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Original Citation

Ward, Paul (2002) Preparing for the people's war: the left and patriotism in the 1930's. *Labour History Review*, 67 (2). pp. 171-185. ISSN 0961-5652

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PREPARING FOR THE PEOPLE'S WAR: LABOUR AND PATRIOTISM IN THE 1930s

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In the 1930s the Labour Party was engaged in an intense debate over the direction of its foreign policy in response to the rise of expansionist fascist powers in Europe. The left of the party rejected rearmament by the National government. Others, like Hugh Dalton, called for rearmament. Some historians have seen this second stance as incompatible with socialism, describing it as an adjustment to reality. This article argues that the Labour re-armers accommodated national defence within their socialism, and that this benefited the party when in 1940 it entered the Churchill coalition and in 1945 when it faced the electorate.

Party activist and historian alike have remarked upon the lack of interest within the Labour Party for foreign policy. During the Edwardian period, as tensions between Britain and Germany rose, C. H. Norman censured this neglect and suggested that it resulted from the view that socialism was about economics, and that the shortage of democrats versed in its intricacies increased the obscurity of foreign affairs.¹ The 1930s seem an exception to such neglect. The rise of fascism in continental Europe sharpened British Labour's interests in the relationships of its government to those of the other European powers. It is historians rather than contemporaries who neglect Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s. Ralph Miliband naturally devoted a chapter of *Parliamentary Socialism* to Labour's 'failure' to meet the challenge of appeasement, caused, he argued, by its parliamentarism. John Naylor was concerned to decide whether Labour's foreign policy in opposition was a success or failure. Michael Gordon more usefully attempted to delineate the nature of Labour's foreign policy emphasising its ideological aspects. But Gordon saw socialism and realism coming into conflict in the attempts to formulate a foreign policy in the 1930s, hence he views the slow adjustment of Labour to a rearmament position as a surrender of the party's socialism. These three accounts were all written within twenty-five years of the end of the war — that is thirty years ago.² More recent works have examined specific aspects of Labour's foreign policy. Jerry Brookshire is concerned with Labour's proposals for reform of the system of national security, and John Swift has examined Clement Attlee's personal contribution to Labour policy in the 1930s.³ The appeal of the myth of the 'red decade', based on a view that if the right were so wrong in their responses to Britain's problems of unemployment and foreign policy, then the left must have been

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correct, has anyway encouraged a concentration on the left of the labour movement rather than on its mainstream.⁴ The Communist Party, Sir Stafford Cripps and the Socialist League and the Left Book Club have therefore been more popular subjects for study than the dominant centre of the Labour Party.⁵ The historiography of the right in the Labour Party on the other hand continues to be built on biography.⁶ This study aims to re-think the Labour right in the 1930s by examining some of the 'attitudes and perceptions' of leading re-armers.⁷ It argues that Labour's response to the foreign policy of the National governments was not a conflict to readjust to reality, but entailed the continuing formation of a 'British socialism' by the moderates who remained dominant within the Labour Party. This response not only enabled Labour to sweep into a reformed coalition government in May 1940, but also allowed Labour to effectively challenge traditional patriotism, culturally during the war and politically in 1945.

It seemed in the years after 1918 that the left had rejected all patriotism. Memories of the First World War, and the desire to prevent another, led Labour to be associated with a rhetorical anti-patriotism. Hence Attlee told the 1934 Labour conference that, 'We have absolutely abandoned every idea of nationalist loyalty. We are deliberately putting a world order before our loyalty towards our own country'.⁸ Ramsay MacDonald's betrayal of the Labour Party in the name of the national interest further diverted Labour from a view of socialism as the onward march of the nation. So, a historian of patriotism has commented that in this decade the left could raise a glow only for foreign *patriae*, and George Orwell remarked upon how Soviet Russia and Republican Spain had become the focus for the left's 'transferred nationalism'.⁹ The apparent reluctance of Labour to support rearmament in the face of rising expansionist dictatorships increased the view of the party as little concerned with patriotism. It seemed that the party was calling for collective security but did not support the establishment of the means to ensure the viability of such a policy. The left, it seemed, called for arms for Spain but not for Britain. The party, and the left in general, distrusted the National government to the extent that it believed that the government was pro-fascist, or indeed proto-fascist. For example, Herbert Morrison called Neville Chamberlain 'pro-Fascist in his foreign policy', and Stafford Cripps wrote of 'National' fascism in Britain. Councillor W. Hodgkiss of Dudley Labour Party saw a 'common parentage' to the Reichstag fire election in Germany and 'the "national" patriotic election in 1931'.¹⁰ The ideological divide between government and opposition, it appeared, was too substantial for Labour to overcome in the interests of the nation.

