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## The Labour Party and Strategic Bombing in the Second World War<sup>1</sup>

*The Second World War had a central role in the history of Britain's Labour Party. Broken in the formation of the National Government in 1931, and worsted in the two subsequent elections, its decision to enter a wartime coalition under Winston Churchill brought with it the role of full partner in the state. The experience culminated in the Party's epochal success in the 1945 general election, a victory that was held to have been the consequence of its concentration on domestic policy planning, and in promising the public a welfarist post-war settlement. It has almost been assumed that Labour was not involved in the strategic or operational conduct of the war, including what was the first, became the longest-standing, and has remained the most controversial, aspect of Britain's waging of war: strategic, area, or 'obliteration' bombing. The disposition of what some maintained was – or should be – an internationalist party of working people towards the mass killing of civilians has not been considered before; whether the Party approved of the policy, or how far it merely had other, more pressing – it may have felt – priorities. Such an examination illustrates 'labourism' in the war, and, in its ambivalence towards Europe and Europeans, also perhaps afterwards.*

If bombing has come to signify for the Second World War what trenches have for the First, it has also come to acquire a similarly significant historiography.<sup>2</sup> The allied (but

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was delivered at the Annual British Scholar Conference, University of Texas at Austin, 1 April 2011. The author is grateful for comments offered there, to the anonymous readers for *Labour History Review*, to the editors for the invitation, and to one in particular for the managing of its delivery.

<sup>2</sup> The simile is Daniel Swift's, in *Bomber County: the Lost Airmen of World War Two* (London 2010). There are too many publications to mention here, but of particular value to the present research: Mark Connelly, 'Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command's Role in the Second World War', *Historische Literatur*, 2:2 (2004), 6-17; Aaron Goldman, 'Germans and Nazis: the Controversy over 'Vansittartism' in Britain during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14:1 (1979), 155-191, 156; Brett Holman, 'The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion between Disarmament and Rearmament', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46:2 (2011), 288-307; Brett Holman, 'World Police for World Peace: British Internationalism and the Threat of a Knock-out Blow from the Air, 1919-1945', *War in History*, 17:3 (2010), 313-332; Tami Davis Biddle, 'Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory', *The Journal of Military History*, 72:2 (2008), 413-449.

predominantly British and American) strategic bombing campaigns against the axis powers (but particularly Germany), were served first by a memoir literature, then by a variety of operational as well as official studies. As the combatant generation passed, the related issues of the efficacy and the morality of the policy came to predominate. The positions of defenders – latterly less numerous – and of critics – at the time and subsequently – have been well served. There remain gaps in the literature, however, one being that of the Labour Party. It was fully integrated into government – indeed, was disproportionately well represented given its denuded parliamentary status – and its leader was appointed deputy Prime Minister. The gap is effectively doubled by the near total absence of any mention of strategic bombing in the historiography of the Party – a disproportionately significant omission considering the importance of the war in its evolution and legend.<sup>3</sup> For Labour, the implication is, the war was a domestic affair.

The subject of Labour and bombing involves both the higher direction of the war effort, and popular engagement with it, and so reflects the high and low aspects (and no subject can lend itself more readily to that bifurcation than strategic bombing). It also concerns the moral dimension. The subject is the more piquant given that Labour, an at least notionally internationalist party of working people, was complicit in what was, effectively, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the majority of whom could be deemed to be workers in what was deemed by some to be an imperialist war. Indeed, insofar as the bombing was targeted, it actually targeted working people, as it was they who lived near to their places of work or manufacture, the ostensible objectives. That internationalist party in the post-war period moreover contained many for whom the atomic bomb was a crime against nature, and yet its leaders were complicit in the only

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<sup>3</sup> The subject is not mentioned at all in the two monographs concerned with Labour and the war (Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party during the Second World War* (Oxford 1992); T. D. Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler's War* (London 1976)), although nor for that matter are any explicitly military measures; nor in essay form: Ian Taylor, 'Labour and the Impact of War, 1939-45', in Nick Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Attlee Years*, London 1991, 7-28; Steven Fielding, 'Labourism in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 3:2 (1992), 138-153. The autobiographies, biographies, and party histories similarly concern themselves with other aspects of the war, as does the journal literature: Jerry Brookshire, 'Speak for England', Act for England: Labour's Leadership and British National Security under the Threat of War in the Late 1930s', *European History Quarterly*, 29:2 (1999), 251-287; Mark Minion, 'Left, Right or European? Labour and Europe in the 1940s: The case of the Socialist Vanguard Group', *European Review of History: Revue Europeenne d'Histoire*, 7:2 (2000), 229-248; Andrew Chandler, 'The Church of England and the Obliteration Bombing of Germany in the Second World War', *English Historical Review*, 108:429 (1993), 920-946.

aggressive uses of those weapons, and shortly thereafter chose to build Britain's own. The position of the Party brings into question not only matters of policy and statecraft, but also values and culture, and of the movement of which it was the parliamentary wing; questions such as whether it cared less for internationalism and class solidarity than it did for hegemony, nationalism, and even racialism. It is perforce as much an attitudinal as an institutional history.<sup>4</sup>

The former and future Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, had framed the debate in 1932 when he spoke of the 'fear of the air', in reply to Labour's Deputy Leader, Clement Attlee, in a House of Commons debate on defence spending, and warned most vividly that one type of weapon 'would always get through'.<sup>5</sup> Attlee agreed.<sup>6</sup> As Leader after 1935, his, and the Party's, position, was, as in other external matters, broadly collectivist. Attlee's predecessors, Arthur Henderson and George Lansbury, had been active on that subject at the League of Nations Disarmament Conference from 1932 to 1934. The Party had supported an Air Pact and had pledged, in the last election before the war, to 'propose to other nations the complete abolition of all national air forces.'<sup>7</sup> Yet it also, as in other areas, urged the Government to spend more and achieve parity with Germany, Hugh Dalton foremost.<sup>8</sup> In October 1938 Dalton was told of Germany's extensive anti-aircraft provision and how "London is defended at most by about 100 guns", and how Britain "is a wonderful target. God could not have helped Hitler more. Enemy planes crossing North Sea make landfall anywhere and then go straight in to inland objectives."<sup>9</sup> Philip Noel-Baker, achieving prominence as a warrior against the arms trade generally, heightened the need by highlighting the impossibility of defence

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<sup>4</sup> Though organisational records have been consulted, in the absence, as will be seen, of formal discussion of the policy of strategic bombing, the press has assumed a significant role as a record and channel of opinion.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Debates [*HCD*], 10 November 1932, vol. 270, cols. 525-641.

<sup>6</sup> Clement Attlee, *War Comes to Britain* (London 1940), 74.

<sup>7</sup> 1935 Labour Party General Election Manifesto, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Dalton, *Government's Air Muddle Exposed* (London 1938); *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London 1957), 165-170.

