The problem of war aims and the Treaty of Versailles

Callaghan, JT

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Why did Britain go to war in 1914? The answer that generated popular approval concerned the defence of Belgian neutrality, defiled by German invasion in the execution of the Schlieffen Plan. Less appealing, and therefore less invoked for public consumption, but broadly consistent with this promoted justification, was Britain’s long-standing interest in maintaining a balance of power on the continent, which a German victory would not only disrupt, according to Foreign Office officials, but replace with a ‘political dictatorship’ inimical to political freedom.¹ Yet only 6 days before the British declaration of war, on 30 July, the chairman of the Liberal Foreign Affairs Group, Arthur Ponsonby, informed Prime Minister Asquith that ‘nine tenths of the [Liberal] party’ supported neutrality. Asquith privately came to a similar estimate, as did the Manchester Guardian.²

These calculations proved to be very wide of the mark. Only four members of the government privately resigned in protest when the decision for war was taken and two of them recanted before the decision became public. Dissenters later complained of having been kept in the dark during the July crisis, of secret diplomacy and secret entanglements, much as foreign policy critics had complained, intermittently, for years past. As the individuals who favoured intervention went to work – Grey, his Foreign Office advisers, Eyre Crowe and Arthur Nicolson, Winston Churchill, much of the Conservative Party leadership – supported by newspapers such as The Times and the Spectator – the dissenters were counselled to hold their peace as delicate negotiations to avoid war proceeded. Norman Angell launched the British Neutrality League on 28 July and Graham Wallas set up the British Neutrality Committee on the 31 July but the mass of Radicals in Parliament remained silent and by the time these groups met it was already too late to affect decision making. In any case, many observers thought there was little to worry about; as late as the
3 August the press reported that no British Expeditionary Force would be sent to the continent and any involvement in the war would be a limited naval commitment (though the Tory press was already demanding much more and there was a sense in some quarters that the war might prove popular).

A crisis meeting of the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) of the Second International convened in Brussels on 29 July, with Keir Hardie and Bruce Glasier in attendance for the British. Here the delegates resolved to organise demonstrations against a possible war but could conceive of no other actions. When Angelica Balabanova reminded the other leaders of the Vaillant–Keir Hardie resolution (at Copenhagen in 1910) to stop war by general strike she elicited only surprise and lack of interest. The ILP’s *Labour Leader* and the *Daily Herald* supported demonstrations against war on the 30 and 31 July, respectively. Fifteen to twenty thousand people assembled to protest against war in Trafalgar Square on Sunday 2 August. The main speakers included Hardie and Arthur Henderson, supported by prominent trade unionists like Bob Smillie and Ben Tillet. Secret alliances and pacts that could lead to war without the pretence of broader consultation were denounced. The Cabinet doubters were informed by similar worries – they could see that Britain’s involvement was inevitable given the naval commitments to France that Grey insisted upon. On 3 August, Grey addressed the House of Commons warning that neutrality would have numerous ‘perilous consequences’ for Britain’s vital interests and that Belgian independence had to be the ‘governing factor’ in determining Britain’s stance; failure to defend it and the whole of Western Europe would succumb to a single dominant power. With the Conservative Party and the Irish Parliamentary Party supporting Grey, it was Ramsay MacDonald who first questioned the Foreign Secretary’s rhetoric in the Commons, pointing to the massive disproportion between intervention for the defence of Belgium and the prospect of ‘a whole European war’ which would change the continental map. Twenty-two Radical MPs followed MacDonald in resolving for neutrality immediately after the 2 hour Commons debate was brought to a close. Neutralists dominated the adjournment debate that followed that evening, but it did not matter. Overnight Asquith persuaded two of the Cabinet rebels to change their minds. Grey and Asquith composed an ultimatum to Germany on the morning of the 4 August and war was declared by the king that night. In explaining to the House why Britain had gone to war, two days later, Asquith focused solely on the question of Belgian neutrality.

