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*Le Mouvement pacifiste britannique de l'entre-deux-guerres*

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# The British Peace Movement in the Interwar Years

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Richard Davis

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## Introduction

Up until 1914, diplomacy and the conduct of international affairs were regarded as being very much part of the secretive world of “high” politics. This remained true throughout the interwar years, in spite of the hopes held in some quarters that the world, and Britain, were entering a new age where the old-style diplomatic practices, carried out behind the closed doors of the European chancelleries, would be done away with. The same hopes had underlain President Wilson’s Fourteen Points set out in January 1918 as part of his proposals for peace. They were also an important part of the thinking behind the League of Nations, set up in 1920 to prevent the world going back to the system of international rivalries, arms races and military alliances that had led to such disastrous results in 1914-18. In their place the ambition was to create a new world order based on democracy rather than the autocratic regimes that had been swept away by the war, on international law, on reconciliation and conciliation, disarmament and international arbitration. As a last resort, this would be backed up by a system of collective security based on economic and, if needed, military sanctions against an international aggressor. All these hopes and beliefs found a particularly receptive ground in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, which saw the growth of a series of pacifist and internationalist anti-war movements. Their objective was summed up in the popular phrases “No More War” or “Never Again.” They also sought to operate as pressure groups acting on public opinion in Britain and, in collaboration with other like-minded groups abroad, internationally, and on governments. In the aftermath of the horrors of the First World War, the possibilities for pacifist and anti-war movements to have an impact on policy were significantly enhanced. Of all the forms of political activism in Britain in the twentieth century, those

that were part of what may broadly be termed the peace movement were among the most widely supported and influential.

## The Pacific Outlook of Britain in the Interwar Years

In considering the concept of a “peace movement” in the context of twentieth-century Britain it is necessary to more clearly define what these movements were, what precisely they were campaigning for, the ways in which they sought to exercise an influence over policy-makers, and how far they were successful in redirecting policy along pacifist, or at least peaceful, lines.

Peace as an objective was shared by almost the whole country. This was based on both a moral standpoint and on material interests. The revulsion against war was almost universal. This was backed up by solid economic and political arguments that further encouraged the pursuit of international peace. The British Empire had reached its peak after 1918, and there was no desire for any further territorial gains. Britain’s economy, its precarious national finances and its trade had everything to lose from another war. All of this meant that Britain had become a satiated power, interested in holding onto what it had and maintaining its international position, whose outlook was essentially conservative and peaceful, a country that had little or no interest in becoming involved in a major international conflict or reliving the experiences of 1914-18. This did not mean that Britain had become a pacifist power and the pursuit of peace in Europe after 1918 needs to be contrasted with the violence it employed in other parts of the world to maintain its Empire, including the harsh repression of numerous anti-imperial nationalist movements. The cases of Ireland, India and the Middle East, where the policy of so-called “air policing” involved the aerial bombardment of recalcitrant tribes, stand out as proof of this inconsistency in British attitudes. Britain’s position was, nonetheless, essentially a defensive one with regard to the other great powers.

In 1914, there had been a broad national consensus over the decision to enter the war. The experience of the following four years, however, was to transform the national feeling. The refusal to contemplate another war became deeply embedded in the “lost” generation that had lived through 1914-18, and in the one that followed on from it. This sentiment was reinforced by a perfectly rational calculation of Britain’s position. As one historian has argued, “*it may help us to understand better the overall context of British policy in the interwar years if we bear in mind that these are the actions of a country with nothing to gain, and much to lose, by being involved in war. Peace in such circumstances was the greatest of national interests.*”<sup>1</sup> Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister from 1937 until 1940, made this point on numerous occasions: “our object”, he said,

must always be to preserve these things which we consider essential without recourse to war, if that is possible, because we know that in war there are no winners. There is nothing but suffering and ruin for those who are involved... When I think of those four terrible years and I think of the seven millions of young men who were cut off in their prime... then I am bound to say... in war, whichever side may call itself the victor, there are no winners, but all are losers.<sup>2</sup>

His predecessor in Downing Street, Stanley Baldwin, thought war “*the most fearful terror and prostitution of man’s knowledge that ever was known.*”<sup>3</sup> King George V thought along the same lines. In one angry outburst he declared “*I will not have another war. I will not. The last one was none of my doing and if there were another one and we are threatened with being brought*

into it, I will go to Trafalgar Square and wave a red flag myself sooner than allow this country to be brought in.”<sup>4</sup> Similar feelings were being expressed from the late 1920s onwards in numerous books and plays that took on anti-war themes.