<sup>9</sup> 'Talk with two Air Force Officers', 25 October 1938, Hugh Dalton papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London [BLPES], II/4/1/21-22.

against the airborne delivery of what would later be called weapons of mass destruction.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the air had become the most feared battlefield of a future war, so it was thought to be the only means actually of participating. Contrary to Lansbury's disposition – and Ernest Bevin most certainly was contrary – the Party was keen to make clear that it 'has never stood for pacifism and non-resistance'.<sup>11</sup> Bob Williams, the *Daily Herald's* leader writer, warned Dalton that Labour should "be pulling its weight again in British foreign policy ... either you fight the Germans: or you surrender to the Germans."<sup>12</sup> As untroubled by cost implications as Labour's pre-war recommendations were, the air fulfilled two other requirements. Its use was relatively affordable, hence the Royal Air Force's pioneering work in the bombing of, *inter alios*, Mesopotamia, Waziristan, Kurdistan, Transjordan, Afghanistan, Burma, Yemen, in the interwar period; and it fulfilled a role for Labour before 1939 not unlike the navy had for the Liberals before 1914 in militating against substantial land forces. Dalton reminded the public that Labour had 'working for a world-wide agreement to get rid of all bombing aircraft everywhere',<sup>13</sup> but strategic bombing as a doctrine was supported by Frederick Montague, Under Secretary in the Air Ministry in the last Labour government, who claimed that by requiring no foreign bases, and therefore no foreign alliances, long-range bombers were actually consistent with an internationalist foreign policy; Lord Thomson, Montague's departmental chief, agreed.<sup>14</sup> Dalton was urged to press on the Prime Minister increased aircraft production, even employing Italian suppliers.<sup>15</sup> The government, appeasing the Treasury more than it satisfied service departments, prioritised defence over offence: fighters were cheaper than bombers.

When war came, Labour announced a policy of 'constructive opposition' – and the ILP announced that, thereby, 'Britain becomes a military dictatorship.'<sup>16</sup> Britain's

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Noel-Baker MP, 'Notes on chemical attacks and air raid precautions', Noel-Baker Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge [CAC], NBKR/3/236.

<sup>11</sup> Labour Party Archives [LPA], People's History Museum, Manchester, 'NEC [National Executive Committee] minutes and papers', [NEC] 'Disloyal attacks on the party', 25 January 1940, by J. S. Middleton and G. R. Shepherd [66d, f. 15-16].

<sup>12</sup> Robert Williams to Dalton, 20 October 1938, Dalton papers, II4/1/18-19.

<sup>13</sup> *The Listener*, 22 February 1940, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *HCDDebs* 18 March 1930, 236:2046-7; House of Lords Debates [*HLDebs*], 10 March 1926, 63:528-37; 9 April 1930, 77:48-52.

<sup>15</sup> Stokes to Dalton, 28 July 1938, Dalton papers, II4/1/8-9.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Leader*, September 1939.

grand strategy, as *Tribune* put it, was essentially to defend the island, and '[t]he only offensive operations possible against the Nazis, inside this plan, were the strategic bombing raids against German territory'.<sup>17</sup> Patrick Gordon Walker, fresh from not contesting the Oxford by-election, observed that 'Hitler has helped to obscure the difference between Labour's foreign policy and the Government's.'<sup>18</sup> The German Chancellor also helped obscure the difference as it related to domestic politics. Winston Churchill created a new government with sixteen Labour ministers, topped by a five-man war Cabinet in which sat Attlee and Arthur Greenwood, to be supplemented, three months later, with Bevin.<sup>19</sup> The Party was centrally henceforth involved and 'has decided that it must give its help to defeat the Nazi aggressor'.<sup>20</sup> By chance, in the same National Executive Committee meeting that reported Bevin's invitation to join the War Cabinet, Lansbury's memorial service was announced.<sup>21</sup>

The Coalition was formed on 10 May 1940, a Friday, and Britain's strategic bombing offensive began on the Saturday. In the first War Cabinet Attlee had said 'the moment had come when it was essential that we should counter-attack', and an 'attack on German railways and oil refineries seemed to provide the best means of doing this'.<sup>22</sup> The Cabinet did, as if expecting future scrutiny, authorize 'attacks on suitable military objectives'.<sup>23</sup> It remained the public position. 'The destruction of the Axis war potential by air bombing is a vital and indeed major feature of our strategy', Attlee said in May 1943, 'and neither the enemy nor anyone else will divert us from it.'<sup>24</sup> By then Attlee was Deputy Prime Minister, and stood in as Chair of both the Cabinet and the Defence Committee during Churchill's frequent absences. Labour's ministerial responsibility for the air war was limited to two Parliamentary Secretaries at the Ministry of Aircraft Production: Montague and Ben Smith, based for most of his time in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Tribune*, 22 August 1941, 6.

<sup>18</sup> P. C. Gordon Walker, 'The Attitude of Labour and the Left to the War', *Political Quarterly*, 11:1 (1940), 74-5

<sup>19</sup> *The London Gazette*, 21 May 1940, 1.

<sup>20</sup> LPA, NEC, *op cit.*

<sup>21</sup> LPA, NEC, f. 320 E.C.18.1939-40, 12 May 1940.

<sup>22</sup> War Cabinet [WC], 15 May 1940, Cabinet Papers, National Archives, Kew [NA], CAB/65/13/9/6-7.

<sup>23</sup> WC, 15 May 1940, CAB65/13/9/8.

<sup>24</sup> *HCDebs*, 27 May 1943, 389:1730.

<sup>25</sup> *Times*, 6 May 1964, 16.

The Cabinet's Defence Committee determined policy; a Liberal, Sir Archibald Sinclair, was civilian head of the RAF as Secretary of State for Air, Sir Charles Portal was Chief of the Air Staff, and under him for most of the war was Sir Arthur Harris as Commander in Chief of Bomber Command. The Defence Committee acted on the advice of the Chiefs of Staff, but, as Dalton soon came to appreciate, '[t]he Chiefs of Staff are much closer to the P.M. as Minister of Defence than to their political Chiefs, and much more influenced'.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth Labour member of the War Cabinet, albeit briefly, was Sir Stafford Cripps, as Minister of Aircraft Production from November 1942. Cripps enhanced what could be called the Cabinet's 'political heterogeneity';<sup>27</sup> and was, George Strauss recalled, 'regarded by many as the possible saviour of the country'.<sup>28</sup> As the person responsible for providing the wherewithal to the RAF, the role also enabled him thereby to support the Soviet Union, a cause to which he largely owed his appointment. Two days after Harris took over Bomber Command, and only six since he had joined the Government, Cripps addressed the Commons on 'the question of the policy as to the continued use of heavy bombers and the bombing of Germany', and whether 'the continued devotion of a considerable part of our effort to the building-up of this bombing force is the best use that we can make of our resources'. The policy had been 'initiated at a time when we were fighting alone against the combined forces of Germany and Italy, and it then seemed that it was the most effective way in which we, acting alone, could take the initiative against the enemy'; it followed that the government 'are fully aware of the other uses to which our resources could be put, and the moment they arrive at a decision that the circumstances warrant a change, a change in policy will be made'.<sup>29</sup> The speech infuriated Harris, which was never difficult. He also dismissed the 'panacea mongers' such as Dalton who at the Ministry of Economic sought 'the best economic targets for air attack'.<sup>30</sup> Harris was even more annoyed with

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<sup>26</sup> Dalton, diary, 4 February 1941, Dalton papers, I/24/27.

<sup>27</sup> *Washington Post*, 9 March 1942, 7.