The British left, including the Labour Party, therefore gave the impression of having rejected patriotism in the 1930s. Labour's move towards the acceptance of the need to re-arm is consequently seen as an abandonment of its past, as a conflict between ideology and reality, in which the latter eventually won. However, it is argued here that Labour's internal dispute over foreign policy was conducted between different varieties of socialist ideas. For moderate Labour, patriotism and a concern for British interests were not seen as incompatible with their form of socialism but as complementary. They did not see their support for rearmament in the late 1930s as a repudiation of their socialism, but as a necessary move for its defence. This study examines the ideas of a disparate group of figures on the right of the party, people like Hugh Dalton, William Gillies, Evan Durbin and Richard Crossman, who turned their attention to the position of Germany within Europe, and drew the rest of the party towards an anti-appeasement stance.

Dalton, Gillies and Germany

Hugh Dalton was on the right of the party, but, none the less, described himself as a socialist. From early on in the 1930s he was concerned that Germany posed a threat to European stability and British democracy. Some historians have seen his position as precarious and unrepresentative of the party,¹¹ but as Ben Pimlott has pointed out, Dalton was the party's principal spokesperson on foreign affairs from 1935 until 1940, trusted by the party leadership to draft important policy documents and to lead the attack on the left and disarmers at conference.¹² Dalton was convinced of the dangers of Nazism, but more than this had seen Germany as a problem for international relations within Europe. This underpinned his hostility towards Germans evident since the First World War, and was enhanced by his fleeting encounter with Nazism in April 1933.¹³ He returned from four days in Germany writing that, 'Germany is horrible. A European war must be counted now among the probabilities of the next ten years'.¹⁴ An ally of Dalton in this antipathy to Germans was William Gillies, international secretary to the Labour Party between 1920 and 1945.¹⁵ Gillies is best known for his wartime memorandum entitled 'German Social Democracy: Notes on its Foreign Policy' which he produced in October 1941. Philip Noel-Baker, of Labour's National Executive, summarised the memorandum as containing 'the implication that the majority of the German Social Democratic Party were in the last war the willing tool of the Kaiser, and that they would have been since 1933 the accomplice of the Nazis, had Hitler allowed them to be so'.¹⁶ Gillies also went on to play a role in the 'Fight for Freedom' group in the Labour Party which saw its role as providing 'more complete and accurate knowledge of the historical events which led Europe again in to war'.¹⁷ It is little surprise that Denis Healey, Gillies' successor as international secretary, was later to describe him as a 'cantankerous Scot who distrusted foreigners and hated all Germans'.¹⁸ Like Dalton, Gillies' distrust of Germans had emerged before the accession to power of Hitler and the Nazis.¹⁹ In 1932 Rennie Smith, later secretary of the 'Fight for Freedom' group, sent Gillies copies of letters he had received from German pacifist socialists. Gillies marked the sections that he found significant. These included the arguments that 'The danger of a German breach of the peace is extraordinarily great', and that 'Even important sections of the Socialdemocratic [*sic*] Party, and especially of the Trade Unions, are infected with nationalism'.²⁰ Gillies forwarded the letters to Arthur Henderson with the comment that they 'unfortunately confirm the worst impressions of my visit to Berlin'.²¹

The majority of the Labour Party did not share Dalton and Gillies' anti-German views but they, with others, were, however, able to convert the party, haltingly, towards the view that it must support rearmament. Such an alteration was not only made possible through a negative view of the German or Nazi 'other', but also by the construction of a positive view of British democracy and the national character.

