

# **Appeasement, Rearmament, and the British Left-Wing Press: The Case of the Daily Herald**

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**Abstract.** This paper provides an investigation into the responses of Britain's left-wing press between 1935-39 to key international developments, specifically fascist expansionism, and the (Conservative) government's foreign and defence policy. By examining the shifting relationship between editorial positioning and the development of such official policies as 'Appeasement' and Rearmament, this study argues for a new appreciation of the interdependency of media, mass politics, and policymaking. In doing so it aims to supplement the existing historiography on the sources of Britain's changing interwar foreign and defence policy, which has traditionally featured elite-centric studies of policymaking, with the public and opposition seen as bystanders to 'statecraft'. The value of the Left as a specific object of research lies in the expanding impact of democratic mass politics on interwar Britain's policy formulation. In this context, public opinion, as reflected in and shaped by newspapers, gained unprecedented impact on high politics. In a period when newspapers (typically with an avowed political alignment) represented dominant organs for the articulation of public opinion, press analysis offers the most effective insight into the masses' relationship to policy. A methodological framework for interpreting public opinion through newspapers is proposed, with an appraisal of the nuances of the press landscape in 1930s Britain. This paper's analysis is periodised around several international crises from 1935 to 1939 which both highlighted editorial positions and catalysed their shift. I conclude that revisions in leftist attitudes speak to a contingent yet meaningful relationship with the Baldwin and Chamberlain Governments' foreign and defence policy.

**Keywords:** *media studies, British Left, Second World War*

## **1. Introduction**

The British state policies grouped under the moniker of 'Appeasement' are generally well-known within the UK's public imagination. The popular historical narrative surrounding the diplomatic concessions made to fascism and the official ambivalence towards its military confrontation has made turned Appeasement into a symbol of cowardice and wilful ignorance. Little attention has been paid to the nuanced ways in which the public reacted to these government actions, and the extent to which public feeling impacted the development of policy. Most historical investigations have adopted an elite-centric perspective, searching for the roots of these policies in high politics and statecraft. Martin Gilbert, in his 2015 work evaluating the roots of Appeasement, focused his analysis on specific statesmen, defending Neville Chamberlain's convictions on preserving peace in Europe[1] and that respecting German ambitions was desirable as well as feasible. Stephen Rock supported this argument in his 2015 study of *Appeasement in International Politics*, though he partly blamed Chamberlain and Appeasement for its failure to prevent war in Europe.[2] Gaines Post Jr., in his 1999 work *Dilemmas of Appeasement: British Deterrence and Defense, 1934-1937*, argued that the process of appeasement was partly a result of British fears surrounding the rapid pace of German rearmament. Going on to claim that Chamberlain was elected to sustain the guttering hope for peace in Europe. Gaines Post Jr. criticised Chamberlain for overconfidence in his diplomacy, which frustrated the peace process. These disagreements notwithstanding, scholarly perspectives remain largely confined to an elite-centric sphere, with ordinary people assumed essentially to be passive bystanders to contemporary international events. This paper takes the view that rather than being a mere component of history the general public functioned as an actor in its own right, and understanding their role is vital to formulating a more complete picture of the context and development of appeasement and rearmament in 1930s Britain.

The concern of rearmament did not appear in the minds of the public out of a sudden, nor is it shaped by any external force. The scars of the Great War, the comforts of long-lasting peace

promised by British appearance in the League of Nations, the more pragmatic worries of unemployment and job-aids dominated the public speeches. These sentiments are condensed in the book of Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* in 1989, in which the author neglected Churchill's simplistic and moralistic interpretation of history and included his own sound and justified argument that the British negligence during the several crisis did induce, to some extent, the outbreak of the war. However, that sense of a remote tensing of international affairs began to appear in the newspaper reports from middle 1930s, a case that is now remembered as the Air Panic of 1935, which is studied by Brett Holman, in his thesis *The air panic of 1935: British press opinion between disarmament and rearmament*. In which he argued about how the press reflected the progress of incidents, and the impact of the press on the issue of rearmament. The paper argued that the air panic of 1935 almost to a sense marked the beginning of the several phrases of public urges for rearmament, which eventually climaxed on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, with the official declaration of war, a starting point for Britain to involve all her capabilities and prowess of research, espionage and production in a full scale war with Nazi Germany. It is important to note though, in Britain, the mood of the voting public constantly impacts the government decisions, especially in turbulent times prior to war, which begs the question whether there is a plausible method for the assessing of public opinion.

It is a challenge to assess British public opinion on the issue of rearmament before the establishment after the war of systematic opinion polling provided a comprehensive qualitative evaluation of national opinion. For the purposes of this research there exist several potential sources of enquiry: the BBC, newsreels, journals, books and newspapers, which all reflect some aspects of contemporary public opinion. Analysis of the press, particularly newspapers, holds several advantages over other sources. Although BBC was widely available to the domestic audience, newspapers were considered the dominant source of news for most families at the time. The circulation of the popular press hugely outweighs that of books and journal articles, even over the widespread newsreel, with the former being more of an information source for the elites and literati, while the latter an active source of entertainment. In terms of its wide reach and sheer volume of information, the newspapers were relied on by the masses for both their informative and analytical capacity. In addition, the short cycle of circulation could allowed for a dynamic and responsive relationship between editors and their readership. Editors received and published letters of comment from the public and could interact with this by either incorporating aspects of these texts within subsequent printings or by modifying the general tone of their text.

