken to organise the opposition of the organised working-class movement in the event of war or threat of war’, and for the national joint bodies to endeavour to secure international action by the workers on the same line. This effectively raised the issue of a general strike in the event of war, a policy that had been previously rejected. Arthur Henderson spoke in favour of the resolution, saying ‘It is a dedication, a solemn vow, pledging us to the works of Peace.’ He welcomed ‘this new spirit, this willingness to dare and to risk all things in the cause of peace.’ Hugh Dalton was uncomfortable with the resolution, later noting that ‘The Conference was in no mood to reject it or allow it to be withdrawn.’ Thus, with ‘more expediency than courage’, he accepted it on behalf of the NEC, saying, somewhat confusingly, ‘the resolution does not carry us perhaps quite far enough’, in that it did not endorse economic and financial sanctions as well.

Thus, the overall picture of Labour’s foreign policy at this point was rather confused. Official policy remained in support of the League of Nations and any agreements on national disarmament that came out of the Disarmament Conference. However, some sections of the party were committed to the policy of a general strike in the event of war; some to complete national disarmament and the establishment of an international military force; while Lansbury, the leader of the party, was advocating national and international disarmament and pacifism. It was in the sphere of foreign policy that the most serious differences appeared between the PLP, which contained some of the most outspoken advocates of pacifism, and the rest of the Labour movement. This confusion was addressed by the National Council of Labour, comprised of the PLP, the party’s NEC and the General Council of the TUC, which produced a memorandum, ‘War and Peace’. This rejected the use of a general strike, since ‘The lack of an independent trade union movement in such countries as Germany, Italy, Austria, e.t.c., makes the calling of a general strike against their Governments an impossibility.’ The document accepted ‘national pacifism’ (in terms of meaning no war between nations), and maintained that ‘loyalty to the world community on the issue of peace overrides any national duty and notably our duty to the government in war. We are world citizens because of our country’s membership of a world community.’ The over-riding claims of world citizenship were arbitration, ‘the duty to insist that our Government settle all its disputes by peaceful means and eschew force’; the use of sanctions as collective action against a peace-
breaker; and resistance to war. This document was approved by the 1934 annual conference by 1,519,000 votes to 673,000.

The next major statement on foreign policy appeared in Labour’s 1935 general election manifesto. This reiterated that Labour sought the ‘whole-hearted co-operative with the League of Nations’ and ‘stands firmly for the Collective Peace System’. It stated that Labour would ‘maintain such defence forces as are necessary and consistent with our membership of the League’, but it also appeased the pacifists in the party by stating that, ‘Labour will propose to other nations the complete abolition of all national air forces, the effective international control of civil aviation and the creation of an international air police force; large reductions by international agreement in naval and military forces; and the abolition of the private manufacture of, and trade in, arms.’ These were precisely the policies that had been put forward at the World Disarmament Conference, but which had not been passed. By the time of the 1935 election, the conference had collapsed, with no major agreements having been reached. Whereas the experience of holding office in 1924 had produced a more realistic assessment of what could be achieved in the realm of foreign policy within the party, by the mid-1930s this had been replaced by the assumption that a future Labour government could automatically deliver on disarmament and world peace, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Indeed, it was felt that the second Labour minority government had given Britain ‘the moral leadership of the World’, and Labour just had to wait until it was in power again in order to implement its disarmament policies. Labour was not alone, however, in supporting policies of disarmament, collective security through the League, and, it was hoped, world peace. Pacifist sentiment was not confined to the left in Britain, and the memory of the horror of the First World War was still potent enough to convince many of the need to avoid war at all costs. The Peace Society had gained greatly in popularity, and its meetings were well attended. There was still a surprisingly strong faith in the League of Nations amongst the general public, despite the failure of the League to deal with Japan. A ‘Peace Ballot’, a sort of referendum on support for the League of Nations, was organised in the summer of 1935 by the members of the League of Nations Union, at which nearly 11,500,000 voted. The overwhelming majority supported a League of Nations policy, based on disarmament by agreement among nations, the abolition of air-warfare, the abolition of private arms manufacturing and sales, and support for economic sanctions, and, in the last resort, military measures by the League against an aggressor.
The collapse of the World Disarmament Conference and the government’s gradual disclosure that Hitler, who had become Chancellor in 1933, was rearming Germany, provided an alarming background to the Labour Party’s flirtation with pacifism. The party voted against the 1935 defence estimates, but in anticipation that Baldwin would further propose the enlargement of the air force because of the threat being posed by Hitler and German rearmament, the PLP, the NEC and the TUC’s General Council decided to meet to discuss the issue of British defence policy on 22 May 1935. The TUC met prior to this meeting to determine their position. Its leader, Walter Citrine, mapped out the pacifist positions being held by the Labour Party. He was concerned that not only was there ‘mental confusion’ over the Labour Party’s foreign policy, but that sections of the labour movement refused to accept it. He complained that ‘Lansbury is absolutely pacifist – from purely Christian motives – and he thinks that this country should be without defence of any kind… . but it certainly isn’t our policy.’ He continued that there were others, such as Henderson, who believed in the collective peace system, such as placing forces at the disposal of the League of Nations, ‘but really they are not living in worlds of reality at all. The collective peace system should be operated, but did anyone think it would have to be operated in the next few months?’ Citrine said that Hugh Dalton had told him the day before that German aircraft could reach Prague in twelve minutes, while German trade unionists had secretly sent him details of the German air force, munitions factories and underground aerodromes. He further noted that ‘in every country with the exception of France where there is a division of opinion, the Socialists have supported their Governments in one way or another in increasing their defence.’ Ernest Bevin, the leader of the massive Transport and General Workers’ Union, prevaricated, suggesting that the TUC should speak to the Prime Minister since it had ‘a big part to play’ but ‘We don’t know what has been going on’. The meeting was reconvened the following day, with heightened tension, just hours before the joint meeting was to be held, and just after Hitler’s speech to the Reichstag in which he outlined Germany’s foreign policy. He had stated that Germany would not return to the League of Nations unless it was given equality of status with the other great powers, and that while Germany would agree to non-aggression pacts and the limitation of arms, it would only do so once it had gained parity with each of these states and, until then, would continue in its expansion of its navy and air force. Ernest Bevin was more outspoken than the day before,
saying that Germany would not listen to reasoned debate, and that dealing with Hitler was like dealing with communists:

