

**Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the British Left,
1919–1939**

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Abstract

Analyses of fascism by the British left between the wars are often overlooked. A common perception exists that the leading organisations of the British labour movement were, in comparison with their European counterparts, deficient in ideology and gripped by an innate moderation, and that these factors negated the worth of their thoughts and actions concerning fascism.

The smaller organisations of the British left have also been dismissed on the grounds that they were too small and politically ineffectual for their theories to have had any relevance, and that in any case, the quality of British Marxism, and therefore its analytical validity, was so poor as to invalidate their theorising. The Communist Party of Great Britain has sometimes been overlooked on the assumption that it was merely a creature of the Soviet Union, without value of its own.

This study is a re-examination of the British left's varied comprehensions of fascism. It provides evidence of a range of ideas and strategies that, given the different national circumstances, stand comparison with those advanced by labour movements elsewhere in Europe. Furthermore, it argues that the organisations concerned constructed definitions of fascism that were dictated both by wider political perspectives and immediate political needs. When these changed, so too did the parties' depictions of fascism. The critiques they developed not only justified the world-view of the organisation concerned, but were also used as weapons with which to attack its competitors on the left. A party's overarching political stance and its position relative to that of its rivals informed its depiction of fascism. This was also true of the left's interpretations of the counter-revolutionary movements that existed immediately prior to the emergence of fascism. The study therefore includes a chapter outlining the antagonistic pattern of the left's conflicting analyses of counter-revolution and the potential sources of reaction and dictatorship during and immediately after the First World War.

Yet the study also establishes the fact that all parties of the left nevertheless emphasised the economic aspects of fascism when seeking to identify its essence. This was an approach that flowed from their fundamental agreement, stated to a greater or lesser degree, that society was divided into competing classes and that the economic orientation of any given movement or theory could locate it in the political firmament.

That fascism was interpreted subjectively, in accordance with the politics of the analyst, has implications for the study of the subject today. There is a current within contemporary scholarship that seeks an agreed definition of fascism. Yet those who examine the phenomenon, if the above is true, must fail to find common ground while they approach it from wholly different perspectives. Concurrence can only be achieved once the wider framework within which

fascism is to be examined has been agreed. This necessitates a debate concerning the nature of the society that fascism sprang from, and over which aspects of that society it sought to defend in practice. The study maintains that this approach is preferable to attempts to define fascism through superficial listings of its characteristics, or by examining the misleading and contradictory justifications advanced by fascists themselves.

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I am also deeply grateful to Jack Jones for sharing memories of the labour movement, his anti-fascist activities and his service in the International Brigades in Spain. Bill Hunter similarly furnished me with invaluable information on his experiences as a member of the fledgling British Trotskyist movement, the ILP and the Socialist Anti-War Front. That Bill, then aged eighty four, insisted upon keeping our appointment on the day after he had been in hospital for an eye operation only deepened my appreciation of his help.

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

Arditi del Popolo: Italian anti-fascist militia.

Biennio Rosso: Literally, ‘the two red years’ of 1919 and 1920, which saw waves of strikes and occupations in Italy.

BF: British Fascisti/British Fascists. Early manifestation of fascism in Britain. Formed in May 1923. Changed name to British Fascists in 1924.

BSLO: British Section of the Left Opposition. British Trotskyist organisation founded in April 1932. It evolved from the ‘Balham Group’ of the CPGB that had developed sympathies with the opposition in the Soviet Union and supported Trotsky’s critique of Stalin and Stalinism.

BSP: British Socialist Party. British Marxist party formed in October 1911. The party became increasingly divided over the issue of support for the First World War, leading its founder, Henry Mayers Hyndman, and his sympathisers to leave in 1916 to found the pro-war National Socialist Party. The bulk of the BSP later supported affiliation to the CPGB in 1920.

BUF: British Union of Fascists. Founded in October 1932 by Oswald Mosley and others after the failure of the New Party.

CNT: *Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo*. Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation.

CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain. British section of the Communist International, founded in August 1920.

Falange Espanola: Spanish fascist organisation founded in October 1933.

Fasci di azione rivoluzionaria: Pro-war Italian nationalist group formed in January 1915.

Fasci di combattimento: Original name of the Italian fascist movement formed in Milan in March 1919. Later organised as the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*.

Freikorps: Semi-independent right wing paramilitary units formed in Germany after the First World War. Fought against revolutionaries and strikers inside Germany, and on Germany’s disputed borders in Silesia and the Baltic.

Gleichschaltung: ‘Co-ordination’ of German organisations, institutions and economic functions under Nazism.

ILP: Independent Labour Party. Formed in 1893 and one of the founding organisations of the Labour Party. The ILP retained an independent membership structure within Labour, and split from the larger party in 1932, partly over the issue of the independence of its MPs from the Labour whip.

KPD: *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*. The German section of the Communist International, formed in December 1918.

LSI: Labour & Socialist International. The international association of socialist and social democratic parties. Labour and the SPD were founder members. Formed at an international conference in Berne in February 1919 as the successor to the Second International.

NCCL: National Council for Civil Liberties. Formed at the Congress of Action Against Hunger, Fascism and War in Bermondsey Town Hall following the 1934 Hunger march to London.

NSDAP: *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei*. Full name of the Nazi Party.

OMS: Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. British government organisation formed in September 1925 in anticipation of a general strike.

PCI: *Partito Comunista Italiana*. Italian section of the Communist International. Founded after a split within the Italian Socialist Party in January 1921.

POUM: *Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista*. Spanish anti-Stalinist Marxist party that had international links with the ILP in Britain.

PSI: *Partito Socialista Italiana*. Italian socialist party formed in 1892.

Reichsbanner: German paramilitary organisation linked to the Social Democratic Party. Later organised as the Iron Front.

Rotfrontkampferbund: Red Front Fighters' League. Paramilitary organisation of the German Communist Party (KPD).

SA: *Sturmabteilung*. The Nazi Party's brownshirt militia. It's leaders were brutally purged by Hitler in 1934 over their calls for a 'second revolution' which would alter the balance of economic power in Germany.

SPD: *Socialistische Partei Deutschlands*: German social democratic party founded in 1869. Its initial Marxism gradually evolved into reformism. The SPD was the German section of the Labour & Socialist International.

TUC: Trades Union Congress. British trade union confederation founded in 1868. Organisationally linked to the Labour Party in the National Joint Council, later renamed the National Council of Labour.

USI: *Unione Sindacale Italiana*. Italian anarcho-syndicalist union.

WSF: Workers' Socialist Federation. British Marxist party formed in September 1918 by Sylvia Pankhurst and others. Briefly part of the CPGB in

1921. Expelled for supporting the Russian Left Opposition and over Pankhurst's opposition to communist attempts to affiliate with Labour.

Introduction

The definitions of Fascism abound, and are marked by the greatest diversity and even contradictory character, despite the identity of the concrete reality which it is attempted to describe.

Rajani Palme Dutt (1934)¹

This is a study of analyses of fascism² put forward by the British left in the inter-war years.³ It will chart the origins of these perceptions by examining the response of the left to counter-revolutionary movements that existed during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The differences and similarities in the various interpretations advanced by the parties of the left will be examined, as will the role that these analyses played in the relations between them.

The study also seeks to identify the various strategies that the British left developed to oppose fascism, and what these can tell us about the nature of the organisations. As a consequence of exploring these issues, the study will set out the implications of its findings for the contemporary study of fascism.

The first chapter will examine the different approaches of socialists and communists in Britain to various counter-revolutionary movements that became

¹ Palme Dutt, R. Fascism and Social Revolution (London, 1934), p. 73.

² 'Fascism' is a much-abused term, so it may be useful here to clarify its use within this study. When used generically it may be taken to apply to the Italian and German movements or regimes, and those, such as the British Union of Fascists, or the *Falange Espanola*, which despite peculiar national characteristics, consciously modelled themselves on either or both of the aforementioned.

³ 'The left', for the purposes of this study comprises the Labour Party (and organisations of the Labour left, such as the Socialist League), the Trades Union Congress, the Independent Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain (and the smaller parties that amalgamated to form it in 1920), the Plebs' League and the small Trotskyist groups that appeared during the 1930s. More broadly based organisations, such as the Left Book Club and the National Council for Civil Liberties, are cited when used as forums in which the views of the subject parties were aired.

prominent during and after the First World War. This will help to clarify the continuities that ran through the left's understanding of counter-revolution and its supporters throughout the period. The second chapter looks at the left's assessments of Italian fascism, from its beginnings as a movement through its assumption of power and the development of its ideology. The third chapter charts the left's perceptions of Nazism, from its origins to its assumption of power in January 1933 and the consolidation of Hitler's rule in June 1934.

The fourth and fifth chapters concern the left's response to British fascist movements. The various parties' assessments as to the likelihood of fascism emerging from sources other than paramilitary-style organisations such as the British Union of Fascists are also included here. The sixth and final chapter examines the left's analyses of the Spanish Civil War and of 'mature' fascism in Italy and Germany up to 1939.

It has often been assumed that the British left's analyses of fascism and value of their anti-fascist tactics between the wars were of lesser importance than those of their European counterparts. The immense quantity of work dedicated to the actions of the Italian and German labour movements prior to their defeat at the hands of fascism is mirrored by that devoted to their various analyses of fascism.⁴ In comparison, the main organisations of the British left, namely the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress, suffer a grievous neglect.

It is too often assumed that these issues were the concern only of smaller groups on the radical fringe. Anti-fascism is frequently overlooked in histories of the Labour Party, and when the subject is discussed, it is often in relation to the party's foreign policy as opposed to what Labour thought fascism actually was.⁵ The TUC can initially appear equally distant from the struggle against fascism. No British union leaders had to summon their members onto the streets in response to a fascist challenge, as in Italy, Spain or Austria, nor declare a

⁴ See for example Beetham, D. Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period (Manchester, 1983); Ceplair, L. Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Marxists, 1918–1939 (New York, 1987); Horn, G.R. European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s (Oxford, 1996).

general strike in defence of democracy, as in France. Indeed, British unions did not take official industrial action over any event relating to fascism in this period. Given these facts, it has been tempting for some authors to suppose that the TUC was concerned only with workplace issues, and that it held no firm views as to the nature of fascism or how it was to be defeated.⁶

When significant episodes in British anti-fascism are considered, such as Oswald Mosley's rally at Olympia in 1934, the 'Battle of Cable Street' in 1936, or the domestic contribution to the International Brigades, Labour and the TUC are generally recognised as being organisationally absent.⁷ Their aversion to these more militant forms of action has tended to obscure their actual stance, leading one historian to brand them as 'passive anti-fascist forces.'⁸

Histories of the Labour Party have tended to play down or overlook the significance that the party accorded both foreign and domestic fascism. Michael Newman argued that, when it came to European fascism, Labour was 'extremely tentative about defining its nature', maintaining that the party examined fascism on a country-by-country basis 'at the expense of any general theory.'⁹

Concerning British fascism, the American researcher Henry Srebrnik stated that Labour was 'strangely quiescent' over action against the British Union of Fascists' campaign in London's East End.¹⁰ In analytical terms, Thomas Linehan, a contemporary historian of British fascism, was critical of Labour and the TUC for what he identified as an 'absence of a detailed consideration of the

⁵ See for example Pelling, H. A Short History of the Labour Party (11th ed. Basingstoke, 1996); Coates, D. The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism (Cambridge, 1975).

⁶ For example, Pelling, H. A History of British Trade Unionism (4th ed. Harmondsworth, 1987), the standard work on the TUC, does not mention fascism.

⁷ A recent work on the most famous of these events does not mention the Labour Party or the TUC in its index: Kushner, T. & Valman, N. (eds.), Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society (London, 2000).

⁸ Lewis, D.S. Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931–1981 (Manchester, 1987), pp. 129-30.

⁹ Newman, M. 'Democracy Versus Dictatorship: Labour's Role in the Struggle Against British Fascism, 1933 – 1936', History Workshop Journal 5 (1978), p. 69.

¹⁰ Srebrnik, H.F. London Jews and British Communism, 1935–1945 (Ilford, 1995), p. 53.

social basis of the BUF's support in East London.'¹¹ Keith Laybourn's history of the party went so far as to conclude that the Labour 'chose to ignore British fascism', while another historian argued in relation to the BUF that after 1934, the Labour leadership 'ceased to worry about the movement.'¹² Though it is true that Labour was less doctrinal in its analysis of fascism and less confrontational in its approach than some groups on the British left, this can in no way be equated with a lack of interest in the subject.

The perception that Labour and the TUC were bereft of ideology may also be responsible for the relative neglect of their attitudes towards fascism. In contrast, European socialist and social democratic parties had been founded on the basis of Marxism. Even latterly, when they were contending for or holding governmental office, or had found accommodation within existing state structures and had relegated the revolutionary transformation of their societies to a point in the far future, they did not in this period publicly disavow their Marxist beliefs. They may have adapted its tenets to suit their new roles, but it was far from unusual to hear European party leaders citing Marxism as the guiding principle of their actions, and a classless society as their ultimate goal.¹³

The Labour Party was born with no such embedded ideology, being founded primarily by pragmatic trade unionists and Fabian gradualists.¹⁴ Many socialists within the party took more inspiration from Christianity than from Marxism,

¹¹ Linehan, T.P. East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex, 1932-40 (London, 1996), p. 206.

¹² Laybourn, K. The Rise of Labour: The British Labour Party, 1890-1979 (London, 1988), p. 86; Webber, G. C. 'The British Isles', in Muhlberger, D. (ed.), The Social Basis of European Fascist Movements (Beckenham, 1987), p. 140.

¹³ On the German Social Democrats see 'Joining Two Histories: The SPD and the German Working Class', in Eley, G. From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past (London, 1986), pp. 171-99; Kautsky, K. 'The Materialist Conception of History' (1927), in Beetham, Marxists pp. 245-50. On the Italian Socialist Party see Ceplair, Under the Shadow pp. 21-4. Austrian Social Democracy has been described as 'a middle position somewhere between Bolshevism and reformism...[in which] theory constantly hobbled along one step behind practice', in Botz, G. 'Austro-Marxist Interpretations of Fascism', Journal of Contemporary History (hereafter JCH), 11, 2 (1976), pp. 129 and 139.

¹⁴ See McKibbin, R. 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', English Historical Review 99, 1 (1984), p. 297. On Fabianism see McBriar, A.M. Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918 (Cambridge, 1966), That reformist trade union influence vastly outweighed that of socialists within the party is emphasised in McKibbin, R. The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924 (Oxford, 1974), pp. 90-91. Pelling noted that in 1900 the TUC had 1.2 million members, compared with just 6084 in the Independent Labour Party: Short History p. 5.

and Labour did not hide the fact that ethics often passed for ideology in its outlook.¹⁵ Clement Attlee argued that ‘probably the majority of those who have built up the Socialist movement in this country have been adherents of the Christian religion...In no other Socialist movement has Christian thought had such a powerful leavening effect.’¹⁶ He also said of the former Labour leader George Lansbury that he had been ‘a Socialist who practised and preached the brotherhood of man. He was a sincere and devoted Christian who strove to follow in the footsteps of his Master.’¹⁷ Another Labour leader, Ramsay MacDonald, asserted that ‘Socialism is founded on the Gospels...It denotes a well-thought out and determined attempt to Christianise Government and society.’¹⁸

MacDonald also stressed the fact that Labour’s socialism was consensual and in line with British democratic traditions, arguing in 1919 that ‘for a progressive movement here to try and copy Russian methods, or create Russian conditions, is to go back upon our own evolution.’¹⁹ Labour sought to effect change through the ballot box alone, and as such extended its appeal to broad sections of the electorate. Philip Snowden, an influential figure in Labour’s leadership, assured voters in 1922 that ‘The Labour Party is the very opposite of a Class Party’, which actually sought ‘justice for all men and women of every class who live by honest and useful work.’²⁰ One historian of the British left, Stuart Macintyre, accurately stated that while the Labour and TUC leaders accepted a conflict of interest between workers and employers, their ideas ‘lacked a hegemonic perspective’, and ‘did not involve any notion of the incompatibility of those interests with the capitalist class.’²¹

¹⁵ See Martin, D. ‘Ideology and Composition’, in Brown, K.D. (ed.), The First Labour Party, 1906–1914 (Beckenham, 1985), pp. 17-37.

¹⁶ Attlee, C. The Labour Party in Perspective (London, 1937), pp. 27-8.

¹⁷ Cited in Shepherd, J. ‘George Lansbury’, Bulletin of the Marx Memorial Library 140 (Autumn 2004), p. 43.

¹⁸ Cited in Trotsky, L. Where is Britain Going? (London, 1970), p. 40.

¹⁹ MacDonald, R. ‘Parliament and Revolution’ in Barker, B. (ed.), Ramsay MacDonald’s Political Writings (London, 1972), p. 232.

²⁰ Cited in Macintyre, S. A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933 (London, 1980), p. 175. Macintyre contrasts Marxism with Labour’s politics in ibid., pp. 47-65.

²¹ ibid., pp. 174-5.

Yet Labour's own Richard Crossman surely went too far when he stated in 1939 that the party's socialism was 'so deeply imbued with Liberal philosophy and springs so directly from the religious tradition of non-conformity that it has not produced any ideas peculiar to itself.'²² Perhaps a better witness than Crossman was Egon Wertheimer, London correspondent of the German Social Democrats' paper, *Vorwärts*. Wertheimer had an intimate knowledge of the left in both countries and in 1929 wrote 'How different is the Labour Party!...The lack of a Marxist foundation has given to British socialism an immediacy in its consideration of practical questions, such as no other Socialist movement in the world possesses.'²³ While Crossman may have been correct about the provenance of the ideas, it was Wertheimer who recognised that the variant of socialism propounded by Labour and the TUC gave rise to a unique political perspective.

It has long been maintained that the distinctiveness of the British labour movement flowed from the fact that, despite periods of intense struggle, it had evolved within an environment of relative tolerance and legality. Another visiting German Social Democrat, Oscar Pollack, observed that Labour and the TUC lacked 'the psychology of the catacombs' which repression had engendered in many European socialists.²⁴ Some of his British counterparts evidently agreed. When the Independent Labour Party was debating breaking away from Labour, one opponent argued against Marxist secessionists that 'British Labour cannot be regimented...The continental temperament is different. There the Social Democrat parties march each as a disciplined battalion under the banner of Marxian dogma. We might do the same had we grown up under the shadow of illegality and persecution instead of in the tender shade of Liberalism and Nonconformity.'²⁵

Given that, it has been easy to assume that the influence of legality and constitutionalism, the absence of a directing theory and an essential moderation

²² Crossman, R.H.S. Government and the Governed: A History of Political Ideas and Political Practice (London, 1939), pp. 206-7.

²³ Socialist Review (July 1929), p. 8.

²⁴ New Leader (23/1/25), p. 6.

²⁵ ibid. (18/4/30), p. 4.

rendered the mainstream British left incapable of fully comprehending, let alone of combating, the politically complex phenomenon that was fascism.

This assumption allows for the existence of more militant and doctrinal left-wing elements within both Labour and the TUC, who were outspoken in citing fascism as the dominant issue of the times and as the factor that should shape other political considerations. Yet this standpoint equally assumes that the limited numbers drawn to groups such as the Socialist League, and their failure to capture or decisively influence the leadership of the larger organisations, ultimately rendered whatever views they held on fascism and anti-fascism irrelevant.²⁶

When the ILP did break with Labour in 1932, some of its members remained within the larger party and formed the Socialist League. This included leading socialists such as Stafford Cripps, G.D.H. Cole, Harold Laski and Aneurin Bevan. Initially championing Labour's socialist tradition as the ILP had, it became increasingly radicalised as the threat of fascism grew. Though ultimately unsuccessful in its aims, the League put forward distinctive interpretations of fascism until its enforced dissolution by the Labour leadership in 1937. Cripps and others continued to argue within Labour that the threat of fascism necessitated a change in tactics, which led to their expulsion in 1939. The analysis of fascism espoused by the Socialist League was significant in its own terms, and in relation to the debate to which it contributed within the Labour Party.

The ILP has itself been dismissed because its membership fell after 1932. It had been one of Labour's founding organisations, and until 1918 was the individual members' section of the party. It remained as a distinct and independent entity within Labour until it broke away. The ILP was one of the organisations that furnished Labour with its socialist current in the party's formative years. At its height it could claim the allegiance of a majority of

²⁶ On the League see Seyd, P. 'Factionalism Within the Labour Party: The Socialist League, 1932 – 1937', in Saville, J. & Briggs, A. (eds.), *Essays in Labour History*. Vol. III. 1918–1939 (London, 1977) pp. 204-31.

Labour MPs, and furnished the party with leaders such as Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, and George Lansbury.²⁷

That the policies of the ILP were not implemented even by its members who held office in the Labour governments of 1924 and 1929 – 1931 is illustrative of the conflict between socialist principles and the realities of political power. The history of the ILP between the wars is a classic example of the dilemmas facing socialists in a democracy. Those who moderated their ideas to attain power were found wanting when it came to delivering significant improvements for the working class. Those who maintained their principles intact were driven further to the left by the seeming failure of reformism and democracy to bring about fundamental changes. The radicalisation of the ILP can be traced back to 1918, but its shift to the left accelerated in 1925 when, dismayed at the actions of the minority Labour government, it made the Glasgow firebrand, James Maxton, its president as a replacement for the conciliatory Clifford Allen.²⁸ Maxton championed a more combative and class-based politics, as a consequence of which the ILP began to shed its reformists and attract revolutionary socialists who had previously stood aloof.²⁹

Increasing dissatisfaction with Labour came to a head after its disastrous second tenure in office ended in 1931 with the defection of some of its leading figures, including MacDonald and Snowden, to form the National Government. Though the ILP's secession the following year was nominally over the independence of its MPs from the Labour whip, it is generally recognised that this was but a symptom of a wider disillusionment. Maxton wrote that he could not face 'the cost of remaining inside and working another thirty-eight years for a repetition of the fiasco of 1931...I intend to be outside the Labour Party, where

²⁷ In the 1924 – 1928 parliament 114 of the 150 Labour MPs were ILP members. See Socialist Review (July 1929), p. 14. At the 1929 general election 67 of 68 Labour candidates in Scotland were ILP members, and the ILP still had 80 Scottish branches in 1935. See Knox, W.W. & Mackinlay, A. 'The Re-Making of Scottish Labour in the 1930s', Twentieth Century British History 6, 2 (1995), pp. 175-6.

²⁸ See Pimlott, B. Labour and the Left in the 1930s (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 42-3; Brockway, F. Towards Tomorrow: The Autobiography of Fenner Brockway (St. Albans, 1977), p. 69.

²⁹ On Maxton's socialism see his 'Policy of the ILP' speech in New Leader (25/4/30), and the 1928 'Cook-Maxton Manifesto', reprinted in McNair, J. James Maxton: The Beloved Rebel (London, 1955), pp. 171-2. For the resignations of Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald from the ILP see New Leader (6/1/28 and 21/2/30 respectively).

I can carry on my work for Socialism among the working people of this land without the harassing preoccupation of having to fight the leaders of the Labour Party for permission to do it.³⁰ Another leading ILP figure, Fenner Brockway, concurred, stating ‘We have come to the conclusion that the leadership, policy and organisation of the Labour Party are unequal to the needs of the working class.’³¹ Independence drove the ILP yet further to the left, an outcome predicted by G.D.H. Cole, who had chosen to remain within Labour’s fold. He foresaw shortly after the disaffiliation that ‘ILP candidates will be under a constant inducement to outbid, as well as to out-Socialist, the Labour candidates to whom they will be opposed.’³²

While the ILP failed to outflank Labour electorally on the left, its travails at least show us the development of an alternative, socialist anti-fascism in Britain. Brockway, who was later to rue the decision to secede, still conceded that in leaving, the ILP ‘began its inner struggle towards a revolutionary socialist position.’³³ However, the party is still often overlooked in general histories of the inter-war left because it declined numerically after 1932. Bill Hunter, who joined in the later 1930s, remembers that ‘the ILP had a certain base, but...in one sense was just an island of the base they’d had when they broke with the Labour Party.’³⁴ One study claimed that from 1936 ‘the last spasms of independent vigour died out in the party’, while John Saville argued that in the 1930s ‘the ILP, in theory and practice, was largely irrelevant to the problems of the decade.’³⁵

But the argument that the ILP did not matter is disputed by Richard Stevens’ study, which noted ‘the general paucity of research concentrating on the ILP after 1932 constitutes a major gap in the historiography both of the British

³⁰ *ibid.* (12/2/32), p. 7.

³¹ *ibid.* (5/8/32), p. 1.

³² *The Adelphi* (September 1932), p. 827.

³³ Brockway, F. *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament* (London, 1942), p. 237.

³⁴ Bill Hunter, interview with author (18/3/04).

³⁵ Littlejohns, G.R.N. ‘The Decline of the Independent Labour Party, 1929–1939’ University of Nottingham M.Phil. (May 1979), p. 185; Saville, J. ‘May Day 1937’, in Saville & Briggs, *Essays Vol. III* p. 246. Saville pointed out that there is still no definitive history of the ILP in the 1930s, *ibid.* p. 279 ff 36.

labour movement as a whole and of far left political parties.³⁶ Tom Buchanan maintained that even in 1936, four years after departing from Labour, the ILP was still 'a self-confident and avowedly independent political agent.'³⁷ Brockway himself argued that the period spent outside the Labour party was 'a chapter of working class history of importance to all interested in the development of Socialism.'³⁸ While it may have lost members and contained diverse and squabbling elements, the ILP's move from reformism towards revolution, and the party's increasingly radical anti-fascism, are illustrative of the role that the overall political stance of an organisation plays in defining its interpretation of fascism, and of the lengths it will go to oppose it.

Aside from the defining characteristics of Labour's socialism, it is also widely accepted that British Marxism had its national peculiarities. Even its sympathisers were often willing to admit that they had not mastered its complexities in their entirety, and Frank Betts of the ILP acknowledged that 'We have a vague idea of Karl Marx and have tried, without success, to fight our way through *Das Kapital*.'³⁹ Here again, Oscar Pollack was able to contrast the effects of the different environments in which British and European socialism developed. British conditions, he argued, had led to Marxism being misunderstood here as 'a dry, dreary and narrow economic doctrine', as opposed to the total conception of history and struggle which gave many European workers and parties their sense of mission.⁴⁰

These views echo a wider assumption that Marxism in Britain was, in the words of one historian 'deficient in the philosophical sphere...[reflecting] the same empirical and non-metaphysical bent of the national culture.'⁴¹ An implicit critique of British Marxism is evident in the absence of British writers from

³⁶ Stevens, R. 'Rapid Demise or Slow Death? The Independent Labour Party in Derby, 1932 – 1945', *Midland History* 22 (1997), p. 114.

³⁷ Buchanan, T. 'The Death of Bob Smillie, the Spanish Civil War and the Eclipse of the Independent Labour Party', *Historical Journal* 40, 2 (1997), p. 437.

³⁸ Brockway, *Inside the Left* p. 237.

³⁹ *New Leader* (5/6/31).

⁴⁰ *ibid.* (23/1/25), p. 6.

⁴¹ Macintyre, *Proletarian Science* p. 127. For a general treatment of this see McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism?', pp. 297-331.

David Beetham's *Marxists in Face of Fascism*, the benchmark anthology of left-wing analyses, both orthodox and heretical.⁴²

Though Betts' experience was common, and Pollack was correct in pointing out a general truism, it would be wrong to discount the contribution of British Marxists, both within and without the ranks of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Stuart Macintyre's study concluded that, despite its peculiarities, British Marxism of the 1920s and 1930s was far from being of the vulgar variety.⁴³ It had a long history, and inspired many organisations that were active between the wars, such as the Labour College movement and its attendant propaganda organisation, the Plebs' League. These were both formed in 1909, significantly pre-dating the CPGB, which was not founded until 1920. They were dedicated to the political and economic education of the working class and the spreading of Marxist ideas, but most of their lecturers, theorists and activists remained outside the CPGB, some being Labour and ILP members, and some belonging to no party at all. Many leftist luminaries cut their teeth in the Labour College movement, not least G.D.H. Cole, Walter Citrine, Raymond Postgate, Ellen Wilkinson, J.F. Horrabin and Jack Jones.⁴⁴

The Plebs' League did not see itself as the progenitor of a future revolutionary party, but believed that Marxism should imbue the existing organisations of the British labour movement. Its stated aim was 'To develop and increase the class consciousness of the workers, by propaganda and education, in order to aid them to destroy wage-slavery, and to win power.'⁴⁵ These organisations represented a vibrant and often overlooked current within British Marxism, while their journals contained valuable early insights into fascism and provided a forum for discussion of the subject throughout the period.

⁴² Beetham (ed.), *Marxists*

⁴³ Macintyre, *Proletarian Science* pp. 117-20.

⁴⁴ The Labour College movement and the Plebs' League were formed after the Ruskin College strike in 1909. Former members relate the story of both organisations in Millar, J.P.M. *The Labour College Movement* (London, 1979), and Murphy, J.T. *Preparing for Power: A Critical Study of the History of the British Working-Class Movement* (London, 1934), pp. 93-6. At one stage, the CPGB did have a significant presence on the Plebs' executive, though this did not last. See Bell, T. *The British Communist Party: A Short History* (London, 1937), p. 84. Most of the latterly famous lecturers are mentioned in Vernon, B. *Ellen Wilkinson* (London, 1982), p. 57.

⁴⁵ Darlington, R. *The Political Trajectory of J. T. Murphy* (Liverpool, 1998), p. 285 ff. 53.

The CPGB, unsurprisingly, considered itself to be the sole British repository of Marxism and was typically scathing of non-party activists like the Plebs, some of whom had previously held party cards. It asserted that ‘Marx’s name is glibly on their tongues.’⁴⁶ On the Plebs’ characteristically British rejection of the need for a disciplined vanguard on the Leninist model, CPGB ideologue Rajani Palme Dutt had thundered ‘Could there be a simpler contradiction of Marxism?’⁴⁷ For most British communists though, a revolutionary organisation was part and parcel of a revolutionary theory. Dutt wrote to John Strachey that ‘It is one thing to reach a certain intellectual agreement with the correctness of the communist analysis...It is another thing to reach real revolutionary consciousness, so that the question of entering the revolutionary movement no longer appears as a question of making sacrifices, losing valuable opportunities of work, etc., but, on the contrary, as the only possible basis of work and realization.’⁴⁸

Another historian of British communism, John Callaghan, has pointed out that many of Marx’s earlier works, along with those of later Marxist thinkers such as Luxemburg, Lukacs and Gramsci were unpublished in Britain between the wars, maintaining that this prejudiced the CPGB’s understanding. He further alleged that, aside from Dutt, ‘there were no theorists’ within the party leadership, and argued in respect of the party’s ideology that ‘there was no alternative source of authority to that of the Bolsheviks.’⁴⁹

That Soviet influence existed is a given, as were the effects on the party, both positive and negative, of policy changes imposed by the Communist International. What has divided historians is the extent to which the CPGB could or did modify these directives in light of national conditions. For example, in 1928 the Comintern declared that a new era of crisis, a ‘third

⁴⁶ The Communist: A Monthly Review (March 1933), p. 99.

⁴⁷ The Labour Monthly (June 1922), p. 430.

⁴⁸ Cited in Thomas, H. John Strachey (London, 1973), p. 123. It was later decided that Strachey would be of more use to the communist cause if he remained outside the party.

⁴⁹ Callaghan, J. The Far Left in British Politics (Oxford 1987), p. 29. Callaghan is too hasty in dismissing figures such as T.A. Jackson, Andrew Rothstein, Robin Page Arnot, Emile Burns, John R. Campbell, Tom Mann and Maurice Dobb.

period' (following the revolutionary upheavals caused by the First World War, and the period of stabilisation which came after them) had dawned in Europe. This was deemed to herald the final phase of capitalism and therefore necessitated new policies for Comintern sections. These entailed the denunciation of reformist socialists, including the Labour Party, as counter-revolutionary agents of the ruling class, and, more pejoratively, later as social fascists. The CPGB leadership feared the implications of this policy, known as class against class, and let it be known in the councils of the Comintern.⁵⁰

It is regarding moments like this that the debate amongst historians can be seen most clearly. Andrew Thorpe, for example, argues of the third period that the CPGB leadership were 'still resisting the drive towards the more combative policy of "class against class" in late 1928', while John Callaghan asserts that 'by March 1928 the central committee and politburo of the CPGB accepted the new sectarianism with virtually no discussion.'⁵¹ While Thorpe provides evidence to back up his assertion, Callaghan's implication that the ideas of the CPGB reflect only the imperatives of Soviet policy, oversimplifies the case. This was a charge commonly hurled at the party by its opponents and one that recurs in the secondary literature. The Trotskyist historian, Robert Black, asserts of the CPGB leadership that its implementation of policy changes were merely 'Stalinist somersaults...[that evinced a] total lack of principle in all the politics of the bureaucracy.'⁵²

Black's theory not only invalidates much original thinking by British communists, but also ignores the historical fact that pressure from below could be effective in changing Comintern policy. It similarly discounts the varying degrees of freedom that individual communist parties had, not least the British. Jane Degras concluded from her work that 'the common belief that the

⁵⁰ See Degras, J. (ed.), Documents of the Communist International, 1919–1943. Vol. III, 1929 – 1943 (London, 1971), p. 41.

⁵¹ See Thorpe, A. 'Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920 – 1943', English Historical Review 113 (1998), p. 654; Callaghan, Far Left p. 37. A detailed exposition of the relationship between the Comintern and its sections is found in 'Problems of Communist History', in Hobsbawm, E. Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays (London, 1973), pp. 3-10.

⁵² Black, R. Stalinism in Britain: A Trotskyist Analysis (London, 1970), p. 117.

[Communist] International was little more than an unofficial agency of the Soviet Foreign Commissariat needs correcting.⁵³

For example, the replacement of the class against class policy by that of seeking to build broad 'Popular Fronts' of all anti-fascists certainly sprang in part from the Soviet Union's desire to build an international alliance against Nazi Germany.⁵⁴ But some of the impetus for the new line came from criticism by communist parties of the ruinous tactics of the Comintern in Germany before 1933, as well as from national initiatives. First in Spain, and then in France, communists participated in alliances with socialists and others. These moves preceded the official announcement of the new line at the 7th Comintern congress in 1935, and in France were taken against Comintern advice.⁵⁵

The CPGB was also distinctive in having had a different attitude towards the majority socialist party than was the case with its European counterparts. Unlike them, it had been formed not from a split within the larger social democratic party, but independently from a number of left-wing groups.⁵⁶ The different conditions pertaining in Britain, and therefore the special position of the CPGB, had been recognised by Lenin, whose advice to it in 1920 contrasted with the stance demanded by the Comintern of its other sections.⁵⁷ Lenin argued that while it should not compromise its revolutionary ideas, nor lessen its attacks on reformist socialism, it should nevertheless seek affiliation with Labour for

⁵³ Degras, J. Documents. Vol. III p. viii.

⁵⁴ See McDermott, K. & Agnew, J. The Comintern: International Communism from Lenin to Stalin (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 120-57; Roberts, G. 'Collective Security and the Origins of the People's Front', in Fyrth, J. (ed.), Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front (London, 1985), pp. 74-88; Haslam, J. The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39 (London, 1984), pp. 53-103.

⁵⁵ See Jackson, G. 'The Spanish Popular Front, 1934 - 1937', JCH 5, 3 (1970), pp. 21-35; the initiative of the French Communist Party in changing policy is set out in Thorez, M. The Successes of the Anti-Fascist United Front (London, 1935). Correspondence between the French socialist and communist parties on this are in the Labour and Socialist International archive (held at the Labour History Archive, Manchester): Box 18, file LSI.18/3/9. That the French party acted in advance of the Comintern is shown in Degras, Documents. Vol. III pp. 331-3.

⁵⁶ The British Socialist Party, the Workers' Socialist Federation, the South Wales Socialist Society and elements of the Socialist Labour Party.

⁵⁷ The Comintern's conditions of membership demanded that candidate sections break utterly with social democratic parties. They are reprinted in Degras, J. Documents of the Communist International. Vol. I, 1919-1922 (London, 1971), pp. 166-72.

tactical reasons.⁵⁸ His advocacy of a fundamental critique going hand in hand with a desire for unity coincided with the views of the majority of British communists, and was to exemplify the public attitude of the CPGB to its larger rival throughout the inter-war years, save for the relatively brief interlude of the 'third period'.⁵⁹ Lenin's recognition of the uniqueness of British political conditions did not prevent the CPGB from undergoing various subsequent degrees of Bolshevisation and Stalinisation, but these were of a much lesser severity than elsewhere.

While giving due public regard to the prevalent Comintern line, and, it has to be said, in most instances supporting it without demur or external pressure, the CPGB maintained a capacity for independent thought and action. As early as 1931 the party had sought to break out of the isolation to which third period tactics had contributed. It repudiated the prevailing methodology and sought links with the ILP leadership, a 'united front from above' in communist parlance, rather than seeking to win over the ILP rank and file as set down in Comintern theses.⁶⁰ In 1932 the CPGB also received Comintern approval for its request to once more work within the established trade unions.⁶¹

When the Comintern showed the first signs of softening of its stance towards social democracy in the wake of Hitler's accession to power, CPGB leader Harry Pollitt wrote to Dutt that the change was 'a damn good thing and urgently due...the only pity is we could not have reached it sooner.'⁶² By this time the party was regaining lost members and endeavouring with some success to undertake joint work that anticipated the tactics of the subsequent Popular Front period.⁶³ Pollitt's latest biographer, Kevin Morgan, concluded that when the Comintern did finally adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the forming

⁵⁸ See Lenin, V. I. 'Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst' (28/8/19), Collected Works Vol. 27, (Moscow, 1960), pp. 561-6; Lenin to Communist Unity Convention (8/7/20), cited in Murphy, Preparing for Power p. 207.

⁵⁹ That the party took Lenin's advice is confirmed in CPGB, Communist Unity Convention: Official Report (London, 1920), p. 38.

⁶⁰ Degras, Documents. Vol III p. 219.

⁶¹ Branson, N. History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941 (London, 1985), p. 110.

⁶² Fyrth, J. 'Introduction: In the Thirties', in Fyrth, (ed.) Popular Front p. 13.

⁶³ See for example Francis, H. Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War (London, 1984), pp. 63-80.

of broad anti-fascist alliances after 1935, it was in fact ‘confirming the [British] Communist Party’s initially tentative moves away from sectarianism.’⁶⁴

Furthermore, the degree of Soviet influence over the British party is now seen, partly due to the recent opening of Comintern files, as considerably less than had often been assumed, and certainly of a lesser order than that which Moscow exercised over other Comintern sections.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Henry Pelling long ago recognised that the lack of factions within the CPGB leadership not only slowed the implementation of external policy changes, but also denied the Comintern a means through which they had manipulated other parties.⁶⁶

Using Russian and British sources, Andrew Thorpe has concluded from his work on the relationship between the CPGB and the Comintern that the latter was ‘not sufficiently powerful to force the CPGB, over sustained periods, to do what it did not itself wish to do.’⁶⁷ In another work he argued that the growing threat of fascism in Europe placed the activities of the British party even further down the Comintern’s agenda, stating that ‘It was becoming more interested in the international situation, less in the day-to-day workings of the CPGB.’⁶⁸ Tellingly, the Comintern kept no permanent representative in Britain after 1929.⁶⁹ Perhaps the actual position of the party is best summed up by the CPGB itself, which stated in 1924 that it was ‘guided by the whole experience of the British working class and that of its comrades abroad.’⁷⁰

The efforts of the CPGB have also been dismissed on account of its size in relation to the larger Labour Party.⁷¹ But in terms of activity and the output of

⁶⁴ Morgan, K. Harry Pollitt (Manchester, 1993), p. 89.

⁶⁵ See Worley, M. Class Against Class: The Communist Party of Great Britain Between the Wars (London, 2002), pp. 68-9; Morgan, K. Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–41 (Manchester, 1989), pp. 6-10.

⁶⁶ Pelling, H. ‘The Early History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–9’, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 5th Series, 8 (1958), p. 51.

⁶⁷ Thorpe, A. ‘Comintern ‘Control’’, p. 640.

⁶⁸ Thorpe, A. The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943 (Manchester, 2000), p. 228.

⁶⁹ Eaden, J. & Renton, D. The Communist Party of Great Britain Since 1920 (Basingstoke, 2002), p. xix.

⁷⁰ CPGB, The Record of the Labour Government (London, 1924), p. 3.

⁷¹ See Fielding, S. ‘British Communism: Interesting but Irrelevant?’, Labour History Review 60, 2 (1995), pp. 120-3. See Appendix A for the relative strengths of the parties.

propaganda, the smaller party certainly made up for its numerical inferiority and wielded an influence far beyond the bounds of its membership. Though the Labour and TUC leaders publicly disavowed joint work with the Communist Party, and did all they could to marginalise it, this appears more as testimony to its effectiveness than to its impotence.⁷² Even within the Labour Party itself there were many who admired the work of the CPGB. G.D.H. Cole wrote that 'Without the sort of men and women who now form the backbone of the Communist Party the Labour movement could never have built up its power.'⁷³ The labour historian Edward Thompson argued that it was 'an elementary error to suppose that the political and industrial influence of the British Communist Party – or its intellectual influence – can be estimated from a count of party cards.' Writing a history of the British labour movement without reference to communism was, Thompson argued 'like writing *Wuthering Heights* without Heathcliff.'⁷⁴

However, the same criteria cannot be used to judge the worth of the early British Trotskyist groups. While a distinct left opposition had been present within the Russian Communist Party from 1923, it had generated little debate within the CPGB, other than condemnation from the leadership.⁷⁵ Dissent over Comintern policies and the direction of the Soviet Union only took an organisational form in Britain with the emergence of what became known as the Balham Group within the CPGB in 1930. Their expulsion from the party in 1932 transformed them into the British Section of the Left Opposition, and thence the Communist League.⁷⁶ Like Trotsky himself, they moved from urging

⁷² On the strenuous efforts of Labour and TUC leaders to reduce the CPGB's influence within the labour movement see Berger, S. *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900–1931* (Oxford, 1984), p. 6.

⁷³ Cole, G.D.H. *The People's Front* (London, 1937), p. 46.

⁷⁴ Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), p. 75.

⁷⁵ See Darlington, *Political Trajectory* pp. 137–43; Bornstein, S. & Richardson, A. *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924–38* (London, 1986), pp. 1–4. For the CPGB's earliest condemnation of the left opposition see CPGB, 'Thesis on Trotskyism', in *Speeches and Documents: 7th Conference of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London, 1925), pp. 116–8.

⁷⁶ On the Balham Group/British Section of the Left Opposition see Groves, R. *The Balham Group: How British Trotskyism Began* (London, 1974).

reform of the Comintern and the Russian party, to calling for a new international and a change of Soviet leadership.⁷⁷

None of the British Trotskyist groups of the 1930s could claim a large membership or much influence within the wider labour movement. Unable to form a viable party to the left of the CPGB, they tended to favour entryism, a tactic described by historians of the movement as ‘the form taken by the “United Front” where the revolutionaries had no forces of their own to bring to the class alliance, the “United Front from within”.’⁷⁸ They worked inside the ILP in the shape of the Marxist Group, and within the Labour Party as the Militant Group and the Revolutionary Socialist League. Fortunately, it is the ideas rather than the labyrinthine structural forms of British Trotskyism which feature in this study.⁷⁹

British Trotskyism is often discounted due to its instability and the frequent fracturing of its small nuclei, leading one researcher, Martin Upham, to describe its pre-war history as ‘years of sectarianism and survival.’⁸⁰ The same writer argues that the movement was further hampered by Stalin’s defeat of the opposition in the Soviet Union, and by the increasingly vehement denunciations of Trotsky by the CPGB. He stated that ‘In 1929–31 Trotsky’s had still been a name to conjure with in Britain. By autumn 1936 his appeal had palpably shrunk.’⁸¹ Eric Hobsbawm went further, dismissing the left opposition in its entirety during Trotsky’s lifetime, declaring that ‘it soon became clear that separation from the communist party, whether by expulsion or secession, meant an end to effective revolutionary activity...The real history of Trotskyism as a political trend in the international communist movement is posthumous.’⁸²

⁷⁷ The early Trotskyist position is set out in *International Left Opposition, The I.L.O. Its Tasks and Methods* (n.d.), Haston Papers, Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, file DJH/1/2; the abandonment of hopes for reform under Stalin is detailed in Getty, J.A. ‘Trotsky in Exile: The Founding of the Fourth International’, *Soviet Studies* 39, 1 (1986), pp. 24-35.

⁷⁸ Bornstein & Richardson, *Against the Stream* pp. x-xi.

⁷⁹ A diagram of early British Trotskyist groups can be found in Callaghan, J. *British Trotskyism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 1984), p. 207.

⁸⁰ Upham, M.R. ‘The History of British Trotskyism to 1949’, University of Hull Ph.D. (1980), p. iii.

⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 216.

⁸² Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* p. 4.

However, while the British groups are relevant in that they emerged from the only significant opposition within the CPGB before 1956,⁸³ they are included here because they provide, in their analyses of fascism and anti-fascism, an alternative British communist approach. Once again, national peculiarities played their part in shaping what could otherwise be dismissed as a foreign-inspired movement. British left communism in fact pre-dated direct contact with Trotsky or his supporters abroad, and it is far from being the case that to ascertain the views of these groups one simply has to read Trotsky himself. John Archer, who became active in the movement in 1934, stated that the early groups ‘tried to apply the spirit of his ideas, but did not necessarily agree completely with him or fully understand him.’⁸⁴ Another veteran of British Trotskyism, Bill Hunter, argued that the movement mattered because ‘It could put a principled propaganda position against the Communist Party, against the Comintern and against Stalin.’⁸⁵ Though the British groups had their differences, they shared a coherent approach to fascism, embracing the basic Marxist view that it was the manifestation of capitalism in crisis.

Yet Trotsky and his British supporters opposed the sectarianism inherent in the Comintern’s third period anti-fascism, claiming that this was leading to division and disaster in Germany. They later rejected the Popular Front strategy, claiming that its embrace of liberal and even conservative anti-fascists represented an unacceptable dilution of revolutionary politics and a misreading of the very class base and origins of fascism. Trotskyism’s desire for a united front of socialists and communists meant that in Britain and elsewhere these small groups were able to develop a left-wing critique of the dominant communist approach to fascism, both theoretically and tactically. They are significant, therefore, in that they retain elements of earlier communist theory and practice, while trying to apply them to the changed circumstances of the 1930s. At the end of the decade, the former Comintern official, Franz Borkenau, tried to sum this up, perhaps a little simplistically: ‘It is interesting to note that

⁸³ The point is made in Wicks, H. Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik (London, 1992), p. 147.

⁸⁴ Archer, J. ‘Trotskyism in Britain, 1931–1937’, Polytechnic of Central London Ph.D. (1979), p. 5.

⁸⁵ Interview with author (18/3/04).

in 1930 Trotskyism was what communism is today and that communism then was what is today called Trotskyism.’⁸⁶

If some have questioned the relevance of the British left during these years, it is also the case that others have gone further, implying that the distinctiveness of British political and economic conditions between the wars make it redundant in discussions of fascism and anti-fascism. It is certainly the case that inter-war Britain did not suffer the same crises as Italy or Germany, a fact as much lamented by some on the left as on the far right. Orwell spoke disparagingly of ‘the deep, deep sleep of England’, while Trotsky bemoaned ‘the stagnant conservatism of British existence.’⁸⁷ Labour’s G.D.H. Cole saw the upside of this relative stability though, arguing that for British fascism to succeed ‘It will therefore need a severer strain here than elsewhere.’⁸⁸

Robert Benewick, a historian of British fascism, was correct in stating that in the Britain of the 1920s and 1930s ‘conditions for revolution or counter-revolution were not present. It is important to take cognisance of British development and political culture.’⁸⁹ However, that is not to say that a sharp and significant struggle against fascism did not take place across the spectrum of the left in Britain, and that in the course of it, analyses of fascism and strategies of opposition were developed which stand comparison with those in Europe. Britain may well have had many distinctive features, but these did not invalidate the actions or the ideas of the left. On the contrary, the recognition that they in turn made for originality and distinctiveness justifies a process of re-evaluation.

Despite the significant amount of research carried out on the British left of the inter-war years, many works concentrate on single parties, and broad comparative examinations are scarce,⁹⁰ partisan,⁹¹ regional,⁹² or focus only

⁸⁶ Borkenau, F. World Communism: A History of the Communist International (Ann Arbor, 1971), p. 403.

⁸⁷ Orwell, G. Homage to Catalonia (London, 1983 ed.), p. 187; Trotsky, Where is Britain Going? p. 35.

⁸⁸ Cole, People’s Front p. 51.

⁸⁹ Benewick, R. ‘Interpretations of British Fascism’, Political Studies 24, 3 (1976), p. 322.

⁹⁰ On the scarcity of such studies see Buchanan, T. The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement (London, 1991), p. xi. Some studies fall just outside the period. See Renton,

fleetingly on the critical issues of fascism and anti-fascism.⁹³ In addition to this, specific studies of anti-fascism are also rare, with few scholars specialising in the field. One of these, Nigel Copsey, has noted that ‘A voluminous literature has been published on the protagonists of British fascism yet very little has appeared on its antagonists’, while another, David Renton, wrote of ‘the few detailed histories of specific anti-fascisms that exist.’⁹⁴

Copsey’s book covers the phenomenon in Britain across the whole of the century, but little work has been done on the left’s initial perceptions of fascism. The ideological framework into which fascism emerged, in the shape of the left’s pre-existing concepts of reaction and counter-revolution, and the impact which fascism had upon these have received similarly scant attention. Also, as Copsey himself points out, an over-emphasis on one or two large events, like Olympia or Cable Street, has meant that the evolution of theoretical and organisational features within anti-fascism tends to be overlooked.⁹⁵ British anti-fascism of the 1920s and 1930s has too often been considered simply as a negation, as reactive, defensive and in terms of activity alone. This study aims to set out what anti-fascists were thinking, as well as what they were doing.

Within the historiography of fascism, there has always been a body of opinion which rejected left-wing and especially Marxist analyses as being crude and reductive.⁹⁶ Indeed, Renton recently noted that ‘At this moment, there is no

D. *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (Basingstoke, 2000). Others encompass the twentieth century as a whole, such as Copsey, N. *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (New York, 2000).

⁹¹ For utterly different treatments of the CPGB in the 1930s see Branson, *History of the Communist Party* and Black, *Stalinism in Britain*.

⁹² See for example, Auty, D. *The Trophy is Democracy: Merseyside, Anti-Fascism and the Spanish Civil War* (Liverpool, 2000); Barrett, N. ‘The Anti-Fascist Movement in South-East Lancashire, 1933–1940: The Divergent Experiences of Manchester and Nelson’, in Kirk, T. & McElligott, A. (eds.), *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 48–62; Renton, D. *Red Shirts and Black: Fascists and Anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1996); Todd, N. *In Excited Times: The People Against the Blackshirts* (Newcastle, 1995); Kibblewhite, L. & Rigby, A. *Fascism in Aberdeen: Street Politics in the 1930s* (Aberdeen, 1978).

⁹³ Pimlott’s *Labour and the Left* focuses mainly on relations between the Labour leadership and the party’s left, rather than as a wider comparative study.

⁹⁴ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 2; Renton, D. *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London, 1999), p. 26.

⁹⁵ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 13.

⁹⁶ Not least because of the apparently indiscriminate use of the term by communists during the third period. See Griffin, R. *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1994), p. 2; Ceplair, *Under the Shadow* p. 4; Ayçoberry, P. *The Nazi Question: An Essay on the Interpretations of National Socialism, 1922–1975* (London, 1981), p. 50.

theory less fashionable among historians of fascism than Marxism.⁹⁷ This dismissive current has a rich pedigree, and incorporates not only those who have objected to specific points of the left's interpretations, but also a number who maintain that they have actually been detrimental to the study of fascism itself. The American writer, A. J. Gregor, argued that 'at least part of the reason for the inadequacy of treatments of Fascism to date has been the disposition, prevalent among political analysts until very recently, to give too much credence to a Marxist or quasi-Marxist interpretation of the entire political phenomenon.'⁹⁸ Zeev Sternhell, who has long argued that fascism should be studied in terms of its own beliefs, and not those of others, maintained that 'the official Marxist interpretation...has also helped to keep the study of fascist ideology at a standstill.'⁹⁹ Renzo De Felice, a controversial Italian historian, also called for fascism to be examined without preconceptions. He dismissed the views of the left, stating 'the interpretation of Fascism has entered an entirely new phase, one in which all previous interpretations have been negated.'¹⁰⁰ More recently, the British historian, Geoff Eley, discounted contemporaneous analyses of fascism in favour of what he saw as empirical research, asserting that 'the accumulated weight of historical scholarship has compromised the explanatory potential of the old theorisations.'¹⁰¹

The widespread belief amongst the left, both Marxist and non-Marxist, that fascism generally acted in the interests of the existing ruling class to maintain profitability and the prevailing social order has led scholars to assume that this view ignored the professed aims and ideals of the fascist movements, and also failed to explain the appeal which fascism evidently had for people far beyond the privileged elites. As far back as 1939, the economist Peter Drucker had rejected the notion that fascism acted in this capacity, arguing 'The whole thesis is nothing but a feeble attempt to reconcile Marxist theory with the facts by

⁹⁷ Renton, Fascism: Theory and Practice p. 44.

⁹⁸ Gregor, A. J, The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism (New York, 1969), p. 11.

⁹⁹ Sternhell, Z. 'Fascist Ideology', in Laquer, W. (ed.), Fascism: A Reader's Guide: Analysis, Interpretations, Bibliography (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 327.

¹⁰⁰ De Felice, R. Interpretations of Fascism (Cambridge, MA, 1977), p. 173.

¹⁰¹ Eley, G. 'What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Tensions or a Crisis of a Capitalist State', Politics and Society 12, 1 (1983), p. 54.

falsifying history; it is a lame apology but not a serious explanation.’¹⁰² After the war, the German historian, Ernst Nolte, similarly believed that the left had concentrated overmuch on constructing an economic explanation for fascism, and that in doing so had neglected a host of other causes and motivations. He argued that ‘the society which makes fascism possible cannot be accounted for with an abstraction such as “capitalism”.’¹⁰³ Jane Degras postulated that, when it came to fascism, communists were ‘Mentally immobilised in the irrelevant economic categories of class, hypnotised by the 1848 legacy of “*the* revolution” and “*the* reaction”.’¹⁰⁴ This view was shared by De Felice, who added that ‘Marxist schematisation...presumes a monolithic quality in the classes and attributes to them relationships that they in fact did not have.’¹⁰⁵

Some scholars went so far as to dismiss the interpretations advanced by the left precisely because they were predicated on opposition to fascism. Michael A. Ledeen held that for the left ‘everything about fascism was (and is) evil, to be condemned and rejected and fought on all fronts. In a certain sense, further research on the subject was redundant, since the conclusions were already known.’¹⁰⁶ Gregor moreover asserted that ‘anti-Fascist interpretations are further impaired by an unrelenting tendentiousness.’¹⁰⁷ These older objections to the ideas of the left have been revived by recent developments within what has become known as ‘fascism studies’.

Significant contributors have claimed that a ‘new consensus’ is emerging as to the definition of fascism. However, this approach appears to perpetuate certain methodologies that have proved deficient in actually defining fascism. In seeking to explain fascism, many researchers have produced lists of its essential features, as they perceived them.

¹⁰² Drucker, P. The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism (London, 1939), p. 7.

¹⁰³ Nolte, E. ‘The Problem of Fascism in Recent Scholarship’, in Turner, H. A. (ed.), Reappraisals of Fascism (New York, 1975), pp. 30-1. Turner refused to invite any Marxist historian to contribute.

¹⁰⁴ Degras, Documents. Vol III p. viii.

¹⁰⁵ De Felice, Interpretations p. 118.

¹⁰⁶ De Felice, R. & Ledeen, M.A. Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice (New Brunswick, 1976), p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Gregor, Ideology of Fascism p. 44.

Ernst Nolte's important early work, *Three Faces of Fascism*, included a typology, and drew criticism for retrospectively trying to impose *a priori* conditions on historical facts.¹⁰⁸ John Weiss long ago set out his nine fundamental ingredients of fascist ideology, and Martin Kitchen put the figure at ten, while the Italian historian, Emilio Gentile, also gave us a ten-point definition (though not, of course, comprising the same ten points as Kitchen's).¹⁰⁹ De Felice, though an opponent of generic theories of fascism, nevertheless produced a list of six preconditions necessary for fascist movements and six factors common to fascist regimes.¹¹⁰ Stanley Payne, a venerable proponent of an agreed definition of fascism, once argued that generic descriptions must amount to more than mere checklists.¹¹¹ Yet he himself has produced an eleven point typology of Italian fascism,¹¹² a 'tripartite definition' of fascism's common features, a list of six variants of fascist movements and regimes, a thirteen point list of the essential features of fascism, a list of twenty elements of what he calls a 'retrodictive theory of fascism', and a table differentiating between lists of fascist, conservative and radical right parties in inter-war Europe. He has even compiled lists, originally of nine, and latterly of twelve, of the most common interpretations of fascism.¹¹³

Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell, two champions of the 'new consensus' idea who both stress the importance of ideology in the study of fascism, have also adopted the typological approach. Griffin has compiled ten 'generic ideological features of fascism', which in turn led to his concise definition of fascism as 'palingenetic ultra nationalism.'¹¹⁴ Eatwell reverses the process, giving us his one-sentence definition of fascism, and then backing it up with a four point

¹⁰⁸ See Epstein, K. 'A New Study of Fascism', in Turner (ed.), *Reappraisals* p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Weiss, J. *The Fascist Tradition* (New York, 1967), pp. xi-xiii; Kitchen, M. *Fascism* (Basingstoke, 1983), pp. 83-8; Gentile's definition is cited in Payne, S. *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (London, 1997), pp. 5-6 ff 6.

¹¹⁰ De Felice, *Interpretations* pp. 11-12.

¹¹¹ Payne, S. *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison, 1980), p. 5. In the same work he apparently contradicted himself by stating 'The term fascism can be applied to the entire broad genus only at the cost of depriving it of any specific content.' p. 142.

¹¹² Payne, S. 'Spanish Fascism in Comparative Perspective', in Turner, (ed.), *Reappraisals* p. 144.

¹¹³ Payne, *History of Fascism* pp. 6-7, 198-9, 13, 489, 16-17 and 177-8 respectively. The nine-point list of theories appears in Payne, S. 'The Concept of Fascism', in Larsen, S.U. et. al. (eds.), *Who Were the Fascists? The Social Roots of European Fascism* (Oslo, 1980), p. 14.

¹¹⁴ Griffin, *Nature of Fascism* pp. 26-7 and 38-8 respectively.

'core set of annotations' in the interest of clarity.¹¹⁵ However, even if a true typology could be chosen from just this abbreviated selection, one must bear in mind the fate of Professor N. Kagan, who refined the essential aspects of fascism into a six-point list, only to find that, on reflection, fascist Italy failed to meet its criteria.¹¹⁶

The listing of apparently significant features in no way detracts from the overall value of the work carried out by these scholars. Indeed, as the German historian Anson Rabinach points out, it is a traditional feature of political science.¹¹⁷ However, the sheer volume of such compilations suggests a methodological failure when applied to fascism. While the desire for clarity that underpins the taxonomic approach is understandable, it does not alter the fact that the definitions extrapolated from it are either bland or impossibly compacted. The former tell us nothing and the latter inevitably demand elaboration.¹¹⁸

In using this method, the danger is that any genuine comprehension of the reality of fascism is lost in the search for a trite summation. In any case, despite the apparently scientific process of identifying the most important features of fascist movements and regimes from which to arrive at definition and meaning, the reality is that the end product merely reflects the pre-existing point of view of the historian concerned in each case, and nothing more. Surely it is better to forego the search for a simple (or complex) short definition of fascism, and to try, as did the inter-war left, to understand it by an examination of its practice alone.

¹¹⁵ Eatwell, R. 'On Defining the 'Fascist Minimum': The Centrality of Ideology', Journal of Political Ideologies 1, 3 (1996), pp. 13-14.

¹¹⁶ Cited in Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology', p. 326.

¹¹⁷ Rabinach, A.G. 'Towards a Marxist Theory of Fascism and National Socialism: A Report on Developments in West Germany', New German Critique 1, 3 (Fall, 1974), p. 150.

¹¹⁸ Griffin stated that his own single sentence definition 'requires considerable 'unpicking' before it is intelligible.' See Griffin, R. 'Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascism Studies', in Berghaus, G. (ed.), Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies of the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945 (Oxford, 1996), p. 12.

This raises the main point upon which the drive for a new consensus has been criticised. In their striving to encapsulate the essentials of fascism, its proponents have been accused of wrongly taking at face value what fascism had to say about itself. Their detractors hold that this approach leads not only to a skewed interpretation of fascism, but also to a dangerously positive one.¹¹⁹ For example, Griffin argues that the idealism of fascism, as represented by its ‘mythic core’ and its professed belief in social regeneration and national rebirth must be included in any definition.¹²⁰ Eatwell has written that ‘the time has come to shed popular stereotypes and to assess fascism as objectively as possible...failure to take fascism seriously as a body of ideas makes it more difficult to understand how fascism could attract a remarkably diverse following in some countries.’¹²¹ Thomas Linehan also stresses the importance of fascism’s self-definition, stating that Griffin’s synthetic approach ‘sought to weld the various generic “parts” into a sense-making, coherent whole by way of emphasising that fascism had a distinct, internally coherent political ideology in its own right.’¹²²

This revival of interest in fascist ideology has led in turn to renewed criticism of left-wing views. Griffin has attacked what he sees as the Marxist approach, writing that ‘By assuming fascism to be an anti-proletarian force, they play down its antagonism to the ethos of *laissez-faire* economics, consumerist materialism and the bourgeoisie.’¹²³ At a recent conference, he argued again that the left ignored the role of ideology within fascism, opining that ‘the bludgeon

¹¹⁹ See for example Renton, D. ‘Fascism is More Than an Ideology’, Searchlight (August, 1999), (taken from www.searchlightmagazine.com/stories/understandingFascismAug.htm, (6/12/02)). This argument has been treated more generally by Noam Chomsky in his essay ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship’, in Chomsky, N. American Power and the New Mandarins (London, 1969), pp. 23-129. Criticisms of an overly positive reappraisal of fascism have obviously hit home. In a recent work on British fascism the editors felt obliged to state that ‘All contributors to this volume condemn, without hesitation, the far Right’s authoritarianism, posturing elitism, anti-democratic aggression, violence, intolerance, sexism and racism.’ Gottlieb, J & Linehan, T.P. (eds.), ‘Introduction: Culture and the British Far Right’, in The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain (London, 2004), p. 2.

¹²⁰ See Griffin, R. ‘Fascism is More Than Reaction’, Searchlight (Sept, 1999), (taken from www.searchlightmagazine.com/stories/understandFascismSep.htm, (6/12/02)).

¹²¹ Eatwell, R. Fascism: A History (London, 1995), pp. xvii-xviii.

¹²² Linehan, T. British Fascism, 1918–1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture (Manchester, 2000), p. 5.

¹²³ Griffin, Nature of Fascism p. 4.

itself may have had its own revolutionary aims.’¹²⁴ Linehan similarly felt that some of the left’s ideas ‘ignored fascism’s anti-capitalist and even anti-establishment leanings’, adding that ‘Absent from a classical Marxist analysis too, was an awareness of fascism’s potential for political radicalism and the independently generated character of many of its ideas and motivations.’¹²⁵ The left stands accused of dismissing fascist ideas, and in so doing, of missing fascism’s ‘distinct, internally coherent political ideology’. Worse still, their detractors hold, the left’s dogmatic blindness caused it to overlook the fact that fascism was not reactionary at all, but was in itself revolutionary, and a grave challenge to the economic establishment of the day.

Critiques of leftist analyses are of course not entirely baseless, and it is a simple task to find examples from the literature that would appear to corroborate them completely. It is equally true that the Comintern’s definitions of fascism changed in accordance with the needs of the Soviet leadership. But rejecting the fundamental contention of Marxists concerning fascism as dogmatic, schematic or reductive from the writings of particular figures, or from a particular phase of communist policy, is to be as unsubtle as those who are so accused. Similarly, to imply from the apparent quiescence and legalism of a few mainstream Labour leaders that socialism preferred to ignore fascism is an inadequate treatment of the subject, as is the dismissal of minority socialist and communist groups simply because they lacked numerical strength.

Some historians, not all naturally inclined to favour the left, have nevertheless argued that left-wing theories of fascism do bear comparison with others, and have contributed, perhaps disproportionately, to the wider field. This is not least because they set fascism in the context of the wider society from which it emerged, relate it to other significant social forces, and aim to define of fascism by means other than examining the components of its ideology alone.¹²⁶ Furthermore, in contrast to the notion of a rigidly pre-determined view of

¹²⁴ Roger Griffin’s address to the Society for the Study of Labour History conference on ‘Fascism and the Labour Movement’, Leeds (8/11/03), (from own notes).

¹²⁵ Linehan, *British Fascism* p. 2.

¹²⁶ See for example Hagtvet, B. & Kuhn, R. ‘Contemporary Approaches to Fascism: A Survey of Paradigms’, in Larsen et. al. (eds.), *Who Were the Fascists?* pp. 42-3.

fascism, many scholars have noted diversity and change within the left's theories, and the fact that they often explained its emergence not on the grounds of immobility in relations between classes, but of flux.¹²⁷ R.J.B. Bosworth argues in his study of Mussolini's Italy that it was the Italian communist leaders Angelo Tasca, Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti who produced the 'fullest and most subtle analyses of Fascism during the inter-war period.'¹²⁸ Renton states that the influential commentaries by the German Comintern delegate, Klara Zetkin, 'explained the rise of fascism within the context of shifting class forces, using the language of dynamism and change.'¹²⁹

On Nazism, the German scholar, Tilla Siegel, argued that far from seeing the regime as purely an agent of big business, the SPD's Franz Neumann recognised it as 'an uneasy alliance of four power blocs – the party hierarchy, the ministerial bureaucracy, the armed forces, and the industrial leadership.'¹³⁰ The French leftist Daniel Guerin is often accused of being amongst the most dogmatic of the agent theorists. Yet he clearly stated of Germany that 'the fascist regime, despite its "totalitarian" pretensions is not homogenous. It never succeeded in dissolving the different elements of which it was composed into one single alloy.'¹³¹ Peter Baldwin's survey of the historiography of Nazism concluded that 'The Marxist view has never been uniform', while the stated purpose of Beetham's aforementioned work was 'finally to lay to rest the idea that Marxism in this period can be simply equated with Stalinist orthodoxy.'¹³²

¹²⁷ See Cammett, J.C. 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', *Science and Society* 2 (1967), pp. 149-63.

¹²⁸ Bosworth, R.J.B. *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London, 1998), p. 47. For the ideas of these three see Tasca, A. *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918–1922* (London, 1938); Forgacs, D. (ed.), *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916 – 1935* (London, 1988); Togliatti, P. *Lectures on Fascism* (New York, 1976).

¹²⁹ Renton, D. 'Towards a Marxist Theory of Fascism', www.dkrenton.co.uk/old3.html, (22/11/03). Zetkin's ideas are set out in 'Resolution of the Third ECCI Plenum on Fascism' (23/6/23), in Degras, J. (ed.), *Documents of the Communist International, 1919–1943, Vol. II, 1923–1928* (London, 1971), pp. 41-3.

¹³⁰ Siegel, T. 'Whatever was the Attitude of the German Workers? Reflections and Recent Interpretations', in Bessel, R. (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 63 ff. 4. The exiled Neumann's *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* originally appeared in 1942.

¹³¹ Guerin, D. *Fascism and Big Business* (New York, 1973), pp. 8-9.

¹³² Baldwin, P. 'Social Interpretations of Nazism: Renewing a Tradition', *JCH* 25 (1990), p. 18; Beetham (ed.), *Marxists* p. 1.

Indeed, the left could claim to have anticipated the recent ‘new consensus’ approach to fascism, with its goal of a generic description acceptable to all, as it was socialists and communists who first looked at fascist movements in a range of countries and discerned similar aims, a similar social composition and similar rhetoric.¹³³ Another historian of British fascism, Philip Rees, observed that ‘it was only in the 1930s that fascism came to be viewed as a phenomenon whose implications ranged beyond the parochial concerns of Italy. Only the Marxists in a systematic manner and the fascists themselves saw its wider context.’¹³⁴ Even De Felice, no friend of the left, recognised this, stating that until the early 1930s ‘With the exception of Marxists, most observers viewed Fascism only in relation to Italy.’¹³⁵

The left had a greater incentive than most to develop an accurate interpretation of fascism, with many in Britain quickly concluding from the fate of the labour movement in Italy that it could not be ignored. The disastrous course of events in Germany made it even more obvious that opposition, based on a clear understanding, was the only alternative to the complete destruction of the left’s organisations and achievements. George Orwell dismissed complacency as an option, arguing of fascism that ‘If you pretend that it is merely an aberration which will presently pass off of its own accord, you are dreaming a dream from which you will awake when somebody coshes you with a rubber truncheon.’¹³⁶

Given all this, it appears necessary to look again at the British left and fascism. Might a re-examination of its various oppositional stances contribute something to the ongoing debates within the historiography of fascism? Do they shed any light on the prospects for a ‘new consensus’? In short, might they perhaps aid us in the recovery of some essentials that are in danger of being overlooked in fascism studies?

