Alternatives to Appeasement: The British Labour Party in the 1930s

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In the November 1997 issue of Vanity Fair magazine, Peter Hitchens, the brother of noted writer and columnist Christopher Hitchens, accused his relation of promoting historical inaccuracy:

"The old half-truth that the British Labour Party fought the appeasement of Hitler is trundled out again by my brother, Christopher, in his latest attack on the throne. It didn’t really. Labour consistently and fiercely opposed rearmament at every opportunity. . . . There’s a much better case for abolishing the Labour Party than there is for abolishing the monarchy."

To this, the republican Christopher replied:

"My poor brother long ago lost the ability to tell his hawk from his handsaw. ‘Appeasement’—the policy of letting Hitler have his way in other people’s countries—was indeed opposed by the Labour Party, though not strongly enough. ‘Rearmament,’ proposed by some Tories, would under Chamberlain’s leadership have become an instrument of appeasement. Some people choose to forget that the Chamberlain faction wanted a military alliance with Hitler and nearly got it. [A forthcoming book] with an introduction by my good self, will make this clear to the meanest intelligence, even if not to Peter."

Setting aside sibling rivalry, these statements illustrate intriguing questions about the relationship of the Labour Party to Britain’s foreign policy in the 1930s. Questions of whether Labour opposed appeasement, how united was any opposition, and when opposition emerged serve to clarify the role of the party in the years preceding World War II. The viewing of that role, however, has not been easily ascertained.

The apparent shift in Labour polity from post-World War I pacifism to the dramatic speech by Labour Deputy Leader Arthur Greenwood urging war on Germany in September 1939 has been pinpointed by some as occurring in the late 1930s. Historian Paul Kennedy stated that throughout the decade, the party “was neither as forthright nor as consistent in its criticism as it later liked to think.” Kenneth O. Morgan added that the British left in general “was pacifist-inclined, with few exceptions.” Yet, these exceptions...

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mentioned by Morgan were far from marginal figures but instead were significant leaders such as Clement Attlee, Hugh Dalton, and Ernest Bevin. The leaders of Labour developed a critique of appeasement earlier in the 1930s than often recognized and this critique gained support within the party throughout the decade. Political conditions, however, and internal divisions stifled the leaders and they did not possess the designation to enact government policy. Though they were out of power, analyses of the policy choices made by the government must acknowledge the alternatives offered by the Labour leaders’ critique.

A primary foundation of Labour’s concept of foreign policy was described by Attlee as “a common rejection of the doctrines and ideals of militarism and imperialism.”6 One aspect of this vision materialized in the strength of the pacifist wing of the party during the 1920s. Advancing from objections to British involvement in World War I, Labour pacifists denounced the use of force to further national policy while promoting the reduction of armaments and the exchange of arbitration for war. Central to the rise of the pacifists was the formation during the war of the Union of Democratic Control which included future Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald.7 Sensibilities of the U.D.C. steadily influenced the Labour Party during the 1920s as MacDonald served briefly as Prime Minister in 1924.

Pacifist sentiment remained strong enough to influence the party platform for the 1929 election. Building upon its support for the League of Nations, the Labour Party issued a statement of principles entitled the “Six Pillars of Peace.”8 The first principle urged for the renunciation of war. Next, the party pressed for disarmament while reiterating opposition to conscription. The platform did acknowledge the financial hardship inherent in decreasing the creation of munitions and offered to include armament workers in plans for national development. Arbitration was the third pillar and it called for the acceptance of the Permanent Court of International Justice as the settler of disputes between states. The fourth pillar advocated for economic cooperation by eliminating the barriers to commerce. The next pillar promised full public disclosure of foreign affairs and the submission to the House of Commons of any international engagements for its consent. The final pillar of peace was political cooperation. The platform described this aspect as perhaps the most significant. Political cooperation “involves the repudiation of all partial military alliances and groups which now again threaten the peace of Europe, and the substitution for them of general agreements for ‘pooled security’ against aggressive war.”9 Coupled with its domestic policy proposals, this platform aided the party to win the election, albeit without a clear majority of seats.

Even while pacifist thought held sway in the party during the decade, the 1920s were by no means a period of monolithic agreement concerning foreign policy. A smaller, but growing, faction advocated for a class-war premise. This group countered the pacifists by stating that the use of force could become useful if deployed in defeating capitalism.10 Economic concerns such as the 1926 general strike and the 1929 financial

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9 Ibid., 47-48.
panic fed the vibrancy of the class-war wing and offered a distinct option to the theoretical approaches of the pacifists.