On 5 August Labour’s Executive blamed the outcome on secret diplomacy but the parliamentary group voted for war credits hours later and the War Emergency Workers’ Committee was set up to monitor economic and social problems that the war might create. The leadership resolved
that 'under the circumstances it was impossible for this country to remain neutral.' MacDonald resigned as party chairman and Henderson took his position. Those Radical MPs who remained convinced that the war was an avoidable disaster took a similar view to Labour's Executive, voting for war credits so that Britain might prevail in the conflict, yet maintaining their criticism of Grey. A Labour circular issued on 7 August attributed the conflict to balance of power politics and secret diplomacy, as the Radicals had argued in the House. Grey was blamed for committing Britain to France without consulting Parliament or informing the public. In the second week of August MacDonald helped to set up the UDC, which continued to question Britain's role in the war along these lines. However, Labour's Executive moved just as rapidly towards practical measures of support for the war effort. By the end of August it was promoting enlistment to the armed forces and had agreed a political truce for the duration, following the TUC's decision to support an industrial truce. Though the ILP opposed the war, on both pacifist and socialist grounds, it lost members and it was soon clear that the labour movement was solidly behind the war effort, as were most Radical MPs, most Irish MPs and most feminists. Even the UDC – and doubting figures such as Hardie and MacDonald – agreed that the war had to be fought to a finish now that it had started.

Expectations and aims

Some of Grey's critics foresaw that the war would be 'catastrophic.' They had good reason. France, Germany and Russia had all massively increased their armies in 1913. Josiah Wedgwood predicted it would also cause revolution when he criticised the foreign secretary's 'jingo' speech in the Commons on the evening of the 3 August. The Manchester Guardian drew attention to Grey's attempt to minimise the 'appalling catastrophe' of war the next day and on the 6 August Kitchener, the newly appointed war secretary, told the Cabinet that it would have to 'put armies of millions in the field' and expect the war to last years. This was at a time when many people expected little more than naval engagements and a resolution of the entire crisis by the end of the year. Yet within a month of the commencement of fighting casualties had reached around 300,000 on the Western Front, though there was no indication of this in the British press. On 15 October, The British Labour Party and the War explained that Germany had caused the war and that Britain fought for democracy against German militarism, as well as in defence of Belgian neutrality. Labour's annual conference, planned for January 1915, was cancelled. By the end of the year Britain alone had sustained 90,000 casualties. Enthusiasm for the war nevertheless remained high and prominent figures from
the Labour movement were drawn into war work, serving on a variety of ad hoc state committees, tribunals and commissions.

The purpose for many was to ‘see it through’ but loftier, more ambitious, even spiritual targets were also set. Speaking in Dublin in September 1914 Asquith said the purpose of the war was ‘the substitution of force … a real European partnership, based on the recognition of equal right, and established and enforced by common rule’. David Lloyd George, speaking in London on the 19 September, told a mass meeting at the Queen’s Hall that he envied young people who now had the opportunity of sacrifice in the ‘great war for the emancipation of Europe from the thraldom of a military caste’. They had been ‘living in a sheltered valley for generations’ but fate had raised them to a level where they could see the things that really matter ‘the great peaks we had forgotten, of Honour, Duty, Patriotism … the great pinnacle of Sacrifice pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven.’ Asquith and Grey were both brought to tears by the peroration, relieved that the great Radical had spoken so emphatically in support of their decisions. Similar nonsense was spoken and written in Germany and France and, as Marc Ferro points out, it elicited similar sentiments of ‘mass exuberance, mysticism, patriotic frenzy, appeals to the judgement of history, to divine mercy’. All parties to the war claimed that they were fighting for civilisation – even Germany, whose army engaged in atrocities and cultural vandalism in Belgium in August 1914. Regime change in Berlin was already being spoken of, together with an international settlement that would reduce the risks of future wars, if not abolish them altogether.

The inter-Allied conference of socialist and labour parties, meeting on 14 February 1915, despite the patriotic sentiment that it represented, was not content to confine its arguments to those of mainstream opinion. It referred to ‘the profound general causes of the European conflict, itself a monstrous product of the antagonisms which tear asunder capitalist society and of the policy of Colonial dependencies and aggressive Imperialism … in which every Government has its share of responsibility’. A victory for German militarism would destroy democracy and liberty in Europe, it claimed, but there could be no justification for ‘the economic crushing of Germany’ when the war was over. The governments of Germany and Austria were at fault but not the people of those countries. The socialists of the Allied countries, the conference asserted, ‘demand that Belgium shall be liberated … that throughout all Europe, from Alsace-Lorraine to the Balkans, those populations that have been annexed by force shall receive the right to freely dispose of themselves.’ The resolution then stressed that the delegates were ‘inflexibly resolved to fight until victory’. However, these delegates would also oppose any attempt to transform an essentially defensive war into a war of conquest. In so doing they sought a justification for supporting the war compatible with their record
of criticism of secret diplomacy, militarism and imperialism, and their support for democracy and even ‘the peaceful Federation of the United States of Europe and the world’.

