

Swift, John (2001) Labour in crisis: Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in opposition, 1931-40. Palgrave Macmillan.

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New Problems: Attlee and Defence and Foreign Policy, 1931–5

Attlee and the Labour Party's developing foreign policy position between 1931 and 1935 was influenced by a number of factors. These include their foreign policy position in 1931, their stance on disarmament and collective security, their reaction to the rise of Hitler, and the internal debates with the pacifists and the Left. They also had to develop responses to the 1935 Defence White Paper, military affairs, the Peace Ballot and the rising crisis over Abyssinia. Indeed their success in dealing with these factors, it is argued, marked the beginning of Labour's development of a more realistic approach, not only to foreign policy, but also to government. It is well known that the party was deeply split over foreign policy questions, and that Attlee was slow to react to the rise of Hitler. But it is here argued that Labour changed its foreign policy stance significantly in 1934, but obscured the fact for political reasons. It is also shown that, despite accusations to the contrary Attlee was at times prepared to give a strong lead in the foreign policy debate.

Labour's foreign policy in 1931

The foreign policy which Labour took with them into Opposition was based on two key elements: disarmament and collective security. It was a widely-held assumption that one of the main causes of war in 1914 had been the preceding arms race. A true peace policy, it was held, must include a reduction in armaments. While there were those in the party who demanded that Britain should disarm unilaterally, official policy was in favour of an international agreement for multilateral disarmament. Another, equally widely held, assumption about the causes

of war in 1914 placed a large part of the blame on the international alliance system which had developed. This, it was argued, had divided the world into two increasingly hostile armed camps, which had rendered the outbreak of war ever more likely. To avoid this happening again, it was held, there must be an all-inclusive alliance system in the League of Nations, which would provide security equally for all of its members, who were all bound to support any member who was a victim of aggression.

During the 1920s, with the world largely at peace, and the League's authority widely acknowledged, the Labour Party had no reason to face the possibility that disarmament and security might be incompatible. This happy state of affairs was not to last. Within weeks of the formation of the National Government, the Japanese began their conquest of Manchuria. The National Government temporized, and the League proved incapable of halting this blatant act of aggression. This proved to be the first of a series of shocks to international stability, and to the comfortable assumptions of the Labour Party. In 1932 the World Disarmament Conference opened. Since this was under the chairmanship of Arthur Henderson, Labour's last Foreign Secretary and MacDonald's successor as party leader, Labour had very high expectations from this. Soon, however, the conference was obviously failing to reach an agreement. In 1933 Hitler rose to power, establishing an extremely brutal regime inside Germany and an increasingly armed and bellicose foreign policy stance. In 1934 the Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss, brutally crushed the socialist Opposition, only to be murdered in an attempted Nazi *putsch* a few months later. By 1935 Mussolini's territorial ambitions against Abyssinia were obvious, and war in Africa was increasingly likely.

In the period 1931–5, therefore, Labour needed to face the inconsistency between disarmament and security. This was no easy task for a party divided on foreign policy more bitterly than on any other issue. There was a very influential pacifist wing of the party, which refused to contemplate the use of force to maintain world order. There was also the Labour Left which rejected the League of Nations as a capitalist institution designed to maintain the international imperialist *status quo*. Further, the Left refused to consider any increase in armaments for a British capitalist government, which it viewed as a greater enemy than foreign fascists. Whether or not the party managed to resolve its difficulties over foreign policy before the 1935 election is debated. There is also disagreement as to the main architect of any change of policy; both Dalton and Bevin, for