National character

In *Practical Socialism for Britain*, published in 1935, Dalton outlined a version of the British national character that included distaste for doctrine, a gift for compromise, a sense of humour and of 'fair play' and above all a capacity for self-government.²² This was a country

in which democracy was suited to the temperament of the people. This version of the national character was little different to that espoused by a wide range of politicians and intellectuals who wished to mark Britain off as fundamentally different to its continental neighbours who were experiencing political upheaval. Stanley Baldwin as leader of the Conservative Party between 1922 and 1937 used such a version of the national character to successfully marginalize extremist politics in Britain, but additionally to exclude Labour from government as far as possible. Baldwin may have been keen to see 'fair play' offered to Labour in 1923 when the electorate had again rejected tariff reform, but Englishness of Baldwin's sort rejected socialism and socialists as foreign. Baldwin sought to suggest that British politics only had room for particular parties that took national character and traditions into account. In addition, many within the Conservative Party sought to associate themselves with the national interest, portraying Labour and the trade unions as sectional, aggressive, militant and selfish. Hence the General Strike of 1926 was cast as the self-seeking actions of un-patriotic and anti-English trade unionists, determined to challenge the constitution and in turn to bring the nation to its knees.²³ Dalton did not repudiate recourse to ideas about national character, but rather contested Labour's exclusion. He was aided in this construction by allies involved in the formulation of a 'democratic socialism'.

Foremost among them was Evan Durbin.²⁴ He drew on an interpretation of British history that placed the Labour Party in its historical context as a moderate, democratic and parliamentary party. He argued that it was one thousand years since Britain had been successfully invaded, three hundred years since an armed insurrection had occurred, two hundred and fifty years since any revolution, and one hundred years since a political assassination. Britain had therefore been remarkably stable (Durbin like so many of the English was clumsy about utilising the terminology of nationality in the United Kingdom). Despite this stability, he argued, there had also been 'an uninterrupted process of change'. The Puritan Revolution destroyed absolute monarchical government, the restoration had destroyed party dictatorship, and the great Reform Act of 1832 had ended the aristocratic oligarchy. The broadening of the franchise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had delivered political power to the workers.²⁵ The whiggish nature of such interpretation was fully drawn out in Durbin's comment that, 'in British history — the Left is always victorious — slowly and gradually but always'.²⁶ Some on the left of the party challenged such assumptions. Hence Harold Laski offered a materialist interpretation for Britain's stability: 'Its insular position, its historic traditions, its great wealth with its consequential capacity to set the limits of concession wider than elsewhere, are all of them, of course, important safeguards against extreme measures', he wrote, 'but they are no more final safeguards here than have proved elsewhere'.²⁷ But it was Durbin's version of British history that, as argued below, was more within the traditions of the party.

Durbin and others built on the work done by Ramsay MacDonald and others between the 1890s and 1920s to establish democracy as central to socialism; the historically specific nature of democracy in Britain, they argued, created a distinct British socialism which was parliamentary and evolutionary.²⁸ In this view, as Attlee explained, the Labour Party was 'an expression of the Socialist movement adapted to British conditions'.²⁹ Dalton too was emphatic upon this point, declaring that 'the British Labour Party is a tree native to this island'. Bearing in mind his remarks that the British national character resented doctrine, he rejected a Marxist derivation for Labour. Instead, 'we derive, in so far as we

derive at all from writers, chiefly from native sources, from Bentham and Owen, Morris and Ruskin, Blatchford, the Webbs and Shaw, Wells ... Tawney and Cole'. This was a well-trodden theme in Labour's version of its history. Sidney Webb had used similar terminology as chairman of the conference in 1923. 'We must always remember,' Webb said, 'that the founder of British socialism was not Karl Marx but Robert Owen, and that Robert Owen preached not "class war" but the ancient doctrine of human fellowship — a faith and a hope reaffirmed in the words of that other great British socialist — William Morris.'³⁰ Such adherence to the view of Britain as unique in its form of socialism did not necessarily mean resolute support for rearmament as it did in Dalton's case. Durbin was far less undecided, supporting the Munich settlement.³¹ Indeed others could oppose rearmament while holding to the view of British peculiarity. Hence C. S. Darvill, president of Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, rejected allowing the National Government to re-arm, but none the less declared that,