<sup>28</sup> George Strauss, autobiographical notes, Strauss Papers, CAC, STRS1/1/93.

<sup>29</sup> *HCDebs*, 25 February 1942, 378:316-7.

<sup>30</sup> Dalton to Sinclair, 24 June 1941, in Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-45* (London, 1961) [SAOG], I, 263; Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive* (London 1947), 223.

A. V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, as he had been in the last Labour government, and keen to employ Bomber Command in the Battle of the Atlantic.<sup>31</sup>

The martial bent of Labour members was not pronounced. The first, and, for most, the only, experience they had of bombing was in being bombed. The Party had given civilian defences considerable attention, and as in other areas made calls on the government irrespective of cost – more a matter of entrenchment rather than retrenchment – whilst at the same time ensuring that the clear class differentials became clearer still.<sup>32</sup> With the Blitz, the reaction was practical, rather than political. ‘Any authority which fails to take the warning from our past experience is’, Ritchie Calder believed, ‘playing Hitler’s game’.<sup>33</sup> Several prominent Labour parliamentarians were involved as constituency MPs, such as Herbert Morrison in Hackney, Strauss in Lambeth, and Alfred Salter in Bermondsey. Air defence, homelessness, food, and the efficient prosecution of the war predominated as responses in London Labour’s published communications; there was no mention of retribution, and reports were as much in sorrow as in anger: ‘the hideous destruction caused by bombing to the homes and lives of humble folk’.<sup>34</sup> *Tribune* found no calls for reprisals either in London or Coventry, where the effect of bombing was most emphatic.<sup>35</sup> *The Daily Herald* went further than most, and then only to write over photographs of rubble that ‘Hitler’s bombers did this to Workers’ Homes in East London’,<sup>36</sup> and of the latter that ‘the Luftwaffe was striving to make Coventry a second Guernica’.<sup>37</sup> Though the *New Statesman* editorialised ‘the reprisal folly’, a ‘sentimental hysteria’,<sup>38</sup> Mass Observation reported that vengeance was rarely heard from those bombed.<sup>39</sup> Violet Markham, visiting bombed cities on behalf of the Unemployment Assistance Board, found the Labour politicians of Sheffield hostile to any outside body, let alone the Germans.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dalton, diary, 28 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/200.

<sup>32</sup> *Labour Party Annual Report*, [LPAR] 1939, 160.

<sup>33</sup> *New Statesman*, 29 March 1941, 316.

<sup>34</sup> *The Labour Woman*, October 1940, 106; *The London News*, October/November 1940–November 1941, nos. 192–202.

<sup>35</sup> *Tribune*, 22 November 1940, 6–7; 3 January 1941, 6–7.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Herald*, 11 September 1940, 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Daily Herald*, 16 November 1940, 1.

<sup>38</sup> *New Statesman*, 26 April 1941, 423.

<sup>39</sup> *New Statesman*, 12 February 1944, 105.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Report on a Visit to Sheffield, New Year’s Day 1941’, Violet Markham papers, BLPES, 8/38.



And yet there was relief with retaliation. In April 1942, A. B. Austin could detect ‘an overture’ to ‘a concerted theme’: air fighting, and the ‘hundred British bombers are droning over France and Germany in a night, equal in hitting power to about 500 of the bombers the Germans used to send over here’.<sup>41</sup>

The extent to which that relief was expressly anti-German varied. It was certainly one of the motivating factors of Lord Cherwell, the government’s chief scientific adviser, and prominent in advocating the bombing offensive, just as it was of Lord Vansittart, the government’s chief diplomatic adviser, prominent in advocating the criminalisation of the German people, ‘[t]his degradation of the human species’.<sup>42</sup> ‘Vansittartism’ drew condemnation from Labour as ‘pernicious’.<sup>43</sup> Victor Gollancz thought it a capitalist distraction,<sup>44</sup> Stokes that it was likely to ‘rally all reasonable and patriotic Germans behind their government’.<sup>45</sup> For Margaret Cole, Vansittart’s ‘series of remarkable misstatements’ was a creed, and so intellectually consistent with Nazism itself,<sup>46</sup> while R. H. S. Crossman broadcast to Germans in German that Germany was not the ‘eternal enemy’.<sup>47</sup> Walter Padley claimed that ‘the virus of race-hatred has eaten into the Labour leadership’, and Vansittartism could certainly claim fellow travellers.<sup>48</sup> ‘[H]ysterical and venomous in tone’, as it was for Dalton, ‘it is true in substance’.<sup>49</sup> Attlee, Bevin, and Dalton were sympathetic to James Walker’s Fight for Freedom group, a Vansittartistic front organisation. Their concerns about Germany included more than merely a Nazi leadership cadre, and included reparations, disarmament, reconstruction, and re-education, though stopping short of supporting the Morgenthau plans, which for the *New Statesman* ‘fail in every test of commonsense’.<sup>50</sup> The Party received many enquiries as to its position on the FFF, eventually accepting Walter Loeb’s freedom of expression, and that he was supported by William Gillies in the

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<sup>41</sup> *Daily Herald*, 8 April 1942, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Sir Robert Vansittart, *Black Record: Germans Past and Present*, (London 1941), 9; Hugh Berrington, ‘When Does Personality Make a Difference? Lord Cherwell and the Area Bombing of Germany’, *International Political Science Review*, 10:1 (1989), 9-34.

<sup>43</sup> *Labour’s Northern Voice*, January 1944, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Gollancz, *Shall our Children Live or Die? A Reply to Lord Vansittart on the German Problem* (London 1942), 117-120.

<sup>45</sup> *HCDDebs*, 8 April 1941, 370:1410.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Cole, ‘Truth and Politics’, *Political Quarterly*, 14:3 (1940), 271.

<sup>47</sup> *The Listener*, 15 February 1940, 341.

<sup>48</sup> *The New Leader*, 26 June 1943, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Dalton, diary, 2 February 1941, Dalton papers, I/24/26.

<sup>50</sup> *New Statesman*, 7 October 1944, 231; Dalton, diary, 23 September 1943, Dalton papers, I/29/85.

International Department, but offered no official backing,<sup>51</sup> prompting the Socialist Manifesto *Against Racial Hatred* in response.<sup>52</sup> The 1943 Annual Conference passed a resolution that embodied the chauvinism of Vansittartism: ‘recognises that there are Germans who are opposed to the policy of their Government but believes that these Germans are in a very small minority,’ and, ‘that the Nazi Government would not have remained in power or have been able to conduct a total war but for the support it received from the overwhelming mass of the German people.’<sup>53</sup>

The TUC subsequently repudiated the resolution.<sup>54</sup> Yet fraternal feelings for the German socialists and social democrats sheltering in Britain were scant. Hans Vogel as chairman of the SPD was treated coolly as insufficiently anti-militaristic; critics such as Curt Geyer, who supported the post-war occupation of Germany, more warmly.<sup>55</sup> Anti-Germanists blamed the SPD and its nationalist leanings in part for the rise of Nazism, and Charles Dukes, General Secretary of the Municipal and General Workers’ Union, claimed he ‘had seen the overwhelming majority of German trade unionists go over to Nazism.’<sup>56</sup> It was a view that took little account of the way in which the Nazis had treated trades unionists, socialists, and communists, and ‘is an eloquent comment on the position’, *Socialist Appeal* observed, ‘that the formerly pro-fascist and pro-Nazi capitalist press such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Dispatch* enthusiastically hailed this decision of the Labour Party Conference.’<sup>57</sup> ‘I am ashamed when I think of foreigners seeing it and imagining that that is the spirit of England’, Victor Schiff told Noel-Baker, fearing that ‘Vansittartism may yet become the spirit of England’, and wondering, if it were true, why the Party had collaborated with the SPD since 1933.<sup>58</sup> Nor did it encourage German workers to seek to overthrow the regime, as ‘the British workers must help them in their difficult struggle by continuing the fight for workers’ power and socialism and extending the hand of friendship and comradeship to their

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<sup>51</sup> NEC, E.C. 12 1942-43 NEC, 27 January 1943, f. 6; NEC International Sub Committee minutes and documents, 1929-41.