The success of the peace movements of the interwar years was, therefore, in many ways, a simple reflection of the general mood in the country. All British governments at this time were inevitably concerned by public opinion; their ability to remain in office was dependent on this and their ability to pursue the policies they supported could never, in the long-term, go against the views of the country. In the interwar years, when questions of war and peace, and of foreign policy, played such a prominent role in public debate, and when they were of such obviously immediate concern, the various peace movements that emerged during and after the First World War, and that were able to mobilize a mass following in some cases, were players that no government could afford to ignore. The leading British historian of the interwar British peace movement has argued that it was “not only the most influential of any major country’s... but also the most legitimate in the sense of being accepted even by its opponents as idealistic and public-spirited rather than subversive or selfish”<sup>5</sup>, “the most interesting and influential pacifist movement in modern times.”<sup>6</sup>

## Peace Movements: Pacifism and Pacificism

It has been estimated that there were over 50 peace organizations in Britain between the Wars, many of which gained a significant membership. Their activities, including organizing demonstrations, boycotts, pamphleteering and speeches, were carried out with messianic zeal and employed the most up-to-date propaganda techniques. The most important petition, the League of Nation Union’s (LNU) “Peace Ballot”, was signed by over 12 million people. Over 100,000 responded to “Dick” Sheppard’s “Peace Pledge” and his call to renounce war. They were, therefore, able to mobilize the support of a great many people in the country and from all groups in society and of different political allegiances. This diversity could be seen as a source of strength. At times, however, it led to a lack of coherence and to internal disputes that weakened its impact and its appeal to the public.

What it meant to be a member or a sympathizer of one of the component parts of the overall peace movement was never entirely clear and this question has been the subject of a great deal of debate amongst historians since. In particular, the exact nature of the pacifism defended by groups such as the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) and others has been open to differing interpretations. If we take pacifism in the broadest terms as a belief that it is possible to settle international disputes by peaceful means then this could reasonably be applied to the country as a whole and almost all those involved in the conduct of British foreign policy in the 1930s as well as, more obviously, to the supporters of the peace movement. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the term “pacifism” was used, both as a compliment and as an insult, in quite contradictory ways. Even if a stricter definition of pacifism as “the belief that all wars are *wrong*”<sup>7</sup> is accepted, both pacifists and many inside official circles can be included. If, however, it is considered as “*the doctrine that the abolition of war is both desirable and possible*”<sup>8</sup> then the clear distinction between the two sides re-emerges.

Further clarification of this terminology is required in order to distinguish between the different tendencies and factions that coexisted within the peace movement. Gilbert Murray, the Chairman of the LNU, explained one of these differences in the following terms:

Supposing all measures of conciliation and arbitration fail, supposing collective non-cooperation breaks down and the war-maker finds his course free before him. They (the pacifists), I presume, will say: 'Let him work his will. Submission is at least better than war.' The true Leaguer will still have two resources left: first, to try even yet to deter the aggressor by showing that he will be confronted by so strong an alliance that conference and arbitration will pay him much better than war; and at last, at the very last, rather than acquiesce in the unopposed triumph of evil, to accept his challenge and fight for the law.<sup>9</sup>

Historians such as A.J.P. Taylor and Martin Ceadel have added to this conception by distinguishing between pacifists and *pacifists*. For Taylor "pacifism" meant no more than "*the advocacy of a peaceful policy*" whereas he took pacifism, "*a word invented only in the twentieth century*", to mean "*the doctrine of non-resistance*."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the fundamental belief of pacifists was that war was always wrong and should never be resorted to, whatever the consequences of not fighting. Pacifism, on the other hand, was a set of ideas that opposed war as an irrational and inhumane means of resolving international conflicts but that did not rule out the recourse to war as a last resort - and so long as it was in a just cause: a defensive and not an offensive action, one that was in the name of collective security and cautioned by international law.<sup>11</sup> Different groups and organizations that correspond to these various definitions could all be found within the broad British peace movement in the interwar years.

## Christianity, Socialism, Utilitarianism and Humanism in British Peace Movements

The diversity of the British peace movement resulted from its numerous and varied sources of inspiration. Much of the pacifist tradition in Britain had emerged out of the various churches well before 1914 and during the 1920s and 1930s many pacifists continued to base their beliefs on their religion. Some of the most notable pacifist leaders of these years, such as "Dick" Sheppard and Canon Charles Raven, were themselves churchmen. The collective engagement of the Quakers to the cause was also significant, less in terms of numbers than in their organisational and ideological inputs. They played a particularly prominent role in the Fellowship of Reconciliation founded at the outbreak of war in 1914 and which continued to operate into the 1930s. Not all Church leaders, however, supported the peace movement, even in its most moderate incarnations. Indeed, there were some who continued with the jingoism that had been heard during the First World War. The Archbishop of York, William Temple, even condemned pacifism as a heresy.

Pacifism had always been attractive from the socialist or Marxist perspective and it won many adherents from within the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This was reflected in their opposition to rearmament under a Conservative-led government that might use those arms not to defend the country against international aggression but to turn them on the workers at home. In the Marxist analysis, both war and fascism were the products of capitalism and should therefore be opposed jointly. Equally, war could be avoided by pacifist actions and capitalism overthrown at the same time. Should capitalist regimes declare war then this should be met by internationally coordinated action by the working classes. By workers

simply refusing to fight, and by mass resistance through a general strike, war would be brought to an immediate halt. Although there were some of the left, such as John Strachey, who placed great hope in this prospect, and others on the right who feared it with equal strength,<sup>12</sup> this belief in the international solidarity of the working classes to act in unison failed to materialize, just as it had failed to stop war in 1914.