¹³³ See Bosworth, *Italian Dictatorship* p. 207.

¹³⁴ Rees, P. ‘Changing Interpretations of British Fascism: A Bibliographical Survey’, in Lunn, K. & Thurlow, R.C. (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London, 1980), p. 188.

¹³⁵ De Felice, *Interpretations* p. 3.

¹³⁶ Orwell, G. *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1937), p. 246.

1: White Guards and Black Hundreds: Existing Concepts of Counter-Revolution

When Italian fascism appeared as a mass movement following the First World War, it seemed to many in Britain an entirely new and bewildering political phenomenon. It attacked workers' organisations, yet its programme contained at least as many policies culled from the left as from the right. Many of its leaders were former socialists or syndicalists, who now mouthed ultra-nationalist slogans. It railed against bourgeois democracy, yet stood in elections. It declared itself republican, but numbered aristocrats and monarchists amongst its backers. It condemned those industrialists who had profited excessively from the war, and also those workers who occupied their factories. It demanded justice for the peasantry that had made up the bulk of the army, yet murdered them when they seized the great estates on their return. Given all this, it is unsurprising that some who first observed fascism struggled to locate it in the political firmament.

Despite some early confusion however, most British socialists and communists quickly came to identify fascism as a reactionary and counter-revolutionary force, assigning its anti-working-class actions and its association with the economic elite a far greater significance than its rhetoric or the provenance of its leaders. The problems that the majority within the British left faced in their early attempts at analysis arose not from doubts about whether it was left or right, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, but around what similarities it had with earlier reactionary movements, how to explain the differences, and how it could be opposed.

Nevertheless, crucial differences of opinion as to the nature of fascism were to emerge within the British left. Their origins are to be found in the contrasting images of counter-revolution that were developed during the political upheavals that characterised the end of the First World War, for it was these formative events which set in place the prism through which fascism was initially perceived.

War, Nationalism and the Threat of Dictatorship in Britain, 1914-1918

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the further left one travelled within the British working-class movement, the sharper the definition of counter-revolution became. The Labour and TUC leaderships showed relatively little interest in the social composition of regressive social movements. But the left wing of these organisations, including the ILP, and the smaller parties to the left of Labour, were far more concerned with this.

The general political stance of an organisation, therefore, appeared to dictate its level of interest in matters of revolution and counter-revolution. This can be seen from the experience of the ILP, which shifted its ideological ground several times between the wars. The experience of the First World War had estranged it from the moderating counsels of the Labour Party. Though it remained affiliated, its effective exclusion from the policy-making process that culminated in Labour's 1918 programme, and an influx of newer, radicalised members, pushed the ILP leftwards in the immediate post-war period.¹ The party was therefore passing through a generally more combative and doctrinal phase during the period of revolution and counter-revolution that characterised the years between 1917 and 1922.

In keeping with this, it was fitting that the CPGB and its forerunners paid the most attention to the social bases of counter-revolutionary movements. This in part stemmed from their analytical Marxist approach. But it was also the case that those who saw themselves as being in the business of revolution were more concerned with, and had most to fear from, reaction. They therefore had a greater incentive in formulating a clear understanding of its origins, aims, composition and dynamics.

Given Britain's long democratic tradition, the left had for the most part relied on foreign examples when it came to examining counter-revolution. It was the

¹ See Bush, J. Behind the Lines: East London Labour, 1914-1919 (London, 1984), pp. 69-101. On the ILP's radicalisation see McKibbin, Evolution pp. 90-4; Brockway, F. Socialism Over Sixty Years: The Life of Jowett of Bradford (London, 1946), pp. 180-1.

‘Thermidor’ of the French revolution, the wave of reaction that swept Europe in 1848 and the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871 that had largely informed their view. These images were later complemented by the repressive actions of Tsarism towards the end of the century and the crushing of the 1905 Russian revolution.²

However, events on the home front during the First World War had also helped to shape the divergent concepts of counter-revolution that would increasingly emerge within the British left. The attitude to the war itself exacerbated ideological divisions, exposing fundamentally different views concerning the role of nationalism, the nature of the state and democracy, and, crucially, the role of socialists in times of national and international crisis.

The mainstream of the labour movement, while generally not displaying the excessive patriotism that was evident elsewhere, supported the war and found during it inclusion in government for the first time. Some pacifists clung to their beliefs and their internationalism, and a few, like the ILP’s Ramsay MacDonald, resigned their positions in the Labour hierarchy. More pragmatic figures, like MacDonald’s successor as Labour leader, Arthur Henderson, modified their views in support of the war. Even Keir Hardie, a former advocate of a general strike in the event of a conflagration, stated in August 1914 that ‘With the boom of the enemy’s guns within earshot[,] the lads who have gone forth to fight their country’s battles must not be disheartened by any discordant note at home.’³ For the TUC, Labour’s new leadership, and the overwhelming majority of their rank and file, the war was accepted as a necessary evil forced upon Britain, and justifiable as being in defence of democracy against absolutism.

The potential appeal of nationalism, and its effects, even upon elements of the left, was demonstrated to all during the war though. Robin Page Arnot, who would go on to serve three terms as the CPGB’s representative to the

² On the British left and Russia from the 1880s to 1905 see Kendall, W. The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921 (London, 1971), pp. 78-83.

³ Cited in Challinor, R. The Origins of British Bolshevism (London, 1977), p. 124. Challinor details the attitudes of the left towards the war on pp. 123-49.

Comintern, was in 1914 a radical Guild Socialist.⁴ Though not a pacifist, he, like they, was aghast at the intense patriotism that swept the country, commenting that 'It was a strange feeling to be living amongst a population where nearly everyone outside a small circle seemed to have gone mad.'⁵ To those few on the British left who retained their pacifist, internationalist or revolutionary beliefs, nationalism had no place within the workers' movement, and was seen simply as a device deployed to transcend natural class antagonisms.

For Page Arnot and his milieu, the war was as much about the maintenance of a dying social system as it was about conquest or principle. In his eyes, the war meant that 'Every old hackneyed slogan in defence of every feudal remnant, of landlordism as well as of capitalism, of militarism and of clericalism, of philistinism and obscurantism and sciolism, of sentimentalism and of romance would be thrown as armour upon the things that are and the powers that be.'⁶

Nationalism, therefore, seemed capable to some of penetrating and corroding elements of the working-class movement. This appeared to be true, to the anti-war minority at least, in the cases of veteran socialists like Will Thorne, Victor Fisher, John Hodge, Henry Mayers Hyndman and Robert Blatchford. While these men had previously spoken out against the threat of German imperialism, they seemed in 1914 dissatisfied even with Labour's dutiful support for the war. Some joined patriotic organisations that aimed to combat pacifism, dissent and defeatism amongst the working class. Groups such as the British Workers' League (with its attendant political wing, the National Democratic Party), the Socialist National Defence Committee, and the National Socialist Party, went so far in their patriotism that the slowly growing oppositionist current within the left saw them as having abandoned their core beliefs.⁷

⁴ See Pelling, 'Early History', p. 43; Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow p. 228.

⁵ Page Arnot Papers, Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, file DAR 6/1-7. p. 12.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 4.

⁷ See Douglas, R. 'The National Democratic Party and the British Workers' League', Historical Journal 15, 3 (1972), pp. 533-52; Stubbs, J.O. 'Lord Milner and Patriotic Labour, 1914-1918', English Historical Review (1972), pp. 717-54.

The most prominent domestic Marxist organisation in 1914 had been the British Socialist Party. Despite internal arguments, it had avoided a split over the outbreak of war. However, tensions grew as the conflict dragged on and opponents of the war began to take control of the organisation. In 1916, as H.M. Hyndman, the pro-war chairman, and his supporters drew near to breaking with the BSP, their detractors on the left accused them of purveying ‘a spurious “national” Socialism, symbol of a fictitious class unity.’⁸

The BSP became yet more radical after the Hyndman faction had gone. By 1917, the party was arguing that nationalism provided the main ideological bulwark against socialism. The concept, their paper argued, ‘furnishes a solid basis for the ideal of “union sacre”...as opposed to the ideal of class struggle and internationalism.’⁹ The party purveyed an increasingly militant opposition to socialist co-operation with the war effort, and against cross-class alliances claiming to represent the national interest. They opened the pages of their paper to the Bolshevik, Georgi Chicherin, who railed against ‘those who in the name of “social patriotism” are poisoning the minds and hearts of the workers and helping to enchain them...Hyndmans, Hendersons, Hodges and Thornes...The great line of demarcation between the two opposing camps in the social struggle does not now run between organised Labour, as a whole, and capital, it runs between internationally-minded Labour and Labour “patriotically” serving home capital and acting as its vanguard.’¹⁰

The actions of the more vociferous Labour patriots led to their being branded by the far left as renegades who had abandoned socialism, with the implication being that an excess of nationalism negated or replaced the prior beliefs of those espousing it. Any remnants of socialist thought which appeared alongside their nationalist rhetoric were dismissed as mere demagogy. Like the BSP, the ILP felt nationalism to be incompatible with socialism, and felt that any who used it

⁸ Tsuzuki, C. H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (Oxford, 1961), p. 233.

⁹ The Call (31/5/17), p. 5.

¹⁰ ibid. (1/2/17), p. 3.

during the war were attempting 'to exploit the patriotic sentiments of their dupes.'¹¹

But the participation of Labour and the TUC in the war effort came to represent something more sinister to the far left than the fall from grace of a few individuals. Some saw it as part of a more general concentration of power and a merging of formerly antagonistic interests that took place on the home front. With the democratic process all but suspended, and Labour and the TUC having agreed to a political and industrial truce for the duration, there were concerns that power had devolved onto unaccountable ministers and massive industrial combinations that were profiting from the war.

While Labour saw a degree of wartime concentration as unavoidable, the BSP pointed to links between individual ministers and big business, and referred to the government as 'our self-appointed dictators...All the profiteering trusts are represented: coal by Lord Rhondda, shipping by Sir Joseph Mackay, food by Lord Davenport, armaments by Mr. Neville Chamberlain...Are they not – all these honourable men – apart from the Labour renegades – possessed of reputations of bitter antagonism to the interests of the working class?'¹² A party pamphlet claimed that 'Never was there a Government so patently capitalist in composition, in ideas, and in methods as the Imperial War Cabinet.'¹³

The BSP feared that the wartime class truce and the perceived dominance of capital in the form of its 'unprincipled speculators, its tyrannical pro-consuls, its unscrupulous mob leaders, its rapacious contractors, [and] its shameful concession-hunters', was leading to the imposition of an actual dictatorship.¹⁴ Foreshadowing later analyses of fascism, its paper, *The Call*, claimed in May 1917 that 'Capitalism is seeking not only the reality, but also the appearance of

¹¹ ILP Information Committee, Who Pays for the Attacks on Labour? (London, 1919), p. 3.

¹² The Call (11/1/17), p. 2.

¹³ British Socialist Party/J.T. Walton-Newbold, The Politics of Capitalism (London, 1917), p. 13.

¹⁴ The Call (24/5/17), p. 2.

absolute authority. It is looking about it for a “Caesar”, a capitalist hireling, a parody of greatness.’¹⁵

The ILP had also opposed the class alliances that had sprung up during the First World War, and later noted attempts to carry them over into post-war politics. The experience of revolution in Russia, they felt after 1917, had persuaded the British ruling class to manage discontent not through confrontation, which could have drastic consequences, but through the incorporation and negation of the working class in broad nationalistic movements. In 1919 the party argued that ‘During the last few years Capitalism has begun to take the Socialist movement seriously...So we have the Coalition Party, the National Democratic Party, and the National Party, each appealing to the working classes for “unity” in support of capitalism.’¹⁶

Counter-Revolution in Russia and Hungary

Domestic wartime differences over nationalism and cross-class organisations, though troubling, were insufficient to generalise the vociferousness expressed by Chicherin. It was events following the first Russian revolution of 1917 that exposed real differences within the British left as to the nature and origins of counter-revolution. The fall of Tsarism had been welcomed by British revolutionaries and reformist socialists alike, with Labour’s George Lansbury writing that ‘there is a happy unanimity in the British appreciation of the Russian revolution.’¹⁷ Despite this, Labour and the TUC initially worried that revolution would lead to Russian neutrality, a feeling exemplified by the Liverpool dockers’ leader, J. Sexton, who told the 1917 TUC that ‘I want to see the Revolution in Russia successful, but our fate and the fate of the Russian people is bound up in the successful licking of the Germans... While Russia is

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ ILP, *Who Pays?* p. 3.

¹⁷ *The Herald* (31/3/17), p. 9. See also *The Call* (22/3/17), p. 1 for the BSP’s first welcome of the Russian revolution. See also Graubard, S.R. *British Labour and the Russian Revolution, 1917–1924* (Cambridge, MA. 1956), pp. 16–43.

“revolting”, Germany is marching on.’¹⁸ However, the pronouncements of the Provisional Government reassured them somewhat, and Labour soon came to regard the February revolution as ‘the one solid gain made by democracy at the expense of reaction’ thus far in the war.¹⁹

The BSP, on the other hand, condemned the moderate left in Russia as representative of ‘that novel variety of Socialism which has been preaching a “fight to the finish”’.²⁰ The representatives from the labour movements of the west who went to Russia to encourage the Provisional Government to fight on were condemned as ‘spurious Socialist and Labour deputations...The Socialist International in the service of the Imperialist International – what a disgrace, what a scandal!’²¹

While Labour hailed a new democracy in Russia, the BSP feared that the Provisional Government was merely facilitating the ascendancy of capitalism over feudalism. In its attempt to sweep away the absolutist inefficiency and restrictive economic practices of Tsarism, the party feared that an unbridled capitalism would take hold. The fear that counter-revolution was taking a new form now that the autocracy had gone was represented in the manifesto that the BSP put out only a week after its welcome for news of the Russian revolution. This stated unequivocally that now Tsarism no longer held political power ‘There are other dark forces which have to be dealt with – the forces of Capitalism. The so-called Liberals of Russia are merely the exponents of the capitalist class.’²² A party propagandist, J.T. Walton-Newbold, was still unaware of Lenin’s belief that Russian conditions justified pushing the revolution forward beyond the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ phase foreseen by Marx. Walton-Newbold pessimistically stated in May 1917 that ‘Capitalism is now triumphant both in

¹⁸ TUC, Report of the 49th Annual Gathering (London, 1917), p. 310. On Labour’s efforts to keep Russia in the war see Winter, J.M. Socialism and the Challenge of War: Ideas and Politics in Britain, 1912–1918 (London, 1974), pp. 240-59.

¹⁹ The Herald (18/9/17), p. 2.

²⁰ The Call (19/4/17), p. 1.

²¹ ibid. (26/4/17), p. 1.

²² ibid. (29/3/17), p. 1.

industry and politics, not only here but also throughout Europe. The Russian Revolution completes its chain of political triumphs.²³

Labour did not identify the Provisional Government itself as counter-revolutionary, but also worried that the new democracy might succumb to some form of capitalist dictatorship. The counsel 'Let her take warning by the Girondins' accompanied the party's first congratulations to Russia.²⁴

All elements of the left noted the prominent role played in the Russian counter-revolutionary movement by those who had most to lose from radical political and economic change: the aristocracy, the feudal landlords and the monarchists.²⁵ However, it was recognised that more modern elites were throwing in their lot with the adherents of the old order. In Siberia it appeared that the counter-revolution, led by the Tsarist Admiral Kolchak, comprised an alliance between feudal remnants, in the form of the Cossack nobility, with business interests and the military. Another pro-Bolshevik party, the Workers' Socialist Federation, led Sylvia Pankhurst, described counter-revolutionary Siberia as 'a dictatorship of the knout...all power is in the hands of a number of "atamans"...these atamans get their support from the officer class – the officer bloc and the merchant bloc are the forces which have effected the Koltchak *coup d'etat*.'²⁶

The far left noted that the White counter-offensive also received support from elements of the Russian middle classes, which were seen to make up much of the movement's rank and file. Reporting the 'White Terror' in Kazan which followed the capture of the town from the Red Army, the BSP identified its perpetrators as 'A crowd of shopkeepers and traders...Ex-officers, schoolboys,

²³ BSP/Walton-Newbold, Politics of Capitalism p. 14.

²⁴ The Herald (24/3/17), p. 9. The *Gironde* had been a party representing commercial and landed interests during the French revolution. Though opposed to the archaic economic practices of the old regime, they eventually sided with the counter-revolution.

²⁵ See for example Labour Leader (28/12/18), p. 7; Labour Party Russian files: LP/RUS/RCW/7i-x, LP/RUS/RWC/18i-vi and LP/RUS/RCW19i-vii; Labour subscribed to an LSI motion at Berne which characterised the Russian counter-revolution in this fashion. See LSI files: Box 8/30/vii. For groups to the left of Labour see Workers' Dreadnought (20/11/20), p. 1; CPGB, The Communist: Organ of the Third International (5/11/21), p. 10.

²⁶ Workers' Dreadnought (22/11/19), p. 1541. Knout: from the Russian *knut* – a whip.

students, landlords' sons, houseowners, the well-to-do – in short, all those with whose interests the Revolution had interfered.²⁷ When counter-revolution swept away a short-lived communist regime in Hungary in 1920, the WSF noted that the middle classes there were also eager participants in the suppression of Soviet rule.²⁸

In stressing the shared aims of the diverse social elements that made up modern counter-revolutionary movements, socialists and communists saw them as purely reactionary, and could find no modernising or progressive aspects within them. Though Marx and Engels had seen capitalism as a progressive force replacing an outmoded feudalism, albeit one that was itself destined to be superseded, the reality was that once revolutionary situations emerged in Russia and elsewhere, both capitalist and feudal elements tended to act in a natural alliance, drawing in elements of the middle classes to form a reactionary block against any fundamental alteration in the position of the working class.

Anti-Semitism, another characteristic of these movements, was seen by the left in much the same way, namely as a method of diverting popular discontent away from its natural targets. The British Socialist Party argued that in Russia such prejudice had allowed 'the governing classes to point towards the oppressed as the culprits for the social wrongs of which the people is suffering, and thus to divert the ignorant people's wrath on the helpless victims of their calumny.'²⁹

Counter-revolutionary movements were therefore not seen as possessing an ideology distinctive from the values of the old order that they were seeking to defend. Their patriotism, nationalism, religion and mysticism were seen merely as camouflage for the reactionary reality of these movements' aims. Even the Tsarist minister, Count Witte, had written of the 'Union of the Russian People' movement, commonly known as the Black Hundreds, that 'they have not a single viable political idea and concentrate all their efforts on unleashing the

²⁷ The Call (19/12/18), p. 2.

²⁸ Workers' Dreadnought (20/11/20), p. 1.

²⁹ The Call (31/5/17), p. 5.

lowest possible impulses...this party can instigate the most frightful pogroms and convulsions, but it is incapable of anything positive.’³⁰

Labour was in possession of reports from Russia which seemed to confirm that anti-Semitism substituted for an ideology when it came to the supporters of the White General, Denikin. One stated “Pogrom” is a party cry. As soon as order is restored, all Jews will be doomed to die.’³¹ A Russian doctor wrote to Labour’s Arthur Henderson that ‘anti-Jewish propaganda is being made in a fanatical fashion. Newspapers and fly-leaves openly call upon the people to resort to pogroms.’³² Russian socialists reported that anti-Semitism was also the policy of the Whites in the Ukraine, stating that ‘no village...has escaped these crimes throughout the length of this vast Ukranean [sic] territory.’³³

The left were also aware through reports from Hungarian Social Democrats and communists of widespread anti-Jewish atrocities there, and the equation by the counter-revolutionary leader, Admiral Horthy, of Jews and Communists.³⁴ The Workers’ Socialist Federation reported one eye witness to events in Budapest in October 1919 who stated that ‘The walls of the capital are covered with posters inciting the people to race hatred and to acts of violence.’³⁵ In 1919, George Lansbury spoke at an East London rally, reportedly 100,000 strong, called to protest about the massacres of Jews in Poland. As in Hungary and Russia, these were justified by the equation of Jews and Bolshevism.³⁶ In all these cases, counter-revolutionary movements had no platform other than anti-Semitism and the destruction of the left, and were seen only to be offering the people a share in whatever they could plunder from the Jews. Society, after that, would remain unchanged. The WSF contrasted the anti-Semitism of the Whites

³⁰ Cited in Cohn, N. Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (London, 1967), p. 111.

³¹ ‘Extract from a letter written by a member of the French Military Mission with Denikin’, (April 1919), Labour Party archive, file LP/RUS/RCW/1i-ii, p. ii.

³² Dr. A. Koralink to Henderson, (4/11/19), Labour Party archive, file LP/RUS/RCW/26i-vii, p. iv.

³³ New Odessa Group, ‘The Massacres of the Jews in the Ukraine’, (n.d.), Labour Party archive, file LP/RUS/RCW/9i-iv, p. 1.

³⁴ Ernst Garami to ‘Ewer’ (23/5/20), Labour Party archive, file LP/HUN/2/7, pp. i-ii.

³⁵ Workers’ Dreadnought (18/10/19), p. 1502.

³⁶ Bush, Behind the Lines p. 208.

with the situation of Jews in Bolshevik Russia, stating that 'Under the Soviet system anti-Semitism and other race hatreds disappear.'³⁷

The experience of the years between 1917 and 1922 removed any simplistic notions that the left may have held about counter-revolution being the preserve of expiring dynastic elements. The modernising capitalist and the backward feudatory, the enterprising middle class and the reactionary upper class, each normally and so recently opposed to the interests of the other, had shown themselves able to unite under the correct circumstances. Once open class conflict had begun, the left reasoned, any divisions between large and small capitalists or between industrialists and agrarians were quickly subsumed in unified counter-revolutionary movements. Where, as in the case of Hungary, the counter-revolution prevailed, reactionary regimes emerged in which the capitalist, the petit bourgeois and the landlord could co-exist with a measure of comfort due to their shared antipathy to significant social change.

Despite the intrusion of nationalism into segments of the labour movement, it was believed that the working class would not willingly support counter-revolution, and the ILP maintained that in Russia for example, Kolchak's peasant troops had been dragooned against their will. The party noted reports that 'the rank and file of Koltchak's armies are unwilling to fight...eighty per cent of the wounded sent back have wounded themselves with their own rifles.'³⁸ A *New Statesman* correspondent illustrated features which surely eliminated the possibility of working-class support for such movements, writing that 'the Whites make no secret whatever of their intentions. They regard the *literal* decimation of the working class as an absolutely necessary preliminary to the re-establishment of any firm government in Russia...There is certainly no other means by which such men as Denikin could hope to re-establish themselves'.³⁹

³⁷ *Workers' Dreadnought* (5/7/19), p. 1384.

³⁸ *Labour Leader* (1/1/20), p. 5.

³⁹ *New Statesman* (1/2/19), p. 372.

Foreign intervention in Russia and Hungary reinforced the idea that counter-revolution had an international aspect.⁴⁰ The way foreign powers, whether democratic or autocratic, effectively banded together even while at war with each other, to strike against the possibility of social and economic change was not a fact that could be ignored. Neither could the way in which Allied intervention in Russia appeared to be motivated by a desire to restore the former rulers and as a means of securing access to raw materials and markets in much the same way as the European powers had extended their influence across the globe before 1914.

Imperialism as a concept was not new to the British left. The power of great industrial and commercial concerns to influence or even direct foreign policy had been noted by Hyndman as early as 1881, and many on the left who had opposed the Boer War did so largely on the grounds of its imperialist nature.⁴¹ But the left drew most extensively on the writings of the English Liberal, J.A. Hobson, whose work on the subject subsequently influenced Lenin.⁴² However, there were other British leftists contributing to the developing critique of imperialism. In 1910 the ILP's H.N. Brailsford had written a perceptive critique, which the party reprinted in 1917. Brailsford had effectively prefigured the far left's charges against Allied intervention in Russia and Hungary when he had written 'It is the epoch of concession hunting, of coolie labour, of chartered companies, of railway construction, of loans to semi-civilised Powers, of the "opening up" of "dying empires".'⁴³

⁴⁰ Aside from 'patriotic' socialists such as Hyndman, only a few on Labour's right supported intervention. See Advisory Committee on International Questions minutes (15/7/18), LP/IAC/1/19. Believing that Bolshevism could not be overthrown by force, Labour and the TUC later threatened industrial action against renewed British intervention. See MacFarlane, L.J. 'Hands Off Russia: British Labour and the Russo-Polish War, 1920', Past and Present 38 (December 1967), pp. 126-52.

⁴¹ See Hyndman, H.M. England for All: The Text Book of Democracy (Brighton, 1973), pp. 103-4; Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman pp. 125-30.

⁴² Hobson, J.A. Imperialism: A Study (London, 1905). Lenin complemented Hobson's work in 1916 when writing his Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (New York, 1939 edn.), p. 15. On Hobson's influence within the left see Macintyre, S. 'Imperialism and the British Labour Movement in the 1920s', Our History 64 (Autumn 1975), pp. 3-24.

⁴³ Brailsford, H.N. The War of Steel and Gold: A Study of the Armed Peace (London, 1917), p. 64.

However, neither Hobson nor Brailsford held the Marxist view that imperialism represented the final phase of capitalism, and both put forward solutions or antidotes which may be described as socialist, but which were certainly not revolutionary.⁴⁴ Their attitude complemented that of the Labour Party, which, like the other parties of the pre-1914 Second International, primarily recognised imperialism as a threat to peace, rather than the apogee of capitalism itself.⁴⁵

Despite these differences, it was accepted by all but a few 'Empire Socialists' that colonisation and intervention abroad could be driven by the desire to turn domestic profits into 'superprofits' via their re-investment through cartels and trusts in lucrative foreign concessions and resources. This in turn led the imperial power to have to safeguard these investments and resources either by the application of direct military intervention, or the installation of malleable local rulers. In this way foreign policy could be dictated by commercial interests and imperialism was therefore a competitive business, often leading to international conflict. The ILP argued that 'One need not be a Marxist to understand that the interests of British capital and the aims of British Imperialism are identical...British foreign policy works with its battleships behind it, to smooth the way for the expansion of British capital.'⁴⁶

Both supporters and opponents of the First World War, therefore, cited clashing imperialisms as its cause, and not a few put its continuation down to the fact that neither side had yet achieved its desired imperial objectives. The BSP maintained in 1917 that 'In the final analysis the aims of all the belligerents are directed to one end, and that is the assurance of their economic stability.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ ibid. pp. 333-8. That the CPGB accepted the Leninist view of imperialism see the 'War Against Imperialism' thesis in CPGB, Report of the 7th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1925), pp. 74-9. Dutt later acknowledged his debt to Lenin's interpretation in Fascism and Social Revolution p. 226.

⁴⁵ See Haupt, G. Socialism and the Great War: The Collapse of the Second International (Oxford, 1972), pp. 135-60.

⁴⁶ New Leader (13/10/22), p. 5; see also BSP/Walton-Newbold, Politics of Capitalism pp. 6-11.

⁴⁷ The Call (22/2/17), p. 2.

The far left also recognised that imperialism had definite domestic social effects. The massive excess profits allowed for the creation of a labour aristocracy: a well paid and embourgeoisified stratum of skilled workers who performed tasks essential to the imperial project and who were often in favour of a beneficial 'social imperialism'.⁴⁸ Yet imperialism was also seen to have another other negative impact at home. Through control of foreign markets the imperialist powers had access to cheap labour, and as a result were able to drive down the wages and conditions of less skilled domestic labour through the threat of transferring production abroad.⁴⁹

Labour saw the intervention in Russia primarily as a blow against the new democracy and in favour of the old order. Michael Farbman felt that the actions of the Allies were a betrayal of the Provisional Government, writing in the *Herald* that 'The fact was forgotten that Revolutionary Russia was an ally and required to be treated as an ally.'⁵⁰ Labour noted that British forces had deposed a socialist and liberal coalition administration in Archangel in favour of Kolchak, and accepted Kerensky's statement to them that parts of Russia that had once proclaimed allegiance to the Provisional Government were now 'ruled by military dictators enjoying the patronage of your Government.'⁵¹ Arthur Henderson concurred, telling an international socialist gathering in August 1919 that 'The real character of the enterprise undertaken by Koltchak with the material support of the British and French governments can no longer be concealed. Supported by all the anti-democratic elements in Russia...Koltchak has established himself as military dictator.'⁵² George Lansbury's impression was that 'the counter-revolution relies everywhere on foreign aid. In the Caucasus, Finland and the Ukraine it looks to the Germans; in the Murman [sic] and Siberia to the Allies and the Tchecks [sic].'⁵³

⁴⁸ See Beetham, D. 'Reformism and the 'Bourgeoisification' of the Labour Movement', in Levy, C. (ed.), *Socialism and the Intelligentsia, 1880 – 1914* (London, 1987), pp. 106-34; Thompson, *Poverty of Theory* pp. 67-8; McBriar, *Fabian Socialism* pp. 123-9; Lenin, 'Imperialism and the Split in Socialism', *Works* Vol. 23, pp. 105-24.

⁴⁹ On the CPGBs perception of the domestic impact of imperialism see 'Agenda and Resolutions for Policy Conference, 18 and 19/3/22', Page Arnot Papers: DAR 6/1.

⁵⁰ *The Herald* (22/9/17), p. 5.

⁵¹ LP/RUS/Ker/li-iv.

⁵² LSI archive: Box 7, LSI 8/2/v.

⁵³ *The Herald* (20/7/18), p. 2.

The massive foreign investments and loans that had been negotiated with Tsarist Russia led those further to the left to see intervention in starkly economic terms.⁵⁴ The BSP believed that these and the control of raw materials explained both the presence of British troops in Russia and the alleged British support for General Kornilov's attempted overthrow of the Provisional Government in September 1917. In condemning both intervention and imperialism they attempted to disabuse those at home who still entertained what they saw as 'parliamentary illusions', arguing that 'Here is a lesson for the British working class which still thinks that the danger to Democracy can only come from Germany, and that the only Junkers and reactionaries are to be found across the North Sea.'⁵⁵ When Allied troops landed in Russia the party proclaimed 'A new war has been commenced – a bondholders' war.'⁵⁶

Walton-Newbold of the ILP also saw economic imperatives at work when he branded the Allied and German interventions 'a War for Liberty – the liberty to exploit, unhindered by the other fellow's dastardly competition.'⁵⁷ The ILP noted that the White general, Wrangel, had assumed responsibility for the debts of the Tsar, and concluded that the Allies 'recognised in him the saviour of the bondholders.'⁵⁸ The Workers' Socialist Federation was similarly convinced of Allied motives, arguing that 'The Governments of England and France, in order to recoup themselves for the losses of the London and Paris bankers...[seek] to re-establish a government, with the aid of armed hirelings, which will impose again the milliard tribute of the loans of Tsarism upon the backs of the Russian workers and peasants.'⁵⁹ As the tide of the civil war turned in favour of the Bolsheviks, the ILP saw the outcome as much as a defeat for western capitalism as for Russian despotism, noting in celebratory tone that 'The last hopes of Churchill and Russo-Asiatic Consolidated Ltd. are being shattered.'⁶⁰

⁵⁴ See for example ILP/J.T. Walton-Newbold, Bankers, Bondholders and Bolsheviks (London, 1919),

⁵⁵ The Call (20/9/17), p. 1.

⁵⁶ ibid. (10/10/18), p. 1.

⁵⁷ BSP/Walton-Newbold, Politics of Capitalism p. 15.

⁵⁸ Labour Leader (18/11/20), p. 5.

⁵⁹ Workers' Dreadnought (3/5/19), p. 1311.

When Allied forces combined with Hungarian counter-revolutionaries to depose the Hungarian Soviet government of Bela Kun in August 1919, the west was deemed largely responsible by the left for the subsequent 'White Guard' regime of Admiral Horthy.⁶¹ The ILP argued that through Allied actions 'the Hungarian proletariat were delivered up to the Cavaignacs and the Gallifets of the Hungarian counter-revolution.'⁶² An ILP member who visited the country in 1920 held that Horthy had pushed Hungary 'through Terror into rank reaction.'⁶³ Several parties argued that Horthy was repaying his foreign backers by offering a favourable environment for investors at the expense of the working class, while the ILP noted that the workers were 'held down by extreme methods', dubbing Hungary and neighbouring Romania as 'Two Capitalist Eldorados.'⁶⁴

But whereas the far left could do little other than keep up a propaganda barrage against the Hungarian counter-revolution, Labour and the TUC preferred constitutional action, which in the end brought them to very different conclusions about the nature of intervention in Hungary and the Horthy regime. A joint delegation met Lloyd George early in 1920, and Labour wrote directly to the Hungarian authorities demanding an end to repression, subsequently accepting an offer by the Hungarian government to send a delegation to the country.⁶⁵

On its return, the delegation issued a report that no longer blamed the Hungarian authorities directly for the murders, internment and disappearance of its opponents, but placed responsibility on non-governmental military formations. References to the complicity of Allied representatives in the terror,

⁶⁰ Labour Leader (15/1/20), p. 3.

⁶¹ See for example Henderson to Lloyd George (17/1/20), in Labour Party archive (Manchester), file LP/HUN/1/3/1/1-11; Brailsford, H.N. 'Memorandum on the White Terror in Hungary' (March 1920), in LP/HUN/2/6/1.1; Workers' Dreadnought (18/10/19 p. 1502, 3/1/20 p. 1589, and 10/1/20 p. 1597).

⁶² Labour Leader (1/1/20), p. 2. Generals Cavaignac and de Gallifet were still reviled on the left for their brutal suppression of the Parisian risings of 1848 and 1871 respectively.

⁶³ Quoted in Brockway, Socialism Over Sixty Years p. 167.

⁶⁴ Labour Leader (7/9/22), p. 6. See also the CPGBs Labour Monthly (Oct 1923), pp. 332-6.

⁶⁵ See the telegram from the Labour Party Executive Committee to the Hungarian Prime Minister (18/3/20), in LP/HUN/2/1/1.1. The reply is in M. Samadam to Labour Party (n.d.), LP/HUN/2/1/1.1.

which had appeared in the delegation's draft report, were deleted in the published version.⁶⁶ Labour later conditionally supported a British government loan to Hungary.⁶⁷ ILP members of the delegation maintained the original charges on their return, but did not officially object to the content of the report.⁶⁸

While the Labour Party and the TUC had opposed foreign intervention in Russia, they came to see the Bolsheviks as ultimately responsible for the destruction of the democratic potential of the February revolution. Once Lenin's party had seized power, it had suppressed all other factions on the left, including those who could be most closely equated with Labour.⁶⁹ Labour supported the attempts of Mensheviks in Georgia and the Ukraine to declare independence from Russia, maintained extensive files on the persecution of Russian socialists under Bolshevism, and protested to the Soviet government for many years over their treatment.⁷⁰ The right-wing leader of the railway union, J.H. Thomas, argued that Bolshevik oppression was worse than that of the Tsars, and held that the Kaiser had been morally superior to Lenin.⁷¹

Counter-Revolution in Germany

The Labour Party had supported democratic socialists in the form of the Mensheviks and the right wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia, and it likewise backed the actions of the SPD in Germany.⁷² Where in Russia Labour equated Bolshevik rule with Tsarist tyranny, in Germany it saw little

⁶⁶ 'Draft Report of Labour Party/TUC Delegation to Hungary' (LP/HUN/2/8.1), has the following sentence crossed out: 'It was stated to us on various occasions that the attitude of the British Representatives in Hungary, civil and military, was partly responsible for the outrages.'

⁶⁷ See Advisory Committee on International Questions minutes 13/9/23 and 18/2/24 (LP/IAC/1/210ii and LP/IAC/1/221i respectively).

⁶⁸ *ibid.* ILP delegates, though not formally challenging the conclusions of the report, blamed the Hungarian government and the Allied missions directly for the terror on their return. See Labour Leader (17/6/20), p. 5.

⁶⁹ See the Menshevik tract 'An Appeal from the Russian Socialists to the Socialists of the Whole World!' (18/8/18), in LSI files: LSI 1/27-39.

⁷⁰ On support for Georgian and Ukrainian independence see Labour Party, International Labour and Peace: Berne International Labour and Socialist Conference (London, 1919), pp. 7 and 13. On Labour and the Bolshevik repression of Russian socialists see LP/RUS/SRP/1 – 122. Minutes show that the issue was raised at ten separate meetings of the Labour Party/TUC Joint International Committee between March 1922 and February 1927.

⁷¹ Cited in Challinor, Origins p. 176; Graubard, British Labour p. 68.

⁷² Divisions within German socialism during the war were well known to the British left. See Bevan, E. German Social Democracy During the War (London, 1918).

difference between communist efforts to overthrow the newly founded German Republic and the putsch attempts of Kapp and Hitler. Labour therefore felt that the violence sanctioned by SPD ministers against the revolutionary left was justified. The party's foreign affairs advisory body minuted in January 1921 'Considered memorandum on Liebknecht murder case. Resolved to take no action.'⁷³

Conversely, many of those further to the left than Labour could not forgive the SPD for their role in the violent suppression of the German left in the aftermath of the war.⁷⁴ The ILP saw the German revolution of November 1918 as incomplete, leaving significant power in the hands of the autocratic and military interests that had launched the war in 1914. It reprinted an article by the German left socialist Alfred Brauenthal, which noted the continuity within the German bureaucracy and judiciary, and stated 'The question is not 'What has the Revolution left of the old Germany?', but on the contrary, 'To what extent has the old system been altered by the Revolution?'...nothing has been changed in the *economic structure* – the capitalist character of German society.'⁷⁵ The ILP, however, did not go as far as British Marxist organisations in their opposition to the new German Republican government.

The Communist Party of Great Britain maintained that the potential for real change in Germany had been betrayed by SPD timidity, and described November 1918 as 'this most reformist of revolutions.'⁷⁶ The BSP blamed the SPD for the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg,⁷⁷ while the WSF accused them of open collaboration with counter-revolutionaries against the threat of a second revolution. It referred to the Weimar Republic as 'the sham democracy which has practised autocracy and White Terror for twelve months past.'⁷⁸

⁷³ Advisory Committee on International Questions minutes (19/1/21), LP/IAC/1/121. Karl Liebknecht had been murdered along with other German communists in January 1919 by troops acting under the auspices of the SPD minister Gustav Noske.

⁷⁴ See for example Labour Leader (8/4/20 and 15/4/20).

⁷⁵ *ibid.* (15/1/20), p. 3.

⁷⁶ Labour Monthly (July 1921), pp. 90-1.

⁷⁷ Cited in Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow p. 24.

As German democracy established itself, the CPGB condemned agreements on wages and working conditions made by the SPD and German employers, branding them as 'The end of Social Democracy.'⁷⁹ Communists held that reformism by its very nature led to debilitating compromise and, in crisis conditions, to reaction. The party likened Labour's policies with those of the SPD, which they maintained had found itself 'forced along the slippery path of Coalition...It is easy to begin by being "moderate": but the class issue knows no moderation, and the end is unity with all the bloody barbarities of capitalism. That is the issue at the end of the avenue of "peaceful progress" of the Labour Party unless the workers awaken in time.'⁸⁰

Different Conceptions of Democracy and Dictatorship

Labour and the TUC were unequivocal in their support for democracy, and argued that the Weimar Republic was infinitely preferable to a dictatorship of the right or the left. Labour was a prime mover after the First World War in re-establishing relations between European socialist parties, and at the inaugural conference of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) in Berne in 1919, Arthur Henderson supported a pivotal motion entitled Democracy and Dictatorship. This was a fundamental statement of the politics of the new international, and re-affirmed that socialism must be democratic, parliamentary and consensual, and should equally oppose all dictatorships.⁸¹ Ramsay MacDonald also spoke at Berne, and illustrated that the ILP were fundamentally in agreement with Labour when it came to the nature of socialism and the varied threats to democracy. He argued that in the post-1918 world 'the conception of democratic liberty may now be supplemented...revolutions must not create conditions which might be accurately described as a transition from one form of tyranny to another.'⁸²

⁷⁸ Workers' Dreadnought (27/3/20), p. 4.

⁷⁹ The Communist (8/10/21), pp. 1-2.

⁸⁰ Labour Monthly (November 1922), p. 328.

⁸¹ Labour Party, International Labour and Peace p. 6.

⁸² LSI files: LSI 6/597/ii.

The WSF and other British Marxists could not accept the equation of Soviet rule, or Bolshevik methods, with those of dictatorships of the right. The WSF reprinted an article by the Hungarian communist Georg Lukacs that differentiated between the social bases and aims of left and right dictatorship, as well as the different justifications for Red and White terror.⁸³ British supporters of Bolshevism also backed the suppression of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia, seeing in their opposition to Bolshevik rule collusion with the forces of intervention and a betrayal of the revolution. The young CPGB was happy to accept Trotsky's equation of Mensheviks and Girondists.⁸⁴

The experience of the war had in fact contributed to the formation of a separate communist party in Britain. The BSP, which before the war had agreed to seek membership of the Labour Party, now began the process of forming a party on the Russian model with other small groups on the far left. Though the new party took Lenin's advice and sought tactical affiliation with Labour, it made no secret of its hostility to the politics of the larger party. At the Communist Unity Convention in 1920, at which the CPGB was inaugurated, these feelings came out in the affiliation debate. J.F. Hodgson, delegate of the BSP's Grimsby branch, equated the Labour leaders with those of the SPD. Both, he argued 'have a bourgeois outlook...whose mentality is that of the middle class...I would say that they are the deadly enemy of the revolution which you and I are seeking. I say that these men are destined to play the part of your Scheidemanns and Noskes, and the time will come when we shall have to deal with them in no uncertain way. Not by voting. I say that.'⁸⁵

The views of the delegate from Derby, William Paul, were similarly shaped by recent events abroad. He argued that contemporary ruling classes, when confronted with a crisis 'did not first of all try to smash the revolutionary class, but tried to gather the moderate elements, to compromise with them and to

⁸³ Workers' Dreadnought (20/11/20), p. 1.

⁸⁴ The Communist (6/5/22), pp. 7-8. See also Trotsky, L. Between Red and White (London, 1922), reprinted by the CPGB and containing a fuller exposition of the case against Menshevism.

⁸⁵ CPGB, Communist Unity Convention pp. 31-2. Philip Scheidemann and Gustav Noske were two SPD ministers particularly reviled for their actions against German revolutionaries after the war.

throw the responsibility of diddling the working class upon those elements.' In Russia capital has placed its hopes first on the moderate Kerensky, and when he could not stabilise the situation in its favour, on the reactionary Kornilov; in Germany the Noske's and the Scheidemann's of the SPD had managed to hold the line without the necessity of their being replaced in power by open counter-revolutionaries.⁸⁶

By the time that fascism came to the fore, the British left had developed sharply different analyses of counter-revolution and reaction. Labour and the TUC had emerged from the war with their faith in democracy strengthened. Their participation in the wartime government had reinforced their desire to return to power electorally, and had impressed upon them the need to expand their support base in order to achieve this. One historian of British socialism, Paul Ward, argued that by 1918 the Labour leadership felt themselves to be a government in waiting, believing that 'politics were to be fought solely in the parliamentary arena...this new role could only be achieved by being a party of the nation, not one in opposition to it. This involved a concentration on winning parliamentary seats at the expense of socialist propagandising.'⁸⁷ Though Labour leaders had welcomed the first Russian revolution as a victory for democracy, they had opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power, and their subsequent repression of Russian socialists and democrats, as the imposition of a new tyranny. They saw communist risings in Germany as unwarranted under the new democracy, and felt that the communist regime in Hungary had provided the impetus and justification for a bloody counter-revolution.

Despite being able to agree that reactionary and counter-revolutionary movements were motivated primarily by the desire to protect or restore the existing economic order, the left differed over other aspects. The parties that placed their faith in parliamentary democracy as a means of achieving reform could not accept that reaction or dictatorship could emerge from within the structures of a mature democratic system. They argued that putschism and

⁸⁶ *ibid.* p. 38.

⁸⁷ Ward, P. Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924 (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 167.

revolutionary agitation on the left might produce a violent reaction from the right. These groups opposed any threat to democracy, be it from the left or the right, and as events unfolded in Russia and Hungary, came to see 'proletarian' dictatorship as being as iniquitous as a dictatorship of the right.

The parties that sought to overthrow the parliamentary system, seeing it as nothing more than window-dressing for capitalism, argued that reaction was inherent within the 'democratic' state, and would be brought into the open should crisis or class conflict sufficiently threaten the bourgeois order. In their eyes, elections were at best contests between well-funded capitalist parties, and at worst, devices for siphoning working-class anger into the futile arena of the ballot box. For them, there was a world of difference between the Soviet system and any dictatorship of the right, be it autocratic or capitalist.

These opposing views were not only applied to eastern and central Europe, but to Britain itself, as parliamentary accountability and control was suspended or eroded during the war. The differing interpretations of war, revolution and counter-revolution helped render wider left-wing unity in Britain impossible. G.D.H. Cole concluded that after 1919, it was 'unrealistic to speak or think of the working-class movement as in any practical sense a single, even loosely unified, force animated by a single object.'⁸⁸

However, the left could agree on several important points concerning the reactionary and counter-revolutionary movements that preceded and were contiguous with the emergence of fascism. These were that they emerged as a response to extreme social and political circumstances. They essentially acted against change and in the interests of those who already held economic power in a given country. They were also seen to lack a specific ideology of their own, but deployed any rhetoric that might mobilise a broad-based movement around essentially reactionary demands. These movements used appeals based on anything from racial prejudice to patriotism and religion in their bids to defeat threats to the established economic order. Furthermore, the left could agree that

⁸⁸ Cole, G.D.H. A History of Socialist Thought. Vol. IV: Communism and Social Democracy, 1914–1931 (London, 1969), p. 2.

despite the professed nationalism of these movements, they in fact had a common interest in the maintenance of capitalism, and would support each other internationally to that end.

The profound divisions within the left over the origin and nature of counter-revolution, coupled with agreement over the economic purpose of reactionary movements would reappear in later analyses of fascism. This first became clear when the left examined events in Italy, the first country in which fascism came to power.

2: Explaining Italian Fascism: From Movement to Dictatorship, 1919-1926

Given the tumultuous events surrounding the Russian revolution and civil war, the upheavals in eastern Europe, the situation in Germany and developments on the home front at the end of the First World War, the British left could perhaps be forgiven for not placing Italy at the top of its agenda. While the origins of Italian fascism, both intellectual and organisational, would later be intensively analysed by the British left, the actual formation of the *Fasci di azione rivoluzionaria* in January 1915, and its evolution into the *Fasci di combattimento* in March 1919 passed virtually unnoticed in Britain. However, British socialists and communists did take note of the growth of militant nationalism in post-war Italy, as well as the wave of strikes, factory occupations and land seizures that swept the country during the turbulent *biennio rosso*, or two red years, of 1919 and 1920. Like many Italians, most British observers did not immediately appreciate the significance of these events for the nascent fascist movement.¹

When considering Italian nationalism after the war, the British left became aware that its programme contained social and economic aspects not traditionally associated with reactionary movements. While reporting on the seizure of Fiume, a disputed port city on the Adriatic, by irregular Italian forces opposed to the terms proposed at the Paris peace conference, the ILP commented on the populism of the short-lived nationalist regime there. They also identified corporatist tendencies in its governance, concluding of its charismatic leader, Gabriele D'Annunzio, that his 'ultimate goal is a guild society.'²

¹ For example, fascism was not mentioned in the ILP's coverage of the 1920 Italian elections. See Labour Leader (18/11/20), pp. 5-7. The debate within the British left centred on the potentialities of the industrial unrest and the significance of concessions given by Italian employers. But the contrasting views of Labour's Philip Snowden and the future CPGB ideologue Emile Burns prefigure later conflicts over responses to fascism. See Labour Leader (30/9/20), p. 4 and (7/10/20), p. 5 respectively.

² New Leader (10/11/22), p. 13.

Other British leftists, however, saw in the Fiume episode a dangerous template for a broader coup attempt by the Italian right. An Italian correspondent of the Workers' Socialist Federation identified this radical nationalism with the interests of the Italian ruling class, predicting that the fervour generated by the Fiume expedition would 'eventually break loose from restraints and dash onwards to the formation of a nationalist Republic.' The WSF's leader, Sylvia Pankhurst, already identifying with the Bolsheviks ahead of the formation of the CPGB, saw but one way to prevent this, writing 'there are only two alternatives – the Soviets or the dictatorship of the rich.'³ In arguing this, she foreshadowed a characteristic element of the approach of much of the revolutionary left towards fascism: namely that once a crisis had deepened to the extent that fascism was transformed into a force seriously contending for power, there could be no return to democracy. The issue at stake in these circumstances was whether revolution or fascism would triumph. As a consequence of this, the actions of the social democratic parties and trade unions became critical.

Although events at Fiume temporarily commanded the attention of British leftists, once the occupation was over, D'Annunzio's star waned, and from this point on the political and ideological struggle between fascism and its opponents became the dominant issue in their coverage of Italy. This new movement generated a flurry of analyses from within the British left. These can generally be divided into two categories: those developed by the adherents of constitutionalism and democracy, and those evolved by the proponents of revolution.

Fascism had first come to the attention of the British revolutionary left when its squads burned down the newspaper offices of the Italian Socialist Party (the PSI) in Milan on April 18th 1919. Though little was known of the background of this new movement, the fascists in these early reports were immediately identified by their actions as 'reactionaries.'⁴

³ *Workers' Dreadnought* (18/10/19), p. 1504.

⁴ *ibid.* (3/5/19), p. 1312.

That August, after the factory occupations had begun, Italian employers were using blackshirt paramilitary formations to attack strikers. The WSF reported the text of fascist posters that went up in the big cities: 'react against Bolshevik provocateurs and proclaim your patriotism aloud! Unfold to the sun from your windows the glorious flag of Italy and decorate your breasts with the victorious symbol of your country, the tricolour. Open your places of business and order will reign.'⁵ Anti-working-class violence and nationalistic appeals addressed to the entrepreneurial class immediately identified fascism as a reactionary and counter-revolutionary force to those on the British left. The Plebs' League reported that before 1922 fascist attacks were directed 'almost entirely' against socialists, trade unionists and poor peasants.⁶ The CPGB initially saw the fascists as a paramilitary force, without an ideology of their own and at the behest of the ruling class, dubbing them 'the Italian Black and Tans.'⁷ When reporting fascist bomb attacks on socialist meetings, and noting that Milanese businessmen were financing the movement to the tune of a million lire a month, the WSF similarly concluded that the fascists 'are in the strictest sense a White Guard.'⁸

The historian Charles Keserich noted a certain ambiguity when he examined Labour's initial assessment of Italian fascism, and, in comparison with the assuredness and stridency of some other groups further to the left, was correct. But he appeared to stretch his conclusions somewhat in questioning whether, on this basis, Labour's stance during the early and mid-1920s could accurately be described as anti-fascist.⁹ Labour opposed fascism from the start, as it opposed all extremist and anti-democratic forces.¹⁰ The fact that both it and the TUC sympathised with the moderate leadership of the PSI, its reliance on Italian democracy, and its refusal to step outside the law when attacked by fascism,

⁵ *ibid.* (30/8/19), p. 1450.

⁶ Plebs' League/'L.W.' *Fascism: Its History and Significance* (London, 1924), p. 6.

⁷ *The Communist Review* (September 1922), p. 265.

⁸ *Workers' Dreadnought* (13/12/19), p. 1570.

⁹ Keserich, C. 'The British Labour Press and Italian Fascism, 1922 – 25', *JCH* 10, 4 (1975), p. 579.

¹⁰ Keserich showed that Labour recognised a certain antagonism within the fascist movement towards big business around the time of the March on Rome. However, while the party discerned something of the radical rhetoric of early fascism, even the quote Keserich selected from the *Daily Herald* stated that, when it came to the economy 'fascism was without a policy to replace the conservatism it had abandoned.' Keserich, 'British Labour Press', *ibid.* p. 580.

should not obscure this. In statements preceding the period covered by Keserich, Labour had already identified the politics and purpose of Italian fascism and concluded from its actions that the movement was composed of 'Anti-Socialists', further describing it in the same period as 'the unofficial army formed to fight the Socialists and the Communists.'¹¹ While noting that under-employed army officers and the impoverished middle classes made up the bulk of fascism's rank and file, the leadership of both British organisations were well aware of reports they were receiving from Italy stating that 'Employers support [the] Fascist Movement because they see in it the means of destroying workers' organisations.'¹² Anti-fascism was implicit in its interpretation from the beginning.

In arguing this, the Labour leadership's analysis of fascism was in fact similar to that of the party's left, as represented by the ILP. Its first description of the Italian movement, in February 1921, described the fascists as 'Capitalist Private Troops', and noted that they were financed by industrial and agricultural concerns.¹³ The ILP also shared Labour's view of the social composition of the movement, identifying its core as 'former combatants, mainly officers', and described their activities as 'the burning down of Socialist offices, street fighting and murder, and other acts of violence against the Socialists.'¹⁴ In both cases, the nature of fascism was judged by its actions rather than its pronouncements.

Labour and the TUC did differ from the smaller revolutionary groups regarding events in Italy in apportioning blame for the success of fascism and the failure of the Italian left to defeat it, arguing that worker militancy had been a contributory factor in the rise of fascism in Italy and would be elsewhere if repeated. The far left conversely held that such belligerence was necessary to defeat fascism. In 1924 Labour and the TUC maintained that Italian fascism had arisen 'when there was a considerable chance of the workers assuming control

¹¹ Daily Herald (22/7/21 p. 1 and 29/10/21 p. 1 respectively).

¹² J.B. Williams to Walter Citrine (28/12/22), TUC archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, file MSS 292/743/1.

¹³ Labour Leader (16/2/21), p. 5.

¹⁴ ibid.

of industry.’¹⁵ The Labour right-winger, J.R. Clynes, argued that ‘The organisation by any one class of force outside a Parliamentary system, where that system exists, provokes and invites a corresponding organisation of force by other classes.’¹⁶

However, regardless of the disputed consequences of the *biennio rosso* the mainstream of the British labour movement did not alter their essential conception of fascism as a weapon used against the PSI and the unions. They disregarded its claims to be protecting Italy from Bolshevism, seeing these as retrospective justifications both for violence and for an unconstitutional seizure of power. This view was summed up in a report circulated to the Labour and TUC leaderships which concluded that ‘Really it [fascism] is an old movement – as old as the first of the countless attempts that have been made in history to suppress by sheer force the workers’ attempts to emancipate themselves. Missolioni [sic] has been consistently anti-socialist.’¹⁷

The conclusion that pre-existing political stances inform analyses of fascism and anti-fascism can also be drawn from an examination of the ILP’s interpretation of events in Italy in the early 1920s. Despite the ILP’s radicalisation at the end of the First World War, it had remained within the Labour Party, and was a strong proponent of working-class unity on that basis.¹⁸ In keeping with its socialist outlook, it identified fascism as a reactionary and anti-working-class movement. Its prevailing world-view also shaped its interpretation of anti-fascist tactics. When Italian communists broke away from the PSI, not least because of the leadership’s vacillating tactics in the face of fascism, the ILP criticised both factions: the Socialist Party had been too moderate in its approach, and had preferred to seek alliances with liberalism rather than the more combative elements of the working class, while Italian

¹⁵ TUC archive, file MSS 292/743/1, ‘Labour Party-Inter-Departmental Correspondence – Subject: British Fascisti’ (9/5/24), p. 1.

¹⁶ *New Leader* (21/11/24), p. 9.

¹⁷ TUC archive, file MSS 292/743/1, ‘British Fascisti’ p. 1. Mussolini’s name is spelt wrongly throughout.

¹⁸ See Pelling, *Short History* p. 49.

communists were declaimed for allowing ideological differences to damage the prospects of anti-fascist and working-class solidarity.¹⁹

The ILP maintained at this point its faith in parliamentary methods as the means by which socialism would be achieved. So when assessing the reasons for the triumph of fascism, it assigned some of the blame to weaknesses in Italian democracy. This, it felt, had become the preserve of liberals, conservatives, place-seekers and mediocrities, thereby failing to involve the masses to a sufficient degree. The party's theoretical journal carried a controversial article entitled 'Fascismo and Socialism' by the Italian writer Camillo Pellizzi. Its equivocation on the socialist potentiality of fascism drew criticism, but no-one contested his assertion that 'There has not been a single eminent figure in the last forty years of the Italian politics before the Fascista revolution.'²⁰ Brailsford in the *New Leader* similarly argued that 'the Fascist attack on democracy succeeded only because democracy in Italy had sunk to a low grade.'²¹

The far left, unlike reformist socialists, had no faith in parliamentary democracy, and therefore, when it came to Italy, was naturally critical of the actions of the PSI leaders in the face of the threat from nationalism and fascism. Those who saw a fatal danger to working-class interests in the constitutionalism of Labour and the TUC, and who sought to create a revolutionary alternative, transposed their arguments onto the Italian situation.

As early as August 1919 the WSF had asserted that the moderate leadership of Italian socialism was tending to echo nationalist demands in the party's publications, rather than to confront the issue ideologically. The PSI had adopted this approach, the WSF argued, for purely opportunistic electoral purposes.²² These pioneers of British communism had linked the actions of the moderate left with the success or failure of the far right. One of the incidents that had fuelled the strike wave in Italy had been the assault by fascists on PSI

¹⁹ *New Leader* (13/10/22), p. 6.

²⁰ *Socialist Review* (June 1923), p. 253.

²¹ *New Leader* (14/11/24), p. 10.

deputies at the opening session of the new parliament in December 1919. Spontaneous anger at this had led to a new round of walkouts and occupations. The PSI leadership were not only taken by surprise at the response to the fascist attacks, but, in seeking to limit its scope, had, according to the WSF, missed a revolutionary opportunity to capitalise on the workers' ire and at the same time crush the fascist movement.²³

The Marxists of the Plebs' League were similarly critical of the PSI's perceived failure to make the revolution in 1919 and 1920, and put the case that once a fascist movement had grown sufficiently, the only way to defeat it was for the working class to seize political power before fascism did. They argued that 'at the moment when the blow for dictatorship should have been struck, the Socialists quailed, and...Mussolini struck instead – thereby saving capitalism.'²⁴ The Plebs and others agreed with Klara Zetkin that fascism was a punishment for the failure of reformist socialism, and that in Italy the equivocation of the PSI had sealed the workers' fate.²⁵

As revolutionaries, the CPGB framed its approach to fascism in keeping with Comintern guidelines and its own tactics in Britain. The party dismissed Labour's preference for passing condemnatory resolutions in response to fascist outrages, and advocated united working-class action as the method of defeating fascism at home and abroad. In keeping with this, the party backed the unofficial action of Cardiff dockers, who in 1922 refused to work on the visiting Italian ship, the *Emanuele Accame*, as it had a blackshirt crew.²⁶ When the Labour-supporting dockers' union negotiated a compromise by which the vessel could leave port, the CPGB was suitably outraged.²⁷

As for tactics inside Italy, the CPGB advocated a united front between the mainstream socialists and the communists. This was not forthcoming though, as

²² *Workers' Dreadnought* (9/8/19), p. 1425.

²³ *ibid.* (27/12/19), p. 1587 and again in (9/10/20), p. 8.

²⁴ *The Plebs' Magazine* (October 1923), p. 466.

²⁵ Zetkin is cited in Plebs' League/'L.W.' *Fascism* p. 7. On fascism as a form of class revenge see *Labour Monthly* (November 1922), p. 360; *Workers' Dreadnought* (2/12/22), p. 3.

²⁶ *The Communist* (9/9/22), p. 8.

²⁷ *ibid.* (16/9/22), p. 2.

the PSI leadership would not agree to it; an outcome rendered all the more likely by the vehement criticism of the socialists by the Italian Communist Party (the PCI). What co-operation there was came when the main union confederation finally broke away from the PSI over its failure to combat fascism, and linked up with the anarchist *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI) and the communists. In Italy, as in Britain, the majority socialist party refused to make common cause with those to its left. Even though the Italian agreement did not create unity on the scale that the CPGB desired, the party nevertheless proclaimed it as ‘The United Front Established.’²⁸

It was not just the tactics of the PSI that the far left condemned, but its faith in Italian democracy at a time when parliament was palpably ineffective, and when, in the eyes of British revolutionaries, certain conservative political leaders and elements of the Italian state were conspiring with fascism to defeat the left. It appeared that reformist socialism was incapable of recognising the realities of the situation or of taking effective counter measures. One contributor to the WSF’s *Workers’ Dreadnought* gave an ironic welcome to the news that Mussolini had come to power, arguing that the March on Rome heralded ‘the beginning of the last fight...Fascismo destroys the great illusions of democracy...[Mussolini] has purged the revolutionary organism of the rot of centuries of weak-kneed temporising...He has brought the class war. Let it spread.’²⁹

The *Dreadnought* also printed an article by the exiled Hungarian communist Georg Lukacs, which stated that ‘The “right” Socialists...speak nebulously of democracy in general instead of distinguishing between bourgeois and proletarian democracy. They speak vaguely of “dictatorship” without differentiating between the classes which enforce the dictatorship.’ That Lukacs’ article referred throughout not to fascism per se but to the ‘White Terror’ in Hungary and Russia mattered not, and his conclusion that white guardism was not a political movement with an ideology in its own right, but merely a method of destroying workers’ organisations and maintaining the

²⁸ *Labour Monthly* (March 1922), p. 272.

²⁹ *Workers’ Dreadnought* (30/12/22), p. 2.

possessing class in power was, for many on the left, as good a description of fascism as could then be found.³⁰

Long before the sectarianism of the third period, and before Mussolini had even taken power, the CPGB was also hammering home the message that the advance of fascism was a direct consequence of the vacillating tactics of reformist socialism. When the law and the constitution failed to prevent fascist attacks on the PSI, its leaders had signed a pact directly with Mussolini in August 1921, agreeing an end to violence. However, fascism's influential backers and the movement's militant core ignored its provisions and combined to force its repudiation.³¹ The CPGB asserted that 'The Fascisti are the true legitimate children of the Italian Socialist Party...[its leaders] Turati, D'Aragona, Modigliani and Co., with their timidity and fear, and their hatred of the workers' revolution made their treacherous pact with Labour's enemies.'³²

When disagreements within Italian socialism, not least concerning the correct approach to fascism, led to a split and the formation of the PCI in January 1921,³³ the CPGB felt that its wider accusations of socialist treachery were vindicated, writing of the PSI that 'they have announced their complete separation from the Communists and have offered to co-operate with other parties "for the good of the whole nation". Their task is accomplished. They have demoralised and disarmed the proletariat; and isolated the Communists to the full fury of the bourgeois-led mob.'³⁴ When reporting fascist 'expeditions' against the working-class quarters of major cities, the CPGB was careful to stress that it was not the PSI but the communists who led the resistance.³⁵

³⁰ ibid. (20/11/20), p. 1. Fascism is again referred to as 'White Terror' or a 'White Guard' in The Communist (9/9/22), p. 8 and (23/12/22), p. 4; Workers' Dreadnought (9/12/22), p. 5 and (10/2/23), p. 4.

³¹ The text of the agreement appears in Labour Monthly (September 1921), pp. 276-7.

³² The Communist (16/9/22), p. 2. Filippo Turati's moderate faction left the PSI in October 1922, after which Giacomo Matteotti became the party's most prominent spokesman.

³³ On the recriminations surrounding the split see Nenni, P. Ten Years of Tyranny in Italy (London, 1932), pp. 106-8.

³⁴ The Communist (16/9/22), p. 2.

³⁵ ibid. (9/9/22), p. 8.

While Italian fascism was seen across the British left to be acting as an agent of employers and landowners, the presence within its ranks of some once prominent members of the PSI and the unions, not least Mussolini himself, had to be explained. Their transformation, like that of others who had been defined as ‘social chauvinists’ between 1914 and 1918, was put down largely to the experience of the war and the corrosive effects of nationalism.

The TUC was moved to describe these people as ‘typical of many who have betrayed the Trade Union Movement and now oppose it.’³⁶ Converts to fascism did not take their socialism with them, but, in the eyes of the left, renounced it when they departed from the workers’ movement. The Plebs’ foremost writer on fascism argued that once Mussolini had declared for intervention in the First World War, his ‘principles were finally swamped by nationalist and bourgeois ideas.’³⁷ The WSF’s correspondents in Italy made the same points in their coverage of the fascist campaign for the November 1919 elections. One writer asserted that Mussolini had ‘turned into Italy’s extremist jingoist.’³⁸ Another reinforced the idea that nationalism replaced socialism, rather than augmenting it, stating that ‘The “yellow” pro-war Socialists, (or rather ex-Socialists, for they were long ago expelled from the Party) have become raving nationalists of the d’Annunzian type.’ He emphasised the view prevalent amongst the left that there could not be a progressive nationalism, and that embracing it led one ever further into the camp of the class enemy.³⁹

On the wider composition of the fascist movement, the WSF held that fascism’s small voting base in 1919 was primarily made up of strike-breaking war veterans, mainly officers at that, who were ‘admitted to be mere instruments of the rich merchants and industrialists to combat the labour movement.’⁴⁰ The CPGB also noted the presence of rootless combat veterans, and placed them alongside other disparate elements that had been swept into the fascist movement, calling them ‘scoundrels of the worst type...degenerates and wastrels

³⁶ Williams to Citrine (28/12/22), TUC archive, file MSS 292/743/1.

³⁷ Plebs’ League/L.W.’ *Fascism* p. 8.

³⁸ *Workers’ Dreadnought* (27/12/19), p. 1587.

³⁹ *ibid.* (15/11/19), p. 1535.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

of every description.’⁴¹ But to the left, the middle classes were the most prominent element within fascism’s ranks, even in the violent *squadristi* formations, where they were labelled by the CPGB as ‘glorified boy-scouts...without any definite political philosophy, but with a strong sentimental objection to what superior young men of the same class in this country sometimes call “these labour swine”.’⁴²

In these descriptions of the fascist rank and file, the CPGB had identified that peculiar mix of the lumpenproletariat and the middle class that the left had noted in previous reactionary movements. Marx had colourfully characterised the nature of Louis Bonaparte’s political vehicle, the Society of December 10th, concluding that it represented ‘the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la boheme*.’⁴³ Of the Russian counter-revolutionary movement in 1905, Trotsky had written that ‘It recruited its fighting battalions everywhere, from every alley, every slum. Here was the petty shop-keeper and the beggar, the publican and his perennial clients, the janitor and the police spy...Embittered poverty, hopeless ignorance, and debauched corruption placed themselves under the orders of privileged self-interest and ruling class anarchy.’⁴⁴ This amorphous mass, drawn from the ranks of both the destitute and the economically threatened strata of society, were seen by Marxists as particularly volatile and susceptible to mobilisation by forces such as fascism, which offered both order and disorder, revolution and at the same time the restoration of lost status. To the CPGB, their presence, as in previous populist movements of the far right, was an unmistakable indicator of the true political nature of Italian fascism.

The left also recognised that fascism drew support from within existing state structures, as well as from without. In times of acute crisis, the recognised, this support could extend to those within governments themselves. The WSF had in 1919 already reported fascists boasting that Italian ministers unofficially

⁴¹ *The Communist* (9/9/22), p. 8.

⁴² *Labour Monthly* (November 1922), p. 360.

⁴³ Marx, K. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1989 edn.), pp. 75-6. He and Engels had described the same social mix in the counter-revolutionary movements of 1848 in *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 1985 edn.), pp. 88-92.

recognised the worth of their attacks on the PSI.⁴⁵ In 1922 they accused the Italian administration of sanctioning joint membership of the army and the *fascisti*, and stated that the King, Vittorio Emanuele II, had connived with pro-fascists within the state structure to assure a smooth transfer of power to Mussolini by refusing to declare a state of emergency immediately prior to the March on Rome.⁴⁶

The CPGB also saw a close relationship between fascism and the state, one that belied the Italian movement's seemingly revolutionary rhetoric. Fascism's position was depicted as 'Existing outside the State, and seemingly in opposition to it, they yet form, semi-officially, a part of the State machinery for the better protection of the interests of the employers.'⁴⁷ The blackshirt militia was, argued the CPGB 'armed by the royal army. They are officered by the propertied class. With the connivance of the Government they have shot up and ravaged all Italy.'⁴⁸

The ILP had similarly noted that the police often turned a blind eye to fascist 'expeditions', yet disarmed anti-fascists. They also argued that the Italian government shared an interest with fascism in the destruction of centres of socialist power.⁴⁹ Many on the left clearly felt that fascism, far from being a revolutionary threat to the existing state, could in fact count on the support of significant elements within it, even to the point of their abandoning democratic and constitutional conventions, to the point of allowing the movement to take power.

Italian Fascism as a Regime, 1922-1926

Fascism is often thought of today as a totalitarian creed, but it should be remembered that after the March on Rome, opposition parties were still allowed a legal existence, there was no immediate ban on independent trade unions, the

⁴⁴ Trotsky, L. *1905* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 148.

⁴⁵ *Workers' Dreadnought* (13/12/19), p. 1570.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* (4/11/22), p. 4.