Have you ever tried to settle within your own Movement with any of your people who follow the philosophy of Communism – whenever you get the type of mind who follows the dictatorship, you can never get a compromise or settlement or trust. And really there is no difference between the Russians, Fascists or Communists.26

One delegate argued that they should listen to Hitler, but he was in the minority. Others argued that ‘Hitler means war’, and that ‘Hitler is merely playing for time … But the more weakness we show the more danger of war.’ Another referred to the fate of their friends in the German Social Democrats who had been imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed: ‘Pacifism in the face of that is absolute cowardice.’ He also argued that Labour was partly to blame for the situation, having been in government for two years only recently. However, others felt that they were being tricked into voting for the defence estimates, and that they should call a disarmament conference.27

The meeting adjourned with no clear decision, but the deliberative process that the TUC General Council went through tells us much about how the trade union leadership was feeling, and how it came to have such an impact on Labour’s position on rearmament. Bevin and Citrine had been holding discussions with Hugh Dalton, and all three agreed that Labour’s foreign policy, vacillating between various forms of pacifism and support for the League of Nations, was not tenable in the face of German rearmament and the threat posed by Hitler. Together this unlikely combination – the rumbustious Bevin and ascetic Citrine co-operated but disliked each other immensely, and neither had much time for Labour Party intellectuals such as Dalton – formed an alliance that managed dramatically to shift the Party’s position on defence.28 Together they urged the PLP to stop voting against the estimates. Dalton accused Attlee of wanting ‘to sponge on the Red Army’,29 while Attlee argued that there was no point trying to match German rearmament, since ‘equality and parity, in the present conditions of international anarchy, being but new names for the old balance of power and the old armaments race’.30 In the end the PLP decided to vote against the defence estimates and rearmament, with the left-wing still reluctant to give arms to a government to which it was opposed, but the ground had been prepared for a shift of policy position, and for the undermining of Lansbury’s position as party leader.
The widely anticipated Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) on 3 October 1935, and its forcible annexation of Abyssinia into its East African empire in 1936, reinforced the tension between the conflicting views on foreign policy. The Labour Party was now divided between those who believed in strong support for the League of Nations and the implementation of economic sanctions in response to the Italian attack; the pacifists, led by George Lansbury, who opposed economic sanctions in principle; and those further to the left, such as Cripps, who viewed the League of Nations and its sanctions as a sham, run in the interests of capitalism and imperialism. In the lead up to the 1935 annual conference, it became clear that Labour was facing a showdown; this was not only on the future direction of the party’s foreign and defence policy, but also on its leadership.