Among the most prominent of the socialist-inclined pacifist groups was the No More War Movement (NMWM), founded in 1921 as a pacifist and socialist successor to the No-Conscription Fellowship. It counted among its leaders Fenner Brockway and several members of the ILP. The more communist-inspired British Anti-War Movement was established in 1932 in the wake of an international conference held at The Hague. It held its first meeting in March 1933 attended by British communists, members of the Labour Party and the ILP, and various other pacifists. These socialist pacifist groups, like the left-wing political parties themselves, were rarely able to coordinate their actions. The Anti-War Movement was banned by Labour as a communist satellite while the NMWM and others rounded on what they condemned as the “bourgeois” pacifism of more moderate groups. Such viewpoints were not, however, fixed over the course of the 1930s. The evolutions in the relations between the parties of the left, and between them and other non-socialist anti-fascist groups with the emergence of a popular front strategy, meant that alliances often shifted. After having initially condemned Sheppard and the PPU, the NMWM agreed in 1937 to a merger. Where they had once condemned the League of Nations, and therefore its supporters in the LNU, as a tool of capitalist governments, many left-wing pacifists had, by 1936, come out in support of collective security and the League as useful weapons with which to resist the spread of fascism.

Another strand of thinking in the peace movement came from Bertrand Russell’s utilitarian argument that “*modern war is practically certain to have worse consequences than even the most unjust peace.*”<sup>13</sup> Given his prediction that any future European war would result in the deaths of between 50 and 90 per cent of its population, war could never be a logical or justifiable choice. This was backed up, first, by his belief that the Nazi regime could be brought round to a more reasonable position via some form of economic appeasement and, second, by his fears that even if a war was fought and won by a democracy it would bring about an unacceptable curtailment of liberties. Russell wrote that if attempts were made to stop international aggressors by war then “*we shall, in the process become exactly like them, and the world will have gained nothing. Also, if we beat them, we shall produce in time someone as much worse than Hitler as he is worse than the Kaiser.*”<sup>14</sup>

Humanitarian sentiments also underlay much of the pacifist thinking at this time. Aldous Huxley, among others, defended pacifism in essentially spiritual terms, arguing that it had,

the double merit of being not only morally right, but also strictly practical and business-like. Guided by the moral intuition that it can never in any circumstances be right to do evil and by the two empirically verified generalizations, first, that means determine ends and, second, that by behaving well to other people you can always, in the long run, induce other people to behave well to you... the only right and practical policy is a policy based on truth and generosity.<sup>15</sup>

The viability of this humanitarian and utilitarian pacifism came down to the fundamental belief that international disputes were inherently irrational and that, given the inevitable horrors that would come with modern warfare, no country would be so foolish as to resort to such a policy. Pacifists such as Donald Soper were still able to claim in 1936 that there was a “*real yearning for peace not least of all in countries like Italy and Germany.*”<sup>16</sup> This

belief, or hope, in the reasonableness of peoples and governments across the world and in the efficacy of a policy of non-violent resistance as a means of preventing war was an increasingly unconvincing argument as the 1930s progressed. The argument that “*against a Pacifist England, Fascist Germany would be completely incapable of making war*”<sup>17</sup> may have been supported by some but it was never likely to have much impact on mainstream opinion in the country and even less so on those in government.

The above-mentioned pacifist groups remained relatively small in terms of their membership, although they were able to exercise a certain influence thanks to their positions within the political parties of the left, in the churches and on public opinion through their campaigning activities. The most significant part of the British peace movement, however, was found outside these groups. The two most significant organizations were the LNU and the PPU. By far the most important mass movement was the LNU whose membership peaked in 1931 at over 400,000. Although this had fallen by more than 50 per cent by 1939 it remained a significant political player and by far the most influential of all the groups that made up the peace movement in interwar Britain. Unlike the pacifists’ simple opposition to war in all its forms, the LNU adopted a more *pacifist* approach. From 1934-35 onwards, it also became a key advocate of the League’s collective security and internationalist role. This was a line that set it at odds with many pacifists who remained opposed to war at any cost.