⁴⁷ *The Communist* (9/9/22), p. 8.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* (16/9/22), p. 2.

monarch remained as head of state, and parliament still served as a forum where dissenting voices, even those of Italian communists, could still be heard. Indeed, Mussolini seemed to send out contradictory messages as to what political form fascist Italy might assume. Full dictatorship came hesitantly and incrementally.

Some scholars have argued that once Mussolini took power in Italy, the British Labour Party moderated its opposition to fascism. However, it is more accurate to argue that the party took a more pragmatic view of a regime that they might one day have to deal with as a party of government. The Labour leadership's commentary on fascism after October 1922, whilst oppositional, was often more guarded than that of many others on the left.⁵⁰ The party was also unsure whether fascism was a uniquely Italian manifestation, or could be exported to other countries. Hamilton Fyfe, editor of Labour's *Daily Herald*, wrote on Mussolini's accession that 'Whether the Italian Fascisti are enemies to the point of view of workers in this country is not very clear.'⁵¹

The ILP also exhibited some doubt as to the course the new regime would take, with one Italian contributor to their paper reporting that since assuming power, Mussolini had sought to build a broader base of support; an approach that apparently entailed something of a rapprochement with the unions. H.N. Brailsford, editor of the *New Leader*, appended his own warning to the article, which observed 'It is difficult as yet for foreigners, who have seen only the destructive class-terrorism of Fascism in its early days, to believe in this immense transformation...Only events can test our correspondent's optimistic reading of its new spirit.'⁵² Brailsford's qualified open-mindedness was only temporary though. In the very next issue he stated that 'I find myself more than ever sceptical of predictions which prophesy that something democratic or

⁴⁹ See for example *Labour Leader* (31/8/22), p. 6 and (21/9/22), p. 6.

⁵⁰ See the WSF's attacks on the *Daily Herald's* coverage of the March on Rome, for example, in *Workers' Dreadnought* (4/11/22), pp. 1 and 4 and (25/11/22), p. 5. The *Herald* later rejected two articles from a PSI MP on Italian fascism. Labour maintained that they were too long, the WSF that they were too critical. See *ibid.* (27/1/23), p. 1.

⁵¹ Cited in *ibid.* (4/11/22), p. 1.

⁵² *New Leader* (10/11/22), p. 13.

quasi-Socialistic is coming out of the terrorism of the “black-shirts”...Mussolini is simply fulfilling the orders of the big men of business who financed him.’⁵³

It is easy in retrospect to criticise those whose initial anti-fascism did not always evince the certainty of later years, and who occasionally held out the hope that, once in power, fascism might have become less beholden to its sponsors, or even have conformed to the perennial Italian political rule of *transformismo*, the aggregation of differing political stances on the assumption of office.⁵⁴ The left were certainly aware of fascism’s egalitarian rhetoric, and for some who lacked the analytical sure-footedness which possessed British Marxists like Pankhurst and Burns, hope occasionally triumphed over experience when it came to predicting what might follow the defeat of Italian socialism.

It is unsurprising that those who were wedded to constitutional and democratic methods should pay less initial attention, or scrutinise less intensively than the revolutionary left, counter-revolutionary movements like fascism.⁵⁵ Neither should we overlook the fact that many in the Labour Party, the TUC and the ILP hoped, like their Italian counterparts, that fascism’s inherent contradictions and antagonistic factions would ensure its early collapse. They could have had no idea then how durable or influential Mussolini’s regime would be, and predictions of its imminent demise continued to characterise their coverage. In June 1925, Brailsford was still hopefully asserting of Italy that ‘This bankrupt country is ripening under tyranny for the inevitable upheaval from below.’⁵⁶

Once fascism was in power, British Marxists argued that there could be no return to democracy. Once the dictatorship had been established, the Plebs’ League and the CPGB agreed that it represented such an intensification of the class struggle that ‘No Liberal revival in Italy is possible. The capitalists and the workers are face to face. The constitutional Socialists, having thrown in their lot

⁵³ *ibid.* (17/11/22), p. 6.

⁵⁴ See *Finer, H. Mussolini’s Italy* (London, 1935), p. 16.

⁵⁵ Fascism was not discussed, for example, at the 1923 ILP conference, a fact seized upon by the rival CPGB. See *The Communist Review* (May 1923), p. 8.

⁵⁶ *New Leader* (26/6/25), p. 3.

with the middle-class opponents of Mussolini, have shared in their ruin...Until a genuine workers' organisation (of which the Italian Communist Party is the only conceivable nucleus to-day) can be re-established, Fascism will remain triumphant.'⁵⁷

With fascism forming a government, the left had to decide who now actually ruled. Was it Mussolini himself, the Fascist Party, or the vested interests that the left saw as being behind its assumption of power? Given the unprecedented situation in Italy, and the contradictory messages that fascism gave out, it was unsurprising that there was some initial confusion over this. For example, Sylvia Pankhurst was characteristically direct, stating of the new premier's aggregation of ministries that 'Such a plurality of offices clearly reveals that the Mussolini Government is to be a dictatorship.'⁵⁸ Another WSF correspondent, however, was more hopeful as to Italy's future, arguing of the new regime that 'It is too aggressively lawless and vulgar to be tolerated even by the bourgeoisie for long, and must soon be cast aside now that it has achieved the purpose for which it was created.'⁵⁹

An early opportunity to answer the question of who actually ruled in Italy came with announcements concerning fascism's economic policies. The left was aware of Mussolini's claim in December 1922 that his government 'is not, cannot and does not wish to be anti-proletarian. The workmen are a vital part of the nation.'⁶⁰ But it was apparent that this had not prevented the regime from quickly embarking upon the privatisation of a range of government assets that led to job losses amongst former state employees and increased profits for the new owners. The Plebs' League and the CPGB recognised the profitability inherent in privatisation, and the reduction in taxes that the regime granted to 'enterprise', and identified these measures as fascism repaying its debts and insuring its future. As such they argued that measures such as these were 'the

⁵⁷ Labour Monthly (May 1926), p. 312.

⁵⁸ Workers' Dreadnought (4/11/22), p. 4.

⁵⁹ ibid. (16/12/22), p. 5.

⁶⁰ Plebs' League/'L.W.' Fascism p. 5.

price the Dictator must pay for the maintenance of his power.’⁶¹ Further economic measures, including price rises and increased taxes on wages, revealed the true nature of Mussolini’s government to the Plebs’, who argued that ‘the value of his pious phrases about class collaboration and the brotherhood of Italians in pursuance of national ideals became plain for the nauseating cant that it was.’⁶²

Mussolini actually had little understanding of economics, and the privatisation programme had been the initiative of industrialists and the first fascist Finance Minister, Alberto De Stefani. However, privatisation was abandoned after the first wave of sell-offs, when De Stefani’s economic liberalism had made him powerful enemies within some sectors of the business community. Not all industry had been in favour of privatisation, and those that had traditionally worked closely with the state favoured greater government intervention in the economy, as did significant elements of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* itself.⁶³ That a new finance minister, Count Volpi, head of the *Banca Commerciale*, was appointed in July 1925, was seen by the CPGB not just as an indicator that finance capital and its industrial partners held the greatest sway with the regime, but as significant in terms of the PNF and Mussolini increasing their grip on political power, in that De Stefani had been one of the few non-fascists in the cabinet.⁶⁴

During Volpi’s tenure, more interventionist economic policies were developed, and further restrictions were placed on independent trade unions. The co-ordination of state and industry was presented in corporatist terms by the regime, in line with its claim to have elevated the interests of the nation above those of any social class. Employers and workers, the latter now represented by fascist-led unions, were publicly proclaimed as having equal worth within corporatist structures, and were depicted as sharing in decision-making regarding their sector of the economy. The fascist party was also represented

⁶¹ *The Plebs’ Magazine* (October 1923), p. 465; the tax reductions for business were noted in *ibid.* (May 1924), p. 205. On the privatisations see *The Communist* (16/12/22), p. 2.

⁶² Plebs’ League/’L.W.’ *Fascism* p. 6.

⁶³ On De Stefani’s dismissal see Williamson, P.J. *Varieties of Corporatism: A Conceptual Discussion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 84.

within these corporate institutions, its presence explained as a guarantee that the much-vaunted national interest was not lost sight of.

Fascist claims that workers and management had parity within the corporations were dismissed across the spectrum of the British left, which noted that even the sham representation to which workers were entitled under the system was accompanied by the withdrawal of the most basic rights of free association and collective action. The ILP said of the early corporatist structures that 'These strange combined associations of employers and employed work most effectively. Strikes are unlawful, save in local and partial disputes. Wages in consequence have been reduced in many trades, if not all round, by as much as fifty per cent.'⁶⁵ The Plebs' declared that corporatism served only fascism and Italian big business, which, they stated 'had one thing in common...both wanted a docile, underpaid body of labourers.'⁶⁶

The TUC noted in 1925 that Italian courts were dissolving free unions and sequestrating their assets, while in the workplace, intimidation was increasingly being used to force workers into the fascist unions. They pointed out that under these conditions, the safeguards guaranteed to workers under international law could not be enforced.⁶⁷

In April 1926, after the passage of the Italian Labour Charter, (which codified many of the measures fascism had already taken against Italian unions), the Labour and Socialist International passed a Labour Party-inspired motion stating that 'The new Italian Law on Trade Unionism shows that in Italy today the right of free trade union organisation does not exist.' This did not, however, prompt international socialism to call for the overthrow of the Italian regime. In keeping with the social democratic tradition of constitutionalism and legality, it merely accused Italy of breaching the Preamble to Article XIII of the Treaty of Versailles that guaranteed the right of free association amongst workers. The LSI therefore demanded that International Labour Office of the League of

⁶⁴ Labour Monthly (May 1926), p. 304.

⁶⁵ New Leader (7/9/23), p. 4.

⁶⁶ The Plebs' Magazine (August 1924), p. 299.

Nations should not accept the credentials of the Italian delegation at its forthcoming conference.⁶⁸

Growing economic control was concomitant with the suppression of all political opposition in Italy, and as such, the murder by fascists of the Italian socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 was a pivotal moment both for the regime in Italy and for those attempting to define it. Condemnation of the murder was universal but the way the different traditions within the British left responded to it exposed contradictory approaches to Italian fascism at that point, and casts light on the wider political positions of the parties concerned.

Though the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) remained outside the LSI until 1930, it maintained fraternal contacts with the Labour Party, and Matteotti had addressed the National Joint Council of Labour and the TUC only weeks before he was murdered. Both British organisations condemned the murder, holding the regime, rather than a few fascist hotheads, responsible. Their Joint International Committee quickly passed a resolution expressing this, and agreed that it be telegraphed to Matteotti's widow, to the PSI executive, and to 'Mr. Mussolini.'⁶⁹

As part of the condolences that were conveyed to the PSI, the JIC sent 'best wishes for the success of their efforts to recover the right of free combination, political and civic freedom, and a judiciary free from Government interference.'⁷⁰ This was not an overt call for the overthrow of the Mussolini regime, and that such things should be thought possible under fascism is perhaps indicative of political naivety on the part of Labour and the TUC. Nevertheless, it should also serve to remind us that, even in the middle of 1924, fascism had still not become totalitarian, and that even Italian socialists continued to campaign for rights under its auspices.

⁶⁷ TUC archive, file MSS 292/743/1: General Council statement : 'Fascismo' (10/11/25), p. 1.

⁶⁸ LSI archive: Box 15-16. pp. 18-19.

⁶⁹ Labour Party/TUC Joint International Committee minutes (18/6/24), p. 2.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

The ILP proclaimed Matteotti's murder as proof that fascism could only maintain itself in power by means of terrorism, yet still betrayed the hope that Mussolini might nevertheless act against the killers, or be swept away by the response to such open brutality. The party's first report on the killing concluded that 'If he allows the real culprits to escape (as he seems to be doing), his rule will become ere long a shame too painful for his country to endure.'⁷¹

The belief that independent organisation, access to justice or the recouping of lost rights were possible under fascism had been quickly dismissed by the far left in Britain, but were only finally extinguished in the minds of more moderate socialists with the banning of the PSI in November 1925 and of all other parties and non-fascist unions a year later.⁷²

Once fascism had assumed full dictatorial powers in Italy, and was proclaiming its brand of corporatism to be a new economic model beyond both capitalism and communism, some within the British left were moved to re-examine their view that fascism had no distinctive ideology of its own. Odd though it may seem, it was amongst British Marxists that the first hints of differentiation between fascism and earlier forms of reaction appeared.

Noting fascism's mass base, the Plebs' League argued in June 1924 that 'it is not sufficient to define Fascism merely as an anti-labour force, like the White Guards of Hungary or the army of Wrangel. Fascism has special characteristics which give it an international importance.' The writer then went on to quote the German communist Klara Zetkin, asserting that fascism perpetuated the essential economic structure of society, while presenting it in a new political form. This made it different from the openly reactionary white guard movements that had preceded it. Where these had aimed at the restoration of an elite that had been deposed by revolution, the Plebs' agreed with Zetkin's

⁷¹ *New Leader* (20/6/24), p. 3.

⁷² Though Italy only officially became a one-party state in 1928, the enactment of the *Legge di pubblica sicurezza* of November 1926 effectively banned all other parties, unions and anti-fascist organisations. See Salvemini, G. *Under the Axe of Fascism* (London, 1936), p. 26.

assessment that fascism represented a concentration of many anti-working class elements, not all of which had identical economic priorities.⁷³

By 1925, the Plebs' Raymond Postgate was arguing that while sectors of industry such as arms manufacturers and exporters still retained close links with the regime, smaller producers and service providers were becoming disillusioned, and, through the fascist militia, were exacting their own retribution against big business. Noting Mussolini's apparent acquiescence in the face of the ongoing violence of the blackshirt militia and the personal aggrandisement of its *Ras* (regional leaders), he suggested that 'now Italian capitalism is in the position of Frankenstein with his monster. Fascism, having served its purpose, will not go away...graft rules all appointments. Inefficiency and corruption follow automatically.'⁷⁴

The CPGB had also begun to see fascism as having the potential to act in contravention of the wishes and the interests of its original paymasters. It too used the Frankenstein analogy, and, in noting the activities of the less idealistic and spiritual amongst the fascist ranks, observed that 'many of the capitalists who originally offered the Fascisti money to do their dirty work are now contributing to the organisation under threats.'⁷⁵

However, any doubts about the outcome of this struggle within Italian fascism were dispelled when Mussolini imposed his authority on the party and the country in the wake of the Matteotti murder. Rogue elements in the militia, those local leaders who were deemed to be a threat to Mussolini, and those fascists who held to the idea that fascism really did have anti-capitalist aspirations and who clamoured for a second revolution were progressively purged. When this became clear, and when economic decisions continued to be taken in a manner favourable to the major financial and industrial concerns, opinion within British Marxism swung back to the concept that fascism remained the outward manifestation of big business predominance. The Plebs'

⁷³ The Plebs' Magazine (June 1924), p. 216.

⁷⁴ ibid. (February 1925), pp. 65-6.

⁷⁵ Labour Monthly (November 1922), pp. 362-3.

principal writer and the CPGB concurred that ‘The clue to the tangled threads of Italian events is found in the fact that the industrial capitalists (now co-operating with the bankers) are achieving complete control of the state; Fascism is their creation and its successive “waves” are the stages in the process whereby the other social classes are worsted in the struggle for power.’⁷⁶ To support this conclusion they cited the fascist paper, *Popolo d’Italia*, which stated in 1926 that ‘The Fascist Government is the best guarantee to the American financiers that the money they are going to put into Italian industries will yield them good, durable and safe interests and profits.’⁷⁷

The left could also agree on the misleading nature of fascist rhetoric. When Odon Por, once a Guild Socialist who had latterly embraced fascism, published a book eulogising the idealism and spirituality that motivated the Italian movement he was roundly lambasted by British socialists and communists alike.⁷⁸ Brailsford for the ILP thundered that fascist mysticism, its references to higher law and destiny, were purely diversionary devices put forward by former socialists to give ideological cover for their *volte face*. He contrasted Por’s stress on the spirituality of fascism with the reality of life in Italy, stating that ‘Fascism has terrorised the weaker adherents of Italian Socialism into submission; they must invent some intellectual justification for their diversion.’⁷⁹ The Plebs were equally scathing, seeing ‘the bludgeon and castor oil as the only symbols of Signor Por’s mystic social force.’⁸⁰

Defining Fascism

When it came to giving an exact definition of fascism, Labour and the TUC shied away from formulating anything beyond stressing its general class bias and anti-democratic nature. These pragmatic organisations were wary of giving an exact definition of their own socialism, and were much less likely than the more doctrinaires of the Marxist left to attempt to do the same to fascism. It was

⁷⁶ *ibid.* (May 1926), p. 309.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 310.

⁷⁸ Por, O. *Fascism* (London, 1923).

⁷⁹ *New Leader* (7/9/23), p. 3.

⁸⁰ *The Plebs’ Magazine* (October 1923), p. 466.

the revolutionary left in Britain, therefore, which first attempted to encapsulate the essence of fascism within a succinct formula, or at least to identify which European movements and parties might be labelled as fascist.

It was when considering that fascism might be able to grow beyond the borders of Italy that the Plebs' League attempted the latter. They saw movements such as German National Socialism, the Heimwehr in Austria, the Iron Guard in Romania and rightist elements in Poland and Hungary as definitively fascist, having taken sufficient inspiration and characteristics from the Italian original to be identified as such. Based on their observations of the actions of all these movements to date, they argued of fascism that 'Whatever purists may desire, it is certain that common usage will fix the meaning of the title sufficiently wide to cover any organisation fighting extra-constitutionally for the bourgeoisie against the workers.'⁸¹

The CPGB had constructed an even earlier definition than the Plebs', based on the transformation of fascism from its original function as a bludgeon used against the working class, into a regime still acting in the interests of its original paymasters. It characterised fascism as 'a miscellaneous group which has hitherto lived on the surplus produced by modern methods, but without direct and conscious relation to industry.'⁸² The proximity of business interests to the fascist party led these British Marxists to conclude that the essential partnership between capital and state that they felt had produced imperialism, competing empires and the First World War, was being replicated in fascism. They were arguing by 1926 that 'Italy to-day exhibits the inevitable tendency of a country dominated by finance capital to develop an imperialist policy. The home market is no longer adequate for the absorption of products of steel and other manufacturers...Colonial markets must therefore be secured, and a policy of imperial expansion has arisen as the official attitude of Fascism.'⁸³

⁸¹ Plebs' League/'L.W.' *Fascism* p. 34.

⁸² *Labour Monthly* (November 1922), p. 364.

⁸³ *ibid.* (May 1926), p. 311.

The CPGB also concluded that fascism had an international applicability, noting PNF links with far right groups abroad, and sensed disaster should it expand beyond the borders of Italy.⁸⁴ The party predicted shortly after the March on Rome that 'If the counterparts of the Fascisti in other countries are emboldened to attempt similar *coups*, and are successful therein, the most probable outcome will be a debacle the like of which has not been witnessed since the break-up of the Roman Empire.'⁸⁵

The British left certainly had differences of opinion concerning Italian fascism. Moderates argued that it had flourished in a climate of fear engendered by revolutionaries within the labour movement. British revolutionaries asserted that, on the contrary, fascism had been so aggressive and so successful because of the timidity of the labour movement in responding to attacks upon it. Labour and the TUC argued that fascism had conquered the state from without, and maintained their view that the best defence against fascism was to support the concept and institutions of democracy.

Communists, on the other hand, maintained that Italian fascism had come to power with the connivance of powerful elements within Italian democracy, and that a 'democratic' state was no more than a cover for capitalist rule. The democratic sheen, they argued, would be removed in the event of an economic crisis severe enough to make the maintenance of capitalism incompatible with the continuation of democratic rights and liberties.

Yet despite these differences, all segments of the left in Britain could agree that Italian fascism's overwhelmingly distinctive characteristic was its anti-working-class stance: a feature that had marked it throughout all its phases. Once the initial uncertainty caused by the seemingly radical planks of the original fascist programme and the presence within its ranks of former socialists had cleared, the left concluded in its entirety that fascist rhetoric and the ideological justifications it advanced were no guide to the reality of the

⁸⁴ The Communist Review (May 1923), pp. 42-3.

⁸⁵ Labour Monthly (November 1922), p. 364.

movement. Socialists and communists, reformists and reactionaries could agree that only the actions of fascism were a sufficient guide to its true nature.

These divisions and concurrences would be replicated when the left had to examine the threat of fascism in Germany.

3: The British Left and the Rise of Nazism

Differing Perceptions of Weimar Germany

It can be difficult with the benefit of hindsight, and the knowledge of the terrible crimes that Nazism ultimately committed, to imagine that people in Britain were ever unsure about its nature, doubted the vehemence of its anti-Semitism, or even, almost until the moment that Hitler became Chancellor, dismissed its chances of ever taking power. It requires a considerable effort to appreciate that, in recognising the severity of the Versailles Treaty, there was a degree of sympathy in Britain for German revisionists, and that some of this even extended to the demands for redress made by the adolescent Nazi Party, the NSDAP.¹

Contemporary impressions of Nazism were developed without knowledge of what was to come, and it is with this in mind that their accuracy should be judged today. It would be, for example, unfair to pass a negative judgement on those commentators of the 1920s and 1930s who, because they judged the Nazis' anti-Semitism in the light of earlier explanations of the phenomenon as well as from their own, often limited experience, did not predict the Holocaust. To do this would be to attribute blindness or naiveté to virtually everyone who commented upon Nazism before the war, and to the Nazis themselves, as there is every indication that the decisions which led to the implementation of mass killings and extermination camps were taken during the war, and were not commensurate with the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies before 1939, or even before 1941.²

¹ See Bernard Crick's introduction to Grantzow, B. A Mirror of Nazism: British Opinion and the Emergence of Hitler, 1929-1933 (London, 1964), pp. 11-17. Before 1933, Labour felt that Germany had been treated harshly at Versailles, and that some redress should have been made, not least with a view to protecting Weimar democracy against its nationalist critics. Once Nazism had come to power, though, the party's position was summed up by Clement Attlee, its deputy leader, who told the Commons in April 1933 that 'I think that this House and this country ought to say that we will not countenance for a moment the yielding to Hitler and force what was denied to Stresemann and reason.' Cited in Naylor, J.F. Labour's International Policy: The Labour Party in the 1930s (London, 1969), pp. 48-9.

² Many historians have argued that the 'absolute' character of the war prompted an 'absolute' solution to the Nazis' 'Jewish Question', implying that, as the course and character of the war

Observers formulated their opinions of the Nazi movement by prioritising from among the available facts those that conformed to their wider world-view. Those who thought that Hitler would bring order to Germany stressed his anti-communism ahead of the lawlessness of the Nazi paramilitaries, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). Those who believed that he could be appeased preferred to emphasise what they saw as the legitimacy of German territorial claims, the harshness of Versailles and the rights of German minorities outside the borders of the Reich rather than the brazen expansionism that characterised Nazi foreign policy pronouncements.

The various parties of the British left did much the same, focussing upon those aspects of Nazism, its growth, support base and ideology that most complemented their own view of the world, and those which could most effectively be used against their political opponents. They applied similar criteria when judging the actions of the German left, with Labour, for example, blaming the failures of German anti-fascism on communist sectarianism and extremism, while the CPGB in turn decried the docility and constitutionalism of the Social Democrats.

In their attitudes to Weimar Germany itself, the British left was divided between the democratic, constitutional socialists on the one hand, and those of a Marxist and revolutionary persuasion on the other. The democrats, in the form of Labour, the TUC and the ILP, had enthusiastically welcomed the fall of the Kaiser in November 1918, yet opposed both the workers' council movement and attempts by the newly-founded German Communist Party (the KPD) to overthrow German democracy by force. Despite some qualms over the excesses that had accompanied the crushing of these threats to the new government, most British socialists supported the SPD and the Weimar state, with the ILP able to proclaim at the end of 1923 that, despite its early tribulations, 'Germany since

could not have been predicted beforehand, neither then could the Holocaust. See for example Broszat, M. 'The Genesis of the 'Final Solution'', in Koch, H.W. (ed.) Aspects of the Third Reich (Basingstoke, 1985), pp. 390-429.

the Revolution has had a really democratic constitution.’³ The prospect of German democracy being overwhelmed by fascism as in Italy, therefore, was viewed with horror. In the early 1920s, this was seen as a possibility, not as a consequence of the activities of the National Socialists, but as a result of the nationalism that the more moderate British left groups saw as a result of Versailles and then by the Ruhr occupation.⁴

Such was Labour’s commitment to parliamentary democracy that the party leaders did not differentiate between the putschist actions of the KPD and those of German nationalists like Wolfgang Kapp. Philip Snowden illustrated this, stating in May 1920 that ‘A new and permanent social order can never be established on any other basis than the consent and co-operation of an enlightened democracy. The only dictatorship which could ever be successful is the dictatorship of the common will.’⁵ Labour did not merely equate anti-democratic tendencies regardless of their sources, but even blamed communist insurrectionism for the resurgence of the far right in Germany. Arthur Woodburn, the party’s Scottish Secretary, argued that the revolutionary tactics of the KPD had ‘reconstituted the counter-revolutionary front. The otherwise beaten officers [who had followed Kapp] could now pride themselves on being the saviours of the state. The “Communist Danger” was their standby for regular use.’⁶ Democracy, allowing for the development of socialism, was for Labour and the ILP the answer to Germany’s post-war ills, as it was to Britain’s.

The far left held a completely contrary interpretation of events in Germany following the end of the war. To them, the actions of the SPD had illuminated the essentially counter-revolutionary nature of social democracy, and the lengths (or depths) to which reformist socialism would go to maintain the status quo under capitalism. SPD ministers had been in command of the troops which had suppressed the communist rising in Berlin in January 1919, and which had afterwards criss-crossed Germany, violently extinguishing risings, strikes and

³ Socialist Review (December 1923), p. 253.

⁴ ibid. (December 1922), pp. 272-2; (December 1923), pp. 248-54.

⁵ Labour Leader (13/5/21), p. 3. See also Ramsay MacDonald’s 1919 essay ‘Parliament and Revolution’, in Barker, (ed.), Political Writings pp. 221-40.

⁶ The Plebs’ Magazine (October 1934), p. 224.

workers' councils. Many on the far left held the SPD responsible for eliminating the possibility of a real German revolution, and for the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. To them, social democracy appeared as a façade behind which the de facto control of the old elites: the army, Junkerdom, the imperial bureaucracy and the industrial cartels, was maintained.

Andrew Rothstein, a leading CPGB theoretician, was utterly dismissive of Weimar democracy, arguing in 1923 that 'ever since the suppression of the workers' revolts in 1919 and 1920, Germany has been under the ill-concealed control of the militarists.'⁷ On the same day in November 1922, both the CPGB and the Workers' Socialist Federation had extrapolated in their press from Mussolini's march on Rome the assumption that, should crisis conditions in Germany mature beyond a certain point, even its democratic facade would be unceremoniously cast aside. The CPGB asserted that this had already happened in Bavaria, where, they pointed out, a reactionary regime had held office and provided a haven for rightist terror groups without interference from Berlin since Kapp's attempted putsch in March 1920. The party maintained that in Germany, as elsewhere, 'toleration for "democratic" forms and "constitutional" methods last only as long as these form a safeguard for Bourgeois rights and Bourgeois order.'⁸ Sylvia Pankhurst of the WSF warned that, in the event of an expected 'Fascisti rising' in Bavaria, 'the [German] Government will not act; it will encourage the Fascisti, as the Government of Italy has done.'⁹ British communists repeatedly drew attention to the fact that elements within the Weimar state were giving both open and covert support to the Nazi movement.¹⁰

Where Labour saw democracy as the stepping-stone to socialism, British Marxists argued that it was but a smokescreen behind which capitalism ploughed its furrow unhindered. To many of them, the turbulent post-war world, with its apparently revolutionary potentialities, demanded that the task of the revolutionary was not to support democracy, but to unmask it. For communists, Labour's idea that socialism could somehow emerge from or be constructed in

⁷ Labour Monthly (October 1923), p. 274.

⁸ ibid. (January 1923), p. 33.

⁹ The Communist (11/11/22), p. 8; Workers' Dreadnought (11/11/22), p. 1.

parliament without dismantling the capitalist economy was demonstrably false. Hence a delegate at the CPGB's founding convention, referring to the leaders of Russia's short-lived democracy and of German socialism, could confidently assert that 'the British working class has not yet passed through the experience of having a Kerensky or a Scheidemann, and the sooner it goes through that experience the better.'¹¹

In the wake of Mussolini's accession to power, the party was happy to cite the Italian communist, Amadeo Bordiga, a vehement opponent of reformism, when he argued that 'the democratic system is nothing more than a scaffolding of false guarantees, erected in order to hide the dominion of the ruling class over the proletariat.'¹² That Bordiga, who before October 1922 had enjoyed parliamentary immunity, was at that moment languishing in a fascist prison altered neither his nor the CPGB's critique.

As the 1920s drew to a close, the Comintern adopted an attitude of enhanced sectarianism towards its socialist and social democratic rivals. In the writings and oratory of British communism, accusations characteristic of this 'third period', including assertions that moderate leftists were 'social fascists' or that they were subjectively fascist can be found.¹³ Aside from the Comintern pressure that produced them, they undoubtedly represented a genuine concern within the CPGB about the dangers of parliamentarism, opportunism and compromise. As such they were a continuation of that hostility towards reformism and social democracy that characterised the party's early years.

However, British communists, painfully aware of their limited numbers in comparison to Labour, knew full well the perils of courting isolation by an over-repetition of these slurs.¹⁴ The party moved away from the policy much earlier

¹⁰ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* pp. 115-6.

¹¹ CPGB, *Communist Unity Convention* p. 33.

¹² *Labour Monthly* (March 1923), p. 178.

¹³ See for example *Labour Monthly* (January 1930), p. 19; for similar attacks on the ILP see the CPGB's 1932 manifesto, 'Immediate Tasks Before the Party', cited in Middlemass, R.K. *The Clydesiders: A Left-Wing Struggle for Parliamentary Power* (London, 1965), p. 276.

¹⁴ On unease within the CPGB leadership over the adoption of the new line in 1928 and 1929 see Thorpe, *British Communist Party & Moscow* pp. 117-20; Callaghan, J. *Rajani Palme Dutt:*

than did other Comintern sections, a fact recognised by one of its own official historians, Noreen Branson, who wrote that 'In 1932 the British Communist Party had with difficulty extricated itself from the Class against Class guidelines for trade unionism and industrial work'.¹⁵ For all their opposition to the underlying philosophy of the Labour Party, British communists knew full well that co-operation with or incorporation into Labour represented their best chance for expansion.

When analysing the role and character of German Social Democracy, therefore, the CPGB veered between an outright condemnation of the SPD as the forerunners and torch-bearers of Nazism, and, when at their most generous, as mere dupes of the German ruling class. Rothstein argued in 1923 that the SPD had become so accommodating to German capitalism that the party was 'practically useless henceforth as a means of hoodwinking the working class. Some other way of keeping the workers attentive to their functions in the process of production has to be devised. The only way open lies through force, and its name is Fascism.'¹⁶ R.P. Dutt, whilst being justifiably seen as the epitome of CPGB sectarianism, also tended towards the latter opinion. He wrote in 1934 that the SPD's position in Weimar politics had been that of a shield for the real ruling class, 'essential to the bourgeoisie as the sole salvation. Only later, as the influence of Social Democracy weakened, and the menace of the proletarian revolution grew...did the German bourgeoisie require to bring into play the additional weapon of Fascism against the working class.'¹⁷

Both men, the first writing when the KPD was actively planning insurrection against Weimar democracy and the second during the Comintern's most sectarian phase, clearly differentiated between fascism and the German Social

A Study in British Stalinism (London, 1993), pp. 110-20; Branson, History of the Communist Party pp. 25-30; Degras, Documents, Vol. III pp. 90-4.

¹⁵ Branson, History of the Communist Party p. 110.

¹⁶ Labour Monthly (October 1923), p. 274.

¹⁷ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 92. While most references to 'social fascism' by the CPGB imply that social democrats were by their reformism aiding the advance of fascism, far fewer directly equate the two. At his most vehement, Dutt argued of the SPD only that its actions had been 'assisting the development of Capitalism to Fascism'. CPGB/Dutt, R.P. Democracy and Fascism: A Reply to the Labour Manifesto on 'Democracy Versus Dictatorship' (London, 1933), p. 18.

Democrats. Dutt later stressed the belief of the CPGB that fascist and social democratic parties could not be equated in terms of ideology, organisation or class composition, but rather that they both acted, consciously or unconsciously, to maintain the existing economic order in their different ways, with the former replacing the latter once a tipping point of crisis had been reached. He wrote of depression-hit Germany that ‘the consequent growth of disillusionment of the workers...with Social Democracy led to the necessity of capitalism discovering a further basis of power, and the development of Fascism as the parallel instrument of capitalism alongside Social Democracy.’¹⁸

If the actions of Weimar democracy had dismayed British communists, the appearance from 1930 of a succession of German Chancellors ruling by decree was, to them, tantamount to fascism and further proof that democracy carried within it the seeds of capitalist dictatorship. For the CPGB, each of these administrations, successively under Brüning, Papen and Schleicher, prepared the way for their more authoritarian successor. Worse still, each had in turn been supported by the SPD. While German socialists claimed that their backing was tactical and aimed at shoring up a lesser evil to that of Nazism, both British and German communist parties followed the logic of their third period assertions that fascism could emerge from democracy in times of acute crisis. The CPGB’s Harold Rathbone argued that the SPD’s stance had succeeded only in providing cover for the steps being taken to pave the way for Nazism.¹⁹

However, whereas the German Communist Party erred in defining all of these cabinets as fascist, the CPGB was more circumspect, generally differentiating between German conservatism and Nazism. Nevertheless, such was the dire situation of the German worker during Schleicher’s tenure that the CPGB was moved to dub his administration a ‘Fascist-like dictatorship.’²⁰

¹⁸ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 29.

¹⁹ CPGB/Rathbone, H. What Next in Germany? (London, 1932), pp. 2-10.

²⁰ ibid. p. 10. A recent work on the CPGB also concluded that ‘among British communists at any rate, a distinction was made between “social fascists” and real ones.’ Worley, Class Against Class p. 260.

The Emergence of Nazism

As had happened in Italy, the emergence of a threatening new political force in Germany came at a time of deep ideological polarisation within the ranks of the British left. Concerning the actions of German socialism, German communism, and the nature of Weimar democracy itself, there were profound and seemingly irreconcilable cleavages. It was against this background that Nazism made its appearance, and in the light of these differing perspectives that it was assessed.

Despite paying somewhat less attention to the political minutiae of Nazism than their revolutionary counterparts, British socialists were aware of this dangerous movement during its earliest years, and immediately identified it clearly as an anti-working-class force. When the ILP's *New Leader* first mentioned the NSDAP in November 1922, it rejected any left-wing pretensions on its part. Referring to the party as 'National "Socialists"', the paper informed its readers that the Nazis had their headquarters in Munich, and were 'in close touch with the most reactionary elements...For several weeks there have been rumours of a reactionary coup in Bavaria.'²¹ Nevertheless, when Sylvia Pankhurst's predicted 'Fascisti rising' did actually materialise, in the form of the Munich putsch of November 1923, the ILP was dismissive of the Nazis. At that time, they could still ridicule such rightist insurrectionism as 'the Hitler-Ludendorff-von Kahr comedy.'²²

While Labour and the TUC were by no means ignorant of the Nazis during the 1920s, they tended to regard them for several years as but one among many reactionary German parties, and, in comparison with the coverage given to Nazism by the far left, the NSDAP did not loom large in their press. One unnamed senior Labour figure later told a researcher that 'In 1930 – well, we had other things to think of than your subject of the rise of the Nazis.'²³ It was only after the NSDAP's breakthrough in the September 1930 Reichstag

²¹ *New Leader* (24/11/22), p. 5.

²² *Socialist Review* (December 1923), p. 253.

²³ Grantzow, *Mirror of Nazism* p. 74 ff 1.

elections that the mainstream of the British labour movement undertook detailed investigations into the Hitler movement.

As Weimar Germany entered its terminal decline, Labour kept faith that it would recover, and many in the party's hierarchy therefore still refused to differentiate between threats from the left and the right to German democracy. When reporting on the 1930 election results, even the ILP's H.N. Brailsford took no comfort from the fact that the KPD had, like Hitler's party, increased its support, writing that 'All Europe has been startled by the success of the "Nazis" (fascists) and Communists in the German elections...Though they fight each other with bludgeons and revolvers, these two parties have something in common...Both would destroy the democratic Republic...It is a formidable omen.'²⁴ He continued his election report by stating 'Their leader, Hitler, who worked for a few years as a builder's labourer, knows how to talk to the workers, and even proposes to nationalise the banks, though I imagine his "Socialism" is chiefly directed against Jews as such.'²⁵

That Brailsford had felt it necessary to point out to his readers that Hitler led the party, and by the use of parentheses to state that they were known as 'Nazis' and were fascists, is testimony to the suddenness of their breakthrough and to the relatively limited level of coverage by British socialists prior to 1930.²⁶ Another prominent ILP figure, John Paton, examined the Nazis' 1930 election platform and noted that it was short on detail, and tried to appeal to an impossibly wide cross-section of the German electorate. He found it to be 'a curious hotch-potch of Nationalism and pseudo-Socialism – with their economic policies expressed only in the vaguest and woolliest form.'²⁷

This latter realisation and the 1930 German election results prompted British socialists to examine the composition of Nazism's new support. Despite a tendency within the Labour leadership to look beyond purely economic

²⁴ New Leader (19/9/30), p. 1.

²⁵ ibid. The ILP repeated that the Nazis' anti-capitalism was limited to 'Jewish' finance in New Leader (1/5/31), p. 17.

²⁶ The ILP's theoretical journal also felt obliged to state that the NSDAP's name had 'been reduced for popular use to "Nazis"'. Socialist Review (October 1930), p. 289.

explanations for the rise of Nazism, the mainstream of the labour movement fully accepted that support for the NSDAP had grown during the economic crisis, coming from a wide spectrum of those hit hardest by the depression. It was also apparent that the NSDAP was receiving backing from significant elements within German capitalism. The British labour movement's co-ordinating body, the National Council of Labour, stated of Nazism that 'By skilful appeals to every class with a grievance, with the support of big business which provided him with lavish funds...Hitler rapidly increased his following.'²⁸ Labour's Arthur Woodburn argued of Germany that 'The breakdown of capitalism produced not a revolution but a counter-revolutionary situation.'²⁹ The ILP agreed, concluding that while the NSDAP was not being used as a strike-breaking force in the same blatant manner which the Italian Blackshirts had been, its attacks on the SPD and KPD indicated that its ultimate function would be to destroy the German labour movement.³⁰

Like others further to the left, British socialists were convinced that Nazism had not made inroads into the German working class, with Ellen Wilkinson asserting that the new NSDAP voters in 1930 'came from the numerous smaller bourgeois parties who were gradually squeezed out of existence, and a large number from the politically indifferent who are always susceptible to violent propaganda methods.'³¹ The ILP agreed, pointing out that the bulk of Nazism's new support came from the lower middle classes who feared the power of labour as much as they did their own impoverishment.³² This view was reiterated in Wilkinson's co-authored 1934 work, which identified Hitler as having been 'the right kind of man to become the mouthpiece of ruined, frightened middle-class people, whose struggles with poverty and dread of becoming "de-classed" he so thoroughly understood.'³³

²⁷ New Leader p. 3.

²⁸ National Council of Labour, What is This Fascism? (London, 1934), p. 4.

²⁹ The Plebs' Magazine (October 1934), p. 224.

³⁰ New Leader (17/10/30), p. 13. That most of the German industrial magnates were still at this point loyal to the conservative parties is noted in ibid. (1/5/31), p. 17.

³¹ Wilkinson, E. & Conze, E. Why Fascism? (London, 1934), pp. 46-7.

³² New Leader (1/5/31), p. 17.

³³ Wilkinson & Conze, Why Fascism? p. 38.

That Nazism drew support from within the structure of the Weimar state was also apparent to British socialists. The ILP claimed in October 1930 that 'The Nazis themselves would present no real danger were it not for the reactionary officials inherited from the old regime and the monarchist army.'³⁴ Once again, the constitutional left was alarmed by the phenomenon of servants of a democratic state lending support to a movement that made no secret of its intention to purge Germany of what it saw as an alien democratic polity, whereas communists, who maintained that fascism could and did emerge from within democratic structures, took it as read that this would occur.

The Anti-Semitism of the Nazi Movement

When seeking to explain the Nazis' anti-Semitism, much of the British left held to its traditional view that it was a feature of reactionary movements. While prejudice against the Jews had customarily been associated with autocracies such as Tsarist Russia, its persistence in Weimar Germany was seen as a regressive hangover in a modern state. The intensification of violence against the Jews after the Nazis took power struck Labour and TUC leaders as a throwback to an earlier, more brutal age. Walter Citrine observed the humiliation of German Jews, and argued that 'Hitlerism has turned back the clock in Germany, not to 1914, but to the Dark Ages'. The Nazis' anti-Semitic actions, he felt, 'recall the Jew-baiting of the Middle Ages...in accordance with a theory of Government and a conception of State absolutism which dominated the human mind in that dark period of history.'³⁵ The National Council of Labour saw the phenomenon in similar terms, arguing in 1934 that Nazi actions 'equalled in abomination the atrocities of the Middle Ages...a succession of foul crimes which would shame a tribe of savages.'³⁶

For those further to the left, who placed greater emphasis on interpreting social and political developments in the light of economic imperatives, Nazi anti-Semitism was generally explained as a means whereby the regime could

³⁴ New Leader (17/10/30), p. 13.

³⁵ Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (September 1933), p. 12.

³⁶ National Council of Labour, What is This Fascism? P. 4.

channel discontent and placate those who were still clamouring for a redistribution of wealth as part of the Nazi 'revolution'. The Labour left-wingers George and Margaret Cole argued in 1934 that 'This it attempted to do by declaring war upon one section of the German capitalist world and thus throwing up a smokescreen for the protection of the rest.'³⁷

There seemed to be little appreciation of the concept that the Nazis might hate the Jews simply because they were Jews, a hatred incorporated within a wider racial world-view, rather than because of the perception that German Jews held an undue influence in the commercial life of the country. Some British socialists pointed out that driving Jews from the professions, and from Germany altogether, made no economic sense. They attributed these actions to the irrationality that they felt already characterised Nazism. Alfred Plummer, Vice President of Ruskin College, wrote in a TUC publication that 'it is hard to see any plausible reason for casting out the Jews, and the action is not only grossly unjust, but unjustifiable on any comprehensible grounds.'³⁸

The ILP felt that most Germans had not been motivated to any great degree by anti-Semitism before 1933, instead ascribing the increase in support for Nazism to Hitler's promise to bring strong government.³⁹ Yet it agreed that anti-Semitism was part of a bogus anti-capitalism put forward by the Nazis. If the Nazis were to make any headway amongst German workers (and the ILP grudgingly admitted that they may have, given the Nazis' 5.5 million votes in 1930), their only chance was in turning working-class hostility towards capitalism against specifically Jewish interests. This false radicalism was dismissed by the ILP, which argued 'It is possible to pass from a rabid anti-Semitism to a qualified anti-capitalism because so many Jews happen to be capitalists. You will get a certain emotional revolutionary outlook in this way, but it will be purely on the surface and quite useless from the Socialist standpoint.'⁴⁰ However, by the time Hitler became Chancellor, the ILP had moved to the left, leaving the Labour party and declaring for revolutionary

³⁷ Cole, G.D.H. & Cole, M.I. A Guide to Modern Politics (London, 1934), p. 196.

³⁸ Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (December 1933), p. 88.

³⁹ ibid. (11/12/31), p. 17.

socialism. Its analysis of the Nazis' anti-Semitism similarly moved much closer to that advanced by the Comintern and the CPGB.⁴¹

Different Approaches to Opposing Nazism

The left were divided over the question of how best to oppose Nazism. As Hitler drew nearer to power, Labour and the TUC did not allow anti-fascism to outweigh their opposition to communism, and both ruled out any suggestion of united action with other parties of the left in Britain or abroad. The 1932 Trades Union Congress discussed a motion proposing that British unions should send solidarity greetings to 'our anti-Fascist friends in Germany', to which the General Secretary, Walter Citrine, replied 'I do not quite understand what is meant by the phrase "anti-Fascist friends"...there are various bodies in Germany which are not connected with the official Labour Movement in any shape or form, and indeed are alternate and rival bodies to the official Socialist and Labour Movement.'⁴² In the ensuing debate a Labour MP echoed Citrine's sentiments, arguing that it would be a mistake 'if we started throwing bouquets all round...I hope this Congress will not allow itself to be side-tracked into expressions of sympathy with people who are just as big enemies to the Labour Movement as the Fascists are.'⁴³ The motion was lost, and the equation of left and right extremism by those who led Labour and the TUC was clear.

That fascism and communism were equally repugnant was not a stance accepted by many on Labour's left. Aneurin Bevan M.P., a founder member of the Socialist League, took up the fight against Citrine's analysis at the 1933 Trades Union Congress, arguing that it was capitalism, not socialism, under which democratic structures were most often disposed of.⁴⁴ George and Margaret Cole, not opponents of parliamentary democracy by any stretch of the imagination, still stressed the differences between the philosophy, class

⁴⁰ Socialist Review (October 1930), p. 291.

⁴¹ See for example the avowedly Marxist analysis in New Leader (17/4/36), p. 5.

⁴² TUC, Report of Proceedings at the 64th Annual Trades Union Congress (London, 1932), p. 336.

⁴³ ibid. p. 337.

⁴⁴ TUC, The Menace of Dictatorship: The Debate at the Brighton Trades Union Congress, 1933 (London, 1933), p. 13.

structure and aims of the fascist states and the Soviet Union. Labour's leadership was mistaken, they maintained, in equating the two systems, as 'the resemblances lie near the surface, covering up far more important features of essential difference'. Of dictatorship as a political method, they argued that 'the same motor car can be used to carry you to John o' Groats or to Land's End.'⁴⁵

Hitler's accession had produced a surge in support for a united front of workers' parties in Britain, but the National Joint Council of Labour and the TUC maintained their stand against this, arguing that 'Unity of action in resistance to Dictatorship and Reaction must be based upon belief in the principles which have guided British Labour throughout its existence...Dictatorship begets Dictatorship.'⁴⁶ In this spirit, Labour and the TUC supported the alteration of the LSI's aid fund, initially constituted to help exiled Italian socialists, into a reconstituted 'Fund to Help the Labour Movement in Countries Without Democracy'.⁴⁷

A test case concerning the Labour leadership's determination not to be drawn into any joint activity came in May 1933. The Communist Party of Great Britain had formed the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, with the intention that it should become a focus for opposition to Hitler across the left. Its broadly based committee included Isabel Brown and Ivor Montagu of the CPGB, along with Labour parliamentary candidates Ellen Wilkinson and Dorothy Woodman, and the Labour peer, Lord Marley.⁴⁸

The Labour leadership moved to ban its members from having links with the CPGB or any group seen as a front organisation. This was on the grounds that involvement with either contravened Labour's repeatedly endorsed policy. The party produced a pamphlet listing these 'proscribed' organisations, and threatened disciplinary action against any members who would not desist from

⁴⁵ Cole, G.D.H. & Cole, M.I. *Guide to Modern Politics* p. 324 and p. 331.

⁴⁶ Labour Party, 'Notes for Speakers: Democracy or Dictatorship?' (24/3/33), p. 2.

⁴⁷ See NJC leaflet, 'Help for the Workers of Germany' (May 1933), ID/GER/5/1; Labour Party, 'Notes for Speakers: Help the German Workers' (May 1933), ID/GER/5/9/1; TUC, Report of Proceedings at the 65th Annual Trades Union Congress (London, 1933), p. 173.

⁴⁸ See Branson, History of the Communist Party pp. 115-6; Copsey, Anti-Fascism pp. 19-20; Vernon, Ellen Wilkinson pp. 157-62.

their activities within them.⁴⁹ These strictures were reinforced by a decision of the 1934 Labour Party conference, which overwhelmingly rejected a motion calling for members to be allowed to continue their participation in the Relief Committee, leading one Labour leftist, Jennie Lee, to brand the party leadership as 'A Dead Machine' in the pages of the ILP's newspaper.⁵⁰

In a bid to channel the undoubted anti-fascist sentiment that existed in the party and the unions into a less politically dangerous direction than that of joint work with the communists, the Labour and TUC leaders launched the 'Campaign for Peace and Freedom' in 1934. It was impeccably moderate in its tone, and stressed the opposition of the official labour movement to all forms of dictatorship, as well as promoting political education and lawful forms of anti-fascist activity. Its meetings around the country failed to attract large audiences and some were cancelled, while others were overshadowed by events at larger BUF meetings nearby.⁵¹

Several of the Labour members who had associated themselves with the Relief Committee did not withdraw from it following the 1934 conference vote, and an illuminating correspondence followed between James Middleton, Labour's Secretary, and Dorothy Woodman, who spoke for the recalcitrants. The exchange perfectly identified their different positions: Middleton insisting that party policy be adhered to, and that Labour should in no way be associated with the communists; Woodman articulating the view of those Labour members who felt that unity in the face of fascism should take precedence over sectional interests.

Woodman denied the accusation that the Relief Committee was a communist front, pointing out that it had had three Labour members on a five-strong committee from its inception, had organised the Reichstag Fire Trial Enquiry in London that had received support from prominent Labour, CPGB and non-

⁴⁹ Labour Party, The Communist Solar System (London, 1933).

⁵⁰ New Leader (5/10/34), p. 1.

⁵¹ See National Joint Council minutes (27/2/34), p. 29.

aligned figures, and that the Committee had been formed 'within a few weeks of the Nazi attack on comrades of all parties in Germany.'⁵²

Middleton replied that conference decisions must be adhered to, and that the NEC 'is not prepared to vary these decisions, but is concerned in promoting the Party's interests and its work nationally and internationally through its own machinery and under its own auspices.' He added that 'No one who reads the Communist Press as consistently as I do has any illusion whatever with regard to the objects of all the various "united front" activities...The "united front" is virtually a disruptive tactic; that is the central point which the National Executive Committee and the Annual Conference cannot and must not lose sight of.'⁵³ Under threat of expulsion, Woodman eventually agreed to withdraw from the Committee, but only after several months of continued activity and further exchanges of letters.⁵⁴

The case of the Relief Committee was but a continuation of Labour's persistent rejection of the CPGB's attempts to affiliate, or to instigate joint work around a range of issues. It was also a precursor of further efforts at unity in different guises, all of which illustrated the continual tension that was present within the left during the 1930s concerning the most appropriate response to fascism.

The Radicalisation of the Labour Left and Shifting Analyses of Nazism

Labour's divisions over how to respond to Nazism predated the creation of the Relief Committee, and had played no small part in the ILP's departure in 1932. Labour and the TUC had unequivocally supported the German Social Democrats in its refusal to co-operate nationally with the German Communist Party (KPD). But some within the ILP had from 1930 begun to doubt the wisdom of the SPD's role in maintaining the absolute division of the German working class in the face of Nazism. By this time, the ILP was entering into its

⁵² Dorothy Woodman to James Middleton, (26/2/35), in the James Middleton papers, Labour Party archive, file JSM/CP/104.

⁵³ Middleton to Woodman, (15/3/35), file JSM/CP/105.

feud with Labour, which, while nominally concerning the freedom of its MPs from the Labour whip, in reality represented a growing frustration with the failings of MacDonald's second administration, and consequently with reformism as a political method. The ILP was moving to the left and significant figures within it were questioning the efficacy of parliamentary democracy as a means of delivering change.

Where once they had supported German democracy without demur, the ILP now began to point to weaknesses in the Weimar constitution and to question the SPD's policy of backing conservative Chancellors ruling by decree without a majority in the Reichstag as the 'lesser evil' to the Nazis.⁵⁵ The ILP's tone became more strident during the later Weimar years. In May 1931 the party's Berlin correspondent attacked the SPD's stance as 'Extreme political "gradualism" [that] is likely to entail a heavy cost to German Socialism.'⁵⁶ A few months later the ILP editorialised that SPD moderation in these circumstances was both encouraging the Nazis and causing the party's support to haemorrhage away to the KPD.⁵⁷ The view that constitutional methods would be ineffective in checking Nazism was reinforced during Fenner Brockway's speaking tour of Germany in the spring of 1932. Nazi mobs attacked his meetings and while travelling between cities he had to be accompanied by leftist paramilitaries.⁵⁸

By the time Nazism took power, the ILP had decamped from the Labour fold and was describing itself as a revolutionary socialist party. It carried its new antipathy towards reformism into its analysis of the German situation, and railed ever more vehemently against the SPD, while lessening its criticism of the KPD. A week after Hitler became Chancellor, Brockway was asserting that 'united action by the working class, on a revolutionary policy could not only

⁵⁴ See files JSM/CP/106, 107,108, 110, 112, 113, 115, 118, 123/2 and 125.

⁵⁵ New Leader (17/10/30), p. 13; Socialist Review (October 1930), p. 291.

⁵⁶ New Leader (29/5/31), p. 7.

⁵⁷ ibid. (14/8/31), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Brockway, Towards Tomorrow pp. 111-2.

have prevented the Fascist triumph but brought about a Socialist triumph. The timid feebleness of the German SPD has been a crime against Socialism.’⁵⁹

In keeping with its declared transformation into a revolutionary party, the ILP had also radicalised its analysis of fascism generally. Brockway told the ILP’s 1933 conference that in Nazism ‘A capitalist dictatorship of unexampled cruelty and ruthlessness holds sway in Germany...The worsening economic conditions, the fact and threat of war, the menace of fascism – all these are reflections of the decay of the capitalist system.’⁶⁰

Freed from Labour’s commitment to legality, the ILP also began to contemplate an anti-fascism that relied more on street politics, direct action and working-class unity than on purely lawful methods pursued within the parameters of a single organisation. In addition to this, reports from Germany and the first-hand experiences of ILP visitors had helped to convince the party that a far more vigorous approach to anti-fascism had to be adopted in any case.

Not all ILP members chose to leave Labour at the time of the 1932 split, and most of those who remained within the party formed themselves into a new organisation, the Socialist League.⁶¹ Begun as a body to propagandise socialism both within the party and among the wider electorate, several factors combined to place it in conflict with the party leadership over issues similar to that which had estranged the ILP before them. This antagonism developed to the point where Labour’s National Executive Committee censured the League in January 1934 for ‘damaging the party electorally’ in that their radicalism might alienate voters.⁶² In the League’s view, Labour did not move sufficiently to the left in the wake of the collapse of the MacDonald government in 1931, or in response to the policies of the National Government thereafter. The League also became

⁵⁹ *New Leader* (3/2/33), p. 4.

⁶⁰ ILP/Brockway, F. *The Next Step Towards Working Class Unity* (London, 1933), p. 3.

⁶¹ See Thorpe, A. *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 72-3.

⁶² See Cowling, M. *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1930–1940* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 29-30.

frustrated with the Labour leadership's insistence that the threat of fascism did not warrant united action with any other parties on the British left.⁶³

When it came to Nazism, the League rejected its professed radicalism and had no hesitation in identifying it as a reactionary and right wing force. H.N. Brailsford, who had joined the League on the ILP's departure from Labour, described Nazism as the 'German Counter-Revolution'.⁶⁴ Once an admirer of the SPD and the Weimar system, his new militancy reflected that of the League and had transformed his views on both fascism and social democracy. By 1934 the German experience had convinced him to argue, in a pamphlet calling for left wing unity in the face of fascism, that German socialists had had been consistently mistaken in thinking that piecemeal reforms could take the place of thoroughgoing changes in the ownership and control of German industry. He wrote of the SPD that 'The collapse of German Social Democracy dates not from its passivity in the final crisis of 1933, but from the opportunity it had missed in 1918. It paid for the illusion, to which it had clung to the bitter end, that a working class may securely enjoy the fruits of political democracy, while the reality of power remains in the hands of the possessing class.'⁶⁵

The League's critique of German democracy and the SPD could equally well have applied to Britain and to Labour, and was intended to be understood in just such a way. Brailsford went on to argue that 'In the calm years of prosperity a democratic party may live to a ripe old age without realising that it enjoys its liberties only by permission of the class that possesses the real foundations of authority. In the hour of crisis, it learns too late that political liberty cannot be divorced from economic and military power.'⁶⁶

The League accepted that Nazism would rule in the interests of German big business, and had not been persuaded by its assertions to the contrary. One of its pamphlets stated in the aftermath of January 1933 that 'In spite of some pseudo-

⁶³ On the League's divisions with Labour see Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* pp. 42-67.

⁶⁴ Socialist League/Brailsford, H.N. *The Nazi Terror: A Record* (London, 1933), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Brailsford, H.N. 'Preface', in 'Miles', *Socialism's New Start: A Secret German Manifesto* (London, 1934), p. 9.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 10.

Socialistic chatter, Hitler's place in the class struggle is obvious. He is in alliance with the ultra-conservative and monarchist party of Hugenberg (the German Nationalists). His funds, it is widely believed, come largely from the big industrialists. His first speech, after he had won his majority, emphasised his faith in private property and enterprise, and was followed by a boom on the Berlin Stock Exchange.⁶⁷ On the basis of evidence like this, the Socialist League could not accept Labour's formula that dictatorships of the left and the right were essentially the same, and they wrote to the National Joint Council in April 1933, making that point.⁶⁸ Even within a Labour Party shorn of the ILP, the idea that communism and fascism were in the final analysis equally repugnant was largely confined to the centre and the right.

British Communists and the Nazi Movement

If the Labour left and the newly radicalised ILP adopted interpretations of Nazism that reflected their much more class-based view of politics than those held by the moderate Labour leadership, the same was true again of British communists in relation to the Labour left and the ILP. Whether or not they had a more or less nuanced understanding of Marxism than their European counterparts, they had learned from their studies that, despite the effect of various temporary and extraneous factors, it was usually safe to ascribe political developments to economic forces. The materialist conception of history, often abbreviated merely to 'MCH' in British Marxist publications, was an article of faith, and was applied to the analysis of fascism as often as it was to the actions of democratic parties and governments.

Marx had held that the dominant class in any given society constructed its ideology and politics on the basis of its pre-eminent economic position, arguing that 'Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the

⁶⁷ Brailsford/Socialist League, *Nazi Terror* pp. 2-3.

⁶⁸ National Joint Council minutes (25/4/33).

corresponding social relations.’⁶⁹ Engels had similarly argued that ‘the ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the minds of men...but in changes in the mode of production and exchange; they are to be sought not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of the epoch concerned’; a sentiment often cited by British communists in the inter-war period.⁷⁰

Marxists naturally applied this method of analysis to fascism and the conditions under which it developed. The inter-war years were, to them, still the epoch of monopoly capitalism, a system that they believed was passing into history, but which had survived the convulsions of the First World War. They took the repeated economic crises, first in the early 1920s, and later in the 1930s, as signs of its approaching demise. If this was indeed the case, they argued, it was likely and indeed probable, that such volatility would lead to the emergence of extreme political movements fighting against history to preserve capitalism and the capitalist class.

From their standpoint, it was evident to Marxists that all political movements had to be defined by the particular class that they were seen to serve, and that all ideologies were class ideologies. The Communist Party’s chief theorist, R.P. Dutt, had no doubts about this interpretive framework, stating in 1921 that ‘The man who thinks he can ignore the class basis of modern society and get “above” class-thinking will understand nothing of modern history, politics or economics.’⁷¹ He attacked the ‘fundamentally false assumption...that history, philosophy, ethics, politics are so many separate subjects to be treated according to the fancy of the individual instead of only having meaning in relation to the structure of society and its stage of development.’⁷² This determinist and class-based approach had guided British communists in their interpretation of Italian fascism, and they applied it equally to what they saw as its German variant. They were concerned to establish who had facilitated the emergence of Nazism,

⁶⁹ Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire* p. 47.

⁷⁰ Engels, F. *Anti-Duhring* cited in Strachey, J. *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* (London, 1936), p. 366.

⁷¹ *The Plebs’ Magazine* (July 1921), p. 201.

⁷² *ibid.* p. 202.

from which classes it drew its support, against which class it directed its actions and which would benefit should it attain power.

During the period of its transformation from the margins of the German, or more particularly, the Bavarian political fringe, into a party contending for power nationally, it was in Britain the far left which subjected Nazism to the closest scrutiny. Though British Marxism became increasingly associated with the CPGB as the party established itself in the 1920s, some of the smaller communist groups that existed during the early part of the decade were also perceptive observers of the young Nazi movement, and it was in their publications that some of the earliest British impressions of Nazism appeared.

The Workers' Socialist Federation, led by Sylvia Pankhurst, was an avowedly communist group that had, after a short-lived incorporation into the CPGB, balked at the demands of Bolshevik party discipline and set out again on its own path. It first mentioned Nazism directly in February 1923, after previous allusions to far right parties in Bavaria. They immediately identified the NSDAP as 'the German Fascisti', and took issue with the party's name, identifying the actual purpose of the National Socialists as being in fact 'to attack Socialism.'⁷³ Even in this first report on Nazism, the WSF correlated its progress with the failure of SPD ministers to confront it, asserting that they had chosen the side of the industrialist supporters of Nazism, as opposed to that of the German working class, who were overwhelmingly anti-fascist. Pankhurst claimed that 'Hitler's men are allowed to remain armed and act with impunity...The reason for this complacency is, of course, that the Capitalists of all nations look with favour upon any armed brigand forces which are set up with the purpose of fighting Socialism.'⁷⁴

Later that year the WSF commented on the Nazis' anti-Semitism, framing it in the traditional Marxist fashion as a weapon in the class struggle. Aware that the Nazis were blaming the Jews for Germany's defeat in 1918, as well as stressing the presence of Jews within the German left, the organisation noted that, 'the

⁷³ Workers' Dreadnought (3/2/23), p. 1.

⁷⁴ ibid.

Hooked Cross provides the German masses with a balm for their injured pride and a victim for their revenge...it has managed to direct the hatred engendered...against the Jewish idealists who sacrifice comfort and career to fight the battle of the disinherited.⁷⁵ The invocation of prejudice against German Jews, therefore, was not only seen as a means of playing on anti-capitalist sentiment amongst the workers, but also as a way in which they could be turned against the parties that had formerly held their allegiance.

The far left did not argue that the Nazis benefited because a generalised anti-Semitism was present in German society, but rather that they played on a residual prejudice to extend their appeal. If, to the communist, anti-Semitism was a characteristic of outmoded and decaying societies, as Marx had argued, then in Germany it was natural for them initially to associate it with the old Wilhelmine ruling caste. This social stratum was itself in Marxist eyes in the process of passing into history with the other remnants of feudal and aristocratic Germany. Before Nazism came to be perceived as a serious threat by British communists, anti-Semitism was associated in their eyes with conservative elements such as the Junker landowners and their preferred party, the *Deutsch Volkspartei* (DVP), or its Bavarian and Catholic equivalent, the *Bayerische Volkspartei* (BVP). These parties, communists believed, used long-held prejudices to bolster support within regressive elements of the wider electorate, such as the peasantry and the small entrepreneurs, who felt themselves to be in hock to or in competition with German Jews.⁷⁶

In expressing this view, British communists displayed an understanding of the actual economic position of the Jews in Germany. All too often, the perception amongst outsiders was that Jews were over-represented at the apex of the economy, but German anti-Semites, while happy to play on this view, also exploited the reality of the situation insofar as many more Jews were concerned in the running of small businesses or working as paid labour than were to be found on the boards of the major banks and trusts. However, historical circumstance had dictated not only that Jews tended to be over-represented in

⁷⁵ *ibid.* (14/4/23), p. 1.

⁷⁶ See *Labour Monthly* (January 1923), pp. 32-3.

some of the professions and the financial sector, but also that it was in these areas that their presence was most resented during periods of economic crisis. It was also the case that Jews suffered just as much as other Germans as a result of the Depression.⁷⁷ Those bent on using anti-Semitism as a political weapon, of course, did not acknowledge any of these things.

The CPGB's first description of Nazism, early in 1923, had been as a movement spawned by *Freikorps* veterans in Bavaria. Like the rest of the British left, they scorned the Nazis' declared 'socialism', and also used parentheses to highlight this when the party's name first appeared in their press.⁷⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, these early references did not dwell solely on the counter-revolutionary nature of Nazism, or its links to big business and the army, but also noted the party's use of the ancient Swastika symbol and the pagan elements held to be part of its ideology. Being Marxists, the CPGB associated these aspects of Nazism with a rejection of modernity common to the fighting organisations of a disappearing social class. The party observed that 'It is almost inconceivable that such views should be held in these days in a European land'.⁷⁹

But the Nazis' more bizarre mystical utterances did not deflect the main thrust of the CPGB's analysis. Initial reports of the movement specifically mentioned its attacks on socialist centres in Bavarian cities, and the funding that the Nazis were receiving from businessmen who anticipated their usefulness in the event of a general strike. Even before the Munich putsch gave them an enhanced prominence, the CPGB had located Nazism on 'the extreme right of the Fascist Movement in Germany.'⁸⁰ It looked beyond the 'petty bourgeois' composition of the Nazi rank and file, and identified the movement's most significant supporters even in 1923 as 'the great industrial and financial magnates, whose aim is to establish a continental economic hegemony on the basis of a system of

⁷⁷ See Niewyk, D.L. *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (Baton Rouge, 1980), pp. 11-25.

⁷⁸ *Labour Monthly* (January 1923) pp. 31-40.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* pp. 36-7.

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p. 38.

industrial slavery in Germany; and the great land-owning militarist clique, whose aim is the restoration of an All-German monarchy.’⁸¹

The post-war depression in Germany and the years following the 1929 crash both saw the NSDAP grow, and the CPGB naturally equated the two. In fact, they argued that German business interests were behind the formation of the Nazi party itself, asserting that ‘Huge masses of the petty bourgeoisie, the small business men, the Government officials and men of the professional classes of all kinds have been bankrupted or dismissed. German capitalism in crisis can no longer support them. Nevertheless, to prevent their complete conversion to the side of the working-class movement, a Party is founded...with the full support of the big trusts.’⁸² Like others on the left, the CPGB had noted the prevalence of the middle classes among the Nazi base, but did not assume that this made it a middle class party, maintaining rather that it was the political vehicle of the existing economic elite: ‘a movement of mixed elements, dominantly petit-bourgeois...financed and directed by finance-capital’, according to Dutt.⁸³

But the CPGB was willing to admit that, in the light of the Nazis’ electoral support and their claim of 600,000 members in 1932, some workers at least must have been influenced by the supposedly socialist content of their propaganda. It ascribed what working-class support there was for the NSDAP to the Nazis’ bogus anti-capitalism, claiming that ‘German Fascism could only reach a mass base by professing to stand for “socialism”’, while at the same time highlighting the failure of the SPD to deliver the genuine article.⁸⁴ Dutt left no-one in any doubt that this was the case when he asserted brutally that ‘Fascism is in practice an abortion consequent on the miscarriage of the proletarian social revolution.’⁸⁵

⁸¹ *ibid.* (October 1923), p. 276.

⁸² CPGB/Rathbone, *What Next in Germany?* P. 11.

⁸³ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 82. On the relationship between Nazism and German business is before 1933 see Geary, D. ‘The Industrial Elite and the Nazis in the Weimar Republic’, in Stachura, P.D. (ed.), *The Nazi Machtergreifung* (London, 1983), pp. 85-100.

⁸⁴ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 116.

⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 157.

To illustrate the real nature of Nazism's professed 'socialism', the CPGB reprinted a Nazi circular, sent to its factory cell leaders, which instructed them 'Not to indulge in avoidable criticism of the employers, except when they are Jews...to prevent strikes...to collect names, addresses and photographs of "Marxists"'. Worse still, the party pointed out, the violence of the *Sturmabteilung*, or SA, the brownshirt militia, had claimed the lives of 1,100 German workers by 1932.⁸⁶

As Nazism came closer to power the communist parties were hampered by the Comintern's strategy of attacking socialists and social democrats as the workers' main opponents. If fascism appeared as a secondary issue, it was due to the belief, present both before and after this phase, but magnified by it, that progress towards social change could only come when the labour movement had come under the correct communist leadership. Co-operation between German communists and the SPD was already an impossibility, due to the latter's actions in the immediate post-war period, and the anti-democratic stance of the former. However, the SPD's policy in the face of the growing Nazi threat, coming as it did during a period of heightened sectarianism on the part of the Comintern parties, guaranteed that there could be no meeting of minds as to their respective analyses of Nazism, or their strategies of opposition to it.

British communists, like their German counterparts, utterly opposed the SPD's tactic of bolstering the lesser evil, in the form of conservative and authoritarian administrations, and condemned German socialism both for its perceived inaction and for the faith it apparently placed in legality and the constitution as a barrier to Hitler. Worse still, according to the CPGB, German socialists were actively hindering the fight against Nazism, and objectively preparing the ground for their success. They cited the banning of the KPD's anti-fascist squads, the *Rotfrontkämpferbund*, in SPD-controlled Prussia as well as their proscription of May Day parades there.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ CPGB/Rathbone, What Next in Germany? p. 12.

⁸⁷ CPGB/Rathbone, What Next in Germany pp. 8-11; CPGB/Dutt, Democracy and Fascism p. 15.