In effect Labour argued that Germany’s bad behaviour outweighed ‘the contributory negligence of British foreign policy in consequence of its imperialism, irrationalism, secret diplomacy, arms trading, and capitalism.’ H. G. Wells came to the assistance of proponents of this argument when he coined the phrase ‘war that will end war’ – a catchphrase that became popular by the end of 1914. The defeat of Germany would be the defeat of German militarism and the making of a lasting peace. Thus one could support the war effort while calling for new principles and institutions that would make war much more unlikely in the future. Before the end of August 1914 G. Lowes Dickinson, a Cambridge academic and Liberal, was already drafting a plan for a future League of Nations with this end in view. But open opposition to the war was confined to persecuted minorities, like the 16,500 officially recorded conscientious objectors. Fear may have been a factor in keeping the numbers so small. For all the rhetoric denouncing ‘Prussianism’ Britain itself became much more intolerant, authoritarian and centralised as the conflict unfolded and people thought to be opposed to the war – like MacDonald and Bertrand Russell – were made to pay for their dissent. Repression alone, however, does not explain the small scale of open opposition.

Even pre-war peace societies such as the Quakers, the Peace Society, the National Peace Council and the International Arbitration League were thrown into confusion and division when the war began, while most of the churches enthusiastically rallied to its support. The need to moralise the conflict seems to have been met. British intervention was widely seen as fully justified. The 2.7 million volunteers to the armed forces of the first 24 months of the conflict were the most visible and important expression of this belief. More people opposed compulsory military service than the war itself, as did the TUC, in September 1915, and the Labour conference of January 1916. But the Military Service Act, which came into force in March 1916, was careful to exempt Ireland, where opposition was widespread, and provoked none of the resignations from the coalition government that Labour had threatened. It was left to the tiny No-Conscription Fellowship – led by ILP and Liberal dissidents like Fenner Brockway, Clifford Allen and Bertrand Russell – to campaign against the Act. The organisation claimed 15,000 members by the summer of 1916 but was probably exaggerating. The vast majority of Labour and trade union people accepted that efficient prosecution of the war made conscription necessary. Opponents knew that they were isolated and likely to face harassment and imprisonment if their opposition became active. The ILP found its membership falling after it opposed the war in a statement of 13 August 1914. Within the BSP it took until 1916 before its pro-war
leaders, like H. M. Hyndman and Robert Blatchford, were forced to resign from the organisation. Membership, never very high, shrank during the war. Other centres of opposition were even smaller.

The UDC, Angell and Brailsford

Among those who took a critical stance, the UDC was the most important hub of sustained thinking about the causes of the war and how it should end. It brought together neutralists, advocates of a League of Nations (or some sort of international authority), isolationists and others who believed that the war was unnecessary and would solve nothing. Most were Liberals, many would join the Labour Party when the war ended. The UDC could not develop a ‘party line’ on the war, given the differences within its membership, but it started with guiding principles. Many of its arguments came to the surface within the Labour Party when the events of 1917, especially the revolution in Russia, encouraged proponents of a new statement of war aims. Labour leaders, such as MacDonald and Henderson, subscribed to the guiding principles of the UDC, namely that there should be no territorial adjustments because of the war without the consent of the people affected by them; that parliamentary sanction should be required before Britain entered any arrangement, undertaking or treaty; that British foreign policy should not be guided by balance of power principles but should aim for the establishment of a Concert of the Powers and international council, operating in public view for the arbitration of international disputes, together with an international court capable of interpretation and enforcement; finally, that any peace settlement should aim for drastic reduction of armaments by consent of all the belligerents and nationalisation of their arms industries and regulation of their arms exports. In May 1916, a fifth principle was adopted at J. A. Hobson’s prompting, intended to eliminate economic warfare by the promotion of ‘free commercial intercourse among all nations by expanding the principle of the Open Door’. Protectionism and autarky led to war, according to this old liberal argument, free trade generated interdependence, prosperity and co-operation.