A third strain of Labour thought was evident in the thinking of Clement Attlee. As a member of Parliament in the 1920s, Attlee was a war veteran with some sympathies to the pacifists. He could not, however, completely support their view. "All Socialists are profoundly opposed to war," he later wrote, "and those who regard the use of force as necessary do not regard it as desirable, but only as an unavoidable necessity at our present stage of society." Instead, he argued that government force ultimately allows for the enforcement of justice. Attlee respectively rejected the pacifist argument as the risking of liberty by not utilizing the sanction of law. Pacifism, unfortunately, could lead to the acquiescence to evil.

Although critical of pacifism, Attlee did not support the view of class war. Proponents of class war "deny that there is any possibility of common interest between the workers and other sections of the community," Attlee stated. "In effect, they deny the possibility of national action." Class war paralyzed the country, he contended, and could not serve as an adequate foundation for domestic or foreign policy. Attlee’s outlook, and those of others, would have to wait for the conditions of the 1930s to influence the policy of Labour.

Ramsay MacDonald had the dubious honor of forming a Labour government only a few short months before the American stock market crash unleashed the forces of an international depression. Already dependent on the support of the Liberal Party, Labour’s efficacy declined steadily in the presence of growing financial crises. Labour appealed that difficulties were "due to world causes over which the Government could not by national action alone exercise effective control." Still, a mid-year monetary run, coupled with perceived inaction by the cabinet, led to MacDonald’s resignation. Shocking his colleagues, however, MacDonald announced the next day that he was returning to be Prime Minister of a National government primarily consisting of Conservatives. Two months later, the National government handily defeated Labour in an election that gave Labour one of its lowest seat totals ever in Parliament.

The impact on Labour of the events of 1931 was disastrous. Internal divisions festered and stymied the party’s policy objectives. For foreign policy, the effect proved particularly decisive. Labour had been especially proud of its efforts to help enact the Disarmament Conference in Geneva, scheduled to begin in February 1932. Labour Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson was elected president of the conference but soon lost his position in the British government due to the MacDonald shake-up. Featuring a new lack of support from the conference’s primary supporter, the Disarmament Conference possessed an inauspicious beginning.

The conference proved to portray the final prominence of the pacifist wing of the Labour Party. After some earlier optimism, the conference, floundered. After Adolf

12 Ibid., 218.
14 Morgan, 616.
16 Dalton, The Fateful Years, 37.
Hitler rose to power in Germany early in 1933, the conference quickly lost any momentum it had acquired. During the same year, however, his actions galvanized the non-pacifist factions of the Labour Party. Hugh Dalton, a party leader who lost his seat in 1931, traveled to Berlin and recorded his outrage at the Nazi disruptions of Jewish and academic circles. "A European war must be counted now among the probabilities for the next ten years," he concluded.17 Ernest Bevin of the Labour-affiliated Trades Union Congress also denounced Hitler early on.18 The T.U.C. soon began to issue anti-Nazi pamphlets on such subjects as refugees and bans on German goods.19

By October, Hitler demonstrated his concern about the conference by abruptly withdrawing his delegation and, one week later, quitting the League of Nation.20 Henderson plodded along, exploring new levels of irrelevance.21 Also in October, a small consolation appeared for the Labour Party in the form of a victory in the East Fulham by-election. Three years later, Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin characterized the victory as a highpoint for Labour pacifism. He described how John Wilmot, the Labour candidate, reversed a solid Conservative seat by advocating an irresponsible unilateral disarmament.

Hugh Dalton, however, disputed Baldwin's analysis:

John Wilmot owed the size of his majority to four factors; first, to his advocacy, not of 'pacifism', but of collective defense through a strong League of Nations, and of a General Disarmament Treaty, and to his most effective exposure of the shameful slackness and obstructive incompetence of the British Government at Geneva; second, to his equally effective exposure of bad local housing conditions and his demand for slum clearance and new building; third, to the superiority of his electoral organisation over that of his Conservative opponent; fourth, and not least, to his own personality and outstanding political ability.22

The by-election was good news for Labour but hardly enough to challenge the still-formidable Conservative majority.