<sup>52</sup> *Socialist Commentary*, October 1942, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Socialist Appeal*, July 1943.

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Herald*, 11 September 1943, 2.

<sup>55</sup> LPA, International Sub-Committee of the NEC, 16 February 1942, 67e/98.

<sup>56</sup> *Daily Herald*, 18 June 1943, 3; *New Statesman*, 11 November 1944, 321.

<sup>57</sup> *Socialist Appeal*, July 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Schiff to Noel-Baker, 16 January 1942, 6 November 1941, Noel-Baker Papers, CAC, NBKR/4/293.

German brother,' an idea Sir Walter Citrine found particularly hard to accept.<sup>59</sup> 'The terrible thing is that the class conscious workers whose normal reactions would be those of international class solidarity are precisely the ones whose leaders – or rather 'misleaders' – are leading them down reactionary paths', wrote Ted Grant.<sup>60</sup> The divide had Harold Laski, Noel-Baker, and Joseph Hallsworth ('silent while their principles are traduced and outraged'<sup>61</sup>) with Stokes, Gollancz, Cole, Noel-Baker, and Kingsley Martin on one side, and *inter alia* Attlee, Bevin, Dalton, Citrine, Walker demanding total victory, occupation, and even pastoralisation, on the other.<sup>62</sup>

No policy was better suited to pastoralising Germany ("to destroy Germans and all they possess" as one civil servant put it to Harris)<sup>63</sup>, and Attlee consistently and explicitly advocated the collective waging of war, and with the collective support of the Party, which included the escalation of the bombing offensive. If dissension was an inevitable feature of Coalition for the Parliamentary Party – and Fenner Brockway for one despaired of 'the manner in which the Labour Party was sacrificing its principles of liberty in order to support the war'<sup>64</sup> – it was less apparent over military matters in general, and bombing in particular. Even the intelligence prepared for Churchill on Labour's policy differences and on 'parliamentary incidents' could find nothing concerned with bombing.<sup>65</sup> Inasmuch as Harris gave any thought to labour matters it was that 'if the workers in aircraft factories will stop striking and taking holidays' more thousands of tons of bombs could be dropped on Germany.<sup>66</sup>

James Chuter Ede, junior Education minister, identified 'at least three dissident groups'.<sup>67</sup> Those who wanted to 'fight the war more vigorously' comprised Emmanuel Shinwell, George Strauss, and Aneurin Bevan, who spent much of the war in Strauss's cellar. Shinwell applauded the bombing as part of 'the efforts of His Majesty's

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<sup>59</sup> *Socialist Appeal*, July 1943; 'Fight for Freedom Publishing Society', Austin Albu papers, CAC, box 13.

<sup>60</sup> *Socialist Appeal*, November 1944.

<sup>61</sup> *The New Leader*, 27 May 1944, 4-5.

<sup>62</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 13 December 1944, 4.

<sup>63</sup> A. P. Rowe to Harris, 23 March 1943, Harris papers, Royal Air Force Archives, Hendon [RAFA], H36.

<sup>64</sup> Fenner Brockway, *Bermondsey Story: the Life of Alfred Salter* (London 1949), 221.

<sup>65</sup> 'Labour Party Policy', Churchill (Chartwell) Papers, CAC, CHAR/9/188A/88.

<sup>66</sup> Harris to Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, 20 September 1943 [copy], Harris papers, H35.

<sup>67</sup> 15 February 1942, in *Labour and the Wartime Coalition: from the Diary of James Chuter Ede, 1941-45*, ed. Kevin Jefferys (London 1987), 50.

Government in trying to bring the war to a speedy conclusion'.<sup>68</sup> By contrast, the 'out-and-out pacifists' included Salter, Cecil Wilson, James Barr, and Rhys Davies. Salter, suffering from deteriorating health and the experience of being bombed, made a famously poignant final Commons speech, describing 'the steady moral deterioration' when [o]pen retaliation and revenge are now being advocated in the highest quarters' with the 'indiscriminate bombing of women and children.' Where 'in the early days of the war only strictly military targets were said to be the objectives of our Air Force, now we have photographs showing whole streets of working-class houses being blown sky-high by our bombs'.<sup>69</sup> Where Salter achieved the respectful disagreement of his opponents, Davies managed to antagonise. His accusation that Attlee was 'bellicose' at the 1941 Labour Conference, produced a reception demonstrating the extent of sympathy within the Party.<sup>70</sup> The third group were 'peace by negotiation supporters' such as W. G. Cove, Sydney Silverman, and Richard Stokes, who was by far the most vocal, and became the leading Labour opponent of bombing; indeed the only parliamentarian to highlight it at all. In the Commons, Stokes asked Attlee, in one of many sharp exchanges, for a 'convention' with Germany for the cessation of the 'contagious lunacy' of night bombing.<sup>71</sup> Attlee repeatedly denied Stokes's claims that there was indiscriminate bombing,<sup>72</sup> though Sinclair's reply to another enquiry was more revealing: 'there has been no change of policy.'<sup>73</sup> Stokes was also a supporter of vaguely fascistic organisations, and wanted to maintain Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union;<sup>74</sup> by any measure an iconoclast, and for Dalton a 'fool'.<sup>75</sup>

The most notable assemblage was the Parliamentary Peace Aims group: eighteen backbenchers of whom the most noticeable were Davies and Stokes.<sup>76</sup> Laski, Noel-Baker, and Shinwell were similarly reluctant to vilify Germany or Germans, holding

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<sup>68</sup> *HCDebs*, 1 December 1943, 395:337.

<sup>69</sup> *HCDebs*, 25 November 1941, 376:640; Brockway, *Bermondsey*, 230-2.

<sup>70</sup> *LPAR*, 1941, 134 ff; *LPAR*, 1942.

<sup>71</sup> *HCDebs*, 24 July 1941, 373:1051-2; *HCDebs*, 27 November 1941, 376:886-7.

<sup>72</sup> *HCDebs*, 27 May 1943, 389:1730-1.

<sup>73</sup> *HCDebs*, 1 December 1943, 395:337.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Crowcroft, 'What is Happening in Europe?' Richard Stokes, Fascism, and the anti-War Movement in the British Labour Party during the Second World War and After', *History* (2008), 514-30.