Norman Angell had developed the thesis that war would be rendered futile by virtue of growing economic interdependence in his 1909 pamphlet, ‘Europe’s Optical Illusion’, subsequently known as ‘The Great Illusion’. When war broke out he argued that popular opinion in Britain had been mobilised for the elimination of ‘the evil doctrine of Nietzcheanism and brute force’, as represented by the German state, in the hope that Europe could be made forever free from war and militarism. The war, on this reading, was not so much against another nation as against an ‘evil spirit’. This was a favourite trope of the politicians and press in Britain. Pro-war
propagandists, such as Wells and Professor Gilbert Murray, equated victory for the Entente with the defeat of both militarism and autocracy (even in Russia). Angell, a neutralist in August 1914, wanted an Allied victory once the war began, but stressed that crushing Germany would not achieve the desired results, it would simply ‘expose us to a renewal [of war] at no distant date [and] fasten the shackles of militarism more firmly than ever upon the long-suffering peoples of Europe.’

Before the year was out he felt the need to argue against those in officialdom who wanted Germany partitioned or wiped off the map. Already there was talk of returning Alsace-Lorraine to France, of the creation of a new Poland at Germany’s expense, of the transfer of German colonies to other hands, of the destruction of her fleet, the dethronement of the Kaiser and the dismemberment of Austria. Against all this Angell cautioned that without Germany’s consent no peace could endure. States have powers of recuperation; the national spirit can be provoked by vengeful defeat and no balance of power could survive under such circumstances. For ‘Prussianism’ to be defeated, as political rhetoric insisted it must, it had to be recognised as a state of mind affecting all the Great Powers. To free ourselves from it, Angell insisted, we must promote mutual co-operation and display ‘a frank recognition that nations do form a society’, which can be regulated.

Lowes Dickinson put the point more forcefully for American readers in December 1914. If the war had been caused by militarism, secret diplomacy and intrigue, peace depended on an extension of democracy to international relations. Foreign policy would have to come under democratic scrutiny, the self-determination of nations would have to become a cardinal principle and armaments would have to be subject to national and international controls. Nations would have to submit their disputes to arbitration and conciliation by a ‘League of Europe.’

Thinking along these lines was inspired above all by the perception that war could be avoided. The way the First World Great had come about was at the root of this thinking. Though profound long-term causes of war – imperialism and capitalism – were often mentioned, the short-term unfolding of the July crisis from a dispute in the Balkans to a general European war by dint of alliances and the decisions of tiny elites was what critical analysis fixed upon. So when the Fabian Society, for example, set up an International Agreements Committee in January 1915, to investigate methods for maintaining peace, it generated a conference in May of that year, and two articles that appeared in the *New Statesman* in July, which focused on ‘Suggestions for the Prevention of War.’ Leonard Woolf, at the centre of this endeavour, published *International Government* in 1916, which put a Fabian construction on the liberal argument that commerce drove global integration forward by forcing states to adopt global rules and regulations. Woolf showed that the process was already underway
Dissident opinion was divided and dynamic on many matters. H. N. Brailsford repeated many of Angell's views in his account of *The Origins of the Great War* but his focus on the war as the postponed sequel to the Balkan War of 1912, explained it as a 'co-operative crime' of Germany and Russia, essentially concerned with the domination of Eastern Europe and utterly remote from any British interest. Both Britain and France, on this view, had been dragged into it by the 'mechanical fatality' of their alliance with the 'unscrupulous and incalculable Empire' of Tsarist Russia. Both should negotiate for peace, Brailsford argued in the winter of 1914, before they were dragged into a prolonged fight to determine who would dominate in the East. Bertrand Russell initially took a similar view to Brailsford. But when he looked to the war in the East, in November 1914, his loathing of Tsarist Russia and his admiration for German culture got the better of him. In a UDC pamphlet he openly accepted the argument that Germany in the East was defending civilisation against the backward Slavs. While the war in the East had what he called a certain 'ethnic inevitability', the war in the West was the result of alliances built in response to 1870 and the 'folly' of Germany's naval programme. Russell soon dropped these pro-German sentiments. But he actively campaigned against the war, later as a prominent member of the NCF. He published his most detailed study of British foreign policy in December 1915 in reply to officially sponsored propaganda written by Professor Gilbert Murray. Russell now accepted that Germany bore the greatest responsibility for the outbreak of the war, and its subsequent conduct, but held fast to the conviction that the 'maxims' of British foreign policy had led to Britain's unnecessary involvement. He maintained that Britain's foreign policy since 1904 had strengthened the war party in Germany, weakened the friends of peace and supported France and Russia 'in enterprises which were inherently indefensible'.