Labour released a flurry of publications denouncing the Nazis during the first three years of Hitler's rule. "Hitlerism, Down with Fascism," "Are We Heading for War," "Austrian Democracy Under Fire," Fascism, The Enemy of the People," "Nazis, Nazism and Nazismdom," "Statement on Fascism at Home and Abroad," "What is this Fascism," and others appeared before Germany remilitarized the Rhineland.23 In its 1934 statement of policy, the party placed international concerns as its primary objective, even ahead of economic reforms during a period of lingering depression. The statement

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18 Morgan, 616.
22 Dalton, The Fateful Years, 47.
criticized the National government for foreign policy failures. "Democracies in Austria and Germany have been destroyed without a word of protest from the British Government," it read. "The danger of war looms over the world." 24

Yet MacDonald remained as a figurehead Prime Minister until the middle of 1935. While he was widely reviled by Labour as a traitor, he was quietly replaced by the Conservative Baldwin in June. At around the same time, Dalton and Bevin began to press energetically for air parity with Germany. 25 This position did not yet succeed as George Lansbury, the last major pacifist member of Parliament, remained as party leader, Sir Stafford Cripps led the class-war wing which argued for non-cooperation with the Conservatives, and Attlee still possessed doubts about the policy. Although doubtful about how parity might affect an aggressive collective security, Attlee remained intrigued. "It always appeared to me that some of my pacifist friends, in their insistence on the wickedness of warfare," he wrote, "considered an inefficient army less wicked than an efficient one." 26 Attlee and Dalton were beginning to move closer together.

Also around this same time, the League of Nations Union, a nonpartisan group organized a national vote called the Peace Ballot. As more than eleven million people participated, the poll provided a useful portrait of public opinion. Only 360,000 voted against Britain remaining in the League of Nations; over ten million favored a decrease of armaments by international agreement; over nine million desired to abolish national air forces by agreement; more than ten million favored the prohibition of the sale of weapons for profit; over ten million supported economic sanctions against aggressors; and nearly seven million even favored military sanctions against aggression. 27 Labour hailed the results as a vindication of its policies while Conservatives chose to ignore the information, although Winston Churchill later wrote that the ballot demonstrated a willingness "to go to war in a righteous cause, provided that all necessary action was taken under the auspices of the League of Nations." 28

Against the developing backdrop of the Italian conflict with Abyssinia, the Labour Party held its annual conference. Dalton led a faction in favor of promoting strong collective security in defense of the African country. Dalton asked the conference, "Do we stand firm in this crisis for the policy to which we have so often pledged ourselves, or shall we turn tail and run away, repudiate our obligations under the Covenant of the League and signal 'All clear' to Mussolini in his barbarous and long-premeditated assault on Abyssinia?" 29 The motion to stand firm passed overwhelmingly precipitating the retirement of the pacifist Lansbury and the eventual election of Attlee to the leadership of the Labour Party.

Attlee's first major speech in Parliament as leader challenged the majority's lax policy toward Abyssinia. "With the declaration of an aggressor nation, that nation could not be treated as if you were purely neutral," he charged. "We support economic

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25 Dalton, The Fateful Years, 63.
27 Dalton, The Fateful Years, 65.
29 Dalton, The Fateful Years, 67.
sanctions. We support the League system."³⁰ Attlee reiterated Labour's position against aggression when he condemned the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the termination of sanctions against Italy. He asserted that the British government had "destroyed the League of Nations as an effective instrument for peace," just a few weeks prior to the Spanish Civil War.³¹

Throughout this period, however, Labour habitually voted against the Service Estimates of the government. Attlee explained this was a custom that "had always been understood to be a vote either against the level of armaments or against the policy of the day, but not as a vote against all armaments."³² He did admit that this custom opened Labour to political attack. Indeed, claiming the mantle of collective security so widely supported in the Peace Ballot, the Conservatives held a majority in the elections at the end of 1935. Baldwin remained Prime Minister while Conservative policies were vocally opposed by Labour.

Historian Michael R. Gordon identifies the three factions within the Labour Party that battled for supremacy in the middle years of the 1930s. The Left wing led by Cripps aligned itself with the Socialist League in 1932 to promote the distinctive elements of class war against capitalism. Gordon describes how by 1936 and 1937, the Socialist League quickly declined due to overenthusiastic support for a united front and a shift in attitude among the majority of the Labour Party.³³ The Left Wing quickly dissipated, with the Socialist League dissolving itself before 1939.