The CPGB noted, however, that during German election campaigns, the SPD put on a front of militant anti-fascism to shore up their vote. They cited the Social Democrats' manifesto for the April 1932 Prussian state elections, which stated, 'let us show our firm determination to beat Fascism. We will beat it. Prussia must not be delivered into the hands of Reaction and Fascism – that is our firm determination.'⁸⁸ This was contrasted with the SPD's passivity that July, when Chancellor Papen dismissed their Prussian ministers. This supine stance helped to explain to British communists why there was only a muted working-class reaction to the Nazis' success in 1933, claiming that, 'Fascism shatters the class organisations of the workers from without...Social Democracy undermines the class organisations of the workers from within.'⁸⁹

Labour, the TUC, and Nazism as a Regime to 1934

Labour shared a widespread hope in 1933 that Nazism was such an unstable amalgam of interests that it could not rule for long.⁹⁰ George and Margaret Cole wrote of the NSDAP that 'there exist within the party...currents of policy so divergent as to defy prophecy.'⁹¹ Labour was aware of Nazism's radical wing, but was as yet unsure what influence it might exert on the policies of the new regime. The *Daily Herald* illustrated the early uncertainty over this in May 1933, reminding its readers that the Nazis 'call themselves "Socialist" as well as "Nationalist". Their "Socialism" is not the Socialism of the Labour Party, or that of any recognised Socialist Party in other countries. But in many ways, it is a creed that is anathema to the big landowners, the big industrialists and the big financiers. And the Nazi leaders are bound to go forward with the "Socialist" side of their programme.'⁹² The Nazi left, if it could be described as such, was correctly identified with the SA, and which now sought to hold the regime to the egalitarian promises made during the party's early years. Citrine wrote in the introduction to a 1933 Labour and TUC pamphlet that the SA were 'determined

⁸⁸ CPGB/Rathbone, What Next in Germany? p. 10.

⁸⁹ Dutt, Fascism and Social Democracy p. 155.

⁹⁰ On this belief in Britain generally see Cowling, Impact of Hitler pp. 25-6; for Labour in particular see 'Record of Conversation' [between Labour's William Gillies and Herr Holtermann of the SPD] (24/4/33), Labour Party International Department files (hereafter indicated by their file identifications, which all begin 'ID'), ID/GER/8/33/ii-iv.

⁹¹ Cole, G.D.H. & Cole, M.I. Guide to Modern Politics p. 183.

that Chancellor Hitler shall not be allowed to escape from the wild promises of his propaganda period.’⁹³

By initially underestimating Nazism’s determination to retain power, Citrine erred in seeing the party as only interested in holding those cabinet posts concerned with the police and internal security. He argued that Hitler was content to leave economic control in the hands of the more experienced conservatives.⁹⁴ This had been the pattern in Italy, where Mussolini had by now been in power for eleven years, and was seen as the influential senior partner in international fascism. William Gillies, Labour’s International Secretary, therefore believed that fascist Italy was ‘the model for Hitlerism’, while the TUC likewise maintained that fascism and Nazism were ‘sufficiently similar to come under one generic term.’⁹⁵

Despite their appreciation of differing tendencies within Nazism, Labour and the TUC nevertheless soon came to recognise that Hitler’s powerful backers would count for more than the SA rank and file, and that German workers would be subservient to both the Nazi party and the employers. They noted that ‘Nazi Commissioners are in complete control of the Trade Unions’, and that so far as the Nazis’ ‘socialism’ was concerned, German fascism, like the Italian original, may have adopted some of the left’s language, but had in fact come into being primarily to destroy the workers’ movement.⁹⁶ While the British left correctly identified the Nazi purge of June 1934 as being in the main directed against the SA and threats to Hitler’s power from any quarter, it also noted that the tendency to move away from early Nazi economic radicalism continued after the killings. British socialists also noted the removal from office of more Nazi ‘anti-capitalists’, amongst them the veteran economist Gottfried Feder, in December of that year.⁹⁷

⁹² Daily Herald (2/5/33), cited in Weber, E (ed.), Varieties of Fascism (Princeton, 1964), p. 31.

⁹³ National Joint Council/Compton, J. Down With Fascism (London, 1933), p. 6.

⁹⁴ TUC, Menace of Dictatorship p. 6.

⁹⁵ ‘First Part of a Lecture Delivered by Mr. Gillies’ (1934), TUC archive, file MSS292/743/4; Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (November 1934), p. 52.

⁹⁶ National Joint Council/Compton, Down With Fascism p. 10 and p. 14.

⁹⁷ New Leader (14/12/34), p. 2.

The uncertainty over the precise form that a Nazi regime would take, and the extent to which it had already cowed its opponents before taking power, enhanced the sense of shock amongst some British socialists concerning the impotence of the German labour movement at the beginning of 1933. The TUC sought reasons for the quiescence of the once-mighty German unions, and transferred from its British experience the conclusion that widespread industrial action at a time of mass unemployment had rendered ideas of a general strike against Hitler impossible.⁹⁸ In any case, the thought that a general strike in Germany may have initiated a civil war, even one fought in defence of democracy, rendered the idea deeply unpalatable to most British trade unionists.⁹⁹

Labour, often decried as being more moderate and less ideological than the SPD, had defended its tactics on Hitler's accession, but nevertheless criticised what it saw as an abandonment of anti-fascism on the part of its sister organisation in the immediate aftermath. The SPD, hoping desperately to retain some form of legal existence under Nazism, had first offered itself as a loyal opposition, should Hitler act constitutionally, and then appealed to the European labour movement to moderate its condemnation of Nazism in the hope that such reserve would persuade the Nazis to be lenient towards their defeated foes.¹⁰⁰ Some German unions acted similarly, which prompted William Gillies to write to the secretary of the Labour and Socialist International that 'According to the "Daily Telegraph" something dreadful has appeared in the official organ of the German Metal Workers' Union – nothing less than an offer of sincere co-operation to Hitler.'¹⁰¹ To their credit, Labour and the TUC refused to accede to the SPD's call for quiescence, and supported the LSI's rejection of the Germans' appeal.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, as democrats and reformers, Labour and the TUC were extremely reluctant to argue that business interests and the army, both sectors of

⁹⁸ TUC, *Menace of Dictatorship* p. 8.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ National Joint Council minutes (31/3/33), p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Gillies to Victor Adler (30/3/33), ID/GER/8/17.

¹⁰² ID/GER/2/iii.

society that Labour fully intended to work with once in government, had conspired to replace German democracy with Nazism. While not denying the general economic alignment of fascism, Labour leaders were unwilling to accept that, in exceptional circumstances, elements of the state structure and the business community would inevitably turn to fascism. In one 1933 leaflet, the party had originally intended to reprint the election address of a prominent SPD leader given the previous year. However, William Gillies intervened to have part of the speech removed. The offending section read ‘We have seen how Fascism, Militarism and Big Business are uniting to rob the German workers of their hard-won rights, the fruits of past suffering and sacrifice.’¹⁰³

Rather than unequivocally locating the fascist bacillus within capitalism and the structures of the democratic state, as the far left did, Labour and the TUC emphasised the fact that fascism and Nazism had come to power in countries with new or weakened democratic institutions. It was the failure to secure democracy, they argued, that had led powerful political and economic forces to support fascist movements. Walter Citrine told Congress in 1933 that Nazism, and indeed all the post-war dictatorships, had arisen in circumstances where democracy had not operated ‘in the full sense as understood in this country, or the democratic institutions had been so recent in origin and had had so little time to become grafted into the consciousness of the people that they had not become part of the national life.’¹⁰⁴

In Germany specifically, Citrine pointed to the multiplicity of political parties, each representing a specific constituency, which had engendered division and deprived Weimar democracy of stable governments and effective leadership. This, and the proportional electoral system, had ensured that ‘parties sprang up like mushrooms...no political party was able at the polls to gain a decisive majority of the electors. Because of this, parties were forced into temporary coalitions which broke down one after the other’, a process that, he argued, had led directly to rule by decree, and thence to Nazism.¹⁰⁵ This was as much an

¹⁰³ The original text is in ID/GER/7/7/111; the amended text is in ID/GER/7/8/I-ii.

¹⁰⁴ TUC, Menace of Dictatorship p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ ibid.

implicit defence of the British electoral system as of the movement's desire to present itself as neither sectional nor ideological. If a strong democracy was the best defence against fascism, as postulated by Labour and the TUC, then it was in the form specifically enshrined in the British practice of electing representatives via the 'first past the post' method. Labour preferred an electoral system that favoured broadly based political parties, and which usually resulted in a one-party government.

The Nazis themselves, TUC leaders asserted, had fed on discontent and disillusionment with the parliamentary system in Germany. A.G. Walkden, President of the TUC, emphasised this when he told its 1933 gathering that it was Nazism's 'militarisation of politics, this disciplined drilling of youth, this subtle belittlement of Parliamentary institutions, and this pretence that the party system is unworkable...that have proved successful.'¹⁰⁶ Labour and the TUC launched a joint education campaign on fascism later that year which primarily stressed its anti-democratic nature and again equated left and right-wing dictatorships.¹⁰⁷

The existence of competing parties on the left, not least when those divisions had been between socialists who sought to use the machinery of democracy and communists whose aim was to wreck it, was identified by the Labour and TUC leaders as having hamstrung opposition to Nazism. Therefore Citrine blamed the KPD for having split the German working class and for exhausting the SPD in internecine conflicts, 'not least by the divisions among the workers as to whether the path of political democracy should be pursued or whether the path of dictatorship should be pursued...as a consequence, divisions, hostilities, and bitterness were developed which prevented the full weight of the workers being thrown in a single direction.'¹⁰⁸

Labour's Leonard Woolf concurred with Citrine, and defended German socialists against the attacks of the CPGB, who, he stated, were pretending that

¹⁰⁶ TUC, Report of Proceedings at the 65th Annual Trades Union Congress p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ TUC, Menace of Dictatorship pp. 1-4 and 25.

¹⁰⁸ ibid. p. 4.

in Germany, 'the communists were manfully fighting Hitler while the social democrats were betraying the workers to fascism. The truth is that the communists were so passionately bent on destroying the social-democrats that they continually aided and abetted Hitler.'¹⁰⁹ This interpretation of events in Germany would be used to rebuff communist attempts at unity, and to purge both party and unions of suspected or acknowledged communist sympathisers.

When it came to practical opposition to the new Nazi regime, Labour's actions were rooted within constitutional parameters. The National Joint Council requested, and was granted, a meeting with the German ambassador in April 1933. During the audience they denounced the imprisonment of their fellow socialists and trade unionists. Despite the fact that the ambassador promised to convey their feelings to his government, the delegation returned to inform the NJC that the meeting was 'thoroughly unsatisfactory.'¹¹⁰

When the SPD and the German trade unions were banned in May 1933, the LSI and its industrial arm, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), called for a boycott of German goods and services. After some hesitation, the National Joint Council of Labour and the TUC agreed to back this appeal.¹¹¹ The British delegate to the LSI optimistically told the 1933 TUC that 'when the news was made public that a ban on German goods had been decided upon, Hitler and his supporters would be forced to pay serious regard to the detestation in which the workers of the world held the Nazi persecution.'¹¹² However, for British workers, the boycott was to be a strictly voluntary affair, as the TUC dismissed calls from the ILP for industrial action to enforce it.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Woolf, L. 'Book Reviews', *Political Quarterly* 5, 4 (1934), pp. 596-7.

¹¹⁰ TUC, *Report of Proceedings at the 65th Annual Trades Union Congress* (London, 1933), pp. 172-3; National Joint Council minutes (25/4/33).

¹¹¹ See NJC statement: 'Ban on German Goods and Services' (n.d.), [1933] ID/GER/3/48.

¹¹² TUC, *Proceedings at the 65th Annual TUC* p. 446.

¹¹³ On the TUC and the boycott see Wilkinson & Conze, *Why Fascism?* p. 188; on the ILP's call for a 'workers' boycott' of goods in and out of Germany see *New Leader* (7/7/33), p. 2 and (22/9/33), p. 1.

British Communists and the Early Period of Nazi rule

When Hitler came to power, it was against a background of continuing economic crisis and mass unemployment in Germany. In this climate, British communists, whilst recognising a Nazi Chancellorship as a defeat, nevertheless retained the hope that it would be short-lived. The CPGB initially saw Hitler's accession as a crisis measure on the part of German conservatism, asserting that, 'The Fascist terror is a sign not of capitalist strength, but capitalist decay. The Hitler Government is a government of class war against the open revolutionary temper of the workers.'¹¹⁴ It was clear from their initial statements that the CPGB expected a backlash against the Nazis, and had failed to anticipate that repression, indecision on the part of the German labour movement and Soviet hopes for co-existence with Hitler would combine to neutralise the KPD, the largest Comintern section outside Russia.

When the revolt failed to materialise, the British party blamed working-class demoralisation on the SPD and its acceptance of ever-more authoritarian cabinets for 'creating the illusion among the workers that these were alternatives to Fascism instead of stepping-stones to it.'¹¹⁵ Allen Hutt, a prominent party theorist, argued that the German socialists' acceptance of these administrations in preference to a united front with the KPD had showed that 'The Social Democrat leaders were in fact not opposed to dictatorship; they were only opposed to the *workers*' dictatorship.'¹¹⁶

British communists nevertheless took a grim satisfaction in being able to state that Nazism, like Italian fascism, had arisen within a democratic system, and had been more or less constitutionally placed in power by elements, both elected and unelected, of the existing ruling class. In an inversion of Labour's equation

¹¹⁴ *Labour Monthly* (April 1933), p. 252.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 253.

¹¹⁶ *The Communist: A Monthly Review* (May 1933), p. 232.

of fascism with communism, the party argued that the events leading to January 30th 1933 in Germany gave ‘an object lesson of the futility and fraud of contrasting capitalist “democracy” with capitalist dictatorship.’¹¹⁷ Once again, Labour and the CPGB had deployed utterly different interpretations of fascism, each tailored to promote their own tactical and political line, while at the same time damning those of their opponents on the left.

The CPGB had though, like British socialists, recognised the existence of differing tendencies within Nazism, whilst having had no hesitation in dismissing the ‘socialism’ of Ernst Roehm and other SA leaders, and declaring that, ‘A socialist fascism is in itself a contradiction, an absurd utopia, alive only in the demagogy of propaganda’.¹¹⁸ After the purge of June 1934, the party reflected the opinion of other European communists that the SA had represented not a working-class Nazism, but the plight of what they termed the ‘mutinous petty bourgeois masses...being demolished by monopoly capital.’¹¹⁹ John Strachey, a CPGB fellow-traveller, argued that Roehm and his colleagues had not wanted socialism in any form, but rather a ‘controlled capitalism’ that could be held back from enveloping the small producer and entrepreneur. It was Roehm’s demand for restrictions on German industry, British communists believed, that had led to pressure from Hitler’s influential backers to decapitate the SA. The German bourgeoisie were, in Strachey’s words, ‘using Hitler as their executive instrument’.¹²⁰

In Nazism’s first year in power, the CPGB noted, share prices of the leading German trusts and the major banks had risen, while for the workers, pay was down, taxation was up and compulsory deductions from wages for Nazi projects had further reduced real earnings.¹²¹ In addition, the unemployed, of whom there were still millions, were often sent to labour camps.¹²² Though official Nazi statistics showed a decline in the number of Germans registered as

¹¹⁷ Labour Monthly (April 1933), p. 252.

¹¹⁸ ibid. (August 1934), p. 503.

¹¹⁹ ibid.

¹²⁰ Strachey, J. The Nature of Capitalist Crisis (London, 1935), p. 347.

¹²¹ For a table of these deductions see Henri, E. Hitler Over Europe? (London, 1934), p. 97.

unemployed in the period 1933-4, the CPGB asserted that the figures were false, and, in any case, did not take into account those undertaking enforced labour.¹²³ The party additionally claimed that there had been two thousand executions during this period, and that 160,000 Germans, mostly trade unionists and members of the banned parties of the left, were in jail or concentration camps.¹²⁴ In the workplace, Nazi Labour Front leaders invariably took the side of the management, and the new Labour Code, in abrogating all pre-existing agreements, was held to have left German workers unable to defend themselves.¹²⁵

Nazism's early anti-capitalist utterances had long been dismissed as bogus by British communists, as were their claims after taking office that they were creating a German corporatism that would grant the worker and the employer parity of esteem. The new regime's Supreme Economic Council had no worker representation, but included, according to the CPGB, 'the ten biggest capitalists in the country, representing between them £700 millions of capital.'¹²⁶ In terms of production and distribution, the party did not significantly differentiate between Nazi economic methods and those that had operated during the Weimar period. Under German democracy, the CPGB argued, the state had also exercised considerable influence over industrial production, and had accrued a huge portfolio of shares in the financial sector as a result of its attempts to support the main banks during periods of inflation and slump. In addition, Nazi claims that they were intervening in industry in the interests of the nation by creating streamlined cartels were also derided by the CPGB, which pointed out that cartelisation had been well advanced in the Weimar period, and was already the most extensive in the world by 1933.¹²⁷ By stressing the fiscal and structural

¹²² Young Communist League, Ten Points Against Fascism (London, 1934), pp. 5-6. The official number of German unemployed was four million in 1934. See Weber, (ed.), Varieties of Fascism p. 84.

¹²³ CPGB/Douglas, J.L. Spotlight on Fascism (London, 1934), p. 3.

¹²⁴ YCL, Ten Points p. 8. One historian gives the number of leftists interned in these early concentration camps as '100,000 or so', and states that between 500 and 600 were executed. See Gellately, R. Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany (Oxford, 2001), pp. 58-9.

¹²⁵ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution pp. 204-12.

¹²⁶ ibid. 82 ff. The same point is made in YCL, Ten Points p. 12.

¹²⁷ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 202. On cartelisation in Weimar and Nazi Germany see Henri, Hitler Over Europe? pp. 24-5. The argument that Nazi cartelisation was a

continuities of democracy and Nazism, the party was reinforcing its assertions that both represented, in their different political forms, mechanisms for perpetuating the same economic order.

Nazi anti-Semitism was, in the regime's first year, still seen as primarily tactical by British communists, playing to the anti-capitalist sentiment amongst German workers that even the Nazis could not ignore. Despite the continuing propaganda against Jews and Judaism, the CPGB pointed out that in 1934 German trade with Palestine had marginally increased, while twenty leading Jewish financiers had been amongst the brokers contracted by the Nazis to handle the issue of a new tranche of Prussian state bonds.¹²⁸ If anti-Semitism had any significance beyond its demagogic effect, British communists felt that it was only as evidence of a rapidly degenerating society. They equated its use in Germany with that by Tsardom, and branded it as the 'typical degrading expression of a tottering system...developed by Capitalism in its dying stage in proportion as the class struggle grows acute.'¹²⁹

British Trotskyists and Nazism, 1930-1934

The dissident British communist groups that emerged in the 1930s might not have achieved a significant influence within the wider labour movement, yet an examination of their views on fascism is still instructive. In the case of political groups, their analyses act as an aid to their particular cause at any given time, confirming beliefs or strategies, and able to be used to attack the standpoints of rival organisations. The first recognised Trotskyist organisation in Britain, which began life as the 'Balham Group' of the CPGB in 1930, developed an oppositional stance that would see it decamp from the party and take on an independent existence.¹³⁰ Before this, there had been too few British supporters of the Left Opposition to develop a consistent alternative Marxist analysis of the

continuation of processes well advanced in the Weimar and other contemporary economies is supported in Neumann, F. Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944 (New York, 1944 edn.), pp. 15, 265-84.

¹²⁸ London Co-ordinating Committee Against Fascism, An Urgent Warning on a Most Important Matter: Jews and Fascism (London, 1935), p. 14; YCL, Ten Points p. 11; New Leader (23/8/35), p. 4.

¹²⁹ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 184 ff.

early years of Italian fascism.¹³¹ It was specifically concerning Nazism, and the policy of the Soviet Union, the Comintern and the KPD towards it, that finally produced one.

As with so many other conflicts of opinion within the left concerning fascism, it was the Balham Group's adoption of a significantly different political stance from that of its parent body, and the perceived failings of a wider political strategy, that led to the development of different analyses of Nazism and how it should be opposed. The Balham members of the CPGB began arguing in 1930 that the 'class against class' approach then being applied was not only extremely damaging to the party in Britain, but was also having catastrophic consequences in Germany. Reg Groves, a leading light in the branch, described the illuminating effect of reading similar criticisms in some American Trotskyist papers in 1931, stating that 'our little world was enlarged.'¹³² The group had originally protested to the party's central committee that the divisiveness of the current policy, which entailed attacks on reformist socialists over and above all other opponents, was driving supporters away from the CPGB and hampering its efforts to recruit in the workplace.

However, it was the course of events in Germany that provoked the ultimate split between the Balham Group and the Communist Party.¹³³ The Balham members had accepted Trotsky's critique of the Comintern's divisive tactics in Germany, and accepted the necessity of his call for a united anti-fascist front of communists and socialists, based upon an agreement between the leaderships of the two parties.¹³⁴ This appeal did not imply that communists should cease criticising the reformism of the SPD, but rather, in recognising that fascism was

¹³⁰ See Groves, Balham Group pp. 12-76.

¹³¹ The Workers' Socialist Federation was an exception. See Workers' Dreadnought (1/7/22, 8/7/22, 15/7/22, 22/7/22 and 29/7/22).

¹³² Groves, Balham Group p. 46.

¹³³ That the Balham Group/BSLO placed differences over communist policy in Germany ahead of other disagreements they had with the CPGB is confirmed in their leaflet 'Appeal to Congress Delegates from the Balham Group' (undated, probably 1932), p. 1, in the CPGB archive, file CP/IND/DUTT/29/03. Furthermore, the first issue of the BSLO's paper was almost entirely taken up by a reprint of Trotsky's article 'Germany: The Key to the International Situation', The Communist (1/5/32), pp. 1-12.

¹³⁴ See Trotsky's articles 'Letter to a German Worker' and 'Still There is Time' in ibid. (September 1932), pp. 4-11.

the main enemy of the working class, demanded tactical unity on this issue alone. Trotsky had summed up this strategy in 1931 when he wrote 'No common platform with the Social Democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! March separately but strike together! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike!'¹³⁵

This approach flew in the face of the prevailing Comintern line, which sought to win workers away from the moderate parties of the left, a strategy euphemistically termed 'the united front from below'. After increasingly heated debates between the Balham members and the CPGB leadership, the group was expelled in August 1932, having styled themselves the British Section of the Left Opposition (BSLO).¹³⁶ After the debacle of January 1933 they gave up hope of reforming either the Comintern or the KPD and echoed Trotsky's call for the formation of a new revolutionary force in Germany, arguing that 'the Stalinists stand condemned for having led the Party to disaster.'¹³⁷

Communists who had broken with Stalin did not, however, take issue with the general Marxist line, advanced at that point by the Comintern, that fascism was the open dictatorship of capital, installed in power by the existing ruling class when constitutional and democratic processes became insufficient to maintain their positions.¹³⁸ Edward Conze, though not a member of the BSLO, was a Marxist and a member of the Labour Party who spoke out consistently against Stalinism inside the Soviet Union and Stalinist policy beyond its borders. He nevertheless made it clear that despite their differences, he agreed with the CPGB's leading ideologue, R.P. Dutt, on this definition of fascism.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Trotsky, L. The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany (New York, 1971), pp. 138-9.

¹³⁶ The correspondence between the central committee of the CPGB, the party's London District central committee and the Balham Group between 1930 and 1932 is held in the Groves Papers, files MSS.172/BG/4/1 – 19. Letters dated 17/8/32 from the CPGB expelling Groves and Harry Wicks from the party, and liquidating the Balham branch are also in the Groves papers, files MSS.172/BG/4/16 and 17.

¹³⁷ BSLO, For Discussion (24/5/33), p. 1.

¹³⁸ Balham Group/BSLO leaflet, Germany!: To All Communists and Militant Workers (1933), p. 1, Haston papers, file DJH/1/6.

¹³⁹ The Plebs' Magazine (September 1934), p. 196. On the similarity between the definitions of fascism advanced by Trotsky and the Comintern see Trotsky, L. 'Preface to the Second English Edition', Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky (New York, 1975), p. 6;

Yet Trotskyists differed markedly with the Comintern over the tactics necessary to defeat fascism. Trotsky maintained that the 'third period' strategy pursued from 1928 until after the accession of Hitler, consisting of vehement attacks on socialists, had not only damaged the communist movement generally, but had played a crucial part in perpetuating the fatal division of the German working class in the face of Nazism.¹⁴⁰ The British Section of the Left Opposition agreed in January 1933 with his assertion that working-class unity was vitally necessary even at that late stage to stop Hitler. Such a united front, allowing for political criticism from both sides, would not compromise German communists, nor act, in their words, to 'conceal or soften the political contradictions between Marxism and reformism, but quite the contrary, to lay them bare, to explain them to the masses, and thus to reinforce the revolutionary wing.'¹⁴¹

Furthermore, Trotskyists argued that the term 'fascist' had been deliberately devalued through incorrect use in Germany by the KPD and the Comintern during the 'third period'.¹⁴² Aside from branding the SPD as 'social fascists', the KPD had also labelled the Brüning, Papen and Schleicher administrations as fascist.¹⁴³ This broad ascription was rejected by British Trotskyists as being 'un-marxist, un-leninist', and ignoring the different class bases of fascism and social

Forgacs, D. 'The Left and Fascism: Problems of Definition and Strategy', in Forgacs (ed.), Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism and Culture (London, 1986), p. 36; Poulantzas, N. Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism (London, 1979), pp. 61-2.

¹⁴⁰ See Dewar, H. Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB from its Origins to the Second World War (London, 1976), p. 102.

¹⁴¹ BSLO, The Communist (January 1933), p. 3.

¹⁴² Trotsky felt that such authoritarian regimes not fascist but rather transitional, and could result in a proletarian revolution or the imposition of fully-fledged fascism. See Trotsky, 'Bonapartism and Fascism' (July 1934), in Beetham (ed.), Marxists pp. 214-21; Trotsky, 'What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat' (January 1932), in his The Struggle Against Fascism pp. 142-257; Renton, 'Towards a Marxist Theory of Fascism', p. 5; Wistrich, R. 'Leon Trotsky's Theory of Fascism', JCH 11, 4 (1976), pp. 157, 171-7.

¹⁴³ German communists first claimed that fascism had triumphed in Germany with the defeat of their 1923 rising. See KPD, 'The Victory of Fascism Over the November Revolution' (November 1923), in Beetham (ed.), Marxists pp. 149-51. On their claims that the post-1930 administrations had been fascist see Carr, E.H. The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935 (London, 1983), p. 26; Togliatti, Lectures p. 7; Degras, Documents, Vol. III p. 121; Bullock, A. 'The German Communists and the Rise of Hitler', in Reuff, J. (ed.), The Third Reich (London, 1955), p. 508; Thälmann, E. 'The Revolutionary Way Out and the KPD' (February 1932), cited in Beetham, (ed.), Marxists pp. 161-7.

democracy.¹⁴⁴ Trotskyists stressed the difference between the cabinets of the penultimate Weimar years and actual fascism, maintaining that an indiscriminate use of the term had confused German communists. If fascism had arrived with Brüning in 1930, why had the KPD not called for a general strike? Similarly, what had been the point thereafter of continuing the daily struggle against the Nazis?¹⁴⁵

However, British Trotskyists shared the Comintern's view that the SPD leadership had since 1918 consistently frustrated working-class unity. As the majority party of the German working class, it was felt that they had a special responsibility in the fight against fascism, and had completely failed to discharge it. The BSLO's successor organisation, the Communist League, argued in 1934 that 'All over the world Fascism comes to power, not through the strength of the Fascists, but through the weaknesses of our own movement.'¹⁴⁶ Conze similarly argued that 'We completely overlook the danger of fascism if we overlook its ability...to split off a substantial section from the unemployed workers as well as a few employed workers...[Fascism] can only appeal to them if nobody can show a better and workable alternative.'¹⁴⁷

Yet Trotskyists remained critical of the KPD, arguing that their ideological closeness to Stalin's Russia had undermined their potential appeal in Germany. Conze wrote that 'the German working-class did not feel whole-heartedly attracted by the Russian experiment.'¹⁴⁸ He also attributed the KPD's inaction in January 1933 to Stalin's elevation of strictly Soviet interests above his opposition to fascism, arguing that 'if this government is completely absorbed

¹⁴⁴ The Communist (September 1932), p. 9; The differentiation of the class bases was made by the BSLO's successor organisation, the Communist League, in their paper, Red Flag (August 1934), p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ See Balham Group/BSLO, Germany!: To All Communists p. 1; BSLO, The Communist (September 1932), p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Communist League leaflet, Five Communist Reasons for Voting Labour (April, 1934), p. 1, Haston papers, file DJH/1/7. The BSLO had been formed by the Balham Group to act as a focus for dissent within the Communist Party before their expulsion. Once expelled, its members had concluded that neither the party nor the Comintern could be reformed, and re-launched itself as the Communist League. See the League's paper, Red Flag (October 1934), p. 1. The ILP rebuffed its efforts to join en bloc, and most members then joined as individuals, forming the Marxist Group once inside the party. This was itself expelled in 1936, and merged with a new, united Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Socialist League, in 1938.

¹⁴⁷ The Plebs' Magazine (May 1934), p. 109.

by the task of building up a huge industry, will a revolution in Germany not disturb the supply of machines; the Russian exports, peaceful relations with the capitalist countries?’¹⁴⁹ Some British Trotskyists went further, accusing Stalin of deliberately sabotaging anti-fascist unity in Germany. Stuart Purkis, a CPGB member since 1927, who had become increasingly sympathetic to Trotsky’s views, published an open letter of resignation to the party leader, Harry Pollitt, in July 1932. In it he stated of the German situation that ‘Party comrades “in the know” whispered that the Fascists were to take power unchallenged. German industry is so important to the success of the Five Year Plan, that nothing must disturb the relations between German capitalism and Russian Socialism. The Five Year Plans were to be completed with the help of German industry: whatever the government!’¹⁵⁰ The anti-Stalinism that characterised these groups was thus incorporated into their explanations for the success of Nazism and the failure of German communism.

Concurrence on Nazism

As was the case with Italy, the British left were profoundly divided over their interpretations of how Nazism had gained the support that it had, how and with what level of collusion from elements within the ‘democratic’ German state Hitler had come to power, and what the German labour movement could have done to prevent this. Again, Labour and the TUC maintained that weaknesses inherent in German democracy (which were not operative in Britain) had undermined it and allowed it to be replaced by dictatorship. They also maintained that, as in Italy, communists had also contributed to the success of fascism by their incessant attacks on democracy and their alarming advocacy of revolution. This, as much as anything, they maintained, had stampeded the German middle class into the arms of the NSDAP.

British revolutionaries, on the other hand, believed that Nazism had come to power with the connivance of elements of the democratic state itself, which they

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.* (April 1934), pp. 87-8.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 88.

in any case regarded as merely one face of capitalist rule. The contribution of the German labour movement to the advance of Nazism, they felt, had been the moderation of the SPD in the face of the challenge, and its flawed faith that 'democratic' rights and liberties would protect both it and the state. It was only when the SPD, in the crisis years following 1929, showed itself incapable of meeting the challenge, the far left argued, that people had come to see the NSDAP as the real alternative.

Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, all elements of the British left could agree that the Nazis, as a movement and as a regime, were consistently opposed to the interests of the working class. There may still be dispute over the extent to which German big business backed the Nazis, but the left concluded that in terms of their actions, the Nazis acted overwhelmingly in the interests of German big business. As in Italy, the left saw through the radical rhetoric employed by a far right movement, and saw in its anti-Semitism, its appeals to various social groups and its professed egalitarianism merely props for use in the construction of a broad consensus around reactionary policies.

This mix of difference and agreement regarding fascism, its provenance and the means of opposing it would recur when the left examined threats from the right in Britain itself between the wars.

¹⁵⁰ Purkis, S. 'Open Letter to Harry Pollitt' (27/7/32), p. 2, in CPGB archive, file CP/IND/DUTT/29/03.

4: The Left and Fascism in Britain, 1919-1932

The British left formulated its impressions of European fascism from a wide variety of sources: the press, newsreels, the exile communities, information passed from the various socialist and communist internationals, and from an increasing number of books by authors, both foreign and domestic, whose political views covered the entire spectrum from left to right. Occasionally, a representative of one or another of the British parties would visit a country in which the struggle against fascism was underway, or one in which fascism had been established. They would then pass on their impressions in the form of books, articles or speaking tours, and this process was accelerated during the Spanish Civil War, when significant numbers of Britons spent extended periods there in one capacity or another.

However, it was when examining the threat of fascism in Britain that theories could be tested most effectively and strategies of opposition put into practice. When confronting British fascist movements, it was much easier for the left to see from which sectors of society they filled their ranks, from where they drew less obvious sustenance in terms of finance and influence, and to assess the significance of the particular issues that British fascists prioritised.

In considering the potential sources from which a fascist threat might emanate in Britain, the left also had to take into consideration those that stood apart from the openly fascist organisations. Commentaries on Italian and German fascism were replete with allegations that big business, the military, the civil service, conservative parties, the landed aristocracy, or the monarchy had, singly or in combination, colluded with fascism. Regardless of its perceived likelihood, the various parties of the left had to evaluate from whence a fascist threat might come in Britain, and if they could not see the possibility of one emerging, to give their reasons as to why the danger identified by their competitors in the workers' movement was exaggerated or false.

Perceptions of the Fascist Threat

It has often been argued that there was no danger of fascism taking power in Britain between the wars. Historians have stressed this almost to the point of establishing a British exceptionalism that guaranteed the domestic continuance of democracy during the very period when it was being replaced by fascist or right wing authoritarian regimes across Europe. British democratic traditions and a widespread respect for parliament as an institution are the obvious starting points for such assumptions.¹ Even Stephen Cullen, a scholar who has been criticised for portraying the British Union of Fascists in too favourable a light, argued that in Britain, fascism was ‘an inappropriate mode of politics.’²

Some historians have stated that the outcome of the First World War, and the relative stability that Britain enjoyed afterwards, meant that the right did not face the same ‘crisis of legitimacy’ that melded conservatism and fascism elsewhere.³ The same factors are cited to explain the absence in Britain of the militant war veterans’ organisations that fed fascist movements abroad.⁴ The fact that Britain was a territorially sated imperial power led Hugh Seton-Watson to argue that here ‘there has never been any function for a nationalist movement or doctrine to perform.’⁵ Robert Benewick felt that ‘The *raison d’être* of the British Fascist movement was the crisis. According to the Blackshirts, the Government and the “old gang” were bound to collapse.’⁶

That no British crisis deepened to the point where significant sections of the population turned to fascism is taken as proof of immunity. The democratic consensus largely held, and even those elements of the British ruling class that expressed sympathy for fascism found themselves having to temper their views

¹ See Webber, G.C. ‘Intolerance and Discretion: Conservatives and British Fascism, 1918–1926’, in Kushner, T. & Lunn, K. (eds.), Traditions of Intolerance: Historical Perspectives on Fascism and Race Discourse in Britain (Manchester, 1989), p. 163; Benewick, R. The Fascist Movement in Britain (London, 1972), pp. 11-13.

² Cullen, S.M. ‘Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists’, *ibid.* 28, 2 (1993), p. 245.

³ See Eaden & Renton, The Communist Party p. 50.

⁴ Webber, ‘Intolerance and Discretion’ p. 160.

⁵ Seton-Watson, H. ‘Fascism, Right and Left’, JCH 1 (1966), p. 189.

⁶ Benewick, Fascist Movement p. 134.

when faced with the violent realities of the European regimes. Even *The Spectator*, for example, equivocated in its support for Mussolini after the murder of Matteotti in 1924, while the Nazis' blood purge a decade later quieted some of Hitler's affluent and influential British admirers.⁷

Furthermore, any resonance that Nazism found, it has been argued, was nullified by the marginal nature of British anti-Semitism.⁸ W.F. Mandle concluded that assimilation and tolerance presented 'a cultural obstacle that we must recognise as being the product of the English tradition.'⁹ The insignificance of two inter-war groups that were predicated upon virulent anti-Semitism, the Britons and the Imperial Fascist League, has been further cited in support of this proposition.¹⁰

However, not all who have examined British fascism have been so sure that its ultimate failure was pre-ordained. Much of the initial reporting of Italian fascism in the mainstream press was favourable,¹¹ and its early imitator, the British Fascisti (later renamed the British Fascists), once dismissed as ineffectual,¹² is now thought by researchers to have had a much higher membership and a larger branch structure than was formerly assumed.¹³ Kenneth Lunn, who has written extensively on British fascism, argued that 'the general consensus within existing literature is to underplay the importance of the British Fascists and 1920s fascist politics...perhaps the focus on the parallels between the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany and the rise of Oswald Mosley and the BUF have obscured a more obvious link between the

⁷ Bosworth, R.J.B. 'The British Press, the Conservatives, and Mussolini, 1920-34', *JCH* 5, 2 (1970), p. 173.

⁸ See Holmes, C. 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', in Lunn and Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism* p. 123; Webber, 'Intolerance and Discretion' p. 161.

⁹ Mandle, W.F. *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists* (Plymouth, 1968), p. 66.

¹⁰ See Lebzelter, G.C. 'Henry Hamilton Beamish and The Britons: Champions of Anti-Semitism', and Morell, J. 'Arnold Leese and the Imperial Fascist League: The Impact of Racial Fascism', in Lunn & Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism* pp. 41-56 and 57-75 respectively. Both organisations are examined further in Lebzelter, G.C. *Political Anti-Semitism in England, 1918-1939* (London, 1978), pp. 49-85. Leese and the IFL are treated in Holmes, C. *Anti-Semitism in British Society, 1876-1939* (London, 1979), pp. 161-70.

¹¹ See Farr, B.S. *The Development and Impact of Right-Wing Politics in Britain, 1903 - 1932* (New York, 1987), p. 54; Bosworth, 'British Press', pp. 167-72; Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 6.

¹² Benewick, *Fascist Movement* p. 31.

fascist challenge in Italy and Britain.’¹⁴ It is also thought that the BF’s links with the Baldwin government and the intelligence services in the middle 1920s were much more extensive than previously thought.¹⁵

The British left was painfully aware of how quickly fascism had grown in Italy, and how viciously it had attacked the working-class movement. It also understood that Italian fascism had ultimately received support from within the existing power structures, and had come to power with the connivance of elements of the state and the economic elite of the country. This led British socialists and communists to pay careful attention to the early manifestations of fascism in Britain.

A Fascist Threat in Britain?

i) The British Fascisti

Calls from right-wing commentators for a British equivalent to Mussolini’s Blackshirts had preceded the emergence of any domestic fascist organisation, and were issued directly as a result of the increased industrial strife that took place in the years following the end of the First World War. In June 1921, the bullish *Saturday Review* asked, ‘Who is to save the country from the tyranny of the Trade Unions?’ The writer was ready with his answer, stating that to avoid ‘this degrading subjection to plebian oligarchy...the only way seems to be an imitation of the Italian “Fascisti” movement.’¹⁶ A few months later, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, no friend of organised labour, carried an article on the continuing strike wave, entitled ‘A Fascisti for Britain?’ In it, the author asserted that ‘if the Italian method of suppressing tumults, riots or felonies is not all that it should be, there is no doubt about the good work that the Fascisti have

¹³ See Baker, D. ‘The Extreme Right in the 1920s: Fascism in a Cold Climate or ‘Conservatism With Knobs On’?’, in Cronin, M. (ed.), The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 20.

¹⁴ Lunn, K. ‘The Ideology and Impact of the British Fascists in the 1920’s’ in Kushner & Lunn (eds.), Traditions of Intolerance pp. 142-4.

¹⁵ See Maguire, R. ‘The Fascists are to be Depended Upon’: The British State, Fascism and Strike-Breaking, 1925-6’, address given to the Society for the Study of Labour History conference on ‘Fascism and the Labour Movement’, Leeds (8/11/03), (from own notes); Linehan, British Fascism p. 44; Renton, D. Fascism, Anti-Fascism p. 12.

¹⁶ Cited in Workers’ Dreadnought (18/6/21), p. 3.

accomplished.’¹⁷ The *Times* in August 1922 celebrated the brevity of an Italian general strike called to protest against fascist violence and the threat to democracy, arguing that ‘Fascismo has proved itself virile, well disciplined, fearless and ready for emergencies. Certainly, the failure of the general strike is chiefly due to the ultimatum of the Fascisti threatening reprisals, and if Italian Socialism and democracy have now to suffer they have mainly themselves to blame.’¹⁸

Clearly there were no illusions within the British right about the nature and purpose of fascism. Like the left, these commentators recognised it immediately as an anti-working-class force to be deployed for the protection of business interests. Furthermore, there was an evident willingness amongst its British sympathisers to forgive fascism its illegal and unconstitutional acts on the grounds of their support for its motives.

The first appearance of fascist sympathisers on British streets also predated the creation of an organised force of that name here. In a controversial act of commemoration, black-shirted supporters of Mussolini’s movement marched to Westminster Abbey for a remembrance service on November 4th 1922. While Labour ignored the demonstration, the communists of the Workers’ Socialist Federation condemned it, and took the fact that the fascists were allowed to use the Abbey as evidence of tacit support from the British establishment.¹⁹

Regardless of its prospects of ultimately taking power in Britain, there were those on the left who were moved to take action against the very first manifestations of a domestic fascist movement.²⁰ Though the British Fascisti, formed in 1923, could muster few adherents when it was launched, its potential

¹⁷ *ibid.* (9/9/22), p. 4.

¹⁸ Cited in Behan, T. *The Resistible Rise of Benito Mussolini* (London, 2003), p. 50.

¹⁹ The *Daily Herald* (4/11/22), actually carried an advertisement for the march, though, as a commercial paper, advertising was prominent and the decision to accept it was unlikely to have been sanctioned by the Labour hierarchy. The WSF’s blanket condemnation is in *Workers’ Dreadnought* (11/11/22), p. 1.

²⁰ The early 1920s saw the formation of several more broadly based anti-fascist organisations. Few of their records survive, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness. Several historians mention the National Union for Combating Fascism as being active at this time. See Eaden & Renton, *The Communist Party* p. 49; Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 7.

was not lost on many within the left. British socialists and communists were aware that in Italy, fascism had also begun with a tiny number of adherents, who were widely regarded as cranks and political outcasts. Yet less than four years later, it had taken power. The British Fascisti proclaimed their loyalty to King and constitution, but made no secret of their intention to act against anything it defined as subversion. Its Summary of Organisation and Policy stated that ‘In times of peace...branches carry on propaganda, recruiting and counter-revolutionary organisation. Should revolution or a general strike be threatened...units would form the active force.’²¹ The very suggestion of an organisation advocating the use of *squadristi* tactics against trade unionists and their supporters in Britain, and the impression that vacillation on the part of the leadership of Italian socialism had led to its destruction, prompted some British leftists into making pre-emptive strikes against the first flowering of British fascism in the early 1920s.²²

Even before the British Fascisti was formed, British communists had been alarmed about the enthusiasm shown in the press for the actions of the Italian Blackshirts, and the CPGB had warned in September 1922 that ‘This sympathy with the Fascisti shows how our masters view the problem of the coming struggle of the workers for power.’²³ It was from this standpoint that the party viewed the emergence of the British Fascisti in the following year. The BF made great play of its willingness to act as a force of strike-breakers in the event of widespread industrial action, and the CPGB took them at their word.²⁴ The party decided not to wait for an industrial trial of strength with the fascists, and disrupted their meetings from the first, quite literally, as reports of the organisation’s inaugural London rally describe it being wrecked by communists.²⁵ The CPGB maintained the pressure on the Fascisti thereafter, with considerable success. According to the *Manchester Guardian*, the first BF meeting in the city, in December 1925, had been brought to a halt by ‘a strong

²¹ Cited in *Socialist Review* (February 1926), p. 24.

²² On the BF’s paramilitarism see Lunn, ‘Ideology and Impact’, p. 149; Benewick, *Fascist Movement* pp. 30-1.

²³ *The Communist Review* (September 1922), p. 266.

²⁴ See the 1925 BF circular cited in Klugmann, J. *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Vol. II. The General Strike. 1925 – 1927* (London, 1969), p. 39 ff 1.

²⁵ See Copsy, *Anti-Fascism* p. 5.

Communist presence much given to heckling'. Stuart Rawnsley's research into fascism in northern England found that after this check, 'nothing was heard again of the movement in Manchester.'²⁶

The CPGB believed that the Fascisti had no distinct ideology of its own, beyond patriotism and anti-communism. The aim of a young fascist movement, the party argued, was not to advance a precise blueprint for the corporate state, but to win as many adherents as it could for counter-revolution by the use of diverse and even contradictory slogans. Historians agree that the movement did not espouse a specifically fascist programme until the 1930s, by which time it was in serious decline, having been outflanked by Mosley's larger organisation.²⁷ Several have interpreted this to mean that the BF were not fascists at all, but merely civically minded defenders of the constitution, differing little from the rash of middle class 'leagues' and 'unions' which sprouted in Britain during and immediately after the First World War.²⁸ Some BF members seem to have felt this, as a section split away in 1925 to form the smaller, but more ideological, National Fascisti.²⁹

The BF clearly saw the left as its main enemy, and did what it could to carry the fight to them. It attacked the Labour Party's press and its newspaper distributors, as well as kidnapping Harry Pollitt, the CPGB's general secretary, from a train at Liverpool's Edgehill station. Pollitt was released unharmed after two days of captivity in a North Wales farmhouse, but Labour's failure to condemn the abduction led the CPGB to accuse it of dangerous complacency regarding fascism.³⁰ Commenting on a 5,000 strong BF march in London on Empire Day, 1925, the Communist Party's journal noted that 'In 1923, when the

²⁶ Rawnsley, S, 'Fascism and Fascists in the 1930's: A Case Study of Fascism in the North of England in a Period of Economic and Political Change', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bradford), (1981), pp. 100-1.

²⁷ Benewick, Fascist Movement pp. 29-30; Cross, C. The Fascists in Britain (London, 1961), p. 58; Thurlow, Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front (London, 1998), pp. 33-5.

²⁸ See Mosley, N. Beyond the Pale: Sir Oswald Mosley and his Family, 1933-1980 (London, 1983), p. 7.

²⁹ ibid. pp. 35-6; Linehan, British Fascism pp. 124-8.

³⁰ Klugmann History of the Communist Party: Vol. II pp. 42-3; Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 8. That the attack on Labour's Daily Herald distributors was carried out by the breakaway National Fascisti did not alter the argument in the eyes of the CPGB.

organisation of fascism was first formed in Britain they were not able to muster a hundred members, according to their own account, for a meeting in Hyde Park. This is a sufficiently rapid growth to merit attention...It is still customary in the Labour Movement to laugh at the Fascists in this country. This is a very stupid attitude which is likely to cost dear.'³¹ Labour, the article continued, wished to avoid debate over fascism as it originated from within the existing ruling class and suggested that 'bourgeois' democracy may not be a permanent fixture or one capable of being used to redistribute wealth. If this were true, communists maintained, then fascism became 'a question which would raise for it [Labour] inconvenient problems.'³²

In a similar vein, the CPGB put the ILP's failure to discuss Italy or fascism at its 1923 conference down to 'the stupid and blind assumption that the present system of society is a democratic one...to admit that the capitalist class will meet every serious advance of the Labour movement with armed force...would be tantamount to granting all that Lenin has ever advocated.'³³ Secondly, British communism took from Italy the lesson that by not pressing home the advantage they had held during the factory occupations of 1919–20, the Italian Socialist Party had disillusioned the workers and allowed the right the political space to utilise fascism to destroy organised labour in an act of revenge. The CPGB's journal argued that 'Fascism arises where a powerful working-class movement reaches a stage of growth which inevitably raises revolutionary issues, but is held in from decisive action by a reformist leadership...Fascism is not the child of revolution. Fascism is the child of reformism.'³⁴

The party's anti-fascism, like its analysis of fascism, was characterised by its wider aims and strategy, and naturally entailed a critique of its political rivals. Its tactic of directly confronting the British Fascists equated with its argument that the police and the laws in a democracy were biased, and could not be relied upon to protect working-class interests, hence the party's argument that the BF must be defeated by the workers themselves. The party ensured that its anti-

³¹ Labour Monthly (July 1925), p. 385.

³² ibid. p. 386.

³³ The Communist Review (May 1923), p. 8.

fascist activities reflected the image it wished to present as an alternative leadership of the working class, whose actions would come to be supported by the most advanced and militant elements of the labour movement.

The CPGB's idea of a united front did not preclude the continuation of the bitterest attacks on the Labour leadership. For communists, the very act of promoting unity therefore entailed a critique of the flawed ideas of the partners in the desired union. The CPGB's foremost theoretician, R.P. Dutt, argued that 'The answer to Fascism is the united front of the working class. Reformism...has no answer to Fascism, because it can only appeal to Capitalist Democracy and the Law. But to appeal to Capitalist Democracy and the Law is to appeal to the bourgeoisie at the very moment when the bourgeoisie is abandoning these and itself organising Fascism.'³⁵

To reinforce this message, the CPGB pointed out that there had been no convictions in the majority of cases where fascists had engaged in attacks on communists, let alone those of the law-abiding Labour Party and the trade unions. This led the party to warn that trusting the state to act against fascism was 'an illusion which will lead to a rude and disastrous awakening.'³⁶ Workers' self-organisation, rather than a reliance on the law, was, to the CPGB, the way to defeat fascism, and the party bore this in mind in its preparations for the General Strike.

In keeping with its general differentiation between real fascists and mere conservatives, the CPGB refrained from equating government actions with fascism during the 1926 strike, though they were aware of links between the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) and the British Fascists (as they were by now renamed).³⁷ Nevertheless, the party's militant approach to anti-fascism led it to form a 'Workers' Defence Corps' towards the end of 1925

³⁴ Labour Monthly (July 1925), p. 389.

³⁵ The Plebs' Magazine (January 1926), p. 4.

³⁶ Labour Monthly (July 1925), p. 393.

³⁷ CPGB, 8th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Reports, Theses and Resolutions (London, 1926), p. 65. In the bitter aftermath of the 1926 defeat the CPGB drew parallels between Conservative governments and fascism, but did not equate them. See for example Labour Monthly (June 1927), pp. 328-31.

as part of its own preparations for the strike, a move inspired in no small part by the example of fascist actions against Italian workers.³⁸

Where the revolutionary left appeared to have a heightened sensitivity to the actions of the BF, more moderate socialists, such as Labour, the TUC and the ILP, tended to play down the threat of the early British fascist movement. While in government in 1924, Labour went so far as to allow the BF to become an incorporated company.³⁹ Labour took the absence of a political programme on the part of the BF as a sign of the movement's weakness, not as a tactical ploy.⁴⁰ Even when the BF could be shown to have links with state bodies such as the OMS during the General Strike, Labour simply saw this as proof that the organisation was little more than a vocal adjunct of conservatism.⁴¹ The ILP argued that the BF were simply admirers of Mussolini, and were 'made in his image', while the TUC agreed that the Fascisti movement 'attempts in a feeble way to echo the ideas of their Italian teachers', explaining its patriotism and innate conservatism by adding that 'Its leaders are wealthy people.'⁴²

The early 1920s had seen the Labour Party re-position itself with a view to winning a far greater share of the popular vote than it had hitherto managed. This strategy had appeared to pay dividends, given Labour's increased representation in parliament and its accession to office in January 1924, albeit as a minority administration.⁴³ Democracy could be seen to be accommodating the advance of socialism, Labour argued, to the extent that there had been no extra-legal opposition from any quarter to its taking power.

The ILP, still very much a part of Labour in 1924, similarly maintained that established democratic traditions in Britain militated against right-wing

³⁸ See Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 9.

³⁹ Labour Monthly (July 1925), p. 390.

⁴⁰ See microfilm Archives of the British Labour Party. Series III. General Correspondence Etc. Part 6. Subject Files LP/FAS/33, p. 12.

⁴¹ Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 9.

⁴² New Leader (2/1/25), p. 3; TUC archive, file MSS 292/743/1, 'Labour Party-Inter-Departmental Correspondence – Subject: British Fascisti' (9/5/24), p. 2.

⁴³ Labour had 57 MPs after the 1918 election, 142 after that of October 1922 and 191 after the December 1923 poll. See Cole, G.D.H. A History of the Labour Party From 1914 (London, 1948), pp. 83, 127 and 152-7.

extremism, arguing that 'A Fascist movement on the Italian pattern would not be created easily in this country. Parliament had no roots in Italian history.'⁴⁴ For the mainstream of the British labour movement, the early 1920s were not a time to be suggesting that democracy was somehow a fraudulent façade which guaranteed the rule of a privileged minority, and which carried within it any fascist potentiality. This belief conditioned Labour's attitude to the British Fascisti. Even when fascist attacks began on Labour's press and distribution network in 1925, the TUC General Council's statement called not for retaliation or self-defence, but for police action, arguing that 'the Trade Union and Labour Movement is entitled to at least the same measure of security and legal protection as other sections of the community.'⁴⁵

However, the ILP's view began to change as the party moved to the left as a result of its growing disillusionment with Labour's performance in office in 1924. When fascists, one of them armed, had attacked and stolen a van distributing the *Daily Herald* in October 1925, the ILP regretted that 'Most of us have hitherto laughed at the witless young men who have organised themselves in this country to imitate Italian Fascism.'⁴⁶ The party was further alarmed by the revelation that the Conservative Home Secretary, William Joynson-Hix, had issued pre-trial instructions to the judge in the subsequent court case, at which serious charges against the raiders were mysteriously dropped on the day of the hearing, the four fascist defendants were merely bound over, and a man who had carried a revolver received only a £20 fine.⁴⁷

The ILP came to argue that the British Fascists' proclaimed constitutionalism was but a smokescreen masking more radical political ambitions, as well as a commitment to violent action against their opponents. Like Mussolini's blackshirts, the ILP began to feel, British fascism could grow to the point where it threatened the whole of the labour movement. As the General Strike loomed, a writer for the ILP's journal argued of the BF that 'They came into existence as an anti-Red organisation, and their principal purpose is to fight Communism.

⁴⁴ *New Leader* (20/2/25), p. 4.

⁴⁵ General Council statement (11/10/25), TUC archive, file MSS/292/734/1.

⁴⁶ *New Leader* (6/11/25), p. 8.

“Communism”, moreover, would, I feel, be found in their eyes to include a considerable range of opinion which is not communist at all.’⁴⁸ While manifesting an increased concern at the activities of the far right, the ILP could still confidently state of British fascism in 1926 that ‘no Mussolini has yet arisen above the horizon.’⁴⁹ They were unaware that just such a figure, yet to arise, was at that moment within their own ranks.

A Fascist Threat in Britain?

ii) The New Party

The General Strike proved not to be the precursor of an intensified campaign by the far right, but marked instead the high water mark of the first wave of British fascism. While the British Fascists were on the wane by the late 1920s, it was departures from the Labour Party itself that were to provide the left with its next points of contention concerning the nature of fascism, namely from whence it could emerge, what form it might take and how it might assume power.

Before Ramsay MacDonald’s defection had brought down the second Labour government in 1931, another significant figure had, in a move also prompted by the party’s handling of the economic crisis, left the party and taken his allies with him. Having formerly sat as a Conservative MP, and then as an independent, Oswald Mosley had risen rapidly through Labour’s ranks after joining the party and the ILP in 1924.⁵⁰ He was appointed to the shadow cabinet in 1925 and, as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, became part of MacDonald’s administration in 1929.⁵¹

Convinced that new thinking had to be applied in order to combat the slump, Mosley, along with another Labour MP, John Strachey, had formulated a set of interventionist proposals in 1925 that, despite gaining some support, were

⁴⁷ *ibid.* (27/11/25), p. 2.

⁴⁸ *Socialist Review* (February 1926), p. 27.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 29.

⁵⁰ See Mosley, O. ‘A New Recruit’s Defence of Labour’, *New Leader* (11/4/24), p. 3.

⁵¹ On Mosley’s background and political career before the founding of the New Party see Benewick, *Fascist Movement* pp. 53-63; Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* pp. 12-16.

eventually rejected by the party.⁵² Increasingly disillusioned with Labour, and with what he saw as the malaise into which parliamentary politics was slipping, Mosley resigned from the cabinet and then broke acrimoniously with the party itself, forming the New Party with a disparate group of MPs and other followers in March 1931.

Many historians have seen elements of corporatism in Mosley's programme, with Richard Thurlow writing that 'The growing nationalism of his schemes needed only the more autarkic economic plan and the authoritarian nature of political control to turn it into fully-fledged fascism.'⁵³ The New Party opposed free trade, and stated that it offered 'a policy designed to meet the facts of the present crisis without prejudice or preconception of party. We differ from all the old parties in our demand for a complete revision of Parliament which will change it from a talk-shop to a workshop...the worker and consumer as well as the employer shall be protected by modern machinery.'⁵⁴ There is some dispute, however, over the nature of the organisation that Mosley intended the New Party to be, and the degree to which corporatism and protectionism should shape its image. His son, Nicholas, felt that it was 'my father's trial run, as it were, for fascism.'⁵⁵ However, Strachey, one of party's the co-founders, remained convinced that Mosley initially saw it as 'a centre ginger group', aiming to win support from across the spectrum around a broadly Keynesian programme.⁵⁶ G.D.H. Cole remembered that, in its early days, 'the New Party still preserved something of a left-wing façade.'⁵⁷

There is no doubt though, that Mosley turned increasingly to fascism during the New Party's short and stormy life.⁵⁸ It had generated intense hostility across the left, and polled poorly, fuelling his disillusionment with both the working class and democracy, while attacks on New Party meetings led to an increasing

⁵² On these see Newman, M. John Strachey (Manchester, 1989), pp. 7-15.

⁵³ Thurlow, Fascism in Britain pp. 26-7. See also Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 18.

⁵⁴ New Party/Mosley, O. (ed.), Why We Left the Old Parties (London, 1931), pp. 3-4.

⁵⁵ Mosley, Beyond the Pale p. 9.

⁵⁶ Thurlow, Fascism in Britain p. 69.

⁵⁷ Cole, History of the Labour Party p. 243.

⁵⁸ See Mosley, N. Rules of the Game: Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley, 1896-1933 (London, 1982), pp. 183-202.

obsession with stewarding and paramilitarism.⁵⁹ What support it did bore get some resemblance to the social mix associated with fascist movements elsewhere. Harold Nicolson, the editor of New Party's paper, characterised this as 'a motley group of second-rank politicians, some notable intellectuals...and a strong contingent of University and back-street youth.'⁶⁰

Even before the party was officially wound up in April 1932, Mosley had met both Mussolini in Italy and Nazi leaders in Germany and had committed himself to the formation of an openly fascist movement.⁶¹ Nicolson recorded then that Mosley 'cannot keep his mind off shock troops and the roll of drums around Westminster.'⁶² In the last issue of the party's paper, Mosley declared that 'We were never fools enough to delude ourselves into the belief that we could build a new political party of normal character in normal conditions. We shall be a movement born of crisis and ordeal or we shall be nothing.'⁶³

The left's interpretations of the New Party varied according to their wider political perceptions. Labour and the TUC refrained from equating it with fascism, but nevertheless regarded Mosley and the other MPs who left the party as traitors and renegades from socialism.⁶⁴ Anger at the defections was compounded by the fact that the New Party was seen to have cost Labour a parliamentary by-election, splitting the anti-Tory vote at Ashton-Under-Lyne in April 1931. The Transport & General Workers' Union journal warned that 'whatever Mosleyism may mean in theory, in practice it means helping the Tories to get back into power. The workers can get all they want by being loyal to their own Movement, and giving the Mosley party and all other political Judases a wide berth.'⁶⁵ Though the labour movement leadership disavowed direct action, several New Party meetings were broken up, with one New Party MP recalling 'angry audiences of disappointed Labour supporters.'⁶⁶ The

⁵⁹ See Skidelsky, R. *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975), pp. 247-56.

⁶⁰ Nicolson, N. (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters, 1930 – 1939* (London, 1966), p. 66.

⁶¹ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* p. 61-5; Mandle, *Anti-Semitism* pp. 1-2.

⁶² Nicolson, (ed.), *Harold Nicolson* p. 106.

⁶³ Cited in Mosley, *Rules of the Game* p. 202.

⁶⁴ See Birch, J.E.L. *Why They Join the Fascists* (London, 1937), p. 42.

⁶⁵ Cited in Skidelsky, R. 'Great Britain', in Woolf, S.J. (ed.), *European Fascism* (2nd ed. London, 1970), p. 249.

⁶⁶ Cited in Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* p. 247.

Labour leadership, though, tended to emphasise that the rapid demise of the New Party was proof that the democratic process was the best way of defeating extremism, later congratulating the voters for ensuring that the New Party was 'still-born.'⁶⁷ However, the actions of the Labour grassroots were less restrained than the parliamentary party would have liked, suggesting that they accepted a wider definition of fascism and a belief in direct action that was not shared by the leadership.

The ILP was, at the time of the New Party's formation, still a part of the Labour Party and had not then abandoned its commitment to parliamentary democracy. It was, however, becoming increasingly disillusioned with MacDonald's government, and had initially sympathised with Mosley's resignation from the cabinet in May 1930.⁶⁸ Once the New Party had been formed, the ILP, like Labour, tended to minimise its significance. R.C. Wallhead, who, as an ILP candidate had easily defeated the New Party in a straight contest at Merthyr in the October 1931 general election, referred to Mosley's movement as 'a cross between a travelling circus and a boxing booth.'⁶⁹

The ILP shared the view that Mosley and his former Labour colleagues had, in leaving, abandoned their socialist beliefs. Commenting on reports that Mosley had originally intended to name his organisation the 'New Labour Party', the ILP argued that his proposals were solely about resuscitating British capitalism, and contained nothing to alleviate the condition of the working class. The party wrote of Mosley's manifesto, *A National Policy*, that 'It is an adroit blend of projects culled from the programmes of all Parties...[Mosley] avoids details and he takes no risks with existing vested interests. The word Socialism...has now entirely disappeared from his vocabulary.'⁷⁰

⁶⁷ See 'Report on Replies to Fascist Questionnaire', in Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/34/20ii.

⁶⁸ See *New Leader* (23/5/30), p. 8.

⁶⁹ Cited in Francis, *Miners Against Fascism* p. 86.

⁷⁰ *New Leader* (6/3/31), p. 8. Wilkinson & Conze also felt that the New Party had been intended as a rival socialist party, but had moved rapidly to the right when the extent of working-class hostility quickly became apparent. See *Why Fascism?* pp. 58-9.

The Communist Party of Great Britain immediately identified aspects of corporatism and dictatorship in the New Party's programme, and Harry Pollitt had no hesitation in branding it 'the first form of an openly Fascist organisation against the workers.'⁷¹ That such a group had emerged from within Labour's ranks chimed with communist attacks on moderate socialists, and was presented as proof that the process of compromise and accommodation with capitalism forced some socialists further and further to the right until they abandoned their creed. In November 1930, the CPGB's William Rust argued that elements of the British ruling class were casting around for a 'strong man' to deal with the economic crisis, and asserted that 'It is possible that the British Hitler will come from the ranks of the Socialists just as Mussolini and Pilsudski did.'⁷²

It appeared to Dutt that Mosley had been 'incubated' inside the majority socialist party, and that therefore, in the argot of the third period, Labour and the ILP had 'characteristically performed the role of Social Fascism.'⁷³ Rust pointed out that Mosley's ideas had crystallised while he was still a member of the ILP, arguing that the reformist programme of the ILP and the perceived corporatism of the New Party were essentially similar: "'Socialism in Our Time" has been scraped off and underneath is found written "Save Capitalism".'⁷⁴

British communists noted that financial support for the New Party came from sources such as the press baron, Lord Rothermere, the owners of automotive firms such as Sir William Morris and Lord Nuffield, the shipping magnate, Lord Inchcape, and a range of lesser industrialists.⁷⁵ The presence of such significant backers confirmed the communists' assessment of the New Party.

The CPGB aimed to counter Mosley's party in much the same way as it had the British Fascists. Its belief that fascist threats should be met by working-class resistance was shown when communists joined Labour supporters in disrupting

⁷¹ Cited in Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern* p. 211.

⁷² *Labour Monthly* (November 1930), p. 658.

⁷³ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 266.

⁷⁴ *Labour Monthly* (January 1931), p. 38.

⁷⁵ Labour Research Department, *Who Backs Mosley? Fascist Promise and Fascist Performance* (London, 1934), p. 10.

the New Party's inaugural rallies.⁷⁶ Mosley claimed, at the time and later, that it was the violent and disruptive tactics of his opponents that drove him towards paramilitarism and fascism. After a meeting in Glasgow in October 1931, where he was attacked with stones and a razor and required a police escort to leave, Mosley told his remaining New Party colleagues that 'this forces us to be fascist and that we need no longer hesitate to create our trained and disciplined force.'⁷⁷

A Fascist Threat in Britain?

iii) The National Government

Labour had formed its second administration in 1929. Like the first, it was hampered by the absence of an overall majority in the House of Commons. However, Ramsay MacDonald's second term as prime minister was to be shaped less by parliamentary arithmetic than by the Depression, and he proved unable to maintain unity within the cabinet when confronted by difficult decisions about cuts in benefits and wider economic policy that had been recommended to the government by both financiers and the Treasury.⁷⁸ The course of the second Labour government has been thoroughly researched, and its outcome is well known. MacDonald, unable to reach agreement with the majority of his cabinet colleagues over reductions in welfare payments, went to Buckingham Palace to tender his resignation, only to be persuaded by the King to lead a coalition administration instead. MacDonald's surprise at this turn of events was only matched by that of the Labour Party, which expelled him and those of his supporters who had followed him into the National Government.

Labour, the TUC and the National Government

The failure of a second Labour government to implement socialist measures, and the unprecedented departure of MacDonald and his clique, had a dramatic impact on the party. A large section of the ILP had become increasingly

⁷⁶ See Mosley, Rules of the Game p. 184; Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley p. 256.

⁷⁷ Nicolson, (ed.), Harold Nicolson p. 91. See also Mosley, O. My Life (London, 1968), pp. 283-6.

⁷⁸ Pimlott, Labour and the Left pp. 11-14. The specific effects of the 1931 crisis on the government are examined in Cole, A History of the Labour Party pp. 249-67.

disenchanted with parliamentarism in any case, and left to pursue a revolutionary socialist policy. The Labour Party as a whole was somewhat radicalised by its sudden return to opposition, by the absence of the restraining grip of the MacDonald faction and by the fact that the monarchy, the opposition and big business, (city financiers were seen as having originally pushed for the benefit cuts that split the cabinet) could seemingly contrive to work with turncoats to oust the party of government. Ben Pimlott argued of the 1929–1931 government that ‘Labour’s second period of office shattered the illusion of the “inevitability of gradualness”’, so central to its Fabian tradition, while Maurice Cowling has pointed out that ‘One by-product of the MacDonalдите participation in the National Government was the loss of the leaders who invented the accommodation with which Labour covered itself in the 1920s.’⁷⁹

The subsequent general election, which saw the slate of ‘National’ candidates overwhelmingly endorsed and Labour reduced from 288 seats to just 52, further alienated the left of the party from the moderating tendencies that the proximity to power usually exercised. Even the normally cautious Sidney Webb went so far as to describe the creation of the National Government as ‘replacing Parliamentary Government by what is in effect a Party Dictatorship.’⁸⁰ Theorists from the New Fabian Research Bureau, formed in March 1931 in an attempt to rejuvenate the cause of socialist reformism, were still arguing in 1937 that ‘In its origin the National Government was a coalition of the capitalist parties, whose object it was to preserve the existing social and economic order...[it] represented the same principle of national concentration, and was performing the same task for this country in the world crisis, as the Fascist dictatorships were doing for Germany and Italy.’⁸¹ That even Fabians were comparing the National Government with fascism was a testament as to how far the events of 1931 had shifted perceptions about the nature of British democracy, and, as a consequence, ideas about the forms that fascism might assume.

⁷⁹ Pimlott, Labour and the Left p. 9; Cowling, Impact of Hitler pp. 22-3.

⁸⁰ Webb, S. ‘What Happened in 1931: A Record’, The Political Quarterly (January–March 1932), p. 1.

⁸¹ ‘Vigilantes’, The Road to War (London, 1937), p. 22.

Those who had been relatively isolated on the Labour left under MacDonald now wielded more influence amongst the party's grassroots, though could still not muster the numbers needed to control party policy. Despite the departure of the ILP, the left was still able to make itself heard in the form of the Socialist League, inaugurated in 1932 by former ILP members, such as Stafford Cripps, Ellen Wilkinson, Aneurin Bevan and H.N. Brailsford. Its purpose was to campaign within Labour for a platform of advanced socialist policies. The League's national secretary, John T. Murphy, argued in the summer of 1933 that 'the Socialist League is not merely the rump of the old ILP carrying on, but the organisation of revolutionary socialists who are an integral part of the Labour movement for the purposes of winning it completely for revolutionary socialism.'⁸² The League's London Area Committee defined the organisation's role in October of the same year as being 'neither a rival to the Labour party nor a parallel party...It is an organisation of revolutionary socialists within the Labour Party, who accept its decisions and discipline, whose aim is to ensure that the Labour Party fulfils its historic purpose of achieving socialism.'⁸³

Cripps and his colleagues began to question the party's strict adherence to democratic forms and parliamentary procedures after what they saw as the open destruction of the second Labour government by powerful un-elected forces. The League went so far as to suggest that a period shaped by emergency legislation, amounting to a virtual dictatorship, would be necessary following Labour's next election victory, so that the party might implement its programme without interference from any quarter.⁸⁴ Cripps argued in January 1934 that 'When the Labour Party comes to power we must act rapidly and it will be necessary to deal with the House of Lords and the influence of the City of London. There is no doubt that we shall have to overcome opposition from Buckingham Palace and other places as well.'⁸⁵

⁸² Cited in Pimlott, Labour and the Left p. 52.