As the war dragged on, Russell repeatedly warned of its dangers to European civilisation. Only pride, fear and hatred prolonged the conflict. In July 1916, he wrote leaflets for the NCF in which he referred to Germany having 'repeatedly offered terms of peace'. At the end of the year he argued that Bethmann-Hollweg's peace note, delivered to the American embassy on 12 December 1916, signalled that Germany was receptive to peace overtures. At the same time, he warned against the sort of peace that the advocates of 'total victory' would bring about – a peace based on fear and humiliation. This was what the new coalition government formed by Lloyd George promised. Russell wrote an open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, as these steps were taken in December 1916, in the
belief that the USA could put a stop to the unnecessary slaughter. But he was sceptical about ideas for a League of Nations and in January 1917 argued that such a body could easily become a new Holy Alliance dedicated to maintenance of the international status quo.

One thing these dissenters were agreed upon was the death of the Liberal Party and the better prospect of the Labour Party championing an enlightened foreign policy. UDC arguments reiterated many of the criticisms of foreign policy that had been common currency among Labour and Radical MPs since the beginning of the Boer War. But Labour was seen as the rising force that could make alternative approaches to foreign policy a reality, especially after the Liberal Party split between supporters of Asquith and Lloyd George in 1916. Labour’s practical support for the war effort did not automatically contradict such hopes. Even UDC members regarded a British defeat in the war as unthinkable. Many Labour men – like Henderson – supported the war effort but did not endorse the foreign policies that had led to it and believed wars could be avoided if the right people and policies were put in place. French and British socialists meeting on 14 February 1915 in London made that clear, as did the Labour and trade union conferences of 1916 and 1917. Labour’s co-operation in the war effort, moreover, was believed to give it a stake in the construction of a just peace. A just peace would mean meeting the claims of workers in Britain and asserting the values of the Labour movement in the international arena. Before the end of 1915 it was clear that President Woodrow Wilson and the USA might play a role in strengthening that case. Even the Cabinet considered some sort of international peacekeeping body in the summer of 1915. Wilson, as Philip Snowden pointed out to Labour supporters around the same time, publicly aligned himself with the arguments of the UDC. In the presidential campaign of 1916 he transformed this more radical case into a national agenda, while Britain seemingly moved in the opposite direction under Lloyd George.

While Wilson argued for a ‘peace without victory’ his supporters in the USA thought they had seen the first signs of hope in Britain when the Labour Party conference unanimously voted for a ‘an international League to enforce the maintenance of peace’ in January 1917. Wilson’s ‘Peace without Victory’ speech had been delivered the day before the conference began on 22 January and the delegates stood cheering when it was read to them. In France the socialist party gave Wilson’s address a similar reception, though both parties remained committed to military victory. Small groups of socialists – without French or British participation – had met at Zimmerwald (5–8 September 1915) and Kienthal (April 1916) demanding a ‘peace without annexations or indemnities’. The Russian Revolution and the overthrow of Nicholas II on 15 March made such demands urgent problems for the Allies. The Provisional Government
formed immediately after the Tsar’s abdication contained liberals from the Duma, but the Petrograd Soviet was led by Zimmerwaldists committed to a negotiated peace and some of these entered a coalition Provisional Government formed on 5 May. Initially these events did not threaten a separate peace in the East. On the contrary, the Allies and the Provisional Government expected a more efficient prosecution of the war now that the Tsar was gone. Even so a ‘peace without annexations or indemnities’ was not what the Allied governments had been planning for.