A great responsibility rests upon our Movement, for it is the British people who must turn the tide of Fascism in Europe. Our people have great traditions of struggle for liberty. We led the way in the organisation of Trade Unions. We have produced men like Robert Owen, Morris, the Tolpuddle martyrs, Keer Hardy [*sic*] and Tom Mann, who have fought for a new and happier world.³²

Internationalism and British democracy

Such a view of Britain's special place in the world did however enable arguments for rearmament to be framed in terms of a defence of democracy. Christine Collette has recently argued that 'between the wars, internationalism was not the dogma of the revolutionary few, but commonly understood as the basis of socialism by the mainstream of the Labour Movement, its revolutionary and evolutionary wings, its leadership and its membership'. She persuasively shows how in the areas of anti-alcohol campaigns, housing, education, sport, language, music, women, young people and co-operators, that the British left operated in an international context, with Gillies providing the organisation for 'mass membership internationalism'.³³ But internationalism, as many British socialists had long pointed out, was not anti-nationalism. Internationalism did not mean that the workers had no country but that there was a plurality of patriotisms, and that therefore the nation needed defending against external threats. This had been the foundation of socialist defence policies since the formation of the Second International in 1889.³⁴

In addition, while the Communist Party's internationalism was focused on Soviet Russia, the preferred countries of affection for the Labour moderates were specifically held up to be model democracies. Czechoslovakia had been a focus of admiration long before the crisis of September 1938. Dalton wrote in May 1935 that, 'I have recently spent three weeks in Czechoslovakia, to-day by far the freest and most civilized land in Central Europe. I wish that more of my fellow countrymen, venturing abroad, would take that road ... [to see] the simple decencies of democracy maintained, amid the surrounding decadence'.³⁵ Ernest Bevin at the 1936 Labour conference described Czechoslovakia as 'one of the most glorious little democratic countries, hedged in all round'.³⁶ Republican Spain during the civil war provides a further and more important example, since reaction to that war had a specific bearing on Labour's attitude to British foreign policy. The Labour

leadership initially supported the National government's position of non-intervention because of the threat of escalation into a general European war. 'Arms for Spain' was rejected as party policy. The leadership, however, reversed its position overnight at the 1936 Edinburgh conference when a representative from the Spanish Republic addressed the conference. Dalton was less enamoured with Spanish democracy than most in the Labour movement. 'When the Spanish left lost the elections in 1934', he noted, 'they started an armed revolt to reverse the result of voting.'³⁷ However the decision that fascism in Spain could only be defeated through arms added great weight to the arguments of Dalton and Bevin that Britain too should re-arm in preparation for war with Nazi Germany.

The importance attached to democracy also made relations with Communist Russia difficult. Dalton and the Labour moderates did want a defensive alliance with Russia against Germany and many believed, like Herbert Morrison, that the Soviet Union was 'a genuine power for peace'.³⁸ Most did remain critical of Marxism and the lack of democracy in Russia. Communism was perceived, like fascism, as a threat to democracy. The TUC General Council in 1932 warned those who 'cannot understand that Communism stands for a dictatorship just as ruthless to minority opinion as Fascism'. Walter Citrine, in a foreword to the National Joint Council's pamphlet on *Hitlerism* (1933) linked external and domestic attacks on democracy. Hence he cautioned that, 'Far too many people in the Labour Movement are not only critical but scornful of Parliamentary Government. It is about time we cleared the decks for the settlement of the issue of democracy or dictatorship'.³⁹ In particular Labour continued to reject all association with British Communism. The National Executive in January 1936 and the party conference in October rejected the Communist Party of Great Britain's latest request for affiliation.⁴⁰ At the same time, the Labour Party entered into a contest with the CPGB over strategies in the fight against fascism. Some within the Labour Party supported the Communists' calls for, first, a united front and, subsequently, a Popular Front, including Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan. In 1939 the National Executive responded by expelling the rebels. Labour moderates were keen not to be involved in Communist initiatives. They also criticised the ideological underpinning of such strategies. Evan Durbin, for example, contributed an article to the *Daily Herald* explaining 'Why I am not a Marxist'.⁴¹ Within the same category, others who questioned the defence of Britain on the grounds that its economic and power structures remained capitalist were also repudiated. 'There are some who deny that freedom can exist in a capitalist society', Citrine explained for the TUC.