⁸³ Socialist League London Area Committee circular to Socialist League branches (24/10/33), TUC archive, file MSS.292/756.1/3, p. 1.

⁸⁴ See Cripps, S. 'Democracy and Dictatorship: The Issue for the Labour Party', The Political Quarterly (October – December 1933), pp. 467-81.

Murphy analysed the National Government in terms of it being the British version of a common European response to an economic crisis of the magnitude that had engulfed MacDonald's second premiership, arguing that 'The centralisation of economic power disposes of the need for capitalist parties expressing rival interests, and as the crisis deepens the domination of a single party in charge of the capitalist state, as in the case of Germany and Italy, will inevitably become the supreme question before the capitalist class.'⁸⁶ Murphy's biographer described him as seeing fascism as 'a counter-revolutionary force within the state and capitalist class aimed at overthrowing parliamentary democracy and destroying all working-class organisation.'⁸⁷

The League noted that under the National Government there was an increasing transfer of powers away from parliament and into the hands of boards, commissions and other non-elected bodies accountable only to ministers. The emphasis that MacDonald, and his successor, Stanley Baldwin, placed on economic planning and on the harmonisation of industrial and commercial activity 'in the national interest' as a method of reinvigorating the British economy bore, to the League, a growing similarity with Italian corporatism or the German practice of *Gleichschaltung*. These processes, whether implemented in Britain or elsewhere, the League argued, had nothing to do with a planned economy in the socialist sense, but were rather 'designed to give the power to plan into the hands of those who own.'⁸⁸ That the League identified the National Government with creating the forms and functions usually attributed to fascism was confirmed in a pamphlet they issued in 1935, in which it was argued that 'The evolution of British Capitalism towards Fascism must not be measured by the number of people wearing black shirts, but by the extent to which Fascist ideas are finding expression among its leaders and in the plans they are advocating to meet the increasingly critical condition of its economy.'⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Cited in Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* p. 52; Ellen Wilkinson, also of the Socialist League, similarly drew parallels between 'MacDonaldism' and fascism. See Wilkinson & Conze, *Why Fascism?* pp. 65-6.

⁸⁶ Murphy, *Preparing for Power* p. 268.

⁸⁷ Darlington, *Political Trajectory* p. 221. Murphy had been expelled from the CPGB in May 1932, and was a member of the League from April 1933 until June 1936.

⁸⁸ *Socialist Leaguer* (June 1935), p. 187.

One historian of the British left, David Blaazer, has concluded that the Socialist League's analysis of fascism evolved in the light of the 1931 debacle to the point where it was 'theoretically indistinguishable from that of the Comintern.'⁹⁰ While this may be an overstatement, it is certainly true that for the League, and indeed for much of the Labour left, the sources from which they felt fascism could emanate after 1931 extended far beyond the small band of Mussolini's admirers that they had previously identified. Their new conception, flowing from the increased intensity of their socialism, now resembled that of the communists much more than it did that traditionally associated with the Labour Party. The feeling that parliamentary democracy contained within it forces capable of its subversion had now permeated the Labour left beyond the ranks of the League. Clement Attlee, even after he had succeeded George Lansbury as Labour leader in 1935, still maintained that 'In 1931, Capitalism closed its ranks...One feature of MacDonaldism needs to be especially emphasised. The attempt was made to make people believe that there was really no need for the existence of separate parties, as all good men were working for a common end. MacDonaldism is, in fact, in its philosophy essentially Fascist.'⁹¹

Despite the League's protestations of loyalty to Labour, it, like the CPGB, placed much of the blame for the successes of Italian and German fascism on the failure of the majority socialist party to implement its programme or to make a stand in defence of democracy. The accession to power of the National Government was similarly seen as a consequence of the Labour leadership's moderation during its second term in government. Stafford Cripps, the League's most prominent spokesman, pointed to Labour's failure to put into practice any of the measures contained in its 1929 manifesto, starting that 'The failure of Social-Democracy is the most fruitful soil in which to plant Fascism.'⁹²

The League, along with other prominent figures on the Labour left, also took from the events of 1931 the lesson that working-class unity was necessary to

⁸⁹ Socialist League/Murphy, J.T. Fascism! The Socialist Answer (London, 1935), p. 9.

⁹⁰ Blaazer, Progressive Tradition p. 171.

⁹¹ Attlee, Labour Party in Perspective pp. 59-60.

⁹² Socialist League/Cripps, S. National Fascism in Britain cited in Socialist Leaguer (June 1935), p. 187.

counter any threats to the implementation of socialism. Against party policy, they campaigned for a united front, to include both the estranged ILP and the CPGB; a prospect as unthinkable to Labour's new leader, George Lansbury, as it had been to MacDonald.⁹³

The bulk of the Labour Party, certainly in parliament, while regarding MacDonald and his supporters as traitors to their cause, hesitated to read into the formation of the National Government any manifestation of fascism. The fact that the 'National' slate was returned by 69% of the electorate in 1931 gave it a veneer of legitimacy in the eyes of many Labour MPs. The parliamentary party, drastically reduced in numbers by the National Government landslide, was, in the words of Henry Pelling, 'a poor and nerveless thing' which only really began to recover its confidence as the 1935 election approached.⁹⁴

Furthermore, the majority of the party responded to the setbacks of the 1930s not by moving away from their own commitment to democracy, but rather by arguing that it was in the widening and strengthening of the powers of parliament, and in the education of all sectors of society in the rights and responsibilities inherent in a democratic system that the interests of the working class lay. This feeling was encouraged in the later 1930s, as the worst of the recession passed, and a measure of recovery set in, albeit aided by rearmament. In 1937, G.D.H. Cole, his brief membership of the Socialist League long passed, felt able to argue that despite his belief that fascism could emerge from within democratic structures in a time of extreme crisis, 'At the moment, British capitalism is not at all disposed to engage British Fascism as its champion.'⁹⁵ With Margaret Cole, he held that under present conditions, most of the electorate was as opposed to extremism of the right as to that of the left, and that therefore 'As long as the suburbanites and the workers in the newer industries and services feel themselves to be tolerably secure in the conditions in which they are at present living, they will be in no mood for experiments which seem

⁹³ On Labour and united front efforts see Blaazer, D. The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity, 1884–1939 (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 154–71.

⁹⁴ Pelling, Short History p. 68.

⁹⁵ Cole, People's Front p. 49.

to them to threaten these conditions, however much the advocates of such experiments may hold out the prospects of a better society.’⁹⁶

Despite his frequent appearances in the pages of the Socialist League’s publications, Harold Laski also rejected an equation of the National Government and fascism. While maintaining that it was undoubtedly a government of capitalist concentration, Laski saw in it an attempt by the British ruling class to render parliament temporarily ineffective while it implemented measures to deal with the economic crisis, rather than as a precursor of parliament’s demise. While acknowledging the possibility that powerful political and economic European elites had turned to fascism under exceptional conditions, Laski felt that this had not yet happened in Britain. Writing in 1937, he argued that ‘The lesson of all foreign experience is that a governing class will not permit the use of democratic institutions to abrogate its economic privileges. So long as these institutions do not operate so as to interfere with the basic structure of capitalism, they are respected.’⁹⁷ Rather than Britain having some inherent immunity to fascism, Laski felt that the crisis had not matured here to the degree that it had elsewhere, which had entailed a different fate for parliament. He concluded that ‘the constitutionalism of British capitalists has not been tested by serious political defeat, and...that its benevolent mood has not yet been subjected to the rigours of such German crises as the inflation.’⁹⁸

The Labour leadership at no time accepted that parliament had been undermined to the point where participation in it was futile. Even in 1939, when Labour had been in opposition for eight years, Herbert Morrison insisted that the party must keep faith with parliamentary democracy, and rejected Cripps’ suggestion that a future Labour government should implement its programme under emergency law if need be, to prevent interference from any quarter. Morrison argued that this would only heighten the chances of extra-constitutional action by the right, and stated of a future Labour government that

⁹⁶ Cole, G.D.H. & Cole, M.I. The Condition of Britain (London, 1937), p. 421.

⁹⁷ Laski, H. ‘Foreword’, in Brady, R.A. The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism (London, 1937), p. 12.

⁹⁸ ibid. p. 13.

‘if we falter, if we muddle, if we steer the ship of State onto the rocks, then anything may happen.’⁹⁹

The TUC also remained steadfast in its belief that there was no alternative to parliamentarism, despite the events of 1931. It had refused to liken the National Government to fascism, despite disquiet over the manner of its creation. Far from concluding that a future period of Labour dictatorship would be necessary to defeat the wiles of the ruling class, the General Council argued quite the opposite. The organisation’s president, A.G. Walkden, asserted in 1933 that, in the National Government, ‘organised Labour is faced now with a determined attempt on the part of those who have felt their power slipping away from them to re-establish their domination both in politics and in industry.’ However, he continued by stating that ‘Democracy is assailed because it has succeeded, not because it has failed.’¹⁰⁰ Walter Citrine, the TUC’s general secretary, told delegates at the 1933 Congress that the labour movement should respond to anti-democratic moves by their opponents by ‘a re-affirmation of their belief in democracy.’ This faith meant that ‘They did not require here any polemical discussion about the limitations of democracy in a capitalist society...they must try to remember it was their function in their day and generation to influence the mass of public opinion in this country.’¹⁰¹

The ILP and the National Government

Even before its departure from the Labour Party, the ILP had become significantly radicalised, and as a consequence of this, so had its view of fascism. The party had generally assumed during the 1920s that any threat from fascism in Britain would be external to the state and the mainstream parties. But the perceived machinations that had led to the split in the Labour government in 1931 and MacDonald’s defection to a Conservative-dominated coalition immediately afterwards quickly altered this view.

⁹⁹ Morrison, H. ‘Social Change – Peaceful or Violent’, *The Political Quarterly* 10, 1 (1939), p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ TUC, *Proceedings at the 65th Annual TUC* pp. 67-8.

¹⁰¹ TUC, *Menace of Dictatorship* p. 10.

The first hint of the formation of a cross-party administration in August 1931 had prompted the ILP to draw ominous parallels with the slow strangulation of democracy elsewhere. The *New Leader* editorialised that ‘In all this the trend to a form of Fascist control is clearly evident...The proposals seem to find their inspiration in the German model, where what is in effect a National Government rules by Presidential decree without the sanction of Parliament. To the pseudo-Fascist minds in Britain the example makes a powerful appeal.’¹⁰² The presence in such a government of former members of the Labour Party, and even former leaders of the ILP, suggested to the ILP that, under extreme conditions, formerly democratic parties, institutions and even individuals, could embrace fascism or exhibit fascist tendencies in their efforts to preserve the existing economic structure of society intact.

Once the National Government was formed later that month, the ILP noted that its first actions were to implement the very cuts that its Labour predecessor had balked at. They immediately branded it as a ‘Bankers’ Government’,¹⁰³ arguing that under its stewardship, ‘the attack on the social services and on wages enters a new and intensified phase.’¹⁰⁴ When MacDonalld dissolved parliament and called a general election in October, the ILP saw the contest not as an exercise in democracy, but rather as ‘The Class War Declared.’¹⁰⁵ Though at this point still technically a part of the Labour Party, the ILP was so estranged from its structures and policies that it conducted its election campaign as though it was already a separate entity.¹⁰⁶ While Labour presented itself to the electorate as the alternative to an essentially Conservative coalition under the leadership of MacDonalld, the ILP warned that the success of the National slate would represent the installation of a new form of government; one of capitalist concentration that was tantamount to a British fascism.

Fenner Brockway also put the actions of the National Government in the context of the continuing economic crisis, and at the same time accepted a

¹⁰² *New Leader* (14/8/31), p. 3.

¹⁰³ *ibid.* (28/8/31), p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ ILP statement, ‘The ILP and the ‘National’ Government’ (25/8/31), in *New Leader* (28/8/31), p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* (9/10/31), p. 8.

definition of fascism close to that put forward by the Comintern, when he warned in April 1933 'Let no one imagine that Fascism is a peculiar characteristic of Italy or Germany. It is a characteristic of Capitalism. It is the final desperate device of the possessing class'. Despite the National Government's huge parliamentary majority, he feared that its responses to the unremitting slump, the reaction to unrest in India and the introduction of increased police powers at home were inimical to democracy. He asserted that 'British Fascism may not take the Italian or German form', but might emerge from 'the use of Orders in Council in Parliament, the application of obsolete laws for the suppression of freedom of speech and organisation, [and] the use of police and military to oppose.'¹⁰⁷ The ILP's W.J. Brown similarly argued that a creeping introduction of fascism was underway, stating that 'we may take it that our British genius for disguising fact by labels will enable us to equip it with a veneer of sanction.'¹⁰⁸

The ILP saw the beginnings of this process of 'fascisation' in Labour's failure to implement its programme and to repeal repressive Conservative legislation, such as the 1920 Emergency Powers Act and the 1927 Trades Disputes Act. The National Government had, in the party's eyes, further undermined democratic norms by stifling free speech with the Incitement to Disaffection Bill.¹⁰⁹ Looking ahead, the ILP predicted the strengthening of unelected bodies such as the House of Lords, and the introduction of corporatist measures in what it described in June 1934 as 'Fascism's Ten Year Plan.'¹¹⁰

The concept of a gradually encroaching fascism was enshrined in official party policy documents in the following year. These asserted that 'All the indications are that British capitalism is in decline...the general tendency will be for greater economic pressures of all kinds on the working-class...the capitalist class will adopt various devices which will strike at the present practices of capitalist

¹⁰⁶ See Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism* pp. 195-6.

¹⁰⁷ *New Leader* (21/4/33), p. 8.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* (30/6/33), p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ See ILP/Brockway, *The Next Step* pp. 7-8; Brockway, *Socialism Over Sixty Years* p. 304.

¹¹⁰ *New Leader* (22/6/34), p. 1.

democracy. These devices, however constitutional, will be in essence fascist.’¹¹¹ The party even placed the 1936 Public Order Act, introduced with the support of the Labour Party, in this category, despite the fact that its purpose was claimed to be to curb the paramilitarism of the BUF. Arguing (correctly, as it turned out), that the new law could be used just as easily against the left as against the right, the ILP branded it as ‘A Fascist Bill to stop Fascism.’¹¹²

The combination of legislative and economic measures introduced by the National Government, coupled with the ILP’s estrangement from the parliamentary process, enabled it to argue that Britain was travelling down the same path towards fascism as Italy and Germany had. There, the party asserted, fascism had come to power in a more or less constitutional fashion, with the aid of preparatory work carried out by those that had previously held power. By 1938, the ILP was arguing that ‘many of the features of the corporate state have already been established in British legislative and economic life...we shall wake up one morning and be confronted with an accomplished feat. Fascism will have appeared to have arrived overnight, but in reality it will be in the process of arriving for some considerable time.’¹¹³

Just how close the ILP’s new perception of fascism equated with that of the communists was shown by the party’s enthusiastic reception of Rajani Palme Dutt’s 1934 work, *Fascism and Social Revolution*. Now seen by many as the classic statement of the CPGB’s sectarianism,¹¹⁴ it depicted fascism as a concomitant of capitalist crisis, and was explicit in outlining the complicity of social democrats generally, and the Labour Party in particular, in the gradual slide to authoritarianism. The ILP declared of the book that ‘The general soundness of the analysis of Fascism is indisputable. He shows that Fascism is rooted in the economic changes occurring...and that its essence, although

¹¹¹ ILP, National Administrative Council minutes (2/8/35), Report of the Policy Sub-Committee, ‘The Policy of the ILP’, in the ILP collection, London School of Economics archives, file Coll Misc 702/14 Policy.

¹¹² *New Leader* (20/11/36), p. 2.

¹¹³ *ibid.* (17/6/38), p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Dutt’s biographer has argued that despite later tactical changes, the book represented ‘a very accurate statement of Dutt’s deepest convictions and a mental universe which remained relevant for Communists throughout the 1930’s.’ Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt* p. 136.

expressed through various forms, is consequently to be found in *all* capitalist countries.¹¹⁵

However, the ILP parted company with Dutt over what it saw as his blanket condemnation of social democratic and socialist parties. While accepting that the leaders could be diverted from the original purpose of their parties, and could even act in a 'social fascist' manner by acquiescing in anti-working class measures, the ILP felt that it was a mistake to ignore the class basis of such organisations.¹¹⁶ The ILP's experiences within the Labour Party may have led it to despair of its leaders and its methodology, but its knowledge of the rank and file would not allow it to accept that they were in any way responsible for, or tainted by, the broader failings of the party.

The Communist Party of Great Britain and the National Government

For British communists, the collapse of MacDonald's second administration was a complete vindication of their ideas. While the CPGB had always repudiated Labour's faith in democracy and its ability to achieve reforms through parliament, these positions had been reinforced during the later 1920s by its adoption of the Comintern's new and aggressive attitude towards social democracy.¹¹⁷ Despite MacDonald being unable to command an automatic majority in parliament, the communists depicted his failure to implement Labour's programme as proof of the inevitable failure of reformism.

MacDonald's incorporation into the Conservative-dominated National Government perfectly matched the CPGB's contention that fascism was in effect little more than a government of capitalist concentration. Though the democratic apparatus of elections and parliamentary debate still functioned, this was seen as a minimal veneer, barely maintaining the illusion of a functioning democracy and obscuring the fact that, in its essentials, the National

¹¹⁵ *New Leader* (20/7/34), p. 5.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ See Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), letter to the CPGB's 1929 congress calling for the exposure of the 'treacherous social-fascist role of the "Labour" Government', in Degras, (ed.), *Documents*. Vol. III pp. 92-4.

Government was a bourgeois bloc little different from those which had preceded fascism in Italy and Germany.¹¹⁸

While others were shocked at MacDonald's defection, the CPGB were less surprised, having pointed to what it saw as the dangerously class-collaborationist responses of his government in the wake of the Wall Street Crash.¹¹⁹ The party had noted the joint initiatives then undertaken by the TUC and the Federation of British Industries regarding industrial rationalisation. The Communist Party had also interpreted MacDonald's calling of an Empire-wide conference on trade and tariffs as aiming at economic isolationism in a manner little different from Mussolini's drive for autarky.¹²⁰

The Comintern's Georgi Dimitrov wrote to British communists in 1935, stating that 'at the present stage, fighting the fascist danger in Britain means primarily fighting the National Government and its reactionary measures'.¹²¹ Yet the CPGB, recognising the damage that too broad a definition of fascism would do to the party, was hesitant about directly equating the National Government with fascism. The party was willing to argue that with its harsh measures against the unemployed and its unprecedented strengthening of police powers, it represented a definite departure from British democratic traditions.¹²² In keeping with the communist line that fascism and social democracy were but different manifestations of capitalist rule, when the party stated that 'MacDonald and Mosley go hand in hand', it was not to imply that MacDonald was objectively fascist, but rather to illustrate that, in power, both would act to maintain the existing bases of the prevailing economic order.¹²³ Even Bill Rust, generally regarded as the most loyal mouthpiece of the Comintern within the leadership of the CPGB,¹²⁴ would only concede that the National Government was 'a big step in the direction' of fascism, rather than it being fascist itself.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ See Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution pp. 242-7.

¹¹⁹ Labour Monthly (July 1929), p. 388.

¹²⁰ CPGB/Gallacher, W. Tariffs and Starvation (London, n.d.), pp. 3-4.

¹²¹ Cited in Eaden & Renton, The Communist Party p. 57.

¹²² See Pollitt's report to the 13th ECCI plenum (December 1933), in Degras, Documents. Vol. III pp. 290-1.

¹²³ YCL, Ten Points p. 14.

¹²⁴ See Morgan, Harry Pollitt p. 149.

¹²⁵ CPGB/Rust, W. Down With the 'National' Government (London, 1931), p. 4.

Dutt argued in 1933 that ‘it is precisely within the forms of so-called “democracy” that Fascism is prepared. This is the whole lesson of Germany. The entire Fascist regime was prepared, step by step, within the four corners of the Weimar “democratic” constitution. All the emergency regimes, the dictatorship, the suppression of every liberty, were carried out under one clause or another.’¹²⁶ The party’s youth section, the Young Communist League, which published nothing without the approval of the CPGB leadership, stated in 1934 that ‘The capitalist class in Britain...is developing Fascism. Every day the policy of the National Government takes on a more Fascist character. Fascism does not descend from the clouds. It is prepared, carefully and cunningly, often beneath a mask of “democracy”.’¹²⁷

The party commented on the fact that the cabinet had been reduced to just ten members, as opposed to the twenty-five posts that had existed under Labour, arguing that this was to ease the passage of cuts that MacDonald had been unable to wring from his Labour colleagues. The party stated of the National Government that ‘They represent only one section, the bankers and capitalists. It is a Bankers’ Government, formed to plunder the poor in the interests of the rich.’¹²⁸ In all, communists argued, the National Government and its actions were proof positive that ‘fascisation’ was well under way in Britain.¹²⁹

Like the ILP, the CPGB blamed the failings of reformist socialism for the advance of authoritarianism.¹³⁰ The party held that in 1929, Labour leaders had been persuaded by those whose interests were fundamentally different to that of their supporters that anti-democratic and anti-working-class measures were necessary, if only in the short term, to stabilise the economy. Even at its sectarian apogee, the CPGB argued not that Labour was fascist, but that by its actions while in government after 1929, the party’s leadership ‘merges in

¹²⁶ CPGB/Dutt, Democracy and Fascism p. 20. Dutt shortly afterwards likened the National Government with the pre-Nazi ‘Bruning stage’ in Germany. Fascism and Social Revolution p. 61.

¹²⁷ YCL, Ten Points p. 13.

¹²⁸ CPGB/Rust, ‘National’ Government p. 4.

¹²⁹ See CPGB, September 9th (London, 1934), p. 11.

¹³⁰ See The Communist: A Monthly Review (February 1932), p. 85.

practice still more completely into alliance with monopoly capitalism and repression of the workers.’¹³¹

‘Social Fascism’, therefore, to the CPGB, was not the direct comparison of Labour or any other party of the left with fascism, but rather described the role of socialists and social democrats who retained their faith in a democracy that was clearly taking on a more authoritarian character and displaying its inherent class bias to the point where it was democratic in name only. J.T. Murphy, who later joined the Socialist League but who was still in 1930 prominent in the CPGB, argued that Labour’s actions in government had shown its ‘development...into a party of social fascism’, explaining that this meant it had become ‘a party which binds the workers’ organisations to the capitalist state and strives to transform these organisations...into instruments to serve the capitalists instead of to fight them.’¹³² A corollary of this was that, for the first time in its history, the party renounced its desire to unite with Labour, not because it believed it had become a fascist organisation, as is often stated,¹³³ but because Labour had become too closely enmeshed with efforts to save capitalism.¹³⁴

British Trotskyists and the National Government

Like all other sections of the British left, the small Trotskyist movement interpreted the creation and course of the National Government, and any threat of fascism from it, in the light of their broader political beliefs and the tactical imperatives that they were confronted with. As revolutionaries, they held no brief for parliamentary politics, other than as a platform from which to address the wider working class. So they were more than willing to accept that fascism was capable of emerging within the prevailing democratic structures. They also

¹³¹ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 60.

¹³² CPGB/Murphy, J.T. The Labour Government: An Examination of Its Record (London, 1930), p. 7. This is a summation of the CPGB’s definition of social fascism in The New Line: Documents of the 10th Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain Held at Bermondsey, London on January 19th-22nd, 1929 (London, 1929), p. 59.

¹³³ See for example Black, Stalinism in Britain p. 84.

¹³⁴ See Howkins, A. ‘Class Against Class’: The Political Culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1930 – 35’, in Groversmith, F. (ed.), Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s (Brighton, 1980), pp. 240-2.

shared the view that whenever a fascist movement had come to power, it had done so with the aid and approval of large sections of the existing ruling class.

As Marxists, the various groups that comprised British Trotskyism could agree that fascism, far from being revolutionary, represented unmitigated reaction in a time of crisis. Hugo Dewar, one of the first British supporters of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, argued that ‘Fascism is not a self-contained entity, something, as it were, materialised out of thin air; it is a political expression of capitalism in decay...The permanent crisis of world capitalism impels it to seek a political solution in the resort to naked force.’¹³⁵ They also agreed that such a crisis was inevitable, with Edward Conze maintaining that, ultimately ‘The objective forces of present-day Capitalism everywhere lead to a fascist reorganisation of society.’¹³⁶

These dissident communists also shared the view of other groups opposed to the gradualism of Labour that its perceived reluctance to take a more aggressive stance in combating fascism was leading, as they felt it had done elsewhere, to disaster. Conze, again, summed up this view when he stated in 1936 that ‘history shows that only the mistakes of the working-class movement create a chance of victory for fascism.’¹³⁷ In the following year, Trotskyists active within the Labour Party agreed that ‘Fascism can only triumph as a result of the failure of the workers’ parties to carry out the tasks facing them.’¹³⁸ The Trotskyists were seeking to provide an alternative leadership for the labour movement, and like other groups in the same position, included a critique of the tactics of Labour and the TUC as an integral component of their analyses of fascism.

While British Trotskyists were divided on some issues, they retained across their fragmented groups the standard Marxist analysis of fascism. They were critical of the Comintern’s ‘third period’ assertions that the Labour Party in particular, and European socialists in general, could be equated in any way with

¹³⁵ Dewar, Communist Politics in Britain p. 120.

¹³⁶ The Plebs Magazine (December 1937), p. 278.

¹³⁷ Conze, E. Spain Today: Revolution and Counter Revolution (London, 1936), p. 81.

fascism. This approach was reinforced in Trotsky's extensive writings on the subject, often reprinted by the British groups. An historian of left communism, Martin Upham, states that their stance, 'rested strongly on Trotsky's analysis of fascism in Germany with its powerful call for unity.'¹³⁹

One British group, the Communist League, illustrated both the similarities and the differences between their understanding of fascism and that of the Comintern parties, stating that 'Social Democracy and Fascism both represent methods by which capitalism maintains its rule; when this is said, however, important differences arise which, in matters of tactics, are decisive. Fascism derives its support from the middle classes and from the lumpenproletariat. Social Democracy is based upon the workers. Parliament is the main arena of Social Democracy: Fascism destroys parliamentary democracy. Fascism cannot rule without the complete destruction of the Social Democrats and the workers' organisations upon which it rests.'¹⁴⁰ While the CPGB was distancing itself from Labour in the early 1930s, British Trotskyists argued for a united front to defend working-class interests, essentially agreeing with Trotsky's interpretation of the German situation.

They interpreted the National Government in the light of Trotsky's description of the cabinets of Brüning, Papen and Schleicher in Germany, as a manifestation of crisis government, though merely of a temporary nature, whose replacement, whether by fascism or communism, would be dictated according to whether the labour movement in a given country fought for power or clung to a sinking constitutionalism.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless Trotskyists held that the National Government was a transitional government of the 'Bonapartist' type that Trotsky had identified as a product of the sharpening of class tensions. It had, they argued, come about as a result of the failure of the mainstream labour movement to respond to a weakened

¹³⁸ Youth Militant (April 1937), p. 2.

¹³⁹ Upham, 'History of British Trotskyism', p. 136.

¹⁴⁰ Red Flag (August 1934), p. 4.

¹⁴¹ See the British Section of the Left Opposition's reprint of Trotsky's article 'Now it is the Turn of Austria', in Red Flag (June 1933), pp. 2-3.

capitalism by pressing forward to socialism. In this case, the failure of the Labour Government had in their view led directly to the creation of a reactionary bloc of a type wholly new to British politics, but not yet one which was fascist. They would maintain that British Imperialism, with its still considerable economic resources, had 'no immediate need to abandon its democratic lieutenants.'¹⁴²

Labour's failure to see the National Government as the transitional regime they felt it was, led British Trotskyists to criticise their continued faith in democracy and their refusal to contemplate a united front. If Trotsky's view that such a government must be succeeded by socialism or fascism was correct, this demanded a radical shift in the politics of the labour movement. The British Section of the Left Opposition argued of Labour and TUC leaders that they 'continue to mouth the ethical abstractions which may have served nineteenth century Liberalism but which today only weaken the workers and deliver them bound hand and foot to the forces of reaction.'¹⁴³

Familiar Patterns Repeated

When considering the threat of fascism in Britain, the left repeated the familiar arguments it had had regarding Italy and Germany. It divided over the nature of the democratic state, and of the potential of reaction to emerge from within it. This was especially true concerning the National Government, which the parliamentarians of Labour and the TUC saw as a legitimately elected government that could only be defeated at the polls. Talk of extra-parliamentary action was not only inimical to Labour's creed, but would, the party felt, increase the danger of fascism by provoking a backlash from the right.

British revolutionaries, however, looked on the National Government as a dangerous step towards, or a precursor of, fascism. The necessary response to this, they felt, was a radicalisation of the labour movement and a move away

¹⁴² Revolutionary Socialist League, 'Political Statement', (1939), p. 1, held in the Denzil Harber papers, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, file MSS.151/file 1.

¹⁴³ Red Flag (March – April 1934), p. 1.

from purely constitutional means. The alternative strategy, which they believed had been pursued in Italy and Germany, had left the labour movement weakened and demoralised in the face of the fascist threat.

The response to actual British fascist organisations had also divided the left, and strategies of opposition had been predicated upon the political character of the party concerned. The legalists of the Labour Party preferred to let the police and the law deal with the activities of the British Fascisti and their ilk. Those who sought to replace both Labour and constitutionalism argued that workers themselves must defeat fascism, almost as an exercise in revolutionary organisation and a forerunner of larger struggles to come. That this is the case can be seen by the actions and analyses of the ILP, which moved leftwards throughout these years. It had initially shared Labour's view that British fascism was best ignored and could only arise outside of the state. But as the party moved away from constitutionalism towards a more revolutionary socialist position in the early 1930s, its attitude to fascism and anti-fascism increasingly came to mirror those of parties originally on its left.

However, the differences within the left over these issues were accompanied by a general agreement on the nature and purpose of fascism. Though conditions in Britain did not match the severity of those in Italy and Germany, and had not therefore drawn the same level of support to the early British fascist groups, the left was clear about their purpose. The fascists had made themselves available to be used against workers and in defence of capitalism and the existing ruling class, and any claims they made to be defending freedom, democracy or the nation were merely a cover for this.

Similar arguments and conclusions would be drawn when British fascism entered a new and more threatening phase with the formation of the British Union of Fascists in 1932.

5: Opposing the British Union of Fascists

After ignoring British fascism in the period immediately following the war, historians have since produced a significant body of work on the subject. The most prominent aspect in this field has been research conducted into the British Union of Fascists, formed in October 1932 by Oswald Mosley after the failure of his earlier venture, the New Party. The BUF remained in existence until it was banned and its leaders interned under wartime security regulations in June 1940.¹

Historians have sometimes differed in their interpretations of aspects of the BUF, not least because of the relative lack of source material on the organisation. Its records were seized by the security services in 1940, and have largely been closed to researchers ever since.² Rumours that quantities of the movement's archives were lodged with less prominent supporters in advance of its proscription and remain in private hands persist,³ but whether this is true or not, the scarcity of primary sources has left room for differences of opinion concerning the BUF.

The very existence of the BUF, regardless of its aggressive campaigning, was enough to command the attention of the left parties, and each expended considerable effort in analysing and opposing it. Aside from giving us invaluable insights into the left's various analyses of fascism, this has bequeathed an invaluable source of evidence concerning the composition, policies and activities of the BUF itself.

Some historians have played down the potential of the BUF. Stanley Payne wrote that 'the volume of literature on the BUF is inversely proportionate to its

¹ See Kushner, T. The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society During the Second World War (Manchester, 1989), pp. 22-9.

² See Linehan, East London for Mosley pp. 206-30; Mayall, D. 'Rescued From the Shadows of Exile: Nellie Driver, Autobiography and the British Union of Fascists', Immigrants and Minorities 8, 1-2 (1989), p. 20; Webber, 'British Isles', p. 140; Brewer, J.D. 'The British Union of Fascists: Some Tentative Conclusions on its Membership', in Larsen et. al. (eds.), Who Were the Fascists? p. 542.

³ See Thurlow, Fascism in Britain p. xvi.

significance.⁴ Yet just after the war, Frederick Mullally, a *Sunday Pictorial* journalist and author of one of the first books on British fascism, noted that the movement was capable of attracting large numbers of adherents and that support for the ideas of the extreme right could survive apparently devastating setbacks. He argued that in 1933-4, 'new members poured into the BUF at a rate never equalled by any other British political party or movement.'⁵ On seeing the resumption of well-attended far-right street meetings in London at the end of 1945, he further concluded that Britain 'did not possess [an] intrinsic immunity to fascism.'⁶

This conclusion is apparently confirmed by recent research into the strategy and tactics of the British Union of Fascists. Labour historian John Hope has examined BUF documents and testimony given by former Blackshirts, and has established that the organisation was deliberately directing violent attacks against both the left and British Jews by the middle 1930s. The aim of this, he asserts, was to contribute to the very crisis that the BUF leadership assumed would be necessary to bring it to power. Hope concluded that 'the claim that the BUF had indeed embarked upon a strategy of violence must be considered to be substantially correct.'⁷

Findings such as these reinforce the impression of contemporary observers such as Herman Finer, who wrote of the BUF's violent East London campaign in 1936 that 'The fascist technique is modelled directly on the fascist squadristi in Italy in 1921 and 1922...If the victims do not resist, the demonstration is a triumph, bigger marches will follow.'⁸ The ILP also saw in the BUF's actions a wider attempt to create social and political strife, arguing in October 1936 that 'During the past two years the Fascists have been attempting to create a Race War in the East End of London, and to some extent they have succeeded.'⁹ Political terror, targeted violence and control of the streets had been

⁴ Cited in *ibid.* p. xi. See also Payne's dismissal of the BUF in Payne, S.G. 'Fascism in Western Europe', in Laquer (ed.), *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* p. 309.

⁵ Mullally, F. *Fascism Inside England* (London, 1946), p. 29.

⁶ Cited in Copey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 82.

⁷ Hope, J. 'Blackshirts, Knuckledusters and Lawyers: Documentary Essay on the Mosley Versus Marchbanks Papers', *Labour History Review* 65, 1 (2000), p. 56.

⁸ Cited in Mullally, *Fascism Inside England* pp. 69-70.

prerequisites of fascist successes abroad, and it seems safe to assume that the BUF leadership realised the importance of such actions here. There were many within the British left who were unwilling to allow a similar strategy to go unopposed.

The Social Base of the BUF

Perhaps the most fundamental dispute concerning the British Union of Fascists is that regarding the nature of its membership. Like fascist movements everywhere, the BUF aimed to recruit from across the social spectrum, tailoring its message to the concerns of the particular audience it was addressing at any given moment. Amongst its supporters were unemployed workers, small business owners and peers of the realm. Historians agree that the membership was an amalgam, but there have been differences over which, if any, social groups predominated.

Even researchers who disagree in their interpretations of other aspects of the BUF generally accept that the membership was broadly middle class, while acknowledging that the movement attracted more varied support at certain times, not least when the Rothermere press was backing Mosley in 1934, and when the movement began a sustained anti-Semitic campaign in the East End and other working-class areas.¹⁰ There are those who argue that the proportion of working-class BUF members has been underestimated.¹¹

Opinion is also divided as to the extent to which elements of the commercial, financial and aristocratic elites sympathised with Mosley's movement. The financial records of the movement are still not accessible, and many supporters and donors, for understandable reasons, might well not have wanted their contributions noted at all. While some peers and prominent businessmen attended the larger BUF rallies and participated in the functions of the January Club, an exclusive network that brought together establishment figures and the

⁹ *New Leader* (16/10/36), p. 2.

¹⁰ See for example Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* pp. 317-28; Mosley, *Rules of the Game* p. 231; Eaden & Renton, *The Communist Party* p. 57; Webber, 'British Isles', p. 145.

BUF leadership, other conservative figures are known to have been watching the development of the movement before committing themselves.¹²

The left were keenly interested in the social composition of the BUF, and recorded their first-hand observations of the movement. Yet the different parties interpreted their findings in a manner detrimental to their opponents on the left.

The Working Class

To socialists and communists, the most important feature of any analysis of the BUF's membership was the extent to which the working class was drawn to fascism. When dealing with fascist movements abroad, it was a simple matter for the British parties to accept the assurances of their European counterparts that they had retained the loyalty of their base, and that the appeal of fascism had found no echo amongst the workers. It became evident, however, that the BUF could attract a degree of working-class support, and the parties of the left had to explain this.

Labour and the TUC maintained that these people came not from organised labour, their bedrock constituency, but almost from an underclass. They identified this group variously as 'unlicensed hawkers or casual labourers...the discontented people who do not care for law and order', and 'toughs...street loafers and hooligans', believing that they were drawn to the BUF not through ideology but were 'doubtless attracted by the prospect of making a little money by selling literature.'¹³ Labour's G.D.H. Cole reiterated this view, arguing of fascism that 'it can make recruits among the unemployed, by telling them that the Socialists have done nothing to save them...it can also stir up the very lowest elements in the working class, if only it can sing to them a sufficiently

¹¹ See Linehan, British Fascism pp. 162-5.

¹² On the January Club see Thurlow, Fascism in Britain pp. xv-xvi and pp. 69-70; Renton, Fascism, Anti-Fascism p. 15.

¹³ Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (December 1936), p. 95; National Joint Council, Fascism at Home and Abroad (London, 1934), p. 14.

violent hymn of hate...offering them something to do and some sort of fee for doing it.'¹⁴

The established labour movement in Britain, while not seeing the BUF as in any way a serious competitor for workers' political allegiance, was nevertheless aware of fascist attempts to recruit in the workplace. The BUF did form its own labour organisation, the Fascist Union of British Workers, but, according to the results of a Labour Party survey of fascist activity in 1934, its message had fallen on deaf ears. Labour's report stated that 'The amount of success that appears to have attended this type of propaganda is insignificant.'¹⁵ Ignoring the fact that the BUF did have some limited organisational successes in heavily-unionised areas such as Lancashire and the North East, the TUC's Bernard Sullivan argued that 'In the distressed areas the Blackshirts have failed to raise much interest. A skilled worker is generally a thinker, and thinking is anathema to all forms of undemocratic organisation.'¹⁶

Labour and TUC leaders had long equated fascism and communism, branding them as different forms of dictatorship that were both repugnant to the democratic traditions of the British labour movement. This stance was reinforced in their interpretation of the social composition of British fascism. In stressing that the unemployed and those lacking class loyalties were being targeted by the BUF, they maintained that this was the natural constituency of all extremism. The TUC stated of the BUF that 'They were adopting the methods of the Communists...They were conducting their agitation among the unemployed.'¹⁷ The unions further linked the two extremisms in alleging that 'It is a significant fact that the Blackshirts are frequently ex-Communists, who have been disillusioned of the promises made to them of an early transition to a new world. The Blackshirts are using the same language as the Communists and attracting camp followers away to their banner.'¹⁸

¹⁴ Cole, People's Front pp. 94-5.

¹⁵ National Joint Council, 'Statement on Fascism at Home and Abroad', (28/7/34), p. 12, in Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/33.6.

¹⁶ Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (December 1936), p. 95.

¹⁷ TUC, Menace of Dictatorship p. 9.

However, Labour and the TUC recognised that British fascism was following a familiar pattern by appealing to almost anyone willing to listen, as the National Joint Council noted in 1934. Their report on the BUF pointed out that it had attacked ‘Tories, Liberals, Socialists, financiers, intellectuals, the “National” Government, Lord Beaverbrook, Lady Londonderry, the Jews, the Bank of England, and the T.U.C. quite impartially.’¹⁹

For Marxists, the presence of workers within the BUF created particular problems. While they recognised that unemployment and poverty could alter political perceptions, the general assumption was that such ‘immiseration’ would drive its sufferers to the left, rather than making them generally prone to extreme politics of any kind, as Labour alleged.²⁰ Marxism had provided its adherents with an alternative explanation for the political behaviour of the very poor though. In some cases, their actions, when reduced to penury, could be explained by their abandonment of any feeling of class solidarity and a susceptibility to demagogic appeals from any quarter. Marx and Engels had described such declassed elements in the *Communist Manifesto* as ‘the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society, [that] may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.’²¹

The Communist Party had felt compelled to define Marx’s use of the term ‘lumpenproletariat’ in its early years, explaining it as ‘A German term denoting the “tramp” element in the lowest ranks of the masses.’²² However, while some British revolutionaries argued that it was indeed from this stratum that the BUF recruited in working-class areas, others were not so sure. Phil Piratin, of the CPGB, attended a Mosley rally in Limehouse, and recalled, ‘I knew some of

¹⁸ *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (December 1936), p. 95.

¹⁹ National Joint Council, *Fascism at Home and Abroad* p. 11.

²⁰ On Marx’s ‘Law of Increasing Misery’ and its supposed effect on the workers see Hunt, R.N.C. *The Theory and Practice of Communism* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 87-93.

²¹ Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto* p. 92.

²² CPGB, *Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International* (London, 1921), p. 15 ff.

these people, some of the men wore trade-union badges...it was too easy to call them *lumpen*.’²³

In general terms, the CPGB recognised that, while they constituted a minority of the membership, some workers had been drawn to the BUF, and that these were far from the down-and-outs portrayed in the *Communist Manifesto*. When referring to the BUF’s Fascist Union of British Workers, the party noted that it prided itself on the calibre of its recruits, advertising to employers that ‘it can supply *reliable workers*.’²⁴

The party, therefore, had to explain the apparently contradictory actions of these workers. Engaged in a battle with Labour for influence within the working class, the CPGB identified not only deprivation, but also the actions of its political rivals in explaining the phenomenon of the fascist worker. Wal Hannington, who had long worked amongst the unemployed for the party, held that it was the failure of Labour and the TUC to bring about tangible improvements that disillusioned those ‘who have long been looking to the working-class movement for leadership and action...The gnawing anxiety of hope deferred produces a sickness of heart and mind which can express itself in a desperate revulsion against the very movement upon which hope was based. It can lead to a distortion of ideas; to the embracing of a false faith which not only turns the sufferer from the path which would lead to his salvation, but into the *cul-de-sac* of a vicious reaction.’²⁵ R.P. Dutt, while arguing that the BUF drew from the ‘slum proletariat’, also noted that some of its recruits were ‘workers under capitalist influence’, who had strayed because of ‘the absence of an independent class-conscious leadership of the main body of the working class.’²⁶ Hannington further differentiated between communist attacks on the Labour leadership, and those launched by the BUF, asserting that ‘Mosley turns the spotlight on to the weaknesses of the Labour movement in order to undermine the faith of the workers in that movement, not, as the Communists

²³ Piratin, P. *Our Flag Stays Red* (London, 1948), p. 18.

²⁴ YCL, *Ten Points* p. 7.

²⁵ Hannington, W. *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (London, 1937), p. 234.

²⁶ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 236.

do, to lead to the building and strengthening of the movement in every respect for progressive struggle.'²⁷

Other groups opposed to Labour's perceived moderation shared the view that this was a factor in driving some workers away. The Socialist League, whose very *raison d'être* was to radicalise the Labour Party, claimed that 'It is the urgent desire for active change that is forcing the younger electors into Movements like the Fascist Movement, not because they believe its policy but because they are caught by the cheap-jack cry of action-at-all-costs.'²⁸

The ILP recognised the socialistic appeal of some BUF propaganda, and argued that this sometimes found a resonance. The party argued that this had to be addressed in anti-fascist literature, implying that the CPGB were 'mainly beating the air when they attack Big Business as the only villain in the piece.'²⁹

The Middle Class

The British left could agree that it was the middle classes that supplied the bulk of the BUF's membership.³⁰ Labour and the TUC identified this group as 'Small tradesmen (shopkeepers, etc) ex-army and navy officers, and small professional people.'³¹ However, the parties were divided over the reasons why this should be so. Labour and the TUC recognised that elements of the middle classes were drawn to fascism in times of crisis, when their status and prosperity were under threat, but argued that left-wing extremism also played a part in pushing such people to the right. Labour's J.R. Clynes argued that this had been the case in Italy, Germany, Spain and France, explaining that this shift operated 'on the principle that it is better to accept the choice of one evil than to suffer

²⁷ Hannington, *Distressed Areas* pp. 237-8.

²⁸ Stafford Cripps, cited in Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* p. 53.

²⁹ *New Leader* (1/2/35), p. 5.

³⁰ See Branson, *History of the Communist Party* p. 118.

³¹ National Joint Council, *Fascism at Home and Abroad* p. 14; Labour's own research produced evidence from around the country which confirmed the leadership's view that the bulk of the BUF's members were middle class. See Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/34/1.

the alternative. Any marked increase of Communism here would recruit the British Fascist ranks just as heavily.’³²

The CPGB rejected the idea that communist activity generated middle class extremism, arguing that this social layer was casting about for a political saviour, squeezed as it was between the opposing blocs of the working class and big business. Terrified of absorption into the proletariat, this group, Marxists maintained, naturally responded to the ‘anti-capitalist’ rhetoric of fascism, which seemingly promised protection for the civil servant, the administrator, the small trader and the service provider. Dutt had, as early as 1927, asserted that ‘In Britain the social basis of Fascism is especially provided, through the imperialist position and overseas rentier income, in the consequent large section of...parasitic City-office-small-clerk bourgeoisie – the “public” of the *Daily Mail*.’³³ In 1934 he produced data showing that the British economy sustained a significant number of this middling sort, arguing that ‘there is a very large proportion of intermediate strata of the population, of petit-bourgeois elements with very narrow and easily controlled political interests.’³⁴ The party felt that any movement within the middle classes from liberalism to fascism was a sure sign of the intensification of the economic crisis, with party member and Cambridge academic, Maurice Dobb, emphasising the significance of ‘the first serious appearance of “middle class unemployment” and of portentous signs of a decline of Britain’s position as a financial and exporting centre.’³⁵

The CPGB often accused the Labour leadership of equating the presence of the middle classes within fascist movements with middle class control of them. The Socialist League, whose Marxism inevitably led them to the belief that fascism acted in the interests of the existing ruling class, was similarly critical. In 1935, the League stated of fascism that ‘No-one can now argue that its significance is in the protest of the lower middle classes against the big capitalists. Whatever the intentions of its supporters in the early stages it

³² Clynes, J.R. The Right Honourable J.R. Clynes: Memoirs, Vol. II, 1924–37 (London, 1938), p. 248.

³³ Labour Monthly (June 1927), p. 329.

³⁴ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution pp. 236-7.

becomes a method by which the great capitalists, especially in finance, smash working-class organisations to safeguard their own position and profits.'³⁶

The Upper Class and the Funding of the BUF

No section of the left could ignore the support that members of the established ruling elites in British society gave to the BUF, and the parties often produced accurate lists to reinforce their claims. Discussions as to the significance of support from big businessmen and aristocrats inevitably merged with the debate over the funding of the BUF. Even before the press proprietor and businessman, Lord Rothermere, publicly declared his support for the BUF in January 1934, the TUC had identified that much of the movement's 'ample financial resources' were emanating from what they saw as the anti-democratic upper echelons of British industry, with their press subtly preparing the ground for fascism. The President of the 1933 Trades Union Congress told his audience that the BUF 'has the scarcely-concealed support of the millionaire-owned newspapers. Skilled disparagement of the Parliamentary method of government, contemptuous attacks upon the party system in politics, virulent criticism of Trade Unionism, and systematic misrepresentation of the policy and aims of organised Labour are the commonplace features of this campaign.'³⁷ Yet Labour's response to the notion that British big business might be funding the BUF was characteristically legalistic, and the day after the 'Battle of Cable Street', it called on the National Government to institute an inquiry into the movement's finances.³⁸

Labour and the TUC's National Joint Council pointed out that a large income was necessary for a movement operating from extensive premises, employing full time staff and paying regional officers and speakers, as the BUF was in its early years. The NJC noted in 1934 that 'There is considerable mystery surrounding the sources of B.U.F. funds. We hear the names of certain

³⁵ Dobb, M. *Political Economy and Capitalism: Some Essays in Economic Tradition* (London, 1937), p. 261.

³⁶ *Socialist Leaguer* (May 1935), p. 174.

³⁷ TUC, *Report of Proceedings of the 65th TUC* p. 68.

³⁸ Labour Party, *Report of Conference* (London, 1936), p. 164.

industrialists mentioned as heavy contributors to Mosley's war chest.' It further calculated that it was not Mosley's own fortune, nor the income from membership dues (1/- per month, or 4d for the unemployed) that generated such an income, but revealed that 'after his visit to Rome in April 1933, Mosley secured £5,000 per month from Italian sources, to continue until a total subsidy of £200,000 had been received.'³⁹

British communists had long argued that the ultimate purpose of any fascist movement was the maintenance of the economic status quo, by force if necessary, and so the support of industrialists, armaments manufacturers, shipping magnates, press barons and aristocrats for the BUF came as no surprise. The CPGB's J.L. Douglas wrote of Mosley's Albert Hall rally in October 1934 that 'Long lines of expensive cars stood outside. A Rolls-Royce meeting came to hear a Rolls-Royce policy!', while the Young Communist League characterised the audience as 'bankers, barristers, stockbrokers, all present.'⁴⁰

While Labour argued that the best defence against fascist tendencies amongst the rich was to strengthen parliament and democracy, communists believed that the British ruling class had always, and would always, resort to extra-legal actions in the event of any serious challenge to its power. Dutt drew parallels with the Curragh Mutiny, the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the Black and Tans to emphasise the point. He cited Lenin's depiction of the 1914 Ulster crisis, which in the anti-parliamentary actions of the army, the Unionists and the Conservative right were 'an excellent lesson in class struggle...[and] tore up all the conventions, tore down all veils that prevented the people from seeing the unpleasant, but undoubtedly real, class struggle...Real class rule has always been and still lies *outside* of Parliament.'⁴¹

³⁹ National Joint Council, Fascism at Home and Abroad p. 12. Though the BUF's financial history has yet to be completely written, the NJC was correct about this source, if not the figure. Richard Thurlow gives the Italian payments as £40,000 in 1933-4, while Nicholas Mosley puts the figure at £120,000 between 1933-5. See Thurlow, R. 'The 'Mosley Papers' and the Secret History of British Fascism, 1939 - 1940', in Kushner and Lunn (eds.), Traditions of Intolerance p. 178; Mosley, Beyond the Pale pp. 30-4.

⁴⁰ CPGB/Douglas, Spotlight on Fascism p. 6; YCL, Ten Points p. 12.

Further proof, for Dutt, that the BUF was little more than a weapon being prepared for use by the ruling class was provided by the sources of the movement's funding, and publicity via 'the million-tentacled Rothermere Press.'⁴² The CPGB gave much prominence to the activities of the January Club, a BUF initiative that allowed its discreet establishment supporters to mingle with the movement's leadership and make undeclared donations. Its London functions attracted industrialists, peers, cabinet advisors, generals, air commodores and newspaper proprietors, allowing the communist press to make the obvious connections.⁴³

Though the activities of the BUF's wealthy backers were a cause for concern on the left, they were to a degree anticipated, given the general acceptance of the fact that fascism was an anti-working class force. That the left, in its entirety, recognised that the backbone of Mosley's movement was its middle-class core was equally unsurprising. Along with support from a segment of the ruling class, this was a combination familiar to the British left from its assessments of European fascism. Most notable, however, was the left's acceptance that the BUF had managed to gain a measure of working class support. Labour and the TUC, perhaps surprisingly, found this hardest to accept, and cast around for reasons to explain away the defection of what they had assumed to be a number of their natural supporters. The CPGB, with its Marxist belief that the workers' 'mission' was to destroy capitalism, in general accepted the existence of working-class fascists, while blaming the aberration on the failings of the Labour and TUC leaders.

The Economic Ideas of the BUF: Corporatism, Planning and Autarky

Some historians who have examined the economic and political ideas of the BUF have come to very different conclusions about the nature of the movement than the contemporary observers of the left. Stephen Cullen argued of Mosley that 'In terms of his ideas and policy in the 1930s, there can be no doubt that he

⁴¹ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 239.

⁴² *ibid.* p. 264.

⁴³ See for example Labour Research Department, *Who Backs Mosley?* pp. 10-13.

advocated a coherent programme for restructuring the political and economic life of Britain. His programme envisaged the implementation of an Empire-wide autarky, and the creation of totalitarian democracy in the shape of the corporate state.⁴⁴

That leading BUF figures such as Mosley, John Beckett, Charles Dolan and Robert Forgan had been members of both the ILP and the Labour Party, while the movement's other corporatist theoretician, Alexander Raven Thompson, had briefly been a member of the Communist Party, has occasionally been used to question the left's assumptions about the essential political and economic orientation of British fascism. The American scholar, Barbara Storm Farr, has written that the BUF 'cannot be termed a right-wing movement because it had its origins in socialism.'⁴⁵ Mosley himself maintained that 'A movement of the Right has nothing to do with fascism, which can be termed as revolutionary but not as reactionary.'⁴⁶

D.S. Lewis' study of the BUF pointed out that a minority of its supporters 'felt hostility towards capitalism...Fascism they perceived as a form of socialism made viable by its national context.'⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Lewis still fails to locate fascism on the political right, stating that because of its stress on 'Enforced synthesis, unity and mediation...Fascism represents, in conception at least, a movement of the political centre.'⁴⁸ Philip Coupland took the uncritical acceptance of the Blackshirts' vision of themselves yet further, arguing that 'Although the BUF has often been separated from the mainstream, it can only be understood as part of the wider utopian politics and culture of the 1930s...The entrance of the BUF into British life was part of this movement.'⁴⁹

The emphasis on the visionary aspect of the BUF's rhetoric was one that Mosley always remained keen to stress, stating of fascism that 'In origin, it was an explosion against intolerable conditions, against remediable wrongs which

⁴⁴ Cullen, 'Political Violence', p. 245.

⁴⁵ Farr, Development and Impact p. iv.

⁴⁶ Mosley, My Life p. 318.

⁴⁷ Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 7.

⁴⁸ ibid.

the old world had failed to remedy. It was a movement to secure national renaissance by people who felt themselves threatened with decline into decadence and death, and were determined to live, and live greatly.’⁵⁰

Needless to say, the left rejected any suggestion that the BUF was anything other than an extreme right-wing organisation, and compared any idealistic elements of its creed unfavourably with both the actions of its members in Britain and the reality of life under fascism abroad. However, interpretations of the BUF’s corporatism impinged upon arguments within the left concerning economic planning and the role of the labour movement in a capitalist economy. Once again, the assessments of the various parties were often tailored with a view to casting their opponents on the left in a bad light.

Many on the left had noted that European fascist movements had depicted their economic plans in corporatist terms, which allowed them to appeal to all sections of society. The small trader could be told that big capital and labour were to be tamed within the new corporate frameworks. Employers were assured that industrial strife would be stamped out and profitability enhanced. Even workers themselves could be presented with the notion that corporatism brought an element of worker participation in the running of the economy. George Orwell, who saw Mosley speak in 1936, recognised how dangerous the appeal of the BUF’s corporatism could be. He recorded that ‘to my dismay [he] seemed to have the meeting mainly with him. He was booed at the start but loudly clapped at the end...the (mainly) working-class audience was easily bamboozled by Mosley speaking as it were from a socialist angle.’⁵¹

Labour and the TUC were also aware of the ambiguities of the BUF’s corporatism, but argued that in reality, it amounted to little more than the suppression of the workers and the elevation of the interests of big business, despite the promise of even-handedness. They quoted the BUF’s own

⁴⁹ Coupland, P.M. ‘The Blackshirted Utopians’, *ICH* 33, 2 (1998), p. 257.

⁵⁰ Mosley, *My Life* p. 287.

⁵¹ Orwell, G. ‘The Road to Wigan Pier Diary’ (1936), in Orwell, S. & Angus, I. (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol. I: An Age Like This. 1920–1940* (London, 1969), pp. 202-3.

description of corporatism to highlight this, quoting from the *Blackshirt* of June 1934, which stated 'Fascism retains the benefits of privately controlled capital and private enterprise and although it lays down definite limits within which capital might operate, it restricts its freedom only when it is being utilised against the economic well-being of the State and the community.'⁵²

The Labour Party's survey of fascist activity in 1934 confirmed this, finding that Mosley's movement was deploying 'a lot more vaguely revolutionary talk about the Corporate State...Thus by stressing the subordination of either capitalists or workers in their talks, according to the audience, fascism can be made palatable to either class.'⁵³ A contributor to the TUC's magazine similarly pointed out that fascists were not averse to couching their economic plans in left-wing terminology, stating that this was 'to disguise their reactionary policies by specious appeals through wearing part of the borrowed or stolen dress in odds and ends of Socialist theory, making at least a momentary appeal to the crudest side of humanity.'⁵⁴

Labour and the TUC differentiated between corporatism and economic planning, which they advocated as an immediate aim, and not just one relegated to the socialist future.⁵⁵ Indeed, the TUC had entered into talks with Sir Alfred Mond, the chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries, and other major employers in 1927 concerning structured economic development and rationalisation in return for a union input into decision-making. At the time, the General Council had argued that the trade union movement 'must say boldly that not only is it concerned with the prosperity of industry, but that it is going to have a voice as to the way industry is carried on...The ultimate policy of the movement can find more use for an efficient industry than a derelict one.'⁵⁶ Though the talks proved unproductive, Labour and the unions remained

⁵² National Council of Labour, *Fascism: The Enemy of the People* (London, 1934), p. 9.

⁵³ Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/34/236, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (November, 1934), p. 52.

⁵⁵ See Carpenter, L.P. 'Corporatism in Britain, 1930-1945', *JCH* 11 (1976), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶ Cited in Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 159.

attached to the principle of planning, and supported democratic interventionists, such as Roosevelt and the proponents of the New Deal in America.⁵⁷

British Marxists felt differently about the involvement of workers' organisations in attempts to regulate or restructure capitalism, be they moves towards rationalisation, or support for economic protectionism. Arthur Woodburn, Labour's Scottish Secretary, and one of the very few Marxists within Labour's ruling councils, argued firstly that even if the Mond talks managed to increase production, this would not rejuvenate British capitalism, as there would still be no market for the extra goods produced. Secondly, he maintained that whatever the attitude of Labour and the TUC to co-operation with major employers, any pact would inevitably be temporary. Writing in the Plebs' League journal, he asserted that 'It is because we, as Marxians, have analysed the dynamic tendencies of Capitalism that we *know* that permanent industrial peace is a will o' the wisp except in a co-operative state of society. There is therefore no possibility that employers and Trade Union leaders will solve the contradictions of Capitalism.'⁵⁸

John T. Murphy, former CPGB luminary but by 1934 a member of the Socialist League, also rejected this type of conciliationism, asserting that it was both a negation of the function of the labour movement and open collaboration with the ruling class. Condemning the actions of the TUC, he stated that it had 'developed its programme of industrial reconstruction in co-operation with the union smashers, Mond and [Lord] Londonderry...the common denominator of these programmes was a concerted effort of *all classes* for the development of capitalism.'⁵⁹

Edward Conze and Ellen Wilkinson feared that the corporatist ideas of the BUF were gaining acceptance beyond a fascist core, and that this represented a greater danger than that of the Blackshirts themselves. They pointed out that

⁵⁷ See Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (September 1933), p. 2. On Labour and planning see Cowling, Impact of Hitler p. 23; Callaghan, Far Left p. 40; Wilkinson & Conze, Why Fascism? pp. 234-48; Swift, J. Labour in Crisis: Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 23-6.

⁵⁸ The Plebs' Magazine (March 1928), p. 61.

'the diffusion of Fascist ideas is independent of the relationships between the B.U.F. and its subscribers...Already ideas of the Corporate State find approval not only among energetic Conservative M.P.s, but even among certain Trade Union leaders.'⁶⁰ They maintained that socialists must be more assertive about the society they envisaged and the role of the planned economy within it, not least to undermine the BUF's appeal to disillusioned leftists.⁶¹ Conze further argued that 'the choice at the moment is no longer between planning and not planning. Mosley, too, wants to plan Britain. He manages, not without success, to get his corporate state accepted as some sort of socialism. This is made easy for him by those who avoid stating clearly the difference between fascist and socialist planning.'⁶²

The Marxism of Woodburn, Murphy and Conze, though differing in other respects, nevertheless implicitly contained a common belief in both the inevitability of class struggle and the ultimate passing of capitalism. This stood in sharp contrast to the stance of the labour movement's leadership, which intimated that at best, socialism could be implemented by piecemeal measures over an indeterminate period, and at worst, that the movement's ultimate aim was not socialism, but merely a less harsh capitalism. These two approaches were so different that agreement between the reformist and the revolutionary tendencies could never be reached, be it on which tactics to adopt to advance the cause of the working class, or even as to the nature of the society they were living in.

This was certainly the case when it came to the CPGB and its attitude to any form of industrial co-operation, rationalisation or corporatism. That the conferences between the TUC and the employers had coincided with the party's embrace of the aggressive politics of the third period meant that they were interpreted as part of the 'social-fascist' role which reformism was held to be playing at that time. In agreeing to the formation of the National Industrial

⁵⁹ Murphy, Preparing for Power pp. 241-2.

⁶⁰ Wilkinson & Conze, Why Fascism? pp. 16-17.

⁶¹ One researcher argues that it was the challenge to the BUF's corporatist ideology set out in Conze and Wilkinson's *Why Fascism?*, that made the book so significant. See Todd, Excited Times pp. 44-5.

Council and attendant local conciliation boards, and in seeming to co-operate with attempts to revive what communists viewed as a dying capitalism, the TUC were seen to be facilitating the step-by-step introduction of more corporatist and fascist forms of economic management and government.⁶³ Even after the third period, the CPGB maintained that Labour and the TUC had abandoned the class struggle in favour of accommodation within capitalism.

John Strachey, who for part of the 1930s represented the communist position without being a member of the CPGB, asserted that to enter into comprehensive talks with employers as the TUC had done facilitated dangerous trends within capitalism, as well as proving the bankruptcy of reformism. He was still arguing in 1938 that 'the fact that...conferences with the employers was the method by which the leadership of the Trade Union movement proposed to rally the movement after the defeat of 1926, was all important.'⁶⁴ Planning and rationalisation within capitalism were, to him, indicative not only of the economic method most closely associated with fascism, but with that final phase of capitalist development which Marx and Lenin had foreseen. He argued that such trends illustrated 'this progressive transformation in the nature of the means of production from small and simple to large and complex...ownership of the means of production becomes less and less scattered, individual and competitive and more and more concentrated, corporate and monopolistic.'⁶⁵ The CPGB pointed out that Mond had headed the Empire Economic Union, an organisation that advocated a tariff wall around Britain and the colonies. The party viewed this as autarkic, stating that 'the movement towards the closed monopolistic area is not in itself new, but is inherent in the whole development of imperialism, whose essential character is the denial and ending of free trade.'⁶⁶

However, the CPGB differentiated between the planning advocated by Labour and the TUC and the corporatism of the BUF. It had identified Oswald Mosley

⁶² *The Plebs' Magazine* (July 1934), p. 151.

⁶³ See CPGB, *The New Line* pp. 15-16 and 58-9.

⁶⁴ Strachey, J. *What Are We to Do?* (London, 1938), p. 153.

⁶⁵ Strachey, *Theory and Practice of Socialism* p. 83; Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 63.

⁶⁶ CPGB/Gallacher, *Tariffs and Starvation* p. 3.

as advocating a sinister protectionism as early as 1930, describing him then as ‘This ex-Conservative young landowner and baronet, who begins to be increasingly and openly looked to in many capitalist quarters as “the man” for a future fascist type of leadership.’ His proposed policy of Empire-wide tariff walls was attacked by the CPGB because ‘it expresses sharply future political trends...the conscious expression of a declining capitalism...The expression of this philosophy, in the conditions of Britain, is fascism.’⁶⁷

The party later condemned the corporatist propaganda of British fascists as bogus, being particularly dismissive of the BUF’s portrayal of the role of labour organisations. Wal Hannington quoted a Mosley article that claimed ‘Fascism stands for good wages, short hours, good houses, opportunities for culture and recreation for the workers’, along with the BUF’s own official speakers’ notes for November 1936, which stated that ‘Not only will the Fascist State aid the trade unions in their struggle against exploitation; it will give them legal recognition as the sole representative of the workers.’⁶⁸ Hannington contrasted these promises to workers with the continued support that the BUF received from elements of big business, asking ‘when the Fascist leaders breathe fire and sword against capitalism itself, do their capitalist supporters gather up their money-bags and beat a hasty retreat? Oh, no.’⁶⁹ Dutt quoted from the BUF journal, *The Fascist Week*, to illustrate the true alignment of the Mosley’s economic proposals. It had tellingly asserted that ‘Fascism differs from Socialism chiefly in this – that in the Corporate State you will be left in possession of your business.’⁷⁰

Like the CPGB, the Independent Labour Party was wary of planning under capitalism, and had opposed contacts with Mond at the time. Party stalwart, Fred Jowett, said of the TUC that ‘Shackled and hobbled by anti-Trade Union law and weakened in financial resources, the trade unions are invited to “co-operate” by big boss capitalists.’⁷¹ The party also opposed the talks because of

⁶⁷ *Labour Monthly* (November 1930), pp. 646-7.

⁶⁸ Hannington, *Distressed Areas* pp. 244 and 242.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p. 242.

⁷⁰ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 192.

⁷¹ Brockway, *Socialism Over Sixty Years* p. 247.

their opposition to the growth of giant trusts, such as Mond's ICI, as they had articulated during the First World War. For them though, the process of cartelisation and rationalisation was indicative of a resurgent capitalism, not the collapsing one that communists identified it with. The ILP also saw the conciliatory and co-operative bodies envisaged in the talks as reminiscent of those proposed by patriotic cross-class organisations such as the National Party and the Anti-Socialist Union of an earlier generation.⁷² H.N. Brailsford pointed out in August 1928 that 'The process of trustification is now immensely strengthening capitalism. The controlling employers are becoming not merely masters of their respective nations, but, through the formation of international combinations, of the world...They are concerned in committing Labour to co-operation in the development of Capitalist Rationalisation and ensuring "peace in industry" whilst it takes place. It is capitalism *in excelsis*.'⁷³

Once the ILP was outside of the Labour Party and had adopted a much more radical stance generally, planning and rationalisation were seen to be much more threatening and were explicitly linked to fascism. By 1933 the *New Leader* was equating the actions of the National Government, such as the protection of its overseas raw materials and markets and the facilitation of mergers and acquisitions, with an encroaching domestic fascism. The party's John Aplin adopted a Leninist tone in his assessment of British economic policy in 1934, stating that 'Fresh markets were the salvation of Capitalism in its earlier crises...Tariffs, to conserve the home market, combined with price-cutting and fierce competition in the foreign markets, serve their turn...But the machine age dooms all such dodges to a short life...In Britain, it is the capitalists and financiers who pour money into Mosley's exchequer, a form of insurance for them against the evil day they know to be coming.'⁷⁴

When it came to the 'socialist' face of corporatism that the BUF presented to working-class audiences, the ILP compared them with the unfulfilled anti-capitalist pledges which had formed part of the NSDAP's 'unalterable' twenty-

⁷² See *New Leader* (13/1/28), p. 9, and (20/1/28), p. 9.

⁷³ *ibid.* (31/8/28), p. 6.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* (7/9/34), p. 1.

five point programme of 1920. The ILP stated that ‘The demagogic appeal of the National Socialists of Germany contained lavish promises both to the farm labourer and landowner, to the small shopkeeper and the trust magnate, to the factory worker and the Krupps.’⁷⁵

Historians who refuse to take the BUF’s rhetoric at face value support the left’s dismissal of Mosley’s appeal to the workers. Luther P. Carpenter, who has written extensively on both fascist and non-fascist corporatism, saw the BUF’s proposals as maintaining the existing balance of power within the economy. He maintained that Mosley’s corporate blueprint, *The Greater Britain*, ‘described a hierarchical economy’, concentrating on broad national interests, rather than building detailed elements into his programme that might address sectional economic grievances. For Mosley, he argued, ‘Organisation was a matter for technicians; the fascist “modern movement” would make any machinery run. Mosley’s concern for the strength of the state and the movement short-circuited his corporatist structure: one can conclude that it would have been stillborn, like the Italian model.’⁷⁶

The Anti-Semitism of the BUF

Despite the left’s awareness that there had always been anti-Semitic elements within the New Party and the BUF, there was a general acceptance that open hostility towards the Jews was a policy that Mosley only adopted some time after the BUF’s founding. He stated in an interview with the *Jewish Chronicle* in May 1933 that ‘Anti-Semitism is no issue of Fascism. The trouble in Germany is entirely local. As I have already said in public I think that the Anti-Semitic policy of the German Nazis was a great mistake. It certainly is not our policy.’⁷⁷ Some historians, and Mosley himself, have denied that his animosity towards the Jews was founded on a racial or biological basis.⁷⁸ Several studies have concluded that anti-Semitism was embraced fully by the BUF as a tactical

⁷⁵ *ibid.* (25/1/35), p. 3.