The high point of the LNU came in 1934-35 when it organized its “Peace Ballot.” Approximately eleven and a half million people, or around 32 per cent of everyone over eighteen, took part. It also mobilized half a million volunteers who went from door to door distributing and collecting the ballot papers. Its first question was “Should Great Britain remain a Member of the League of Nations?” 11,166,818, or 95.9 per cent of respondents answered “yes.” To the second question, “Are you in favour of an all-round reduction of armaments by international agreement?”, 10,542,738 (90.6 per cent) replied positively. There were slightly lower percentages in favour of the all-round abolition of military aircraft (82.5 per cent) and for the prohibition of the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit (90.1 per cent). Over ten million (86.8 per cent of respondents) came out in favour of the use of economic and non-military measures in response to an international aggression. These figures dropped significantly when asked if they would support military measures. In reply to this final question 6.8 million (58.7 per cent) said “yes”, 2.37 million (20.3 per cent) said “no”, and 2.38 million (20.4 per cent) gave no answer. The option for respondents to identify themselves as “Christian pacifist” was included in the last questions. 14,169 chose this reply when asked about economic sanctions and 17,536 when asked about the use of military sanctions. These represented 0.1 and 0.2 per cent of all answers.

The LNU was certainly the most important of the peace movements in terms of numbers, but its size also meant that it was never entirely united. In 1937, Gilbert Murray wrote to the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, complaining that the LNU was “*having trouble... with some of our members – chiefly Youth Groups and Pacifists – who oppose rearmament and recruiting*” unless the government committed itself to only using military force “*in accordance with the (League of Nations) Covenant.*”<sup>18</sup> Overall, however, the LNU remained a moderate organization, one that

appeared to be very much a middle-class do-gooder movement, high-minded and respectable, basically moral in content and attractive to ‘liberals’ of all parties. It did have pacifist and leftist members who were more in the tradition of radical dissent than of liberal high-mindedness. However, the group as a whole—even where

it advocated disarmament or internationalism, which could have been radical causes—was so cautious in its advocacy that it remained thoroughly safe and respectable.<sup>19</sup>

The more radical and uncompromisingly pacifist PPU was also able to bring together a wide range of leading thinkers and to mobilize a mass membership of over 100,000. It originated in October 1934 when Sheppard's "Peace Letter" was published in the press. In this he argued that Britain should never support another war and he called on all those men who agreed with his principles to send him a postcard in support of his campaign. "The main reason for this letter", he wrote, was

the almost universally acknowledged lunacy of the manner in which nations are pursuing peace... the risks we are running by our present methods (are) far graver than those which a more enlightened policy would involve... It seems essential to discover whether or not it be true... that the majority of thoughtful men in this country are now convinced that war of every kind or for any cause, is not only a denial of Christianity, but a crime against humanity, which is no longer to be permitted by civilized people....

It concluded with the declaration: "*I renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will I support another.*"<sup>20</sup> Within twelve months 80,000 cards had been received.

It was out of this initiative that the PPU was formally launched in May 1936. Among its members were some of the most influential writers, intellectuals and political activists of the 1930s including Osbert Sitwell, J.D. Beresford, George Lansbury, Fenner Brockway, Ellen Wilkinson, Arthur Ponsonby, Aldous Huxley, Vera Brittain, Bertrand Russell (after some hesitation), ex-Brigadier General F.P. Crozier, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon. George Bernard Shaw and Virginia Woolf, while never becoming signed-up members, expressed their support and contributed to its cause. This group was no doubt intellectually distinguished but, in the words of one among them, they were "*an odd lot.*"<sup>21</sup> It was, above all, the personal role of Sheppard that was the driving force behind the PPU and when he died at the early age of 57 in October 1937 the organization suffered a severe setback. His friends and biographers have written of him as "*a legend while he lived... a man unique in his dedication to humanity,*"<sup>22</sup> describing him as a "*genius*" and even as a "*saint.*"<sup>23</sup> On his death crowds of people lined the streets of London and his funeral service was broadcast by the BBC. By sheer hard work and determination and thanks to his charisma Sheppard was able to give Christian pacifism a mass appeal. He also succeeded in uniting various Christian, socialist and humanitarian strands of interwar pacifism. The PPU's key characteristic was its broad appeal and the heterogeneity of its membership, its sympathizers, and its leadership. It was also remarkable for the enthusiasm of its activists and its ability to attract many young people who had not previously been committed to any group or cause. It was, according to one historian,

a typical example of the moral impulse of the time. For all its shortcomings, it represented a genuine and significant protest against the evils of modern war... (It) possessed not only well-known names, but was able to harness the enthusiasm of the young to create a crusade of formidable dimensions.

Yet the same author had also to recognize that it was weakened by internal divisions between its supporters coming from the left and right of British politics, by the fact that its only fixed position was the "*negative pledge of war renunciation*" and that beyond this the PPU's message was "*exceedingly nebulous.*"<sup>24</sup>

## Peace Movements and Politicians: Integration and Opposition

The Labour Party had traditionally been associated with the peace movements and many of the country's leading peace activists could be found among its ranks. But this association between the Labour Party and the peace movement underwent important changes in the 1930s. In particular, the 1935 Party Conference held in Brighton was an important moment in the redirection of Labour's foreign and defence policies. The party leader since 1931, George Lansbury, was a convinced Christian pacifist and close to the peace movement and its leaders. As such he could have been expected to be a useful means by which this movement could bring to bear its influence. By 1935, however, Lansbury's position as party leader was untenable as the party, and its powerful trade union backers, moved away from their previous endorsement of an anti-militarist, anti-armaments position and towards a more internationalist approach that accepted the need to react forcefully against the rising tide of international aggression through a policy of collective security. Lansbury enjoyed the personal sympathy of large parts of the Labour Party but his uncompromising pacifist position was clearly at odds with the way the party was moving. Having been attacked by Hugh Dalton and Ernest Bevin, Lansbury chose to resign. Other pacifists in the party also stepped down: Arthur Ponsonby as party leader in the Lords and Stafford Cripps from the National Executive.