The 1935 conference, as Ben Pimlott puts it, ‘focused on the ritual martyrdom of George Lansbury’.31 At the centre of the conflict was the resolution that the NEC had drafted for submission to the conference to support sanctions by the League of Nations if, as it looked increasingly likely, Italy was to invade Abyssinia. However, it was more than just Lansbury the man who was being rejected, it was his view of international socialism based on pacifism, and his position on Britain’s foreign policy and role in the world. Even most of the Labour-left had by this time come to the conclusion that the use of force could not be ruled out against fascist aggressors, and that unilateral disarmament would leave Britain exposed and vulnerable to attack. However, there was deep mistrust of the National government and concern that it might use rearmament for aggressive purposes. According to G. D. H. Cole, ‘Most of the Left in the Labour movement did not share Lansbury’s pacifist convictions. But they were moved, as he was, by deep mistrust of the Government, and were exceedingly reluctant to agree to a re-armament policy which they felt sure would be used not to support the League but to do without it and to betray it.’32 Tension was further heightened by Stafford Cripps resigning from the NEC on the eve of the conference over his objections to the resolution. Moved by Hugh Dalton on 1 October, it called for the League of Nations to ‘to use all the necessary measures provided by the Covenant to prevent Italy’s unjust and rapacious attack upon the territory of a fellow member of the League’. Cripps opposed the resolution, and after a lengthy debate, Lansbury then laid out his position on foreign policy and how it differed from Labour’s official policy. He spoke against rearmament and the use of force even by the League of Nations, for ‘I personally cannot see the difference
between mass murder organised by the League of Nations, or mass murder organised between individual states.’ While ‘it is difficult for me to stand here today and publicly repudiate a big fundamental piece of policy,’ he said that ‘I believe that force never has and never will bring permanent peace and permanent goodwill in the world.’ He went on to proclaim that given the chance he would go to Geneva and tell them that Britain was finished with imperialism and that ‘we would be willing to become disarmed unilaterally’. He declared that ‘God intended us to live peaceably and quietly with one another. If some people do not allow us to do so, I am ready to stand as the early Christians did, and say, “This is our faith, this is where we stand, and, if necessary, this is where we will die”’. He was received sympathetically by many, with applause at the beginning of his speech, and was supported by some; it was even recommended that Abyssinians offer hospitality to the invaders and ‘trust to the moral judgement and moral pressure of the whole world’. However, Lansbury was strongly opposed by the majority of the leading figures in the Labour movement, with Attlee defending the use of sanctions ‘for insuring the rule of law’, and Bevin deconstructing Lansbury’s moral scruples. He stated: ‘It is placing the Executive and the Movement in an absolutely wrong position to be taking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what you ought to do with it.’ Bevin pointed out that the Labour Party and the TUC had already endorsed the principle of sanctions in the document For Socialism and Peace, which had been supported at the 1934 annual conference. Neither Lansbury nor anybody else had suggested putting unilateral disarmament into the policy document, and for Lansbury now to speak against that policy was a betrayal. The trade unions had been let down by certain members of the Labour Party, and he reminded conference that ‘our predecessors formed this Party. It was not Keir Hardie who formed it, it grew out of the bowels of the Trades Union Congress.’ Bevin went on that while trade unionists were loyal, party members such as Stafford Cripps and Lansbury stabbed the Labour movement in the back by complaining to the press and resigning over policies which they had been involved in developing. He finished by saying that those who could not endorse the party’s support for the League of Nations should ‘take their own course’. This made Lansbury’s position untenable, and he resigned from the leadership of the party. Attlee later said that ‘This was a grief to all of us, for we had a great admiration and affection for him, but he was right in thinking that his position had become impossible.’
The differences between viewpoints had led to the resignation of the Labour Party's leader. This was the second time that a leader had left over a policy difference with the party, Ramsay MacDonald’s resignation in 1914 over the PLP’s support for the war being the first. That both leaders resigned over foreign and security policy was remarkable. Lansbury’s departure occurred only a month before a general election, held on 14 November 1935. Deputy leader Clement Attlee became temporary acting party leader during the election, which saw 154 Labour MPs elected. This was a very good result compared with the scant fifty-two seats won in 1931, but Labour had expected to win more.37 There followed a leadership election, between Attlee, Morrison and Arthur Greenwood. At the first ballot, Attlee gained fifty-eight votes, Morrison forty-four and Greenwood thirty-three. At the second ballot, most of Greenwood’s supporters switched to Attlee, who subsequently won. Attlee assured the PLP that he had been elected to the leadership for one session only, and if they wanted him to stand down after that he would.

Attlee was an unlikely leader, ‘Quiet, unassuming and with the appearance of a suburban bank manager’.38 One of his early decisions was to form a Defence Committee to meet and discuss defence problems, and he spoke in favour of the creation of a Ministry of Defence, for he was ‘determined to take steps to create a better knowledge of defence problems in the Party’. Indeed, Attlee, when made Under-secretary of State for War in the 1929–31 Labour government, had set out to learn as much as he could about defence problems, ‘for I realised that, whatever might be done in the field of disarmament, there was bound to be the need for an army for policing the widespread territories of the British Commonwealth and Empire’. Attlee wrote that ‘It always appeared to me that some of my pacifist friends in their insistence on the wickedness of warfare seemed to think that an inefficient Army was less wicked than an efficient one, a point of view to which I was unable to subscribe.’39 Attlee made Hugh Dalton the opposition spokesman on foreign affairs, a position Dalton used not only to criticise the government on its position of neutrality on Abyssinia, and urge a tougher policy, but to get the Labour Party to shift its policy away from pacifism. He was helped in this by trade union leaders Bevin and Citrine.
Troops in Rhineland and German rearmament

Early in 1936 another conflict arose with the entry of German troops into the Rhineland, which had been demilitarised in the Treaty of Versailles. This posed a problem for Labour in that while it condemned Nazism, it had repeatedly blamed the Versailles Treaty for German rearmament and militarism. The NEC had even said in its report for 1934–35 that with regard to ‘the Nazi regime’s open reversion to power politics and international anarchy’ that ‘The verdict of history will assign to the British “National” Government a not inconsiderable share of responsibility for the present Nazi menace, in so far as it has been created by external factors.’ Even non-pacifists such as Dalton supported the government’s policy of asking for a formal condemnation by the League of Nations, rather than any other form of immediate action. It was felt that no physical resistance could be taken, for ‘public opinion in this country would not support, and certainly the Labour Party would not support, the taking of military sanctions or even economic sanctions against Germany at this time in order to put German troops out of the German Rhineland.’ Dalton later admitted that he had been wrong on this, and that Hitler’s reoccupation of the Rhineland, against the advice of even his own military advisors, had been the ‘greatest bluff of his life.’ In his diary Dalton noted that ‘Hitler’s rearmament races on. Few people in the Labour Party seem to know or care anything about it.’ He then attempted to get the PLP to abandon its yearly practice of opposing the defence estimates, but it voted by 57 votes to 39 to continue its practice of voting against them.