⁷⁶ Carpenter, ‘Corporatism in Britain’, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *Jewish Chronicle* (12/5/33), cited in ‘Notes and Factual Matters for Address at Conference on Fascism and Anti-Fascism’, in NCCL archive, Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, file DCL/44/4, p. 2.

move, implemented because the movement was rapidly losing support in the latter part of 1934.⁷⁹

The left had long found it difficult to accept that pure racism was a motivating factor amongst anti-Semites, and had often looked for more tangible reasons to explain its use. These often centred on economics. Labour's G.D.H. Cole suggested that the Blackshirts' turn to an overtly anti-Jewish stance came from the need to create a scapegoat for genuine economic grievances. He argued that Mosley and other European fascists 'adopted the ancient device of inventing an imaginary enemy, against whom the resentment of the suffering people may be directed, so as to divert it from the vested interests which are the paymasters of fascist propaganda...the British Fascists, after disclaiming anti-Semitism at the outset, soon resorted to the same device as the Germans.'⁸⁰ Whereas previously, it had been the ruling class and their proxies who had used anti-Semitism for diversionary ends, many on the left now saw fascism, as the modern expression of unadorned class rule, doing the same.

Nevertheless, the parties' different attitudes towards the Jewish community in Britain betrayed something of their wider political stances. While the CPGB created organisations to campaign specifically within the Jewish community, it still regarded Jewish workers as an integral part of the working class. Furthermore, the party maintained that the Jewish community in its entirety should identify its interests with the progressive agenda of the left rather than with the British ruling class, which it portrayed as the locus of prejudice.

Conversely, the tendency within the Labour and trade union movement, as Caroline Knowles' research has shown, opposed discrimination and overt anti-Semitism, but was less class-based, retaining the view that issues facing the Jewish community were less weighty than those that confronted the wider movement. Despite the affiliation of Jewish socialist organisations such as Poale

⁷⁸ Linehan, *British Fascism* p. 193; Mosley, *My Life* p. 336.

⁷⁹ Mandle, *Anti-Semitism* pp. 18-19; Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* pp. 94-5; Thurlow, R. 'The Black Knight: Reactions to a Mosley Biography', *Patterns of Prejudice* 9, (May-June 1975), p. 17; Benewick, *Fascist Movement* pp. 151-8.

⁸⁰ Cole, *People's Front* p. 92.

Zion and the Jewish Labour Council with Labour,⁸¹ Knowles found that ‘The official Labour Party position...suggests that Jews were a separate category of the working class. Jews were seen as an immigrant, rather than indigenous, part of the population of East London, even though Jewish immigration had largely ceased by this time.’⁸² The party leaders, she asserted, similarly shied away from depicting the BUF’s anti-Semitism as a class issue, opposing it instead as a more localised problem than that of fascism itself, and as ‘part of a humanitarian concern about inequality and social injustice.’⁸³ Another researcher, Gisela Lebzelter, argued of Labour’s official stance that ‘The prevalent attitude clearly was that political anti-Semitism was a passing phenomenon, incapable of mobilising a substantial following among the English public.’⁸⁴ The contemporary Labour writer and parliamentary candidate, J.E.L. Birch, argued of Mosley in 1937 that ‘The flavouring of anti-semitism was added late to a hotch-potch which had not so far suited the palates of the British people. Having failed to unite his crowds on a programme of amiability tempered with discipline, he strove to unify them by hatred.’⁸⁵ Birch implied that this would fail in the same way as the BUF’s earlier appeals had.

Those on the right of the Labour Party displayed the least ideological attitude towards anti-Semitism, interpreting it as an expression of barbarism and a revival of archaic hatreds. J.R. Clynes, a former chair of the Labour Party, asserted in 1938 that ‘The Blackshirt attitude towards the Jews has been expressed very often; it is the attitude of the gutter-child who shouts vulgar abuse and throws stones at whatever he cannot understand.’⁸⁶

Dan Frankel, the Labour MP for Mile End, also wished to minimise the significance of anti-Semitism, holding that he had been elected as a Labour candidate, and not as a Jew. He also opposed anti-fascist demonstrations, and

⁸¹ On the JNLC see Rawnsley, ‘Fascism and Fascists’, pp. 282-3.

⁸² Knowles, C. ‘Labour and Anti-Semitism: An Account of the Political Discourse Surrounding the Labour Party’s Involvement With Anti-Semitism in East London, 1934–6’, in Miles, R. & Phizacklea, A. (eds.), Racism and Political Action in Britain (London, 1979), p. 53.

⁸³ ibid.

⁸⁴ Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism p. 156.

⁸⁵ Birch, Why They Join pp. 36-7.

⁸⁶ Clynes, Memoirs. Vol. II p. 247.

was in America at the time of Cable Street.⁸⁷ He stressed that Britain had relatively healthy community relations, and gave two reasons for this, asserting that ‘In two of the major countries only can one find the Jew established with reasonable security – Great Britain and France. One is immediately impressed with the thought...that they still maintain a democratic form of Government that has not fallen into disrepute. It is also important to note that in these countries the percentage of Jews compared with the general population is extremely small.’⁸⁸ While he was accurately reflecting the Labour line that the defence of democracy was the best method of countering racial prejudice, he was one of the few leading Labour or TUC figures to publicly infer that the size of the Jewish community had a bearing on the issue.

The Labour left, though, operating as it did from a much more firmly defined socialist position, shared with the communists the view that anti-Semitism was a class issue and must be confronted as such.⁸⁹ The Socialist League issued a pamphlet, *East End Crisis*, specifically dealing with the BUF’s anti-Semitic campaign. It advanced the traditional Marxist argument that the purpose of anti-Semitism, and indeed of all racial and religious prejudice, was to divide workers as a first step towards the complete nullification of their strength. The pamphlet located the source of anti-Semitism within the ruling class, and not the BUF, which it saw as mere hirelings. The League asserted that ‘They set Gentile against Jew and Catholic against Protestant...Division among the workers, particularly in the East End where, for over a generation, the workers have stood together in their common interest, is the first step to the ultimate destruction of every freedom and every right that the workers have rested for themselves from the capitalist.’⁹⁰ Mosley had chosen this particular moment to initiate his divisive campaign because, the League believed, it coincided with a sharpening of the economic crisis.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Srebrnik, *London Jews* p. 54.

⁸⁸ *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (October 1937), p. 35.

⁸⁹ See Knowles, ‘Labour and Anti-Semitism’, p. 54.

⁹⁰ Socialist League/Groves, R. *East End Crisis: Socialism, the Jews and Fascism* (London, 1936), pp. 4-5.

⁹¹ See Upham, ‘History of British Trotskyism’, p. 149 ff 1.

While the anti-Semitic campaign may have had its specific political origins in Britain, its tactics, according to the League, were imported wholesale from Germany. Though it had been forced to disband by the Labour leadership in 1936, former League members had launched a new journal, *Tribune*, which in 1938 was still asserting of the BUF's activities in East London that 'The agitational methods, the actual strategy of street warfare and mob terrorisation, are those of Goebbels.'⁹²

The ILP agreed wholeheartedly with the League's analysis. For it too, the conflict between Jews and non-Jews in Britain was a false dichotomy, and the party accepted a belief widely held on the left that capitalism bred prejudice and discrimination, and that the Soviet Union was free from racial and religious strife. The ILP declared that 'the problem is fundamentally an economic one...in a non-competitive society, anti-Semitism withers away.'⁹³ The existence of anti-Semitism, in Britain as elsewhere, was indicative not simply of a temporary crisis, but illustrated a society in an advanced state of decay. The ILP's John McNair equated the BUF's campaign with the pogroms of an ailing Tsardom, remembering that 'The Blackshirts specialised in the old, old practice of Jew-baiting, the one sure sign of political decadence and sterility.'⁹⁴

After the massive demonstration that stopped the BUF marching at Cable Street in October 1936, the ILP stated of its campaign in the East End that 'The Fascists know that they can win only if the workers are divided. They fasten on the Jews as the easiest section to isolate in animosity...Not Capitalism, but Jewish financiers, Jewish multiple shop-owners, Jewish house-owners are made the enemy...The Fascist appeal to Race against Race can be met in one way only – by the appeal to Class against Class.'⁹⁵

⁹² *Tribune* (23/9/38), p. 4.

⁹³ *New Leader* (5/4/35), p. 5.

⁹⁴ McNair, *Beloved Rebel* p. 219.

⁹⁵ Like the Socialist League, the ILP likened anti-Semitism to religious sectarianism in Scotland and Ireland as classic methods of divide and rule. See *New Leader* (16/10/36), p. 2.

Communists, the Popular Front and the Changed Analysis of Anti-Semitism

It is at this point that the effects of the adoption of a new policy by the Communist Party, that of the Popular Front, must be examined. From its formation in 1920 the CPGB had been defined by the contrast it presented to the established leadership of the labour movement. The CPGB did not accept liberal democracy or aim at reform. It possessed an inherently revolutionary ideology and aimed to prove that in terms of both organisation and philosophy it was better suited than Labour to advance the cause of the working class. Even when the party sought amalgamation or co-operation with Labour, first in line with Lenin's advice, and then as part of the Comintern's united front strategy, it had done so with the barely concealed intention of either splitting sections of radical workers away from the party and the unions, or of replacing the existing leaderships and repositioning the larger organisations as instruments of an intensified class struggle. On occasion, its appeals to the Labour leadership were couched in such intemperate language as to make them seem designed to fail in their aim.⁹⁶

When, towards the end of the 1920s, the CPGB adopted the politics of the third period, all efforts at joint work and affiliation attempts were abandoned, and Labour, the established unions and democracy itself were routinely excoriated as mere fronts for the maintenance of class rule. However, the CPGB moved away from this extreme position earlier than most other communist parties, and in doing so, anticipated the change that the Comintern agreed at its seventh congress in 1935. In a move that was primarily designed to bolster the efforts of the Soviet Union to build alliances against the growing threat from Nazism, the new policy aimed at creating 'Popular Fronts', or 'People's Fronts'.

For the Popular Front strategy to be effective, pro-Soviet communists had to radically alter the nature of their propaganda. Internationally, the Soviet Union went to great lengths to assure the democracies that it had abandoned any notion

⁹⁶ See CPGB to Labour Party, (10/3/33), in Labour Party archive, National Joint Council minutes, Box 2, file 30K, p. 8.

of exporting revolution, and that co-operation between them was the surest way of containing fascist expansionism. On the national level, the new policy committed all Comintern sections to reach out to those socialists, liberals, democrats and even conservatives that they had been castigating such a short time ago. As evidence of their bona fides, the communist parties now extolled the concept of democracy and urged all to join a coalition in its defence. In France and Spain, massive Popular Front movements were created, and took power through the ballot box.

The CPGB had been one of the first Comintern sections to move away from the divisive tactics of the third period, but had retained its faith in an ultimate revolution, and kept up its criticism of Labour's reformism. However, the changed language of its public utterances after 1935 was evidence that the party had welcomed the Popular Front approach. Throughout its existence, the party had had a curious relationship with Labour and the TUC, being at the same time massively critical, politically poles apart, and yet wanting to work with or within their structures as changing strategy demanded, aside from the brief hiatus of 'Class Against Class'. The Popular Front era in Britain marked a change in strategy and rhetoric, without an abandonment of the party's ultimate goals. Its chief ideologue, Rajani Palme Dutt, so recently an enthusiastic propagator of the third period stance, wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Comintern's seventh congress that 'Where before the dream of democracy was a counter-revolutionary opiate, to-day the fight for democratic rights against fascism has become the mass fight against the main attack of finance-capital.'⁹⁷

Faced with the deadly threat of fascism, the Soviet Union and the Comintern had, in the eyes of the CPGB, devised a tactical defence in the form of the Popular Front. The policy was generally welcomed, as it suited British conditions, and mirrored the existing strategy the party. It aimed at the protection of the Soviet Union and the creation of national and international alliances capable of defeating fascism. It might also, if it worked, extricate the

⁹⁷ Labour Monthly (October 1935), p. 595.

Communist Party from the isolated position of the early 1930s, and bring a new level of acceptability and influence within the wider labour movement.

A dramatic concomitant of the Popular Front line was the changed definitions of fascism and anti-Semitism that the new accommodationism demanded. The advent of Popular Front politics could be seen in the way the CPGB interpreted the anti-Semitic campaign of the BUF. Organised hostility towards the Jews had always been seen by British communists in terms of divide and rule, and as an indication of a political system in terminal decline. Its adoption by British fascism was seen as tactical, and in 1934 the party argued that 'Mosley hopes to drive a wedge into the anti-fascist front, and at the same time secure a mass base for the B.U.F.'⁹⁸ These earlier perceptions of the BUF's anti-Semitism survived into the Popular Front period, but now that the party was scaling down the revolutionary rhetoric of the past and seeking to present itself as a friend of democracy, the threat from anti-Jewish prejudice had to be explained differently too.

Thus the party sought to identify anti-Semitism as a potent threat to the majority, and not just to Jews. Referring to a major Mosley rally in March 1936, the party argued that 'anti-semitism is gaining ground at a rate which must rouse serious thought and no-one who heard the beastly and obscene howling of the fascists and their supporters in the Albert Hall against the Jews, can say with an easy conscience that pogroms cannot happen here.'⁹⁹

In April 1937 the National Council for Civil Liberties (itself a broad front initiated but not directly controlled by the CPGB)¹⁰⁰ held a conference on fascism and anti-Semitism. The contribution of a CPGB member, Joe Jacobs, displayed perfectly the new interpretation of racial hatred and its function in building the Popular Front. He asserted that 'Jew-baiting was as much the concern of the democrat as of the Jew. Anti-Semitism and the smashing of democracy were two facets of the same thing...Fascism could not be beaten by

⁹⁸ *ibid.* (December 1934), p. 729.

⁹⁹ *Discussion* (April 1936), p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ See Fyrth, J. 'Introduction: In the Thirties', in Fyrth, (ed.) *Popular Front* p. 13.

socialists or communists alone. This could only be achieved by the co-operation of all people, no matter what their political opinions might be, so long as they were opposed to fascism.’¹⁰¹ The conference duly resolved that ‘the history of fascism on the continent shows clearly that racial discrimination against a section of the people has resulted in the loss of freedom for the whole population.’¹⁰²

While the new strategy allowed the party to appeal to a broader base, presenting anti-Semitism as being of concern to every democrat, it also allowed communists to appeal to Jews as Jews, rather than just as members of the working class. The American scholar, Henry Srebrnik, has pointed out that after the Comintern’s 1935 change of tack, ‘one approved tactic was an appeal to minorities along ethnic lines.’¹⁰³

The party implemented the Popular Front strategy even at the neighbourhood level in areas like the East End, using or creating broadly based organisations, such as the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement and the Stepney Tenants’ Defence League. These not only appealed to people beyond the party base, but campaigned around issues such as unemployment, high rents and evictions which the BUF itself had been keen to exploit.¹⁰⁴ These efforts may not have created official cross-party unity in the East End, but did succeed in attracting significant support to the CPGB, resulting in the election of communist local councillors, one of whom, Phil Piratin, was returned to Westminster in 1945.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ ‘Report of Conference on Fascism and Anti-Semitism’ (25/4/37), in NCCL archive, file DCL/44/4, pp. 2-3. Jacobs attended as a delegate of the Jewish People’s Council Against Fascism and Anti-Semitism, in which many Jewish CPGB members participated. Despite his loyal presentation of the new line at the conference, he was actually opposed to what he saw as the dilution of the CPGB’s anti-fascist militancy as a result of the Popular Front strategy, and was suspended from the party only two days after this conference, before being expelled later in the year. See Jacobs, J. Out of the Ghetto: My Youth in the East End. Communism and Fascism, 1913–1939 (London, 1978), pp. 276 and 297-307.

¹⁰² ‘Report of Conference on Fascism and Anti-Semitism’ (25/4/37), in NCCL archive, file DCL/44/4, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Srebrnik, London Jews p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ See Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society p. 199; Srebrnik, London Jews pp. 38-42 and 56.

¹⁰⁵ On the building of a wider electoral base during the Popular Front period see Srebrnik, London Jews pp. 1-14. Piratin had been the party’s first councillor in Stepney, in November 1937. ibid. p. 35.

Opposing the BUF

The extent of the conflict between fascists and anti-fascists in Britain has often been underestimated. This is partly because evidence of it is scattered across local and regional newspapers, the records of county constabularies or the non-metropolitan, small circulation publications of left wing and anti-fascist groups.¹⁰⁶ Robert Skidelsky's assertion that, in the mid 1930s, 'British fascism became of interest only to Jews and anti-Semites', not only echoes Mosley's own conception of his opponents, but cannot stand in the face of the facts.¹⁰⁷

An examination of the early months of 1936 alone, before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War led to a fresh upsurge of anti-fascist sentiment in Britain, is sufficient to give the lie to this. The most sustained opposition to the BUF at that time was in London, where fascist candidates were contesting the County Council elections. It is unsafe to assert, as Skidelsky would have us do, that the protests against the BUF's electoral campaign, and against their Albert Hall rally that spring, had been solely the work of London Jews with no input from the more broadly based organisations of the left.¹⁰⁸ Even if that were true it would not explain the large numbers of anti-fascists that prevented the BUF from holding rallies in Aberdeen in February and April,¹⁰⁹ and who took part in the violent clashes surrounding BUF meetings in Manchester in February, Barnsley, Warrington and Hull in March,¹¹⁰ and Liverpool, Rochdale and

¹⁰⁶ See for example the reports of the Chief Constable of the Manchester constabulary to the Home Office as cited in Barrett, N. 'A Bright Shining Star': The CPGB and Anti-Fascist Activism in the 1930's', Science and Society 61, 1 (1997), p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Skidelsky, R. 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism', in Lunn & Thurlow (eds.), British Fascism p. 86.

¹⁰⁸ For the BUF's Albert Hall rally in March 1936 see Mullally, Fascism Inside England p. 53; Kidd, R. 'Notes and Factual Matters for Address at Conference on Fascism and Anti-Fascism' (n.d.), in the NCCL archive, file DCL/44/4, pp. 5-6. Witness statements concerning police and fascist violence there are in *ibid.* file DCL/74/4, pp. 2-3. For the London County Council election campaign clashes see Allen, E.A. It Shall Not Happen Here: Anti-Semitism, Fascism and Civil Liberties (London, 1943), p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 127.

¹¹⁰ On these events see Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists', pp. 161-4; Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur pp. 122-3; Orwell, 'Wigan Pier Diary', in Orwell & Angus, (eds.), Collected Essays pp. 203-4.

Oxford in May.¹¹¹ That events like these were repeated throughout the period is proof of the persistent and widespread nature of British anti-fascism.

Furthermore, simply by virtue of the numbers involved in some of the protests, such activity must be assumed to have drawn in activists from all parties of the left, including those whose leaders had at various times spoken out most stridently against confrontation as a method of opposing fascism.¹¹² Though estimates of the numbers present at particular events can be a bone of contention, the following figures are generally agreed.

The spectacular nature of the clashes at Cable Street and Olympia have overshadowed many of the smaller events, and have perhaps contributed to an underestimation of the scale and intensity British anti-fascism.¹¹³ Another factor which has obscured the parallels between British anti-fascism and that in Italy and Germany is the absence of confirmed fatalities arising from clashes between British fascists and their opponents (though there were thousands of arrests and injuries).¹¹⁴

However, the parallel that should be drawn between British anti-fascism and that in Italy and Germany is that in each country, the left was radicalised proportionately by the extent of its own national crises, and responded proportionately to the level of violence that fascism directed against it. The economic and political consequences of the First World War and the Depression were less severe in Britain than in Italy or Germany, and British fascists did not generally go armed into the streets; nor did they conduct a campaign of assassination against prominent leftists. Therefore, the left in Britain acted in

¹¹¹ See Cullen, 'Political Violence', pp. 248 and 253; John Lee to Walter Citrine (14/5/36), in TUC archive, file MSS292/743/4i; Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley p. 413.

¹¹² Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur pp. 123-4.

¹¹³ Copsey makes this point in Anti-Fascism p. 13. On the predominance of Cable Street in the limited historiography of British anti-fascism see Kushner, T. 'Long May its Memory Live': Writing and Re-Writing the Battle of Cable Street', in Kushner & Valman (eds.), Remembering Cable Street pp. 109-80.

¹¹⁴ Mandle, Anti-Semitism p. 66, claims that there were no fatalities in clashes between British fascists and anti-fascists, or as a result of fascist attacks on British Jews between the wars. The ILP claimed that in June 1935 a woman died as a result of fighting between the BUF and anti-fascists in Bootle, Liverpool, and that the local BUF office was attacked in the wake of this. See New Leader (28/6/35), p. 1.

accordance with the prevailing conditions, as did their counterparts in Europe. Those engaged in anti-fascist activity in Britain nevertheless still took action with the intention of doing what was necessary to counter the threat as it appeared to them, though the prevailing conditions dictated that this was carried out in a less violent fashion than was the case elsewhere. Many on the left acted on the assumption that in the BUF they were seeing not the apex of British fascism but rather a movement in its early stages, and one that could grow in size and influence given a sufficiently serious political crisis or economic downturn. The effort devoted to opposing British fascism, therefore, can be seen, explicitly in the case of the revolutionary parties, and implicitly in the presence of large numbers of Labour and TUC members on the demonstrations, as the British left having learned the lessons of complacency and sectarianism in Italy and Germany.

For example, on May 13th, 1934, 1,000 anti-fascists stopped the BUF's John Beckett from speaking near Newcastle by rushing the platform he occupied. On the following day, 10,000 people were mobilised in neighbouring Gateshead to prevent a BUF rally from taking place there.¹¹⁵ In June, 10,000 protesters rallied outside the BUF's showcase Olympia rally in London, while in July, a similar number demonstrated against Mosley's presence in Cardiff.¹¹⁶ On September 9th of that year, an estimated 120,000 anti-fascists had assembled in London to swamp a BUF rally in Hyde Park, with the ILP pointing out that 'The capitalist press accounts varied between 100,000 to 150,000', as did the CPGB's.¹¹⁷ A further 5,000 anti-fascists opposed a Mosley rally at Manchester's Belle Vue Gardens on the 29th, while the Liverpool Anti-Fascist Committee managed to muster a reported 4,000 people to protest against a BUF meeting the following month.¹¹⁸

Even small towns could witness surprisingly large and violent anti-fascist demonstrations. At Tonypany, in the Rhondda Valley, 2,000 people prevented

¹¹⁵ Todd, Excited Times pp. 56-9; Mullally, Fascism Inside England p. 53.

¹¹⁶ Cross, Fascists in Britain p. p. 110; New Leader (6/7/34), p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Ceplair, Under the Shadow p. 164; New Leader (14/9/34), p. 1; Labour Monthly (October 1934), p. 595; CPGB, September 9th p. 11; Branson, History of the Communist Party p. 124.

¹¹⁸ Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 37; New Leader (26/10/34), p. 4.

the BUF from holding a public meeting in June 1936. Thirty-six people were arrested on charges of riot, affray, unlawful assembly and breach of the peace, culminating in what has been described as ‘Britain’s biggest anti-fascist trial’ at Swansea Crown Court that December.¹¹⁹

Opposition to a major and long-threatened BUF march through the East End of London in October 1936 was so strong that 77,000 people signed a petition calling for its proscription in just two days.¹²⁰ When the Home Secretary refused to issue a ban, Londoners turned out in such great numbers that even a huge police presence was unable to clear a path for the Mosleyites. The *News Chronicle* reported that the anti-fascist demonstrators numbered 300,000, the ILP counted 250,000 ‘at a low estimate’, while the Metropolitan Police put the figure at 100,000.¹²¹ Feelings were running so high that, to emphasise just who did control the streets of the East End, 15,000 anti-fascists assembled on the following Sunday and marched through the area.¹²² The last major confrontations before the war came against a background of declining fascist activity. However, 10,000 anti-fascists saw Mosley hospitalised by stone-throwers on his final visit to Liverpool in October 1937, while various sources claim that 40-50,000 anti-fascists assembled to force the abandonment of a BUF march through Bermondsey in the same month (while even the police put the number of protestors at an impressive 12,000).¹²³

That many of these figures should be counted separately is attested to by the fact that of the 83 people arrested at Cable Street in October 1936, 82 were Londoners.¹²⁴ Jack Jones, a prime mover behind the anti-BUF demonstrations in Liverpool, may have travelled to Spain to fight in the International Brigades, but when it came to visiting Manchester in connection with anti-fascism,

¹¹⁹ Francis, *Miners Against Fascism* pp. 92-3.

¹²⁰ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* p. 80.

¹²¹ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* p. 59; *New Leader* (9/10/36), p. 3.

¹²² *New Leader* (16/10/36), p. 1.

¹²³ Auty, *The Trophy is Democracy* pp. 15-18; Copsey, *Anti-Fascism* pp. 69-71; Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism* pp. 134-5; Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* pp. 127-8. David Renton also points out that one million people signed a petition opposing Mosley’s release from custody in 1943: *Fascism, Anti-Fascism* p. 4.

¹²⁴ Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism* p. 163.

remembered that he only went 'a couple of times' during the 1930s.¹²⁵ The geographical spread of the reported clashes with the BUF was due to an intense and pervasive hostility towards fascism that is too often overlooked.

That British anti-fascism lacked the element of organised violence often associated with its Italian and German counterparts has led to the assumption that the British left was completely immune from paramilitarism. In Italy the Communist Party had had its own paramilitaries, while a broader group, the *Arditi del Popolo*, united anarchists with dissident socialists and communists in armed opposition to fascism.¹²⁶ In Germany, the Communist Party had its *Rotfrontkämpferbund*, while even the legalistic SPD could deploy organised physical force detachments, first in the form of the *Reichsbanner*, and later as the 'Iron Front'.¹²⁷

Yet in Britain, at times of raised tension, the beginnings of an anti-fascist paramilitarism could be discerned. The CPGB attempted to organise a form of workers' militia to act against the O.M.S., British Fascists and other strike breakers as the General Strike loomed,¹²⁸ while in the 1930s, communists, Trotskyists, the ILP and the South Wales Miners' Federation all attempted to form, or discussed the formation of, groups dedicated to direct action and the use of physical force against the BUF.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Interview with author (24/11/04).

¹²⁶ On the Italian left's paramilitarism see Behan, *Resistible Rise*; de Agostini, M. et. al. *Prisoners and Partisans: Italian Anarchists in the Struggle Against Fascism* (London, 2002); Hunter, A. (trans.), *Red Years, Black Years: Anarchist Resistance to Fascism in Italy* (London, 1989); Abse, T. 'Italian Workers and Italian Fascism', in Bessel (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* pp. 40-60; idem. 'The Rise of Fascism in an Industrial City: The Case of Livorno, 1918 – 1921', in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism* pp. 52-82.

¹²⁷ On German paramilitarism see Rosenhaft, E. *Beating the Fascists?: The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-1933* (Cambridge, 1983); Diehl, J.M. *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington, 1977).

¹²⁸ The Politburo statement on this is reproduced in Bell, *British Communist Party* pp. 107-8.

¹²⁹ See the CPGB's theoretical journal, *Discussion* (May 1936), pp. 21-4; British Trotskyists called for workers' defence forces in *Youth Militant* (January 1937), p. 7, *The Militant* (August 1937), p. 2, (October 1937), p. 1, (November 1937), p. 7, as does the leaflet 'Militant Labour League' (London, n.d.), in the Maitland/Sara papers, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, file MSS.15/4/1/3; the ILP used red-shirted stewards at some of its public meetings. See *New Leader* (3/3/33), p. 2; on calls for workers' militias in the South Wales coalfields, including that by Aneurin Bevan, see Francis, *Miners Against Fascism* pp. 61-3.

After anti-fascists were attacked by Blackshirts in Oxford in November 1933, J. Payne of the NATSOPA union wrote to the TUC's Walter Citrine that 'I assure you that it is a difficult task to keep our own men in order now. Everyone is raving about the apathy of the T.U.C. Now as I am writing, they are discussing ways and means to return that which they have received with interest.'¹³⁰ W.H. Stevenson, editor of Labour's *Daily Herald*, also wrote to Citrine following attacks on BUF members and property in the North East in 1934, warning that 'A development that needs to be watched – and in my opinion, scotched – is the tendency of some of our people to form rival bodies to the Blackshirts on somewhat similar lines.'¹³¹ Concerns such as these, expressed by labour movement figures opposed to direct action and concerned about alternative poles of influence developing, were generated by the fact that groups of non-aligned or cross-party activists had in fact formed and had entered the fray against the BUF: 'Red Shirts' appeared in Oxford,¹³² while 'Greyshirts' were active on Tyneside.¹³³

That none of these initiatives evolved into an Anglicised *Arditi del Popolo* or *Reichsbanner* was not due to any innate pacifism within the national temperament. Wider factors, such as the absence of a crisis of sufficient intensity, and the tactics of Britain's fascist movements, dictated the nature of the conflict between fascists and anti-fascists here. British fascism could be countered, even violently, without recourse to the formation of large paramilitary groups.

¹³⁰ Payne to Citrine, (3/11/33), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/743/2.

¹³¹ Stevenson to Citrine, (19/6/34), in *ibid.* file MSS.292/743/3. Citrine seemingly liked to appear more radical than he was. In 1934, spoke in San Francisco at the American Federation of Labour's convention. There, referring to the armed rising of the Vienna socialists against the Dollfuss regime, he stated that 'facing no other alternative than for the movement to go down under the heel of the dictatorship and given no chance of democratic expression, I say if I were facing the same conditions I would do the same thing.' AFL/Green, W. et. al. Labor, [sic] Democracy and Fascism (San Francisco, 1934), p. 14.

¹³² See Renton, Red Shirts and Black; The idea of a red-shirted anti-fascist organisation in Britain was not new, having been first proposed by a Mr. H.T. Noble, of Stoke Newington, in Workers' Dreadnought (26/5/23), p. 8.

¹³³ On the Greyshirts see Todd, Excited Times pp. 54-9; Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 25.

Labour, the TUC and Anti-Fascism

Labour and the TUC, of course, abjured violence of any kind, and called on members to stay away from anti-fascist protests. However, the numbers attending these events suggest that these calls often went unheeded. Andrew Thorpe has written of the massive Hyde Park demonstration on September 9th 1934 that 'it was clear that many of those present were rank and file Labourites and trade unionists. Thirty four trade union branches were officially represented.'¹³⁴

But the leaders of Labour and the TUC have been accused of failing to oppose the BUF, and hoping that it would peter out without the intervention of the labour movement. It is true that they tended to minimise the threat from British fascism, but this did not mean that they paid it no mind. In 1934, Labour and the TUC's co-ordinating body described its own position regarding the BUF by stating that 'The National Joint Council, whilst it avoided giving too much publicity to this sinister movement, did not make the mistake of ignoring it, since events abroad had shown that insignificant numbers at the beginning might be no measure of ultimate strength.'¹³⁵

The Labour and trade union leaders were also concerned at the influence which smaller groups, most obviously the CPGB, could exercise within the labour movement through their anti-fascist activism.¹³⁶ When rejecting calls for both the united front and the Popular Front, they cited the odium of being associated with opponents of democracy. It is possible to detect in their responses a wariness about the effects of radical rhetoric on the Labour rank and file. A party tied to constitutional conventions and legality was not always best placed to counter criticism of its moderation or calls to action against the BUF

¹³⁴ Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow p. 213.

¹³⁵ National Joint Council, 'Statement on Fascism' p. 13.

¹³⁶ See Citrine's circular, 'Communist and Other Bodies', (5/6/34), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/756/1. The TUC's so-called 'Black Circular' of 1934 was just one method used during

issued by smaller left parties operating without responsibilities and beyond the electoral pale. In 1934, Arthur Henderson replied to a CPGB call for co-operation that Labour opposed any unity 'behind which intensified Communist propaganda would be carried on against associated organisations', only mentioning secondarily that 'the Communist Party does not believe in Parliamentary Democracy.'¹³⁷

Non-aligned and broad based anti-fascist organisations and activities were viewed with suspicion at the highest levels of the labour movement. When one union official, Charles Dukes, contacted the TUC to ascertain their views on his proposed vice-presidency of the newly-formed Northern Council Against Fascism, he was told that 'after a good deal of inquiry, we had not been able to trace definite evidence that this organisation is connected with the Communist Party. At the same time, it is extremely likely that it is. Suggested that probably the best thing would be for Mr. Dukes to "play for safety" and refuse.'¹³⁸

When the National Joint Council proposed its own national campaign against fascism in 1934, it was specified that 'as regards the source of its authority it would be an integral part of the Transport House machinery...Co-operation with the national labour movement should be the law of its life...The officers and members of the Council and General Committee would be appointed by the competent authority at Transport House...It would not be competent for it to co-operate with any other organisations except with the approval of the competent authority at Transport House.'¹³⁹

Labour and the TUC were committed to legality and constitutionalism, and as such, were extremely cautious about calling their members out onto the streets or, in the case of the TUC, in using industrial action with regard to fascism.¹⁴⁰ One historian, Tom Buchanan, wrote of Labour that the party 'believed that

the period to deny communists access to official posts and delegations. See Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 37.

¹³⁷ Henderson to CPGB Secretariat, (2/3/34), in the Morgan Phillips papers, Labour Party archive, Box 4, p. 3.

¹³⁸ 'Note of 'phone conversation'', (22/6/36), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/734/4 (1).

¹³⁹ National Joint Council statement, (1/9/34), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/734/4, pp. 1-5.

¹⁴⁰ See TUC, Menace of Dictatorship p. 22.

Mosley could best be contained within the existing system.’¹⁴¹ To contemplate extra-legal action against the BUF was to go against core beliefs. It was during public demonstrations, the movement’s leaders feared, that large crowds could get out of hand, be subject to provocations, or fall prey to the appeals of hotheads or revolutionaries. Labour’s *raison d’être* was to establish its credibility and to build an electoral base, and both of these could easily be jeopardised if the party became associated with riot and tumult. When it came to anti-fascism, therefore, the party regularly urged its supporters to stay away from counter-demonstrations and to refrain from disrupting fascist meetings for these very reasons.¹⁴² The justification given by the leadership was that to ignore the BUF was far more effective than in giving it publicity in this way, or by allowing it to portray itself as the defender of order against ‘red’ mobs.¹⁴³ Even after Cable St, which the bulk of the left hailed as a great victory, the party condemned the demonstration, while at the same time equating fascism and communism as alien beliefs. The party’s *Daily Herald* argued that ‘The majority of Englishmen have no sympathy with red Communism or black Fascism, and we resent it deeply that supporters of foreign creeds should make our city hideous.’¹⁴⁴

Labour and the TUC even declined to take statements from victims of BUF violence at the Olympia rally in 1934, stating ‘it was felt there might be dangers in this course. It was strongly emphasised ...that the Labour Movement must make quite clear their repudiation of organised interruptions of meetings, no matter by what Party the meetings may be held.’¹⁴⁵ They did send a delegation to see the Sir John Gilmour, the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, at which Citrine argued that the perceived failure to tackle BUF violence by legal methods meant that ‘We have a great difficulty in the Labour Movement in

¹⁴¹ Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War* p. 34.

¹⁴² On the Hyde Park demonstration of September 9th 1934 see National Joint Council to All Affiliated Bodies, (22/8/34), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/778/1, p. 2; Poplar MP George Lansbury’s call for people to stay away from Cable Street is cited in Renton, D. *This Rough Game: Fascism and Anti-Fascism* (Stroud, 2001), p. 140; on Labour and the TUC’s opposition to anti-fascist demonstrations generally see Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* p. 131.

¹⁴³ See for example Labour Party Executive Committee to London Labour Party organisations (20/9/37), in Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/33/17.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Knowles, ‘Labour and Anti-Semitism’, p. 66.

¹⁴⁵ National Joint Council minutes, (7/6/34), file NJC 26 June – 18 December, 1934, 40, C2.2.

persuading our people that all is being done that ought to be done to deal with what they consider to be a very serious situation.’¹⁴⁶

However, Labour and the unions did seek to use legal forms of pressure, protest and political education in a campaign against the BUF that has often been overshadowed by more confrontational anti-fascist actions.¹⁴⁷ Though out of office throughout the entire period of the BUF’s existence, the parliamentary party used the Commons as a platform from which to attack British fascism, and pressed ministers for legislation. Following the violence at Cable Street, the party backed the introduction of the Public Order Act on the grounds that it would damage the BUF. Its proscription on the wearing of uniforms, restrictions on the behaviour of stewards at public meetings and its enhanced definition of insulting words and behaviour all addressed concerns expressed by anti-fascists.¹⁴⁸ The parliamentary party also questioned Home Office ministers over alleged police partiality in the treatment of fascists as against their opponents.¹⁴⁹

Regardless of the criticism which its opponents on the left directed at its analysis of fascism, Labour and the TUC did conduct educational campaigns which stressed the threat to parliamentary government posed by fascism, and argued that the preservation of democratic freedoms was the best defence against the BUF. Extra-legal methods, they argued, were a mere imitation of the fascists’ own practice, and could only lead the labour movement to disaster, either through physical reverses, or by stampeding the right into precipitate action of the kind enacted against workers elsewhere in Europe.¹⁵⁰

As democrats, Labour were committed to the principle of free speech, and on occasion the party argued that this right should apply, within the same legal

¹⁴⁶ ‘Notes of a Deputation Received by the Secretary of State for Home Affairs from the National Joint Council’, (26/6/34), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/743/4, p. 4. ; on the meeting see also Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* pp. 71-2. .

¹⁴⁷ For an outline of the educational campaign see NJC, *Fascism at Home and Abroad* p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ See NCCL, ‘Notes and Factual Matters’, pp. 14-15; National Council of Labour minutes, (22/12/36), Labour Party archive, file NCL Minutes and Papers, 24 November 1936 – 9 June 1937, document 13 B7.

¹⁴⁹ See Branson, N. & Heinemann, M. *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (St. Albans, 1973), pp. 316-7.

¹⁵⁰ See Morrison, ‘Social Change’, pp. 3-6.

limits to which all other public speakers were subjected, to the BUF. One MP, F.R. West, opined after Olympia that ‘We, of the Labour Party, do not fear the effect of Mosley’s speeches. In any event let him be heard.’¹⁵¹ When Herbert Morrison addressed the Labour Party conference in Edinburgh on the day after Cable St., he called for a ban on provocative fascist marches, but not on the BUF’s right to be heard, affirming that ‘the Labour Party would be the last organisation in the world to do anything which interfered with the sacred right of liberty of expression and freedom of speech.’¹⁵² Similarly, Alderman J. Toole, the Labour Lord Mayor of Manchester, called for curbs on the fascist movement after disturbances at a BUF march there in 1936, but not an outright ban. He first remarked that ‘the peace of our City has never been so disturbed since Peterloo as it was when the Fascists gave us a call.’ He then went on to state that ‘It appears to me to be the plain duty of the Government to introduce legislation, arresting this phase of our public life...Whatever action is taken, great care must be used to preserve for everybody the precious right of free speech, and when I say free speech I mean, of course, free speech for everybody, including the Fascists themselves.’¹⁵³

At other levels of the party, however, Labour MPs and councillors used their positions to deny the BUF its ‘right’ to free speech by preventing it from using local authority premises. This was not a co-ordinated approach, and indeed, Labour’s opponents could point to instances of their councillors allowing the BUF to use publicly owned premises for meetings. Nevertheless, this tactic did begin to gradually bear fruit.¹⁵⁴ By the later 1930s, the BUF was having difficulty in finding venues in which to be heard. One historian has asserted that the denial of municipal facilities had ‘by 1936 had become commonplace as the hand of local government closed like a vice around the windpipe of British fascism.’¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Cited in *Labour Monthly* (July 1934), p. 400.

¹⁵² Labour Party, *Report of Conference* (London, 1936), p. 164.

¹⁵³ *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (November 1936), p. 59.

¹⁵⁴ For instances of Labour representatives allowing the BUF’s use of municipal premises see *Youth Militant* (February 1937), p. 3; Smith, E.R. ‘Jewish Responses to Political Anti-Semitism and Fascism in the East End of London, 1920–1939’, in Kushner & Lunn (eds.), *Traditions of Intolerance* pp. 58-9.

Labour and the TUC also took their opposition to direct action and their equation of fascism and communism onto the international stage. The stances they took both within the Labour and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions generated criticism, and even threats of expulsion, because of their absolute opposition to co-operation with the Comintern. When the Spanish government brutally crushed a rising by the miners of the Asturias region in October 1934, the National Council of Labour had refused joint action with the CPGB and the ILP in Britain, and was adamant that it would not countenance any joint international action.¹⁵⁶ They resolved that their delegates 'should make it clear...that on no account would the British Labour Movement be party to arrangements with the Communist International.'¹⁵⁷

When the Spanish Civil War began in July 1936, Labour stood out against intervention, nullifying the response of the LSI. The vehemence with which leading party figures attacked the Comintern and the Soviet Union at international gatherings led the Belgian socialist, Emile Vandervelde, to blame Labour for 'the funeral of the Second International.'¹⁵⁸ One historian of the labour movement, Christine Collette, has written of the party's attitude that 'The British Labour Party was guided in its relationship to the LSI less by a theoretical approach...than by the simple transfer of policy to the international field and by bureaucratic convenience. The prime interest of the Labour Party was its electoral viability, growth and efficiency at home.'¹⁵⁹

By 1939 the LSI's secretary, Friedrich Adler, was so frustrated at Labour's refusal to engage with the International, or to be bound by its decisions, that he was on the verge of calling for the party's expulsion. He wrote that 'there is a tendency among a number of representatives of the British Labour Party which questions the very existence of the International...[Labour] desires to free itself

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* p. 135.

¹⁵⁶ See *New Leader* (19/10/34), pp. 1-3.

¹⁵⁷ National Council of Labour resolution, (23/10/34), Labour Party archive, file NJC 26 June – 18 December, 1934, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Collette, C. 'The Labour Party and the Labour and Socialist International: The Challenge of Communism and Fascism', *Labour History Review* 58, 1 (1993), p. 33.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 29.

from the obligation to participate in the joint actions of the LSI...If the British Labour Party wishes to stand by the idea of complete autonomy...this signifies the frank and sincere acknowledgement that the basic principles of the international organisation...have become untenable.’¹⁶⁰

The Anti-Fascism of the Far Left

Those groups and parties that proclaimed themselves revolutionaries had a very different approach to anti-fascism than did the legalists of Labour and the TUC. Believing that capitalism was doomed to collapse sooner or later, many implicitly believed that democracy would give way to fascism or be replaced by a revolution from the left. In this they shared the views of European revolutionaries like Daniel Guerin, who argued that anti-fascism was not just another political issue for the left, but the most important tactical question that faced them. He argued that ‘Once fascism embarks on the road to power, the labour movement has only one recourse left: to outstrip the fascists and win power first.’¹⁶¹

Many on the far left, therefore, viewed anti-fascism as an essential component in the building of a revolutionary movement: a necessary preparation for larger struggles to come. In the throes of the third period, the CPGB’s Rajani Palme Dutt rejected any reformist solution to fascism, arguing that ‘The myth of a third alternative is in fact no alternative, but in reality part of the advance towards Fascism.’¹⁶² The ILP also posited a straight choice between socialism and fascism for much the same reasons, with W.J. Brown holding that ‘Political democracy is dead and Fascism cannot act otherwise than in accordance with the laws of its own being.’¹⁶³

In attempts to extend their influence, the far left launched a number of initiatives designed to mobilise large numbers of workers around anti-fascism, a

¹⁶⁰ Adler, F. ‘The Position of the LSI’, (June 1939), in Labour Party archive, LSI papers, Box 22, file LSI.22/4/29, pp. 1-2.

¹⁶¹ Guerin, Fascism and Big Business p. 121. Guerin’s book was not published in English until 1939.

¹⁶² Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. x.

field which not only carried an intense significance for them in any case, but one in which they sensed the instinctive unease of their 'reformist' opponents. The Communist Party formed the 'Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity', a broad front organisation, constituting, in the words of one historian, 'an attempt to circumnavigate the labour leadership's refusal to co-operate by appealing directly to local anti-fascists.'¹⁶⁴ In a similar vein, the Socialist League helped to initiate a broad front anti-fascist organisation in the East End in the wake of the Cable Street demonstration, in which the ILP participated along with other London leftist groups.¹⁶⁵

The ILP, while at times a proponent of united front activity with the CPGB and others, enthusiastically backed anti-fascist marches organised by ad hoc and non-aligned organisations around the country.¹⁶⁶ It was concerned with building an alternative leadership to that of Labour, and framed its anti-fascism accordingly. After Cable St, the ILP argued that the intense anti-fascist sentiment generated should be capitalised upon to build a revolutionary working-class movement, stating that, 'The Fascists will not be overcome by merely banning uniforms and declaring their organisations illegal. They will only be defeated by the mass strength of the workers and by the determination of the workers – first to defend themselves against Fascism and then to go on and win power for themselves.'¹⁶⁷

George Orwell joined the ILP after his return from Spain and agreed that the struggle against the BUF had to be an integral part of building a revolutionary socialist movement. He argued that 'The things I saw in Spain brought home to me the fatal danger of a mere negative "anti-Fascism"'.¹⁶⁸ The stance taken by the parties of the far left was an integral part of the ideological conflict between themselves and the Labour and TUC leaders, with calls to action almost invariably mixed with criticism of the larger organisations.

¹⁶³ New Leader (30/6/33), p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 133.

¹⁶⁵ The Socialist (November 1936), p. 8; ILP, They Did Not Pass p. 10; Pimlott, Labour and the Left p. 93.

¹⁶⁶ See for example New Leader (28/9/34), p. 1, (5/10/34), p. 4, (2/11/34), p. 5, (7/12/34), p. 4. All extol broad based anti-fascist activity.

¹⁶⁷ ILP, They Did Not Pass: 300,000 Workers Say No to Mosley (London, 1936), p. 10.

The Trotskyists of the Militant Group, agitating from within the Labour Party, asserted that ‘The only alternative to fascism and war is the revolutionary overthrow of the system of which they are the inevitable outcome...There is no middle path.’¹⁶⁹ Of direct action against the BUF they insisted that ‘the smashing of every manifestation of fascism is an essential part of the class struggle.’¹⁷⁰ They maintained that radical anti-fascism was an integral part in building support for a combative alternative to what they saw as the ineffective constitutionalism of the Labour leaders, arguing that ‘fascism must be fought by mass activity and not by methods of bourgeois legality.’¹⁷¹

Given the small size of groups like these, it was difficult for them to sustain their own campaigning organisations. British Trotskyists tended to see the larger organisations that they generally operated within, like Labour and the ILP, as vehicles for their wider aims. Their limited numerical strength and their opposition to Popular Fronts between working-class forces and those they described as ‘pacifists and liberals’, helped to persuade them against participation in most specifically anti-fascist groupings, in which they were likely to be swamped or excluded by their ideological foes in the CPGB.¹⁷²

This also fuelled their scepticism as to the real value of one-off anti-fascist mobilisations, and they argued instead that each should be part of a constructive building process. Though enthusiastic about the mass mobilisation at the Hyde Park anti-BUF demonstration in September 1934, British Trotskyists felt that opportunities to build on this had been squandered in the aftermath. Commenting on the broad anti-fascist organisations initiated by the CPGB in its wake, the Communist League argued that ‘Setting up Anti-Fascist committees means, in most cases, the separation of the militant workers from the main body of the workers. No “Anti-Fascist” movement can give permanent results, not only because it tends to move away from the mass organisations...but also

¹⁶⁸ New Leader (24/6/38), p. 4.

¹⁶⁹ The Militant (August 1937), p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ ibid. p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Minutes of Militant Group Secretariat, (12/9/37), in Haston papers, file DJH 2A/5/1.

¹⁷² Youth Militant (January 1937), p. 3.

because opposition to Fascism is not a policy but a protest...A demonstration in itself can accomplish nothing...Had it been part of a sustained effort towards a concrete end it could have been splendid. But it wasn't, for there is no sustained campaign going on.'¹⁷³

British Trotskyists therefore generally argued that anti-fascist actions were best conducted through their host parties, as part of the agitation therein against what they saw as reactionary leaders. These instances illustrate again the fact that anti-fascism was tailored to the general aims of any given political group, which in Militant's subsequent incarnation towards the end of the decade, the Militant Labour League, was stated as 'the building of a revolutionary left-wing inside the Labour Party to win the masses away from the reformist bureaucracy for the seizure of power and the establishment of Socialism.'¹⁷⁴

Clearly, British revolutionaries saw anti-fascism as a method of radicalising workers and drawing them into active political struggle. Despite the injuries to anti-fascists during the violence at Olympia in 1934, the furore that followed and the increased sense of opposition to fascism that it generated were not lost on the CPGB. The party described the event as 'an act of high revolutionary significance.'¹⁷⁵ When around 100,000 people opposed the BUF's Hyde Park rally that year, despite Labour and TUC strictures to the contrary, the party framed this too in terms of political radicalisation, calling it the 'biggest breakthrough ever made against the ban on the United Front imposed by the Labour leaders.'¹⁷⁶ In its eyes, aggressive anti-fascist tactics were winning the rank and file of the labour movement away from their reformist leaders: just the scenario that the united front strategy had envisaged. Similarly, the ILP, by now also advocating a united front of working-class parties, proclaimed Hyde Park a success, despite 'the defeatist utterances of the Labour Party and T.U.C. leaders...these masses...were largely Labour Party members. Many were out

¹⁷³ *Red Flag* (November 1934), pp. 2-3.

¹⁷⁴ Constitution of the Militant Labour League, in Haston papers, file DJH 3/1.

¹⁷⁵ CPGB, September 9th p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

for their first demonstration, but they had shown that their loyalty was not to party tags but to their class.’¹⁷⁷

Aside from the natural inclination of the revolutionary parties of the left towards direct action and working-class mobilisations, the other impetus towards this confrontational approach was the apparent lack of an effective anti-fascist strategy on the part of the mainstream labour organisations. John Strachey, secretary of the Co-ordinating Committee, sent a circular to the executive committees of the main unions after the TUC General Council had called on workers to stay away from the Hyde Park counter-demonstration. He argued against the General Council’s line that ‘The parade of Mosley storm troopers from all over the country is represented not as a provocative display of violence against the workers, but as a harmless public meeting... We ask your Executive to consider whether Fascism can be beaten by being “ignored” or by the mass action of the workers directed against it.’¹⁷⁸

When Labour and the TUC did raise the issue of opposing fascism, specifics were usually lacking.¹⁷⁹ When the TUC’s General Council put out its 1933 report on fascism, *Dictatorship and the Trade Union Movement*, it dismayed the far left in that it placed communism on a par with fascism, on the basis that both were equally hostile to democracy. The TUC’s position was also attacked for its perceived failure to offer a lead in anti-fascist activism. Accusing the trade union leaders of defeatism, the CPGB’s John Campbell was dismissive of the General Secretary’s endorsement of the report at that year’s Trades Union Congress, stating that ‘Citrine devoted precisely three minutes to this question at the end of a long speech. The General Council devotes one paragraph out of forty-six in the entire memorandum to the same question.’¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ *New Leader* (14/9/34), p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Strachey to trade union executive committees, (31/8/34), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/743/6, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ On the need to fight fascism before it took power, see Citrine’s article in *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (September 1933), p. 13. No methods of fighting fascism are mentioned.

¹⁸⁰ *Labour Monthly* (October 1933), p. 622.

When the TUC discussed fascism at the following year's congress, some again saw the absence of an anti-fascist strategy, with the ILP's *New Leader* editorialising that Citrine's speech 'did not contain a single constructive idea of how the menace was to be met...How Fascism is to be fought was left to the imagination.'¹⁸¹ Dutt, for the CPGB, warned that the absence of an anti-fascist strategy beyond that of relying on the state was risking the entire future of the labour movement and repeating the errors of the majority socialist parties in Italy and Germany. He argued that 'every working-class movement which follows the reformist line, which endeavours to remain on the increasingly discredited parliamentary plane, trusting to the "appeal to reason" and the "reign of law" finds itself hit below the belt by Fascism and knocked out before it realises what it is all about.' This legalism, he maintained, 'is precisely the chloroform which serves to daze and paralyse one antagonist, without for a moment fooling the other.'¹⁸²

Changes in Political Direction Change Anti-Fascist Tactics

The argument that an organisation's wider political stance conditioned its approach to anti-fascism is further reinforced by two examples of changed policies leading to a change in tactics. In the case of the ILP, it began the period as a socialist, but constitutionalist, element of the Labour Party. It originally shared Labour's attitude that confrontation was not the best way to deal with British fascism. In 1925, H.N. Brailsford had argued that a strong democracy was the best insurance against a domestic fascism movement, and that worker militancy could be dangerous. He surmised that 'A Fascist movement on the Italian model would not be created easily in this country. Parliament had no roots in Italian history...Even in Italy it required a great deal of lawless provocation from the Red side to create Fascism.'¹⁸³

Even in the immediate aftermath of its departure from Labour, the ILP still believed sufficiently in free speech for all to hold several public debates with

¹⁸¹ *New Leader* (7/9/34), p. 3.

¹⁸² *Labour Monthly* (October 1934), pp. 585-6.

¹⁸³ *ibid.* (20/2/25), p. 4.

BUF speakers.¹⁸⁴ However, as the party adopted a revolutionary socialism, its anti-fascist activism came to be characterised by mobilising for street demonstrations like Hyde Park in 1934, Cable Street in 1936 and Bermondsey in 1937. This is a testament to the fact that radicalised politics lead to new interpretations of anti-fascism, and of fascism itself.¹⁸⁵ In 1938, the party's coordinating body stated that 'The ILP recognises that Fascism is an inevitable development of Capitalism in crisis and reiterates its call to the working class to resist it by intensifying the class struggle and by independent class action against all Fascist aggression.'¹⁸⁶

The Communist Party, on the other hand, proved that anti-fascism could take on a more moderate tone in accordance with changes in the political outlook and strategy of a party. It had taken direct action against fascism in Britain since the earliest blackshirt manifestations, and saw such activities as being both tactically and politically correct for a revolutionary party. The CPGB also felt that this combative approach was in line with the feelings of many rank and file working-class activists, despite the protestations of their leaders. Joe Jacobs, of the party's Stepney branch, argued that 'the majority view, certainly among the youth, was that Mosley should be met everywhere with the maximum force available.'¹⁸⁷

Hitler's accession to power in January 1933 had led to an intensification of calls within the British labour movement for unity, and the CPGB and the ILP had co-operated in a joint demonstration in support of the German workers shortly afterwards.¹⁸⁸ These events coincided with increased efforts on the part of the Labour and trade union hierarchy to exclude communists from their ranks. The CPGB's John Mahon, cited the increased pressure for a united front as being 'the reason for the new rain of warnings, cleansing schemes, bans, penalties and expulsions directed from Transport House against the trade union

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.* (3/3/33), p. 2, (2/11/34), p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ The ILP's preparation for Cable St. is set out in ILP, *They Did Not Pass* pp. 3-9.

¹⁸⁶ National Administrative Council draft statement, 'Forward to Socialism', in ILP papers, LSE archives, file Coll. Misc. 702/12, 1936 February – November, p. 5.

¹⁸⁷ Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto* p. 205.

¹⁸⁸ *The Communist: A Monthly Review* (April 1933), p. 163; Cole, *History of the Labour Party* p. 286; Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* p. 82.

branches.’¹⁸⁹ The Communist Party nevertheless retained its proactive oppositional methods regarding fascism for the bulk of the inter-war period, and used anti-fascism as one of the core factors in its many calls for a united front with Labour.¹⁹⁰

However, just as the introduction of the Popular Front policy had led to the anti-democratic aspects of fascism being elevated above its anti-working-class nature, so the new approach demanded a change in approach to anti-fascism.¹⁹¹ In 1934, Dutt had asserted that ‘The specific character of Fascism can only be defined by laying bare its *class-basis*, the systems of *class-relations* within which it develops and functions, and the *class-role* it performs.’¹⁹² On anti-fascism, he was equally strident, maintaining that ‘Once the myths and illusions of legality and pacifism have fallen, once the united mass of the workers have entered the struggle...there is no question of the ultimate outcome.’¹⁹³

By 1936, however, with the Popular Front agitation at its height, the party was aiming its message at a much wider constituency, and in doing so was portraying itself as the defender of democracy against fascism. The CPGB’s Arthur Downton appealed ‘Let us make British democracy work better so that progressive public opinion results in progressive public policy...important sections of the upper and middle classes will support us. Not only University Professors, Liberals, Quakers and Civil Servants, but even important sections of the Conservatives can be won for our line.’¹⁹⁴ Similarly, in 1938, William Gallacher envisaged a very different anti-fascist movement from that of Dutt in 1934 when he addressed the CPGB’s congress, saying ‘We appeal to the shopkeepers and the wide range of professional people who are identified with liberalism or associated with peace organisations. We appeal to all farmers and agricultural workers... We appeal to the Churches, where great congregations of

¹⁸⁹ Labour Monthly (August 1933), p. 499.

¹⁹⁰ See CPGB/Dutt, Democracy and Fascism pp. 21-3.

¹⁹¹ On the shift in the CPGB’s emphasis regarding the nature of fascism at this point see Srebrnik, H.F. ‘The British Communist Party’s National Jewish Committee and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism During the Second World War’, Immigrants and Minorities 8, 1-2, (1989), p. 89.

¹⁹² Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 76.

¹⁹³ ibid. p. 282.

¹⁹⁴ Discussion (January 1936), p. 15.

peace-loving people continually meet to dedicate their lives to the fight against evil.¹⁹⁵

In seeking allies among socialists, liberals and even conservatives, the CPGB calculated that being identified with illegal and violent demonstrations would be a hindrance.¹⁹⁶ Without heralding the change publicly, the leadership began to back away from confrontation. It encouraged its members to engage persuasively with potential BUF supporters, to concentrate on more restrained political demonstrations and to make links with a wide range of anti-fascists.¹⁹⁷ An early indication of this approach came in July 1934, when the party in Brighton instructed its members to attend a communist rally rather than protest against a Mosley meeting, only to reverse the decision when it became clear that its call had fallen on deaf ears.¹⁹⁸

The party remained vulnerable to pressure from its own activists on this issue, and was unwilling to be seen conceding the streets to the BUF or its influence amongst anti-fascist to smaller parties on the left. Thus in October 1936 the CPGB was persuaded to cancel its plans to hold a rally in Trafalgar Square in support of the Spanish Republic when the likely scale of the Cable Street protest became apparent. The influence of the rank and file, along with the mobilising activities of groups like the ILP pushed the London leadership into supporting the effort in the East End. The party was later happy to take credit for the events of the day.¹⁹⁹ In a similar situation the following year, the party swung behind street opposition again when it became clear that large numbers of anti-fascists were going to challenge a BUF march through Bermondsey.²⁰⁰ In 1939, however, the CPGB chose not to oppose Mosley's rally at Earl's Court, and

¹⁹⁵ CPGB, For Peace and Plenty: Report of the Fifteenth Congress of the C.P.G.B. (London, 1938), pp. 15-16.

¹⁹⁶ On the desire to win Churchill and other anti-appeasement Conservatives to the Popular Front idea in 1938-9 see Black, Stalinism in Britain pp. 396-7; Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow pp. 243-4.

¹⁹⁷ See Ceplair, Under the Shadow pp. 164-70; Francis, Miners Against Fascism pp. 88-92; Renton, Fascism, Anti-Fascism p. 20.

¹⁹⁸ Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 124.

¹⁹⁹ See Jacobs, Out of the Ghetto pp. 237-45; Piratin, Our Flag pp. 19-20; Young Communist League, Thirteen Years of Anti-Fascist Struggle Manchester, 1943), p. 17; Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 125; Eaden & Renton, The Communist Party p. 58.

²⁰⁰ Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur p. 128.

instead sent many of its London activists off on a countryside ramble that day instead.²⁰¹

David Renton, critical historian of British communism, argued accurately of the changes in the CPGB's oppositional tactics that 'anti-fascism was linked, indeed subordinated, to its wider politics.'²⁰² This though, was true of all the organisations of the left.

In each case, analyses of fascism flowed from wider political perspectives, and the parties used them to attack their political opponents on the left. The overriding faith that Labour and the TUC had in democracy led them to conclude that fascism could not emerge from within the liberal state. It followed from this that fascism was an extraneous force, represented in Britain only by the black-shirted movements of the political fringe. These, therefore, were best ignored where possible, and the surest guarantee of their continued marginalisation was to educate potential recruits about the value of democracy as a means of delivering change. In their eyes, a rejection of democracy from a left wing standpoint was to invite dictatorship on the Soviet model, a denial of democracy the Labour and trades union leaders placed on a par with fascism itself.

Those groups that rejected parliament and reform were much more assertive in their opposition to fascism, and looked upon mobilising people for anti-fascist events as a fundamental part of building a revolutionary movement. Fascism was not, for them, a foreign ideology confined to those countries with weak democracies, but was the universal manifestation of capitalism in crisis. As such, they used fascism to illustrate the reality of class rule as it existed, in their eyes, behind the democratic façade. No institution, they felt, which carried the seeds of fascism within it, could be used to defeat fascism. To attempt to use such structures or to foster faith in them was, in effect, collusion with the very system that incubated fascism. Anti-fascism, therefore, could be a useful

²⁰¹ Revolutionary Communist Party/Grant, T. The Menace of Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It (London, 1948), p. 7.

²⁰² Renton, Fascism, Anti-Fascism p. 5.

weapon not just against fascists, but also against one's political opponents on the left.

Concurrence on the Nature and Purpose of the BUF

Despite the deep divisions the left had concerning potential sources of support for the BUF and over how best to oppose it, Mosley's movement did give British socialists and communists the chance to see at close quarters the development, composition and purpose of an openly fascist movement. While they argued over how to deal with the BUF, as they had over anti-fascism in Italy and Germany, there was agreement over the fundamental economic alignment of fascism. Regardless of the emphasis that the BUF placed on race and nation, they felt, these were in fact diversions. The essential fact was that British fascism, like its foreign variants, manifested itself during periods of crisis and would act as a bludgeon for use by those opposed to significant social change. Reformist socialists and the revolutionary Marxists may have differed in many respects, but they could agree on the nature and purpose of fascism, and their views were reinforced by the study of the established regimes in Italy and Germany during the later 1930s, and the experience of the Spanish Civil War.

6: Fascism: Cause of Unity and Division on the Left

Spain, Franco and Fascism

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 when right-wing generals led most of the army in a coup attempt against a moderate, centre-left Popular Front government that had been elected only five months previously. General Francisco Franco quickly emerged as the leader of the insurgents. Deep social divisions and an intense class conflict had preceded the rising, and Franco's movement embraced much of the Spanish right: the military, the church, monarchists, industrialists, landowners, fascists and traditionalist social movements.¹

The military rising was initially successful in only one third of Spanish territory. In large parts of the country it was checked not least by the actions of the anarchist and socialist trade union federations and the parties of the left, all of which armed themselves as best they could. The authority of the central government became eroded in many of these areas as workers and peasants collectivised large tracts of industry and agriculture. Militias were hastily formed and a failed coup attempt was therefore transformed into a civil war.

While Franco would maintain a strained unity between the diverse forces of the right, those ranged against him failed to contain their divisions, even in the most pressing circumstances. The anti-Franco alliance ranged from moderate Republicans to militant anarchists, with the various factions having completely divergent social and political aims. As soon as the civil war had begun, crucial questions arose as to its nature and the ultimate aims of those resisting Franco. Was this the defence of a democracy, or did the collectivisations of the early months herald a revolution and a general struggle against capitalism? The divisions over this ran so deep and engendered such in-fighting behind the lines

¹ A short but accurate contemporary assessment of the Spanish right can be found in Borkenau, F. The Spanish Cockpit (London, 1937), pp. 279-80.

that one author has termed it ‘that conflict which was the fundamental fact of the internal history of the Republican zone.’²

Central to this was the Spanish Communist Party, presenting itself as the defender of democracy in accordance with the Popular Front policy pursued by all of the Moscow-aligned parties. Popular Front governments, composed of liberals and socialists and supported by communists, had come to power in France and Spain by the time the civil war began.³ Furthermore, Stalin was trying to initiate an anti-fascist alliance with the western democracies, and was desperate not to be associated with revolutionary experiments of the type being initiated across anti-Franco Spain. The Soviet Union wanted to portray an image of moderation to the governments in London and Paris, and in consequence, the Spanish Communist Party had grown by becoming the most forceful defender of Spanish democracy and defender of both property rights and the ‘bourgeois’ order it had once decried.⁴ In doing this, the party had attracted the support of many in the Spanish middle classes who were alarmed at the revolution of July 1936.⁵ Its prestige was further boosted, and Moscow’s influence over the Republican government extended, by the arms and specialists that Stalin sent to Spain.

During the civil war, communism would become associated with provocative and violent efforts to undermine and destroy those to its left, most notably the anarcho-sindicalist trade union federation, the CNT, and the POUM, a small but vociferous Marxist party opposed to Stalin and Stalinism.⁶ This link between communism and counter-revolution is not generally understood today, and

² Alexander, R. The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War: Volume II (London, 1999), p. 970.

³ See Jackson, ‘The Spanish Popular Front, 1934 – 1937’.

⁴ See Cattell, D.T. Communism and the Spanish Civil War (Berkeley, 1955); Carr, E.H. The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War (London, 1984).

⁵ Probably the best account of the conflict behind the lines is in Bolloten, B. The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power During the Civil War (Chapel Hill, 1979). See also Alba, V. The Communist Party in Spain (New Jersey, 1983); Borkeau, World Communism pp. 406-7; Claudin, F. The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 223-7; Morrow, F. Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain (London, 1963 edn.), pp. 23-36. Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia is the best contemporary British account.

⁶ On the *Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo* see Peirats, J. The CNT in the Spanish Revolution (3 vols.) (Hastings, 2001, 2005 and 2006 respectively). On the *Partido Obrero de Unificacion*

neither was it during the 1930s, in all but small anti-Stalinist Marxist and anarchist circles. Yet Noam Chomsky wrote that ‘I do not think that one can comprehend the events in Spain without attaining this perspective.’⁷

The British Left and Spain

This ideological conflict within Spanish anti-fascism was to be replicated within the British left, albeit with less at stake, and showed once again that perceptions of fascism and the means of opposing it were predicated upon the broader political position of a given party, rather than on purely objective bases. Only when the goal or strategy of a party changed did these things shift, in accordance with it.

Yet the Spanish conflict, like fascism itself, acted as a cause of both unity and division within the left. It was commonly held that Franco’s rising in Spain had to be opposed, but pre-existing political stances determined that the left in Britain not only divided over strategy and tactics, but also over the nature of the war itself. Amongst British socialists and communists, the conflict was described in different terms depending upon the strategy and ideology of the tendencies concerned at that particular time.

The Far Left and Spain

When British proponents of revolution, like the ILP and the Trotskyist groups, looked at the Spanish war, they prioritised the far-reaching implications of the syndicalist and collectivist efforts of the workers at the beginning of the conflict.⁸ Fenner Brockway of the ILP felt that in Spain ‘they will make a proper job of it by carrying through the social revolution, and so destroy the

Marxista see Alba, V. & S. Schwartz, Spanish Marxism Versus Soviet Communism: A History of the POUM (New Jersey, 1988).

⁷ Chomsky, American Power p. 70.

⁸ For the ILP on this see ILP/McGovern, J. Terror in Spain (London, 1937); ILP/Huntz, J. Spotlight on Spain (London, 1937). For British Trotskyism see the Militant Group’s Fight for the Fourth International (April, 1937), p. 1.

Capitalism which is the parent of fascism.’⁹ C.L.R. James, a prominent figure at this time within British Trotskyism, hoped that the Spanish struggle would ‘start the revolutionary movement in Europe surging again. It would mean upheaval in France.’¹⁰ These groups were briefly optimistic that the example of revolution in Spain might reduce the influence of Moscow on class-conscious workers everywhere, and might allow for an alternative leadership to stake its claim. However, Stalinist persecution of dissident communists dominated the outlook of Trotskyists everywhere, and James accurately predicted the reaction of the Soviet Union and its proxies to the Spanish revolution, asserting that ‘Not only do they [the Stalinists] not want a Red Spain, they will fight to prevent it.’¹¹

Both the ILP and the Trotskyists opposed the Comintern-inspired Popular Front strategy that combined working-class organisations with liberals and democrats of various hues.¹² The ILP was critical of the Popular Front government in Madrid, stating ‘Coalition governments with Socialist ministers were still capitalist governments. A few miserable reforms were passed, but the ruling class recovered its courage and commenced to sabotage even these.’¹³ C.L.R. James similarly argued that ‘There is no room for the democratic republic in Spain today. Either Spain must go back to the nightmare of reaction...or on to the social revolution.’¹⁴

Both tendencies agreed that such broad coalitions inevitably diluted the revolutionary potentiality of anti-fascism, and, furthermore, that communist actions against anarchists and anti-Stalinist Marxists behind the lines in Spain

⁹ Brockway in Stapledon, O. (ed.), Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War (London, 1937), p. 7.

¹⁰ James, C.L.R. World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International (London, 1937), pp. 405–6.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 406.