The Conservative Party leadership was never as inclined to work alongside the peace movement as was the Labour leadership. Yet, as we have seen, they did share the peace movement's deep abhorrence of war. On the other hand, many Liberals worked closely with the LNU. The National Liberal leader and Foreign Secretary from 1934 to 1935, Sir John Simon, was described as "*a congenital pacifist*."<sup>25</sup> Most Conservatives, however, shared the view that the peace movement, while it could not be ignored, and even if it contained within its ranks many Conservative voters, could not quite be trusted. Neville Chamberlain, for example, was keen to distance himself from the peace movement. 'Pacifism', for him, was a term of abuse that he applied equally to the PPU and to the more moderate and respectable LNU. "*I can find no polite words to express my opinion of the LNU*", he wrote to his sister. "*The kind of person who is really enthusiastic about the League is almost invariably a crank and a Liberal and as such will always pursue the impracticable and obstruct all practical means of attaining the object in view*."<sup>26</sup> Their electoral importance, however, could not be so easily ignored.

The view of the peace movement, and of the PPU in particular, from the Foreign Office was even more scathing: the Permanent Under-Secretary, Robert Vansittart, thought that Sheppard was "*harmful*" and that the PPU "*drew in many otherwise balanced, even gifted, souls*"; the policies he was advocating were "*helping to endanger lives by the million*."<sup>27</sup> The Secretary to the Cabinet, Maurice Hankey, dismissed the pacifist wing of the LNU as "*hopelessly unpractical and generally badly informed to boot*"<sup>28</sup>, although he also indirectly recognized the peace movement's influence when he denounced the "*moral disarmament*" of the country brought about by LNU and pacifist propaganda. These views were echoed abroad by Britain's French allies. The Foreign Minister in 1936, Pierre Flandin, later complained of the "*superpacifistes anglo-saxons germanophiles*"<sup>29</sup> who were influencing British foreign policy in dangerous ways. Inside the British Cabinet there were worries

that recruitment to the armed forces was being made more difficult by the pacifists' propaganda campaign. The Minister of Defence warned that:

into the more thoughtful and semi-educated minds of the young men of today persistent and widespread propaganda is being poured with the object of persuading them that it is wicked to join the Army... The pacifist campaign has had a long start and is being pursued with vigour... This propaganda is not confined to sermons and speeches. It is also supported by films, plays, novels and all the arts of the publicity agent....

Recognizing the enormous potential support for the PPU, the Minister admitted that “*propaganda is never so powerful as when it is directed towards persuading people to act in accordance with their own inclinations*”.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this mix of fear and denigration of the peace movement in government circles there were many ways in which it was well integrated into the political and social establishment. Even in the most socially elitist and traditionally conservative of universities pacifism seemed to be gaining ground. On 9 February 1933, the University of Oxford Union debated the motion “That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.” The motion was passed. In political circles too the peace movement was able to get its message across. Robert Cecil, one of the driving forces behind the creation of the League of Nations and the President of the LNU from 1923 until 1945, was clearly an establishment figure. The son of one Prime Minister and the cousin of another, his nephew was the Junior Minister at the Foreign Office. He was also a King's Counsel and had sat in the government as a Minister on three occasions between 1915 and 1927. All this allowed him to put across the LNU's message, even if it was not always welcomed. Conservative ministers might have had been suspicious of the LNU, but they were always represented on its governing board. In fact, many of the views of moderates in the LNU were accepted in government, in large part because they corresponded to most ministers' own pacifist beliefs. The moral and religion-based pacifism of others, such as the Quakers, was accepted as an honestly-held and honourable point of view, although thought to be misguided and far removed from the ‘realities’ of international diplomacy. When, however, the peace movements appeared to be in danger of veering too far to the left the government and the Foreign Office became alarmed. Sheppard and the PPU leaders were not from the same milieu as Cecil, although Sheppard did have several personal contacts in high places. In general, PPU leaders were never likely to meet government ministers over dinner or at their clubs. Neither Sheppard's personal contacts nor other PPU connections inside the Labour Party and in literary circles gave any access to the corridors of power similar to that enjoyed by the LNU. For the most part, the PPU's ideas were treated with absolute contempt by the government and its permanent officials even if some of the leaders were recognized as respectable men. While Sheppard talked of a fundamental rejection of all war linked to a policy of non-resistance, Baldwin, Chamberlain and others inside Whitehall, in their daily dealings with the worsening international crisis, could not grasp, let alone accept, such a profound change of attitude as that called for by Sheppard. Their mutual incomprehension was almost total.