<sup>75</sup> Dalton, diary, 22 November 1940, I/23/109; 'Gallacher, Maclaren and Stokes, three of our worst fools', 14 April 1942, I/26/135.

<sup>76</sup> *The Times*, 28 October 1940, 2; *The Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1941, 4; 19 October 1942, 3.

economic grievances rather than military aggression as being the reason for the war. Austen Albu, Patrick Gordon Walker, and W. N. Warbey of the Socialist Clarity Group published in their *Labour Discussion Notes* a condemnation of Vansittart, as did the Fabian Society.<sup>77</sup> ‘I can imagine how Goebbels rubs his hands when he hears some of the propaganda of our hate-mongers’, John McNair wrote.<sup>78</sup> Dalton also wondered when he heard doubts as to the bombing campaign.<sup>79</sup> The most notable individual was Harold Laski, who was advised by one meeting that ‘air force victories’ would do more to raise morale than a programme of nationalisation.<sup>80</sup> Regarded as unrepresentative of party opinion in his criticism of the ‘paralysis of Labour members of the war Cabinet’, and with expressions to expel him from the Party,<sup>81</sup> Laski nevertheless maintained loyal addresses for American consumption, both public and presidential.<sup>82</sup> None of the groups or individuals were, however, anything more than marginal.

The party in the country, as represented at the annual conference, paid even less attention to bombing, and indeed more to civilian flying, and post-war plans for international air travel.<sup>83</sup> Thoughts and deliberations were throughout concerned with domestic policy issues, as early as 1941 moving to post-war reconstruction, and in 1944 and 1945 being preoccupied with preparations for the next general election. The NEC was similarly preoccupied. When overseas affairs were discussed they were usually colonial, particularly India, and when they concerned the war predominately dealt with Russia. Relations with German socialist and social democrat refugees were the extent of notional engagement with the ‘enemy’, as was the case for the Socialist Clarity Group.<sup>84</sup> So too, for the Women’s Committee, and perhaps more surprisingly the International Committee, which was preoccupied with conditions, particularly political, in the occupied countries. Significantly one aspect of British policy in the war which

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<sup>77</sup> *Labour Discussion Notes*, March 1941, 9; Heinrich Fraenkel, *Vansittart’s Gift for Goebbels*, (London [1941]).

<sup>78</sup> *The New Leader*, 30 October 1943, 6; *Daily Herald*, 14 October 1944, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Dalton, diary, 30 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/202.

<sup>80</sup> Dalton, diary, 16 August 1940, Dalton papers, I/23/39.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Notes on the present position in the House of Commons’, 13 June 1941, Noel-Baker Papers, NBKR/3/237.

<sup>82</sup> *Washington Post*, 8 March 1941, 7; 12 April 1941, 9; 31 May 1941, 7; Dalton, diary, 2 February 1941, Dalton papers, I/24/26.

<sup>83</sup> *New Statesman*, 28 Oct 1944, 279; 24 March 1945, 184; *Daily Herald*, 27 January 1945, 2; 15 March 1945, 2; *LPAR*, 1945, 146-148; Noel-Baker Papers, NBKR/3/15-25.

<sup>84</sup> Albu papers, box 34.

did, briefly, arouse fratricidal strife was not Germany but Greece.<sup>85</sup> Unlike bombing, Greece constituted an ideological issue.

The defining political construction of the war in Britain was the electoral truce, another exigency of war that divided the leadership from the party at large, though not in a way that was to prove any more than mildly disruptive.<sup>86</sup> For those committed to the war, Dalton thought, it should have been a simple matter: it should not be possible to support any but the Coalition candidate.<sup>87</sup> Domestic issues rather than military doctrine were the grounds for complaints from constituency associations, or the motivation for members to vote against a Conservative coalition candidate in by-elections. One exception was King's Norton in May 1941, the party harmony being broken by an Independent Reprisal Candidate whose succinct manifesto was 'Bomb Berlin', and during whose campaign 'the Luftwaffe did some dark electioneering'.<sup>88</sup> The government candidate duly won. During the war the Government lost thirteen by-elections though none to candidates opposed to the war; Labour lost only one seat, Motherwell, occasioned by James Walker's death, and that to a Nationalist campaigning on housing and Prestwick airport.<sup>89</sup> Anticipating the national verdict, Churchill asked Harris "I suppose that, when the election comes, I can count on the votes of most of the men in the Air Force?" Harris replied "No Sir, eighty percent of them will vote".<sup>90</sup> Harris blamed the 'political complexion' of his airmen in particular on the influence of Education Officers typical of the 'underpaid "red" crowd in our National School teaching profession', with the *Daily Herald* and 'socialist and communist organisations' prominent in support.<sup>91</sup>

One connection, though it was rarely made explicit, between the Party and the bombing offensive was the second front. It at least demonstrated the role of chance, since, as *Tribune* commented, 'the British Government's long term planning of the war could not

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<sup>85</sup> Andrew Thorpe, 'In a Rather Emotional State'? The Labour Party and British Intervention in Greece, 1944-5', *English Historical Review*, 121:493, 1075-1105; *Daily Herald*, 12 December 1944, 2; *New Statesman*, 16 December 1944, 399; *Daily Herald*, 6 January 1945, 2; *LPARC*, 1944, 143-50.

<sup>86</sup> Attlee to A. V. Alexander MP, 1 March 1944, Alexander papers, CAC, AVAR/5/9/6.

<sup>87</sup> LPA, NEC minute E.C.19, 9 April 1942, 178.

<sup>88</sup> *Time*, 12 May 1941.

<sup>89</sup> *The Times*, 14 April 1945, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Dalton, *Fateful Years*, 464.

<sup>91</sup> Harris to Ralph Assheton MP, 8 June 1945 [copy], Harris papers, H36.

be based on anticipating a Soviet entry into the war on Britain's side'.<sup>92</sup> It was the alliance with the Soviet Union with the aim of beating Germany that lay behind Labour advocacy of a second front as much as any doctrinal sympathies and it was maintained that the bombing offensive assisted the Russians; it was effectively, an 'invasion from the sky'.<sup>93</sup> So too the issue of efficacy predominated over that of ethics. Strategic bombing was both the official term and the intention, but in practice, through operational limitations as much as design, the policy undertaken was area bombing, which was how it was referred to in the War Cabinet, whatever was said to Stokes outside.<sup>94</sup> In that it was, the defence could be made that it was little different from long-practised long range artillery actions.<sup>95</sup> It was also held as being the best way of preventing another western front of apparently futile attrition.<sup>96</sup> Strategic bombing as it was originally envisaged, was targeted bombing, where the targets were enemy assets, and particularly oil, as Dalton claimed publicly, and others privately.<sup>97</sup> Sir Richard Peirse, Harris's predecessor, affirmed that "complementary" to other methods of "material destruction" was "the attack on the people themselves ... there is no distinction between combatant and non-combatant".<sup>98</sup> Operational limitations were revealed in the Butt Report, and on 14 February 1942 the Area Bombing Directive was issued, targeting 'the morale of the enemy'; and three weeks later Essen was the target of the first significant British raid of the war.<sup>99</sup> Harris in any case felt that in an industrial war there was no sensible differentiation between military and civilian, and even his *bête noire*, John Strachey, maintained that the choice was either to bomb cities, or prolong the war.<sup>100</sup> Yet even where civilians may have been targets, '[r]eports on the way the German civilians are taking the raids show that the general consequences on morale are similar to what they were here. Bombing leads either to despondent apathy or to a hardening of the spirit'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Tribune*, 22 August 1941, 6.