¹² See ILP, Through the Class Struggle to Socialism (London, 1937), p. 4; Militant Labour League, Aims of the Militant Labour League (London, n.d.) in the Maitland/Sara papers, file MSS.15/4/1/3/. Trotskyists also opposed the Unity Campaign on the Grounds that it aimed at a Popular Front rather than a workers’ front. See Militant (January 1937), p. 1; Wicks, Keeping My Head pp. 176–9.

¹³ ILP London Divisional Council/Hultz, J. Spotlight on Spain (London, 1937), p. 5.

¹⁴ James, ‘Introduction’, in Low & Brea, Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War (London, 1937) pp. vi–vii.

were proving their point.¹⁵ James argued that Communist opposition to collectivisation was ‘preventing Spanish workers and peasants from doing the very things that created Soviet Russia.’¹⁶

The ILP and the Trotskyists both accepted the need for unity in the face of fascism, but believed that it should be led by a united front of all working-class organisations. They noted that in Spain, a broadly based Popular Front government had failed to take sufficiently radical measures to crush the forces of reaction before they had struck in July 1936. The ILP’s London Divisional Council therefore painted the civil war as an all-out struggle between fascism and revolution in a 1937 pamphlet, stating of Franco’s rebellion that ‘Fascism is the last resort of Capitalism struggling to keep its hold over the workers...the worker can answer only with a complete and revolutionary overthrow of capitalism – to remove the weed of fascism by digging capitalism up by the roots. To attempt to smash fascism in any other way can only end in failure and the delusion of the workers.’¹⁷

Other British revolutionaries interpreted the conflict in similarly stark terms. J.P.M. Millar, leading light of the the Plebs’ League, wrote on the outbreak of the civil war that ‘The news that is coming from Spain...reminds one poignantly of 1917’, while the Socialist League saw events in Spain as ‘a civil war between classes.’¹⁸

Labour and Spain: a War for Democracy

Those left-wing organisations that adhered to legality and constitutionalism, namely Labour and the TUC, argued that the civil war was being fought in defence of the democratic Republic and nothing more.¹⁹ In fact, this was the

¹⁵ See Brockway, F. Workers’ Front (London, 1938) p. 29; ILP/Brockway, F. The Truth About Barcelona (London, 1937), p. 6; Orwell, Homage pp. 193-212.

¹⁶ James, World Revolution p. 406.

¹⁷ ILP London Divisional Council, The Spanish Revolution, July 1936–May 1937 (London, 1937), p. 1.

¹⁸ The Plebs’ Magazine (August 1936), p. 177; Socialist League leaflet, A Workers’ or a Fascist Spain? Socialist League’s Manifesto (London, n.d.).

¹⁹ See National Council of Labour circular, ‘Help the Spanish Workers’ (27/7/36); National Council of Labour leaflet, ‘The Spanish Workers’ Defence of Democracy’ (19/8/36) both in

image of the war that was most commonly portrayed at the time. Despite public support for the Madrid government, there was scant understanding of actual conditions in Spain beyond the obvious facts of the military rising and the subsequent civil war. This was highlighted by George Orwell, who wrote in 1937 that 'Outside Spain few people grasped that there was a revolution; inside Spain nobody doubted it.'²⁰

Yet Labour and the TUC wholeheartedly accepted the argument that the Spanish war was being fought for the defence of legality and democracy. That view, and an inherent moderation, dictated their approach. Labour initially supported the internationally agreed but wholly porous agreement concerning non-intervention in Spain, and the leadership took a while to revoke this policy, much to the chagrin of many in the constituency and district parties.²¹

Even after that, the parliamentary party, along with the leaders of the TUC, shied away from any aggressive campaigning on the issue, despite the strong emotions that the conflict aroused within the labour movement and the country generally.²² Though the TUC had moved more quickly to revoke its support for non-intervention,²³ it nevertheless repudiated all calls for industrial action in support of Republican Spain.²⁴ The dominant organisations within the British labour movement restricted their activities to lobbying and fundraising for humanitarian relief, largely amongst their own members.²⁵

Labour Party archive, LSI Box 19, (LSI.19/3/2 and LSI.19/3/8 respectively); Labour Party, We Saw in Spain (London, 1938); National Council of Labour, What Spanish Democracy is Fighting For (London, 1938).

²⁰ Orwell, Homage to Catalonia p. 193.

²¹ For Labour's initial support for non-intervention see the Labour Press Service release, 'Labour and the Spanish Conflict', (28/8/36); Naylor, Labour's International Policy pp. 138-48.

²² See Fyrth, J. 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936 - 39', History Workshop Journal 35, (1993), pp. 153-64; Buchanan, T. 'Britain's Popular Front: Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', History Workshop Journal 31 (1991), p. 60; Fleay, C. & Saunders M. 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War', Historical Journal 28, 1 (1985), pp. 187-98; Saville, 'May Day 1937', p. 241.

²³ See Francis, Miners Against Fascism p. 148, 152 ff 52.

²⁴ See Labour Party archive, National Council of Labour minutes and papers, file 24th November 1936-9th June 1937, p. 13.

²⁵ By the end of the civil war, Labour and the TUC had raised £500,000 for relief work. See Labour Party archive, National Council of Labour minutes and papers, 24th January-25th July 1939, document 140B.

Labour hoped the League of Nations could resolve the conflict, and argued that the Republican government was entitled to support under the terms of the League's Covenant. Within the European labour movement, Labour and the TUC provoked anger by blocking any co-operation between the Labour and Socialist International, its trades union affiliates and the Comintern over Spain.²⁶ Domestically, Labour leaders were bitterly opposed to official joint actions with other parties of the left, on Spain as on any issue. The party believed that it could succeed electorally on its own, without the aid of any 'Popular Front' coalitions. From this flowed the leadership's threat to disaffiliate the Socialist League for its involvement in the Unity Campaign with the CPGB and the ILP.

The CPGB and the Spanish Republic: 'A Democratic and Parliamentary Republic of a New Type'²⁷

The Communist Party, by 1936 stressing its moderation in the pursuance of the Popular Front strategy, also framed the conflict in terms of a universal struggle then taking place for democratic liberties.²⁸ The party leader, Harry Pollitt, stated in the month following Franco's rising that 'The people of Spain are not fighting to establish Soviets, or the proletarian dictatorship. Only downright lying scoundrels, or misguided self-styled "lefts" declare that they are.'²⁹ This portrayal dovetailed well with the party's overall approach, leading one historian to conclude that 'A reactionary rebellion against a popular front government was an almost perfect opening for the CPGB.'³⁰ The party launched or supported a range of broad front campaigns concerning Spain, which, given

²⁶ See 'Report of Meeting of IFTU General Council and LSI Bureau, held in Paris, 4 & 5 December 1936', in Labour Party archive, National Council of Labour minutes and papers, file: 24th November 1936 – 9th June 1937, p. 13; 'Report of Joint Meeting of IFTU Executive and LSI Bureau, Paris, 17th February 1937', in *ibid.* document 21 B1-2; NCL minutes 22/6/37, pp. 34-5 in *ibid.* National Council of Labour minutes and papers file: 22nd June 1937 – 21st December 1937.

²⁷ This communist description is cited in Bolloten, Spanish Revolution p. 215.

²⁸ Daily Worker (22/7/36), p. 1.

²⁹ *ibid.* (6/8/36), p. 1.

³⁰ Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow p. 230.

Labour's refusal to share platforms with them,³¹ allowed communists to gain influence and credibility in the eyes of many labour movement activists.³²

Though the party acted on Comintern instructions in recruiting and transporting volunteers for the International Brigades, it was made clear that these forces were in Spain to support the Republican government and not to establish a regime on the Soviet model.³³ The CPGB condemned the advocates of revolution in Spain as irresponsible elements who were consciously (as they argued of the Trotskyists) or unconsciously (in the case of the ILP) playing into the hands of fascism by undermining the capabilities of the Republic with reckless and ill-timed social experiments.³⁴ The CPGB vilified the POUM, the ILP's sister party in Spain for the same reasons, though their attacks became more vehement in tandem with Comintern hostility towards Trotskyists and dissident Marxists everywhere. The CPGB joined with all other Comintern sections in characterising the POUM's support for the Spanish revolution as treachery to the anti-fascist struggle. J.R. Campbell wrote in 1937 that 'The POUM declares that the existing Governments in Spain must be overthrown by force...objectively and subjectively their policy is aiding the fascist counter-revolution.'³⁵

The Unity Campaign

Nevertheless, despite these different interpretations of the nature of the Spanish war, the pressure for united action that it produced on the left did help to initiate the most concerted effort for unity on the left since the CPGB had adopted the Popular Front policy in 1935.

³¹ For examples of the party enforcing this see Labour Party archive, files LP/SCW/1/11, 1/12 and 1/29. For Labour and the TUC's refusal to joint the Spanish Medical Aid Committee on the same grounds see National Council of Labour minutes (24/11/36), pp. 2-4.

³² See Branson, History of the Communist Party pp. 224-9.

³³ See Richardson, R.D. Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War (Lexington, 1982), pp. 31-46.

³⁴ See Harry Pollitt's article, 'To the Aid of the Spanish People', in International Press Correspondence (8/8/36), p. 2; John Strachey's article in Left News (July 1937), p. 442.

³⁵ Campbell, J.R. Spain's Left Critics (London, 1937), pp. 6-7 and 16.

The Spanish Civil War fuelled the arguments of those who had been calling for a common anti-fascist front, be it exclusively of the parties of the left, or on a broader basis. In Britain, one outcome of this was the formation of the Unity Campaign in January 1937.³⁶ This comprised the Communist Party, the ILP and, from the left of the Labour Party, the Socialist League.

Given the different political strategies and aims of these groups, and the history of conflict between the CPGB and the ILP, it was an ill-starred venture. Some historians have suggested that the CPGB used it cynically, partly to build its links with Labour through contact with the Socialist League, and partly to win activists away from the ILP.³⁷ Yet for a while, it appeared to some that the Spanish conflict might foster something approaching genuine unity within the British left.

This was not the view of British Trotskyist groups though. They knew that the hostility of both the Comintern and the CPGB to dissident Marxists and followers of the now exiled Trotsky would make the formation of any broad front conditional upon their exclusion. Harry Wicks, then working inside the Socialist League, argued that the Unity Campaign was ‘transparently designed to silence left wing criticism of Soviet foreign policy.’³⁸ In any case, the increasing repression directed against the POUM by communists in Spain further persuaded Trotskyists that no common endeavour was possible with the CPGB anyway.³⁹

However, it was largely due to differing interpretations over the nature of the Spanish struggle that the Unity Campaign eventually collapsed, amidst much acrimony.⁴⁰

³⁶ See Watkins, K.W. Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion (London, 1963), p. 181. The Campaign’s manifesto is reprinted in Cole, People’s Front pp. 357-9.

³⁷ See Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow pp. 233-6; Littlejohns, ‘Decline of the Independent Labour Party’, pp. 216-24.

³⁸ Wicks, Keeping My Head p. 178.

³⁹ See for example Militant (September 1937)

Divisions Over Spain Become Acute

As divisions between Spanish anti-fascists became more acute, so they exacerbated tensions between the parties of the British left. The Spanish Communist Party grew rapidly during the civil war, not least due to the reflected prestige from Soviet aid to the Madrid government. It also drew support from the middle classes, because the Popular Front policy and Stalin's desire to win friends amongst the democracies demanded that Spanish communists took a stand against collectivisation and revolution. The civil war coincided with the purges and show trials in Russia, and the Comintern directed its sections to crack down on 'Trotskyist' deviationists in every country. In Britain, the CPGB attacked the ILP over its support for revolution in Spain, saying the party was mouthing 'the pro-Fascist ravings of Trotsky under the delusion that they are criticising the Soviet Union from the left.'⁴¹ The venerable ILP leader, James Maxton, said of communist actions that 'I can now understand the Trotsky purge in Russia. No honest person who is a member of the Communist Party can defend this murderous campaign in Spain. I accuse the Comintern of brutality on a par with Hitler, Mussolini and Franco.'⁴²

In Spain, where Soviet agents were operating both within and without the Communist Party, attacks were particularly murderous, with revolutionaries being imprisoned and assassinated, and their organisations banned. This was in addition to the use of communist and Republican forces to destroy collectives in the anti-Franco zones.⁴³ The ILP's John McGovern argued that 'To oppose the anti-revolutionary line of the Popular Front and to criticise Moscow puts your life in serious danger at the hands of the Communists in Spain.'⁴⁴

When communist and Republican forces seized control of the collectivised telephone and telegraph industry in Barcelona itself, in May 1937, four days of

⁴⁰ See Brockway, Workers' Front p. 224; Buchanan, Spanish Civil War p. 120.

⁴¹ CPGB/Campbell, J.R. Soviet Policy and its Critics (London, 1939), p. 308.

⁴² New Leader (10/12/37), p. 1.

⁴³ See Leval, G. Collectives in the Spanish Revolution (London, 1975); Fraser, R. Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War (New York, 1979), p. 373; Richards, V. Lessons of the Spanish Revolution (3rd ed. London, 1995), p. 118; Alexander, The Anarchists. Vol. II pp. 794-5; Orwell, Homage to Catalonia p. 98.

street-fighting followed between themselves and the anarchist rank and file of the CNT, which represented the majority of workers in Catalonia. The CNT leadership, left with the choice of brokering an unfavourable deal or effectively sponsoring a civil war behind the lines, eventually managed to persuade its members to return to work, representing a further blow to the collectivised sector. The outcome of the fighting led to increased communist influence within the Republican government⁴⁵ and an intensified persecution of its opponents on the left.⁴⁶

The 'May Days', as this internecine conflict became known, added to tensions between different left factions in Britain. The ILP saw the attack on a collectivised industry as 'an undoubted provocation'.⁴⁷ The CPGB's Harry Pollitt, on the other hand, presented the resultant fighting in Barcelona as 'this stab in the back to the cause of Spanish democracy.'⁴⁸ John Langdon-Davis, a journalist sympathetic to the communist position saw the May outbreak as 'a frustrated putsch by the Trotskyist POUM'.⁴⁹ Another fellow-traveller, John Strachey, implicitly linked criticism of the 'Trotskyist' POUM and the 'uncontrollable' Spanish anarchists to the CPGB's opponents on the left in Britain. He stated that the May Days were 'the consequences of Leftism, and the sectarianism of which it is the cause and effect.'⁵⁰ The arrest and subsequent death in a communist-run prison in Spain of the ILP's Bob Smillie, also contributed to the deterioration in relations between the parties in the Unity Campaign.⁵¹

⁴⁴ ILP/McGovern, Terror in Spain p. 5.

⁴⁵ Several sources cite the May Days as the factor behind the replacement of Republican premier, Largo Caballero, with Dr. Juan Negrin – a right-wing socialist and no friend of revolution. See Broue, P. & Temime, E. The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain (London, 1972), p. 295, ff. 47; Degras, Documents. Vol. III p. 401; Alba, Communist Party in Spain p. 235; Richards, Lessons of the Spanish Revolution p. 128.

⁴⁶ On the banning of the POUM, the murder of its leader and the trial of its central committee see Alba & Schwartz, Spanish Marxism pp. 231-7; Bolloren, Spanish Revolution pp. 516-21.

⁴⁷ Brockway, Truth About Barcelona p. 9.

⁴⁸ Daily Worker (25/5/37).

⁴⁹ Cited in the POUM's English-language paper The Spanish Revolution (19/5/37)

⁵⁰ Left Bookclub News (July 1937)

⁵¹ See Buchanan, 'Death of Bob Smillie', pp. 437-9. More recent evidence appears to support the fact that Smillie was murdered in prison, and that the ILP were aware of the full facts of the case before the end of the civil war, but did not make their knowledge fully known so as not

These differing interpretations of the nature of the Spanish Civil War, and the fact that one of the Spanish parties proscribed at communist insistence was an affiliate of the ILP, damaged the Unity Campaign. In addition, the parties involved in it viewed the nature and purpose of the campaign differently. The ILP tended to see it as a united front of workers' parties, whereas the CPGB appeared to want to use the involvement of the Socialist League within it as a means of drawing closer to Labour. This was seen as a first step towards the Popular Front they really sought. Incompatible stances were highlighted even in the negotiations preceding the formation of the Unity Campaign, of which the CPGB MP Willie Gallacher remembered 'The ILP representatives took an ultra-left attitude on all questions[,] always putting forward the most extreme proposals, proposals that would have made any approach to the Labour Party impossible.'⁵² The ILP would eventually conclude that 'The experience of the campaign emphasises that it is a mistake to attempt to realise an artificial basis of unity by stifling fundamental differences of policy'.⁵³

But the Unity Campaign was fatally undermined when the Labour Party leadership insisted that its third component, the Socialist League, disband or be expelled.⁵⁴ The League reluctantly accepted this, withdrew from the Unity Campaign and duly dissolved itself.⁵⁵ Therefore, as the civil war dragged on, it transpired that each segment of the British left increasingly pursued its own efforts to aid the struggle in Spain.

Concurrence on Franco and Spanish Fascism

It is now commonplace for historians to assert that General Francisco Franco was not a fascist.⁵⁶ He and the movement he led are now more often described

to damage the overall Republican effort. See Newsinger, J. 'The Death of Bob Smillie', *Historical Journal* 41, 2 (1998), pp. 575-8.

⁵² Gallacher, W. *The Rolling of the Thunder* (London, 1947), pp. 147-8.

⁵³ ILP, *Annual Report of the National Administrative Council of the Independent Labour Party* (London, 1938), p11.

⁵⁴ See the Labour Party circulars 'Party Loyalty: An Appeal to the Movement', (12/1/37) and 'The Labour Party and the so-called "Unity Campaign"' (n.d.), in the Labour Party archive, James Middleton papers, file JSM/CP/1-.

⁵⁵ See *Tribune* (21/5/37) p. 8 for the League's statement on this.

⁵⁶ See Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* p. xviii; Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* p. 23; Vajda, M. *Fascism as a Mass Movement* (London, 1976), pp. 14-15; Meisel, J.H. *Counter-*

as being conservative, reactionary, autocratic, militarist, Catholic or traditionalist, with only the *Falange Espanola* identified as being openly fascist. Though the Falange consciously modelled itself on the Nazi SA and the Italian Blackshirts, it was always but a subordinate faction of Franco's coalition, and was forcibly merged with monarchists and conservatives into a single political party in April 1937.⁵⁷ This interpretation of Franco's politics is usually reinforced by claims that after the civil war, Franco rejected the radical proposals of the Falangists, preferring staid and stolid conservatives as his ministers.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, despite their differences of interpretation, the British left was agreed in essence that fascism was the political form taken by a ruling class in crisis, and shared the view that the Franco movement represented fascism in its Spanish form. This belief incorporated the view that, in semi-feudal Spain, the composition of a fascist movement would be different from Hitler's in Germany or even from Mussolini's in the more agrarian Italian context.⁵⁹ Spanish fascism appeared, like the country itself, to be at a somewhat less advanced stage than its European counterparts. At the outbreak of the war, Edward Conze wrote that 'The Spanish fascists are thus still in the process of development and immaturity...Big business is not on their side yet. The fascists are too much allied to the agrarians.'⁶⁰

The collusion of Hitler and Mussolini in the planning of the rising, the overtly fascist character of the Falange and the brutality meted out to workers and peasants in the areas taken by Franco further convinced the left that this was fascism in the raw. Labour asserted that the rising had been 'organised by

Revolution: How Revolutions Die (New York, 1966), pp. 184-5. That the Franco regime itself exaggerated its traditionalist character as opposed to its fascist traits after 1945 see Preston, P. 'War of Words: The Spanish Civil War and the Historians', in Preston, P. (ed.) Revolution and War in Spain, 1931 – 1939 (London, 1993), p. 3.

⁵⁷ Thomas, H. The Spanish Civil War (3rd ed. Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 639-40.

⁵⁸ See Seton-Watson, 'Fascism, Right and Left', p. 191.

⁵⁹ See Manning, L. What I Saw in Spain (London, 1935), pp. 29-38; New Leader (31/7/36), p. 3 and (21/8/36), p. 2; CPGB/Pollitt, H. Save Spain From Fascism (London, 1936), p. 5; Borkenau, Spanish Cockpit p. 50; Cole, People's Front p. 124; Jellinek, F. The Civil War in Spain (London, 1938), p. 142, 609-11; for Orwell on this see Seidman, M. 'The Un-Orwellian Barcelona', European History Quarterly 2, (April, 1990), p. 163.

⁶⁰ Conze, Spain Today p. 80.

Fascist forces in Spain...the Fascist States openly support their Fascist accomplice.’⁶¹ Arthur Koestler stated that the Falangist creed was ‘the establishment of a corporate state, the leadership principle’, while in terms of beliefs, Koestler argued that the Falange reflected ‘with striking exactitude the ideological features of the German, Italian and French semi-military Fascist organisations.’⁶² Another widely read book on Spain asserted that the Falange were ‘slavishly copying the Nazi model.’⁶³

Beyond the overtly fascist Falange, there was a feeling that the parties of the Spanish right had moved from conservatism to fascism in the face of an intensified class conflict. They had bloodily suppressed the rising of the Asturian miners in 1934 and then agreed to unconstitutional and violent action against the elected government in 1936. The patriotism and traditionalism that characterised the pronouncements of Franco’s coalition were, in the eyes of many on the left, mere cover for its fascist intent.⁶⁴ The context of the times and the brutal actions of the Franco movement against Spanish workers rendered nuances between authoritarianism and fascism in Spain inappropriate to the British left.⁶⁵ The concurrence within the left over the essential economic realities of fascism did not just apply to Spain, but can be seen in their observations about the nature of fascism in Italy and Germany too.

Italy and Germany: Consensus Within the Left on the Economic Reality of Fascism

Despite their differences, British socialists and communists shared a general consensus about the reality of fascist rule as the 1930s wore on and conditions in Italy and Germany became more apparent. The parties were agreed that whatever its origins or causes, fascism, once in power, acted against the

⁶¹ National Council of Labour, What Spanish Democracy is Fighting For p. 11.

⁶² Koestler, A. Spanish Testament (London, 1937), p. 78.

⁶³ Gannes, H. & Repard, T. Spain in Revolt (London, 1936), p. 58.

⁶⁴ ibid. pp. 98-9. Labour and the TUC declared the rebel movement to be fascist in their first pronouncement on the civil war: see ‘Emergency Resolution – Civil War in Spain’ (22/7/36) in Labour Party archive, file LSI.19/3/1.

⁶⁵ Some historians agree that whatever Franco’s personal politics, his movement was created by crises of the state and parliamentary legitimacy identical to those that launched other fascist movements. See Eley, ‘What Produces Fascism’, p. 79.

interests of the working class and for those who had wielded economic power before its accession. In supporting its assertions about the economic orientation of fascism, the left was able to use a mass of statistics, reports and firsthand accounts from across the political spectrum, including the official publications of the fascist states themselves.

'Mature' Fascism in Italy, 1926-1939

Corporatism

British socialists and communists and both recognised that Italian corporatism in its early stages was located more in the realm of ideas than in reality. It had been widely reported that Giuseppe Volpe, a leading Italian corporate theorist, had stated in 1928 that 'The Corporative State is on the horizon...an equal right to control the national economic system will be granted to all social classes.'⁶⁶ But British leftists noted that only one corporation, and that regulating the theatrical sector, was functioning before May 1934, when Mussolini, stung by criticism as to the ephemeral nature of any distinctively fascist economic structures, hastily ordered the formation of 22 more.⁶⁷ But in these skeletal organisations there was no equality between the classes, the left noted. Fascist Party functionaries regulated the conduct of the state-sponsored labour organisations, while employers dominated industry and the economy with scant interference.⁶⁸

The British left was aware that separate organisations existed in Italy for employers and employees in given industries, but that the lack of any higher co-ordinating bodies left owners and managers in control.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the regime did issue a barrage of publications concerning how the corporations were to function and these led many commentators in the mainstream press to

⁶⁶ Cited in Salvemini, *Under the Axe* p. 114.

⁶⁷ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* pp. 200-1; Ashton, E.B. *The Fascist: His State and His Mind* (London, 1937), p. 288.

⁶⁸ On this see Williamson, P.J. *Corporatism in Perspective: An Introductory Guide to Corporatist Theory* (London, 1989), pp. 38-9; Williamson, *Varieties of Corporatism* pp. 88-9.

⁶⁹ See Salvemini, *Under the Axe* pp. 33 and 115-9; Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* pp. 178-81.

assume that a new type of economics, beyond capitalism and communism, was beginning to evolve in Italy.⁷⁰ The left were unimpressed though, recognising that fascist corporatism, despite the fanfares which surrounded it, drew heavily on earlier interventionist economic theories propounded by the Italian Nationalist Association and the Catholic Church.⁷¹ Labour's William Gillies argued in 1934 that what had actually come into being was 'a jungle of laws, decrees and regulations...After twelve years, foreign correspondents have become submerged in the Vesuvian eruption of the Italian Stationery Office.'⁷²

It was clear that in Italy, the pre-fascist industrial concerns remained intact and in control of their enterprises, despite the belated proliferation of corporative bodies for different sectors. In 1934, the National Joint Council of Labour and the TUC stated that in comparison with the all-embracing co-ordination propounded by fascist corporatists 'there is still no Corporative State in Italy', regarding the very idea as 'an invention of the modern propagandists of Fascism.'⁷³ Two years later, Harold Laski asserted that 'The Corporations, of which we have heard so much have no real existence...There is no corporate state. There is a series of Government declarations which relate to no existent practice.'⁷⁴

The highest corporative structure created by 1934, the Grand Council of Corporations, was, in the words of Labour and the TUC, merely a mechanism to ensure that 'the two or three hundred great industrialists and financiers who govern Italy will determine labour conditions.'⁷⁵ In 1937, E.B. Ashton, an American Democrat, had an influential work published in Britain. In it he reminded those beyond the left who retained a lingering faith in fascist egalitarianism that Article 8 of Mussolini's Carta del Lavoro, 'the gospel of

⁷⁰ See for example Drucker, Economic Man pp. 124-34; Barnes, J.T.S. Fascism (London, 1934), pp. 137-95. The falsity of this view is set out in Neumann, Behemoth pp. 222-6.

⁷¹ See Ashton, The Fascist p. 287; Finer, Mussolini's Italy p. 492. That fascist corporatism bore the imprints of earlier theories of pro-business interventionism see Williamson, Varieties of Corporatism pp. 84-6; Payne, History of Fascism p. 12; Weber, (ed.) Varieties of Fascism p. 77.

⁷² 'First Part of a Lecture Delivered by Mr. Gillies', (1934), in TUC archive, file MSS.292/743/4, p. 3.

⁷³ National Joint Council report 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', (26/2/34), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Left News (October 1936), p. 121.

⁷⁵ National Joint Council report 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', (26/2/34), p. 3.

corporate theory', had stated a decade earlier that 'The corporate state considers private initiative the most valuable and most effective instrument for the protection of national interests.'⁷⁶

In 1938 the Italian Chamber of Deputies was finally closed down, and replaced by the 'Chamber of Fasces and Corporations', which, according to fascist propaganda, was the manifestation of true corporate government. In fact, leftists noted, it represented the almost entirely congruent interests of business leaders and the Fascist Party, under the direction of Mussolini.⁷⁷ If there was 'industrial peace' under fascism in Italy, it was because of repression and the control of labour organisations by blackshirt executives, the left believed. One Left Book Club author argued in 1939 that in Italy, "'Class-collaboration" is like the collaboration of horse and rider.'⁷⁸

The British Trotskyist, Charles Van Gelderen, serving with the army in Italy in 1943, had the opportunity to discover the reality of the corporative system in his discussions with Italians. In a letter home he wrote that 'Peasants had to sell their products to the Fascist Corporations at fixed prices, who then sold it to the consumers at enormously inflated prices. The only people who gained from the Corporations were the big landowners and industrialists and, of course, the Fascist bureaucracy which absorbed quite a proportion of the surplus value created by the workers and peasants.'⁷⁹

Fascist attempts to present corporatism as a specific ideology were rejected across the spectrum of the British left as mere window dressing for the enforced maintenance of capitalist rule. The TUC asserted of Mussolini's own tract, *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, that 'The Duce's statement of the philosophical basis of Fascism is one of Mussolini's afterthought: he confesses that when he formed the Fascist Revolutionary Party he had no doctrinal

⁷⁶ Ashton, *The Fascist* pp. 284 and 286.

⁷⁷ Schmidt, C.T. *The Corporate State in Action: Italy Under Fascism* (London, 1939), p. 81.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 106.

⁷⁹ Charles Van Gelderen to John and Janet Goffe, (26/10/43), in the Haston papers, file DJH 13 C/3, pp. 1-2.

attitude.⁸⁰ The ILP also quoted Mussolini on this point, remembering that he had stated, 'What we need is not a programme, but action.'⁸¹ The left felt that in terms of ideology, fascism lacked a significant degree of distinctiveness from that of its capitalist backers. The left could therefore agree with Mussolini when he stated that fascist theory had 'found its realisation in the laws and institutions of the regime as enacted successively in the years 1926, 1927 and 1928.'⁸²

Trade Unions and Arbitration

As fascism entrenched itself in Italy, the position of the trade unions, precarious as it had been on Mussolini's assumption of power, worsened dramatically. Though there had been no outright ban on independent trade unions, there had been repression. The fascist unions that had been formed October 1922 operated alongside the existing workers' organisations, and had consolidated their role within the workplace through a combination of threats, violence, management partiality and government patronage. In 1926, membership of the fascist unions was made mandatory, thus eroding virtually all freedom of action on the part of the workers.

Compulsory arbitration was also introduced then, with the publicly proclaimed aim of ending class conflict and industrial strife. Arbitration boards and tribunals were created before which grievances could be aired. The British left recognised that these were inherently biased, with Laski stating in 1936 that 'The individual worker has no real protection before the committees of conciliation...the Labour Courts, supposedly evolved for the protection of the workers, have become just one more instrument for their material degradation'⁸³

Where frustration with working conditions broke through fears of reprisals, as with strikes in the steel industry in 1925, the left noted that these were generally brought to a premature and unsatisfactory end by the intervention of the fascist

⁸⁰ Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (December 1933), p. 89.

⁸¹ New Leader (1/2/35), p. 5.

⁸² Mussolini, B. 'The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism', Political Quarterly 4, 3 (July-Sept. 1933), pp. 341-56, p. 344.

⁸³ Left News (October 1936), p. 121.

labour organisations, which patched up a deal with management. During the rare instances of industrial action under fascism, this tactic was invariably used.⁸⁴

Wages and Taxation

John Strachey stated in 1935 that ‘the course of wages in fascist countries will provide almost conclusive evidence of the nature of fascism’, and pointed out that even Italy’s own unreliable economic statistics showed a fall dating back beyond the Depression.⁸⁵ The Young Communist League agreed, and used League of Nations figures to show that Italian pay rates had been ‘the lowest in Europe’ between 1929 and 1932.⁸⁶

In 1934, Labour reported that wages in Italy were between 35% and 50% lower than they had been in 1921, while the TUC produced similar figures at around the same time.⁸⁷ The Plebs’ League noted a survey in the same year that found Italian wages to be 40% of those in Britain.⁸⁸ Dutt, for the Communist Party, concurred with these statistics, and cited an enthusiast for corporatism, Paul Einzig, who had proclaimed of Italy in 1933 that ‘In no country was it so easy to obtain a reduction in wages.’⁸⁹

That poverty was spreading and deepening under fascism was manifested beyond just falling pay rates. The Socialist League cited an *Economist* report in 1935 stating that the cost of living in Italy had risen by 20% in two years, and also noted that meat consumption in Milan had fallen by over a quarter in the

⁸⁴ The steel strike is covered in Salvemini, *Under the Axe* pp. 29-32. Figures on strikes under Italian fascism are in Schmidt, *Corporate State in Action* p. 105.

⁸⁵ Strachey, *Capitalist Crisis* p. 343. The figures are on pp. 344-5. Salvemini concurs in *Under the Axe* pp. 182-9.

⁸⁶ YCL, *Ten Points* p. 5.

⁸⁷ YCL, *Ten Points* p. 5; ‘Report on Replies to Fascist Questionnaire’ (6/12/34), in Labour Party archive, file LP/FAS/34/1, p. 2; *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (November 1934), p. 90. This figure has been confirmed by later researchers. See Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* p. 32.

⁸⁸ *The Plebs’ Magazine* (May 1934), p. 108.

⁸⁹ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 204. Figures for wage reductions are on p. 208. On Einzig’s over-estimation of fascist economic achievements see Salvemini, *Under the Axe* pp. 157-61.

five years to 1932.⁹⁰ Direct taxation rose under fascism for all classes in Italy, though it was those on lower incomes that were disproportionately affected, suffering from higher prices while not benefiting in terms of increased profits or lower wage costs as did the proprietors of the larger concerns.⁹¹ Capital gains tax, inheritance tax, and the tax on excessive war profits were all abolished under fascism.⁹²

Unemployment and Public Works

Whereas elsewhere in Europe, the scale of unemployment fluctuated in time with the ebb and flow of economic crises between the wars, in Italy it remained at chronically high levels throughout the entire period. At the height of the Depression, British communists had cited internationally accepted figures showing that five million Italians were without work, while the left still put the number of unemployed, based on the Italian government's own data, at over a million in 1932 and one million in 1934.⁹³ Underemployment was also a problem. Labour and the TUC published figures asserting that the proportion of Italians engaged on short time working had risen from 6% in 1928 to 30% in 1932.⁹⁴

The persistent failure of the Mussolini regime to tackle unemployment raises questions about the interpretation of those historians who see Italian fascism as a 'developmental dictatorship'.⁹⁵ Italian unemployment was not a consequence of new and efficient industries displacing workers from older, more labour intensive concerns. It remained at a high level precisely because Italian industry and agriculture was not modernised to the point where it could compete with

⁹⁰ Socialist League/Murphy, *Fascism!* p. 4.

⁹¹ The disproportionate burden of taxation was noted from an early stage by the left. See for example *The Plebs' Magazine* (July 1927), p. 229.

⁹² See Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* p. 33.

⁹³ Rudlin, W.A *The Growth of Fascism in Great Britain* (London, 1935), p. 34; National Joint Council report 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', (26/2/34), p. 4.

⁹⁴ National Council of Labour, *What is This Fascism?* p. 8. Even official Italian figures stated in 1932 that 200,000 people were working shortened hours. See Rudlin, *Growth of Fascism* p. 34.

⁹⁵ See for example, Gregor, A.J. *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship* (Princeton, 1979)

other European economies, and Italy remained a net importer of manufactured goods and food throughout the period.

Italian fascism did, however, boast of its system of social insurance, pensions, and sickness funds. But where the left examined these, it found them to be overwhelmingly contracted not between the state and the worker, but between the employer and the employee, which invariably meant that employers passed any increased costs onto their customers in higher prices. The left also pointed out that many of these schemes predated fascism, having been instituted in the Giolittian era.⁹⁶ In addition, only one in four of the Italian unemployed received any assistance at all under fascism.⁹⁷

Mussolini made great play of public works schemes in Italy, presenting them as examples of fascism's ability to mobilise, co-ordinate and direct great projects and masses of workers. However, Labour and the TUC differentiated between their vision of a planned socialist economy, and the fascist dream of massive, hierarchically directed schemes. While making this distinction, they recognised public works schemes were not unique to fascism, and were far less effective than the Duce claimed. In 1934 they argued that 'such things were done in Italy before the arrival of Mussolini, and on a greater scale elsewhere since Mussolini.'⁹⁸

British Trotskyist, Charles Van Gelderen, travelling through Italy with the army in 1943, saw that the attention heaped on the prestige public works schemes had served to conceal a more widespread neglect, stating that 'The Pontine Marshes were drained with much publicity but in Sicily and the South there are hundreds of such places...Such was Mussolini's Italy – a gigantic edifice built on fraud.'⁹⁹ He, like later historians, recognised that most Italian

⁹⁶ See Schmidt, *Corporate State in Action* pp. 114-6.

⁹⁷ Rudlin, *Growth of Fascism* p. 34.

⁹⁸ National Joint Council report 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', (26/2/34), p. 4. On this see also Salvemini, *Under the Axe* p. 414. Williamson, in *Varieties of Corporatism* p. 99, points out that less than 20% of the Italian jobless were ever employed on any of the public works schemes

⁹⁹ Van Gelderen to John and Janet Goffe, (26/10/43), p. 2.

workers remained alienated from the regime despite its claimed achievements.¹⁰⁰

The Wider Economy

Despite the presence of the middle classes in the ranks of the Italian fascist movement, small businesses in fact fared badly under fascism. The persistent economic malaise that Mussolini presided over produced a bankruptcy rate well above the average of comparable European economies and, according to Labour and the TUC, reached well upwards of 20,000 in 1934.¹⁰¹

The drive for autarky had not led to the development of Italy's productive capacity, but had caused the country's overseas trade to decline drastically even before 1929.¹⁰² The relatively under-industrialised nature of the Italian economy, its failure to develop under fascism and the excessive fiscal demands which militarism and overseas military commitments placed upon the Italian exchequer meant that fascist Italy was always significantly more indebted than the previous democratic governments had been.¹⁰³ The ILP noted in 1936 that the budget deficit at the beginning of the year had been £33 million, and that the Abyssinian war was costing the country £350,000 per day.¹⁰⁴

Towards the end of the 1930s, when much of the rest of Europe had emerged from the worst effects of the slump, and when economic recovery, not least in Germany, was being helped by rearmament, the Italian economy was still in crisis. While Mussolini may have felt that he and Italy had established an enhanced international standing with victory in Abyssinia and intervention in the Spanish Civil War, these foreign policy commitments had drained an

¹⁰⁰ See Ghirado, D.Y. 'Citta Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle', *JCH* 31, 2, (April, 1996), pp. 362-7.

¹⁰¹ The Plebs' League noted that smaller Italian firms suffered from a restriction of credit as this was increasingly directed towards larger concerns directly associated with state interests, such as armaments and civil engineering. See *The Plebs' Magazine* (July 1927), p. 229. The 1934 figures are in the National Joint Council report 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', (26/2/34), p. 4.

¹⁰² See Garratt, G.T. *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London, 1938), p. 11.

¹⁰³ Fascist Italy owed almost 100,000 million lire by 1928. See Nenni, *Ten Years of Tyranny* p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ *New Leader* (3/1/36), p. 1.

already weak economy. Beyond Mussolini's talk of a new Roman Empire, the reality was that the Italian economy was in no shape to sustain a general war, and the left recognised this, using it to challenge the apparent willingness of the British government to appease Italy. Labour and the TUC argued in 1938 that 'The Government is determined to negotiate with a bankrupt dictator.'¹⁰⁵

Foreign Policy and War

The left shared the belief that despite Mussolini's early claims that fascism was not for export, his general policy was one of colonialism and territorial expansion, which would eventually lead to war. Despite the differences within the left over the relevance of frustrated national ambition and the rise of fascism, all could agree that once in power, fascist foreign policy had a tendency to evolve in an aggressive manner that revived memories of the period preceding 1914.

The revolutionary left, which most closely equated fascism and capitalism in the economic sphere, were happy to make the same parallels when it came to foreign policy. Any capitalist economy, they held, had an inherent need to maintain profitability, and when this could not be generated from within the national economy, powerful voices demanded the conquest of foreign markets and resources. This imperialism was accepted as having been central to the outbreak of the First World War and became generally associated by the left with fascist foreign policy.

Marxists made this point most forcefully,¹⁰⁶ but it can be found across the left. John Strachey argued that this 'externalisation' of capital, not least in the case of Italy, would lead to conflict.¹⁰⁷ He stated that fascism had 'no economic programme whatsoever, except the intensification of every one of those characteristics of capitalism which drive it on to its own destruction.'¹⁰⁸ Maurice

¹⁰⁵ National Council of Labour leaflet, 'Labour and the Crisis in Foreign Policy', (1938), in Labour Party archive, file NCL Minutes and Papers, 10 January – 26 July 1938.

¹⁰⁶ For an exposition of this see Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* pp. 1-53.

¹⁰⁷ Strachey, *Capitalist Crisis* p. 368.

¹⁰⁸ *Left News* (December 1936), p. 173.

Dobb, economist and CPGB member, argued that fascism had taken on the task of 'organising the nation both spiritually by intensive propaganda and practically by military preparations and authoritarian centralisation for an ambitious campaign of territorial expansion.'¹⁰⁹ The CPGB's youth organisation cited Mussolini himself on the matter, when he asserted that 'Italian expansion is a matter of life and death.'¹¹⁰

As early as 1927, the left had been aware of Italian interest in Abyssinia, and had even then framed this in terms of economic expansionism and imperialism. A leading member of the Plebs' League had written that 'The Fascist Government represents a combination of banking and industrial interests...and both of these classes must secure colonial expansion in order to maintain the profits of their economic system. The industrialists require a steady source of raw materials, well under their control, and an assured market for their manufactured articles, while the iron and steel masters see in a spirited military policy the best prospect of sales of heavy munitions of war. The financiers equally desire further fields for their investments as the home market becomes increasingly inadequate.'¹¹¹

When Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in 1935, Labour's Ellen Wilkinson wrote that it would be a mistake to see this as adventurism or the desire to mimic ancient Rome, stating that 'It is the policy carried through by an Imperialist country when it is in a tight place.'¹¹² The Socialist League agreed, arguing that 'the struggle over Abyssinia...will be waged for the economic aggrandisement of the national capitalist interests.'¹¹³ Even those of a more moderate hue stressed the economic imperatives behind foreign policy ventures such as Mussolini's Ethiopian war. Labour's J.E.L. Birch called it 'the calculated unemployment-easing Abyssinian campaign.'¹¹⁴ Similarly, the *Manchester Guardian* journalist, G.T. Garratt, in a widely-read work on fascist Italy, stated

¹⁰⁹ Dobb, Political Economy and Capitalism p. 259.

¹¹⁰ YCL, Ten Points p. 4.

¹¹¹ Labour Monthly (February 1927), p. 105.

¹¹² New Leader 13/9/35, p. 1.

¹¹³ The Socialist League's statement on Abyssinia was reprinted in New Leader (20/9/35), p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Birch, Why They Join p. 22.

that 'The home situation called for a military adventure which would absorb the whole nation in its preparation and accomplishment.'¹¹⁵

In looking at Mussolini's war in this light, many on the left felt that Abyssinia was not an isolated case, but represented imperialism in its modern form. The old colonial powers such as Britain and France had expanded on the basis of their economic success, and had sought new territories and new markets for their surplus profits. The fascist powers, seeking ever-greater markets and sources of raw materials as any capitalist state did in Marxist eyes, were expanding with the intention of matching and then surpassing their sated democratic rivals. In the words of the Socialist League, Abyssinia was 'the signal for a large-scale imperialist drive which will be waged by the economically hard-pressed capitalist powers – Italy, Germany, Japan – for a wholesale redistribution of colonial territories and spheres of influence.'¹¹⁶

Germany: The Economic Reality of National Socialism

As had been the case with Mussolini's government, the British left judged the character of the Hitler regime not least by the economic policies it pursued. Though there was an awareness of a current within Nazism that took seriously the egalitarian and anti-capitalist elements of the original party programme, British socialists and communists knew that these views were not shared by the Nazi leadership. The left's belief, repeatedly articulated when Nazism was still but a movement of the streets, that it posed no threat to the German elite or to the prevailing economic system, was proven for them by its actions on coming to power. Where Nazi rhetoric about national rebirth, racial purity, blood, soil and spirit seemed at that point to have little concrete application, the left could point to actual policies that were explicitly designed to maintain the existing economic structure intact. The Socialist League was typical of this approach, asking in 1935, 'What class has Hitler dispossessed?'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Garratt, Roman Empire p. 11.

¹¹⁶ The Socialist (September 1935), p. 1.

¹¹⁷ Socialist League/Murphy, Fascism! p. 1.

Trade Unions and Wages

Many of the left's observations about the class bias of Nazism were confirmed after January 1933. In the regime's first year, opposition parties, beginning with those of the left, were outlawed and persecuted.¹¹⁸ Trade unions were banned and replaced by pliant party organisations.¹¹⁹ Collective bargaining and previously operative pay settlements were abolished, while wages were fixed at the levels they had been during the Depression.¹²⁰ Even Dr. Robert Ley, head of the Nazi Labour Front, admitted in April 1934 that 'The German worker, to some extent, was being paid starvation wages'.¹²¹ A.L. Rowse, writing as a prospective Labour candidate in 1936, stated that 'Everybody knows that the wage-rates of the working-class have been driven down since the Nazis came to power...Krupp and the armaments makers have no causes to complain – all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'¹²² While wage costs and unemployment benefits fell, profits and share prices rose.¹²³ A sharp increase in food prices also fell disproportionately upon the German worker.¹²⁴ A Labour Party pamphlet of 1935 summed up the situation by stating that 'To-day, "class war" is prohibited in Germany, but the princes of industry and banking, men such as Thyssen and Schacht, are allowed to plunder the masses of the unhappy German people under the radiant colours of the national revolution.'¹²⁵

Superficially, Nazism attempted to recompense German workers for reduced wages and the loss of trade union rights by the introduction of a Labour Code in 1933. But to the left this was merely the legislative embodiment of the new

¹¹⁸ Degras, Documents Vol. III p. 250; Renton, Fascism: Theory and Practice p. 37.

¹¹⁹ On the National Socialist Plant Cells (NSBO), see Schweitzer, A. Big Business in the Third Reich (London, 1964), pp. 142-55, 358; Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution pp. 204-5; Guerin, Fascism and Big Business pp. 184-94; Togliatti, Lectures pp. 98-9.

¹²⁰ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution p. 212; Schweitzer, Big Business, pp. vii-viii, 361-2, 391-9; TUC/Citrine, W. United Against Fascism (London, 1934), p. 4.

¹²¹ Cited in National Council of Labour, What is This Fascism? p. 10.

¹²² The Plebs' Magazine (November 1936), p. 258. Later writers confirm the left's claims about falling wage rates in Nazi Germany. One author states that 'The total mass of wages and salaries paid out in 1938 was still less than in 1929', a fall of 23% during the nine years in question. See Mandel, E. Late Capitalism (London, 1978), pp. 159-60.

¹²³ Guerin, Fascism and Big Business pp. 194-7; Socialist League/Brailsford, Nazi Terror pp. 2-3. Mandel in Late Capitalism p. 160, states that profits rose in Germany from 15.4 billion Reichsmarks in 1929 to 20 billion in 1938, after having dropped to just 8 billion in 1932.

¹²⁴ See New Leader (23/8/35), p. 4. Tribune (29/1/37) reported that living standards in Germany had fallen by one third over the past year.

subservience. Labour and the TUC called it 'the most up-to-date piece of machinery for the enslavement of workers that dictatorship has been able to achieve.'¹²⁶ Their report went on to state that the machinery of the Labour Code, claimed by Nazism to obviate the need for unions and industrial action, was hugely weighted against the workers. Under it, each workplace was represented by 'Labour Trustees' appointed by the state to set pay and conditions. Representations from the workers to the trustees came via the Nazis' own Labour Front, and the proposals that these put forward would in any case have to have the blessing of the NSDAP cells which operated in every workplace employing more than twenty people. Though 'Courts of Honour' were operated by the Trustees it was held that they were hopelessly biased and that in any case, non-party workers were too afraid to appeal to them.¹²⁷

Unemployment

Though the Nazis claimed by 1934 to have reduced the fearful levels of unemployment that Germany had witnessed in the early 1930s, it was generally felt that Nazi figures were not to be trusted, and that a general easing of the recession may have brought about a fall anyway. Furthermore, government statistics did not account for the numbers of socialists, communists, women and Jews driven from employment in the early period of Nazi rule.¹²⁸ In 1935, the ILP cited figures published by the *Economist* showing that the real number of German unemployed was five million, as opposed to the 1.8 million admitted by the regime.¹²⁹ The Nazi figure of 1.9 million unemployed at the beginning of 1937 was similarly disputed.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Labour Party, *Nazis, Nazism, Nazidom* (London, 1935), p. 6.

¹²⁶ National Joint Council report, 'Fascism at Home and Abroad', p. 6.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* pp. 6-7. One author states that the Courts of Honour heard only 516 cases from a 20 million-strong workforce between 1934-6. See Schweitzer, *Big Business* p. 368.

¹²⁸ *ibid.* p. 7.

¹²⁹ *New Leader* (23/8/35), p. 4.

¹³⁰ *Tribune* (29/1/37), p. 6.

Nazi Corporatism and Co-ordination

It was apparent that Nazism did not advocate the establishment of the same corporative structures that were envisaged in Italy.¹³¹ But the regime nevertheless intended to intervene in the German economy to ensure that production in certain sectors conformed to the needs of broader Nazi policy in terms of rearmament and major building works. The Nazis presented this as the subordination of unregulated capitalism to the needs of the German people as a whole. However, Hitler's interventionism, like that of Mussolini, did not threaten either the nationalisation of industry or the management's right to manage. But in Germany the regime did not introduce even the appearance of corporate structures as Mussolini had.¹³²

Much of industry benefited from the increase in civil and military contracts brought about by public works schemes and rearmament, and the Nazis generally found German business to be a willing partner. That Nazism and industry worked together in *Gleichschaltung*, the co-ordination of political aims and economic output, in a much less structured way than in Italy, led Labour and the TUC to comment that concerning Germany they had heard 'no humbug yet about the Corporative State'.¹³³ The British left concurred with the exiled anti-Nazi, Konrad Heiden, when he stated of Hitler's skeletal corporate structures that 'the class character of his so-called corporations (*Stände*) is clearly revealed.'¹³⁴

The left came to note, however, that under Nazism the state came to play a larger role in the economic life of the nation than in Italy. They saw that by its sheer size, the Nazi state became both a major customer of foodstuffs, raw

¹³¹ See Mosse, G.L. 'The Genesis of Fascism', *JCH* 1 (1966), p. 20.

¹³² On the superficiality of Nazi corporatism see Neumann, *Behemoth* pp. 228-34; Hamilton, A. *The Appeal of Fascism: A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism, 1919 - 1945* (London, 1971), pp. xix, 145.

¹³³ National Joint Council report, 'Fascism at Home and Abroad' p. 6.

¹³⁴ Heiden, K. *A History of National Socialism* (London, 1934), p. 77.

materials and finished goods, and a prime source of orders and employment.¹³⁵ G.D.H. Cole pointed out that the level of demand created by state initiatives such as rearmament and public works schemes had become so great that it had affected the usual trade cycle of boom and slump.¹³⁶

When Nazism intervened directly in the market, Cole continued, it was to set minimum prices for commodities which the state needed, but which may otherwise have been uneconomical to produce. Certain historians have shared the left's view that the Nazis' economic intervention, not least in accord with the demands of the rearmament programme, was little resented by the employers, who were anyway handsomely reimbursed for their co-operation. Arthur Schweitzer wrote of the co-operation of German business with the regime that 'Not the freedom of markets but the opportunity to increase profits became the central criterion for judging the desirability of direct actions by the state.'¹³⁷

The Wider Economy

The continued development of powerful industrial cartels was encouraged under Nazism, and harmful international competitors were excluded from the German market.¹³⁸ Even before the liquidation of those radical Nazis who were agitating for a second revolution, Hitler had confirmed the left's broad analysis of Nazism himself, when he told the Reichstag in April 1933 that 'The Government will firmly carry out the safeguarding of the economic interests of the German people, not by the roundabout way of a state-organised economic bureaucracy, but by the most vigorous promotion of private initiative, with the recognition of private ownership.'¹³⁹

¹³⁵ That the left recognised the interaction between the Nazi regime and German big business, rather than the subservience of the former to the latter, is set out in Dorpalen, A. German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach (London, 1985), pp. 393-409.

¹³⁶ Cole, G.D.H. 'Nazi Economics: How Do They Manage It?', Political Quarterly 10, 1 (1939), p. 56.

¹³⁷ Schweitzer, Big Business p. viii. For Schweitzer's treatment of the German 'rearmament boom' see pp. 297-349 and 453-503.

¹³⁸ On cartelisation as a general trend in Europe, rather than as a specific feature of the Nazi economy, see Rabinach, 'Towards a Marxist Theory of Fascism and National Socialism', pp. 133-5.

¹³⁹ Hitler's speech is cited in the Labour Party International Department file, ID/GER/2/23.

The autarkic principle that characterised fascist economics generally, was not, as is often assumed, applied under Nazism to the detriment of German capitalism. The left was aware that the Nazi state set import and export quotas, and fixed foreign exchange rates, but did not take this as evidence that Nazism had tamed market forces. They saw it as German industry being rewarded via protectionism and fiscal stability for its co-operation with the regime.¹⁴⁰ These mechanisms ensured that resources were marshalled for the Nazis' various projects and that industries and technologies important to the regime were allowed to grow inside Germany, without significantly interfering with the profitability of the leading German concerns.¹⁴¹

The Nazis also reneged on their promise to nationalise German banks,¹⁴² and the left noted that, far from introducing either nationalisation or corporatism into the German economy, the privatisation of state assets was increasingly common by 1937.¹⁴³ G.D.H. Cole noted that the Nazis increased the indebtedness of the state in terms of massive borrowing as compared with that under the Weimar period, as even the revenue from increased taxation failed to keep pace with the enormous expenditure generated by rearmament and the burgeoning wage bill of the state.¹⁴⁴ The ILP pointed out that during the first eighteen months of Hitler's rule, the German national debt had increased by fourteen million marks.¹⁴⁵

Nazi Racial Policies

The British left generally believed the Nazis' anti-Semitism had merely been a rabble-rousing device before 1933, but that it would become a burdensome necessity now that the movement was in power. Walter Citrine, speaking of continuing attacks on German Jews, told the 1934 Trades Union Congress that

¹⁴⁰ See Tribune (5/3/37), p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Cole, 'Nazi Economics', p. 57.

¹⁴² London Co-ordinating Committee Against Fascism, Urgent Warning pp. 8-9.

¹⁴³ See Schweitzer, Big Business pp. 128-34; Drucker, Economic Man p. 118; Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (February 1937), p. 150; Hannington, Distressed Areas p. 241.

¹⁴⁴ Cole, 'Nazi Economics', p. 61.

¹⁴⁵ New Leader (23/8/35), p. 4.

‘Whatever the inconvenience is to the Nazi regime as a consequence of this persecution, Hitler cannot possibly overthrow that point in his programme upon which the hordes of his Brown Army were gathered around him...it is not surprising that we read of the persecution of the Jews having reached now almost unpassable measures.’¹⁴⁶

Others on the left saw in the retention of anti-Semitism the traditional means by which a regime could channel the discontent of its subjects onto a vulnerable minority. The CPGB reprinted Lenin’s writings on the function of anti-Semitism under Tsarism, and the Labour MP, Dan Frankel, argued in 1937 that ‘Any intelligent observer must realise that dictatorships need a defenceless whipping-boy for their own political sins, and that economically intense nationalism, debasing the commercial life of a country towards false standards such as the needs of armaments for aggression, can offer no place to the Jew.’¹⁴⁷

The Kristallnacht violence of November 1938, nominally provoked by the killing by a German Jew of a Nazi diplomat in Paris, was also seen in these terms, with one Trotskyist group, the Militant Labour League, arguing that ‘The vast armament programme which Germany is carrying through can only be maintained at the expense of the conditions of the ordinary people, which are rapidly worsening. As a result, widespread discontent persists among the working class, which has never been completely reconciled to the Nazis. Once again it was necessary for Hitler to find a scapegoat. The assassination...was a godsend to him.’¹⁴⁸ Another left communist faction, the Revolutionary Socialist League, also reprinted Lenin’s views, and said of Kristallnacht that ‘The thugs, in union with the landlords and the capitalists, attempt to divert the natural hatred of the workers and peasants for their exploiters against the Jews.’¹⁴⁹

The left also saw the Nazis’ excluding one group of people from the new ‘national community’ as being designed engender a sense of belonging in other

¹⁴⁶ TUC/Citrine, United Against Fascism p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ CPGB/Andrews, R.F. (ed.), What Lenin Said About the Jews: Extracts From His Writings (London, 1935); Labour: A Magazine for All Workers (October 1937), p. 35.

¹⁴⁸ The Militant (December 1938), p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Workers’ Fight (November 1938), p. 1.

Germans. The Nazis emphasised the pan-national nature of Jewry to highlight the virtues of national and racial solidarity. The British Marxist writer on anti-Semitism, George Sacks, noted the Nazis' insistence that 'the Jew is incapable of comprehending the sacred ties of blood and race. The Jew is essentially international and can have no real appreciation of the ideals which animate the "Aryan". The historic significance of racial destiny, of exalted patriotism, are emotions which no Jew can genuinely feel.'¹⁵⁰

Sacks also reflected the left's understanding that anti-Semitism was ultimately irrational, and that its premises could be demolished by the force of argument and example. They recognised too that this would never convince the committed anti-Semites, who for the most part, placed the value of anti-Semitism's economic and political functions above any consideration of its racial or biological veracity. The struggle against anti-Jewish prejudice, therefore, was to be fought across a varied terrain. Sacks recognised that 'No sooner is it established that there has never been a Jewish plot to dominate the world, and that the "protocols of Zion" is an impudent forgery, than somebody discovers that the Communist movement is Jewish. It is impossible to keep pace with the constantly changing aspect of the case against the Jew.'¹⁵¹ Its only logic was its use at any particular moment to the class that the left felt had traditionally fostered and unleashed it. Sacks concluded that 'the rhythmicity of anti-Semitism corresponds to the rhythmicity of the class-war, and that the constant factor lies in this and in nothing else.'¹⁵²

However, the persistence and intensity of the Nazis' anti-Semitism began to imply that this was a different prejudice to those that had gone before. As early as 1935, one Labour publication recognised that 'The Nazi persecution is directed against the Jewish race, not only against the Jewish religion. A man of Jewish origin has no better hope of evading the anti-Jewish laws of Nazism when he belongs to the Christian religion.' Three years before Kristallnacht, the

¹⁵⁰ Sacks, G. The Intelligent Man's Guide to Jew-Baiting (London, 1935), p. 28.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.* p. 33. On the shifting accusations against the Jews see Cohn, Warrant for Genocide pp. 108-48; Mosse, G.L. Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism (London, 1978), pp. 117-82; Wistrich, R.S. Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred (London, 1992), pp. 3-65; Postone, M. Anti-Semitism and National Socialism (London, 2000), pp. 7-10.

author foresaw widespread, state-sanctioned violence against German Jews.¹⁵³ But there was still no expectation that the Nazis would one day seek to exterminate the Jews, as after all, this would serve no economic purpose. George Sacks wrote that ‘it is more expedient for the modern State to transform a national minority into helots than to wipe it out by pogroms.’¹⁵⁴ If it represented anything more than an outlet for the energies of Nazi hotheads, anti-Semitic violence was only conceived as a means of making the Jews leave, in the hope of allowing others to occupy their economic space or to receive the property taken from them by the state.¹⁵⁵ In 1936, the ILP argued that Nazism was looking beyond the use of the occasional pogrom as a means of relieving economic and political pressure, with laws and violence being used in an ‘increasingly ferocious campaign to uproot them from Germany.’¹⁵⁶

Labour’s Richard Crossman saw the retention of anti-Semitism as part of Nazism’s attempt to present its ideas as a complete world-view, with racism as its driving force. He argued that ‘It is futile to underestimate the majesty of the National Socialist myth. It is indeed a *Weltanschauung*, a complete dogmatic religion which explains everything with an all-embracing German logic. All its premises are false, but they are of immense emotional appeal. Racialism is the supreme example of wish-fulfilment in the history of political ideas. It gave an explanation of world history which freed the German people from all responsibility for its plight.’¹⁵⁷

In stating this, Crossman was echoing a wider recognition within the British left that Nazism, while having none of the ideological coherence generally associated with Marxism, had nevertheless cobbled together a body of ideas capable of inspiring its followers. The ILP’s David Davies had pre-empted Crossman by a year when he wrote ‘You don’t say the whole truth about Nazism merely by stating that it is Capitalism on its last legs...It is also a new

¹⁵² Sacks, *Intelligent Man’s Guide* p. 133.

¹⁵³ Labour Party, *Nazis, Nazism* pp. 14-15.

¹⁵⁴ Sacks, *Intelligent Man’s Guide* p. 135.

¹⁵⁵ See Neumann, *Behemoth* p. 121.

¹⁵⁶ *New Leader* (17/4/36), p. 5; Sacks agreed with this in his next work, *The Jewish Question* (London, 1937), pp. 7-8.

¹⁵⁷ Crossman, *Government and the Governed* p. 278.

Barbarianism on its first legs...It is, literally, the embodiment of sheer irrationality in a conscious, deliberate struggle against everything that we mean by European culture, tradition and achievement...In its final unfolding it stands revealed as a new philosophy, a new faith, a new religion.¹⁵⁸

At the turn of 1939 Labour's Leonard Barnes agreed that Nazism had elements of 'a system of faith', but one 'whose leaders have declared war against the empire of reason...Such a faith...will not tolerate the continued existence of its adversaries in any place to which its own influence can effectively extend.' Barnes, a socialist and a humanist, was horrified by the prospect of a victorious Nazism, and saw in it the potential to reverse human progress: 'We look over that pitiful tale of senseless horrors which is modern political and social history, and complacently we read its most appalling passages as some temporary stoppage of the unending heavenward motion. No failure of human kind is too gross or too unredeemed to be written off as a brief flirtation in a general upward trend...The usual fate of species in the past has been not progress, but extinction, often after slow degeneration through long periods...For the last half century the world has been in the throes of a great crisis...If, as it deepens, it conducts us much further down the slope of barbarism and unreason than we have already descended, then it may end in the destruction of civilised culture all over the planet.'¹⁵⁹

For those on the left, like George Sacks, who felt that religion's primary function was to confer divine sanction on existing social relations, Nazism did not represent a nihilistic new creed. Instead it was 'the old religion masquerading as the new. The wretchedly paid worker, in a factory or a mine, is told that what comes first is the struggle of his race for supremacy, not his own personal struggle for security, just as his ancestor was told that a Supreme Being had ordained his poverty and the wealth of his feudal lord.'¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ *New Leader* (5/8/38), p. 7.

¹⁵⁹ *Tribune* (13/1/39), p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ Sacks, *Intelligent Man's Guide* pp. 82-3.

Foreign Policy and Appeasement

It was the aggressive foreign policies of the fascist powers that convinced Labour to augment its belief in the League of Nations with support for British rearmament.¹⁶¹ Having controversially backed non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War at its 1936 Edinburgh conference, the Labour leadership were moved by the storm of protest, and by conclusive evidence that Italy and Germany were aiding Franco, to consider changing their stance. A joint Labour and TUC review of the policy asked 'is it not incumbent upon the Labour Movement, and in particular the Parliamentary Labour Party, to face the responsibilities and consequences of the anti-Fascist policy we are bound to take up? Can we go on assailing Fascism, can we advocate an anti-Fascist bloc of Powers, and expect the bloc to call the Fascist bluff (if it be a bluff) if we appear to oppose the adequate rearmament of our own country?'¹⁶² Attlee told the House of Commons that non-intervention 'has become a farce. It is a humiliating position for this country... We sat by and saw Abyssinia crushed; now we are to sit by and see Spain crushed. It is not, however, merely sitting by; we are, in fact, almost accessories before the fact.'¹⁶³

It was on the left that some of the earliest opposition to appeasement could be found. They were the first to argue that foreign policy adventures were intrinsic to the survival of fascist regimes. In Germany as in Italy, the left asserted, militarism and expansionism were essential in ameliorating discontent and providing solutions to otherwise insurmountable domestic problems.¹⁶⁴ These ranged from unemployment to challenges to the leadership from radical

¹⁶¹ See Cole, History of the Labour Party pp. 324-6; Naylor, Labour's International Policy pp. 138-61.

¹⁶² National Council of Labour, 'Memorandum on the Spanish Conflict', (27/8/36), in Labour Party archive, LSI section, Box 19 – 20, file LSI.19/3/18, p. iv.

¹⁶³ Cited in Swift, Labour in Crisis p. 103.

¹⁶⁴ The left's view that domestic concerns drove Hitler's foreign policy is repeated in Laski, H. Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (London, 1943), pp. 102-3. It resurfaced later in the work of other British Marxist historians. See Mason, T. 'The Primacy of Politics: Politics and Economics in National Socialist Germany', in Woolf, S.J. (ed.), The Nature of Fascism (London, 1968), pp. 165-95; Mason, T. 'Internal Crisis and War of Aggression, 1938–1939', in Caplan, J. (ed.), Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class: Essays by Tim Mason (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 104-30; Renton, Fascism: Theory and Practice pp. 103-4. Some on the left later abandoned this idea though, arguing after the war that Nazism had been driven by foreign policy

elements within the party and conservative forces from without. The delegate who proposed a motion passed at the 1937 TUC condemning fascist aggression told delegates that Hitler 'would be forced to make war rather than face internal collapse or revolution.'¹⁶⁵ By 1939, G.D.H. Cole could conclusively state of Nazism that 'For such a system, armament is not a mere means of making work, but an inherent necessity; for force is the instrument of exploitation...' 'Appeasement' is impossible to it; for if it is once accepted the conditions of appeasement [and] its foundations would be destroyed.'¹⁶⁶

Despite this general belief, the Labour leadership nevertheless supported Chamberlain's efforts to come to an agreement with Hitler before the Munich settlement, albeit with a continued belief in rearmament and an international anti-fascist front. The CPGB would not support Chamberlain, and attacked Labour for doing so, with William Gallacher being the only M.P. to publicly condemn the betrayal of Czechoslovakia before the pact was signed.¹⁶⁷ British Trotskyists were similarly critical, with one paper asserting that 'The unwillingness on the part of the official Labour leadership to place their trust in the strength and ability of the working class movement to save itself and the world from destruction finds – as always – its reverse expression in a naïve confidence in the leadership of a capitalist government.'¹⁶⁸

All factions of the left felt to some degree that powerful interest groups within Britain were driving the policy of appeasement. Some acted because of their sympathy for Nazism, while others were primarily moved by the desire to defend Britain's global interests through an understanding with Hitler.¹⁶⁹ The Left Book Club published Simon Haxey's *Tory M.P.*, detailing the fiscal links between prominent Conservatives and the fascist states. The book also exposed the powerful political and commercial members of organisations such as the

concerns, and that these had in turn influenced domestic priorities. See Cole, G.D.H. *A History of Socialist Thought: Volume V, 1931–1939* (London, 1969), p. 13.

¹⁶⁵ TUC, *Report of the 69th Annual Trades Union Congress* (London, 1937), p. 386.

¹⁶⁶ Cole, 'Nazi Economics', p. 68.

¹⁶⁷ CPGB, *For Peace and Plenty* p. 9; Montagu, I. *The Traitor Class* (London, 1940), p. 69.

¹⁶⁸ *Socialist Vanguard* (October 1938), p. 148.

¹⁶⁹ See for example, CPGB, *For Peace and Plenty* pp. 32-45; *Labour Monthly* (January 1939), pp. 26-34.

Anglo-German Fellowship, the Friends of Italy, and the Link.¹⁷⁰ *Tribune* cited von Ribbentrop, former Nazi ambassador to Britain, who stated of the Anglo-German Fellowship in 1937 that ‘When Hitler’s Reich was formed at the beginning of 1933 there was but little contact between this country and the New Germany. A handful of Englishmen and a handful of Germans made up their minds that contact should be established.’¹⁷¹ Trotskyists within the Labour Party warned in March 1938 of a ‘most powerful combination, known disrespectfully as “the Astor Gang” whose mouthpieces are the London “Times” and “The Observer”. They include in their ranks such worthies as Lord Londonderry, Lord Lothian, Major Astor, Lord Astor, and Cabinet Ministers [such] as Lord Halifax and Sir John Simon. They have one policy, simple and understandable: Make a deal with Germany – at any price.’¹⁷²

When the Munich agreement was signed, the left did not reflect the sense of relief evident in some quarters. The CPGB promptly stated that ‘All the machine-made plaudits of the press and sycophants’ chorus have not been able to conceal the general awakening of the people to the menace which now confronts them thanks to the policy of Chamberlain.’¹⁷³ The Labour leadership and the party’s left wing were united in their condemnation of appeasement and the Chamberlain government. *Tribune* thundered that ‘Chamberlain sacrificed the interests of Britain, not Czechoslovakia...*nothing* can save Britain from becoming the servile vassal of Nazi Fascism if Chamberlain and his supporters continue to rule us...It is not accurate to say that Chamberlain “sold out”. There was no price. Hitler gave absolutely nothing. It was pure, absolute, abject surrender.’¹⁷⁴ Ellen Wilkinson was only marginally more vociferous than her front bench when she stated in the Commons after Hitler’s occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 that ‘What we are facing to-day is the working out of a class policy against the national interests of this country: a policy which the Government have pursued ever since Herr Hitler came to power.’¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Haxey, S. *Tory M.P.* (London, 1939).

¹⁷¹ *Tribune* (14/7/39), p. 5.

¹⁷² *The Militant* (March 1938), p. 1.

¹⁷³ *Labour Monthly* (December 1938), p. 720.

¹⁷⁴ *Tribune* (23/9/38), p. 1.