They regard it as a bourgeois institution of no real value to the people. It is not to disregard the disabilities of a wages system under capitalist control of industry, to point out that in Great Britain an individual normally possesses certain liberties that are worth preserving. The State has not yet the authority to shoot citizens without trial. Nor do people disappear at the hands of the secret police; nor is criticism of the Government a crime...⁴²

Democracy was therefore seen as something especially British. Morrison argued that, 'Of all the great countries in the world, we are, I think, so far, the most successful in the art of self-government'.⁴³ This attitude gave the left the belief that Britain should take the lead in democracy's defence. Therefore during the Czech crisis, Labour demanded the recall of Parliament, 'that historic assembly of our democratic State', and when war finally broke out in September 1939, one draft of Labour's statement on the war was

headed 'Britain's Historic Task', explaining that 'Britain in the past has led the world in the development of Parliamentary democracy and civil freedom. If these precious gains are not now to perish from the earth, it is imperative to break the evil power of Totalitarian tyranny in Europe'.⁴⁴

Imperialism

The existence of the British Empire had for long posed doubts about the unconditional nature of British democracy. Stephen Howe has identified four currents of thought on colonial issues among the British left between the wars. There were, he says, 'Empire Socialists' who supported the imperial idea and protectionism, 'constructive imperialists' who saw Empire as a force for good, and those who wanted social and economic development to buttress active preparation for self-government. Finally, there were some anticolonialists.⁴⁵ Only the latter group, who had little influence on the Labour Party's leadership or policies, held that the existence of Empire and British democracy were incompatible and therefore to defend democracy, empire should be brought to an end. G. D. H. Cole, for example, argued in 1937 that, 'Colonial empire is a plain denial of democracy: it is a predatory institution which no real democracy can defend. It is, moreover, an insuperable barrier to the secure establishment of peace. Away with it!'.⁴⁶

Even those who were not anticolonialists could feel uncomfortable about the Empire. '[I]s this society of ours purchased at the expense of a slave population scattered throughout the world?', Durbin asked in the context of the 'people's war'.⁴⁷ Howe argues that the consensus on the Labour benches was 'developmentalist, paternalist, emphasising economic rather than political change', but firmly excluded talk of decolonisation.⁴⁸ Much of Labour therefore opposed imperialism but could not envisage the end of empire. They therefore felt the need to ease their discomfort about Empire. They attempted to achieve this in a variety of ways. Much of the British left thought that they had to accept the fact of empire. Ramsay MacDonald, one of the few Labour leaders to give sustained consideration to the Empire, had argued as far back as 1898 that 'The question of Empire cannot be decided on first principles, so far as this country is concerned. We have a history and it is an imperial one'.⁴⁹ Also, many assumed that Britain was the best-fitted power to rule an empire, because its history had been linked to the advancement of political institutions based on liberty. Again, MacDonald best expressed this assumption, in his formulation of the 'Imperial Standard' to which the Empire should be reformed. This would bring British criteria to the practice of justice and administration of the Empire, 'the inheritance which past experience has taught the present generation to cherish'.⁵⁰ The Labour leadership continued to think along such lines in the 1930s, so while Attlee felt that imperialism was a taint incompatible with the democratic principle, he believed that British imperialism was most able to lead to the 'gradual extension of self-government to all' within the Empire.⁵¹ At the 1937 conference, attitudes to the defence of the Empire were framed in exactly these terms of British democracy, when John Walker MP, speaking for the National Executive, was heckled from the floor. 'Britain, the Mother of Democracy, has always stood for democratic liberty (a voice: "India"). Yes, India, Shall we leave India for Japan, Germany or Italy to go into? ... under the British flag there is more democracy than there is under the flag of any other country in the world.'⁵²

This attitude was backed up by another method used by Labour to cope with the incongruities of democracy and empire. Differentiation was made between the dominions and India and the colonies. The dominions were admired as a force for democracy in their own right. Dalton saw his visit to Australia and New Zealand in 1938 as one to 'sunny, healthy British Democracies in the South Pacific'.⁵³ This enabled Labour to call the Empire by the more acceptable names of 'Britannic Alliance' or 'the British Commonwealth of Free Nations'.⁵⁴ In these circumstances it was the abuses of imperialism that were the objects requiring reform rather than imperialism itself.