The National Council of Labour reacted more strongly to the invasion of the Rhineland than the Labour Party’s NEC did alone. It denounced it as a violation of the Locarno Treaty, which Germany had signed, and as evidence of the ‘clear determination of Nazi Germany to repudiate its obligations and take what it wants by force.’ However, it also urged that ‘a sincere effort must be made to discover a basis of negotiations with Hitler.’ At the 1936 TUC conference, Bevin said that it was time to re-examine the labour movement’s commitment to a League of Nations system of collective security. He argued that ‘The question of collective security it in danger of becoming a shibboleth rather than a practical operative fact ... We are not going to meet the Fascist menace by mass resolution. We are not going to meet it by pure pacifism.’ If this meant ‘uprooting some of our cherished ideals and facing the issue fairly in the light of the development
of Fascism, we must do it for the Movement and for the sake of posterity’. Bullock notes that Bevin’s point ‘was accepted without challenge with that practical common sense which distinguished the discussion of foreign affairs in the TUC from the debates at Labour Party conferences throughout the 1930s’. This is perhaps a little unfair, for of course the trade unions and the TUC played a not-insignificant role in the debates at the Labour Party conferences themselves.

The confusion within the Labour Party over foreign policy and disarmament continued. On the eve of the Labour Party’s 1936 annual conference, Stafford Cripps argued against those who recommended conditional support for rearmament. In one of his more astounding pronouncements in a speech in Leeds, he urged an end to recruitment to the armed forces, saying that it would not necessarily matter if Britain were conquered by Germany. ‘British Fascism would be less brutal than German, but the world situation would be no better.’ If Britain were pushed into war, he hoped that the workers would revolt, which would result in the fall of the capitalist government. At the conference, the party’s NEC then forwarded a resolution which ran counter to the stronger tone of the National Council, declaring that ‘The armed strength of the countries loyal to the League of Nations must be conditioned by the armed strength of the potential aggressors’, but concluding that ‘having regard to the deplorable record of the Government, the Labour Party declines to accept responsibility for a purely competitive policy.’ Proposed reluctantly by Dalton, this suggests that the trade union influence was taking the National Council towards a more militarised stance than the NEC was prepared for, though no one was actually clear whether the above resolution implied that Labour would vote against the government’s defence estimates or not. Bevin revealed his annoyance at the situation, referring to a speech by Morrison in defence of the resolution as ‘one of the worst pieces of tight-rope walking I had ever seen in this Conference’. As for Cripps’ position, Bevin was scathing: ‘I say this to Sir Stafford Cripps. If I am asked to face the question of arming this country, I am prepared to face it … Which is the first institution that victorious Fascism wipes out? It is the trade union movement.’ Bevin, unlike the other speakers, was unequivocal in his support for rearmament, and said it was time to ‘tell our own people the truth’ about the situation:

The International Movement are wondering what we are going to do in Britain. Czechoslovakia, one of the most glorious little democratic countries, hedged in all round, is in danger of being sacrificed tomorrow. They are our brothers … You cannot save Czechoslovakia with speeches.
We are not in office but I want to drive this Government to defend democracy against its will, if I can ... I want to say to Mussolini and Hitler ... ‘If you are banking on being able to attack in the East or the West, and you are going to treat the British Socialist Movement as being weak and are going to rely on that at the critical moment, you are taking us too cheaply.’

This comment on Czechoslovakia was made two years before Munich, and as Bullock notes, ‘Bevin, commonly regarded as an uneducated man, never made the mistake of referring, as Chamberlain did in 1938, to Czechoslovakia as “a far-away country” of whose people “we know nothing”.’ Bevin further argued that it had been the mentality of the liberal pacifists that had led Britain into war in 1914, and that the League of Nations could not be left to defend democracy because it has been proved weak: ‘The League of Nations is the first puny attempt at world organisation.’ Therefore he would vote for armaments to defend democracy and our liberty, though we must ‘strive with all our might ... to build the great moral authority behind international law, [so] that in the end law will triumph by consent instead of by force’. For the time being, he was afraid that ‘we may have to go through force to liberty’. He finished by calling for clarification on what the resolution really meant in terms of supporting or not supporting rearmament. This was not provided, and despite Bevin’s comments the resolution was passed. Adding to the confusion was the developing crisis in Spain.

The Spanish Civil War

A republican, socialist, anti-clerical, Popular Front government had been voted into power by a narrow margin in Spain in February 1936. On 18 July the monarchist, nationalist, General Franco led an army coup to topple it; the result was a bitter and all-out civil war, which continued until the defeat of the Popular Front government in 1939. The British government, along with the major European states and America, signed a non-intervention agreement, which included an arms embargo, for fear that the conflict might spread across Europe. Despite the non-intervention pact, the right-wing nationalist rebels received considerable support from the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy in the form of weapons and men. At least 40,000 Italian troops and up to 15,000 Germany troops were sent to Spain. The Soviet Union sent arms to the left-wing Republican government, and
volunteers from across Europe – including Britain – arrived in Spain to support the Republican cause. Numbers are difficult to estimate, but perhaps up to 15,000 such volunteers formed what were called the International Brigades.54

The dilemma that the Labour Party faced over the Spanish Civil War reflected the wider debate on foreign and defence policy in the 1930s. The Labour Party was horrified by events in Spain, and now found that relying on the League of Nations to defend democracy against fascism did not produce the desired results. However, at this time intervention was equated with precipitating war, not preventing it, and the underlying fear was that intervention would be worse than futile as it cause the conflict to spread across Europe.55 Thus, the Spanish Civil War highlighted the confusion and divisions within the labour movement on foreign policy. Labour’s immediate response to the Spanish situation in July 1936 was to send a delegation to see Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. A special meeting of the PLP, the General Council of the TUC, and the NEC of the Labour Party was then held on 28 August, at which a statement was drawn up stating the party’s position on the situation, ready to be presented at the annual conference. This in effect argued that non-intervention was the preferable policy as it would reduce the danger of a general war in Europe; but that it should only be supported so long as it was being carried out by all sides and that there should be an immediate inquiry into alleged breaches of the arms embargo. While expressing ‘regret that it should have been thought expedient, on the ground of the dangers of war inherent in this situation, to conclude agreements among the European Powers laying an embargo upon the supply of arms’, it said that ‘such agreements may, however, lessen international tension’. The ‘utmost vigilance will be necessary to prevent these agreements being utilised to injure the Spanish Government’. The statement ended by calling for the labour movement to support the International Solidarity Fund for Spain, which was created to provide humanitarian assistance to the Spanish people.56