## Pacifism, *Pacifism*, Isolationism, Appeasement and *Defencism*

The dividing lines between the various peace movements, whether they were inspired by pacifist or by *pacifist* thinking and whether they drew principally on Christian, socialist or other moral inspirations, could never be clear-cut. Supporters of such groups and movements often belonged to more than one at a time or shifted their allegiances in reaction to events at home and, more importantly, abroad. Support for the various dimensions of the peace movement could also overlap with support for isolationism from Europe, the appeasement of the dictators and, for some, a policy of rearmament, in so far as it was designed to reinforce a policy of collective security based on the League of Nations and/or defence of democracies threatened by fascism. At the other political extreme, some supporters of the peace movement were prepared to envisage a substantial revision of the Versailles Treaty in order to assuage German demands. Some went so far as to become sympathetic with, even apologists for, Nazi German claims that they had been victims of an unjust peace. Given this diversity of opinion within the broad spectrum of groups that made up the peace movement it is difficult to arrive at any clear conclusions as to their actual impact on government decisions.

The inconsistencies in the peace movement's approaches to international affairs became all the more evident when it was confronted with an actual international crisis of real danger and with open warfare. In 1935, Italy, after months of clearly visible preparation, invaded Ethiopia, one of the few remaining independent African states and a signed up member of the League of Nations. Such a blatant act of international aggression, in clear violation of League principles and of international law, presented clear choices to the British government and to supporters of the peace movement. Few of them, with the exception of some of the most devout pacifists, were able to adopt a coherent line. Instead it was the sense of confusion, and deep disappointment that war had not been avoided in the first place, that prevailed. Sheppard admitted in July 1935, even before the outbreak of hostilities, that "*Abyssinia and Italy simply beats me. I don't know what we pacifists ought to be at.*"<sup>31</sup>

The interactions between pacifists and the various peace movements on the one hand and supporters of isolationism, appeasement or of a "realist" approach were often complex and changeable. This became increasingly the case over the course of the 1930s as Britain was confronted by the growing threat of war. Attitudes and beliefs that had previously been theoretical were now being challenged by the harsh reality of violence in Asia (Manchuria), Africa (Ethiopia) and Europe (Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia). By 1939 the threat was no longer only to other countries but to Britain itself. This new situation led many previous supporters of pacifism to rethink their positions. At the same time, there was a hardening of the official policy adopted by the government which distanced itself more and more from the idealistic views of the peace movements. The changing international environment also led to a realignment of the peace movements and changes in the ways in which they related to government and government policy.

Many pacifists shared the appeasers' dislike of the League of Nations and the policy of collective security which, they felt, risked dragging Britain into wars that they had no concern with. This was backed up by their shared disapproval of the pro-French and anti-German stance of the Foreign Office which many regarded as a throwback to the pre-1914

system of armed alliances that had been one of the causes of Britain's entry into the First World War. Military sanctions in the name of the League of Nation's collective security meant in effect going to war in the defence of any country that was a victim of aggression. This could never be an acceptable line for pacifists. For the appeasers and the isolationists, it was unnecessary. However, for many supporters of the League of Nations in the LNU, and for a growing number on the left, the seriousness of the threat to international peace posed by the militaristic regime in Japan, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany meant that such idealistic pacifism was unthinkable. Instead they called for a reinforcement of the country's military strength and, if needs be, for the country to be prepared to go to war to defend those countries that were being threatened and, from a purely national perspective, to defend Britain itself. Support for rearmament and taking on a commitment to intervene militarily on the continent in the event of international aggression could, therefore, be supported by some in the peace movement, on condition that this was done in the name of the League of Nations. For pacifists this was just the pre-war alliance system by another name. For socialist pacifists in particular the start of Franco's attempt to overthrow the Republican government in Spain was a decisive turning-point and led many of them to conclude that the need to defend democracy and socialism overrode their belief in pacifism. The Spanish Civil War was a cause that many socialists and pacifists, including Brockway, thought worth fighting for. Those pacifists who stood out against this line now found themselves alongside right-wing isolationists and pro-German sympathizers, something which many felt ill at ease with. Others suffered a form of schizophrenia, backing armed resistance against fascism in Spain but holding onto the basic principles of pacifism at home.