<sup>93</sup> *New York Times*, 28 May 1942, 16.

<sup>94</sup> WC, 9 April 1945, CAB195/3; *HCD*eb's, 31 March 1943, 388:155.

<sup>95</sup> J. M. Spaight, *Bombing Vindicated* (London 1944), 29.

<sup>96</sup> SAOG, I:341.

<sup>97</sup> *The Listener*, 13 June 1940, 1116.

<sup>98</sup> Sir Richard Peirse, speech, 25 November 1941, Peirse papers, RAFA, AC71/13/61.

<sup>99</sup> SAOG, IV, appendix 13.

<sup>100</sup> War Commentary (John Strachey), 22 February 1944, Sydney Bufton papers, CAC, BUFTTR/5/6.

<sup>101</sup> *Tribune*, 7 January 1944, 6.

Perhaps in the absence of any position on the policy, the notion arose that the Party was hostile to Bomber Command. John Strachey held a wartime temporary commission as a Squadron Leader, serving the Directorate of Bomber Operations, and reporting on the effects of bombing.<sup>102</sup> Harris reportedly called on the Air Ministry to remove Strachey owing to his political views, and Harris maintained that Strachey had influenced Attlee's decision not to offer Harris a peerage after the war.<sup>103</sup> For his part, Attlee was happy to associate himself with Tedder and Portal, but not with Harris, whom he blamed for not targeting oil installations, though accepting that 'there were technical difficulties involved which were only solved later and which I hadn't fully realised'.<sup>104</sup> While it could be claimed that in the absence of a second front 'Bomber Command dictated to the German High Command how the German forces should be distributed',<sup>105</sup> Douglas Jay, then one of Dalton's civil servants at the Board of Trade, complained that the bombing offensive, or at least the production of Lancasters it necessitated, meant that there were no decisive results, but the dictation to the Government as to how Britain's resources should be distributed.<sup>106</sup> Dalton was not convinced.

Such public opposition as there was was more limited, and largely limited to the Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple and the Bishop of Chichester George Bell appeared more effective representatives of what should have been the concerns of Labour than were those in Labour, Stokes, a staunch Catholic, and Cripps, equally devout, excepted. The Bombing Restriction Committee, whose members included Vera Brittain, aroused more indignation than influence – Harris described it as 'subversion' and wanted to limit paper<sup>107</sup> – but the Herbert Morrison, Home Secretary and the fifth and final Labour member of the War Cabinet from October 1942, refused to ban it, and even defended it: 'in my judgment if people sincerely hold the view that

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<sup>102</sup> Bufton papers, BUFTR/5/6.

<sup>103</sup> Harris to Andrew Boyle, 23 September 1980, Boyle papers, Cambridge University Library Add. Ms. 9429/2c/8(i).

<sup>104</sup> Clement Attlee, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, (London 1961), 49. Harris took exception: 'Notes on bombing strategy', Harris papers, H136 f. 7; Harris to Boyle, 4 August 1979, Boyle papers, 9429/2c/5(i-ii).

<sup>105</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 March 1943, 112.

<sup>106</sup> Dalton, diary, 28 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/199; Douglas Jay, *Change and Fortune* (London 1980), 104.

<sup>107</sup> Harris to Sir Charles Portal, 29 March 1943 [copy], Harris papers, H82. Portal agreed with Morrison: Portal to Harris, 9 April 1943, *ibid.*



bombing should be abolished or restricted, I cannot see that it is terrible to say so.’<sup>108</sup> Similarly he supported Davies.<sup>109</sup> Morrison had from the outset been far from aggressive towards Germany, condemning ‘foolish and purposeless vindictiveness’ of the 1919 settlement, inviting Vansittart’s opprobrium.<sup>110</sup> Otherwise dissent tended to embarrass rather than damage, and was throughout tolerated. ‘It seems to me essential that we should see beforehand what is going to be said to the troops’, Churchill told Sinclair. ‘This rule might be waived in the case of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Sir Stafford Cripps’.<sup>111</sup>

Approval was harder to discern, but evident in the absence of public disquiet in the national, or the Labour press.<sup>112</sup> Harris was sensitive to speeches and newspaper stories that were critical of Bomber Command the strategy, and duly facilitated the cultivation of propaganda, to ensure “a suitable record of achievement”,<sup>113</sup> given that “the cumulative effect of bombing is what matters”.<sup>114</sup> Stories were planted, and through aerial photographs could Bomber Command be presented as demonstrably effective by authors duly assisted,<sup>115</sup> and that air power was “the sword of justice”.<sup>116</sup> Throughout the war the prevalent complaint was about escalation and efficiencies. When bombing was reported in the Labour press, even bombing of British towns, there was little in the way of sensationalism. Homelessness was presented as an indication of effectiveness: in February 1944 it would take only ten more raids ‘to wipe out Berlin completely’; it was a ‘city of sleepwalkers ... [t]hey have nowhere to go, nothing in

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<sup>108</sup> *HCDDebs*, 28 October 1943, 393:363-4.

<sup>109</sup> *LPAR*, 1942, 102.

<sup>110</sup> *HLDebs*, 19 May 1942, 122:1066-76.

<sup>111</sup> Churchill to Sinclair, 26 October 1942, in *Winston and Archie: the Letters of Sir Archibald Sinclair and Winston S. Churchill, 1915-1960*, ed. Ian Hunter (London 2005), 371.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Connelly, ‘The British People, the Press and the Strategic Air Campaign against Germany, 1939-45’, *Contemporary British History*, 16:2 (2002), 399-58. The ‘Labour press’ here being: *Tribune*, *Daily Herald*, *Socialist Commentary*, *The Left Forum*, *The Land Worker*, *The Socialist Vanguard*, *Labour’s Northern Voice*, *Labour Discussion Notes*, *The Town Crier*, *The Labour Woman*.

<sup>113</sup> Directorate of Public Relations, undated, Air Ministry papers, NA, AIR20/2955; Harris to the Under Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 23 December 1943, and 10 April 1944, AIR2/7852; Harris to Dingle Foot MP, 10 March 1944 [copy], Harris papers H36

<sup>114</sup> Air Ministry Bulletin 18230, AIR20/4229.

<sup>115</sup> Allan Michie, *The Air Offensive* (1943), 152 ff; Harris to [Sir Arthur Street], 10 April 1944, AIR2/7852.