Not everybody in the Labour Party supported this policy. Morrison was ‘strongly and unconditionally against non-intervention’.57 Many regretted that the non-intervention pact had been signed, but since the pact was originated by Léon Blum, the leader of the French Socialist Party and Prime Minister at the head of the Popular Front government, they felt that they had to support it. Attlee noted in his memoirs that “The French attitude hampered us in bringing pressure to bear on our own Government, while the efforts of the
Communists to exploit Spanish resistance for their own ends did harm to the cause of freedom.’ But ‘Enthusiasm for the Republic ran very high in all Left Wing circles in Britain’. Hugh Dalton, George Hicks and William Gillies, the Secretary of the Labour Party’s International Department, had been to see Blum in September 1936, and according to Dalton, Blum had ‘insisted that the policy of non-intervention in Spain was his policy. It was he and not Eden, as some alleged, who had first proposed it. He was sure that this policy, if it was fully observed by all the European Governments, would help the Spanish Government forces much more than the free supply of arms to both sides.’ Dalton noted that Blum’s preference for a non-intervention pact was due to concern that, having just disarmed the groups of right-wing extremists in France who had opposed his Popular Front government, any French intervention on a large scale would result in rearming both left and right within France.

At the 1936 TUC and Labour Party conferences, support for the non-intervention pact was presented as policy in the report of the National Council of Labour. This was accepted more readily at the TUC conference than the Labour one, where Arthur Greenwood, the Deputy Leader of the Party, was jeered when he moved the resolution supporting the report. He did not help himself by pointing out to the conference that ‘We know perfectly well that it was within the rights of any Government to provide all the necessary military equipment for the assistance of a nation fighting an internal rebellion. Unfortunately, that line was not taken’, and the non-intervention pact was signed instead. This was ‘a very, very bad second best’. The alternative now was to allow the situation in Spain ‘which has almost broken the hearts of many of us’, to develop into a European-wide struggle. Asking ‘Is this Conference prepared to have the battle between dictatorship and democracy fought over the bleeding body of Spain?’ Greenwood argued that the alternative to non-intervention was free trade in arms, which would result in the collapse of the Popular Front government in France, and a war involving all of Europe, which was not what the British public wanted.

The resolution was carried by 1,836,000 votes to 519,000, but under pressure from the floor, it was announced that Attlee and Greenwood would go that evening to London to discuss the situation in Spain with Neville Chamberlain, who was acting Prime Minister while Baldwin was away. Attlee returned and urged a speedy investigation into the alleged breaches of the non-intervention pact: Labour’s position was that if it were found that countries had been flouting the...
agreement, then the British and French governments, who had initiated it, should at once restore to the Spanish government the right to buy arms.63

It quickly became apparent that the non-intervention agreement was being breached. Spain complained of this to the League of Nations, and lobbied the international labour movement to rethink their policy of support, however reluctant, of non-intervention. At the request of the Spanish trade union centre, a meeting of the International Federation of Trade Unions, the Labour and Socialist International and the International Trade Secretariat was held on 28 September to discuss the situation in Spain. British representatives argued against changing the existing line, that is, observation of the non-agreement pact, but agreed that the accusations that Germany and Italy were breaking the arms embargo be investigated.64 A month later another meeting was held, and this time the representatives agreed there was evidence that the agreement was being breached. They agreed that,

In view of the fact that the Non-intervention Agreement has not produced the results expected in the international sphere, because of the determination of the Fascist Powers to assist the rebels and of the impossibility of establishing really effective supervision, the two Internationals declare that it is the common duty of the Working class of all countries, organised politically and industrially, to secure by their influence upon public opinion and upon their respective Governments the conclusion of an international agreement – for which the French and British Governments should take the initiative – restoring complete commercial liberty to republican Spain.65

Members of the trade unions and socialist parties of the two internationals should also do all they could ‘to prevent the despatch of supplies to the Spanish rebels’.66 The PLP and the Labour Party’s NEC, along with the TUC’s General Council, subsequently unanimously adopted a declaration on Spain on 28 October 1936. This stated ‘that the right of the constitutionally elected Government of Spain to secure, in accordance with the practice of international law, the means necessary to uphold its authority and to enforce law and order in Spanish territory must be re-established’.67 After this the Labour Party lobbied, without success, for the lifting of the non-intervention pact and the recognition of the Spanish Republican government’s right to buy arms from abroad, arguing that non-intervention had been shown to be one-sided and a sham.68

The Labour leadership was sympathetic to the republican cause
in Spain, and had a hard time defending their initial support for non-intervention. However, it was felt by some that Spain was a distraction from the real danger of German rearmament. Buchanan argues that for the leadership of the labour movement, the Spanish Civil War was ‘a faction fight in a backward and feudal society which could have little relevance to Britain and which distracted attention from the real threat of a resurgent Germany. Thus, the Civil War had merely exposed Spain as an innately violent and undemocratic society.’