## Pacifism, Peace Movements and their Impact on Policy-Making

Many later accounts attempted to place at least part of the responsibility for Britain's unpreparedness to meet the challenge from the totalitarian states at the feet of the peace movements who, it is alleged, held back the governments of the 1930s from the measures that they knew were required but which they refrained from introducing for fear of provoking a popular backlash. According to this scenario, the peace movements' propaganda instilled in the country an opposition to any strong line in either foreign or defence policies. In its place they encouraged a woolly thinking that was far removed from the realities of international affairs. Such arguments overestimate the influence that these groups exercised. In the case of the Peace Ballot, it is fair to argue that this may have influenced the government's rhetoric and its electoral strategy but not the direction of British policy. The Peace ballot was a massive declaration of public support for the League and for the principle of collective security and it strengthened those who wanted to adopt a harder line towards Italian aggression. It did not, however, reverse government policy or impose a fundamentally different approach from that which ministers had already agreed on. Nor did it prevent the government from attempting to reach a dubious, and secretive, deal with the French and the Italians, at Ethiopia's expense, a deal which flouted the most basic League principles. When this was revealed, the public outcry against the government's double-standards did force the Foreign Secretary's resignation but it did nothing to bring about a change of direction in policy.

Nevertheless, the peace movement as a whole could sometimes act as a constraint on the government's ability to direct policy along the lines, and at the speed, it wanted. During the vain international negotiations to reach an agreement on disarmament in 1932-34, the pressure on the government from the peace movement had been considerable. Two years later, it was rearmament that was on the political agenda. This remained a sensitive issue and one that aroused strong opposition across the peace movement, parts of which were still wedded to the fundamental belief that arms races led inevitably to armed conflict, just as they had in 1914. Stanley Baldwin later argued that he had been held back from launching the rearmament programme the country needed earlier because of the peace movement's opposition and the impact this would have had on his government's electoral fortunes. Similarly the "continental commitment" to stand by France and Belgium militarily in the event of a German attack was constantly watered down by Ministers in part due to the strength of opposition in the peace movement to France's perceived militarism. Later on the peace movement's support for a policy of reconciliation and economic appeasement, and for an agreement between the so-called "haves" and "have-nots", also fed into Chamberlain's policy of political appeasement. Yet, in all these examples, the government was committed to these policies regardless of the arguments and pressures expressed by the peace movement.

The British peace movements of the interwar years were certainly vigorous. They were, however, rarely able to come together to act as a coherent force. Each movement was also divided within its own ranks by personal quarrels, political differences and sometimes by accusations of improper conduct. By the end of the decade the peace movement lacked any sense of unity. Gilbert Murray admitted in 1937 that the LNU was "*no longer a Peace Party opposing a Jingo Party. We are a 'League of Collective Security' party opposing pacifists, isolationists, pro-Germans. We are actually for a 'spirited foreign policy!'*"<sup>32</sup> All this drove a deep wedge between the pacifists and the internationalists with the PPU on one side and the LNU leadership, although not all its members, on the other. Cecil complained in May 1935 "*that some pacifists seem to hate collective security even more than they hate rearmament.*" "*The only alternative to the old policy of armaments and alliances*", he argued, "*is that of a league for the mutual defence of all.*"<sup>33</sup> In saying this, Cecil was highlighting the fundamental fracture that ran through the peace movement. The two sides became ever more divided on this issue in the four remaining years before the outbreak of war.

If we accept Ceadel's argument that, by the end of the 1930s, pacifism was "*not so much a policy for war prevention as an act of faith*"<sup>34</sup> or A.J.P. Taylor's view that "pacifism" and "the doctrine of non-resistance" were "*the negation of policy, not an alternative*"<sup>35</sup>, then it should be accepted that its ambition had never been to act directly as a leverage on policy-makers. The PPU saw itself, in the words of Aldous Huxley, as "*a fellowship of men and women... enthusiastic missionaries in the cause*" who regarded their pacifism "*in terms of a Faith.*"<sup>36</sup> For Sheppard the pacifists' "*duty is to prevent war*" and that "*If war comes we shall have failed.*"<sup>37</sup> Unable to come up with an effective or convincing pacifist policy to avoid war and to dampen either international tensions or jingoistic sentiments at home, of which there were in fact very few in the 1930s, the only hope for the pacifist peace movement, and in particular the PPU, was to achieve such a mass membership that the government would be forced to take them into consideration. In July 1935 Sheppard told a meeting at the Albert Hall: "*Send me a million men like you and then any government must look out.*"<sup>38</sup> He did succeed in attracting a mass following with his unequivocal pacifist message but this alone was not enough and even with over 100,000 signatories the PPU

fell far short of its ambitions. Without this it had little chance of bringing about the fundamental change in the government's international outlook that it was aiming to achieve. The claim in 1935 that Sheppard was “*one of the most influential men in England, one who was bound to be considered by leaders of all parties*”<sup>39</sup> or that made by Canon Charles Raven the following year that Christian pacifism was now “*in the sphere of practical politics... The practical politicians were in fact taking pacifism seriously*”<sup>40</sup> overstate their real influence. The PPU had deliberately chosen not to enter the political arena directly by contesting elections or by expressing support for any particular party. Most of its support came from the left although Sheppard himself had voted for the National Government in 1931 and was socially conservative on all domestic policy questions. Any attempt to unite the PPU on a broad range of issues would have been impossible. But it did not want to exist in some sort of spiritual isolation, removed from the real world. Sheppard and other pacifist leaders claimed that they were operating very much in the realm of practical politics and were not confined to ivory towers, Churches or Meeting Houses. In reality, the PPU remained a marginal propaganda group whose ideas had little or no impact on government decisions, voicing a desperate but vain plea for reason and peace in an increasingly unreasonable and violent international environment.