<sup>116</sup> Allan Michie, *Keep the Peace* (1944), 9.

which to ride, nothing to see except ruin death and decay.’<sup>117</sup> The first thousand bomber raid, of obvious propagandistic as well as destructive value, where the sky over Cologne was as ‘[b]usy as Piccadilly Circus’ was particularly well received.<sup>118</sup> *The Daily Herald* editorialised ‘[t]he whole nation gains a new sense of power from this evidence of its air strength’, and its repudiation of Goering’s prediction that British bombs would never fall on Germany.<sup>119</sup> Mass Observation counted that in London in February 1944 six out of ten ‘give unqualified verbal approval of the raids’.<sup>120</sup> The public disclosure of the new 12,000lb High Capacity bomb, the ‘cookie’, or ‘blockbuster’, was accompanied by the warning that ‘it is too terrible to be dropped on ordinary targets’, and that crews had been briefed to return with the bomb if targets could not be identified.<sup>121</sup> These new ‘block bombs’ were ‘reputed to raze a whole area in a single blast’, and the *Daily Herald* produced confirmatory evidence.<sup>122</sup> The 12,000lb ‘Tall Boy’ was unveiled in similar tones of excitement.<sup>123</sup> ‘Wings for Victory Week’ in March 1943 produced the largest crowds since the coronation appearing on the streets of London.<sup>124</sup> It helped that Britain continued to be bombed until two months before the German surrender, as if to remind people.<sup>125</sup> The ‘rocket bomb’ had as great a psychological effect as it did physical, and the V2 campaign, which ran from September 1944 to March 1945, was only made public once all the launch bases had been captured.<sup>126</sup> By then regular reports from liberated concentration camps maintained the momentum of the war effort. Even Stokes had abandoned the cause, though he did turn up at Heliopolis, GHQ, Middle East Force, announcing that he had escaped ‘the lunatic asylum called Parliament’ attacked the government, and enraged a General. ‘It is scandalous that a M.P. can come out here on private business and talk as Mr Stokes did to servicemen’.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Daily Herald*, 2 February 1944, 1; 1 February 1944, 1, 4.

<sup>118</sup> *Daily Herald*, 1 June 1942, 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Daily Herald*, 1 June 1944, 2.

<sup>120</sup> *New Statesman*, 12 February 1944, 105.

<sup>121</sup> *Daily Herald*, 4 March 1944, 1.

<sup>122</sup> *Daily Herald*, 27 March 1942, 1.

<sup>123</sup> *Daily Herald*, 13 March 1945, 1.

<sup>124</sup> *The Economist*, 6 March 1943, 7.

<sup>125</sup> WC, 3 July 1944, CAB65/43/1; *Daily Herald*, 5 March 1945, 1.

<sup>126</sup> WC, 28 July 1944, CAB65/43/14; 25 September 1944, CAB65/43/43; *Daily Herald*, 27 April 1945, 2-3.

<sup>127</sup> Sir Bernard Paget to Sir P. J. Grigg, 6 December 1944, Grigg papers, CAC, PJGG/9/7/21.

Stokes was still scandalised that Sinclair could speak ‘almost gloatingly of “the great crescendo of destruction”’. I thought what a magnificent expression for a Cabinet Minister of Great Britain at this stage of the war.’<sup>128</sup> The culmination of the bombing offensive was the culmination of the war, which posed, as it has continued to, many causal questions. ‘The real effectiveness of our air bombing remains to be checked up later on’, Dalton admitted. ‘My own view is that it *is* becoming one of several decisive factors, but, like the blockade last time, the results won’t show clearly till the end is reached.’<sup>129</sup> Reports increasingly conveyed the devastation of the built environment, but without questioning the policy that had done so or the likely benefits.<sup>130</sup> In March 1945, the quantity of British and American bombs dropped on Germany was three times the total of those dropped on Britain in the entire war.<sup>131</sup> That month, the last of the war, included what became the emblem of the policy: Dresden. Churchill, at Yalta, confirmed the action, and Attlee, chairing the War Cabinet, approved; the outcome amounted to applied Vansittartism, which its creator welcomed.<sup>132</sup> Different in degree rather than in kind (of which its timing was part), there were strategic justifications, but Dresden aroused misgivings.<sup>133</sup> Cecil King, of the *Sunday Pictorial*, thought it ‘entirely horrifying. Not only does it make nonsense of all our protestations about our war aims and about our bombing policy: it gives official proof for everything that Goebbels has said on the subject’.<sup>134</sup> Harris irritably explained that he had merely ‘implementing official policy ... [w]e have never gone in for terror bombing’.<sup>135</sup> In any case, ‘[t]he news’, Strauss recalled, ‘was received by Londoners with satisfaction. At last, they said, we were making our enemies suffer the horrors they are inflicting on us’.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *HCDebs*, 6 March 1945, 408:1898.

<sup>129</sup> Dalton, diary, 28 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/199.

<sup>130</sup> *Daily Herald*, 9 March 1945, 2.

<sup>131</sup> *WC*, 3 April 1945, CAB/195/3.

<sup>132</sup> Lord Vansittart, ‘The Problem of Germany: a Discussion’, *International Affairs*, 21:3 (1945), 313-324.

<sup>133</sup> *New York Times*, 12 February 1945, 18; Sir Norman Bottomley to Harris, 28 March 1945, Harris papers, H9.

<sup>134</sup> 17 February 1945, *With Malice toward None: a War Diary by Cecil H. King*, ed. William Armstrong (London 1970), 290.

<sup>135</sup> Harris to Bottomley, 29 March 1945 [copy], Harris papers, H9; a longstanding irritation: Richard Peck minute, 3 November 1943, AIR2/7852.

<sup>136</sup> Strauss papers, STRS/1/1/82.

At the Quebec conference in September 1944, the British and Americans determined that the defeat of Japan was likely to be eighteen months after that with Germany.<sup>137</sup> Popular opinion appeared to even less concerned with the laying waste of Japanese cities than it was with those of Germany, and a range of geopolitical imperatives impelled the British government to be more actively involved in the final assault.<sup>138</sup> Churchill offered Bomber Command, as well as naval and land forces. For much the same reasons as the British were keen – the post-war settlement – were the Americans reluctant. Not only unwanted, and unnecessary, Britain's contribution to the strategic bombing of Japan was not readily available. 'If all went v. well, 6 months before we cd. drop our first bomb on Japan' was Sinclair's great crescendo in the east.<sup>139</sup> Preparations were made and in July 1945 there were five joint British-American raids on Japan.<sup>140</sup> A month later, and five days after Labour took office, President Truman informed Attlee that the Americans were to fulfil the arrangement made with Churchill at Potsdam to use atomic weapons against Japan. Five days later the first was dropped. Hiroshima, 'a town like Hull', the *Herald* told its readers. The raid was 'only the beginning. Hundreds more and even more powerful are to follow'.<sup>141</sup> The death toll made public was 200,000; '[o]n this basis one raid by 300 planes with atomic bombs could disintegrate the whole population of the Japanese main islands'.<sup>142</sup> The second, and final, raid on 15 August 1945 included two British observers.<sup>143</sup> Harris admitted that the strategy was exactly what he had been practising on Germany.<sup>144</sup>

The implications of the bomb brought a widespread moral dimension to consideration of strategic bombing really for the first time. *Tribune* observed that 'Mr Churchill is left thanking a merciful providence which withheld this instrument from the hands of our enemies'.<sup>145</sup> Citrine highlighted the weapon's 'indiscriminate nature', which therefore contradicted stated allied policy; Morgan Philips was concerned lest

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<sup>137</sup> WC, 22 September 1944, CAB65/43/41.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas Hall, '“Mere Drops in the Ocean”: The Politics and Planning of the Contribution of the British Commonwealth to the Final Defeat of Japan, 1944-45', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 16 (2005), 93-115.