Certainly Hugh Dalton’s position was that ‘I valued France above Spain, both as a civilised modern state, and as a friend and pledged ally of Britain. I was not an admirer of the Spanish approximation to democracy.’ Labour ‘knew very little of the Spanish Left-wing leaders … And there were other elements in the Spanish Left, including Anarchists, who did not inspire much confidence.’ Furthermore, he did not support “Arms for Spain” if this meant that Britain was to supply arms which otherwise could be used for rearmament against the German threat. Dalton points out, however, that ‘My own personal view of the Spanish Civil War … differed from that of most of my colleagues.’

Spain was ‘at once a test of conscience and a symbol of protest’ which stirred the emotions of the younger generation on the left ‘as no other event in the pre-war decade’. However, it was difficult for pro-interventionists to counter the Labour leadership’s arguments, given that it was French socialist Prime Minister Léon Blum who had originally proposed and supported the non-intervention policy. Furthermore, the Soviet Union, officially at least, also supported it. Hardest of all reasons to overcome, most of the Labour Party had spent the last few years supporting pacifism, and the years since the First World War fighting for disarmament, and so now had to undergo massive shifts both intellectually and emotionally when confronted with the failure of the non-intervention policy to alleviate the situation in Spain. A few on the left resolved the situation for themselves by joining the International Brigades and fighting for Spain, but, more generally, discontent was strongly expressed by the rank-and-file on Spain.

Numerous resolutions were sent in to the Labour Party and the TUC urging action to support Spain. One asked the National Council of Labour to organise meetings and demonstrations for Spain up and down the country, and urged ‘the smashing of the non-intervention pact’ and ‘full support for the Spanish government’ in its ‘heroic fight against Fascism’. The reply from Labour headquarters was that while the PLP had raised the issue of the government’s attitude to Spain, ‘It
is quite clear, however, that there will be no withdrawal from the Non-Intervention Pact either by the British Government or the French Government. Nor is there the least possibility of Munitions being sent to Spain from the Armaments Manufacturers in the country.’ Furthermore,

The Radical element of the Blum Government is as strongly opposed to the supply of Munitions to the Spanish Government in accordance with Treaty obligations as is the British Government, and any attempt to test the issue in the French Chambre would bring down the Blum Government with the possibility of a strong turn to the right rather than the left.

The official response ended with ‘These are the facts of the situation which the National Council of Labour has had to face from the very beginning, and no Resolutions passed by enthusiastic Demonstrations will alter them – tragic as the situation is.’ Of course, we do not know what would have happened in France, but with the only left-wing European government lobbying for the Non-Intervention Pact to continue, Labour was left with very little scope for action. Another resolution, from the Birmingham Labour Party, expressed its ‘grave concern’ at the government’s proposal ‘to prevent the enlistment of British volunteers for the International Column to fight in the case of international Democracy’. It also called for the Labour Party ‘to demand the immediate withdrawal of the arms ban and expose the pro-Fascist policy of non-intervention’. A resolution from the South Wales Regional Council of Labour stated that ‘This Conference views with dismay the tragic results arising from the farcical policy of non-intervention in Spain … which deprives the Spanish people of the means of defending their lives and liberties, while other members of the so-called Non-Intervention Committee are openly and defiantly supplying all the armaments they require to [the] rebels’. It was therefore the view of the Conference that ‘the present is the supreme moment’ for the British labour movement ‘to take such action as will force the British Government to remove the embargo on the supply of arms to the Spanish Government’. The Conference declared that it was ready ‘to take such action as may be necessary to prevent the supply of materials of all kinds to the aggressive Fascist Powers, to force the Government to reverse its pro-Fascist policy, and we ask the National Council of Labour to call an immediate National Conference to decide upon the necessary action to secure that result’. This resolution had actually been ‘altered’ from its original format, which had specifically
said that the labour movement was ready to take such action, both ‘industrially and politically’, to stop the ‘supply of materials to the Fascist Powers’.75

Support groups for Spain also sprang up. The Labour Spain Committee, which represented local and divisional labour parties but did not represent the official line of the Labour Party leadership, campaigned under the slogan ‘Arms for Spain’. It urged others to ‘demand that our Leaders shall at once prepare to use all the power of the Trades Union and Labour Movement to end the farce of the Non-Intervention Agreement, and to secure for the Spanish people their right to purchase the arms of which they stand in such desperate need’.76 The IFTU and the Labour and Socialist International launched an ‘Aid for Spain’ campaign, which the Labour Party and TUC vigorously supported. More specifically, the Basque Children’s Committee was set up to provide support for displaced Basque children. A camp for refugee children was set up in May 1937 at Eastleigh, which held 4,000 refugee children prior to their dispersal to homes around the country.77

The labour leadership did make some attempt to influence the government. Citrine had written to the Prime Minister on 31 January 1937 to express his horror at the massacres in Spain during aerial bombing campaigns. This action was approved by the National Council of Labour, who determined that the government ‘be urged to press forward with its proposals for securing a speedy agreement to put an end to such bombing outrages’.78 A deputation from the General Council of the TUC, headed by Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine, went to see the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, on 22 March 1937 to inform him of the resolution passed at the recent international conference in London. They expressed the grave anxiety felt in the Labour movement at the delay in the operation of effective control over the non-intervention agreement, and the reports of the continued landing of German troops in Spain. ‘The deputation urged that decisive steps should be taken to establish an effective system of control and to secure the early withdrawal of the foreign troops from Spain.’79