The PPU, like the British peace movement in its entirety, was handicapped by not having the time that it would have needed to move opinion away from the more “realistic” way of viewing international relations and to convince the people of Britain, and elsewhere, of the merits of adopting a more peaceful outlook. Its belief in the force of pacifism was overestimated. If enough men were to simply refuse to fight, they believed, governments would have no other choice than to sue for peace. Individual choices in this sense would come together in a collective movement that would have an irremediable impact on government and bring about peace. The confidence of pacifists, as, for example Donald Soper's argument that “*pacifism contains a spiritual force strong enough to repel any invader*”<sup>41</sup> or Aldous Huxley's that “*pacifism is to war what clean water and clean milk are to typhoid; it makes the outbreak of war impossible*”<sup>42</sup>, seems naïve, especially in the face of the brutality and determination of the potential invaders the country was facing. Nor did it have any means of exercising any real influence over those people who were in positions of power and who could decide on questions of war and peace, neither those in Britain nor, more significantly, internationally who were perfectly immune from any pressure that British or international opinion could deploy.

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## ABSTRACTS

1918 was regarded by many observers at the time as marking the end of an era and the death of the old international order. Hopes for a peaceful future and a deep-rooted abhorrence of war as a means of settling international disputes were characteristic of large parts of British opinion in the interwar years. Pacifism, in its most general sense, was widely shared across British society. British decision makers shared this broadly felt revulsion against war. This was backed up by the purely rational calculation that Britain had nothing to gain from war and that its national interests would be best served by preserving international peace.

These sentiments were channelled via a number of different peace movements which drew on various forms of socialist, humanist and Christian thought. While they all shared a common and broadly peaceful outlook there remained strikingly divergent approaches between what some historians such as A.J.P. Taylor and Martin Ceadel have termed the pacifists as opposed to the pacifists. While the former put forward a broadly peaceful policy the latter group remained opposed to all war on principle, to the point of adopting a policy of non-resistance. Over the course of the interwar years, with the heightened threat to international peace from the revisionist powers in Europe and the Far East, the tensions between the various peace movements became ever greater.

At times, as for example during the Italo-Ethiopian war, the peace movement was able to mobilise a mass following that was able to exercise a significant pressure on decision makers. However, the anti-war sentiments expressed by movements such as the League of Nations Union and the Peace Pledge were in fact widely shared from within official circles. The more clear-cut pacifists however, who refused to support a policy of either rearmament or of collective security in the name of the League of Nations, had little input into policy making and their ideas and leaders were, for the most part, dismissed out of hand. By the time that war came in 1939, both sides of the peace movement had lost much, if not all, of their earlier enthusiasm and support in the country.

Les sentiments pacifistes, dans le sens plus général du terme, furent largement partagés dans la société britannique de l'entre-deux-guerres, même par une partie des décideurs pour qui l'idée d'entrer dans une nouvelle guerre mondiale était vue avec horreur. Cette approche était en accord avec les calculs les plus élémentaires selon lesquels la Grande-Bretagne n'avait rien à gagner et tout à perdre si une telle guerre arrivait.

Ces sentiments se sont exprimés à travers différents mouvements pacifistes fondés sur les idéologies socialiste, humaniste ou chrétienne. Bien que tous partageaient la même vision du monde et une opposition à la guerre, les différents mouvements furent fondamentalement divisés dans leurs approches. D'un côté les pacifistes les plus radicaux restèrent opposés à l'utilisation de la force militaire, même en cas de menace directe, alors que les plus modérés acceptèrent qu'en cas extrême le recours à la guerre pouvait être justifié. La montée des tensions internationales dans les années 1930 accentua ces divisions et les oppositions.

A certains moments, comme par exemple lors de la guerre italo-éthiopienne, les mouvements pacifistes ont su mobilisé un grand nombre de personnes ce qui les a permis d'avoir une influence directe sur la politique menée par le gouvernement et la diplomatie britannique. Cependant l'opposition à la guerre qu'exprima les plus grands mouvements pacifistes comme la

*League of Nations Union* ou la *Peace Pledge Union* fut partagée par la plupart des décideurs. Par contre, l'opposition à la guerre en tout circonstance défendu par les plus radicaux des pacifistes, tout comme leur rejet d'une politique de réarmement ou de sécurité collective à travers la Société des Nations, fut rejetée sans hésitation par les décideurs. Au moment où la guerre s'est déclenchée à nouveau en 1939, le mouvement pacifiste, toute tendance confondue, avait perdu son dynamisme et la plupart de ses soutiens dans le pays.

## INDEX

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