The British policies during the interwar period was highly Tory-dominated, with the conservative party winning seven out of nine general elections during 1918 to 1939. An evaluation of the opposition allows us an insight into the dynamics of policy-making and interactions between the electorate and the government.[3] By reflecting concerns over various crises and the government's statements, the press also worked as an organ of public supervision which ultimately impacted government thinking. Within the context of conservative domination of interwar decision-making, evaluating public opinion of and through the leftist opposition serves to supplement existing historical studies, inasmuch as it provides valuable context for the popularity of the aforementioned policies and decisions. From MacDonald to Neville Chamberlain, the British government generally (if not always) behaved in a reactive manner to the escalating international crises of the 1930s.[4] As an analysis of anti-establishment understandings of and reactions to foreign and domestic policy, this paper will follow a periodized structure around a number of salient crises: from the air panic of 1935, the Abyssinian crisis, the Anschluss, and the Czechoslovakian crisis. From 1935 onwards to the outbreak of the war, the governments were without exception Conservative, and thus a review of the leftist voice – namely the voice of the opposition, is a useful addition to the existing historiography.

One important and relevant characteristic of British newspaper is their open retention of firm political and economic stance, which in turn influences the political composition of the papers' readership. Among the papers with an avowed association with leftism, *The Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror* are considered those with the widest circulation. *The Daily Herald* with its strong

connections to the Trade Union Congress (TUC), was considered very influential among the leftist intelligentsia, whereas *Daily Worker* was a more radical left-wing tabloid that was generally considered to have communistic connections. Among these newspapers *The Daily Herald* stood out as one especially important piece, for it had been long seen as the throat of Labour Party – this is a newspaper with a substantial Labour audience, also featuring articles by renowned Leftist activists like W.N Ewer. However, it cannot be taken as a given that readers believed everything that appeared in the newspaper, as British readers had the habit of purchasing different newspapers, so as to get a clearer view of the facts. This could be interpreted as speaking to a certain anxiety among the British public concerning the validity of news presented to them. Nonetheless, despite the imperfection of this instrument, newspapers are the best source available for the evaluation of mass opinions in 1930s Britain.

During and after the war, British military preparation (or lack thereof) suffered from domestic criticism. In *Guilty Men*, an anonymously authored book published in July 1940 by the Left Book Club raised the question in the context of the Dunkirk disaster: where was the RAF? Where were the armoured units and anti-tank guns? These questions focussed criticism on pre-war planning and foreign policy, which indeed begs the question of how the issue of armament was approached during the interwar period.

## **2. Early Tension: 1935 Air-Raid Panic & Stresa Front**

The British Left was not a homogeneous faction in terms of public opinion. There existed divisions between the different parts of leftist opinion groups, trade unionists, the elected Labour Party, and the more radical socialists. During the 1935 crisis however, leftist opinion reflected in general an inclination towards disarmament. Stanley Baldwin announced in the House of Commons in 1932 that “the Bomber will always get through”, articulating British fears of an all-out air attack on civilian targets. The solution, declared Baldwin, lay in retaliatory attacks and deterrence, claiming as he did that “the only defence is in offense, which means that you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves”.<sup>[5]</sup> This proclamation was equivalent to saying that Britain’s civil defence required a bomber fleet large enough to inflict considerable damage on the enemy, so that the enemy could either be deterred from air-attacks or could not afford to continue bombing after the initial exchange. This did not go unnoticed by the press. On Nov.11<sup>th</sup>.1932, the front page of the Daily Herald declared “Cabinet’s Arms Plan revealed”, noting the government’s plans for disarmament proposed at the Geneva Peace Conference, and, especially noting a “most remarkable speech” made by the Prime Minister, about “war in all its horrors – of destruction by chemicals and from the air.”<sup>[6]</sup> On the second page, the Daily Herald reproduced a quote from Baldwin that “There will be another war”.<sup>[7]</sup> The main emphasis put forth in the Daily Herald focused on several appeals made by Labour MP.s during the debate, calling for internationalization of private piloting and support for the League of Nations and the notion of collective defence. Government policy, though, followed a different path. The Air Ministry, along with the RAF, were in the process of creating and maintaining offensive supremacy, in line with the claims on bombing made by Stanley Baldwin. The following years saw an increase in editorial concerns over the uncertain international situation. 1933 saw utter disappointment in terms of the lack of progress of the peace conference in Geneva, and the publication of *The Shape of Things to Come* by H.G Wells prognosticated the present decade’s ending in an Armageddon of aerial bombing and chemical warfare. The more radical side of the Left, represented by *The People*, reported that in Germany “Munition Plants Working at High Pressure and a New Conscript Army” on September. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1933.<sup>[8]</sup> The socialist paper warned its audience about the prospect of upcoming conflict. The milder leftists representing the Daily Herald continued to support the Labour Party’s claim of pushing forward with disarmament.