Finally, in the 1930s attention was focused primarily on Europe because that was the centre of tension in international relations. On the whole, the seriousness of developments within Europe meant that Labour gave little attention to the Empire in the 1930s.⁵⁵ While the Conservative Party was severely divided over its policies towards India, few in the Labour Party, other than Attlee, contributed to the debates leading to the Government of India Act of 1935.⁵⁶ Few other imperial issues broke the surface within Labour politics. In 1938, Labour MP William Lunn pointed out in the House of Commons' debate on the unrest in the West Indies that, 'It is a rare thing for any event that takes place in any British colony to get any sort of publicity in this country ... something really sensational has to happen if anything is to take place in this country with regard to the colonies'.⁵⁷ The sensational was happening in Europe, and the left's attention was fixed there. There was some attention paid to China, but it was an aggressive Japanese imperialism that was seen as the problem rather than imperialism as such. The link between imperialism and war were becoming divorced in Labour's discourse. Howe has pointed out that Radical-Liberal and Leninist analyses of imperialism connected it intimately to the outbreak of war in 1914.⁵⁸ In the 1930s, outside the Communist Party and Independent Labour Party, few held such views. If imperialism was likely to be a cause of war then it was Nazi and fascist imperialism that was to be held responsible rather than the imperialism of the democratic powers.

There was some truth in George Orwell's remark of 1939 that, 'in an imperialist country, left-wing politics are always partly humbug'.⁵⁹ Much of the Labour Party side-stepped the necessity to discuss imperialism in connection with foreign policy, except to congratulate the British on their achievement of making imperialism a vehicle for the export of democracy. This enabled Labour to append a further criticism to their attacks on the Conservative/National government, for as Attlee declared in 1937, 'The imperialism of the Conservative Party, so far from preserving the British Empire and Commonwealth, is calculated to lose the one and break up the other'.⁶⁰

Speaking for Britain

By the late 1930s, the Labour right saw itself as better able to defend Britain than the ruling class, whom they saw as a sectional, partisan interest. Labour regularly branded the government as 'the so-called "National" Government'.⁶¹ While the 1931 crisis is seen as pushing the party to the left, towards a more class-based view of politics, the response of some on the right of the party confirmed their view of Labour as a national party seeking to prevent the usurpation of the nation by parasitic bankers and their political allies. Hence in 1931, Durbin, fighting the unwinnable seat of East Grinstead, accused

'the Conservative Party [of] trying to snatch a victory for the forces of reaction, and have chosen to set their sectional interests before those of the nation'.⁶² At the other end of the country, in Barnard Castle, Will Lawther headed his 'Election News', 'Nation Faces the Bankers'. He also called for 'Britain for the British', a slogan in use since the 1890s. Coined by Robert Blatchford, it expressed the belief that Britain did not belong to the British but the very rich few. It therefore inferred that socialists had a patriotic purpose.⁶³ Despite the severe damage caused to Labour's conception of national unity by the fall of the Labour government, there remained an underlying patriotism within the labour movement. Herbert Morrison after a visit to the United States recorded that, 'I'm glad to be back. When I saw England again I thought what a wonderful country it is. There is something so sound about it all'.⁶⁴ There was a sense of ownership by the left of the nation; hence George Lansbury entitled his 1934 book, *My England*. While he opposed allowing the National government, as an 'ally of Fascism', to re-arm, Jack Clayton of Bury Labour Party, still referred to 'this great country of ours', and at the 1939 Labour conference, A. F. Seares of Balham and Tooting Divisional Labour Party used the phrase, 'this England of ours'.⁶⁵ Even in the immediate aftermath of the 1931 reverse the party could declare that, 'If Patriotism means the love of actual men and women — of common folk of our own kind — not admiration of Kings and "great" men — then Socialism is patriotic'. For Labour then, it continued, 'England and Scotland and Wales are the railwaymen, the postmen, the textile workers and the women in poor homes, whom we all know'.⁶⁶