Secret treaties

Lewis Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies under Asquith, drew up a secret memorandum as early as March 1915, called ‘The Spoils’, in which he outlined the imperial gains in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific that Britain could expect to make out of the war. Most of Germany’s colonies had fallen into British hands by February 1916 and arrangements were made with France, Japan and the Dominions to make these losses permanent. Secret deals were also made with Italy and Tsarist Russia involving major territorial transfers and plans were laid for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Publicly, however, the talk was of restoring Belgium, perhaps destroying Germany as a naval power and punishing it for breaking international law, while somehow turning it into a democracy. When the USA entered the war in April 1917, President Wilson was informed of the secret treaties and lost no time reiterating his demand for ‘peace without victory’. But American entry into the war reinforced the case of those who wanted an Allied military victory over Germany by making it more realistic, as did their initial reading of the revolution in Russia. Many of those of who wanted a negotiated peace recognised the problem. But Wilson’s rhetoric combined with that of the Provisional Government in Petrograd also strengthened the prospect of a just and lasting peace. Labour was at any rate now prepared to consider a proposal of the Dutch and Scandinavian socialist parties that a conference of the social democrats of the belligerent countries should be held on neutral ground (Stockholm) to formulate peace terms – to the extent that it decided in May to send a delegation to confer with the Russian socialists. In the event the delegation was refused permission to depart by the Sailor’s and Fireman Union when it attempted to board ship at Aberdeen. Lloyd George meanwhile instructed Henderson to visit Russia in response to demands from the Provisional Government for urgent discussion of war aims and associated Allied fears that Russia would negotiate a separate peace. In Petrograd Henderson discovered strong support for the proposed conference in Stockholm and returned convinced of the need for negotiations before the Eastern
front collapsed completely. Labour’s Executive came out in favour of the Stockholm conference upon his return and an emergency conference, convened to discuss the proposal on 10 August, supported it by a large majority – the first time the unions had wavered about the ‘fight to a finish’ line. Henderson was forced to resign from the Cabinet on this issue (to be replaced by Labour MP George Barnes) and both the British and French governments scuppered the proposed international conference by refusing to grant passports.

The episode is significant chiefly as evidence of new thinking among the war’s Labour supporters. More evidence was supplied by a successful TUC resolution in September demanding a voice for the working class at any future peace conference. Labour’s Executive used this prompt to declare the need for a statement about war aims to be ratified by an inter-Allied conference of socialist parties as the first step in uniting the left of all the belligerent countries. But before this was taken any further the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. On 22 November Leon Trotsky published the secret treaties entered into by the Allied powers, exposing what he denounced as secret capitalist diplomacy and imperialist robbery. By the middle of December the Manchester Guardian began publishing the details and continued to do so into 1918. They were greeted in left-wing circles with ‘shame and anger’ but also as weapons to support the cause of Woodrow Wilson. They also permitted the Bolsheviks to strike a noble pose, since among the deals they repudiated were those that would have annexed the Straits and Constantinople to Russia and given it ‘full liberty of action’ in northern Iran.

The Bolshevik disclosures had revealed, according to the secretary of the ISB, that the governments of the Allies were ‘in opposition to the traditions of our Movement … in denial of the moral conceptions which underlie our Movement.’ These governments had not responded with any enthusiasm to Wilson’s agenda. But Labour’s Memorandum of War Aims – approved by a special conference of the TUC and Labour Party on 28 December 1917 – echoed Wilson by claiming that the ‘fundamental purpose of the British Labour Movement in supporting the continuance of the struggle is that the world may henceforth be made safe for democracy.’ To achieve this, it went on to list all of the demands associated with the UDC – including a League of Nations, open diplomacy and the self-determination of nations. Denouncing imperialism in general the Memorandum wanted the administration of dependent peoples by a commission of the League of Nations in places like the Middle East and envisaged a vast neutral state composed of all tropical African territories south of the Sahara and north of the Zambezi.

In January, Lloyd George made a speech to the British Trade Union League at Caxton Hall that appeared to embrace Wilsonism, persuading Henderson that the prime minister stood closer to Labour than ever
before. Three days later Wilson unveiled his Fourteen Points. Labour now demanded a joint statement on war aims from the USA and British governments and called for an international conference of socialist parties to consider the Memorandum, adding that the social democrats in the Central Powers should state their own war aims and demand that their governments do the same. In February, an inter-allied conference of socialist parties took place and the Memorandum was expanded, though not significantly altered. In March, the rapacious Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was concluded and the fact that only the Independent Social Democratic Party voted against it in the Reichstag did not augur well for Labour’s initiative. In fact Vandervelde and Huysmans, on behalf of the ISB, told the SPD majority that the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk stood in complete disregard of the democratic peace that the inter-Allied conference had just endorsed.