It was not until the Balkan crisis – the regional disruption to the Balkan Pact signed in 1934 that Daily Herald referred to dramatically as ‘Balkan Crisis’<sup>[9]</sup> where worries of air destruction reached their crescendo. The Daily Herald published “Planes Chase Fleeing Insurgents” on its front page, in

a clearly exaggerated story from a correspondent in Greece on the horrifying sound of warplanes and their “machinegun swoops”. [10] Appreciating the British public’s fear of an all-out attack from the sky is essential to understanding particular character of British rearmament. As Baldwin said in the House on 8 March 1934: in “... air power, this country shall no longer be in a position inferior to any country within striking distance of our shores.” [11] the leftist public however was disappointed not to observe any meaningful effort in terms of preparing Britain for the war, let alone deterring potentially hostile forces. Instead, leftist opinion clung onto the belief that peace is only possible through the mean of diplomacy and disarmament, the view that Ramsay MacDonald had held while in office. The Daily Herald placed “Labour’s Arms Censure” on the FrontPage, noting it to be the “greatest challenge” the cabinet faced. [12] Page 6 saw the Daily Herald reporting more than 30 social, religious, political and other bodies indignantly condemning the MacDonald White Paper on national defence. The Government’s shift towards rearmament was considered “deplorable”. “Will our old men,” the Daily Herald quoted one of the many sharp questions those pressure groups presented to the Prime Minister, “always tread the same path of increased armaments, the path which has always led, and will always lead, to destruction?” [13]. It is clear that by 1935, the Daily Herald’s attitude to war was hostile, and even more so against the prospect of rearmament, corresponding to the Labour’s policy of international (and if necessary unilateral) disarmament. This attitude is best expressed by the paper’s May 24<sup>th</sup> quotation from a Labour MP: “Parity in Air No Security”, urging against “a calamity that [Europe] should be facing wholesale rearmament ostensibly to secure parity in arms”. [14] The Daily Mirror, at that point still representing conservative opinion, reported a similar mood. A weekly paper, *The People*, representing the socialist left, was more concerned with the prospect of eminent war.

By 1935 the Labour Party, since the 1920s representing the official parliamentary Opposition to the Tory government, urged international peacemaking through such diplomatic institutions as the League of Nations and the 1934 World Disarmament Conference in Geneva. In point of fact in this period the chief target of Labour’s criticism was anything that was perceived to threaten or undermine the multilateral system of peace represented by the League of Nations. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1935, the Daily Herald sought a specific editorial coverage of the “Stresa Front” – the tripartite alliance involving Britain, France and Italy, accusing it of being a “Rival to the League”. W.N. Ewer, the man behind the editorial, described the Stresa Front thus:

“France and Italy have, in fact, interpreted the ‘Stresa Front’ as something very close indeed to a military and diplomatic alliance. They have been shocked and angered by the discovery that the British Government has not put the same interpretation on it. The jargon of diplomacy was used. Nobody troubled to dot the i’s and cross the t’s.

“This Abyssinian business may, at least, sharply demonstrate this: ‘Whom none could advise, it may persuade.’ The tragedy is that the process has already gone so far that the chances of saving the League system as an instrument of preserving peace are already precarious. We may be driven to begin all over again.” [15]

From the attitude of the editorial, it is clear that the left placed great faith in League of Nations, believing it to be the only viable means of deterring international conflict. By their understanding the best way or realising peace lay in disarmament and military solidarity, that is, to abjure non-League military or diplomatic alliances, as this would only increase the probability of war. Under this context, the indignation against MacDonald’s decision to increase the country’s military spending was shared among the Leftist public.

### **3. Abyssinia**

Interestingly enough, the first subtle slide towards active support for rearmament among the Labourite left occurred during and the Abyssinia crisis, when support for the League of Nations was badly compromised by its powerlessness. The tension in Abyssinia however was not the only concern Britain had at the time. Germany’s naval ambitions were expressed by trip of Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to London, where he engaged in heated bargaining with the

British Government to upwardly revise the total naval tonnage permitted to Germany. An agreement was eventually signed between the two nations, allowing Germany to build 35 percent of the surface tonnage of British Commonwealth naval forces, and 45 percent of its submarine tonnage. The British Left did not perceive this kindly. In an editorial of the Daily Herald, a week after the Anglo-German naval agreement was signed, the editor William Norma Ewer quoted one of the readers that “England, France and Germany aren’t playing oranges and lemons. They’re just *being* three blind mice.”[16] The Left was generally disappointed by the course of developments since the Stresa alliances and was even more disenchanted by Cabinet Minister Anthony Eden’s visit to Paris. The capacity of international diplomacy to curb aggression slowly but sure lost its credibility within the Left, as Ewer wrote “Solemn fellows call the game ‘power – politics’ – the pre-war German *machtpolitik* revived and made fashionable for 1935 use.” Eden’s Paris conference was considered a mere partial redress of the mistake Britain had made in signing the naval agreement with Germany, that “Mr. Eden’s real task in Paris was not to convince the French that the agreement was wise, but to convince them that ‘Anglo-French cooperation’ is still to go on, that Great Britain has not ‘gone pre-German’ and he is prepared to see that a remaining fee is paid. At any cost – to Abyssinia or Austria – the ‘Stresa front’ must be preserved.”[17] The Left was convinced that Britain was involved, if not in name, at least in fact, in the power-politics and alliance-building that had preceded the Great War. In their eyes the Abyssinia crisis was only pouring fuel into this already raging fire.