This linked in well with the investigation of 'the common people' being carried out by many vaguely left-wing individuals and organisations in the 1930s. As Raphael Samuel has commented, 'Cultural nationalism is an inescapable sub-text in 1930s literature and *leitmotif* of the documentary movement in writing and film'.⁶⁷ The various documentarists in cinema, literature and social survey sought to get into the everyday experience of masses, to understand, extract and privilege this as the national culture, imbued with a democratic and populist edge.⁶⁸ Labour too participated in this social investigation, for example with its commission on the 'distressed areas' in 1937, undertaken by Dalton, George Dallas and Barbara Ayrton Gould.⁶⁹ Labour's enquiries were not just about the problem of social poverty but also involved the discovery of a national popular culture.⁷⁰ This construction of national culture in the realm of everyday life fed directly into the emergence of the perception of a people's war once Labour had entered the government in 1940.

Faced with aggressive European dictatorships, parts of the Labour Party linked two forms of patriotism, the need to defend the nation externally with an inward-looking patriotism that urged the improvement of the condition of the people.⁷¹ As Brookshire has pointed out, some advocates of rearmament campaigned for *defence* measures such as fighter planes, anti-aircraft guns and balloon barrages, because 'Defending Britain's population and economy appealed to the public and to Labour's constituencies, and on this Labour made its most telling criticisms of military unpreparedness'.⁷² Both Huddersfield and Sheffield Labour Parties criticised the inadequate nature of the air raid precautions of the National Government, and called for greater provision to be made.⁷³ None the less, Labour wanted Britain to be able to win any future war. Evan Durbin argued that, 'In an age of power politics — I want this country — my country — to win ... I want England to live and grow'.⁷⁴ Richard Crossman wanted Labour to lead 'a national revival'.⁷⁵ On

2 September 1939, Leo Amery, a Conservative anti-appeasement MP, called on Arthur Greenwood to 'Speak for England!'. That there was some conflict between class and nation within the Labour Party was shown by the call from the Labour benches to 'Speak for the working class!'. But that parts of the Labour Party were comfortable with the idea of speaking for the nation, as long as the right terminology was employed, was further revealed by the call to 'Speak for Britain!'.⁷⁶

These developments were not altogether unproblematic. Following the Munich settlement, discussions took place between rebel Tories and Hugh Dalton about possible joint action. The rebels wanted a Labour amendment that would enable them to support it. Dalton recorded that 'One draft which they pressed upon me spoke of "national unity and strength"'. He said to Churchill: 'That is not our jargon.' The party was not yet ready to modify its earlier vocabulary of internationalism and collective security towards that of patriotism and national defence. A further dilemma was posed by the imposition of conscription in early 1939. The Labour Party was by now fully committed to rearmament, but the government's announcement of conscription increased the party's distrust as Chamberlain had pledged not to do so. Labour opposed military conscription fearing that it would be followed up with industrial conscription.⁷⁷ Historians, such as Naylor and Miliband, have seen Labour's opposition as a serious mistake, questioning the resolution of their conversion to rearmament, while Gordon has seen this as a conflict between Labour's socialism and its realism in foreign affairs.⁷⁸ In fact, Labour's opposition to conscription revealed a conflict between two forms of patriotism. For the Conservatives, patriotism meant defence of the nation against its external enemies, whilst for Labour, by 1939, patriotism meant defence of the nation but also a concern for the condition of the people. Hence, Labour MPs had little difficulty in asserting their patriotism in the debate on conscription, but the nation they loved included 'The old British tradition of freedom' with which they found compulsion incompatible.⁷⁹ This was recognised by Richard Crossman, who saw conscription as necessary. Labour's opposition to compulsory military service, he argued, was not

the result of fears of Fascism or industrial conscription or a dislike of broken pledges, nor did it have anything Socialistic in it: on the contrary it sprang from the peaceful sentiments of an island people, guarded for generations by a strong navy, and governed by an adroit ruling class, which could afford to pay men to do its fighting instead of compelling its subjects to do so.⁸⁰