Gordon labels the second wing of the party as the Majority Faction. This group held to the pacifist image of the Labour Party long after the image declined. The resignation of Lansbury in 1935 dramatically depicted the decline of this once-dominant strain. Their decline was linked to the inability to rectify unfolding events with an anti-militarism outlook. According to Gordon, what was needed was a rupture "so that at least a few influential Labour spokesmen, themselves driven to an open-eyed awareness of the crisis shaping up, would be able to agitate from within the party for altered policies."³⁴

This third faction was initially led by Dalton and Bevin. Both men possessed a somewhat outsider status as Dalton was without a seat in Parliament for many years while Bevin was not a politician in the 1930s, but a trade unionist. This faction increasingly favored an increase in military readiness and often expressed the most intense denunciations of fascism. "If I am asked to face the question of arming this country," declared Bevin, "I am prepared to face it . . . Which is the first institution that victorious Fascism wipes out? It is the trade union movement."³⁵ When Attlee replaced Lansbury as the leader of the Labour Party in Parliament, he shared the views of the third faction, although with perhaps a calmer demeanor.

By 1936, the third faction had finally emerged as the dominant voice of the Labour Party. The opposition to Conservative policy became more consistent if not more

³⁰ Attlee, As It Happened, 142.
³¹ Ibid., 143.
³² Ibid., 139.
³³ Gordon, 67.
³⁴ Ibid., 68.
vocal. The arrival of Neville Chamberlain in 1937 only intensified the criticisms of Labour. Following the tradition of attempting to strengthen the League of Nations by attracting the United States, the National Council of Labour (combining the authority of the Labour Party and the T.U.C.) issued an appeal in the fall to an apparent ally:

There is reason to believe that, though American public opinion is largely “isolationist,” President Roosevelt would welcome an opportunity of intervening to promote peace in any way that promises success. We should insist on the importance of promoting Anglo-American relations and making such an opportunity easy.36

Labour clearly was foreseeing war and attempting any course to avoid such a calamity.

On October 21, 1937, Attlee explicitly condemned the policies of Chamberlain. “The policy of this Government throughout, right on from 1931, has always been to try and appease the aggressor by the sacrifice of weaker States, but the more you yield to the aggressor the greater his appetite.”37 This analysis was not an isolated sentiment but a culmination of years of third faction viewpoints. Attlee’s statement cannot be merely attributed to his own views but representative of the dominant attitude of the Labour Party.

Just how typical this perspective was for the Labour Party was evident in the Labour Party’s 1938 Interim Report of the National Executive Committee. The full one-hundred-page report was dedicated to the opening statement: “The whole world stands today upon the brink of war.”38 The report immediately delineated the threat to democracy posed by Germany. The report praised Czechoslovakia for its government and its treatment of various nationalities. Next, the report reproached Germany for attempting to acquire Czechoslovakia’s territory. Following that rebuke, the report offered another strong sentiment. “British Labour emphatically repudiates the right of the British or any other Government to use diplomatic or other pressure to compel an acceptance of such a humiliation,” as conquest by Germany, the report stated.39

Following these assertive statements, the report continued in a direct tradition of the third faction. Placing Czechoslovakia in the line of Abyssinia, the Rhineland, and Spain, the Labour report argued that Britain should lead a collective defense of the threatened nation. “The British Government,” it read, “must leave no doubt in the mind of the German Government and that they will unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack upon Czechoslovakia.”40 The report concluded its accusations by proclaiming: “Labour cannot acquiesce in the destruction of the rule of law by savage aggression.”41

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 2.
41 Ibid.
On September 2, 1939, Labour Deputy Leader Greenwood rose, made reference to the current threat to national interests and national honor, and strongly urged the Prime Minister to discontinue "dragging out what has been dragged out too long" and declare war. The perception of the Labour Party changed from an image of pacifism to the direct leadership of Greenwood. However, this did not occur in the late 1930s. The transformation was an evolution of the party, an institutional decision to lead the nation. Prominent leaders of the Labour Party developed a sophisticated critique of Conservative policy early in the 1930s. Yet due to divisions within the party and political conditions such as economic depression and the loss of elections, the leaders did not possess the authority to enact their alternative views into government policy. Still, the Labour Party, though out of power, was a critical component to growing opposition to both Hitler’s actions and the Conservative response. When assessing the culpability of British government leaders in the causes of World War II, historians must realize that Conservative policies were not predetermined. Historians must contemplate the alternatives offered by the leaders of the British Labour Party and investigate why these other strategies were never explored during the turbulent years of the 1930s.

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