Apart from discontent surrounding the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the newly elected (Tory-dominated) National Government under Stanley Baldwin faced more acute threats in Abyssinia. The Daily Herald reportages closed followed the developing crisis. The July 22<sup>nd</sup> edition included a note from the US ambassador to the Foreign Office expressing “grave concerns” about the dispute, before “the British and the French Ambassadors in Rome are expected to see Mussolini in a last bit for a ‘compromise’.”[18] This coverage of the issue reflected burgeoning anxieties over the effectiveness of the League of Nations, anxieties which only increased after the aforementioned Anglo-French appeal to Rome. After Mussolini had rejected the “Zeila proposal”, (the diplomatic brainchild of the British foreign affairs team of Hoare, Vansittart and Eden aiming to dissuade Italy from an invasion of Abyssinia[19]) the Daily Herald expressed increasing concern over the precariousness of peace in Europe in its issue on October 3<sup>rd</sup> issue, the front page of which declared “War about to begin”, and “Mussolini’s Cry to Nation” in bold.[20]

When a second Anglo-French peace proposal was leaked to the press on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1935, the Daily Herald commented “There is little doubt that in a few days the British and French Governments will be in the shameful position of having proposed terms satisfactory to the aggressor, unacceptable to the victim.”[21] The government’s perceived betrayal of the principle of collective security, almost immediately coupled with a remark of Stanley Baldwin concerning the future of the League of Nations, was attacked in an editorial on December 11<sup>th</sup> claiming that “No greater breach of faith could be imagined. It is a decision to enter into a conspiracy with the aggressor in order to defeat the League. This, by a Government which before the election was pledging itself over and over again to pursue a steadfast League policy and to fulfil punctually its Covenant obligations.”[22] The government’s inclination to not follow the League path certainly angered a large portion of the Left.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1936 the Daily Herald reminded League of Nation members that “it is their strict duty to prevent the aggressor from prosecuting his enterprise”, however, this remark was to no avail.[23] Much attention and hope was given to the prospect of economic sanctions. An issue on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1935, discussed Labour’s resolve to implement economic sanctions, speculating that a vote by which “Labour Party will declare its position in regard to sanctions under the Covenant of the League of Nations” was to be taken.[24] On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, The Daily Herald quoted a speech made by Dr. Hugh Dalton, former Labour Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, on the prospects of economic sanctions, in which he claimed:

“Without the power of sanctions war was certainly inevitable, and war in a far more terrible form than that between Italy and Abyssinia...Economic and financial sanctions rigidly applied might be enough to prevent war and, if war broke out, might be sufficient to re-establish peace.”[25]

This was clearly representative of sentiment among the Left and its hope in the power of economic sanctions. As a mechanism for imposing peace, the sanction, as described an issue on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1935 in Daily Herald, would be imposed in the form an oil embargo: asserting that “Italy has no oil. Most of it – 90 percent last year – she gets from members of the League of Nations”. Though “whether oil sanctions against Italy ever will be agreed by the League of Nations – and if agreed to actually imposed – now seem to be in the lap of God.”, the Daily Herald assured its readers that “Italy is certainly troubled by the prospect of an application of oil sanctions against her.”[26] Curiously, the mood of the report in the economic sector of the paper aroused a certain doubt, instead of the overt confidence contained in Dalton’s speech, on the probability of actually imposing such a sanction. While the League of Nations was still discussing the implementation of such sanctions, Mussolini was using the Hoare – Laval pact as leverage to circumvent the oil ban – and, at the same time manoeuvring his forces closer to Abyssinia. Front-page coverage on the same day opined that the “Committee of Eighteen – the sanction ‘Cabinet’” would be played for fools by Mussolini and would wait for adjournment.[27] The procedures of the sanctions, however, were postponed straight into 1936. As a matter of fact, Labour M.P.s were still discussing the possibility of putting forward stronger sanctions on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1936, as recorded in the Daily Herald.

Despite these efforts, the invasion began on October 3<sup>rd</sup>.1935 and on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1936, Mussolini had the King of Italy proclaimed Emperor of a completely annexed Abyssinia. To the utter disappointment and fury of leftist opinion, the threat of sanctions had been completely ineffective. On the day of Mussolini’s announcement of a ‘New Roman Empire’, the Daily Herald reported on Lord Eustace Percy, who was a member of Cabinet when the sanction policy was adopted, who claimed that “we never dreamed that economic sanctions alone could prevent aggression... Economic sanctions were never anything but a silly dream. We looked on them only as a means by which all nations might back up military resistance offered by those nations who were in a strategic position to offer it.”[28] In the event of course, the allure of economic sanctions was exactly the policy preventing military response. The British Left was thus in a dilemma: it would be contemptible to follow the route selected by the Foreign Office, which as the Hoare – Laval pact demonstrated would lead to recognition and accommodation of dictatorships, yet at the same time they could not follow the League, which had proven powerless to stop an unambiguous war of aggression. Following the conquest of Abyssinia, the left lost its uncompromising allegiance to the League of Nations and its principle of preserving peace through collective security.