The ISB began to collect responses to the Memorandum from the social democrats in the belligerent countries. While the Austrian social democrats accepted the proposed League of Nations, the principle of no annexations and indemnities, and the right of self-determination, it cast doubt on the idea that democracy could emerge victorious from the defeat of either side in the struggle. A negotiated peace was needed and the right of self-determination must be extended to all colonies. The Berliner Tageblatt rejected one-sided indemnities altogether and the SPD theoretical journal Die Neue Zeit wondered why the idea of international control over colonies should be limited to tropical Africa and not extended, say, to Ireland. Was this not a cover for the extension of ‘English world hegemony’ it wondered? The social democrats of Germany and Austria certainly did not see how democratic regimes could emerge from their military defeat. Heinrich Cunow, editor of Die Neue Zeit, reacted to Labour’s proposals for the democratic control of foreign policy by observing that such general principles already had the support of the SPD majority, Bethmann-Hollweg and Pope Benedict XV, among many others. Such talk was cheap. Labour wanted the self-determination of nations but did not mention Ireland, Egypt, India, the former Boer States, Cyprus or Malta in its Memorandum. Even the socialists of the neutral countries had sympathy for this argument while the Marxist USPD went much further, stating that a durable peace required the socialists in every country to fight their own governments and prepare for socialism. This was as far as the discussion went. Interest in a negotiated peace in any case declined with the German spring offensive of 1918 and the Allied riposte that began in August. Germany’s defeat soon followed. Social Democrats entered the government at the beginning of October under politically volatile circumstances and by 12 October Germany accepted Wilson’s demand for the evacuation of occupied territory. Soon the threat of social revolution in Germany became apparent.
The general election and the peace conference

In the December 1918 general election all prominent ILP candidates and UDC figures who stood as Labour candidates were defeated. The UDC now had 650,000 members but the 59 Labour MPs who formed the official opposition were almost all former trade union officials sponsored by unions. Labour's election manifesto had referred to 'the present world catastrophe,' which it took as evidence of 'the culmination and collapse of a distinctive industrial civilisation … the workers will not seek to reconstruct.' The Paris Peace Conference opened on 18 January and in February the pre-war Second International took the first step to reconstruct itself at Berne. The Berne conference objected to most aspects of the peace settlement unfolding and conveyed its opposition to Clemenceau through a delegation, which included Henderson and MacDonald. MacDonald was one of the first in Britain to denounce the proposed League of Nations as a sham. It would be dominated by the victorious powers and represent states not peoples. By June 1919, however, Labour's annual conference accepted that the League's deficiencies might be remedied and there was already evidence of popular enthusiasm for the League in, for example, the growth of the League of Nations Union, formed in 1918 only days before the armistice. But Morel, Hobson and other UDC figures who had joined the Labour Party saw only a Carthaginian peace in the decisions taken in Paris. The Berne conference agreed with them but made clear, as Labour had done in the Memorandum, that the sort of League it wanted – representing peoples not governments and able to enforce its decisions in collective action – depended on the prior triumph of socialism and democracy in the participating countries. Nevertheless the victorious powers stood accused of malicious intent to punish Germany, establishing a new balance of power and laying the foundations for economic damage in Europe for years to come. The NEC concluded that the peace treaty 'was defective not so much because of this or that detail of wrong done, but fundamentally, in that it accepts, and indeed is based on, the very political principles or premises which were the ultimate cause of this war.' Yet when the Treaty came before Parliament the Labour group approved it and subjected it to only mild criticisms.

No doubt some Labour members had travelled a long way in four years from the belief that the war was a justified defence of Belgian neutrality to the realisation that it had been a catastrophe with identifiable causes susceptible to rational intervention. But others had always taken both views – that though the war must be fought to victory, it could have been avoided and many of its causes were forces and practices that Labour opposed on principle. By 1918, more people doubted that any great issue of principle could be identified to justify the carnage, but at least Wilson had invested the conflict with a noble meaning and goal. Labour's immediate
rejection of almost everything connected with the peace settlement reflected the immense disappointment of those who had taken the ‘peace without victory’ slogan seriously. But root and branch rejection of the Treaty of Versailles never had popular support and it took only another few years for Labour’s leaders to adjust to the facts. By 1922, all were convinced that Britain had to make use of the existing League.