The Labour Party established a Spain Campaign Committee, with William Gillies and Ellen Wilkinson as its secretaries. This organised and advertised demonstrations around the county, held meetings and allocated speakers from the Labour Party, and organised appeals for money through a ‘Milk for Spain’ fund. It was not so different from the unofficial campaign for Spain in its aims, informing party members that, ‘We are not neutrals in this conflict’, and that ‘We shall demand
Freedom, Food and Justice for Democratic Spain and the ending of Fascist intervention.’ It pointed out that ‘Democratic Spain is not merely confronted with enemies within’ for it was having to defend itself against ‘the men and resources of Hitler and Mussolini. The war in Spain is an international war.’ Hence, ‘We demand unconditional freedom of commerce for the Spanish Government in the purchase or arms.’ It also highlighted the plight of the refugees in Spain, with official estimates that there were now 800,000 refugees in Catalonia alone. There was a desperate need for food and supplies, but ‘the most urgent necessity of the moment is for milk’ for the children. Labour Party members were asked to distribute leaflets and posters and to help the ‘Milk for Spain’ fund by buying milk tokens from Co-operative Society stores. The party also organised a ‘Christmas Gifts for Spain’ campaign which asked people to buy parcels of food, clothing and soap to send to Spain, and collected money through the International Solidarity Fund. Publicity leaflets were produced such as We Saw in Spain, a collection of articles by Attlee, Ellen Wilkinson, Philip Noel-Baker and John Dugdale on their trip to Spain, and What Spanish Democracy is Fighting For, published on the second anniversary of the start of the civil war. These highlighted the suffering of the Spanish people, and graphically described the plight of the refugees. In this way, the Spanish Civil War had a radicalising effect on many in the Labour Party and the trade union movement, leading people to question their previous conviction in the moral superiority of disarmament, arbitration through the League of Nations, and non-intervention.

The acceptance of British rearmament

One major effect of the Spanish Civil War was that it undermined the popularity of pacifism on the left, destroying the Labour Party’s stance on pacifism and non-intervention, and paving the way for its acceptance of rearmament and the use of force. In July 1937, after extensive lobbying by Hugh Dalton, the PLP agreed by forty-five votes to thirty-nine to refrain from its usual habit of voting against the army, navy and air force estimates in the House of Commons. Instead, they would abstain. This signalled an end to the party’s automatic stance against rearmament. Dalton notes that whereas the previous year he had been unsuccessful in attempting this, ‘In 1937, after twelve months of Spain, the Party’s policy being “Arms for Spain”, it became impossible, in the view of many of us, to justify a vote which, whatever
pundits in Parliament procedure may pretend, means to the plain man “No Arms for Britain”. He asked his colleagues ‘what possible answer had we got in the country to the accusations that we want Arms for Spain, but no arms for our country?’ He argued that people were ‘bewildered’ by Labour’s attitude on foreign policy and defence. The decision to abstain was greeted with approval by the conservative press. According to the Daily Telegraph, ‘Labour’s decision … is the first indication that the Socialists are realizing the nature of the world in which they live.’ The Times expressed the opinion that ‘Mr. Dalton’s action is of special importance and there is no doubt that he considerably enhanced his Parliamentary prestige by his victory yesterday.’

The change of stance on the defence estimates also helped pave the way for the adoption at conference of a new statement on International Policy and Defence. This stated that ‘A Labour Government will unhesitatingly maintain such armed forces as are necessary to defend our country and to fulfil our obligations as a member of the British Commonwealth and of the League of Nations.’ As Bullock notes, ‘the debates at the two autumn conferences made clear what the resolution left unsaid, that acceptance of the report meant the abandonment of opposition to rearmament.’ At the 1937 TUC conference the report was adopted by a show of hands. Bevin was chair at this conference, with Dalton present as Chairman of the National Executive. At the Labour Party conference the following month, Dalton was chair, and devoted much of his speech to foreign affairs and defence. Lansbury spoke against the statement on International Policy and Defence, proposing that it be remitted back to the NEC rather than accepted as policy. Philip Noel-Baker described the report as ‘bold, courageous and opportune’, minimised the shift in policy, and said that ‘There is really only one point of substance on which we differ from Mr Lansbury. It is on the proper use of power.’

He wants a League of Nations that acts by conciliation, and conciliation alone. He wants us unilaterally to disarm … For ten years we had in Geneva a League of Nations whose members all believed that the new law of the Covenant would be observed … [but since] 1931 … we have had a League of Nations without sanctions, a League of Nations where, with one feeble, transient exception, aggressors have had nothing to fear but resolutions. What are the results? The long, cumulative martyrdom of Manchuria, which still goes on; the squalid degradation of Mussolini’s triumph over black men whom he burned and bombed … the fearful holocausts in Spain; a major war in China … a Europe where two great Powers bombed and burned Guernica systematically to the ground … an
Assembly of the League of Nations so demoralised that last week it
refused to help the Chinese wounded in order not to irritate Japan ...
That is the result of Mr. Lansbury’s policy. It is cause and effect. Italy
attacked disarmed Abyssinia and disarmed Spain, and Japan attacked
disarmed China, because there was no collective security to make them
safe. 91

After a long and heated debate, the statement on International Policy
and Defence was adopted by a massive margin of nearly 2 million votes,
as Lansbury’s motion to reference it back was defeated by 2,169,000
to 262,000 votes. 92 Bullock notes the role of the Spanish Civil War in
prompting this change, that ‘More than anything else it was the
Spanish Civil War which produced the swing in Labour opinion
between 1936 and 1937.’ 93 Buchanan, somewhat surprisingly,
disagrees, arguing that ‘the conversion to rearmament, while genuine,
was often incidental to labour’s response to the Civil War’. 94 It seems
likely, however, that Spain did indeed provide the catalyst for the rejec-
tion of disarmament and non-intervention, but it did so within the
wider context of a build up of awareness that fascism and rearmament
in Europe were not being deterred by the League of Nations’ policies
of conciliation and arbitration.