In the wake of realising that the League was a dead letter, the British Left reappraised their posture on the issue of rearmament, believing that breakdown of collective security meant that aggression could no longer be deterred through peaceful means alone. The Left’s attitude to this state of affairs was well summarised by Hannen Swaffer’s contribution to the issue of March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1936, that “although, individually, members of the Cabinet have, in the past, admitted that armaments lead to war, rearmament is now the Cabinet’s only remedy for a world situation for which it, more than anybody, is to blame.”[29] Rearmament was considered important and perhaps essential given the international tension. Since the shield of collective security had been visibly shown to be ineffective the leftist public came round to the necessity for Britain to rearm. It is important to note, though, rearmament was only considered as a means to ensure peace. On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1937, the Daily Herald reported on the government’s rearmament plan. “‘Racing to war’ – Mr. Attlee’s Challenge” was the title of the coverage of Labour Leader Clement Attlee criticism of the peace plans of the government. “We have no trust for this government. This government is not interested in the defence and is always on the side of dictatorships.”[30] This quote was representative of the leftist perception of the government’s failure to preventing the dictatorial powers from gaining land and power through diplomacy or economic sanctions, and the complete disenchantment with the government’s peace proposals. “This is a plan to organize this country permanently on a war basis. The government has absolutely no policy for peace.” A huge

rearmament plan was drafted, including a £400,000,000 loan. In an issue on Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1937, Douglas Jay, editor of the Daily Herald, commented on the details of the rearmament prospect, claiming “There is no substance in this claim” that the proposed defence expenditure cannot be provided out of government revenue.[31] This indicated, still a reluctance of the British Left to fully embrace the idea of investment into the military apparatus rather than peacetime industrial infrastructure.

Though the League of Nation’s inaction during the Abyssinian crisis had proven its ineffectiveness in hindering violations of international peace, the Left was still faithful in the prospect of peace through the League. A key reason behind this was, unfortunately, that Abyssinia was not “close enough”, and thus was not important enough to provoke massive protest favouring a change in policy. The Abyssinian war, though portrayed in the numerous columns and editorials as a brutal, bloody war where aeroplanes of a loathsome dictator strafed innocent African citizens at will, was eventually met with some resignation and apathy by most on the Left. Though some did begin to revise the effectiveness of the League of Nations, an overwhelming majority, however, still inclined to the principles of international agreements, collective security and universal disarmament.

#### **4. Eastern Problems Brewing: Germany**

Though developments in Abyssinia signalled the erosion of leftist commitment to the League, Nazi Germany’s increasing assertiveness and challenge to the Versailles settlement put new stresses on the idea of collective security. By late 1936, Mussolini declared Italy would leave the League of Nations and should form an ‘Axis’ with Germany to preserve the peace in Europe. Leftist opinion did not take this lightly. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1936, a Mr. Greenwood wrote to Daily Herald denouncing il Duce’s speech: “Mussolini insolently declared that the new German-Italian alliance was an axis around which every state which wanted peace could revolve – no doubt, to the tune set by dictators.”[32]

By the end of 1936, even after the episode in Africa was settled, the leftist press and its readership had to come to editorial grips with the Germany issue much closer to home. As early as the end of 1935, the leftist press had already begun to publicise the extent of Nazi Germany’s turpitude. An editorial by James Norman on 11<sup>th</sup> December from Daily Herald 1935, gave full details of the journalist’s trip into Germany. “Thousands of foreigners from all countries of the globe have travelled in Nazi Germany during the past three years. For them ‘dictatorship’ and ‘terror’ were just words, shallow and vague description for political realities they have never experienced themselves.”[33] James took specific notes on two incidents of political terror directed against two of his friends who were brutally beaten and one of whom lost her life in police custody. The exposition of Germany on this level focused more or less on its character as an odious regime, where a dictator ruled through terror within and lies without. German aggression on an international level however, did not become a topic of immediate interest and reports in the leftist press until the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The Daily Herald reported on its front page on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1936, that Hitler was ready to discard the Locarno agreement which was portrayed to the leftist public as a necessary safeguard for peace, for the agreement clearly stated that “in case of a flagrant breach of Articles 42 or 43 (of the Treaty of Versailles) each of the other contracting parties undertakes immediately to come to the help of the party against whom such a breach has been directed”, where “Articles 42” directs to the preservation of the non-military zone of the eastern bank of Rhein river.[34] On 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1936, the Daily Herald reported on Hitler’s army crossing of the Rhine, titled “France Demands Rhine Withdrawal, Refuses Discussions While Troops Remain There”. The French Premier, Albert Sarraut, declared “We are not prepared to allow Strasbourg to fall under the menace of German guns” and the situation was so grave that the French Minister of War, General Maurin, was approved of “military moves,” and the fighting services were “given power to make further moves if they felt the occasion demands them”. The reportage speculated that military conflict between the two major powers on the European Continent was imminent. The international