The numerous contradictions and inconsistencies in Labour’s thinking only became apparent with the passage of time. The Memorandum of War Aims not only wanted the world made safe for democracy, the peace it sought was said to depend on the spread of democracy to ‘all countries’ coupled with the frank abandonment of ‘every form of imperialism.’ These preconditions were not likely to be realised soon. Yet Labour also wanted, ‘forthwith,’ a League of Nations, the suppression of secret diplomacy and the control of foreign policy by popularly elected legislatures. It envisaged progress towards the abolition of conscription and profit-making armaments firms, as well as arms controls. Critics of the Memorandum observed that Labour did not envisage a British withdrawal from Empire or even propose consistent opposition to its imminent expansion. Did the party understand that such a global enterprise had to be policed, that the scale of defence needs was therefore also global and that the risks of future military conflict were correspondingly greater? Labour was committed to the trusteeship conception of empire and advocated international supervision of peoples deemed unable to govern themselves. In that sense the League of Nations’ mandates – associated with Jan Smuts – was an idea that can be traced to the work of Labour intellectuals as they pondered the future of the former German colonies. In practice the goal of trusteeship was often conflated with the prevailing condition of the Crown Colonies and British colonial policies at any particular time. Critics of the imperial reality existed but were few in number and mostly ignored. Complacency about the benevolence of the British Empire was deeply ingrained in the British political culture and the Labour Party fully shared the view that it was already an example of the trusteeship idea in action. The vast central African state, which Labour envisaged between the Sahara and the Zambezi under international supervision, was meant to deal with the German colonies only. Philip Snowden perceived a nationalist rather than internationalist mentality in this thinking. But he was a rare (and short-lived) doubter. The more common condition was to give very little thought to the Empire at all. Certainly it seems unlikely that many Labour people had really thought much about the implications of Empire for any future Labour government. Yet through this portal Labour would accept foreign and defence policies which it officially abhorred in 1919.

The war’s immediate aftermath was admittedly an emotional time of exceptional events when Labour was only just emerging as a functioning political party. The desire for a more professional image and performance
in Parliament under MacDonald's leadership after 1922 would make its own contribution to the process of 'growing up.' The marginalisation of the party’s principal foreign policy thinkers – Morel, Woolf, Brailsford, Hobson and the like – was an inevitable part of the process, as was the elimination of any rhetoric concerning the peace treaty that implied the sort of class analysis favoured by the Bolsheviks. In reality the national sentiment that had been encouraged and drawn upon for purposes of fighting the war could not be conjured away. From 1921, Labour’s foreign policy interests turned to the question of economic stability, economic growth and employment. Growing trade with Germany and Russia was proposed to address these issues. Linked to these interests was a growth in opposition to their continued punishment by economic or military means.\textsuperscript{47} In substance Labour’s policy was not much different to Lloyd George’s. However, resistance to the growing pragmatism of the PLP was kept alive by the anger and cynicism generated by the constant drip of decisions and events which came after the main peace settlement, such as British support for Poland during the Polish–Soviet conflict over Ukrainian territory (1919–21), the Anglo-Irish War (1919–21), the danger of war with Turkey (1922) and the crisis of reparations payments which led to French military occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. Across the Empire resistance to British rule was such that the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, privately declared in 1919 that ‘every place is a storm-centre.’\textsuperscript{48} Some other people had taken Wilson’s rhetoric seriously, though neither Wilson nor British Labour paid much attention to them.\textsuperscript{49}

Notes

6 Newton, \textit{The Darkest Days}, pp. 246, 262, 280.
8 Hochschild, \textit{To End All Wars}, p. 126.
10 Ferro, \textit{The Great War}, p. 122.
11 ‘Declaration of the inter-allied conference of the socialist and labour parties,’ 14 February 1915, LSI 3/5/1i, Labour archive, People’s History Museum (PHM), Manchester.
18. Angell, *Shall This War End*, p. 3.
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40 ‘Statements of national parties to the inter-allied war aims memorandum’, n.d., LSI 1/21, PHM, Manchester.
41 ‘The War Aims Memorandum of the Allied Socialists and the Projected League of Nations’, LSI 1/14, a document which reproduces the gist of Cunow’s article in Die Neue Zeit, ‘The Projected International Conference at Berne’ published in number 10, 7 June 1918, PHM Manchester.
42 Labour Leader, 20 February 1919.
43 LPACR, 1919, pp. 139–42.
47 Unemployment: The Peace and the Indemnity (London, 1921), p. 5. This originated as a paper by Brailsford for the advisory committee on international questions.