<sup>139</sup> WC, 11 June 1945, CAB/195/3.

<sup>140</sup> *Daily Herald*, 19 July 1945, 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Daily Herald*, 7 August 1945, 1.

<sup>142</sup> *Daily Herald*, 9 August 1945, 1.

<sup>143</sup> *New York Times*, 9 September 1945, 1

<sup>144</sup> Harris to Bottomley, 29 March 1945 [copy], Harris papers, H9.

<sup>145</sup> *Tribune*, 10 August 1945, 1.

‘atomic power should be left to private interests’; Laski saw it as ‘unthinkable that the discovery should not lead us to see why international government must become the basic condition of civilised living’.<sup>146</sup> History had repeated itself, ten years on. The very new and specific circumstances after August 1945 emphasised the importance of ‘building a new society’, as *Tribune* put it, with ‘a pre-eminent role ... by the new Government and the new Britain’.<sup>147</sup> ‘Who owns omnipotence?’ the *New Statesman* asked.<sup>148</sup> The Labour government would formally decide to acquire some of it just over a year later. Even then, in Cabinet and the Defence Sub Committee, Strauss recalled, discussion concerned practicalities.<sup>149</sup>

The issue of strategic bombing in the Second World War as far as the Labour Party was concerned, was, as it was for any non-pacifist institution or individual, a matter of balance between efficacy and ethics. With no other dimension of the war were the two so at odds, and that was how it remained. At the time, *The New Leader* maintained, ‘[t]here is no point in protesting against bombing if we do not protest against war’.<sup>150</sup> Vera Brittain’s *Seed of Chaos*, and the correspondence it had given rise to, had particularly irritated George Orwell. ‘There is something very distasteful in accepting war as an instrument and at the same time wanting to dodge responsibility for its more obviously barbarous features’<sup>151</sup> Dalton agreed, with ministerial *mien*. ‘[I]f the bombing of German civilians – and, after all, it was quite false to draw a line between a soldier in uniform, and a civilian making arms for the soldier or otherwise assisting the ‘war effort’ – resulted in shortening the war and saving lives of large numbers of British soldiers, who would otherwise be slaughtered as on the Somme and Passchendaele in the last war, I was all for it.’<sup>152</sup> And yet, although the infamous absence of a campaign medal was “entirely due” to Churchill,<sup>153</sup> as far as Harris was concerned, it was Attlee

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<sup>146</sup> *Daily Herald*, 9 August 1945, 4; *The Town Crier*, 18 August 1945, 7.

<sup>147</sup> *Tribune*, 10 August 1945, 2.

<sup>148</sup> *New Statesman*, 11 August 1945, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Strauss papers, STRS/1/2/123-8.

<sup>150</sup> *The New Leader*, 3 July 1943, 1.

<sup>151</sup> ‘As I Please’, *Tribune* 19 May 1944, 11 (echoing Sidney Dark, *New Statesman*, 19 February 1944, 124-5).

<sup>152</sup> Dalton, diary, 30 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/202; ‘War Commentary’, 4 April 1945, Bufton papers BUFTR/5/6.

<sup>153</sup> Harris to Boyle, 13 June 1979, Boyle papers, 9429/2c/3(ii).

“(influenced no doubt by that Left Wing intellectual Strachey and the weak Stansgate) who denigrated Bomber Command after the socialists won power.”<sup>154</sup>

Insofar as there is any historical consensus, it has settled on the balance between strategic bombing being initially Britain’s only way of waging war against an aggressor, and then a significant contributory factor to Britain and its allies prevailing, before finally, when the institutional momentum had almost broken free, to an unnecessary and excessive scale. For the Party, bombing was a necessary retaliatory and offensive action; quite how it was conducted was a matter for Bomber Command and the Prime Minister, and a matter they wished to retain. Labour men would help provide the delivery systems, and select suitable targets, and even eighty per cent of the crews. Operational matters were matters for others; as was often the case, the war was elsewhere. The subject was not mentioned in substance in the Party’s national meetings, public and private, nor its press, or by its leading figures. It was not minuted at any meeting of the NEC, nor its International Sub Committee, or the International Department Executive Committee. On bombing, conference said nothing; even Jack Blitz, delegate of Portsmouth Borough Labour Party, was silent.<sup>155</sup>

Institutional insensibility notwithstanding, a ‘labourist’ approach to the subject can nevertheless be discerned. As horrific as the bombing of Britain was, it was borne; perhaps the layperson was unable to comprehend how much greater was the damage meted to Germany. It was rare to read that ‘there is a unity of suffering among the common people of both nations’.<sup>156</sup> In any case, as Attlee told Davies, and has been said subsequently, ‘I suggest that my hon. Friend might turn his attention to those who began it.’<sup>157</sup> Yet Jay was worried that it could “be argued that it was we who began the bombing of cities and civilian populations.”<sup>158</sup> Even when asked ‘must we kill German women and children’? One Labour paper concluded that no government would sanction such an order, nor would any British airman undertake it; ‘but it is conceivable that circumstances might arise where the bombing of civilians might have to be regarded in the nature of a regrettable necessity.’<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> ‘Notes of conversation with Harris’, 31 May 1979, Boyle papers, 9429/2c/14(ii).

<sup>155</sup> *LPAR*, 1944, 164-5.

<sup>156</sup> *The New Leader*, 31 October 1940.

<sup>157</sup> *HCD*eb, 26 January 1944, 396:686.

<sup>158</sup> Dalton, diary, 28 June 1943, Dalton papers, I/28/199.

<sup>159</sup> *The Town Crier*, 30 August 1940, 2.

The subtext to this historical question is whether a progressive, perhaps *soi-disant*, internationalist party ought to have served as some sort of conscience of the people, as the state church sought to. The nature of the Party was one thing; the nature of the Party in the war was another. The workers did have a country, disproving Marx, but also had a mission. Out of office for a decade, but feeling its moment nearing, Labour was preoccupied with its own operational matters. During the first Cabinet meeting of the new government in August 1945, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was questioned by ministers as to the strategic situation, observing afterwards ‘all of them mainly influenced by political as opposed to military motives’.<sup>160</sup> Yet insofar as there were military motives, they were consistent with the Party’s values and conduct. The ‘national security’ perspective that had produced a muscular position on armaments before the war (and no change in policy when the government changed) was more than consistent – was intrinsic – to the Party’s ambition of winning and wielding parliamentary power in the interests of its supporters: the strategy was one to make implementing Beveridge possible. To that extent it was less that patriotism had prevailed over class consciousness, than that patriotism was class consciousness: winning the war was more important than the Socialist International. In that, the Party could perhaps be said truly to be the tribune of the people. A month before the German surrender, *The Daily Herald*, the Party’s official newspaper with a readership of over four million, organised an exhibition – in collaboration with the Air Ministry – called ‘To Victory with the RAF’, and starring a 12,000lb ‘blockbuster’. Amongst the many exhibits popular with the ‘many children there ... [c]hief interest appeared to be in the representation of a raid on a German town.’<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> 7 August 1945, Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945*, ed. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London 2001), 715.

<sup>161</sup> *Daily Herald*, 28 March 1945, 3.