tension was coupled with Clement Attlee's declaration of Labour's position on the issue, which the Daily Herald included in the editorial section on Page 10. Attlee asserted that the government's rearmament white paper was a repetition of 1914's arms race, claiming that "(The government) points to the growth of armament in other countries and claims that we too, must arm". However, opinion of Labour's rank-and-file was not totally like-minded. The editorial beneath Attlee's declaration contained W.N. Ewer's remarks on recent developments in the Rhineland, coupled with an excerpt of a much longer essay from the Evening Herald. This excerpt called the Rhineland Crisis an opportunity to make "a new, more equitable, and therefore, more lasting settlement." [35]. To some extent, the leftist public sympathised with the right of the German people. Combined with the leftist resentment to setting of the nation's economy on a war footing, this mood provides us with a depiction of Leftist opinion towards armament and peace in early 1936: that the Left would continue to put faith in the League of Nations, and would not repeat the mistakes of an escalating arms race as before 1914.

1937 saw increasing German overtures towards Generalissimo Franco, which the Daily Herald's editorial board called "the Fascist violation of democratic Spain" on May 27<sup>th</sup>. The day's editorial, however, was to discuss the Jewish question: "Half a million Jews have, by the Nuremberg Laws, been legally sentenced to outlawry, deprived of state and citizenship rights. They live under the iron ruthlessness of Hitlerism, under an incredible tyranny" Hitler's treatment of the Jews is indeed well known to the public today, however back in 1937, when this utter ruthlessness was exposed to the population, it was partly believed to be ruses and the British left needed convincing of the full extent (and implications) of Nazism's violent racism. What occurred in early 1938 certainly gave them a sufficient reason to distrust Hitler. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1938, the Daily Herald's front page declared "Germany invades Austria". [36] What would be later known as the Anschluss had begun and was followed closely from the beginning by the British press. The editorial cried out in outrage that "naked aggression has once again emerged as the chosen weapon of German diplomacy." This aroused almost great indignation among the leftist public, not only towards the aggressor Germany, but also towards the government's policy toward the European dictators. The editorial continued furiously that "Austria is the latest chapter in a long tragedy whose early chapters have been Manchuria, Abyssinia, Spain, China. And the end is not yet." The main reason behind the grim international outlook was labelled as the inaction of successive Conservative cabinets: "What irony in the fact that while the Nazis threatened Austria Mr. Chamberlain was discussing, over the luncheon table, the possibility of an Anglo-German entente". Hitler's untrustworthiness was elaborated on as the editorial continued with a satirical anecdote about German – Austrian diplomacy. It was made known to almost all the leftist readership, that less than two years before the German annexation of Austria, that in a peaceful agreement Hitler had undertaken to "unconditionally recognize the political independence of Austria", while Goebbels had explained "in detail" that "each of the two governments considers the inner political developments existing in the other country, including the question of National Socialism." This was taken as a typically instructive instance of how ridiculous it was to believe in an agreement or treaty that "can claim lasting and sacred respect" with Herr Hitler. [37]

Faced with the increasingly dim prospect that peace could be preserved through internationally binding contracts, the British Left gradually but decisively repositioned itself on foreign as well as domestic policies touching on international conflict and national defence. Two days from Germany's takeover of Austria, the Daily Herald ramped up its publication of information, reports on recent progress, special editorials and letters regarding the issues of armament and international collaboration, through with a more circumspect view of the League. This incident marked the beginning of the Left's shift towards a positive view of British rearmament or, in the words of an editorial board member for the Daily Herald, a 'shift towards realism'. [38] Though realism, in this context, remained consistent with the Labour policy of collective security. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1938, Francis Williams wrote an editorial in the Daily Herald on "facts and the implications of facts." He rejected the possibility of Britain's remaining aloof while the rest of Europe descended into violent chaos, and moved to denounce the idea of increasing Britain's security "by an abandonment of all

ideals of international justice and of collective security...even at the cost of sacrificing a large part of the world to barbarism.”[39] The solution, he argued, lies in the “return to the policy of collective security,” though this time it is to be carried out with firmness, instead of the “hesitation of the past.” In action, it entailed “an immediate assurance to Czechoslovakia that Great Britain and the other League Powers will fulfil their obligation and maintain her integrity and independence”. In this view. The best prospect of peace lay in an international alliance against the three fascist powers – Germany, Italy and Japan, in the form of collective security.