Labour and the war

Once war broke out, there was less conflict between Labour's socialism and its patriotism; the former was, by the end of the 1930s, re-established as nationally minded. The majority within the party accepted the view that it was a necessity to fight Germany. A few within the party declared the war as of an 'imperialist character',⁸¹ but the rebuttal came from Harold Laski, on the left of the party, that, 'British imperialism has passed its stage of expansion and aggression'.⁸² Labour's attitude was Whiggish in that it privileged parliamentary democracy within British history and as central to socialism. Yet it also saw the social condition of the people within patriotic terms. For many in the Labour Party, the failure of the 'National' government in foreign and defence policy terms amounted to a failure of patriotism. Hence Labour refused to serve in a coalition government in 1939, though

Attlee stressed that Labour would be loyal in its opposition.⁸³ Those Tories who wanted to work with Labour would have to have already proved their worth as patriots.⁸⁴ Labour's confidence in itself and in its place within the nation was heightened by the events of 1940, but also because as Dalton pointed out, 'The British Labour Party and the Trade Union Movement showed, from the first a better judgement of Hitlerism than the Conservatives, the City and the Peerage'.⁸⁵

Labour could also delineate what it was fighting for with greater clarity than the Conservatives. In 1942 Evan Durbin published *What Have We To Defend?*. Brooke has called it 'a striking example of socialism as patriotism'.⁸⁶ Durbin recognised Britain's 'national faults' — economic and social inequality, vandalism of Britain's heritage and countryside, and a lack of imagination, but he believed in the unity of the nation. It could build on its strengths — tolerance, brotherhood, courage, and intelligence. He lent a democratic edge to 'courage' as a national strength, citing 'Every busman who drives through a raid, every workman who continues at his lathe after the alert, every woman who makes her home in a windowless house'.⁸⁷ Such strengths, he argued, made it worthwhile to undertake social change in Britain, with socialism the British method for doing so. Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* is by the far the better remembered book of similar content, but its advocacy of revolution, however 'English', contradicted the version of 'British socialism', founded on parliamentarism and adhered to by much of the Labour Party.⁸⁸

Whatever the limits to the impact of war as a radicalising force,⁸⁹ in 1945 Labour faced the electorate with two forms of patriotism intertwined. Labour connected its own inward-looking patriotism based on social reform to an outward-looking form linked to defence. During the period of the war it was this combination that was branded as 'British Socialism'. During the election campaign, Conservatives linked Labour's socialism to foreignness and Nazism. Winston Churchill took the lead with his accusation that Labour would require some form of Gestapo to impose its programme, but local parties used similar styles of attack. In Chelmsford, the Commonwealth candidate was asked 'What do the letters NAZI stand for?' and 'Have we not been fighting National Socialism for years?'.⁹⁰ Labour's confidence was such that these accusations were easily rebutted. Attlee replied directly to Churchill that British socialism was a product of Robert Owen and not of Marx. He continued by reaffirming his pride in 'the fact that our country in the hours of its greatest danger stood firm and united'.⁹¹ This confidence was not only a product of the war, but also of the 1930s when Dalton and others called for rearmament. As Morrison had put in plain words in the debate on the Munich settlement in 1938, 'Our country is less secure. Our country is in greater danger and there sit the men [on the Conservative front bench] who have put our country in danger'.⁹² In 1940 the best-selling pamphlet *Guilty Men* had reiterated the failure of those who called themselves patriots to defend the nation: 'MacDonald and Baldwin took over a great empire, supreme in arms and secure in liberty. They conducted it to the edge of national annihilation'.⁹³ As Finney has pointed out, *Guilty Men*, was fundamentally premised on an assumption of British strength and that therefore policy makers in the 1930s had a choice and had chosen appeasement.⁹⁴ Labour was now confident that the public would understand that it would have made alternative choices based on its 'British socialism', so that when the 'people's war' came in 1940, the Labour right was ready to take political advantage of it, for the benefit of the whole party. During the 1930s many within the Labour Party and on the

left generally had already decided that the nation was composed of ordinary British people and that Labour's socialism was integral to the parliamentary history of the nation. Labour did not, therefore, go into the Second World War as an unpatriotic party infected by the mood of a red decade, but had been preparing for the people's war for a number of years.

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