Many on the left, including those with no affinity for the Soviet Union, felt that appeasers and fascists shared both an intense anti-communism and designs on Russia's resources. Labour's international secretary, William Gillies, wrote of Hitler's designs on the Soviet Union that 'the crusade against Bolshevism is but the ideological façade of a very old-fashioned militant imperialism.'¹⁷⁶ The far left saw in Munich the formation of a class front against the Soviet Union, with one Trotskyist group stating that 'Hitler is hewing a path into the Ukraine and the Soviet Union stands isolated and disrupted, awaiting the attack of the fascist and "democratic" aggressors.' Stalin, it mused, 'may try to postpone the blow by seeking an agreement with Hitler.'¹⁷⁷

The Nazi-Soviet Pact and the War

If the left could agree on the economic character of fascism and be united in their opposition to appeasement, events in 1939 served as a reminder of the gulf that separated them on other issues.

The conclusion of a treaty between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany in August 1939 caused severe problems for the Communist Party of Great Britain. Labour and the TUC, subjected to years of attacks over the alleged flabbiness of their anti-fascism, now restated their argument that all dictatorships were essentially alike. Labour argued that the Nazi-Soviet pact constituted 'a bigger betrayal of peace and European freedom even than Munich.'¹⁷⁸ The ILP was a little more understanding, noting that the pact did not preclude further agreements between the Soviet Union and the democracies. However, they echoed Labour in denouncing it as a 'catastrophic bombshell...already dubbed "Stalin's Munich".'¹⁷⁹ The *Tribune* group within the Labour Party were more generous still, with the Labour M.P. Koni Zilliacus asserting that the British

¹⁷⁵ *New Leader* (24/3/39), p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ *Labour: A Magazine for All Workers* (March 1937), p. 168.

¹⁷⁷ *Workers' Fight* (November 1938), p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ *Daily Herald* cited in *Left Forum* (August 1939), p. 213.

¹⁷⁹ *New Leader* (25/8/39), p. 3.

government were to blame for the pact in their refusal to conclude an anti-fascist alliance with Stalin.¹⁸⁰

Marxists who had earlier broken with Moscow argued that the Pact confirmed their claims as to the betrayal of the revolution and the bankruptcy of Stalinism.¹⁸¹ When the Soviet Union invaded Poland and the Baltic states in September 1939, the ILP stated that it 'makes no difference to the Imperialist character of the war...Russia's present move marks the final stage in the departure by the Stalin regime from the principles of International Socialism and its adoption of purely imperialistic power politics.'¹⁸²

The CPGB was left with the task of presenting this agreement with fascism as an anti-fascist act. It did this by pointing out that the Soviet Union had been calling for an international alliance against Nazism since Hitler's accession, and that the British government had always rejected the idea.¹⁸³ They reminded those who would listen about the betrayal of Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia when the Soviet Union had been offering co-operation and military assistance in each case.¹⁸⁴ They pointed out that it had been Britain that had undermined its closest ally, France, by signing the Anglo-German Naval Treaty in 1935. Finally, when war broke out, the party argued that Britain was pursuing it half-heartedly in the vain hope that some further act of appeasement could yet bring peace.¹⁸⁵

Given this, the Communist Party held, it was very late in the day to be blaming the Soviet Union for signing a pact with Hitler, especially when this pact could, in its immediate aftermath, be presented as having averted a general conflagration and foiled Hitler's aggressive designs on the socialist motherland.¹⁸⁶ Despite the initial shock, party discipline and loyalty to the Soviet Union were decisive for many CPGB members. One of them, Douglas

¹⁸⁰ Tribune (1/9/39), pp. 5-9.

¹⁸¹ Trotsky had been predicting an understanding between Hitler and Stalin since 1933. See his article in Militant: The Organ of the Militant Labour League (October 1939), p. 2.

¹⁸² New Leader (22/9/39), p. 1.

¹⁸³ Labour Monthly (October 1939), pp. 580-93.

¹⁸⁴ See Montagu, Traitor Class p. 29 and pp. 48-51; Labour Monthly (October 1939), p. 593.

¹⁸⁵ ibid. p. 57.

Hyde, even remembered that 'The Soviet-German Pact...did not trouble the trained Marxist at all', and that Stalin had been justified in his action. Hyde wrote that 'The Soviet leaders had a responsibility to the working-class of the world to defend the U.S.S.R. and could, if necessary, for this reason make a pact with the devil himself.'¹⁸⁷ After war had broken out, and the Soviets had occupied eastern Poland in accordance with the treaty, the pact was similarly depicted as having saved at least part of that country from the ravages of Nazi occupation.¹⁸⁸

Yet the CPGB was to be wrong-footed once more by Soviet actions in 1939. When war began, the party issued a pamphlet depicting the conflict as one between fascism and democracy. As far as it was concerned, the Popular Front line still held, despite the Molotov/Ribbentrop pact.¹⁸⁹ Yet shortly after fighting began, the Comintern declared that the war was actually a clash between rival imperialisms, and the party hurriedly changed tack accordingly. Its analysis of fascism reverted almost to that which had been prevalent during the third period. Now, fascism and democracy were again portrayed as alternate manifestations of class rule, with neither side worthy of communist support.¹⁹⁰

The CPGB duly reprinted Lenin's writings on the nature of the First World War to reinforce this stance, and one leading figure, Ivor Montagu, asserted that 'the Fifth Column is the ruling class.'¹⁹¹ The CPGB pointed out that, as in 1914, many British firms profited from the war, while government and business interests became increasingly intertwined.¹⁹² However, the party, as it had during the third period, shied away from an exact equation of fascism and democracy. It further moderated its position in the wake of the Dunkirk

¹⁸⁶ Daily Worker cited in Left Forum (August 1939), pp. 213-4.

¹⁸⁷ Hyde, D. I Believed: The Autobiography of a Former British Communist (London, 1952), p. 68.

¹⁸⁸ See Pelling, H. The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile (London, 1958), p. 113.

¹⁸⁹ See CPGB/Pollitt, H. How to Win the War (London, 1939).

¹⁹⁰ See Callaghan, Far Left p. 47.

¹⁹¹ Hyde, I Believed pp. 72-4; Montagu, Traitor Class p. 33.

¹⁹² Montagu, Traitor Class pp. 96-105.

evacuation, which lessened to a degree the hostility that their volte-face had caused, and even won them some new supporters.¹⁹³

Inevitably, the Comintern's 'imperialist war' interpretation did lose the CPGB some significant allies, with Victor Gollancz and John Strachey being among the more prominent non-party figures to distance themselves from communism.¹⁹⁴ Inside the party, leading spokesmen such as Harry Pollitt and J.R. Campbell had initially opposed the new line, and only later recanted.¹⁹⁵

This all changed again, of course, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941. The war once more took on the anti-fascist hue that it had had for the CPGB in the first days of September 1939. Fascism again became the enemy of democracy, and victory was to be achieved by a 'Popular Front', not just of anti-fascists at home, but in the form of the alliance between the democracies and the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁶

Others on the left had no similar international pressures put upon them. As in the First World War, the ILP stood out in 1939 against what it saw as an imperialist conflict. It had argued as early as 1937 that 'For the British working class to line up behind the British Capitalist Class in war is merely to invite the British Capitalist Class to introduce here the very Fascism which is the enemy in Germany. In wartime itself the methods of Fascism would certainly be applied. We should have a Totalitarian State which would mercilessly suppress all opposition.' The 'methods of Fascism', they argued, were already in operation throughout the Empire, and would be implemented in Britain in the

¹⁹³ See Morgan, Against Fascism and War pp. 171-253; Eaden & Renton, The Communist Party pp. 68-84.

¹⁹⁴ On the CPGB's volte face see King, F. & Matthews, G. (eds.), About Turn: The Communist Party and the Outbreak of the Second World War (London, 1990); Atfield, J. & Williams, S. (eds.), 1939: The Communist Party and the War (London, 1984). On the defection of prominent supporters see Gollancz, V. (ed.), The Betrayal of the Left (London, 1941); Thomas, John Strachey pp. 195-7; Copsey, Anti-Fascism p. 75.

¹⁹⁵ Their statements supporting the anti-fascist war line are reprinted in King & Matthews (eds.), About Turn pp. 102-17 and 197-210. Their recantations are in Black, Stalinism in Britain pp. 398-400.

¹⁹⁶ See Morgan, Against Fascism and War pp. 303-6; Branson, History of the Communist Party pp. 287-313.

event of another war.¹⁹⁷ The party therefore opposed rearmament and conscription.¹⁹⁸ The ILP's Diana Stock wrote in 1938 that 'Hitler's anti-Semitism is trivial compared to the indignities which Africans suffer on British African soil.'¹⁹⁹

By 1939 the party was arguing that 'Fascism and Nazism seek to lead the Italian and German masses behind their own Imperialisms by means of demagogic phrases regarding the fight of "proletarian" (!) countries against plutocracies. In actual reality, the impending war is an Imperialist war in which there will be no question of defending liberties, but of seizing spheres of profitable investment of capital...the conquering of the sources of raw materials and overseas markets.'²⁰⁰ On the day that Germany invaded Poland, the ILP's paper asserted that 'The slogans of the rights of small nations and the defence of democracy now used are precisely the same as those used in 1914. They have been proved to be shams and deceits by all that has happened subsequently, and are as false now as they were then.'²⁰¹ The party's four MP's forced a division in the Commons the next day over the introduction of conscription, stating that in so doing the party had adhered to 'the attitude of International Socialism which the ILP maintained in the war of 1914 – 18.'²⁰²

British Trotskyists took a similar line, seeing the war as a conflict ignited by fiscal and strategic pressures that had affected the Axis powers more than they had the democracies. In February 1939 the Revolutionary Socialist League argued that 'Bad though the economic position of Britain and France is, that of imperialist powers with less or no resources in the form of colonies or foreign investments – Germany, Italy and Japan – is much worse...Hence the frenzied building up of armaments and the constant danger of war.'²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ New Leader (15/10/37), p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ For the ILP's opposition to British rearmament see New Leader (11/3/38), p. 1. For its campaign against conscription see ibid. (7/10/38), p. 2.

¹⁹⁹ ibid. (6/5/38), p. 3.

²⁰⁰ ibid. (12/5/39), p. 2.

²⁰¹ ibid. (1/9/39), p. 1.

²⁰² ibid. (8/9/39), p. 1. See also Brockway, Towards Tomorrow pp. 135-44.

²⁰³ Revolutionary Socialist League National Conference (London, 1939), p. 1, Haston papers, file DJH 13a/96.

When the war began, Trotskyists maintained this stance. The Militant Labour League urged 'No support for the Bosses' War' in September 1939, and the Revolutionary Socialist League declared in July 1940 that 'The character of the Second World War is that of an imperialist struggle for the re-division of the earth.'²⁰⁴ They agreed with the Fourth International, the worldwide association of dissident communists, that Hitler's war aims were little different from those of the Kaiser, and that the outbreak of war opened the possibility of revolution in the same way as it had in 1914. The International stated of Hitler in May 1940 that 'This German epileptic...did not fall from the sky or come up out of Hell: he is nothing but the personification of all the destructive forces of imperialism...Through Hitler, world capitalism, driven to desperation by its own impasse, has begun to press a razor-sharp dagger into its own bowels'²⁰⁵

The Trotskyists, despite their intense hatred of Stalinism, nevertheless called for the unconditional defence of the Soviet Union during the war, with the RSL maintaining that 'Despite present alliances or future changes in the alignment of the powers, the class antagonism between the imperialist states and the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state retains its full force.'²⁰⁶

The great bulk of the left, though, in the form of Labour and the TUC, unreservedly supported the war, which united the leadership and the left. Stafford Cripps, still in September 1939 outside the party following his expulsion for Popular Front agitation, together with the rest of the *Tribune* supporters inside Labour, saw the war as a wholly justified anti-fascist conflict.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Militant: Organ of the Militant Labour League (September 1939), p. 1; Revolutionary Socialist League, Internal Bulletin (July 1940), p. 1, Haston papers, file DJH 13a/10a. On the British Trotskyists' attitude to the war see also Callaghan, Far Left pp. 55-6.

²⁰⁵ Fourth International, Manifesto of the Fourth International (New York, 1940), p. 7.

²⁰⁶ Revolutionary Socialist League, Internal Bulletin (July 1940), p. 1; See also Militant: The Organ of the Militant Labour League (9/12/39), p. 1.

²⁰⁷ See Tribune (8/9/39) and (15/9/39).

Conclusion: The Old Left and the 'New Consensus'

Before the advent of fascism, the British left had differed over the origins, impetus and potential loci of counter-revolutionary and anti-working class movements. During the First World War, reformists and revolutionaries in Britain had argued over the danger emanating from the extensive powers the state had accrued, and over the significance of the congruence of business interests and political power that had arisen. Profiteering, the militaristic regulation of labour and the presence of leading industrialists as government ministers caused the anti-war ILP and revolutionaries further to its left to fear that democracy was giving way, or had given way, to a capitalist dictatorship couched in the language of wartime necessity.

The revolutionary left feared that dictatorship and repression could gestate within democratic structures in time of economic and political crisis. This stance was predicated on their belief that democracy was in large part a sham, dominated by parties that essentially agreed on the fundamental economic structure of society. In many cases, this belief incorporated the view that those who had entered the democratic process with the intention of pursuing reform were likely to fall prey to the temptations of accommodation within the existing system, thereby betraying the class which had sent them there. With such vested interests at stake, the far left argued, the financial oligarchy would not allow itself to be voted out of office, let alone of power. Before the advent of fascism, therefore, the revolutionary left believed that given a sufficient crisis, democracy would be replaced with a much more repressive method of maintaining capitalism intact and that those who would introduce the change already held influential positions.

This stance, predicated on an underlying belief that capitalism could operate equally freely under democracy or dictatorship, had its mirror image in the constitutionalism of the Labour Party and the TUC. They had accepted the need for such wartime restrictions, and had even agreed an industrial and political truce during the conflict. Their basic faith in democracy enabled them to accept

that the exigencies of war made the continuation of normal politics impossible, and that social and political aspirations would be frozen for the duration. Their acceptance of this, in line with their participation in the war effort at every level, was founded on a genuine agreement with the aims of the conflict, but was also an opportunity for the party to display its patriotism, responsibility and readiness for government, with a view to the inevitable election contest that would accompany the peace.

To Labour, the war had not led to the emergence of a capitalist dictatorship in Britain. Indeed, the party argued that the way to remove any possibility of dictatorship was to participate in and strengthen the existing democratic institutions. Democracy, far from representing the most benign face of capitalist rule, had in fact facilitated social progress. It was by securing democratic freedoms, the party and the unions felt, that further advancement was guaranteed. Labour's acceptance of the democratic path precluded it from seeing within democratic institutions either the hidden face of class rule or the genus of dictatorship.

The British left had also differed regarding the emergence of counter-revolutionary movements in Europe after 1917. Revolutionaries blamed their growth on the failure of reformist socialists to enact change or to inspire in the working class the belief that they could do so. Reformists could point to the alarming activities of the revolutionary left to explain why reactionary movements were able to gain support. However, both wings of the British left could agree that movements like the Black Hundreds in Russia, or 'White Guard' regimes, such as that of Horthy in Hungary, were bent on maintaining capitalism intact and depriving working people of any gains they had made.

The curious social mix of these counter-revolutionary movements, which mobilised swathes of the middle classes and even 'lumpen' elements of the poor behind a reactionary programme, was replicated in fascism.

Fascism: Cause of Unity and Division on the Left

When fascism emerged, first in Italy after 1919, and then elsewhere, the British left faced the same questions as to its nature as they had with earlier counter-revolutionary movements. The different standpoints from which the various parties of the left viewed fascism initially gave rise to the same differing emphases that had characterised their view of reaction and counter-revolution. The parties of the British left therefore disagreed on many issues relating to fascism: its origins; the social content and political location of its support; the motivations of its supporters; its chances of making political progress in Britain and the actions necessary to oppose it. The importance of these analyses was most pressing concerning the potentiality of fascism in Britain, but the stances the parties took can be shown to have been grounded in the distinctive reality of the domestic political situation and were proportionate to the threat each party perceived from fascism in Britain.

British Anti-Fascism: Proportionate and Successful Analyses and Tactics

One of the purposes of this study was to challenge the perception that, during the inter-war period, the British left was less analytical, less effective and less concerned with fascism than comparable European labour movements. This approach entailed questioning the view that in relation to fascism, British socialists and communists failed to develop either interpretations or strategies of opposition worthy of comparison with their counterparts.

However, despite the different political and economic conditions prevailing in Britain, Italy and Germany, it can be seen that the British left did in fact develop sophisticated models for explaining all aspects of fascism, and evolved methods of countering it which appeared proportionate to them, given the political and economic situation in Britain, and which complemented their particular strategies at the time. While it would be an oversimplification to state that these tactics were superior to those deployed by the left elsewhere, in that fascism did not take power in Britain, it is true to say that the ideas and actions of the British

left were at least as appropriate and effective as those of many European labour movements.

Labour and the TUC maintained that the threat emanated solely from the openly fascist movements themselves. They argued that movements like the British Union of Fascists did not receive significant support from within the state structure or from the business sector. In these respects, Labour and the unions could be said to have assessed the political situation in Britain more accurately than Italian or German socialists. The leaders of Labour's sister parties had acted on the same constitutional and legalistic premises, but in conditions where democracy and the rule of law proved to be much less securely rooted, where their fascist and Nazi opponents were more widely supported and where economic difficulties carried greater political consequences than in Britain. Labour and the TUC, for all their supposed lack of theory and organisational depth, in fact judged the actual political situation they faced and the potentiality of domestic fascism much more accurately than their oft-cited inferiority to the PSI and the SPD suggests.¹

Because they saw fascism as a force extraneous to the state and the establishment, it followed logically that while groups like the BUF posed no direct challenge to legality and parliamentary democracy, it was best to ignore them and allow the police and the courts to counter their excesses. The intense constitutionalism of the mainstream British labour organisations defined their anti-fascism. They ignored BUF demonstrations and called on workers to boycott anti-fascist mobilisations.

However, Labour did use its influence on local authorities, and was often responsible for denying the BUF access to municipal premises for its all-important public meetings. Labour's faith in legality led it to support the introduction of the 1937 Public Order Act, and the party could point to the fact

¹ In the primary literature see Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?* pp. 30-41; Wertheimer, E. *Portrait of the Labour Party* (London, 1929); Pollack, O. 'British Labour and the International: A Continental Replies', *New Leader* (23/1/25), p. 6. In the secondary literature see Beetham, 'Reformism and the 'Bourgeoisification' of the Labour Movement', pp. 107-25; McKibbin,

that in terms of political impact and with regard to membership and influence, the BUF's best days had preceded its passing into law. The uniform ban incorporated in the Act, along with its tighter provisions concerning incitement to racial hatred, Labour argued, had detracted significantly from fascism's allure and its ability to use its chosen weapon of anti-Semitism to garner support.

Unlike the smaller, revolutionary parties, Labour operated purely in the electoral arena, being committed to building a broad support base, and believing that it could win power without the need for unity with others on the left. Indeed, the party leaders were convinced that any association with these groups would be detrimental to their aims. This thinking was behind Labour's rejection both the united front and Popular Front strategies. The party's stance was eventually vindicated, although not until 1945.

The TUC carried these principles into the workplace. Concerning fascism, therefore, union leaders often called on the rank and file to stay away from anti-fascist demonstrations, placing its faith in democracy, law and order to contain the BUF. Militant anti-fascism was, most union leaders argued, irrelevant in British conditions.

The Communist Party of Great Britain could also claim to have acted proportionately and successfully in its opposition to fascism. Though the party held the classic Marxist interpretation of fascism as being the modern expression of unadorned class rule, it was nevertheless able to tailor its message for a British audience. The party also proved capable of adapting its core interpretation to the different strategies it pursued before the war.

The CPGB's attacks on Labour, even during its most sectarian phase in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were never as vociferous or as damaging to the idea of unity within the wider labour movement as they were in Germany, for example. Indeed, the fall in the party's membership during this period has been attributed to factors other than its attacks on Labour. The party generally held to

'Why Was There no Marxism', pp. 301-28; Ceplair, Under the Shadow p. 3; Berger, The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats p. 14.

Lenin's advice that, in Britain, it was advisable for communists to seek accommodation with, or accommodation within, the overwhelmingly dominant Labour Party. This policy was only briefly abandoned in the late 1920s, and then at the Comintern's behest. Despite Labour's continual rejections, the CPGB's calls for unity found an increasing resonance.

It is true that communist appeals for unity were always accompanied by attacks on the policies and ideology of the larger party. Yet this seemingly contradictory stance in fact mirrored the true feelings of CPGB members. Without abandoning their core beliefs, they realised that the route to real influence within the British working class was ultimately through the Labour Party.

The CPGB is often compared unfavourably with its German and Italian counterparts in terms of membership, electoral performance and influence within the wider labour movement. Yet the party did manage to create a significant base and extend its influence beyond its own membership in a way that few British revolutionary movements have done. [See Appendix 3] This can be seen in literature sales, the election of MPs and councillors, its prominent non-party supporters, its influence in initiatives like the Left Book Club and the Aid Spain movement as well as in the support it could attract to its anti-fascist actions. Furthermore, unlike other Comintern sections, it understood the reality of British conditions, and did not over-estimate the revolutionary potentialities of economic crises or the domestic working class. The Labour Party and the TUC were certainly aware of its presence and its potentiality, as shown by their continuous efforts to silence, expel and discredit CPGB members and supporters.

The party has also been dismissed as nothing more than a creature of Moscow, with little or no freedom of action.² However, even the apparently negative effects of the Comintern's policy somersaults have been questioned in the light

² This is the general theme in Pearce, B. & Woodhouse, M. A History of Communism in Britain (London, 1995). See also Thompson, N. John Strachey: An Intellectual Biography (London, 1990), p. 118.

of the party's popularity during the Popular Front period.³ The CPGB's influence was such that the labour movement historian, John Saville, wrote that 'without the Communist Party the history of the 1930s, from about 1933-4 onwards, would have been very different.'⁴ Jason Gurney, a veteran of the International Brigades who later broke with the CPGB, nevertheless recalled that for much of the 1930s, 'The Party at that time was undeniably brilliant at making itself all things to all men with radical inclinations.'⁵

Even the smaller parties of the British left, such as the Socialist League, the Independent Labour Party and the Trotskyist groups, could similarly claim that their analyses of fascism were accurate, and that their anti-fascist strategies were popular and effective.

Though the Socialist League came to embrace the idea of a Popular Front against fascism while the ILP preferred a more proletarian united front, they both interpreted fascism in class terms. They maintained because of this that opposition to fascism could not be confined to the purely legal and constitutional field, but instead had to rest on the strength of the organised labour movement. They shared the CPGB's view that those most attracted to fascism were the threatened and decaying middle classes, with the workers remaining largely immune to an ideology inherently biased against them. These groups also recognised that for fascism to take power, it needed, and often received, the support of capitalists, state functionaries, the army and the established parties of the right. Both, therefore, argued that fascism was as likely to emerge from within the existing political structure as from without.

British Trotskyism had originated amongst communists who rejected the Comintern's divisive tactics in Germany. Despite the schism this caused, these fledgling groups shared with the CPGB the view that fascism was the crisis ideology adopted by capitalism. They also shared the communist rejection of

³ CPGB membership increased from 8,600 in June 1936 to 17,756 in July 1939. See Thorpe, British Communist Party & Moscow p. 231 and Pelling, British Communist Party p. 192. The party sold 225,000 pamphlets concerning the Spanish Civil War in 1936 alone. See Pollitt, H. Harry Pollitt: Selected Speeches and Articles. Vol II, 1936 – 1939 (London, 1954), p. 22.

⁴ Saville, 'May Day 1937', p. 248.

social democracy as a means of transforming the position of the working class, and therefore rejected the whole approach of parties like Labour and the SPD. Trotskyists nevertheless rejected the Comintern view, expressed most forcefully during the late 1920s and early 1930s, that social democracy was the main enemy facing the working class. They agreed with Trotsky's calls for a united anti-fascist front of workers' parties, and could convincingly argue that had this tactic been applied in Germany, catastrophe could have been avoided.

It was for the same tactical reasons that British Trotskyists rejected calls for a Popular Front against fascism, arguing that such a broad and contradictory alliance would be incapable of the cohesion necessary to defeat a fascist challenge. The movement pointed to the vacillation of the Spanish Republican government when it was faced with a growing threat from the right, and to the ineffectiveness of the Popular Front government in France. In pursuing their aim of a united front, the Trotskyists supported calls for anti-fascist mobilisations, and sought to use them to that end. A common theme in their reportage, even of anti-fascist successes like Cable Street and Bermondsey, was that far greater attempts should be made to organise and politicise those thousands that took to the streets.

In terms of anti-fascism, all of the groups that advocated direct action could make a case for their tactics having been successful. Through demonstrations they called or supported, BUF marches and meetings were often stopped, while control of the streets and the desired air of invincibility were denied them. Across the country, the activists of the far left helped with mass mobilisations that denied British fascism space to organise and spread its message.

While the vast majority of anti-fascist activists remained loyal in electoral terms to the Labour Party, their presence on protests called by the smaller groups showed that there was an appetite amongst the working class for a far more combative stance than their erstwhile leaders were prepared to

⁵ Gurney, J. Crusade in Spain (Newton Abbot, 1974), p. 24.

countenance. Significant numbers of these people also shared the desire within the left for some form of anti-fascist coalition.

The Effect of Political Orientation on the Analysis of Fascism

Certain organisations underwent significant changes in the years between 1919 and 1939, and in doing so, completely altered their analyses of fascism, as well as their chosen methods of opposing it.

The ILP

Though the ILP was always a broad church, its general attitude towards fascism during the 1920s generally mirrored that of the Labour Party, of which it was a constituent part. British fascism was seen as a fringe phenomenon, and the party felt that to ignore it, rather than confront it, would more effectively ensure its demise. The ILP at this time also shared Labour's view that Italian fascism could be dealt with by the principles enshrined in the League of Nations' Charter and by the League's commitment to open diplomacy, mediation and collective security.

The ILP's disillusionment with both Labour and reformism following ineffectual spells in government, MacDonald's defection and the party's apparent inability to rise to the challenges of the 1930s, led it to disaffiliate and adopt revolutionary socialism. Though the ILP did not formally adopt Marxism, it drew revolutionaries to it and shed some of its reformist elements. As a consequence of these things, the ILP's interpretation of fascism was transformed. The emergence of the BUF was a clear warning to the newly-radicalised ILP that domestic fascism represented a real challenge, and that the best way to oppose it was by mass mobilisations, direct action and the construction of a revolutionary movement capable of beating the fascists to the seizure of power.

The Socialist League:

The members of the Socialist League, formerly ILP stalwarts who had decided to remain within the Labour Party in an attempt to radicalise it, nevertheless went through the same transformative process as figures like Maxton and Brockway. The League rejected Labour's calls to ignore the BUF's campaign and promoted anti-fascist demonstrations while calling for the creation of a Popular Front against fascism. Their insistence on this was the primary factor that motivated the Labour leadership to insist on the League's disbandment in 1937 and the eventual expulsion of Stafford Cripps and others. It was the League's radical socialism that generated its analysis of fascism, in exactly the same way that the moderation of its host, the Labour Party, framed its own.

The Communist Party of Great Britain

Throughout its changes in political tactics, from the militancy that characterised its early years, the officially sanctioned sectarianism of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the more inclusive approach of the Popular Front period, the CPGB at no time abandoned its core belief that fascism was latent within capitalism. This was the case regardless of whether the party was arguing that parliamentary democracy was merely a cover for capitalist rule, or, in the mid and late 1930s, that democrats and communists should join together to defeat fascism. Nevertheless, the party did undergo a fundamental shift in its tactics that entailed a political repositioning no less dramatic than that which the ILP had undergone. The advent of the Popular Front era, formally initiated at the seventh congress of the Comintern in 1935, meant that the CPGB was committed to seeking the broadest possible alliance in the face of fascism. This aim was not compatible with traditional communist attacks on democracy, and the party sought to portray fascism as a political aberration, still brought forth by capitalist crises, but best combated by an alliance of all anti-fascists, and by the defence of democratic institutions and freedoms.

This line was closer to Labour's than to the position the CPGB had so recently propounded. The new policy, and the new definition of fascism that accompanied it, nevertheless illustrated that changed political strategies often generate changed interpretations of fascism. Those parties that did not undergo such fundamental changes in outlook or strategy retained a consistent interpretation of fascism throughout the period.

The left's various analyses of fascism were undoubtedly tailored to be of use to them in attacking their opponents in the labour movement. Labour equated fascism and communism as variants of totalitarian rule against which its democratic politics were the only defence. The CPGB could assert that democracy was simply one face of class rule, to be discarded, and fascism imposed, when economic crises rendered democratic freedoms incompatible with the operation of capitalism. Labour, therefore, could be branded as at best, naïve, and at worst, complicit in perpetuating democratic illusions in the face of a looming fascist threat. Even when espousing a broad Popular Front against fascism, the CPGB could use Labour's refusal to countenance such an alliance as a weapon with which to beat its larger rivals.

The smaller parties also used their analyses of fascism and their anti-fascist tactics to point out the perceived inadequacies of their competitors. The ILP and the small Trotskyists groups, while rejecting the Popular Front idea as being too broad and politically diffuse to be viable, argued for a united front of working class parties against fascism. In this way, they hoped to gain influence within the wider labour movement. They used the refusal of parties like Labour and the CPGB to engage seriously in such common projects to question their commitment to building an effective working class movement and to anti-fascism itself.

The British Left's Common Theme

While the left parties differed in their interpretations of aspects of fascism, there was agreement over its primary purpose as a movement and as a regime. In each country, fascism was seen to have been a weapon against the working

class. Failure to take this into consideration was looked upon as a fundamental misunderstanding of its nature. Ellen Wilkinson and Edward Conze pointed out in 1934 that 'For those to whom Fascism appears to be the seizure of power by a gang of toughs, no further explanation is necessary. Nothing remains except to be sorry for the victims and to wish that the war for democracy had turned out better for them.'⁶

This interpretation was reinforced from a wide range of evidence: from the testimony of anti-fascists and other witnesses from the countries concerned, to data taken from international agencies, from the words of fascists themselves, and even from the heavily censored official figures of the fascist regimes.

As a movement, Italian fascism was seen primarily as an anti-working-class force. After the turbulent years of 1919 and 1920 that so frightened the Italian bourgeoisie, the fascist movement appeared as a willing implement in the hands of agrarians and industrialists. Fascist attacks on workers, peasants and their organisations were widespread and brutal. Fascism enjoyed its first successful campaigns in rural areas like the Po valley, Reggio Emilia and Tuscany where, acting on behalf of local landowners and in tandem with the agencies of the state, their squads attacked socialist centres and destroyed peasant communes, beating and killing with impunity.

The fascist movement then replicated these actions in the cities, where, despite meeting greater resistance, they specifically targeted party premises, left-wing presses and other centres of working-class activity. Businesses provided funds, the police and army supplied arms and transportation, and the government largely turned a blind eye to Blackshirt violence. The premier, Giovanni Giolitti, equated the function of Mussolini's men with that of the Black and Tans in Ireland.⁷

In Germany, the Nazi movement often used the language of the left, and competed with socialists and communists for the allegiance of impoverished

⁶ Wilkinson & Conze, *Why Fascism?* p. 9.

⁷ See Carocci, G. *Italian Fascism* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 20-27.

workers. Yet despite this, the movement's activity centred on conflict with the organisations of the left. The NSDAP, faced with a well-organised and deeply entrenched working-class movement, did not act as strike breakers in the same way that their Italian counterparts had done. Occasionally, the party even supported strikes to win over the nationally-minded worker, but still fought continuously against the left. At the same time the Nazis were building their links with the captains of German industry, and privately assuring them of their commitment to capitalism and the destruction of the trade unions.

In power, fascism was seen to consistently act in the interests of capitalism, and against the interests of the workers. The parties of the British left used an extensive range of sources in its exhaustive exposition of this fact. Every indicator of workers' rights, wage levels, deductions from pay, taxation, unemployment figures, working hours, and methods of workplace organisation were scrutinised and shown to be discriminatory in their effect.

The claims of both Italian fascism and Nazism concerning the equal value with which they regarded workers, managers and owners were challenged with a blaze of figures and examples. Fascism's assertions that it had replaced the class war with a shared commitment to the national interest were similarly countered. The new mechanisms that both regimes had established with the declared intention of replacing industrial conflict with mediation, negotiation and justice were shown as being hopelessly biased against the individual and collective interests of the worker. The concepts and structures of corporatism and *Gleichschaltung* were both shown in practice by the left to be hollow and ineffectual, leaving power and wealth in the same hands that had held it prior to the advent of fascism.

The difference between fascist statements of belief and the character of its actions prompted the British communist, Rajani Palme Dutt, to assert that 'Fascism, in the view of the Fascists themselves, is a spiritual reality. It is described by them in terms of ideology. It represents the principle of "duty", of "order", of "authority", of "the State", of "the nation", of "history"...all this verbiage is of very little use to bring out the real essential character of

Fascism...[it equates to] the dreary commonplaces of all bourgeois politicians and petty moralisers to cover the realities of class domination and class exploitation.⁸

Dutt was for a time the foremost British proponent of the 'agent theory', the view of fascism advanced by the Comintern and its sections during the later 1920s and the early 1930s.⁹ The attention paid to the agent theory often means that the left's more general theme concerning the economic reality of fascism is overlooked. It is not difficult to amass evidence that appears to contradict the Comintern's third period assertion that fascist movements were the conscious agents of monopoly capital. The diverse social composition of fascist movements, examples of radical rhetoric and the fact that, in taking power, fascists displaced conservative politicians are often cited to this end. On this basis, Gilbert Allardyce asserted that 'Most of the older writings in this tradition reveal the impoverishment of Marxist historiography rather than the character of "fascist" movements'.¹⁰

Yet using the agent theory to dismiss the left's central thesis concerning fascism is a false argument. It fails to address the claim that fascism was inherently anti-working class, and that fascist regimes facilitated a more favourable climate for business than the democracies they replaced. Fascists of course denied this, and claimed that their destruction of the left's organisations was carried out in the interests of the nation and of social peace, rather than those of the possessing class. The point made by all parties of the left at the time, including those that rejected the agent theory themselves, was that the overall effect of fascist actions and policies was beneficial to the existing ruling class. Those who held economic power during the rise of fascism largely retained it once the movements had taken power, and profited greatly from the policies of the new regimes. The evidence for this, presented at the time by the left and confirmed by later academic studies, is incontrovertible, and historians

⁸ Dutt, Fascism and Social Revolution pp. 73-5.

⁹ See for example, De Felice, Interpretations pp. 163-8.

¹⁰ Allardyce, G. 'What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept', American Historical Review 84, 2, (April, 1979), p. 369. That the agent theory has not completely

who judge fascism in terms other than these have yet to build a case convincing enough to refute John Strachey's claim that 'We cannot, it is clear, understand fascism unless we understand the nature of capitalism and its crises.'¹¹

Objectivity and Opposition: The Two Currents Within Fascism Studies

The left, like all contemporary observers, found it impossible to approach the subject of fascism from a completely objective point of view. The French scholar, Pierre Ayçoberry, pointed out that from its advent, any analysis of Nazism was inevitably 'a call to action, for or against.'¹² The left obviously tackled the subject from a fiercely antagonistic point of view, and the British historian, Tim Mason was amongst those who argued that it was precisely this oppositional stance that made its analyses so pertinent.¹³

Objectivity is not in the nature of political parties, whose innate function is to convince others that their view of the world is correct. The left felt that objectivity was therefore undesirable and unattainable. The CPGB's James Klugmann concluded that 'I believe that all histories are, in a sense, partisan, but not all consciously, and certainly not all admittedly.'¹⁴ A work produced by the working-class educational body, the National Council of Labour Colleges, stated that 'The intellect is, before anything, an organ of partiality...Hence all the talk about "impartiality"...where it is not conscious hypocrisy, is to be regarded as the outcome of that muddle-headedness and unconscious intellectual dishonesty which a decadent culture fosters and promotes.'¹⁵ Its journal argued for politically committed research, writing and instruction, stating in 1921 that 'All true learning has come sword in hand, from Plato to Darwin and from Marx to Lenin. We shall welcome it more for that, nor need

disappeared from recent explanations of fascism is shown in Poulantzas' Fascism and Dictatorship.

¹¹ Strachey, Capitalist Crisis p. 352.

¹² Ayçoberry, Nazi Question p. xi.

¹³ See Mason, T. 'Open Questions on Nazism', in Samuel, R. (ed.) People's History and Socialist Theory (London, 1981), pp. 205-10.

¹⁴ Klugmann, J. History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Volume I: Formation and Early Years, 1919 – 1924 (London, 1968), p. 11.

¹⁵ Lyster Jameson, H. An Outline of Psychology (revised edition, London, 1938), p. 3.

we fear to entertain a prejudice for truth.’¹⁶ Another British Marxist, R.P. Dutt, also stressed the principle that the point of analysis was to come to a conclusion about a given subject, thereby being better able to respond to it, whereas, in his words, ‘The mark of learning divorced from action is that it is always branching out into new sidetracks and byways, with more learning and yet more learning, because it has nothing else to do.’¹⁷

Many historians have supported this position. Giuliano Procacci argued against the notion of pure and unbiased study, maintaining that all observations are coloured by pre-existing political or intellectual concepts and that these are necessary in placing any movement, regime or ideology into context. ‘Scholarship’, wrote Procacci, ‘is not simply an empirical exercise in organising data in a coherent way, but rather must be based on an already elaborated ideology. A proper world view – whether it be Marxism, Freudianism, Catholicism, or whatever – is not only essential for understanding the past, but also for present and future actions.’¹⁸ The Greek scholar, Nicos Poulantzas, who re-examined the Comintern’s approaches to fascism, similarly maintained that political phenomena ‘can only be rigourously – that is, demonstrably – comprehended if they are explicitly analysed with the aid of a theoretical apparatus constantly employed’.¹⁹

Today, no analyst studies fascism without preconceptions, willing to be attracted or repulsed purely from a reading of the documents. Yet some historians argue that an ‘objective’ reading of fascist literature and statements will help us to understand fascism, and aid in the construction of an agreed definition.²⁰ However, when Renzo De Felice attempted to produce an ‘unbiased’ reassessment of Mussolini, his work was condemned as ‘a monument to fascism’ by the Italian Marxist scholar, Giovanni Ferrara. Ferrara argued against the idea that there could be even-handedness when writing about

¹⁶ *The Plebs’ Magazine* (July, 1921), p. 203.

¹⁷ *Labour Monthly* (June, 1922), p. 430.

¹⁸ Cited in De Felice & Ledeen, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction* pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Cited in Caplan, J. ‘Theories of Fascism: Nicos Poulantzas as Historian’, *History Workshop Journal* 3, (1977), p. 85.

²⁰ See for example Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* pp. 3-4; Trevor-Roper, H.R., ‘The Phenomenon of Fascism’, in Woolf, (ed.) *European Fascism* p. 28.

fascism. If, like De Felice, Ferrara argued, one felt that analysing fascism was ‘undertaking a dispassionate intellectual adventure, one may also believe that writing history is only an elegant academic profession. But it is not.’²¹

Robert Skidelsky attracted similar criticism when he claimed that objectivity was his guide in writing a biography of Oswald Mosley. Skidelsky wrote of one critic, Vernon Bogdanor, that ‘he cannot get away from the notion that the historian’s duty is to condemn fascism and anti-semitism in order to prevent their revival. For him, a “rounded view of reality” is one which provides evidence for damning Mosley and all his works.’²²

The approach of scholars like Ferrara and Bogdanor echoes that of the left. It maintains that the most incisive analyses of fascism have come from those who stood in direct opposition to it, and that objectivity itself is neither a valid nor a realistic way to approach a phenomenon as emotive, deceptive and malevolent as fascism. The endless shifts in emphasis and justification that fascism enunciated, the diverse promises it made to its different constituencies, and the contradictory motivations of its supporters mean that the focus of any analysis must rest on what fascists actually did, rather than on what they said. The left naturally based its explanations of fascism on its core belief that society was essentially composed of conflicting economic classes. In identifying which class was predominant under fascism in economic terms, and which class suffered, these analysts looked beyond the utterances of the fascists themselves, placing fascism in its wider social and economic context.

These studies were not undertaken in the dry spirit of investigation, but to arm anti-fascists with the information they needed in their campaigning. John Saville pointed out that the British socialist historian, G.D.H. Cole, maintained in the 1930s that ‘he was writing for the ordinary members of the labour movement, both to enlighten them of their past and to encourage them in their future

²¹ Cited in De Felice & Ledeen, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction* p. 18.

²² Skidelsky, ‘Reflections on Mosley’, p. 81. For the debate see Benewick, ‘Interpretations of British Fascism’, p. 322.

projects.’²³ This approach remains the purpose of politically committed historians today. James Eaden and David Renton stated that their history of the CPGB aimed to help ‘a new generation of activists to learn from the past to avoid some pitfalls in the future’.²⁴

Yet there has always been a current amongst historians of fascism which not only rejected the left’s interpretations on the grounds of bias, but which favoured the study of the fascists’ preferred definitions of themselves. Alistair Hamilton chose the anti-capitalist rhetoric of fascist movements as a basis for explaining them. He stated that because some fascists ‘believed not only that fascism was revolutionary, but that it was left-wing...we are not entitled to dismiss it as purely conservative or interpret it in terms of the traditional right wing. Fascism purported to be a third solution, based on the left.’²⁵ Yet this approach not only ignores the fundamentally capitalist economics of fascism in power, but also the often bloody fate meted out to these ‘left-wing fascists’ by their own leaders.

The American researcher, A. J. Gregor, thought that ‘Fascism has by-and-large been misunderstood...primarily because most studies of fascism have been conducted under the burden of preliminary assumptions which have led to the serious neglect of its explicit ideology’.²⁶ As well as assuming the existence of a distinctive fascist ideology that transcended or made redundant the significance of its evident economic orientation, Gregor dismissed leftist analyses purely on the grounds of their oppositional premises. He stated of his major work on the subject that ‘Given the intentions of this account, specific criticism of fascism has been no more than marginal...In any event, substantive criticism of fascist thought must presuppose what this volume attempts: an

²³ Saville, J. ‘The Crisis in Labour History: A Further Comment’, Labour History Review 61, 3, (1996), p. 324.

²⁴ Eaden & Renton, The Communist Party p. xxi.

²⁵ Hamilton, The Appeal of Fascism p. xvii.

²⁶ Gregor, Ideology of Fascism p. x. Gregor explains away the ‘concessions’ that Mussolini gave to Italian big business as being merely those necessary for the survival of his regime. This view ignores the fact that the economic orientation of the regime was decided by the upper echelons of the Fascist Party, especially after its incorporation of the conservative and pro-business Italian Nationalist Association in 1923. It also implicitly acknowledges the location of real power in Italy at the time.

accurate and objective account of Fascist commitment. Most past criticism has failed to meet that first minimal requirement.²⁷ More recently, George Mosse argued that by adopting this approach, historians could 'take the measure of fascism on its own terms, investigating its self-representation, and attempt to grasp it from the inside out. Only in this way can we understand the true and awesome nature of its appeal.'²⁸

Yet these approaches fail to address the main contention of the left: namely that the truth about fascism is to be found not in its propaganda, or in measuring the degree of popularity that it attained, but rather by identifying in whose interests it acted and ruled. In establishing that, an examination of fascist rhetoric is more hindrance than help, whereas the validity of the left's general approach towards fascism is that it clarifies just this point above and beyond any consideration of fascist apologia. Therefore, the left's central theme and oppositional premise must be restored to contemporary definitions of fascism.

The urgency attached to the development of a 'correct' interpretation of fascism often helped hone the left's arguments to a great degree and gave them a depth that more objective approaches lack. The Plebs' J.P.M. Millar summed this up in 1934, stating that 'it is too late to discuss either war or Fascism when war and Fascism are upon us.'²⁹ The British historian, David Beetham, argued of anti-fascist analyses that 'adequate theory is a *necessary* rather than a *sufficient* condition of successful practice.'³⁰ Indeed, they stand comparison with, and in many cases inform, many later assessments of fascism. They warn against attempts to judge fascism in the same way that one might judge other, less contentious political philosophies, namely on the basis of their self-proclaimed ideals.

David Renton, perhaps the most vehement critic of the contemporary habit of judging fascism in the light of its own claims, has argued that this method

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁸ Mosse, G.L. 'Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations', *JCH* 31, 2, (April, 1996), p. 244.

²⁹ *The Plebs' Magazine* (June, 1934), p. 123.

³⁰ Beetham, *Marxists* p. 4.

comes dangerously close to producing positive interpretations, holding that ‘The only objective definition of fascism is a critical definition of fascism. The current academic approach, which attempts to understand fascism “from the claims made by its own protagonists” is a flawed and uncritical approach.’³¹ In another work he stated that ‘One cannot be balanced when writing about Fascism, there is nothing positive to be said of it.’³²

Yet the left had considered and rejected the ‘objective’ approach to establishing the nature of fascism long before the current debate about it. The CPGB’s R.P. Dutt argued in 1934 that ‘The first illusion that requires to be cleared out of the way is that there is a “theory” of Fascism...the innocent may solemnly and painstakingly discuss at face value these miscellaneous “theories” provided to suit all tastes. But in fact their real importance is rather as symptoms and by-products of the real system and basis of fascism than as its origin and *raison d’etre*.’³³ The huge variety and dubious veracity of the claims made by fascism as to its inspiration, nature, aims or orientation, Dutt stated, rendered the study of such things purposeless. In arguing against a theory of fascism, he maintained that ‘There is only a practice; to cover this practice, a medley of borrowed plumes of any and every theory, principle or institution which may serve the purpose of the moment, often with the utmost consequent theoretical contradiction.’³⁴

A Left Book Club work of 1936 quoted Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* itself to show just how such contradictions were deliberately used to cloud the essential nature of fascism. In his book, Hitler stated that the aspiring dictator should ‘Always appear to be a revolutionary, [yet]...Use the instruments of authority that are already there, bring powerful existing institutions over to your side, derive the greatest possible advantage from old sources of power.’³⁵ Evelyn Anderson, in another Gollancz publication, argued that Germans who had voted for Hitler ‘did not do so because of what he was and what he planned, but because of what

³¹ Renton, ‘Fascism is More Than an Ideology’, p. 3. (accessed 6/12/02).

³² Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* p. 18.

³³ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* p. 177.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 180.

³⁵ Olden, R. *Hitler the Pawn* (London, 1936), p. 58.

he was believed to be and believed to plan. People followed him not because they wanted war, but because he spoke of justice; not because he aimed at world domination but because he promised social security. They followed him because they were not sufficiently mature to see through his blatant lies and ambiguous half-truths'.³⁶

The left's scepticism concerning fascist statements of belief, and an acceptance of the general assertion that fascism acted in the interests of or as an effective coalition with the established ruling class have previously been incorporated into the historical literature, often by historians who could not always be described as belonging to the socialist or communist traditions.³⁷

Even Ernst Nolte, the noted German conservative historian, rejected the idea of a coherent ideology that could be studied in isolation from the actions of fascist movements. He stated that fascism was 'perhaps merely an explosive concentration of principles, most of which were individually necessary.'³⁸ Similarly, Martin Broszat, while rejecting the more crudely expressed variants of the agent theory, nevertheless accepted that there was agreement over 'the fundamentally reactionary character of National Socialism.'³⁹

Ernst Mandel made a similar point, arguing that debates concerning which elements of German big business supported Hitler, from which point in time and with what level of enthusiasm, were less important than the identification of the essential political and economic orientation of the regime. He argued that 'What matters is to determine whether the Hitler dictatorship preserved or destroyed, consolidated or undermined the social institutions of private property, of the

³⁶ Anderson, E. Hammer or Anvil: The Story of the German Working-Class Movement (London, 1945), p. 176.

³⁷ See for example Payne, History of Fascism p. 12; Paxton, R.O. 'Five Stages of Fascism', Journal of Modern History 70, 1, (March, 1998), p. 16; Williamson, Corporatism in Perspective p. 34; Schweitzer, Big Business pp. 506-7.

³⁸ Nolte, E. Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism (Munich, 1965), p. 24.

³⁹ Broszat, M. 'The Social Motivation and Fuhrer Bond in National Socialism', in Gregor, N. (ed.) Nazism (Oxford, 2000), pp. 81-2.

means of production and the subordination of the toilers forced to sell their labour to capitalism.’⁴⁰

S.L. Andreski concurred with this, observing that the traditional ruling class in Italy and Germany had been willing to cede a significant degree of political power to fascism because they were secure in the knowledge that it would act in their interests.⁴¹ In fact, one of the characteristics of fascism that the left repeatedly pointed to was the degree of freedom business had in its own sphere, despite fascism’s talk of corporatism, the primacy of the state over business interests and the aim of economic co-ordination without regard to profits.

The current concentration on fascist ideology ignores the fact that many historians have previously illustrated the ambiguous, contradictory and deceptive nature of fascism’s stated beliefs.⁴² Carl Cohen, for example, pointed out that ‘Mussolini had been a socialist and an atheist; he became a bitter critic of socialism and a supporter of the Roman Catholic Church. He was once in favour of republicanism, but became a monarchist; once a supporter of the principles of laissez faire, he eventually came to demand complete state regulation of all economic activity.’⁴³ Gilbert Allardyce, no friend of left-wing interpretations of fascism, nevertheless concurred that Hitler and Mussolini were opportunists concerned above all with taking power, and who therefore tailored their message to the audience immediately before them. When it came to weighing the value of their utterances, Allardyce asserted that ‘the safest course is to discount everything.’⁴⁴ More recently, Robert O. Paxton maintained

⁴⁰ Cited in Dorpalen, German History p. 395.

⁴¹ Andreski, S.L. ‘Some Sociological Considerations on Fascism and Class’, in Woolf, (ed.), Nature of Fascism p. 99.

⁴² At least one contemporary observer argued that even amongst its own supporters, fascism was embraced on the basis of prosaic economic and political factors, not because of its racial, mythical and heroic rhetoric. See Drucker, Economic Man pp. 10-11.

⁴³ Cohen, C. (ed.) Communism, Fascism and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations (New York, 1972), p. 314. Even the latter views attributed to Mussolini by Cohen were subject to change as events demanded. His belief in total state regulation of the economy was never enforced against the will of the big industrial concerns. Even Mussolini’s views on socialism altered during the period of the Salo Republic, which was characterised by his populist calls to mobilise the people and during which he confided that fascism should have had a much stronger socialist content. To the last, Mussolini’s views were malleable in the extreme.

⁴⁴ Allardyce, ‘What Fascism is Not’, p. 380.

that to understand fascism one had to identify what it did, stating that ‘One must observe it in daily operation.’⁴⁵

Objectivity, even if it could be achieved, would prove deficient when examining fascism. According legitimacy to self-definition is a dubious methodology at the best of times, but in the case of fascism, only gives credence to its demonstrably bogus assertions. Understanding developed through the prism of opposition, analysis and refutation rather than through the acceptance of the fascists’ justifications, was during the inter-war years and is still now the only effective method of identifying its essence.

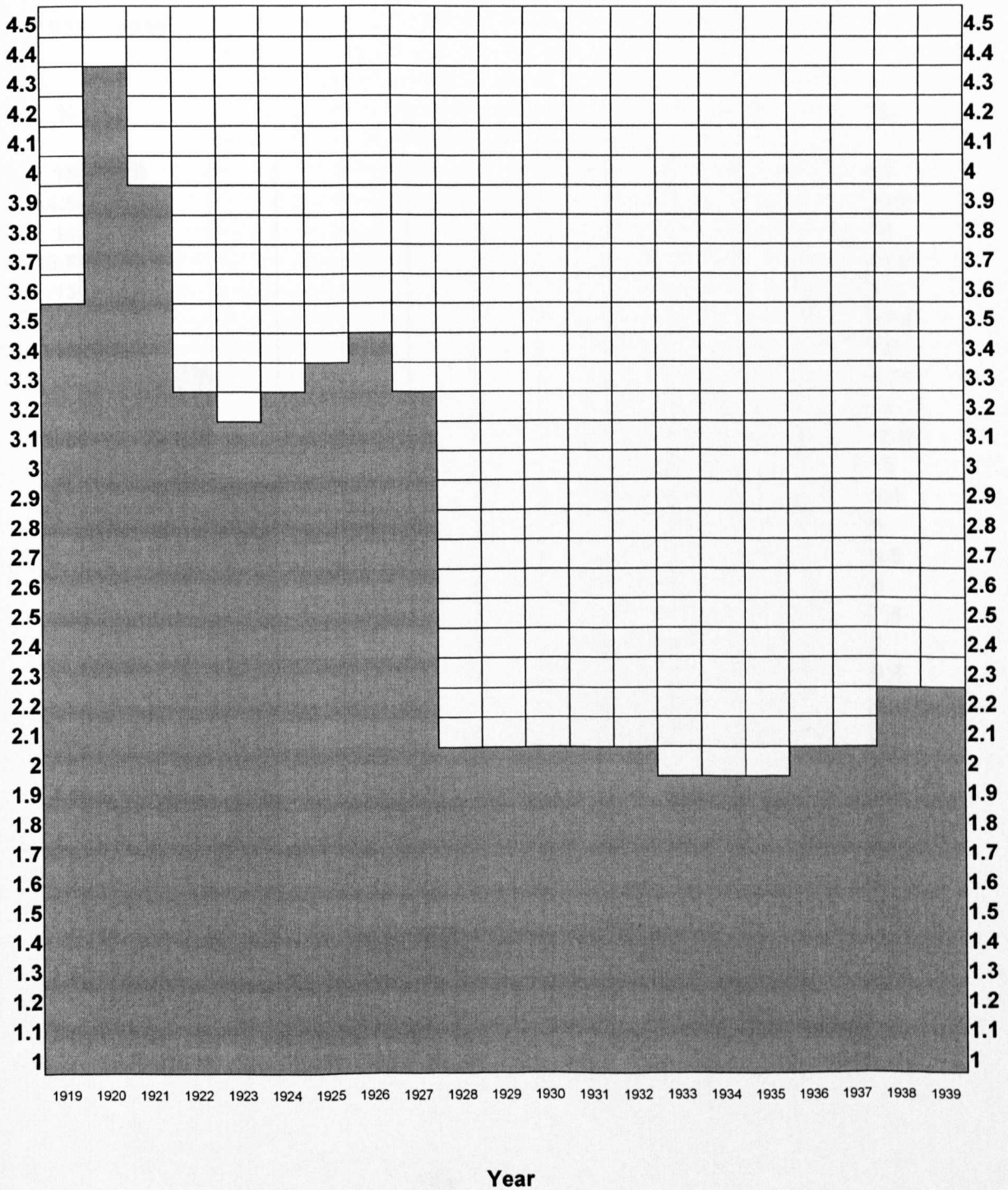
The declared aim of those seeking a ‘new consensus’ in this field is the creation of a widely acceptable definition of fascism.⁴⁶ Yet no agreement can be reached by theorists working from wholly different perspectives and using wholly different methodologies. However, if they can find common ground about the general economic orientation of fascism, and its fundamental opposition to the organisations and ideas of the left, then they, like the left, will be able to produce a broadly agreed definition. From this, more specific areas of debate can be approached and resolved. The key issue today, as it was in the 1920s and 1930s, concerns the nature of the society that fascism sprang from, those aspects of it that fascism sought to defend, and the predominant motivations of its supporters.

The issues at stake transcend the mere question of ‘what was fascism?’ but centre rather around determining ‘how did fascism come to power?’ and ‘in whose interests did it rule?’ Answers to the latter, in fact, determine the former. These were the issues that the left set out to clarify and their success in doing so cannot be replicated today without the acceptance of their findings, and less still by the study of aspects of fascism extraneous to these central questions.

⁴⁵ Paxton, ‘Five Stages’, p. 22.

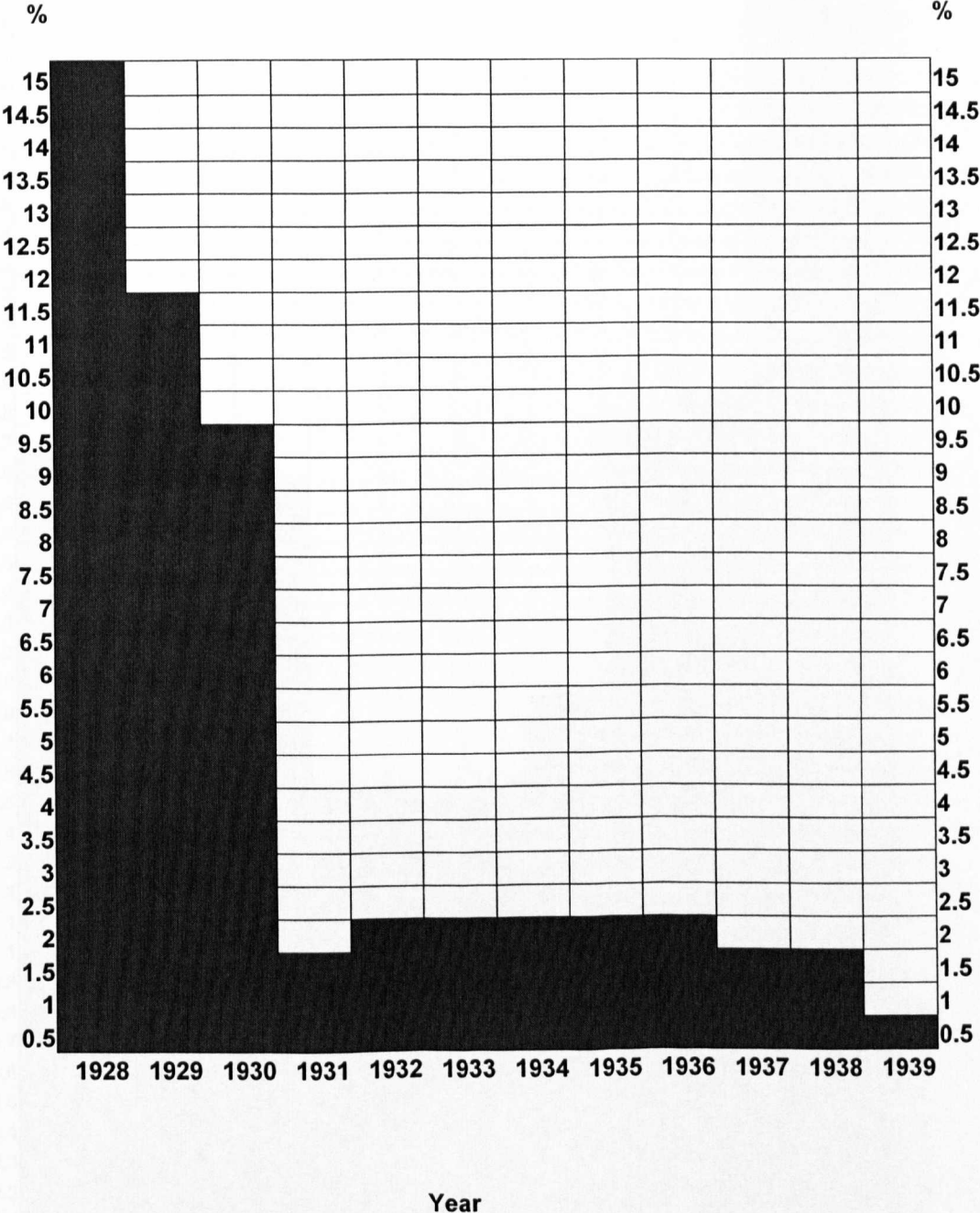
⁴⁶ See for example Griffin, Nature of Fascism pp. 12-14.

Appendix 1: Trades Union Congress Membership, 1919 – 1939 (in millions)



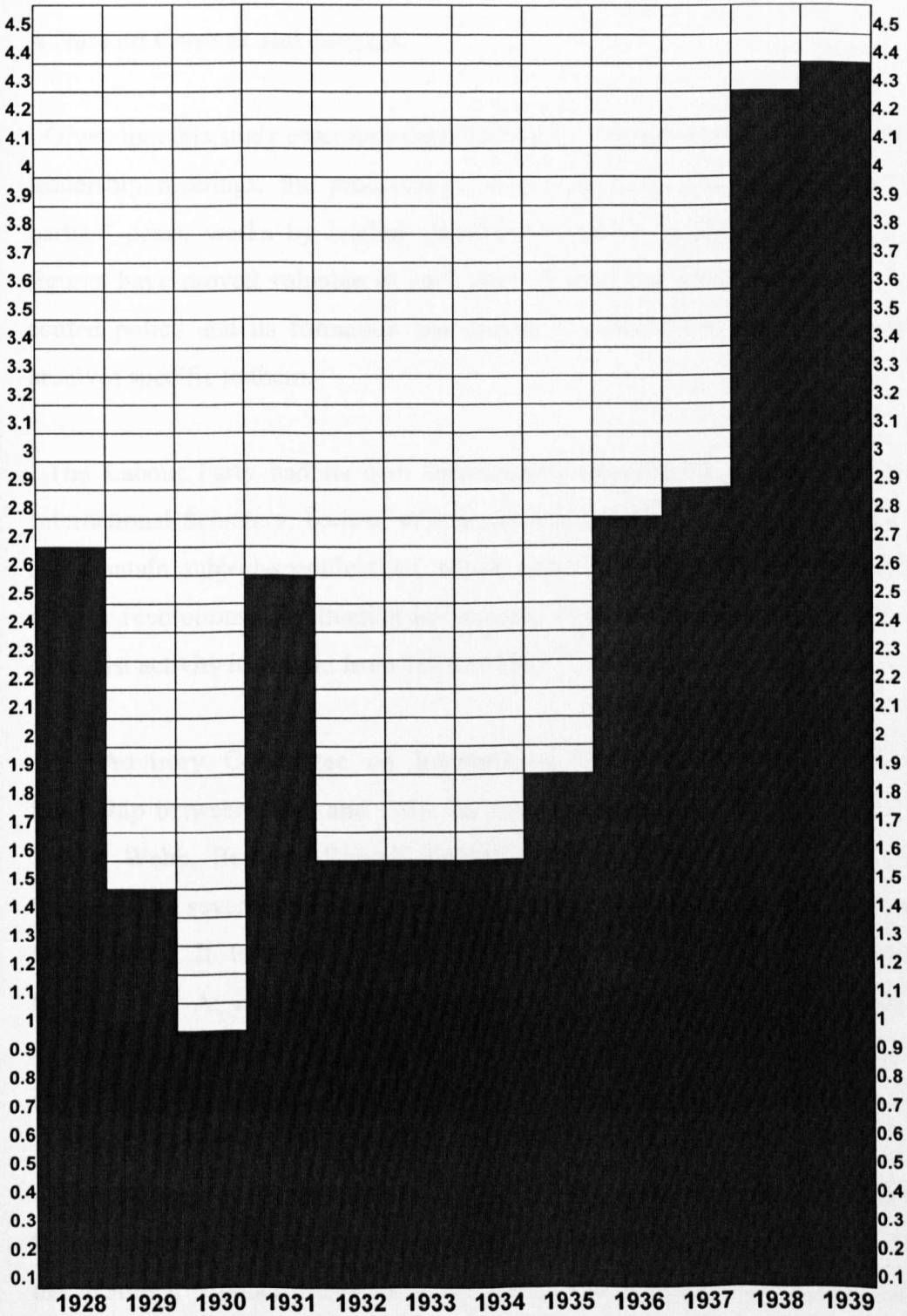
Figures from Pelling, H. A Short History of the Labour Party (8th ed.) (London, 1985), pp. 193-4

**Appendix 2: Membership of Affiliated Socialist Societies (including the
ILP) as a Percentage of Labour Party Membership (to the nearest 0.5%),
1928 – 1939**



The Labour Party did not maintain a record of individual membership before 1928.
 The ILP counted its members as a separate party shortly before its split with Labour in 1932.
 Figures from Pelling, H. *A Short History of the Labour Party* (8th ed.) (London, 1985), pp. 193-4

Appendix 3: CPGB Membership as a Percentage of Labour Party Membership, 1928 – 1939



| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| CPGB | 5556 | 3170 | 2555 | 7478 | 5600 | 5500 | 5800 | 7500 | 11500 | 12500 | 18000 | 17756 |
| Labour | 214,970 | 227,897 | 277,211 | 297,003 | 371,607 | 366,013 | 381,259 | 419,311 | 430,694 | 447,150 | 428,826 | 408,844 |

Figures from Pelling, H. *A Short History of the Labour Party* (8th ed.) (London, 1985), pp. 193-4; Thorpe, A, *The British Communist Party & Moscow, 1920 – 43* (Manchester, 2000), p. 284.

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A Note on Content and Sources

Given that this study examines organisations at a national level, the records of leadership meetings, the proceedings of annual or special conferences, the parties' press, works by leading ideologues and the memoirs of prominent figures have proved valuable in each case. With some groups however, their settled policy and its formation can further be clarified by consulting other archives specific to them.

The Labour Party had its own International Department, and an attendant International Secretary, both of which left detailed records. Labour's archives also contain subject-specific files, which include the Russian and Hungarian counter-revolutions, the situation in Germany from 1925, and a detailed survey of fascist activity in Britain from 1933 to 1937.¹

An Advisory Committee on International Questions served the Labour leadership between 1918 and 1928. Its membership at various times included Sidney Webb, Bertrand Russell, Oswald Mosley, Arnold Toynbee, Erskine Childers, and several future communists, not least Dutt, Emile Burns, and Robin Page Arnot. It took contributions from figures as diverse as Alexander Kerensky, J. A. Hobson and Gaetano Salvemini.² Though the committee's recommendations often failed to become party policy, its deliberations help to illuminate a wide range of opinion on fascism and the international situation.

The Labour Party and the TUC maintained a co-ordinating committee throughout the period, known as the National Joint Council until July 1934, and the National Council of Labour thereafter. Its minutes are replete with references to domestic and European fascism. The two organisations also

¹ See National Museum of Labour History, A Guide to the Labour Party Archive (Manchester, 1998).

² Advisory Committee on International Questions files: LP/IAC/1/14; LP/IAC/1/86; LP/IAC/1/288.

participated in a Joint International Committee for part of the 1920s.³ The TUC's own publications on fascism, and the proceedings of its congresses have also been consulted.

Both Labour and the TUC played leading roles in the Labour and Socialist International, the inheritor of the functions of the old Second International. The LSI's archives are critical in displaying the similarities and differences between British and European socialists.

The main ILP archive is held with Labour's in Manchester, though several other repositories have collections of the party's publications and records. The Socialist League's records are augmented by its newspaper and pamphlets, and by *Tribune*, the journal founded by former League members in 1937.

The Communist Party of Great Britain's records are also housed in Manchester's National Museum of Labour History.⁴ The party initiated and participated in many anti-fascist organisations that extended beyond the party membership, and the records of some of these are held within its official archive.

The records of British Trotskyism are not held centrally, although Glasgow Caledonian University has recently taken possession of a large collection of left communist material and is in the process of cataloguing it under the working title of the British Trotskyist Movements Archive. At the moment, however, the relevant material can be found within the collections left by individual activists, such as Reg Groves, Jock Haston, Harry Wicks and others. Ironically, given the

³ The Labour and TUC leaderships shared almost identical views on fascism and anti-fascism during this period. See Mullings, M. M. 'The Left and Fascism in the East End of London, 1932-1939' Polytechnic of North London Ph.D. (1984), p. 88.

⁴ See King, F. 'Archival Sources on the Communist Party of Great Britain', *Science and Society* 61 (1997), pp. 131-9; Morgan, K. 'The Archives of the British Communist Party: A Historical Overview', *Twentieth Century British History* 7, 3 (1996), pp. 404-21; Durham, M. 'Communist Party Bibliography', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 45 (1982), pp. 9-10.

hostility it directed towards them, some useful information on the movement is held within the CPGB's own file on Trotskyism.⁵

A number of other broad-based organisations are also referred to in this study. Communists founded the National Council for Civil Liberties to campaign against the public order legislation proposed in the wake of the Cable Street violence of 1936. On paper, the leadership of the NCCL was overwhelmingly non-communist, and it succeeded in mobilising support across a broad swathe of political opinion. The organisation produced leaflets, pamphlets and books as part of their campaign against fascism, and is therefore relevant to the latter part of this study. Its archives are housed at the Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.

The Left Book Club is another obvious source of information on British anti-fascism, and its journal, *Left Bookclub News* (later *Left News*) has plentiful contributions from Labour, CPGB, and ILP members. Though the influence of the CPGB meant that the views of Trotskyists were kept out, the LBC was much more than a communist front. Kevin Morgan was correct in assessing the Club's politics more than 'a simple question of "Communist domination"', but one of a convergence of views on the left at a time of deepening crisis.⁶ European socialists and communists were regular contributors, giving the magazine an informed and cosmopolitan air.

Another useful forum was *The Political Quarterly*, a journal of contemporary politics. Although far from being a specifically left wing publication, the *Quarterly* allowed significant figures from within the British left a chance to set forth their views, as well as reprinting important texts from figures as diverse as Mussolini and Trotsky.⁷

⁵ The papers of Reg Groves and Harry Wicks are held at Warwick University's Modern Records Centre: Refs. MSS 172 and MSS 102 respectively. The Jock Haston Papers are at Hull University's Brynmor Jones Library: Ref. DJH.

⁶ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War* p. 258.

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⁷ See Mussolini, 'Political and Social Doctrine', pp. 341-56; Trotsky, L. 'Is Stalin Weakening, or the Soviets?', The Political Quarterly 3, 3 (July-Sept. 1932), pp. 307-22.

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