To achieve this, the progress of British armament was repeatedly raised as an issue of grave concern in the various reports of the Daily Herald. An example would be a journalistic report criticizing the state of armament on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1938. Under the title of “Scratching the Surface”, the paragraph read

“This public disquiet is not made any less by a consideration of the present state of air raids precautions. Despite the grievous waste of time from 1934 to 1937, progress is still extremely slow. On the material side, it is only gas masks that exist in sufficient numbers. Everyone knows that in probably the more vital matter of air raid shelters the surface of the problem is barely scratched. The local authorities are all at sixes and sevens about the kind of shelters they are supposed to provide. Nor has any decision been given on the simple and elementary point of whether or not those who construct shelters on their own property will have their rating assessments increased in consequence.”[40]

As had been suggested by the earlier ‘Air Panic’, the most concerning aspect of rearmament in terms of protecting civilians from air raids were gas masks, and this paragraph articulated this anxiety. The main concern of the British masses lay not in the production of rifles and armoured vehicles, but rather in the equipment necessary to save their lives during the war, though materiel was nonetheless important. The process of rearmament would not be considered satisfactory until the basics of these life-saving apparatus were decently supplied. In the case raised by this journalist, time was precious and could not afford to be wasted on inefficient or extraneous aspects of rearmament. It was pointed out that the masses had not been kept apprised of recent developments in the armament process, and the government was criticised accordingly. Another report from the issue of May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1938 pointed out facet of the public’s reaction. “The truth of it is that people will go on feeling sour about rearmament as long as a minority of individuals are amassing their private wealth out of the nation’s need.”[41] The sentiment reported by the leftist press was that the population felt that large armament industries such as Vickers, United Steel and many more are profiting unfairly from the rearmament program. Such was the leftist attitude towards rearmament by early 1938. The process was urged for the sake of protection against a seemingly imminent war, and out of consideration for preventing individual profiteering.

Labour’s resolve and focus of concern, however, lay firmly in Czechoslovakia, or more precisely in the preservation of the integrity of this central European country. As early as on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Daily Herald reported with some astute caution a “warning” from Goering commenting on the Anglo – French intention to arbitrate the Czechoslovakian question. “The Czechoslovakian question does not, in German opinion, need any diplomatic discussions between the Western Powers and the Reich...It will have to be solved in Czechoslovakia itself.”[42] The question specifically referred to the agitation by ethnic Germans in the ‘Sudetenland’ areas bordering Germany. The Nazi party was known to be a key support behind Sudeten activists’ agitation for a regional plebiscite on incorporation into the Reich, which if not assured through a vote would be finalised by a German invasion, potentially dragging the rest of Europe into war. The stakes of this potential conflict go some way towards explaining the levels of passion it provoked in the left-wing press. Arguments raged between newspapers, politicians and civilians. The Daily Herald, stern as it always had been on the issue, published correspondence between a journalist, a Mr. Wickham Steed and Viscount Rothermere, (owner of among other papers, the Daily Mail and a fascist sympathiser) The Viscount had published an article in the Daily Mail in mid-July, advocating for British non-interference in the brewing Sudeten crisis, coupled with some sharp criticism of the Czechoslovak government. That very day, the named leftist journalist responded in letter form, which the Daily Herald quoted on

August 16<sup>th</sup>. “I can readily understand why Germany should wish you to this. Czechoslovakia...is an indispensable preliminary to a final German reckoning with the British Empire, which forms the ultimate obstacle to German Supremacy in the world.”[43] The leftist stance on the issue was exemplified in this response: the necessity of forming a united front against German aggression, for which Britain must intercede in the Czechoslovakia crisis, even it meant to war with Germany. In this respect, the Left was indeed hypothetically prepared for a war against Germany.

And intercede Britain did, but in the complete opposite direction the Left had wished. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, in a last ditch effort to preserve peace in Europe, Neville Chamberlain flew from Heathrow to Munich for the four-party discussions initiated by Hitler to resolve the Sudeten crisis and avoid another war on the continent- the four parties did not include the Czechoslovakian government. At Munich, Chamberlain consented to German annexation of the Sudetenland (an area containing three million people and bulk of Czechoslovakia’s defences against future German invasion) in exchange for assurances that Hitler’s territorial ambitions were sated, from which the Prime Minister felt able to declare ‘Peace in Our Time’. Despite the subsequent characterisation of the ‘Munich Betrayal’ as the apogee of appeasement, at the time even the opposition Daily Herald reported: “London Sings and Cheers” as the looming spectre of war was dispelled.