The period after the Labour minority governments saw significant
transformations in Labour’s foreign policy, with the optimism of the
1920s being replaced by the growing pessimism and fear of fascism in
the 1930s. The initial reaction to the perceived failures of the League
of Nations over its inability to prevent the use of force by Japan in
1931 and then by Italy in 1935 was, paradoxically, to increase support
for the League in the short-term, for there appeared to be no alterna-
tive to this policy. This period saw Labour’s foreign policy shift from a
fairly anti-militaristic, and almost pacifist stance in 1933 to 1936, to
support for rearmament and a policy of strength in the face of the
threat posed by fascism. This was quite a remarkable shift in policy in
a short space of time, resulting in the resignation of George Lansbury
as party leader, and an increase in the influence of trades union move-
ment over foreign policy through the work of the TUC on the
National Council of Labour. In particular, the Spanish Civil War burst
the bubble of popularity of pacifism on the left, destroying the Labour
Party’s stance on pacifism and non-intervention, and paved the way for
its acceptance of intervention and the use of force and the role of
power in international affairs. It meant that when the Chamberlain
government was replaced in 1940, the Labour Party was ready to join
forces with Churchill in a coalition government to support Britain’s
war effort. It also meant an end to the perception that the Labour Party stood for non-intervention and was against the use of force as a tool of foreign policy.

Notes

7 Manchester, Museum of Labour History, Labour Party archive, letter from Lansbury to James Middleton, 8 September 1934.
9 *H.C. Deb.*, vol. 286, col. 2044, 8 March 1934.
10 *H.C. Deb.*, vol. 287, col. 466, 14 March 1934.
14 *LPACR*, 1933, p. 192.
19 *LPACR*, 1933, p. 188.
20 *LPACR*, 1934, p. 245.
23 Muir, *The Record of the National Government*, p. 188.
24 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter MRC), Trades Union Congress (hereafter TUC) archive, MSS 292/906/8,
TUC General Council 15, 1934–1935, Minutes of Special Meeting of
the General Council 21 May 1935.

25 Keesing’s Contemporary Archive, vol. 2, 1934–1937 (London: Keesing’s,
26 MRC, TUC archive, MSS 292/906/8, TUC General Council 15, 1934–
1935, Minutes of special meeting of the General Council, 21 May 1935.
27 Ibid.
28 See Walter Citrine, Two Careers: A Second Volume of Autobiography
30 LPACR, 1935, NEC statement, p. 5.
31 Pimlott, Hugh Dalton, p. 229.
34 Many reports have Bevin saying ‘hawking’ rather than ‘taking’, but the
account in the Labour Party annual conference report has ‘taking’.
37 See, for instance, Dalton’s view, in Pimlott, Hugh Dalton, p. 230.
38 A. J. Davies, To Build a New Jerusalem: The British Labour Party from
39 Attlee, As It Happened, pp. 115 and 117.
40 LPACR, 1935, p. 3.
41 H.C. Deb., vol. 310, col. 1454, 26 March 1936.
42 Dalton, The Fateful Years, pp. 88 and 90. See LPACR, 1936, pp. 109–11
for a summary of its opposition to the estimates.
43 LPACR, 1936, p. 34; National Council of Labour, ‘Labour and the
Defence of Peace’, May, 1936, p. 3.
45 Trades Union Congress Annual Report (hereafter TUCAR), 1936,
p. 358.
47 Glasgow Forward, 3 October 1936, cited in Bullock, Ernest Bevin, vol. I,
p. 583.
48 Simon Burgess, Stafford Cripps: A Political Life (London: Victor
49 LPACR, 1936, p. 182.
50 Ibid., pp. 203–4.
53 Alan James, Peacekeeping in International Politics (London: Macmillan
for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1990), p. 80.
54 Ibid.
55 See, for instance, Citrine’s comments at the 1936 TUC annual confer-
ence, TUCAR, 1936, p. 362.
56 LPACR, 1936, p. 29.
60 TUCAR, 1936, p. 362.
62 LPACR, 1936, pp. 169 and 171.
63 Ibid., p. 258.
65 LPACR, 1937, p. 7.
75 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/16i, Morris, South Wales Regional Council of Labour, to Middleton, Secretary of the Labour Party, 8 April 1938.
76 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/19, Arms for Spain.
77 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/14/3, 7, and 8–27.
78 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/4, National Council of Labour decisions, 4 February 1938.
80 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/21, Middleton, for the Spain Campaign Committee, November 1937.
81 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/24, Christmas Gifts for Spain, December 1938.
82 Manchester, Labour Party archive, LP/SCW/1/30, We Saw in Spain, Labour Party, no date.
84 Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, p. 133.
85 Ibid., pp. 133 and 134.
87 The Times, 23 July 1937, cited in ibid.
88 LPACR, 1937, p. 4.
89 Bullock, Ernest Bevin, vol. 1, p. 593.
90 TUCAR, 1937, pp. 426.
92 Ibid., p. 212. At this conference, the disaffiliation of the Socialist League was approved by 1,730,000 to 373,000, and the United Front Policy was again rejected, by 2,116,000 votes to 331,000.