Nonetheless, the Left kept a cynical eye on the prospect of maintaining peace with fascism. On November 8<sup>th</sup>, in the financial section of the editorial, a correspondent carefully observed an “armament boom since Munich...while ordinary industrial shares have fallen.” A statistical chart was enclosed to convince the doubters, “Baldwin 4s, B.S.A., John Brown 10s., United Steel, Vickers 10s.,” all saw an increase in their share, whereas for “Imperial Tobacco, I.C.I., Dunlop, Burmah Oil...every single one has fallen” The Left doubted not only the extent they could trust a deal with Hitler, but also the overall effectiveness of these deals and agreements signed only between nations, rather than within the structure of the League. Indeed, notwithstanding Munich brought peace in the short term, it was heavily criticized by the Left. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, A.L Easterman, a correspondent in Prague during the crisis, presented this editorial to Daily Herald, that “when we can bring ourselves to wipe away the tears of joy which have clouded our eyes these last emotional days, our vision will, perhaps, become a little clearer...If any single man gave peace to Europe and the world, it was not Neville Chamberlain...it was a little man who sat calm and dignified in tragic isolation on the hill overlooking Prague...Edvard Beneš, President of the dismembered Czechoslovak Republic.” Chamberlain was seen as a flawed hero, for he achieved peace to Europe and the world through contemptable means: by allowing effective subjugation of a sovereign nation. The leftist public, in their letters to the Daily Herald, expressed the same sentiment “We the undersigned actors and actresses wish to express our dismay at hearing that the territory of a peaceful and democratic nation has been handed over to an aggressor state without even the courtesy of a joint consultation.” These letters were published on October 6<sup>th</sup> with signatures. But peace, notwithstanding its dubious cost, was invaluable. The whole of Europe was on the brink of renewed conflict, and war was almost eminent had it not been Chamberlain’s effort. As a result, the leftist attitude towards rearmament shifted once again towards disarmament. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, just above the letters was a collection of readers’ opinions on “How do you want to save the world”, where “the voice of by far the largest section [of the readers who wrote on this topic]”[44] was a return to the League, however this time the League should ensure German and Italian populace was also included. Universal disarmament was the tone of the day.

But that tone was not to last long. Merely half a year had passed since the peaceful assurance of the Munich Agreement, Hitler occupied the remnants of Czechoslovakia, shattering the promise of lasting peace and the credibility of any future accommodation with Hitler. Disarmament was no longer preferred, and the Left was in where they could only advocate for the rearmament of Britain. Daily Herald exclaimed in utter despise of what Hitler had done:

“He signed the Munich Agreement. He agreed to honour the new frontiers of Czecho-Slovakia—to be satisfied with the bitter sacrifice which that brave people had been required by their onetime " friends " to make in the interests of world peace. He signed, as he has signed before, as he will no doubt sign again, with no intention of honouring his signature.”[45]

And a powerful question was thrown out: “And what comes next?” Hitlerite expansion will not stop, “unless peaceful nations make themselves so strong and so united that they can force these warmakers to cry halt.”[46] Hitler’s occupation of Czech-Slovakia provided this almost *casus belli* for Britain’s participation in the war of arms race against Germany.

## 5. Final Focus

The British Leftist public opinion towards the issue of rearmament went through several period of transition, as demonstrated by this essay. 1935 saw the Left tuning around the idea of the League of Nations, which had functioned smoothly for years and was not challenged by any serious international conflicts or crises, whereas after the Abyssinia incident the Left began to question the effectiveness of the League – thus effectively began to work on domestic defence of Britain herself. But Abyssinia, important as it was, was not perceived an important factor in European and World peace, not like the integrity of the Rhineland demilitarized zone and the independence of Austria and Czechoslovakia. When an ambitious individual sought to benefit from the European system, the Left had no other choice but to sought to rearmament. Rearmament as a policy for the Left was almost never an active choice, instead was more a reaction to the world tension during the few short years before the world war. They presented such a voice that, with careful examination, one could argue that they were advocates for peace and internationalism. Yet their faith in an international system was uttered dismantled by the unfaithful Mussolini, deceitful Hitler, and perhaps also, if not more, by their own government. Thus the up-cry in *Guilty Men* “Where was the RAF? Where were the amour units and anti-tank guns?”[47] But at the end of day, it is important to realize that the British Left participated in this game of armament, and they stood by the side of their wavering opinion. Their faith in the League and collective security, their enthusiasm to establish a revigorated industry rather a nation armed might also had led Britain down the road of passiveness towards rearmament.

Noteworthy from an analysis of editorial positioning during this period is how attitudes among the Left indirectly affected the formulation of government policies. The pattern which emerges was one in which the government typically appeared to be responding to public concerns while pursuing its own agenda. The general election of 1937 and the government’s reaction to increasing popular demand for armament in 1938 provide two examples of this. In the the former case Conservative candidates espoused pro-League slogans yet once elected failed to commit to the the League covenant, while in the latter Britain’s rearmament process lagged behind what had been promised in response to popular demand. Regardless, public opinion still had an impact on the direction of policy, as when public pressure forced the government to publish the Armaments Whitepaper 4 March, 1935, public dissatisfaction with which hastened the pace of British rearmament. But in whole it would be far too assertive should historians attribute a dominant role to public opinion in determining how a government was run. An examination into the dominant Leftist press certainly provided such insight into the minds of the Leftist populace during 1935 to 1939. For it reminded us, that prominent individuals, such as Chamberlain, perhaps were not the only group that should be held responsible for what we now see as the destructive and dishonorable appeasement: Ordinary people participated in the making of appeasement as well, though in a way much subtler, much more indirect. For the government opposition and its supporting populace, the Labour Left, when faced with a easy way out (such as how the League of Nations or Munich Agreement was preceived), all could not help but felt that perhaps peace had been achieved, and by doing that allow the rearmament progress to halt or slow down. It was not until all seemed crystal clear (such as the situation after the German occupation of Czech – Slovakia) that the Left finally supported the “correct policy” of armament. The degree which the populace had pursued the seemingly correct policy without considering further implication or long-term strategy should be remembered as an invaluable lesson that History taught us.

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